

## Chrysalis 671

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#### Chapter 671: The Siege pt 17

It didn't take long to locate the two golgari advisors within the Colony. Corun and Torrina were anxiously awaiting news of the outcome in Enid's rooms. The Colony had been unwilling to allow the two to fight on the frontline, despite them putting forward numerous requests. In the end it was the Eldest himself who shot them down, relegating the pair to tea and biscuits with the mayor as the fight to determine their survival went on without them.

Needless to say, they were more than a little shocked to be summoned to the gate during the battle, and even more shocked to learn of the circumstances when they got there.

"By the granite gonads of my forefathers!" Corun swore. "Is that idiot noble *seriously* trying to fight an honour duel against a monster here and now?! With Granin's head on the line? This is madness!"

Torrina stared hard at the gate, as if her gaze were enough to pierce the hundreds of tons of metal that stood between her and her mentor.

"We have to save him," she turned to her fellow triad member, "we can't just leave him there."

The usually cold and distant Torrina was nowhere to be seen, replaced with someone whose eyes brimmed with fear. For once, the talented Shaper appeared to have no clue how she should proceed. Seeing the change in her, Corun drew quiet as he wracked his brain trying to find a solution.

[I have to tell you,] Coolant told them, [at the moment we have no intention of bringing the Eldest here to do battle with this person.]

Corun was taken aback by how direct the mage was being with him, but he couldn't support their decision when his mentor's life was on the line.

[I assure you], he pleaded, [Anthony would not want Granin to die!]

Coolant eyed him.

[They probably wouldn't,] she admitted, [but is the Eldest willing to sacrifice hundreds of their siblings in order to come here and fight to the death against a foe of unknown strength? Indeed, it would seem to be in the best interest of the Colony to take this decision away from the Eldest, and allow them to focus on the battle in front of them.]

[Is that how the Colony treats its oldest member now?] Corun asked. [You control Anthony and make decisions for him?]

[Do not presume to judge how we treat members of our own family!] the usually placid mage displayed her rising anger in her furious tone, [the Eldest is fighting for the survival of our entire *species*. What is one golgari, regardless of who, against that?]

As much as he wanted to argue, Corun could not tell Coolant that she was wrong. He wrestled with himself for a moment before his shoulders slumped in defeat.

[Is there really nothing we can do?] he pleaded. [Granin has done so much for Anthony. It's not right that we would abandon him.]

He brightened as an idea struck him.

[You could let me go,] he said, [perhaps they would take me instead. I could reason with them, or fight in Anthony's place.]

Torrina had kept her mind attuned to the conversation, listening with stone faced silence as Corun tried to negotiate for the Colony to save her teacher, but she couldn't remain silent now.

[Corun, you mustn't!] she broke in, [you'd be cut down in a second!]

Her fellow triad member set his jaw.

"You can't be sure of that," he said out loud, "I'm stronger than you think."

"I know you're good, but that's a High Blade! In a one on one fight, you wouldn't stand a chance. If you get yourself killed, they'll kill Granin too, and I'll be the only one left."

The heartbreak of being the lone survivor of a triad was not something she was willing to bear, not when she could save at least one of the most important people in her life.

"Then what do you propose we do?" Corun hissed, his frustration bubbling up, "they won't get Anthony, and if nobody goes out there then Granin is as good as dead!"

"Please, calm yourselves," a new voice pierced the gloom that had descended over the two Shapers, "I may be able to assist in this matter."

Outside the gate, Balta was rapidly growing impatient.

"How much longer before they bring the beast here for me to slay?" he demanded.

"We do not know, High Blade," the leader of the Shaper triad managed to hide his exasperation and reply with proper deference. How could he possibly know?! These were ants he was negotiating with! Who knew how they would react to anything!

He was positively relieved when he realised there was movement at the gate once more, the giant, looming ant head split as one side of the gate was pushed open slightly and a figure emerged. It wasn't an ant, which was disappointing, but at least *some* form of response was coming their way. The mage could only hope it was enough to relieve the irritated noble's temper before he started taking it out on them.

Balta watched the distant person approach with hooded eyes, scanning for every detail his eyes could pick out. What he saw intrigued him. This was no ordinary messenger. Something about the way they moved told him that this person was high level. There was a confidence, a balance in every step that only those with true power possessed. From what the High Blade knew, there shouldn't be such a person here with these miserable ants. He resisted the urge to lean forward to see better so as not to give away his curiosity as he tried to gather more information.

There wasn't much to glean. The figure was shrouded in a dark robe and appeared to carry no weapons, with the hood pulled up to cover their face, it wasn't even possible to determine race or gender.

"Halt there," called the Shaper as the mystery person drew within twenty paces. "Reveal yourself and state your business."

The figure made no move to draw back their hood as they responded. The voice that emerged was steady and sure, confident and calm. When he heard it, the High Blade's eyes narrowed.

"I have come to negotiate, on behalf of my people."

There was a moment of pause before Balta himself replied.

"Who are 'your people'?" he demanded, "if you are an ant, you are surely a strange one. My demands are clear, bring me the abomination or this one dies."

He gestured without looking at the silent Granin who remained forced to his knees, tied and bound securely. The figure laughed quietly as they revealed their face.

"I am indeed, no member of the Colony," Grey said, "but the Folk have something to say regarding what is taking place here."

The wolf-like features of the representative struck the golgari dumb momentarily, except for Granin who chuckled through his gag. What in the name of the Great Worm is one the Folk doing here?! Not even he could have predicted this! Anthony truly did bring chaos wherever he went.

Almost against his will, Balta sat straighter when Grey revealed himself. The currents were shifting quickly beneath his feet and he struggled to hold his ground. He still needed to get what he wanted and he would not allow this turn of events to deny him!

"Your people hold no claim to this territory," he sneered, "and have no authority in these tunnels. Were I to cut you down where you stand, the Folk would have no ability to seek redress from me. You are obstructing us in prosecuting an extermination."

"Things are rarely so simple," Grey chided as he massaged his palms and forearms, "and never when the Dungeon is concerned. I have applied to have the Colony recognised as one of the New Races. The tribes deliberate as we speak."

"It will be years before they come to any sort of agreement," Balta scoffed, "why does this concern me?"

"Because," Grey said, "it means I am within my rights to fight to defend this new race, according to the Laws of my people."

The wolf flexed his hands and from each finger snapped a wickedly gleaming claw several inches long.

"What are you proposing?" The High Blade asked as he eyed those edges.

"Well. I *could* take a position at the gate and carve your people apart by the dozens as they approach, dooming your expedition to failure..."

"Or," Balta grated.

"... *or*, you could accept me as a substitute for your duel," Grey smiled fiercely, his pointed teeth on display.

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### **Chapter 672: The Siege pt 18**

Spell after spell I flung toward the oncoming Legion soldiers, battering away at their layered bubbles of golden shields along with the rest of my siblings. Hundreds, thousands of projectiles and magical strikes rocket through the air, sometimes colliding before even reaching the target, to smash into the enemy defences which flash and burst with rippling waves of light with each connection. It was a dazzling sight to behold, not that I had the time to appreciate it. The return fire had begun. My sharpened reflexes and precognitive instincts keep me relatively safe from the barrage of arrows that crunch into the stone as if they've been fired out of a cannon. I am forced to constantly hop from side to side as my antennae tingled constantly, warning me of the projectiles directed at me.

I get the feeling the Legionaries are holding a grudge, or perhaps I just make too shiny of a target out here in the front of the Colony lines. My diamond carapace is so damn sparkly that the enemy just can't help but shoot at it. At least I'm serving my intended purpose and absorbing more than my fair share of the damage, keeping my siblings safer through this early part of the battle. It does throw off my concentration though, making it much harder to maintain my wind assisted lava assault. The need for my main mind to continuously pick up the slack for the other brains makes it hard to focus on dodging and casting at the same time. I decide to focus more on my spells, which means I get hit moments later.

Not a problem for the diamond carapace! Gweheheheh. Oh shoot!

Seeing me get hit with an arrow appears to have emboldened the Legion mages and snipers, at least, that's what it seems like since the wave of ordinance being sent my way has intensified. Settle down people! You need to find your chill! The carapace on the lower side of my body gets pelted with shards of stone as impacts crunch into the rock between my legs. I'm dancing the dance of my people, which turns out to be a frantic six-legged scramble back and forth whilst contorting my body into strange shapes and flinging spells. It can't look too dignified, but it's going to get the job done!

BOOM!

Aha! Invidia is finally in range to do his thing! Explosions begin to rock the tunnel, sending dust and stone flying into the air and causing trickles of loose soil to rain down from above as the impacts shake the stone itself. The balls of fire are spectacular as they blossom against the enemy shields, causing them to spark and ripple as the Legion continues their implacable advance. I can't help but be a little impressed with the indomitable and unyielding discipline of the Legion soldiers. We are pouring all the firepower that the Colony can muster down on their heads right now and they don't flinch. It must help that they're encased from head to toe in armour far better than anything we can make, but still, they're just humans. Compared to us ants, they're clearly lacking in many respects (legs) but even so they've pushed our backs to the wall.

As the Legion draws closer, it becomes harder and harder to dodge the incoming fire and I begin to take more damage than I would like as arrows and spells start to chip my precious carapace. Incremental damage will pile up over time and the closer the Legion gets, the stronger these shots are. Colony mages

are doing their best to erect shields and take the sting out of our foe's magical barrage, but as the distance shortens they have much less time to work. Naturally, the same goes for us.

BOOM!

Holy smokes! The heat from that one nearly singed the hair off of my antennae. The glare of the light momentarily blinds me and I hop to one side before my vision is restored, trusting in my instincts to keep from taking an arrow through the eye. Not being able to blink really sucks at moments like this, I can't shield my vision even though I want to! I notice all around me the Soldiers are starting to loosen their joints and flex their mandibles as the ranks tighten. It won't be long now until the two sides collide for the first melee of this battle and it pays to ensure you aren't too tightly wound up before it happens. The ranks tighten and even my performative display of dodging becomes reduced in scale as I have less space to manoeuvre.

Working with the lava mana is too hard for my weary sub-brains right now, I need to switch over to something that's going to be more effective in close range. Limiting myself to the easier to work with base elements, I flip to water and fire. The two opposing elements don't play all that well together, but I suspect that they'll be more effective at impacting the battle in ways other than direct damage.

Sensing his moment is near, the armoured colossus that is Tiny draws himself up to his full height. Up to this moment he's just been parked on his backside behind me waiting impatiently for a chance to get into the action. I didn't want him to waste his charge so I ordered him to hold back in this initial phase. Rather than spend all of his fuel blasting the shields, I decided he'd be better off swinging his lightning fists in close combat and that moment has nearly arrived. Even from behind his gnarled and twisted helmet I can tell the great ape has a massive grin on his face as he clenches his hands in mighty fists and begins to punch the ground and air, eager to begin the fight.

Not much further to go now, only fifty metres between us.

The flurry of spells and projectiles is now so thick that mid-air collisions are detonating just as often as Invidia's explosions. Bright flares of light and bursts of acid fall everywhere between the two armies and dodging has become all but impossible now. With my two sub-brains having managed the process of starting to grind out the new mana forms, I squeeze myself back into formation fully, powerful soldiers on both sides, and then hunker down for the charge. Pelted by arrows and spells, our HP starts to fall immediately but none falter in their position, even for a second. Eyes as powerfully mutated as mine aren't enough to keep track of the sheer volume of firepower being thrown around and my antennae are overwhelmed with the feedback. Heat signals flare up and die every instant and the future sense is almost painful at the sheer amount of information it tries to cram into my head. The sound is deafening. Explosions crack and shake the rock, acid sizzles and arrows fizz through the air before they crunch into stone or carapace or bury themselves in soft earth.

It's overwhelming and for a few minutes is all I and my fellow front-line ants know as we sit still and wait for our moment.

I'm holding up better than most, thanks to my higher level of evolution and carapace, but even so, I'm grateful when I feel a cool healing touch spread over my back and then the rest of my exo-skeleton.

"Thanks for the heal!" I tell the medic hidden in an emergency trench just behind me, "but make sure the rest of the line gets a dose before I do!"

"No can do Eldest," the little ant tells me as she burrows herself back down to safety. "Everyone gets healed whenever we can get to them. We don't have the ability to set up a schedule."

The healers have really changed over the course of the conflict. No longer are they the timid creatures they once were. They know their job and they don't take no guff, even from me. Mother help any ant who tries to get between them and healing those that need it.

"Right you are," I say and shift my position slightly to ensure the trench is covered by my body.

That burst of healing works to counteract the damage I'd been taking and by the time it runs out I'm almost back to full again. Only thirty metres remain between the two sides. It won't be long now.

Then something unexpected happens. The ranks of the Legion, normally so uniform and unbreakable, split apart. The soldiers take brisk steps, shields and defensive formations maintained at all times as the column breaks into halves that press themselves against the wall to maximise the space between. It only makes sense if they're clearing the way for something...

"Something is coming!" I warn the ants around me and brace my legs into the ground.

"HUURAAAAAAA!!!" an inhuman bellow slices through the cacophony of sound in the tunnel and through the gap in the Legion lines storm creatures the likes of which I have never seen.

Swollen and misshapen, with no armour or weapons, but tough hides and gleaming claws, they look more like monsters than anything else. But something in their faces, something in their eyes, tells me that I'm wrong. Were these... people?!

"GRAAAAAAHHH!!!"

Tiny doesn't care *what* they are, he's ready to fight. Unleashing his own devastating war cry, the giant ape slams his fists into the ground, shaking the stone beneath my feet. Whether it's my pet's rage or the collective instincts of the Colony, but in that one moment every one of us is up and charging, legs a blur as we pick up speed and race toward the monstrosities hurtling back at us. I can see the humans begin to emerge from their bunkers behind me, taking up positions spread throughout the second line of ants where they'll be protected from the worst of the fray, but I don't have much mind for them right now. Twin jets erupt from my mouth, one of flame and one of water, the liquid steaming and bubbling in an instant, creating a wave of searing steam in front of me. The front line of creatures screams in rage and pain before the two sides collide with an almighty CRASH.

"FOR THE COLONY!" I bellow.

"FOR THE COLONY!" comes the reply of thousands.

No more time to think. Blows crunch into my body and my mandibles open wide. Time to fight!

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Whatever these things are, they're *fast* and they hit *hard*. The creature in front of me shrieks in rage as it presses through my screen of steaming hot... steam, and brings two massive hands down on my back in a devastating hammer blow. My legs buckle under the impact but barely manage to hold my body up as the diamond carapace and inner-plating does the work absorbing the blow. My mandibles are locked in position and I unleash them, feeling the coiled energy within unleash all at once in a mighty chomp!

The jagged edges of my jaws slice forward and the opponent in front of me screeches with pain. Yeah, you don't like that, do ya?! Ouch! Dammit, this guy is tougher than I gave him credit for, he recovered from the bite quickly and scraped his claws down my back. He was aiming for the antennae but my reflexes fired in time and I pushed forward into his chest. I don't have time to mess around with this guy! I channel my newly minted fire mana into my mandibles and they begin to glow white hot, heat rolling from them in waves as I reset the muscles in my face and lunge forward again.

CHOMP!

As strong a physical specimen as this weird hybrid is, it lacks the same level of protection that the regular Legionaries have and even without using my skill, the power of my musculature is enough to bite deep. The sizzling smell of roasting meat that fills the air is disgusting enough on its own and my opponent falls back before me. As much as I want to lunge forward for the finishing blow, I resist the urge and maintain my formation with the ants around me. If I go out too deep, I'll only get surrounded and end up needing my siblings to rush forward and bail me out, increasing the risks they have to face. Not worth it. Instead, I'll stand here and absorb my share of the punishment as we grind out this battle. This one's going in for the long haul.

The crush of bodies forces another hulking monstrosity in front of me in short enough order and I greet them with another burst of searing hot steam, which obviously goes down very well with my next customer. I follow up that opening salvo with another roasting hot chomp and get punched in the head for my trouble. Bare fists against my carapace turns out to be a bad idea though, who would have thought. The shock of the impact rattles the enemy long enough that I can lunge forward and bite down once again.

"GRUAAAAAAAA!"

BOOM!

Tiny's here. Clad in his armour he looks like an unstoppable juggernaut, the sheer mass of him is intimidating enough, but then he starts to throw hands and things get *really* scary. Just not for us. Standing just behind the frontline of soldiers, Tiny's fists blaze with light and electricity and he uses his potent ape boxing skills to send fists of pure energy smashing into the faces of the oncoming tide of creatures. Relying on their natural toughness, they try to withstand his strength but quickly find it impossible to tank it head on. With a devastating uppercut that starts from his toes and ends with his knuckles nearly scraping the ceiling of the tunnel, Tiny sends a number of enemies flying as if a bomb had detonated beneath their feet.

But they don't stop coming, and not all of the defensive line is holding as well as this section with myself and Tiny in it.

[Invidia, I need you to support the rest of the line, don't let them buckle under the pressure. Crinis, get ready to intervene if you need to.]

[*I hearssss you.*]

[Yes, Master.]

Ironically, this is exactly the sort of drawn out fight that Leeroy and her group are perfectly suited to fight. Vibrant is a powerful soldier and her group are all highly evolved, but they're built for speed, not this sort of face to face slug fest. It's going to be tough going for the speedy ant so long as the battle lines remain static, she simply has no room in which to run. As the pressure increases and the packed armies smash into each other again and again it becomes harder to have the spare room for thoughts of the rest of the battle. In my face is a constant stream of these disfigured part monsters, each one quick and strong, smashing at my carapace and trying to claw my eyes before I can finish them off or drive them back. At my back, the ants hold the line and push up behind me, occasionally climbing onto my back to dart forward and provide support, shrinking my vision even further.

The heat and noise are intense to the point I'm forced to sink my mind deep into the meditation Skill just to maintain my focus. It's something that I've become reluctant to do at times. Being able to think free from distracting emotions is nice and all, but emotions can be a source of great energy and drive, pushing me past the point when my mind under the influence of the meditation skill would pull the pin. The distractions are overwhelming to the point that I don't have any choice in the end.

CHOMP! CHOMP! CHOMP!

My mandibles reset and snap, reset and snap as fast as I can manage it until my face starts to ache. The extra penetrating power of the bites is more than welcome, allowing me to preserve stamina by holding off on using my Doom Chomp but still inflict severe damage on the foe. In the back of my mind, I'm conscious that this is merely the opening stanza of the battle. Whoever and whatever these creatures are, they are the prelude for the true fight to come. Waiting in the wings for us to tire, the Legion is still out there and they'll join in the fight the moment they feel the time is right.

[Master, I'm stepping in.]

Dammit! Surely they aren't breaking through already?!

**DOOM CHOMP!**

To gain space, I activate my most powerful physical Skill. The black mandibles of dark energy manifest and crunch closed on everything ten feet in front of my face, the momentum and power of my new muscular mutation translating into the Skill. Whatever is left standing after the strike I blast with steam and rear back, lowering my back legs and extending the front to lift my head high enough to see. Crinis is right, a section of the line to my right is starting to struggle. The freaks, sensing weakness, hold and scream with savage glee as they pile on the pressure, activating their Skills and slashing into the lines with wild abandon, heedless for their own safety. Crinis steps into the breach, announcing her presence in her usual insidious way as a forest of barbed limbs rise from the tunnel floor. The moment they are long enough, they begin to wind themselves around the unsuspecting forms of the attackers, binding them tight as the barbs dig into their flesh and begin to perform their dark work.



I lower myself back down, unwilling to see the rest. Hopefully she manages to trigger her fear skills and these guys back off a little. If the ant battle line is already starting to break, it's a worrying sign to say the least. Will we need to bring the humans forward and activate their buff already? I hope not, we need to hold off as long as possible before we bring the antmancers into the fray. Their buff is powerful, boosting the stats of our combatants, but the humans simply aren't trained for extended, intense fighting such as this and we don't have enough people to rotate them during the battle. No matter what, we can't bring them forward until the Legionaries themselves stand before us.

It only took a second, but the space in front of me is once again filled with opponents to fight and I feel my reflexes trigger just in time to help me avoid another strike directed toward my eyes.

Dammit! Do I need diamond eyes now?!

CHOMP!

This is going to be a long fight...

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#### **Chapter 674: The Siege pt 20**

Titus watched the battle unfold from the rear ranks of the Legion column, his experienced eye catching numerous flaws in execution that any outside observer would fail to notice. He couldn't prevent the slight twitch of his eye at the sight. They can't help it, he reminded himself, his Legion was still green, not used to working together and lacking proper drill experience. The auxiliaries were even worse, though it was more common for the shock troops to show such a lack. Former prisoners slated for death, they hadn't come from the best stock, even so the Legion had turned them into viable soldiers, given them a family, a purpose and the dignity they had lacked most of their lives.

"Don't pull that face, commander, I can see it too. Don't you worry, I'll give them a proper tongue lashing when they get back."

Titus turned to his side where the commanding officer of the auxiliary detachment stood, doing much the same thing he himself was, looking over the field of battle, seeking flaws in both sides of the conflict.

"Your unit is relatively fresh into the field?" he enquired.

Waving a gnarled claw, the former human turned to one side and pulled a towel from beneath his robes, which he then used to wipe the slobber from his distended jaws.

"Pardon, commander. I figured you wouldn't want a shower as well as a conversation!"

A wheezing chuckle emerged from the auxiliary which threatened to do just that as a spray of sizzling drool launched from the back of his throat. Titus glanced down and saw that little was left of the towel, most of the fabric already being melted away.

"Cloud salamander?" the commander asked.

"Spot on! You know, most people think the acid came from a bile monster or some such. Terrible eating! I'm far too classy to be caught feasting on Biomass such as that!"

Once again the wheeze and cough which passed for a laugh, followed by another spray of hissing fluid.

"We lost a lot of people during the last wave," he continued, "fresh recruits get shoved into the mix with hardly a 'how do you do' and we need to whip them into shape faster than you can blink. It's not easy, but I think we've done fairly well."

Titus nodded. If what he was saying was true, then the many tactical lapses he saw were understandable, generous even.

"It's hard for us once we get in the field," the auxiliary commander went on, gesturing at his own facial appendages, "communication isn't our strong point at the best of times. If I start barking orders at my troops I'm likely to melt half of them!"

Wheeze. Cough. Spray.

"So we'll give them a full review once we're done. The blood will have cooled by then. Once the monster gets into you, the urge to fight is always there, after all."

"Your sacrifice is honoured, commander."

The once-human shrugged his massive, misshapen shoulders.

"It's nothing. Not like I was doing anything worthwhile before I enlisted. No need for the title, just call me Ristos."

Titus nodded.

"Ristos then. Your troops don't appear to have listened closely to the briefing. I can see many moving to engage the abomination in direct combat. I believe they were instructed to avoid that target, it's too strong for them."

Wheeze. Cough. Spray.

"Some of us are a little hotter in the blood than others, shall we say. When they hear there's a big bad monster out there, they want to show that they're bigger and badder, you know? It's something that happens, I've seen it a lot over the years. That's why auxiliaries who can't overcome the urge don't last long. Oof. There goes another one."

The ant in question had reared back and unleashed a brutal chomp, crunching the opponent in front of him into a mangled mess in an instant.

"Stupid waste of Biomass," Ristos sighed. "Don't matter how you warn them, some people just too stupid to live."

The commander rolled his shoulders and turned back to his own Legion. They continued to support the assault with long range fire and medical assistance, dragging the wounded clear for healing and pounding the ant's shields with an endless barrage of spells and arrow fire. It wasn't like they could miss. There must have been twenty thousand ant monsters packed into the tunnel in front of them. The rows of the enemy were so densely packed from floor to ceiling that the imposing metal gate (the second damned gate!) was almost totally invisible.

He still felt irritated by the existence of that imposing ant head studded metal monstrosity. If he'd known there was another, he'd have been much more reluctant to step out of the battle. It wouldn't

have swayed his decision in the end. Morrelia had to survive, that was the end of it. He could still feel his body protest when he recalled the blow he'd unleashed to damage what had turned out to be the outer gate. It had been a long time since he'd been forced to unleash his Master Axe Arts and the strain had been severe. The mana saturation in his cells was still too low to channel Skills of that magnitude, though age may have also played a factor. He wasn't exactly in his prime anymore, and hadn't been at his peak strength for some years. The surface would do that to a person. Not even the mana tonics were enough to stave off the decay.

Almost by habit, he checked the ambient mana and then was forced to stifle a sigh. It was still rising. The wave could come anytime now. Might be a few days, might be in an hour. The ants had done everything they could to delay the Legion advance and if they were lucky it might just pay off. Titus pushed it from his mind, he wouldn't stress over things he couldn't control, that was a quick way to burn out in the Legion. Besides, if the waves kept coming at this pace, everyone would have much bigger things to worry about than an ant colony. A second cataclysm, the rising of the ancients. If it came to pass as he suspected it might, he may just need to get back into top shape. Just the thought of baring his axe at one of the nineteen strongest monsters in the Dungeon was enough to get his blood pumping.

"Tell your people to push harder, Ristos," Titus ordered, "In five minutes I'm going to order my ranks forward and you'll have a chance to rest before the next engagement."

"Right you are then commander," the half-monster saluted before he turned and loped forward through the column to relay his instructions.

An experienced and able ally was always welcome in Titus' book, even if he did threaten to melt your face off every time he laughed.

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### **Chapter 675: The Siege pt 21**

Coolant and Sloan watched, gobsmacked as the fight unfolded before them. At first it seemed as though everything had gone well, after Grey had walked out and spoken with the Golgari, the kneeling form of the Shaper, Granin, had risen to his feet, had his bindings broken and painfully jogged his way toward the gate. It was clear at that point that the negotiations had been a success. In the distance, the small camp the golgari had erected was disassembled by the mages and the two figures of the noble and Grey stood a slight distance apart, both of them watching as the newly freed Granin made his painful way to the nest.

When he arrived the gate was pushed open slightly as a few ants emerged to welcome him. Mage ants all of them, they reached out with their minds to reassure him before leading him inside where he was sure to be greeted and cared for by the two who had pled so strongly for his life. Against the odds, their wishes had been granted and their mentor had been returned to them, all that was left was to witness the outcome of the battle.

"How do you think it will go?" Coolant asked her more martially knowledgeable sister.

Sloan started, her concentration broken.

"Sorry, what?" she said, distracted.

"Who do you think will win?" Coolant tried again with patience.

The general turned slightly toward her sister.

"How on Pangera am I supposed to know?" she sounded exasperated. "I don't know their levels or Skills even slightly! From what we know, they don't even evolve, so I can't judge from their physical forms or mutations. What am I supposed to go on?"

"They have classes," Coolant offered sagely, "their species doesn't change, but they have a 'class' that gives stats per level. You should know this much."

Sloan shrugged.

"I know it, of course I do," she jabbed a leg toward the two figures in the distance, "but I don't know what *their* classes or stats are, so I can't possibly make a prediction."

"Does it really matter to us? Who wins I mean."

The thought hadn't occurred to Sloan and she contemplated for a moment as Grey and his opponent began to move, walking apart until there were five hatchling lengths between them. Did it really matter? She had obviously wanted Grey to win, since he was more or less on the Colony's side, though he had gone to some lengths to conceal his motives and opinions from the Colony. They certainly knew nothing of his true strength. Ultimately though, with Granin released to their custody, the outcome of the duel didn't seem to be all that important. The Shaper was only relevant to the Colony because of his connection to the Eldest, nothing their lives depended on. If Grey could win though... that might take an important piece for the golgari off the table. With this, the most powerful of their number removed from the battle, the odds of holding off the rock-people until the wave began improved dramatically.

"If Grey wins, our position will be much stronger. Also, he is an ally, of a sort. It would obviously be better if our allies are stronger," Sloan reasoned.

"That's true," her sister agreed and the two settled in to watch as the distant figures bowed to one another in a strange display of etiquette before they both took a pose.

The golgari had dispensed with his sheath, the glittering blade of stone shining with the same potent energy that rippled through the hardened 'skin' that coated his body. No armour was worn for this duel apparently, the noble had dispensed with it, revealing his true skin for all to see. The stone was streaked with golden rivers of mana that rippled and flowed as he moved, casting light around him in a dazzling display of power. Whatever mineral or ore had been used it was clearly top shelf, Sloan had never seen anything like it. She wagered Smithant would give an antenna to study it for five minutes. The sword itself was slender and curved, but long, perhaps as much as two meters. Held in the grip of the giant warrior, it looked sharp and deadly, a precision implement of death. When weighed against Grey, unarmed and far smaller, dressed in a humble robe with his claws unsheathed, it didn't look favorable for him.

When it began, Sloan could have sworn that she'd missed it. One moment the two were still as statues, watching each other for the slightest movement, the next they had *shifted*. It was as if they had vanished from where they stood and reappeared in another place, dispensing with the hassle of traversing the intervening distance.

*So fast!*

Several more times the two of them flickered until finally they clashed. The poor eyes of the ant general caught the impact a second after it happened. The golgari had rushed forward, his entire body a blur as the great blade had come down in an overhead chop. The energy infused in the blade was so great it felt to Sloan as if a thousand tons of rock was descending on Grey at the speed of a lightning bolt. Inescapable. Unfazed by the danger, Grey had swung both hands from right to left, his claws blazing with light that had extended outward and clashed with the blade, diverting it to the side.

The stone shattered under the force of the impact, shards flying as several tons of rock disintegrated. With his opponent unbalanced, Grey lashed out with his claws, once, twice, thrice, almost too fast to see before he danced back out of reach, both hands extended. The noble golgari took his time righting himself as he gripped the hilt of his sword in one hand, using the other to brush dust and stone from his skin. Whatever material he was coated in, it was clearly tough as nails, not a scratch could be seen on him.

The two exchanged a few words which Sloan and Coolant couldn't hear before they once again took a ready stance, giving the two ants a chance to process what they'd seen.

"What the hell was that?!" Sloan gasped.

"Did you see the mana packed in that sword?!" Coolant was shocked. "That was insane! How does it hold that much?"

"Did you see the speed?"

"The power..."

It was clear then to the two council members, that outside of the Eldest and possibly the Queen herself, there were none who could hope to stand against individuals as powerful as these two. Indeed, no matter how many tier three ants they were to throw at the two combatants before them, would it really matter? In the face of this kind of condensed might, only an individual of equal strength would suffice. Unless they could cultivate warriors of comparable ability themselves, the casualties they would suffer to bring down these exceptional individuals would be obscene. And who knew? Were creatures such as these two even that rare in the depths?

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 676: The Siege pt 22**

Grey and his opponent, the High Blade Kooranon Balta, studied each other, their experience and observation Skills provided a constant stream of information as they continued to feel each other out. Using his rank five Keen Eye, Grey could see every muscle twitch, every exhalation of breath in excruciating detail. The golgari wouldn't be able to twitch a toe without the wolf-folk being able to tell him how many millimeters he'd shifted it. Not just sight, every sense was pushed to the limit of his ability, Skills and his natural advantages as one of the folk ensuring that nothing took place outside of his notice.

Experience was what allowed him to filter that information, to disregard that which wasn't important. He could smell the ant pheromones that blanketed this tunnel, smell the blood and ichor of those that had fallen beyond the gate before him, but ignored those, all that mattered was the battle.

He centered himself as the great warriors of the Folk were trained to do, balanced his mind against his instinct to find the proper equilibrium. Almost reflexively, so ingrained was the technique, Grey began to circulate the mana inside his body around his center, creating a flow that empowered his movements and hastened the absorption of energy throughout his body. It had been so long since he'd fought in a high level duel such as this. The old familiar feeling had begun to stir in his veins, the impression of being on the hunt. The wolf within him had begun to bare its fangs and he allowed the sensation to wash over him, acknowledging its presence but he did not embrace nor dismiss it. Equilibrium was his safe harbor.

The High Blade mastered his breathing and once more began to exert his aura. Powerful and domineering, it swept through the air and attempted to crush down on the wolf-kin, intimidating and robbing him of strength. As before, he did not resist it, but instead let it pass through him. Such childish tricks were a waste of precious energy in a duel and would have no effect on him. The fact that the High Blade insisted on attempting it displayed a lack of experience.

"You will yield to me, beast," Balta said, confidence dripping from his large frame. "How many of your kind have fallen to my blade already? You are just another notch and you don't even know it."

Anger flared in Grey's heart. The war between the new and old races of Pangera never really ended and conflict between the Empire of Stone and the Folk continued to this day. There was a chance that Balta had slain his people in the depths, it was true, but most likely it was just a taunt. He allowed the anger to sputter out. This was not the time for anger.

"You are a pup," Grey said calmly, "whining and snuffling in the dirt, waiting for the alpha to teach you the ways of the world. What are you waiting for? I'm right here."

The golgari's stone covered face twisted with rage and he lunged forward, the rock beneath his feet shifting with the force of his Dash. In a battle of this level, there wasn't time to think or ponder, no consideration for the next move. It was a realm of highly trained reflexes so fast and automatic that an argument could be made the brain wasn't involved at all. Grey threw himself into the battle, refusing to direct or control his body to strike. He didn't need to, it would strike all by itself. He and his instinct were one and the same.

He Dashed with his right foot only, rotating his body as his left activated Meteor Slash. Stamina and mana drained out of him through his claws as the Skill activated and manifested in the air. Enhanced by the rotation of his body, the five jagged cuts streaked through the air at a speed faster than even his eyes could follow. As predicted, Balta had charged directly forward, relying on his toughened body to absorb whatever Grey could unleash, yet once again he had been underestimated. With a loud crunch, the slash impacted the golgari's side and threw off his balance enough that the destructive overhead strike flew past its target by centimeters.

Breathe. Then flow. The wild joy in his heart surged and Grey allowed his lips to peel back in a savage snarl, baring his fangs. His body continued its rotation, completing the full spin in an instant whereupon he slammed both feet down and charged. Mana swirled in the air and within his body as his hands fell inward to rest at his hips. Dash. DASH. **DASH**. Three times in less than a second he executed a perfect

micro dash, bringing his speed up to a dizzying height as his hands concentrated stamina and mana. Unleashing his named Skill, he thrust both hands forward, palms up and claws extended.

Pierce the Wall!

The light from each claw unified in a single fang that shot outward from his thrust and dug into the side of the noble.

The golgari wasn't without his own Skills. Unable to bring his blade to bear in time, he activated his own Dash to take momentum from the strike as golden streaks of metal on his skin slithered together toward the point of impact. Just before the moment of impact, Grey noticed the telltale shimmer of a shield around the frame of the noble, then his Skill landed and blew the body of the golgari away.

He wasn't finished though, despite how much that must have hurt. As he blasted out from the point of impact, Balta rotated his body to protect his head before he slammed into the roof of the tunnel and felt the rock shatter around his frame. Even from that position he was able to fight back, his free hand gripped the hilt of his living stone blade and he used it to send a wide defensive slash toward the beast as he freed himself from the stone. Contrary to his opponent's expectations, Grey did not choose to follow up on his advantage, instead, he chose to be patient. Eyes wide, he studied everything. How hurt was the golgari? How effective had his strike been? At the same time he focused on regulating his breathing and ensuring his state of mind was not disturbed. It had taken a long time for him to learn the necessity of resisting his urge to chase, but it had been a valuable lesson.

As Balta dropped back to the tunnel floor, Grey flexed his hands and shook out his legs, ensuring he remained as limber as possible.

"That's a very tough mineral you have bonded to your skin," he observed conversationally, "quite a rare find."

Balta sneered as the light glittered on his true skin.

"We prize the stone above all things, beast. Naturally the best ore is destined to fall to the best of our people."

He was unbalanced to his left side, Grey was sure of it. The moment he detected the weakness his pupils dilated and the breath caught in his throat for the briefest of moments, then it passed and he was in control once more. It was unfortunate, but in that moment he lost control of his bloodlust, the murderous aura of the hunter had surged out of his body and judging by the expression on the noble's face, he had sensed it. It was almost funny. Balta had been so willing to call him a beast as a taunt, not realising that the description was quite apt. Grey *was* a beast, and Balta was his prey.

A wide and feral grin stretched across Grey's face as he accepted the rising tide of the wolf within.

"Naturally," he growled through his exposed fangs, "and I suppose you won that ore by your own hand? Did you Balta? Or did someone else buy it, like everything else exceptional about you?"

The mix of fear and outrage on the noble's face was like ripe wine on Grey's tongue and he didn't wait for a reply before he *lunged* forward. The golgari responded with excellent reflexes and high level Skills, slashing out once, twice, thrice with his sword in the blink of an eye. The sword light howled with malevolence as it carved through the stone floor of the tunnel, but Balta paid it no mind. His foe had

dodged at the last possible moment, he had sensed it. His eyes flickered as he tried to track his opponent but the aged wolf had gotten even faster than before and his instincts were yet to catch up.

He never saw the final blow coming. Grey had leapt above the sword blows and used his shifting cloak to blend with the stone behind him. In a battle of this level, losing track of your opponent for an instant was ten times longer than they needed to end the fight. Focusing hard on his inner self, Grey breathed and shoved hard with both feet. To the outside observer, it looked as if the wolf-kin pushed off thin air, descending on his unaware opponent like a fanged comet. A vortex of mana and stamina formed in front of him and he rotated his body to give it more speed and power. When he reached the High Blade, he sent all of that energy driving into the giant, rock covered frame with the points of his claws.

BOOM!

The stone around them shattered like porcelain as Grey drove his foe deep into the ground. By the time his attack had dissipated, he found he had buried the golgari in ten metres of solid rock. As he had no personal grudge with this foe, he ensured that the noble still lived before he hauled the fellow up and carried him back to the tunnel floor. Once there, he lay Balta down on the ground so that he might be collected by his people, turned and began to walk back to the nest.

A nice little fight. Just enough to whet the palate.

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 677: The Siege pt 23**

At least those crazy malformed humans were good for experience. Whatever the Legion did to turn them into... what they were, they certainly seemed to lack the finely tuned discipline of their more regular compatriots. After I'd demonstrated the ability to rip into them using my Doom Chomp, cutting down several at a time, they continued to come, almost ant-like in their eagerness to sacrifice themselves for their allies. If they'd just fought defensively, been a bit more cagey in front of me, then I wouldn't have been able to hit their numbers even half as hard as I did in the end. I've not been paying attention to the notifications that Gandalf has been whispering into my ear, but I'm sure I must have racked up three levels from these clowns by now. If they want to throw experience at me, I'm more than happy to take it!

Although I'm a little tired from having to use the draining Doom Chomp so many times, which was possibly their aim.

It doesn't look like I'm going to get time to rest, either. When the bizarre creatures pull back from the ant line, they slide expertly through the perfectly aligned ranks of heavy armored Legion soldiers waiting behind them. The moment the way is clear, the ranks reform into a solid wall of shields and blades that begin to close with us at speed.

"Bring up the humans!" comes the call from the generals huddled close to the front. The words are repeated all the way up and down the line before being passed through mages to the human antimancers dotted throughout the battlefield.

With an enthusiastic roar, the first real sound from our side of the field, the human volunteers and the robed figures of Beyn and his true believers take their places in our formation. A half-second before the two forces collide I feel the rush and surge throughout my body as the potent buff rolls through me from



the nearest Antmancer. I see every ant around me stand a little taller, a little firmer, as their stats get a healthy bump from the aura effect. It's needed too, without it, most soldiers simply aren't able to stay in front of the more powerful Legionary soldiers for long. For me? It makes me a real pain in their backside.

The nice thing about the aura provided by the antmancers, is that it doesn't cancel the benefits we gain from the generals, so that's nice, but also that the stat boost they give affects *all* stats. Which means my brains get that little edge they need to be able to handle the construct I have spinning without me having to interfere with the main mind nearly as much. Gweheheheh. It might not be much, but I'll take every advantage I can get in this contest for the survival of my family.

The two lines smash together as carapace and mandibles contest against stone and steel. A shield is thrust in my face and a short sword flickers like a snake tongue, seeking my eyes. Always the eyes with these people! Is my diamond carapace so damn impressive that you've just given up on ever breaking through. With my antennae still functioning and my reflexes primed and ready I'm able to make small adjustments of my legs, shifting my head by a few centimeters in order to deflect each attempt.

Get out of here punk!

Firing my legs in a Dash, I surge forward with my head tilted to one side, using my 'shoulder' to smash into the braced shields. The new muscle augmentation isn't just useful for my mandibles. I've found that if I set my legs before a dash I can snap out with more power and acceleration than before. Which is certainly handy! Faced with my bulk, the soldier in front of me has little choice but to give ground as I crunch him back into the ranks lined up behind him. They brace together to absorb the impact, but I've gotten the little bit of breathing space that I wanted.

Eat steam!

I blast all of them in the face with a searing wave of steam as I wind my mandibles back and unleash a mighty Doom Chomp!

**SNAP!**

I feel my mandibles pierce and crunch but the lack of notifications tells me my attempt hasn't been as successful as it was with the previous wave of foes. These armored guys are hard nuts to crack! Especially when the ranks are packed together like this. The extended mandibles of dark light that manifest when I use the skill help to extend my reach, certainly, but they also spread the impact out across a half dozen Legionaries. When they all work together to absorb the blow, it becomes even harder to break through their defense.

I throw away the residual fire and water mana so I can start cooking up the lava mana again combined with a little earth mana. Hopefully I can make something good happen with this combo, I have a few good ideas.

"ROOOOAAAAAR!!!"

The colossus of metal and muscle that is Tiny continues to be a pain for the Legion as he sends his devastating fists over the heads of the Colony members in front, smacking them in the face over and over again with his electrified punches. Crinis has retreated to the shadows once more now that she isn't needed to shore up that faltering section of the line, but I get a feeling we're going to need her

again fairly soon. With the two forces confronting each other at this range, I know Invidia is working double time on the defensive end. I can feel the spells flying over my head with my mana sense, an endless flurry of magic that could cause incalculable damage to either side should one group of mages get on top. Even with all our numbers, the Colony is being suppressed in this area as more and more of the Legion mages find their range and pile on the offense. With Invidia throwing his *enormous* ability behind the mage-ants, the line is holding for the time being.

All I can do is keep battling away here in the front lines, using my body to protect my family as best I can.

Once the lines hit, the battle devolves into an endless tug of war as the two fronts smack into each other endlessly, shoving, stabbing and biting in an attempt to break the other. I continue to use every trick I have in the book, charging, biting, blasting with acid and lava as the fatigue starts to set in, even for me, but it never ends. The effort is unrelenting and neither side is prepared to back down. As the minutes grind past though, it starts to become clear that the Colony is being pushed back. The line is just too wide and I can't cover the whole thing at once. Wherever I and my pets aren't, the Legion pushes forward, wounding our soldiers, cutting them down and advancing one step at a time. Even deploying Crinis isn't enough to stem the tide.

Can that wave start already?!

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 678: The Siege pt 24**

"Something isn't right," Sloan suddenly scented out loud.

Coolant looked askance at her sister as the two of them continued to hang outside the second gate facing the golgari invasion. She could tell the general wasn't discussing with her but thinking out loud, so she remained silent and waited.

"They've formed up, but they aren't approaching us, why is that?"

One of the two ants most central to the Colony's planning of this siege was more than a little off-put when she saw something so out of her expectations. The force from the Empire of Stone had behaved almost exactly as expected right up until they started demanding honor duels in front of the gates. With the bizarre rituals of their people disposed with, Sloan had expected the golgari to return to their expected behavior and assault the gate. They were here to exterminate her family, were they not? How was that going to be achieved if they didn't attack? They were on the clock, after all. The entire strategy that Sloan and Victor had hammered out centered on the concept of their enemies working within a limited time frame. If the wave started before they had finished their task, they would be forced to retreat. They couldn't possibly hope to stand against both the Colony and a raging Dungeon filled with desperate monsters? Surely?!

Yet before her eyes, something inexplicable was taking place. Once their leader had been collected and returned to his troops behind the first gate, the golgari had forced the gate open wider and formed ranks, their soldiers imposing in their sheer size and mass. Not wanting to be caught unprepared, the Colony had deployed their own troops, along with the human volunteers and prepared for the confrontation. Except it hadn't come. According to her understanding of the situation, it should have

begun immediately, yet here they were, several minutes later, still waiting for the enemy to take a forward step.

"Perhaps they're waiting for their leader to awaken? They seem quite rigid in their authority structures," Coolant suggested.

Sloan shook her antennae.

"They are an organised semi-military force who pride themselves on martial skills. I refuse to believe they don't have a second in command willing to issue orders to complete the mission. It would be insane to arrange the command structure in any other way. This is something else..."

The general stared, her twin compound eyes focused on the unmoving ranks of the golgari in the distance as if trying to penetrate their thoughts.

"Do you think their ranks looks thin?" she asked.

Taken by surprise by the change in topic, Coolant could only go still as she tried to assess the 'thickness' of the enemy soldiers.

"They seem well fed to me?" she said.

"And why didn't they open the gate all the way? Do you see the way it isn't fully open? They could probably fit an extra six soldiers to each rank through that gap if they pushed it open all the way. It doesn't make sense to create a choke point for their own troops there. It only makes it take longer to bring their soldiers to bear against ours. It only makes sense if there's something they don't want us to see. Something that they're hiding, out of our line of sight."

*That* made a lot more sense to the mage. She was instantly more alert, scanning the distance with her mind as well as her eyes.

"You think there is some sort of super weapon back there? Something we haven't seen and can't predict?" This was one of the council's greatest fears. They were young as a people and it was certain that those races and groups that had existed for hundreds, if not thousands of years would have innumerable pieces of wisdom that the Colony just hadn't had the time to experience. They couldn't prepare for the unknown, only acknowledge that it existed.

"... No," Sloan said, her eyes still scanning the distance.

Coolant was confused.

"Then what?" she said.

"... I think we've been betrayed."

So saying the general turned and dashed back within the nest as if a hundred golgari soldiers were at her back.

*Within the nest.*

The Queen clacked her mandibles in an attempt to dispel her irritation but knew it wouldn't succeed. Her conversation with the human, Enid, had been enlightening and had helped explain the exasperating

behaviors of her children, but it did little to alleviate the frustration she felt at being treated like a grub. Out of deference for the concern of her children, she had agreed to remain within the nest to protect the brood in the event of a breach, a role that kept her out of the fighting altogether. If the battle came to the brood chambers, then it was already lost, she understood that much just from having the plans explained to her by one of the soldiers who stood guard. Still, she had agreed, only to find now how chafed she felt not being able to fight alongside her children. She felt as if her carapace were being scratched from the inside. A constant, maddening sensation that just wouldn't go away, no matter how she scratched at it.

Not for the first time, she stood, her six legs heaved her bulk from the floor, only for to her to slowly lower herself back down. She had given her word she would remain and defend the brood, so she would. No matter how much it grated her. Internally she vowed that her children would never extract another such pledge from her, no matter how they pleaded.

"How do you think the battle is going, mother?" Antionette asked, obviously nervous.

The two young Queens were anxious, despite being members of the council and privy to all the planning that had gone on, they felt helpless being unable to help protect their family. For the Queen's life had continued much as it always did. The Biomass reserves were brought to them, they ate, and then produced their maximum daily quota of brood. The brood tenders cared for and raised the young in the chambers, much as they had before. The only real difference in their environment was the huge chambers carved beneath the egg-laying space to house the hatchling who couldn't be transported to the surface nest for their academy training. Obviously, the Queen hadn't been able to leave on her regular hunting expeditions, another imposition that chafed her, but otherwise the three of them continued to perform their role for the Colony without pause.

"I'm sure it will be fine," the Queen soothed her daughter, patting her on the head with an antenna, "trust that they will work hard and succeed, just as we must..."

She trailed off, her antennae quivering.

At that moment, several soldiers broke into the chamber at high alert. A scout moved away from the others and approached the royal triplet.

"We have detected vibrations in this area, moving fast. Really fast. We aren't sure what's going on, but we want to be careful."

Antionette and Victoriant looked up at their mother anxiously and she tried to soothe them until she suddenly paused. She felt something. Something odd...

The Queen turned toward one of the walls of the egg-laying chamber and approached it slowly, her two antennae dancing in the air as she felt the vibrations in the air. As she drew near, a trickle of dirt broke loose on the wall, cascading down the rock to come to a rest on the floor. Then another. Then another. As she finally came face to face with the wall, the rock had started to quiver and shift, almost as if it were being *pushed* from the *other side*.

"Daughters," the Queen called, not turning around, "fetch the guards. All of them."

"Mother?" Victoriant called.

"Now, child," came the stern reply.

Suddenly, the wall bulged and the Queen leapt back to avoid the collapsing stone and dust that rained down when whatever it was finally broke through. Waving her antennae to clear away the dust, the Queen found herself face to face with the featureless, ringed face of a giant worm.

[I'm sorry,] she heard in her head.

Before she could respond, the worm lowered its face, the almost invisible mouth opening wide to crunch into the stone floor of the chamber and in a blink it was gone, burrowed into space between the rooms. With the bloated creature no longer blocking her view, the Queen was able to see the massed ranks of stone covered warriors charging toward the new opening and she reacted in the only way she knew how.

"FOR THE COLONY!"

Mandibles wide, the War-Queen charged into the breach.

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 679: The Siege pt 25**

Brendant dashed into the depths of the nest, the emergency pheromone trails screaming against her antennae with every step. The brood was in danger! The Queens were under assault! Every nerve in her body was on fire with desperate rage. There wasn't a single ant in the Colony who wouldn't put their life down to protect the brood, including the Eldest, and now they flooded from every inch of the nest toward the breach.

She burst into the egg-laying chamber to find a scene of utter chaos. Without any plan or strategy, the ants were racing forward to throw themselves upon the enemy any way they could. Brood Tenders raced up the walls and dropped down on the golgari from above, biting and tearing with their feeble jaws until they were dispatched by the stone people in short order. That didn't stop others from repeating the action and already the piles of dead and dying ants being dragged out by exhausted medics were growing into hills.

A member of the Council and graduate of the Eldest's own training program, Brendant knew she needed to be calm, needed to take control of the situation and establish some order, only then would the chances of a successful defense be maximized. She knew that. But when she saw the Queen, covered in wounds, thrashing and biting in the midst of the battle, she lost it. Her reasoning fled, replaced by her instinct and the next thing she knew she was face to face with the golgari, her mandibles cracked as she bit again and again.

What had happened?! Where was the Queen!?

She pulled back a moment and lifted her head, desperately seeking her mother amidst the heaving bodies still locked in battle. There! She was there! Somehow, someone had managed to get her to retreat. In glimpses caught through the legs and segments of ants that crawled over the top of each other to grapple with the invaders, she saw the Queen being tended to by healers as she stood, wounded heavily and dripping ichor on the floor.

"Hey-hey! You awake now Brendy?" A scent managed to cut through the chaos long enough for Brendant to catch the meaning.

Vibrant?

"You gotta do better than that Brendy!" her sister chided, "can't go losing your temper just because Mother had to fight. Not like she didn't want to anyway."

Suddenly she was there at her side, the massive and absurdly quick soldier who talked just as fast as she moved.

"Hi-hi! You look a little beat up, let me getcha!"

Those massive mandibles reached out to grasp hold of her thorax and before she knew what was happening, Brendant was being dragged away from the fighting.

"Hey! Vibrant, let me go! I can still fight."

"Hummmm," Vibrant released a meaningless, musical scent as she continued to haul her wayward sibling out of the fight before dumping her in front of a small team of medics and generals. "Got her out of there finally!" Vibrant cheered, "Get her fixed up alright? She couldn't bite a cheese wheel with her mandibles like that! What have you been doing Brendy? Trying to chomp their swords in half?"

Bewildered and confused, the soldier could barely process the rapid fire words coming out of Vibrant as the healers stepped forward, applying magic and regeneration fluid to her many injuries. Her carapace began to tickle as it started to stretch and flex, the damaged sections stitching shut at a visible pace.

"Vibrant?" she finally muttered, "when did you get here?"

"Pretty fast! We got word over at the gate so me and my team raced over here to help out. Everyone was pretty mad so we ran-ran *super* fast, I don't think I've ever run like that before. Good thing others did such a good job holding the breach, but the time we got here, the stony people hadn't gotten far at all!"

"What about the brood?" Brendant was desperate, "What about the young?"

This chamber was directly connected to the chambers above where the eggs were kept before hatching, and then above those were the myriad rooms reserved for the larvae. For a brief moment, even the irrepressible Vibrant was at a loss for words and she knew something was wrong.

"Tell me," she said.

Vibrant sighed, a scent rarely detected in her vicinity.

"We weren't fast enough," she said softly, "several groups of golgari were able to invade the upper chambers, they're still fighting up there."

A crushing feeling of despair and rage seized Brendant's heart as she thought of the young lives lost, but after a few seconds, the anger won.

"Come on, let's scour these scum from our home!" she declared.

"No-no you don't!" Vibrant said, tapping the wounded soldier on her still mending carapace. "You're in no shape to still fight. Me though? I'm still good to go!"

With a savage clack of her mandibles, the speedy soldier was gone, back into the thick of the fray and where she went, her loyal troops followed. Filled with righteous anger and the need for speed, they ploughed into the fight, leaping over the backs of their own allies to ensure they crashed into the golgari lines at full speed.

"FOR THE COLONY!" Vibrant roared and her followers echoed her cry as they impacted the front lines like a thunderclap.

The resurgence of Vibrant and her allies gave the Colony the little bit of breathing room they needed. Once Brendant stabilised her condition, she kept a cool head and began to organise the defense, a job that sorely needed doing. Gradually, the Brood Tenders were taken out of the battle, replaced by soldiers. Mage and scout support arrived and began to pepper the enemy from range. The medics were given more space to work and proper paths established for the transport of the wounded.

The battle still raged, but the Colony were starting to hold the line.

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 680: The Siege pt 26**

RAGE! RAAAAAAGE! That damned worm! How could he do this to us?! After everything we did for him?! He's food. FOOD I TELL YOU! If I ever get my mandibles on that worm I'll feed him to the larvae myself! The mere thought of the brood being destroyed by the golgari makes the mana in my body boil like the lava I'm spitting out of my mouth. He let them in to the egg-laying chamber?! With MOTHER?!

I'm so damned angry I'm going blind! I'm going to bust a vein at this rate! Is that even something I can do? Perhaps I'll be able to manifest it out of sheer anger, at this rate, I can believe I'll make it happen.

I channel my anger into the only positive avenue I have available to me. Chomping like a fiend and blasting my enemies with bolts of lava to the face! All I get in exchange is about seventeen sword strikes to the carapace and I think someone kicked me... Since Vibrant and her crew had to take off, things have gotten tense here at this gate, and when I say tense, I mean, real tense. The Legion is pushing us hard and the ant line has been driven back to within the shadow of the gate. Spells and arrows are smacking into the grand metal structure already, but so far the enchantments are holding steady and there's been minimal damage.

"Come on you slackers! Are you trying to live forever?!" an ant bellows from nearby.

"Victor! What the hell are you doing here?!" I cry.

"Trying to shore up the line! We diverted a portion of the troops from the other front to here, but they haven't been able to make up the difference. We need to go harder!"

I check my menu for a second. I'm getting constantly topped off with healing, pumping my regeneration gland on cool down and the Vestibule replenishing my energy. With all of the ants in the nest providing me with a portion of energy, I've been able to push well beyond the normal limits of my body, but even that has a limit. I've been chomping and throwing my weight around out here for a long time and I'm starting to feel it.

[Tiny! You got much left in the tank big guy?]

The giant ape has been giving his all in the fight since the very beginning and to be honest I'm not even sure how he's still out here swinging. In reply to my query, the exhausted and battered bat-faced gorilla flashes me a grin full of fire before he throws out another fist. I mean fist literally now, since he's long been out of the stamina required to activate his skills properly. His hands are a bloody mess by this point, but he doesn't flinch as he crunches his knuckles into the shields of the enemy over and over again.

[Crisis?]

[I'm running low on my reserves of shadow flesh, Master! They've been targeting my limbs whenever they can see them.]

Dammit.

[Keep pushing but don't take too many risks. I can't afford for you to take permanent damage.]

[You're taking damage...]

[What was that?]

[...]

That's what I thought. I let Crisis sulk on her own as she continues to operate as best she can. The Legion are a terrible matchup for her and she's done far more than I expected of her at this point. Instead of trying to saw the enemy apart, she's been disrupting as much as she possibly can, sneaking her tentacles out into the enemy ranks and grabbing ankles, shoving legs, doing whatever she can to blunt the offensive and help the front line hold up.

As I continue to battle with the Legionaries in front of me I feel another wash of healing flow over my carapace from behind as the healer who's been with me throughout the battle pops her head up once more.

"How's it looking?" she asks through the mass of scents.

"It's been better," is all I can manage.

She seems to take it in stride.

"Do I need to move back?" she says.

If the frontline needs to fall back then we need to let the healers and generals behind us know in advance. Even a few seconds is enough for them to uproot their positions and find a new bunker further back before we crawl backwards. Needless to say, this has already happened numerous times over the course of the battle. I give out a short, sharp laugh.

"The next time we retreat, we're going to be behind the gate, little one."

"Oh," is all she says before she sinks back below the surface of the tunnel floor to recharge her abilities.



I'd shake my head, but I'm already doing that since I managed to get a good grip on a shield for once. Gimme that! I pull the slab of layered metal to one side and unleash a blast of lava that coats the Legionary in front of me right across the chest plate. The stone there glows bright red from the heat as he falls back, releasing his grip on the shield before I can hit him again and the ranks close tight in front of me as another soldier steps forward to take his place.

Dammit! Irritated, I throw the offending shield back over the lines and reset my mandibles for another Doom Chomp.

"Watch it up there!" comes a strong scent. "You nearly knocked a human's head clean off!"

What? Raising my head just a little, I can see that it's true. At some point, Beyn has ended up behind me and I've darn near brained the man with that throw. Rather than be mad, the priest's eyes blaze with purpose as he seizes the shield with his one hands and labors to lift it from the ground despite it being clearly too heavy for the man. I can already see him roaring out some nonsense or other, the pitch of his voice rising to seemingly inhuman levels.

Why do I get the terrible feeling I've created a 'holy artifact' or some other nonsense?

[Invidia, if you see a spell coming at the priest, don't work *too* hard to deflect it, alright?]

[*Your siblingssss protect them mossst ardently.*]

[So you're saying he'd live anyway.]

[*Mossst likely.*]

Dammit. I'm still mad as hell!

KEEP BITING!