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Chapter 661: The Siege pt 7

The battle raged around Isaac Bird and in the brief moments where he wasn't desperately trying to keep himself from getting skewered or sliced in half he had to wonder why he was even here. Peer pressure was part of it, he could admit that to himself. When three quarters of the guards under him had volunteered to go down and aid in the defence it would have looked a little ridiculous if he, their leader, didn't go with them. There was an element of pride, also. The ants had done much to help the refugees and now when a chance came for the people to return the favour it would be churlish to turn it down. Another part of him, a more honest part, was willing to admit that he'd hoped to see Morrelia here. When she'd left, all those weeks ago, he regretted not going with her, and now that she'd returned with the Legion, how could he not take this chance? What exactly he hoped to accomplish in wooing the woman who captured his heart with her fierce and headstrong ways from the opposite side of a battlefield, he wasn't sure, but it was worth a go! He hoped it was worth a go.

"SPEARS UP LADS!" he roared into the din and hoped his people could hear him as the Legionaries surged forward for another clash.

CLICKCLICKCLACKCLIK!

A chorus of snapped mandibles rang out as the ants issues their own warcry. Isaac held his ground and tried not to get buffeted by the huge monsters around him as they crawled over each other and clung to the ceiling to try and get at the enemy.

"FOR THE COLONY!" Roared the priest from behind him. "DELIVER VENGEANCE UPON THE INFIDEL WHO REFUSE TO ACCEPT THAT WHICH HAS BEEN MADE CLEAR TO US! FIGHT! FIGHT FOR THE COLONY!"

"I'm fightin', I'm fightin'!" Isaac grumbled as he activated his shield wall Skill and deflected a blast of sword light upwards.

The ant above him angled its carapace to absorb the diminished blow before it lunged forward to try and snap the sword of the offending soldier but the enemy was too crafty and snatched the weapon back just in time.

"Try this on!" He roared and executed a perfect micro-dash as he ignited his spear with energy and used Expert Thrust.

A pure beam of light shot forward from the weapon and caught the enemy unawares, hitting them full in the chest. Other than knocking the wind out of them, the strike didn't appear to do much to the foe. The ranks closed around the soldier who was back in the fight a few moments later after collecting their breath.

"Their armour is too damn tough. What the hell is tha' stuff even made of?" Even exhausted in the midst of battle, Isaac couldn't help but complain to himself about how unfair life was.

Whilst it was true that the Colony had provided the guards with brand new arms and armour, far better quality than anything they'd been able to lay their hands on before, it felt a little inadequate when they

were put against the bloody Abyssal Legion. Still, beggars couldn't be choosers. If he was here in his old gear he had no doubt his head would have left his shoulders behind some time ago.

"DO NOT YIELD TO THE HERETIC. DEFEND THE PATH WHICH WE HAVE FOUND THROUGH TRIAL AND SUFFERING. DO NOT FORGET THOSE THAT SAVED US! DO NOT ABANDON THE ONE WHO LIBERATED YOU FROM FEAR!"

How the damned priest didn't detonate at the neck projecting that level of volume, Isaac would never know. It was inhuman as far as he was concerned. Not that he had much time to worry about it.

"SPEARS UP!" He roared again as the two sides surged toward each other once more.

The clash and ring of steel filled his ears as the flash and flicker of light blasted his eyes. There were hundreds of beings fighting at once, each employing their Skills, equipment and natural gifts to the limit as both sides struggled to hold on. Isaac snarled and bellowed as he dipped low before executing a sneaky shield charge. He clipped his opponent's weapon at a different angle than was expected which caused the soldier to lurch backwards before he was disarmed. Not willing to let go of this chance, Isaac lashed his spear through a tight sweep that clipped the left foot of the Legionary and caused him to crash to the ground.

The moment the man fell, his allies on either side leapt to defend the breach and protect their comrade as those behind pushed forward to cover the gaps. The ants refused to let it happen so easily and *dove* forward, hurling their bodies into the swords of the enemy to try and widen the break in the line.

"RALLY TO ME!" Isaac called, hoping someone could hear him above the clamour.

If the ants were going to push, he sure as hell wasn't going to let them do it alone! He cursed and spat with wild abandon as he lashed out with his spear, desperate to widen the gap and take the pressure off the monsters who absorbed insane amounts of punishment without taking a backward step. It wouldn't be possible for Isaac to perform half of these heroics without the boost he was receiving from Beyn and his kin. The more humans and ants gathered together, the greater the strength of the buff and right now Isaac was riding high, his stats pushed to levels he'd never experienced in his life.

"DEFEND THIS HOLY GROUND WITH EVERY FIBRE OF YOUR BEING! LET YOUR VERY SOUL SHAKE WITH THE POWER OF YOUR EFFORTS AS WE DRIVE AWAY THESE LOST ONES. DO NOT BLAME THEM CHILDREN, FOR THEY TREAD THE FALSE PATH, COLD AND ALONE WITHOUT THE LIGHT OF THE GREAT ONE TO ALLEVIATE THEIR FEAR!"

Does he ever shut up?! Isaac shoved all thoughts of the priest from his mind as he frantically battled in the front lines. The fighting had reached a fever pitch as both sides jumped on the tiny, infinitesimal edge he had created for the Colony and he was finding it harder and harder to hold his ground. Sweat poured into his eyes, his shield was battered and rent, and his spear arm shook from pure exhaustion. He refused to quit. So long as the ants kept fighting, so would he.

"Come an' get it you shiny bastards!" he grimaced his challenge as he forced himself to keep fighting.

Then she was there. For the rest of his life, he would fail to explain how he recognised her so quickly, but the instant that red armoured figure, a brutal short sword in either hand stepped into view, he knew

it was her. His heart froze in his chest and a foolish smile broke out on his face. It was wildly not the time for it, he knew that, but somehow he just couldn't help it.

"Hey Morr. How've you been?" he grinned.

He didn't get a reply before Morrelia charged forward, her twin weapons a blur as she struck at him from both sides. Somehow he managed to parry the first attack with the shaft of his spear and catch the second square on his shield. The weight from that blow nearly caved his shield in completely and he suspected his arm may have been fractured but he didn't have time to worry about it. Still with a stupid grin on his face he struck back, spear lancing out only to find empty air as she brought both her weapons up in a perfectly timed cross block. She didn't give him time to recover, snapping out a quick kick that threw him back a few feet. God's she was strong!

He set his feet quickly and brought his weapon up once more, eager for the fight to continue.

"That all you got?" he laughed, "and here'n I thought you was supposed to be strong!"

It was a complete bluff and both of them knew it, but he wasn't going to back down, and neither was she.

"HAAAAAA!" Morrelia bellowed and Isaac could see her eyes blaze with red light through her helmet as her berserker Skill ignited.

Isaac watched as she charged forward, heedless of the danger, like a stone from a siege engine right into the ant lines. Her weapons smashed his spear and shield aside with ease as she crunched straight into his chest and just kept going. He felt his feet lift from the ground as her shoulder bore his weight deeper amongst the swarming Colony. When she finally stopped running she collapsed on top of him, causing him to cough out a mouthful of bright red blood.

"Nice ta see you too," he said.

"You're an idiot," came back her distraught reply. As the ants and humans descended on the top of them she dropped her weapons and ripped off her helmet, exposing her midnight black hair to the light.

"Capture me, Isaac," she said.

Was it the chest injury, or those magnificent words that finally drove him over the edge? A few seconds later, as Morrelia raised her hands in surrender and was taken away under guard, the ants would find Isaac passed out, blood leaking from numerous wounds. What they couldn't explain was the copious flow from his nose that continued long after they had already healed him. A quirk of human physiology, they decided, and promptly forgot about it.

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Chapter 662: The Siege pt 8

"THE SEARCH GOES ON, SISTERS!"

"WE SEEK!"

"Oh no you don't! Retreat now! That's an order!"

Brendant waved her antennae threateningly at the 'Immortals' and their reckless leader.

"Leeroy! Get your metal covered carapace back to the gate! The enemy has pulled back and so are you!"

It was never a good idea to give the misguided armoured soldier a chance to 'misinterpret' her orders. Brendant watched like a hawk as the heavy assault ants begrudgingly turned themselves around, putting their backs to the retreating enemy and dragging themselves back to the gate. Healers swarmed over the ants already, tending to the numerous, near fatal wounds that covered them.

Even from where she stood, Brendant could hear the medics taunting the survivors.

"Ooo. That's a rough wound, *nearly* enough to kill you, wasn't it? Good thing you survived!"

"Just a few centimetres to the left and you'd have been *done*. Look at the scoring in the carapace next to your eye! Punched right through the armour it did. Not a problem though, you'll be back to full health in just a few hours."

The healers continued to bait and mock their charges all the way back to the gates where the immortals moved toward the foundries established just inside where their armour could undergo an emergency refit. No doubt Smithant was already bashing the exhausted soldiers over the head with her hammer, lamenting the damage done to her precious armour. The moniker 'immortals' had run amazingly true over the duration of the siege, only a single member had perished in the fighting so far. The others had been unsure whether to curse or praise their sister for her misfortune, but they had gathered for a solemn vigil as the soldier had been peeled from her armour and laid to rest.

Though the tunnel before the gate was now almost totally bare, still, the council member did not turn back. There was still one more warrior of the Colony yet to return.

"How is she?" the soldier asked one of the nearby mages.

The two of them watched the great bear as it drew deep, measured breaths. Each exhalation sounded like a gale and blew dust and earth into a small whirlwind in front of the huge monster's face.

"She is coming back to herself more slowly after each battle. We are growing concerned for her wellbeing."

Sarah, the friend of the Colony had been instrumental in holding back the golgari on this side of the nest, but more and more the ants were becoming worried for her state of mind. A team of ants combed over her frame, cleaning and soothing her as she slowly reclaimed her sense of self from the fury that seized her during battle.

"She must not participate in the next clash, preferably the next two. Tell her the council has ordered that she rest herself."

The mage twitched her antennae.

"I will tell her, but she we will not like it. She wants to help," the mage hesitated, "and I believe that part of her yearns for this state. She *wants* to fight."

"But we cannot allow her back into a state she once rejected fighting on our behalf. Be sure to tell her what I said."

Without the bear on their side, the next clashes would be far more difficult, but it was necessary. The other side was holding against the more powerful Legion without the assistance of a tier six behemoth like Sarah, though they did have the Eldest, they would have to make do here. Weary and filled with a thousand worries, Brandant finally retreated behind the gate and returned to the embrace of the nest once more.

Thousands of ants swarmed here, each with a specific job to do. Triage was taking place in the field hospital as the many wounded were tended to. The most grievously injured would be shifted to the dedicated facilities as soon as they were able to be moved, whereas the others would heal on the spot. A bit of Biomass, magic and regeneration fluid all they needed to repair their wounds.

"How goes it?" came a scent from the left.

"Wills? It goes as it goes, I'm afraid."

The scout, clung to the roof, nodded her antennae in acknowledgement. The enemy had been repelled four times from the gate so far, but the cost was higher than they would like. Still, they were holding, which was all they needed to do. So far the foe had managed to reach the gate twice and inflict significant damage to the metal before they had been pushed back. Eventually they would smash through and the Colony would be forced to retreat to the second, and final layer of defence.

"We'll have to make the next defence without the help of Sarah. She needs to rest to regain her sense of self."

The scout hesitated for a moment.

"That's going to make things ... more interesting."

"We don't have a choice. It may finally be time to commit the humans to the front."

The Colony had hesitated to send out the humans so far, a decision that hadn't gone down too well with the people themselves. The general feeling amongst the ants was that they should be responsible for defending their own nest and didn't want to depend on assistance from others. The mayor Enid had rightly pointed out that the Colony had helped defend the human homes, so why shouldn't they return the favour? It looked as though they were about to get their chance.

"They'll be happy about that," Wills said. "I wanted to pass on that the scouts haven't managed to break through to the satellite nests. We'll keep trying, but it looks as though we're still ringed in."

The nest itself was a massive area. How the enemy had managed to contain them in all directions and detect every attempt to tunnel out was something beyond the ant's understanding. There was still so much they had to learn before they could compete on equal footing with enemies like these. Given enough time, Brandant knew that the Colony would not only match their opponents, but exceed them in all aspects, but that day was far off yet.

Numbers and hard work were what they could depend on for now, it was their only chance.

[Where is she?!] a voice broke into her thoughts.

[Friend Jim?] Brandant asked.

[Obviously it's me!] came the irritated reply of the large worm, [where the hell is Sarah?]

[She is still recovering outside the gate. She is being watched by a team of ants as she gathers herself, worry not.]

[Oh, I'm worried. I'm massively worried. Do you even realise what she's doing to herself for you? You should tell her to step back from the battle before it's too late for her!]

[We have.]

[And... what?]

[We have noticed her struggles and I have asked the mages to tell her to rest for the next two clashes. After that she will be able to choose whether to re-join the fight or not.]

[That's not good enough. If you give her a chance to fight, she will. Tell her to step back completely.]

Brendant paused for a moment.

[We will not take away her autonomy without good reason.]

[You mean you can't win without her.]

[It will be more difficult,] the soldier readily admitted, [but we will still win.]

The worm went silent and Brendant felt him tunnel away through the soil, no doubt returning to the chamber set aside for himself and Sarah to which his friend would soon return. Before long, the council member had pushed the interaction from her mind. The battle went on and there was much to do.

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Having to wait for your legs to regrow sucks. Even if it only takes an hour considering all the healing that the Colony, my pets and I can pour into it. I even mutated these legs so that they grow back faster. An ant without legs is like... pretty much anything without its legs. Not particularly mobile. By the time I have my claws back under me enough that I can walk, the battle is over. After a bruising and bloody exchange, the Legion pulled back and gave the Colony the room it needed to make an orderly retreat. Obviously that also included dragging my sorry carapace inside where far too many medics fussed over me whilst others waited for their wounds to be tended.

"I'm fine!" I told them. "Go bother someone else! Look, you can't even see my insides anymore!"

It's true, the muscle has *mostly* regrown to cover the organs which have been plainly visible not so long ago. The carapace which had been sheared off has also begun to reform at the edges, which is nice to see. Reforging the diamond carapace from nothing can take some time, so it's nice to see it making a swift recovery. Thanks to the Vestibule, I've already been able to unload another full blast from the regeneration gland which, combined with the ministrations of Invidia, have gone a long way to speeding up my recovery. What I've found though, is that coming back from heavy injuries like this has a minimum time frame. No matter how much healing magic and regeneration fluid you pump into yourself, there's a hard cap to how fast my cells will regenerate themselves. Some things just take longer

than others, like the carapace for example. With the organs and muscles regrown, the only thing I can do now is wait.

"There are plenty of ants and humans who need caring for, there's nothing else you can do for me now," I assure the fussy healers.

"Are you sure about that Eldest?" Mendant asks. "You aren't exactly... all the way back together."

"I'm sure. Go tend to our new allies. They look like they need some care."

"Are you sure you don't want to just go talk to the prisoner?" The healer asks me, he antennae looming dangerously.

"Not at all!" I protest. "The energy of the healers is a precious resource and I would hate for it to be wasted when it could be better spent elsewhere. Please. Tend to the humans and the ants in need. I will heal given enough time."

There were indeed plenty of humans and other ants in need of care. Despite the Colony going all in to try and protect their human allies, not all of them had made it back, and many were injured. The number of injured and fallen on the part of the Colony numbered in the thousands, yet another wrong to lay at the feet of the Legion. It would be days before some of them were back to combat readiness, and all would need to draw from the limited supply of Biomass stored in the nest.

After giving me a couple hundred side-eyes (compound eyes and all that), Mendant finally gives in and waves away the swarming healers, directing them to the many others who need their help. Once the council member herself moves away, I take it upon myself to mosey over to where the crowd has gathered. I say mosey. My legs aren't fully regrown yet, so it's a bit more of a 'drag' but I get over there in the end.

Morellia has, as far as I know, turned herself in to our custody, or something along those lines. Isaac hasn't been able to communicate all that well since the battle for some reason and Beyn can't bring himself to talk to her, given that she's a 'heretic betrayer' or some such. Without Enid being here, it's been hard to find someone to communicate with the berserker, so things have been at a bit of a standstill as far as I can see.

The Legionary is sitting on the ground with her arms raised in the air, her weapons having been taken long ago. With her helmet off, it's clear to see that she isn't afraid of what may occur here. Whether that's because she doesn't think we'll hurt her or she doesn't care, I'll have to find out. Damn I need some torpor. Hopefully I don't get dragged away or anything before I talk to Morrelia.

"By the by Protectant, I didn't see you in the battle," I say to the empty air.

After a brief silence, I get a near undetectable reply brush against my antennae.

"Please don't address me when there are so many around. We want to remain secret, remember?"

I tap my antennae together in acknowledgement and wait.

"We could do nothing to prevent you leaping in front of the strike that nearly killed you, unfortunately. Once the guardian pulled you back to the gate, we were positioned around you the whole time."

"You didn't show yourselves, even then?" I ask, a touch incredulous.

"It wasn't necessary. Should any of the enemy have reached us, we would have fought them, to the death if needed."

I sigh. So many of our siblings made that sacrifice in the battle. Having such potent defenders is nice, but I'll always feel the council wasted resources that could have been better spent protecting others. Ah well, it's all water under the bridge now I suppose. I push my tired brains to whip up a mind bridge and I extend it out towards Morrelia as she watches me approach.

[Hey there, Morrelia,] I greet her with a wave of an antenna, [how've you been?]

Her face twists with an unknown emotion before she finally smiles, her shoulders sagging.

[I didn't know what you would say to me when we met again, but I should never have had any doubt.]

I honestly don't know what she means.

[Thanks for saving me, by the way,] I tell her. [If you hadn't told me to run, things would have gone sideways pretty fast. That dude with the axe is something else. Look at what he did to my carapace, dammit!]

She takes a good look at the still healing (and completely disgusting) wound.

[A foot to the left and he might have carved me clean in half!] I complain. [Is someone like that even human anymore?]

[That's my father] she says quietly.

[Lovely guy. Charming even. I mean, so human. Such a warm personality and totally regular level of strength.]

She bursts out laughing.

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Chapter 664: The Siege pt 10

Despite being surrounded by hostile monsters who, quite rightly, were more than a little suspicious of her, Morrelia felt more at peace than she had in a long time. The Colony weren't in the wrong, she'd known that all along. The problem was, she wasn't sure that her father was wrong either. In the end, she decided her conscience would not abide sentencing Anthony and his family to death on the grounds that they *might* do something in the future. So far, they had only been a force for good and until that changed, they did not deserve to be exterminated.

She knew what this would mean should the Colony turn against the Sapient races in the future. Given enough time, the ants would amass unfathomable strength and should they attack, Pangea would be devastated before they could be stopped. In the end, she had decided it was a risk she was willing to take.

[You really don't seem to care,] she said to Anthony, [it doesn't bother you that I betrayed your trust and joined an army that was fighting against you?]

The giant ant looked at her quizzically, his antennae twitching in the random way they did whenever he was confused.

[No?] came his voice in her mind. [Should I be? I mean, from what you've said, you haven't personally fought us, didn't pass on any intelligence about us and have given us a potential key to survival in this conflict. Rather than be mad, I think I ought to thank you.]

Those jagged mandibles clacked happily and Morrelia knew he was about to do just what he'd said he would and thank her. For some reason, she was unwilling to hear that.

[I didn't even tell you I was going!] she burst out. [I just straight up abandoned the village and the Colony! And for what? To turn around and attack the people I had wanted to save?]

All the guilt that the proud soldier had been suppressing came flooding out, surprising her with the intensity of the emotion. She seethed with rage and self-loathing that had piled up over the weeks as she'd suppressed her doubts and fears about her chosen course of action. She felt so stupid now. The indecision and hesitation that plagued her seemed so foolish now, as if those feelings had belonged to another person. She realised her hands had clenched into fists that shook with the strength of her anger and she struggled to release the tension in her body.

[Sigh. Let me just roll over here a bit ... Ahhh. That's a bit better.]

The giant ant in front of her scrabbled in the dirt with his still undeveloped right side legs until he'd managed to tilt his carapace to present his wounded side to the roof.

[You gotta keep the dirt out of it, you know what I mean? Clean wound is a healthy wound. I mean, not healthy, but better. Actually, can monsters even get infections? Is their bacteria in the Dungeon? I've never thought of that. Is there monstrous bacteria?! That would be terrifying, holy moly!]

...

[What were you saying again?]

It was infuriating, the way he always turned the conversation away from the darker paths. It was particularly maddening because even now she couldn't be sure he was doing it on purpose. He was so *young*. It was easy to forget that some times. The voice that echoed in her mind whenever they spoke belonged to a boy not yet in his full growth. She didn't know why she always forgot that about him.

[Oh, right. I remember now, the abandonment thing. Look, I really think if you want to make that argument, you're talking to the wrong species, if you take my meaning.]

He gestured to himself with all six legs, though three of them were smaller than the others, making the motion rather lopsided.

[I'm an ant. Well, I'm an ant now, I suppose. Family is everything to us. I mean, *everything*. If you told any ant here that you walked out on the village in order to be with your family and you felt bad about it, they'd look at you like you were defective. Then they'd probably insist that you get some sleep. We're big on that here. Which reminds me.]

There was a brief pause in the conversation as Anthony grew still, his antennae sweeping around the swarming ants around them. Then each of those ants froze in place for a fraction of second before

resuming what they were doing, except now with a good dose of nervous energy added into the mix. After spending enough time amongst the ants, it wasn't too hard to pick up on a few of their emotional tells. The erratic, soft clacks of the mandibles, the incessant antennae cleaning and frequent flexing of the legs were all tells of a nervous ant.

[What did you say to them?] she asked.

[Just reminded them that rest is mandatory.]

Morrelia felt a laugh bubble up in her chest.

[You have to mandate rest periods?]

[Absolutely. Even then we get rebels who try and skip it sometimes.]

[What happens to them?]

[Dark things. I would rather not speak of it. Let us get back to your problems. You went to be with your father and mother. That's fine and totally the right thing to do. Could you have asked your dad to not almost cut me in half? Sure, I'd have liked it if you did. But you've done the next best thing by the sounds of it. You're absolutely sure he won't take the field if you're our prisoner?]

[So long as you get the message out that I'll be killed should he do so. My mother ordered that he bring me back alive, which means he can't take any action that would get me killed.]

[Because it's an order? You don't think he'd refuse to take the field just because you're his daughter?]

She hesitated, which told Anthony what he needed to know.

[Yeouch. That's rough.]

[He might and he might not,] Morrelia slumped over. [His duty is very important to him. I'm not saying that family isn't, but he has thousands of people, thousands of families to consider when making decisions. He takes that seriously.]

The ant nodded.

[A lack of selfishness. A strong ant-like trait that we respect. I suppose that order might turn into a relief for him. Now he has no reason to refuse to accede, given that it allows him to spare his daughter as well as follow orders. Wait a second... did you say your *mother* gave the orders? Your mum is even stronger than your dad?! What is up with your family?!]

Morrelia could only shrug helplessly.

[I didn't even realise how strong they were growing up. It just seemed normal to my brother and I.]

[You have a brother?]

The old and familiar pain stirred up.

[I had a brother.]

An antenna came down and patted her on the head.

[I'm sorry for your loss. The loss of a sibling is a painful thing. I have lost many in this lifetime and each of them stings in their own way.]

[I suppose I never thought about that. Each of you are related, aren't you? Siblings from the same parent.]

[Technically some of the Colony members are my nieces now that we have more than one Queen, but I rather just think of them all as siblings. There's no need for a generational hierarchy in the Colony.]

Morrelia was sceptical.

[Don't they call you the 'Eldest' and listen to you because you're technically the first of them? Sounds like a hierarchy already exists.]

[That's on them! I had nothing to do with that, and frankly I regret that it turned out this way. I was just a regular ant back in the day, one face in the crowd, and I liked it. Now I have all sorts of nonsense to deal with.]

For some reason he glared and snapped his mandibles at the roof as he spoke. It was a little ridiculous and Morrelia felt the tension drain out of her.

[I'm ready, you can take me to my cell now.] She levered herself to her feet.

Anthony flicked an antenna.

[Meh. We'll put you in Enid's rooms. I'm sure she'll be happy to see you. She brews a good cup of tea as well, or so I'm told. Nice to catch up Morrelia. Don't be a stranger. Provided your family doesn't keep trying to kill us, I suppose.]

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Chapter 665: The Siege pt 11

Alberton and Titus stood in grim silence as they awaited the emissary of the Colony to approach. The elderly woman looked the same as she had before, her expression the same resigned weariness that she had borne the first time they had met.

"I apologise for making you wait," she greeted them, "my old bones aren't as nimble as they once were."

Titus was in no mood for pleasantries.

"My daughter," he ground out, "does she still live?"

If Enid was surprised by his coarse attitude, she did not show it.

"She is still alive, of course she is. She spent many weeks with us helping the survivors of the Garralosh wave. I personally count her as a friend and would not see her come to harm."

It was such an infinitesimal change that only Alberton, through his long years working alongside his commander, saw the release of tension in Titus when he learned that Morrelia had not perished during the battle. Ever since his daughter had berserked and charged headfirst into the enemy lines he'd been wound as tight as a void-steel trap.

"What do you desire in exchange for the safe return of the prisoner?" he asked, his voice stiff.

Enid paused.

"You desire a prisoner exchange? Pardon my rudeness, but I do not believe you have captured any of our people..." she left a deliberate gap, "... alive."

It was true. On campaign against the monsters, the Legionem Abyssi did not take prisoners. Never had, never would.

"Can you offer a reprieve? Leave the Colony alone for a period of months? The ants would be more than willing to accommodate such an offer," Enid said.

Alberton grimaced, after even just two months, these ants would have multiplied into the millions. Multiple Legions would need to be deployed, probably even golems and praetorians. Such an expensive campaign would drain them of precious resources at a time when they couldn't afford it. Besides which, the Loremaster glanced at Titus.

"I will not entertain anything that goes counter to my orders," Titus stated flatly. "We have come here to exterminate this threat and that is what we intend to do."

Enid nodded in understanding.

"Although I hate to say it, that doesn't give the Colony much reason to continue to keep your daughter alive though, does it commander?" she pointed out. "There must be a point at which your duty and your familial affection can intersect, don't you think?"

"You're threatening her life?" Alberton demanded, "didn't you say moments ago that she was your friend?"

"She IS a friend," Enid insisted, "to me and many others in Renewal. But the Colony will make any decisions regarding her safety. They are fighting for their existence because of you. The idea that they would balk at them killing a prisoner when you slaughter every one of them you get your hands on is laughable."

Though she tried to hide it, the contempt she felt for their actions seeped into her voice as she spoke.

"You would weigh the lives of monsters against those of *humans*?" Alberton scoffed. "And then expect us to do the same?"

"You would give no weight to the lives of monsters, and then expect them to treat you differently?" Enid countered.

"Enough," Titus growled and the controlled rage in the man's voice was enough to silence the others in an instant. "No more games, Enid. You are a skilled negotiator and I have not the patience for this dance. State your terms."

When he wasn't actively holding himself back, the power of the commander rolled off him in waves and Enid needed a moment to steel herself before she spoke. With Morrelia's help, they had agreed on what the arrangement should be long before she had walked out to parley, but it was necessary that they create some form of illusion to protect the girl.

"The Colony will keep your daughter alive so long as you, commander Titus, do not take the field for the remainder of this battle. Should your forces be victorious, you find her within the nest, safely ensconced in my rooms. Should you pull back for whatever reason, send an emissary and she will be returned to you."

Alberton was troubled. This offer implied that the enemy was confident they would be able to hold the Legion at bay until circumstances forced them to fall back. This meant the Colony was as keenly aware of the approaching wave as they were. Maintaining a siege in the second strata would be impossible. Once these tunnels became flooded with demons, they would be forced to retreat. More than that, he was worried of the growing tree-kin presence in the tunnels below. Scouts reported that the forest spread further by the hour and movement had been spotted within several times. Most likely, the grove-keeper was already awake and the others wouldn't be far behind. The Loremaster inwardly cursed. That infernal tree would hound them any chance it got. How unlucky they had stumbled on a root stem out here in the middle of nowhere. The odds of it were so small he almost developed a headache just thinking about it.

"If I do not take the field, more of my soldiers will die in order to see that those living on the surface do so in peace," Titus said.

"I live on the surface, right next to the biggest anthill I've ever seen and I'm doing just fine," Enid replied.

"My people will still die."

"Not if you turn around and leave."

"You know I can't do that."

"Then you must make a choice, commander. Will you sacrifice the lives of your soldiers in order to save one of them? It's not a decision a leader would make," Enid sighed, "but it's one that a father might."

If Morrelia was right, Titus had little choice in the matter at all. His orders were clear and he had to follow them. Even if he was willing to sacrifice his daughter, which he likely wasn't, he would have to agree to their terms. The end result was that due to Morrelia's action, innocent soldiers would die who might otherwise have lived. A hard choice, but one that may have saved hundreds of thousands of Colony members.

Alberton was about to speak, but Titus cut him off.

"I agree," he rumbled.

Having said his piece, the commander nodded stiffly to Enid and turned on his heel to march back to his camp. Caught flat footed, Alberton stumbled a little before he too turned and caught up to his friend.

"Are you sure about this, old friend?" the Loremaster asked. "Do you really believe that they will hold to their end of this arrangement?"

"I believe Enid Ruther to be an honourable woman," Titus replied, "this is the best chance I have to ensure that my child is returned to me." His voice quietened. "I cannot lose her too, Alberton. I just can't."

Only when he heard those words did Alberton understand the true depth of the struggle that took place inside his commander. The loss of his first child had cut the man in a way that had never healed, though he hid it far too well. Should his daughter die, the man considered throughout the Legion to be unbreakable may crack like a fragile egg, never to come back together.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 666: The Siege pt 12

Ah! It's nice to have fully grown legs again. Like, just being able to walk normally is such a sweet thing. Only took a few hours too. There are advantages to being a monster, don't let me say that there aren't. Heck, if you ask me, I'd prefer monster every time! Which is probably exactly why the bearded bozo picked up my soul for this gig in the first place. Still, if I'd had this level of healing in my past life, I'd have missed a lot less meals. Which might have helped with the whole starvation situation.

Ah well.

No point crying over spilt... life. Got a whole new family with their lives on the line, and it's time to come good. Waving one antenna through the air I get a sense of the mood in the crowd of ants gathered outside the second gate. Despite the impending battle, or perhaps *because* of the impending battle, the general feeling is positive. My siblings are so packed full of fighting spirit they practically vibrate in place. I don't know why I even bother to check anymore, it's more of a reflex than something that I actually need to do. Trickleing through the Vestibule, the whispered will of the Colony is always there within my thoughts, inescapable and inevitable. I know what they want. They tell me, all the time. I can hear the ants defending against the golgari just as well as the Queens deep within the nest. Sometimes I forget that it's not the normal for me to know these things and I have to consciously remind myself what it is that I'm hearing. It's a bit weird but I'm getting the hang of it. If it gets worse in my next evolution though, it'll get annoying.

The other thing that rings alarms to my senses is the concentration of mana. The speed of the rise towards the last wave was much faster in the last few days and we've hit that point already. Every hour it gets higher. The shadows are so thick you could spread them on toast. Even this high up in the strata, the stink of death is starting to creep into everything. I mean, it's not really a smell, but the sickly taint of death mana is starting to permeate the air and stick to everything it touches. I hope they're cleaning it out of the brood chambers, we don't want the young getting exposed to this stuff, it's nasty.

Before too long a full blast wave is going to kick off and the council has agreed that the Legion and golgari are unlikely to want to pursue their siege with an infinite number of crazed monsters flooding the tunnels. Heck, if we ended up holding them out of the nest, their encirclement would end up protecting us rather than hurting us. Given the time frame involved, it looks like they have enough of a window for one big push to try and crack the gates before they run out of time. Since the last attack, we've had almost six hours of tense quiet in the nest. Our enemies have all pulled back and I suspect they are gathering their strength and coordinating their plans for an all-out assault.

Naturally, the Colony has not wasted that time. If the enemy is going to give us an opportunity to get some work done, then we ants aren't going to hold back. The carvers have gone absolutely ballistic, swarming all over the place in a frenzy of mandibles and earth mana. It was quite a sight to see. One second, you'd be looking at a stretch of tunnel, the next it would be filled with ants crammed together

like sardines in a can. After ten minutes of furious work they'd vanish, leaving behind a reinforced tunnel with choke points, traps, hardened walls, embedded steel stakes and pristine carvings engraved in the stone.

WHY THE CARVINGS?!

I wanted to yell at them but they were gone so quickly, I didn't get a chance! Off to their next assignment. Now I sit outside the second gate, awaiting the resumption of the fighting. I doubt it'll be long, I can already sense the mana stirring at the end of the tunnel.

"I still think we shouldn't have abandoned the first gate," Vibrant interrupts my thoughts, "it was a great gate! Very shiny and metal and it must have taken so long to build. I know that the carvers worked on it for ages! Think about all that work going to waste, it isn't right! The second gate is bigger though... and shinier! Why is it more shiny? Is it the metal? I bet it's the metal. Do you think it's the metal? Maybe they polished it. I wonder if polishing the gate makes it stronger in some way. Does magic slide off it? It probably doesn't. Do you know -"

"Gah! Vibrant! Can you hold it in for a minute or two? My antennae feel like they're about to fall off!"

"No, I can't."

... At least she's honest.

"You've been like this since you were a larvae, I can't be surprised about it now," I sigh. "Just try and not die, alright? These guys pack some serious heat, I nearly got carved in half and your carapace is weak as paper compared to mine, so be careful."

"It is not!" she protests, "I've upgraded my carapace heavily I'll have you know!"

"Didn't you get some mutation that made it lighter so you could run faster?"

"... no."

"That's what I thought. Just don't get killed, alright? It's going to be hard to make use of your speed out here in the crush."

"Kay-kay, Eldest. I'll be careful."

I still feel like I'm herding children half the time with the Colony, even if most of them are smarter than me. Good thing I'm not fighting on the same front as Leeroy. I'd have probably smashed her armour to pieces through sheer force of thwacking.

"Movement down the tunnel!" I smell someone call down the tunnel and in a moment I see Burke running back through the darkness.

"I think they're coming, Eldest."

"Of course they are," I tell her, "what the heck else were they going to do? Leave us alone?"

Around me an elite force of thousands of the Colony's finest stirs, peppered amongst them the human reinforcements of the village with their antmancers, including the stupid priest. If the Legion wants to break through here and into the nest, they're going to have to pay a heavy price. I'll make sure of it.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 667: The Siege pt 13

Granin sighed and scratched at the solid granite covering his leg. He could feel his hands against the stone as if it were a part of his own body, a product of the fusion process he'd experienced in his youth. He'd never regretted choosing the humble ore that now coated his body. Granite was common as mud, resistant to weathering and hard to grind down. It was the same kind of stubborn that he was and he liked how much it suited him just as much as he liked the message it sent.

Too many flaunted their wealth and connections, using the sacred tradition of bonding to the stone as a means to differentiate themselves from their fellow golgari. He found it distasteful. It was another sign of the degradation, the rot, that had sunk into the Empire of Stone through the centuries. Whenever they saw him, whenever those elites were forced to turn their gaze on his skin, he was slapping them in the face. He could see the distaste in their eyes, see the sneer that was born in the corner of their lips. Though he wouldn't admit it, certainly not at his advanced age, he took a childlike glee in rubbing their faces in it. In forcing them to look at how the rest of them lived.

Which was why, when summoned to stand before the High Blade, he took particular pleasure in scratching his leg and making no effort to conceal the boredom that he felt at being forced to stand and wait for his 'betters' to notice him. At least it gave him a little time to reflect.

He'd had to admit that he'd been right to trust his instincts with Anthony. That boy showed tremendous promise for a monster and had overcome everything Pangera had thrown at him so far. What he'd seen of the Colony so far from this conflict had impressed him to no end. There was clearly great potential in the ant-strain of monsters that had gone unexplored all this time. Granin couldn't fault the researchers who'd gone before him though, he himself had overlooked them despite dedicating his research within the Cult of the Worm to other sidelined species.

If Anthony managed to survive and evolve another two or three times, his true potential would be unveiled. Thinking about it, the ambitions that Granin had thought buried with his youth ignited within him once again. The dream of every cult member was to create or mentor the final ancient and complete the circle. This had been their mission since the mission had been handed down to them by the Great Worm itself. Like all new cult members, Granin had yearned for that glory and devoted long hours to scouring books and roaming the Dungeon in search of overlooked, under-researched or unseen specimens. Whilst he'd contributed well above the average for a cult member and experienced many great successes, the dream had eventually died out in him.

Only for a strange ant to stumble into his path and open his eyes to new possibilities and a future that he had given up on seeing within his lifetime. At times he regretted not going with his younger Triad members when Anthony had escaped. He had decided at the time that he would rather stand alongside his people for the trials that were to come, but every day his people seemed to find a new way to let him know that they didn't want him there.

A few metres away, the warrior caste muttered amongst themselves in a loose circle around the High Blade. Their glorious leader listened to all of it with a pensive frown on his face, as if anything that was being said was in any way relevant. Granin doubted they had anything to say that hadn't already been

chewed over a hundred times. Despite spending golgari blood like water, they were no closer to achieving their goal and they were running out of time. All for the pride of the clans.

"Shaper Lazus, the High Blade wishes to speak with you."

Finally they have time for him. He still isn't sure why they insist on speaking to him at all. They have their own clan aligned Shapers, loyal to the house of Balta, why call on someone like him? Because of Anthony, obviously, but he wasn't sure what it was about his connection to Anthony that interested them so much.

"I am here," Granin announced himself, making a point of openly displaying his granite skin as he saluted. "What is your will?"

The High Blade stared hard at him, disgust and contempt clear on his face for all to see. Granin nearly laughed out loud but managed to stifle it in his chest. If he only knew Granin felt the exact same about him, how would he react? He'd probably cut off the Shaper's head, to be honest.

"It is good to see you have survived the hardships of this expedition," Kooranon Balta intoned in the needlessly formal way of the nobility. "You have proven to be a survivor."

"Shapers learn to adapt and survive in situations that don't allow us control. The Dungeon does not bend to our will from birth, so we learn to manage it," Granin replied.

Muttering and growls rose from the warriors around him for the implied insult to their caste. Every citizen of the Empire hopped when the warriors said jump. They truly were coddled from the day they were born. Though usually Granin would put some effort into concealing his jabs, he must be more bored with living than he thought. Insulting warriors to their face was a quick way to get into an honour duel. Totally fair one on one combat, with no magic allowed...

Surprisingly, the High Blade raised a hand and silenced those around him in an instant.

"You are bold," he observed, "perhaps foolishly so."

"With respect," Granin nodded, "I think I'm merely getting old. One tends to lose their subtlety as one ages."

"I have found the same. Perhaps I would be able to speak with you directly then."

He waved a hand and an adjutant brought a chair over in a rush, placing it behind the noble and inviting him to sit with a quiet "by your will". With his eyes still on Granin, Kooranon sat, placing his sheathed blade across his knees. The Shaper noted wryly that no seat was offered to him. Typical bloody nobles.

"You have a relationship with the reincarnated creature, do you not? He was under your care during his stay with the Shapers?"

"He was. I wouldn't say we had a relationship, but we spoke many times."

The noble's eyes glittered.

"That is good," he said, "I had hoped for as much. You may be fit to serve the purpose I have in mind then."

Granin had a bad feeling about this.

"May I know what the nature of service will be?" he asked, not expecting an answer.

Surprisingly, the High Blade elaborated.

"I have made no secret of my desire for the creature to die by my hand. It is necessary to expunge the shame that filth has placed on my house. Sadly, breaking down this nest and slaughtering all within has proven more challenging than anticipated, and, strange as it might be, the possibility that the wave will force us to retreat before the work can be completed has become very real."

He leaned forward, his hands caressing the sheath of the blade he held unconsciously.

"This is unacceptable."

The unbridled anger that burned in the noble was intense and the power of the man began to leak out, oppressing Granin where he stood. As much as he looked down on the warrior, his level was the real deal.

"So I have been forced to consider an alternate strategy to destroy the pest. I will use you as bait and demand the beast meet me in combat outside the gate. Should it refuse, I will cut off your head in full view of the nest and the siege will resume."

Somehow, Granin doubted this was in line with what the High Blade had no doubt promised his allies in the Legion, but it wouldn't matter to him. Clan honour was the only honour that truly mattered to the Blades.

"Typical," he sighed.

A sharp blow cracked the stone on the back of his head and he knew no more.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 668: The Siege pt 14

I can already hear the fighting. The sounds of clashing steel and snapping mandibles tug at my claws and I have to force myself to resist charging blindly into the fray like a shinier, much smarter Leeroy. Keeping myself so still has never been so hard before. Then again, the only member of my family that I know was exposed to danger in my previous life was myself. In Pangera, I have thousands of siblings exposed to terrible danger almost every day. It's enough to drive a person nuts.

The Vestibule makes my situation even worse, but if I focus then I can filter out their whispers.

We have a plan and I'm going to stick to it. When the fighting gets hot here at the gate, I'm going to be right in the thick of it, which is where I want to be. At the front gate, the lead force of a few thousand is busy putting the Legion through their paces using all of the same tricks and tactics that we spent on them the first time around. River of acid, magic barrage, the works. They'll have to fight their way through all of it a second time before they even get through the first gate. By the time they reach me here, I'm hoping that they'll be all tuckered out and want to quit and go home.

More likely they'll be mad as hell and wanting to carve me into itty bitty pieces but at the very least they'll have worked to get here. The ants and humans on this side of the picture need every edge we can get.

"How confident are you, Eldest?" Advant asks.

The powerful soldier stands next to me in the dark, her antennae twitching in a rarely seen sign of nerves.

"We're going to win," I tell her with certainty, "we're ants. What can they possibly do against us?"

"They've managed to bottle us up in our nest and destroy the outer gate."

"Bah. Just a flesh wound."

"You nearly got cut in half."

"As I said, just a flesh wound."

"Getting cut in half is just a flesh wound?"

"I'm perfectly fine now aren't I?"

A beat.

"So you're saying the Colony might get cut in half but we'll heal eventually?"

"No! I'm saying we'll be fine!"

...

"I think so too."

All around us the packed ants of the Colony stir. It's not like we can keep our scent conversation private from them, not that I felt any need. I truly believe that we will win. My family has been incredible from the moment I found them in this life and I refuse to believe they won't overcome this challenge just like they have every other.

BOOM!

A thunderous impact roars down the tunnel as the gates buckle on their hinges. A moment later, a flood of ants begins to pour through the gap between the two doors, a gap that rapidly widens as more of my siblings push it open as they retreat. It looks like the line has buckled at the first gate, a bit faster than expected. No matter.

Injured soldiers and scouts supported by their still healthy allies as the retreat occurs in swift silence. When they reach us, the lines part in unison to allow the wounded through, medics already rushing forward to work their magic. The air is tense now as we watch and wait for the enemy to show their faces. It takes longer than I expect, they must be being cautious in the extreme. Understandable, considering this is their big push. If they fail on this assault, they probably won't be able to muster another before the wave hits.

After ten minutes, I see the gate buckle as armoured figures appear and begin to force them open, teams bracing their shoulders against the metal and pushing with raw physical strength. The gate Titus cut into is in particularly bad shape. That mad man managed to cut through the damn thing from a hundred metres away. I hope the Legion doesn't have many more like him tucked away somewhere, because just one is more than the entire Colony can handle at the moment.

Another ten minutes pass in tense silence as the legionaries force open gates and reassemble themselves into the disciplined, impenetrable ranks that we have come to know them for. Our side watches it all happen, unwilling to be baited into a fight other than the one we've prepared for. These buggers are crafty. They looked all disorganised as they were moving through the gate, but I wager if we'd try to charge over we'd have found them snapped into neat ranks in a matter of moments.

[How are you holding up there Priest?]

In a rare showing of charity toward the crazy, one-armed human I reach out to him with my mind and initiate a conversation. Inwardly, I brace myself for what may come of it. If he doesn't shout at me, I'll take it as a win. To my shock, the priest sounds incredibly lucid.

[I am well, Great One. My brethren and I eagerly await the coming contest. We hope that in a few hours, the Colony will be freed from this threat and able to once more pursue its grand destiny.]

I mean. He *sounds* calm, but the words are about as batty as I'd expected.

[Any idea what sort of destiny you have in mind?]

I'm sort of curious to learn what he thinks this rapidly swelling pile of monster ants is going to amount to.

[I have no idea,] he surprises me instead. [It is not for me to guess or influence you, or the Colony, in any direction in particular. Such a thing would be sacrilege. We will wait and watch as we tread upon the path that you set before our feet. That is our mission.]

[Fair enough I suppose. I like that you don't intend to interfere with the Colony. I don't think that would go down too well. Oh, right! I forgot you can smell our pheromone language now. How's that going for you?]

[It is wonderful. I cannot wait until I am able to communicate with a scent of my own.]

That will be... interesting. How will the scent be produced? I'm going to assume 'magic' and not some sort of extreme diet leading to eloquent flatulence.

Up ahead, the Legion has begun their advance, marching toward us with measured steps that shake the ground with their uniform tread. It's time.

[Thanks for the chat Beyn. We are counting on your guys in this battle. Do your best to keep your people alive.]

[I will, Great One. May you also fight well and survive into the new day.]

Maybe I was wrong about Beyn being a lunatic. During that conversation he was cool as a cucumber. Maybe he's turned over a new leaf and calmed himself down? That's be a welcome change, to be sure.

Let's see. Interested in this 'new Beyn', I lift up my head and survey the massed forces of the Colony, scanning for a sign of the priest. I know which direction he is after the mind connection... just need to.. Ah! There he is.

He's actually a little hard to miss, standing atop a rock. I didn't notice him at first because rather than wearing his usual robes, he is almost totally naked, his bare and pale skin revealed for all to see. In his one good hand he is holding a gnarled staff with an ant head carved on the top, which he is brandishing at the oncoming Legion. From his mouth, an endless stream of both vile curses and foam are directed toward the enemy as his eyes bulge with the fervour of his rage.

You know what? This makes more sense to me. This is fine.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 669: The Siege pt 15

As the approaching wall of legionaries draws closer, I perform a final check to make sure everything is ready for the battle to come. Do I have a giant ape? Check. Crazy shadow blob of unending horror? Check. Weird eyeball dude? Check. Omni-elemental construct fired up and ready to go? Check. Even my spiffy diamond carapace is back to full shininess. I couldn't possibly be more ready to deal out the pain.

[Tiny, you remember what you need to do?] I ask.

The big bat-faced gorilla turns to look down at me and nods slowly, a broad grin splitting his face.

[Tiny smash,] he declares confidently, one car tire sized paw patting himself on the chest.

With his patchwork armour and helmet strapped on, he makes quite the intimidating sight. Smithant outdid herself when slapping this stuff together, her work has kept the big fella's injuries down to an almost unheard of level. He's going to need every bit of that protection for this one, as there is simply no retreat. We fight until the fight is won.

[How about you Crinis? Are you going to be alright?]

[I would rather stay by your side, Master,] she complains yet again.

[You'll be able to inflict far more punishment on the enemy from where you are rather than hanging on the back of my carapace. There's no avoiding the danger this time, we just need to dive in and hope for the best.]

[I understand, I simply worry about you. I will do my best to bring a swift end to this conflict.]

[Make sure you stay safe in there. When your supply of shadow flesh runs out, you need to retreat. That's the agreement, remember?]

[I know!]

I've been hassling her a bit over the plan for this battle, so I understand why she might be a bit frustrated. I've been doing all I can to try and make sure that my pets will survive the fight, but in Crinis' case, all she cares about is if I survive. Fortunately, I get to make the final call.

[How about you Invidia? You ready to cut loose?]

The eyeball is hovering further back towards the gate amongst the other mages of the Colony, further back than the front-liners like myself and Tiny. Going to need to rely on his firepower pretty heavily if we want to make it through this. The Legion is going to put a big target on him for sure and I expect a ton of magic and arrow fire to go his way once the fighting gets thick.

[I am alwaysssss ready. They wantsss to take what we have? I envy their optimissssm.]

Invida is throwing shade at the Legion now? Colour me surprised. Just goes to show that if you try hard enough, you can even tick off a greed demon. I have to give our enemies their due, they *have* been working hard. The massed ranks of the Legion begin to step forward with their slow, measured tread and immediately the long range acid artillery kicks into gear. Huge, dense arcing jets of sizzling acid fly overhead, the force of the shots so powerful that even the spray and drizzle lands in front of me. The artillery squad have really been amping up their Skill levels during these battles and the effects are clearly visible here. As I watch the burning liquid splash against the golden layers of the enemy shields, I nervously check my omni-elemental construct once more.

I've decided to make the decision to lean on this new-fangled piece of technology for this battle. Normally, I'd be winding up a massive gravity bomb and chucking it at the Legion, but I don't think I should in this fight. Although the bomb does a great job of causing chaos and inflicting the occasional casualty, as well as serving the intended purpose of wearing down the barriers the Legion puts up, taxing their mages and soldiers alike. It's a great plan and I loved it, but this fight isn't like the others. This is going to be a grind. This is going to be a no holds barred head-butting contest until one side blinks. The bomb is a great piece of work, but it tires out my brains to the point that even with the Vestibule refilling my tank it takes a while to get back to full strength and frankly, I wasn't sure it would be a good idea to knock myself out so hard at the beginning.

Practice with the new construct has continued whenever I have the chance and now I'm finally confident that each of my brains is prepped and knows what they are doing well enough that I can manage to use the thing effectively. My current setup is to have the main sub-brain focus on maintaining the construct whilst the two sub-brains operate the thing. The only problem with this is that none of the brains are quite up to the tasks they've been assigned on their own. Maintaining the construct and helping to create the desired mana types is too much for the larger sub-mind, which means my main mind needs to chip in and help. Similarly, the two smaller sub-minds aren't quite up to the task of producing and weaving the mana that comes out on their own, which means the main mind needs to pitch in and help.

Does it make much sense that I made the main mind the strongest and then only relied on it for biting and dodging whilst the smaller, weaker sub-minds have to do the heavy lifting magic wise? It doesn't does it? Ah well. It's not easy, but if I can maintain the delicate balance of ducking in with my main brain to help out when needed then it all comes together to a reasonable degree. It's not perfect, but it's usable. In fact, the time to put it to the test has finally arrived. I absentmindedly raise my abdomen to start aiming my own acid barrage toward the oncoming Legionaries whilst my focus turns inward. My main sub-mind is already straining under the pressure so I jump in to aid it as the two sub-minds begin to operate the construct. Raw mana flows from my core which is quickly replenished by the flow pouring up through my legs, before splitting into halves and entering the many layered sphere at two separate points. Now the magic really begins. As each segment of the construct rotates in its own direction, the sub-minds hold onto the flow of mana that they control and direct it carefully through a labyrinthine route that only they can see. As the energy traverses the construct, it begins to change, taking on the

properties of the desired elements and then rising through the layers once more to exit, ready to be shaped.

My main mind leaps to work controlling the flow of mana as the two sub-minds grasp hold of the new mana and begin to shape it into spells.

Nothing too complicated to start with, this is already hard enough without getting too crazy. The two types of mana I've produced are lava (the combination of fire and earth) and air. With the lava, I'm forming a simple lava bolt, the most basic of all spells. The lava mana is tricky to work with. It's turbulent and broiling. Too hot to handle, in a way. With the air mana, I create something akin to the spear shape. Air acts very differently to the other types of mana, which makes sense as it isn't as solid as they are. The spear isn't exactly something that I'll throw at the enemy, creating a pointy tornado and flinging it about isn't really something I can do (yet). Instead, it will act more like a wind tunnel, drawing air in on one side, accelerating it and then flinging it out the other side.

Think of it as a booster tunnel that I want to shoot lava through. Because... that's exactly what it is.

Let 'em fly!

The lava bolts are about the size of my eye, the molten oozing liquid burns with a fierce energy and I feel a little relief from the sub-brains as the spells are finally pulled from their grasp. Once the orbs of lava enter the wind tunnels, they shoot forward faster than I can track with my eyes, only to *crack* into the Legion barriers over a hundred metres away where they steam and sizzle before I realise it.

That's tasty!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 670: The Siege pt 16

Coolant looked out from her perch next to the upper sally port of the great gate and felt nothing but confusion.

"Do you want to go tell him, or should I?" she said to Sloan who was clinging to the wall next to her.

The general shook her head, bewildered.

"I mean. They have to know, right? There's no chance that they don't know."

"I assume they know. I mean, what are the odds the two forces aren't communicating to this extent?"

"Almost none, surely. Such a lack of organisation in our foes would throw our plans way out."

"Hasn't this thrown them way out anyway?"

Sloan hesitated.

"That's... true."

The two of them looked out in silence for a few more moments at the totally unexpected scene before them.

"What do you think we should do?" Coolant asked, her scent as calm and unruffled as it always was.

"I don't know!" Sloan fretted. Why would these idiots perform this sort of moronic action *now* of all times? It didn't make any sense!

Once again that strange, undirected mental communication washed out over them, rippling through the ambient mana in the air and into their heads.

[Bring the reincarnated one here, or this one, a friend of that creature, will die.]

Just inside the first gate, a procession of golgari stood with one of their own forced to kneel on the ground at sword point whilst an elaborately armoured figure reclined in a chair next to him, watching all that occurred with an expression of detached boredom. Next to them a trio of mages worked together, supposedly sending out the mind magic communications.

"They have to mean the Eldest... Who else could they possibly want?" Coolant wondered with some interest.

"I have no idea, but the Eldest *isn't here*. There is almost a zero percent chance that they don't know that! Surely!" Sloan said. "... We have to talk to them."

"What, why?" Coolant asked. In her opinion, if one of the golgari wanted to kill another golgari for some reason, why not let them do it? One less for them to fight when they made a push for the gate.

"If the Eldest is involved, there might be some element at play that we don't understand," Sloan sighed. "Anytime something weird happens, it's usually to do with the Eldest."

Coolant could only nod to that. It was true. For whatever reason, the Eldest gobbled down trouble like a Queen taking in Biomass. The end result was something good, but the appetite appeared to be endless.

"So you want me to reach out to them?" Coolant offered. "I'll need to move a little closer, I don't think I can extend a mind bridge that far."

"I'll arrange an escort."

The general scuttled away and had a thousand ants ready to escort the mage closer to the enemy in a matter of seconds. Coolant had a thought though.

"Do you think a thousand may send the wrong message?"

"What do you mean?"

"They have a total of.." she counted quickly, "eight golgari over there. If we walk closer with a thousand, might they think they are being attacked?"

"You think a thousand is too many?" Sloan rubbed the top of her head with an antennae. A thousand didn't feel like many to her. Then again, she was an ant. "I'll send a hundred."

The mage nodded. A hundred should be fine. Shortly thereafter a procession of a hundred and one ants cautiously advanced toward the golgari delegation, ready to flee at a moment's notice. Sloan had considered things carefully and the delegation contained a healthy mix of mages, for raising shields, scouts, for detecting foul play, and soldiers, to hold the line in the event the others needed to retreat. Once they had covered half the ground toward the first gate, they very obviously stopped and parked

themselves for a moment. Acting with great caution, Coolant wove together a mind bridge and extended it toward the trio of mages in the golgari party.

[I greet you on behalf of the Colony,] she started off formally, [I have come to clarify exactly what it is that you want.]

The stone-people all communicated with each other for a long moment before a reply came back.

[The reincarnated ant. We want you to bring them here so that they may duel the High Blade Balta. He wishes to expunge the shame the creature has cast upon his house with his own hand.]

Coolant was rather taken aback by this. This guy came all the way out here chasing the Eldest? For what? Some imagined insult? She couldn't possibly comprehend the meaning behind such actions, but she didn't let her confusion show. True to her name, she remained calm.

[When you refer to the 'reincarnated one', you refer to the member of our family who was captured by your people? Large? Shiny carapace?] Better to be sure.

More conferring.

[That is correct.]

Nice to have that confirmed.

[You are aware that the individual you refer to is currently engaged in fighting your allies on the other side of the nest?]

[We are.]

...

[It will be difficult to bring the one you want here to this place,] Coolant said, which was putting it mildly. There was battle going on! Did they forget that?

[We believe the reincarnated one will not want this individual to perish. His name is Granin and he knew the monster we want quite well.]

In all likelihood the Eldest would not want this golgari to die. Surely not even these invaders would be so foolish as to try a gambit such as this if they weren't at least somewhat competent. On the other claw, there was precious little chance the Eldest would be able to extricate herself from the battle with the Legion. Feeling somewhat deflated, Coolant bade the enemy farewell and returned to Sloan at the gate. She rapidly explained the situation to the general who pondered for a moment.

"We will need to consult those two. They might know something that can help sort this out."