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Chapter 681: The Siege pt 27

Titus watched the battle unfold from the rear of the formation. The irregulars had formed up once again and begun to execute another charge. Using them as shock troops, charging, pulling back, charging again, was a brutally effective tactic the Legion had long made use of. It was hard on the half-monsters, in terms of effort and casualties, but it was a role they seemed to relish. The ants had held up remarkably well against the punishment, but as he had expected, they were being ground down.

In the distance, he could see the abomination buck and lash out with its mandibles, using its body to shove against the tide and try to push the Legion back, all to no avail. The auxiliary troops rammed into the gaps the regular Legionaries opened up for them and the ant lines were thrown back once more. Another wave of the giant insects flooded out of the gate, jaws snapping at the air in rage as they replaced those who had fallen and after a few minutes of furious fighting the order was given and the irregulars pulled back, replaced by the iron wall of the Legionaries who continued to relentlessly batter away at an enemy that outnumbered them immensely, but couldn't hope to match them one on one.

In a way, the ants had chosen a poor field of combat. Within the confines of the tunnel, their ability to maximise the effectiveness of their numbers was hampered. In a more open battleground, where they could flank or open up more fronts, their numbers would matter far more. Still, they hadn't had a choice. In many ways, he had to acknowledge the cleverness of whoever had coordinated the defence of the ants, presumably the abomination. This was the only plan that could hope to save them, and it had almost worked.

Had the wave come early, and he had been worried for some time that it would, he would have ordered his troops back to the base camp already. Orders were orders, but any commander who pushed to complete the mission and got their Legion wiped out would get hanged and deservedly so. Even now there was a chance, a narrowing window in which he would be forced to order the retreat, but it was so slim now that he felt rising confidence that this nest would be purged before time ran out.

It was likely the satellite nests wouldn't survive the surge of monsters from the third strata without the support of their most powerful members here, but just in case he would have his troops bunker down within the nest to ride out the wave. Once it was done, they could emerge and track down the remnants at their leisure.

"Looks like the gate is starting to take damage, commander," Aurillia observed from his side.

The other tribunes attached to his Legion nodded their heads, each of them an experienced head with decades of experience, they watched the fight with the air of hawks.

"After the next push, they'll probably fall back behind the gate and wait for us to break it down," Titus mused.

"Do you think they have another gate?" Alberton asked, the Loremaster having joined with his advisors. "They have two, why not three?"

"Judging by the size of the nest, I deem it unlikely," spoke up Meognus, a newly attached tribune, "but the possibility exists, as you say. If we find another gate, we'll knock that one down too. How else can we achieve our aim?"

The young tribune was a fresh promotion, placed within Titus' Legion for a bit of seasoning. He was a good soldier, but Titus found him a little green as a leader.

"Our troops are tired and drained, casualties are mounting and exhausted Legionaries make more mistakes," Titus spoke slowly, no judgement in his voice, "if there is another gate, we will pull back to give rest, water and food to our people. The men and women who put on the armour of the Legion are our greatest resource and they mustn't be wasted under any circumstances."

There were a few nods, but it was Alberton who protested.

"B-but..."

Titus silenced him with a glare.

"Under *any* circumstances," he repeated.

His friend turned his head away from the anger on the commander's face, his protest dying in his throat. '*What about Morrelia?*' he'd wanted to say, but Titus had known his intentions before he finished opening his mouth. Despite appearances, Titus *was* desperately worried about his daughter. The thought of her in the clutches of these monsters was enough to make his blood boil and his stomach turn, but there was only one way within his power he could bring her back and so he would follow it to the letter and hope.

After a few moments of awkward silence, the other tribunes began to offer their own thoughts on the battle as it raged on. To the more seasoned officers, the cold, brutal calculation of war was evident in their observations. Discussions centred on the rate the monsters were slain versus the number of Legion casualties and how those numbers could be improved were had in quiet voices amongst them as various hypothesis were pondered. Such talks may seem inhuman, and Titus found new officers often struggled with them, but in reality, this was how a commander and his tribunes ensured aims were accomplished with the minimum possible losses. To do anything less than confront the harsh reality the Legionaries faced with unemotional logic would be an unthinkable abrogation of responsibility.

Over the next minutes, things played out much as expected. Though the abomination and the pets it had raised caused significant issues, they were not individually powerful enough to overthrow the course of the battle. It was lucky they hadn't had a chance to evolve again. Had the reincarnated monster reached the next tier, this fight would have been far more difficult. As it was, the next charge of the irregulars disrupted the ant lines enough that they were forced to pull back once more lest the Legionaries cut their haphazard formation to pieces. Acid and spells rained down on the Legion forces as they advanced more and began to batter at the gate itself. Without proper siege equipment, it would take some time to break down, but with the proper application of fire and water the metal could be warped and splintered. Throw in some good old fashioned whacking with sword and axe skills to provide some oomph and the job would get done.

The closer they got to breaking through, the more tense Titus became. He hoped he could trust the enemy to provide mercy to his only remaining child. Would they hold to their word and keep her safe? Or would they strike her down out of spite once the battle was lost?

So lost on his thoughts was the commander that he didn't notice the disturbance behind until Aurillia reached out to shake his arm.

"Titus!" she shouted, "look behind!"

Shocked at his own lack of awareness, the veteran turned to see something he had truly hoped not to see.

Green. The entire tunnel had turned green. Even as he watched, vines and leaves sprouted out through the Dungeon walls, transforming the darkness around them into an emerald sea.

"That damned tree!" Titus growled under his breath as he drew his axe in a tight grip.

"The Great Mother Tree feels much the same toward you," an unfathomably deep voice echoed out of the darkness. "You have made war on her and she does not forget, nor forgive."

"Your mother is a monster," Titus spoke flatly.

"Haaaa," a sound halfway between a sigh, a laugh and bending tree branch resounded through the tunnel, causing the leaves to bend and flutter.

A great figure stepped into the light, massive, as his kind always were, his head near scraped the ceiling of the tunnel as his thick wooden limbs were as far around as the mightiest of trees.

"What care do we children have for the origins of our parent? She made us, that is enough."

"She is spawned from the Dungeon," Titus replied, "that is enough."

A tense air had descended amongst the officers and those Legionaries around them as each of them stared at the newcomer. As if it sensed the hostility, the greenery had ceased its expansion and remained as it was, ominously writhing and twisting with every word that was spoken. At Titus' declaration, a rustle so loud it was almost a shout rippled through every leaf and the giant figure cocked its head.

"She has told your kind she had no choice regarding the manner of her birth in this world," the giant said.

"Did she also have no choice in the lives she has consumed?" Titus didn't back down.

The giant shook his wooden head slowly.

"There can be no understanding between our people, this is old growth."

"Why are you here, Grove Keeper?" Titus demanded, "this conflict has nothing to do with your kind, or your damned mother."

From the abundant growth, more figures emerged, smaller and thinner, but nonetheless powerful, the bruan'chii formed loose ranks behind their Keeper.

"Haaaaa," that sound came again as the Grove Keeper looked down on them with ancient eyes, "you want something, so the mother will take it away."

He shrugged.

"She can be petty like that," he said.

The leaves rustled again with malicious glee.

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The massed ranks of my siblings can only watch as the gate bulges and buckles under the immense weight of the pressure the Legion is applying. Exhausted and weary, the last fighting fit ants on this side of the nest stand ready for the final conflict. Once those gates come down, this will be the final stand. If the Legion manages to break through this point, they'll be able to separate into smaller teams in the narrower tunnels where we can't hope to apply the numbers needed to defeat them. They'll destroy the nest one piece at a time until they reach the brood chambers where the golgari are fighting and complete the annihilation of the Queens and young.

Looking around I can see that we've all been pushed to the brink. Almost every ant is carrying wounds but the healers are so tapped out they have to be selective where they apply their ministrations. I'm pretty sure I saw Beyn spitting blood a little while ago, even his legendary vocal endurance unable to go the distance. Tiny's hands have been healed a few times already and I can still see they're raw and broken. Crinis has lost almost all of her reserve flesh and Invidia is suffering the kind of mental exertion migraines I frequently experience after casting too many spells. Even so, we need to front up again. The gate booms and shudders as our enemies batter it down, but each second that passes is a blessed relief. A few moments to recuperate will do wonders for all of us. We're going to need all the energy we can get in a minute.

A strange silence descends amongst the collective ants and humans that remain. We watch the gate as it gradually breaks down, awaiting the foe to come together.

Elsewhere, in the brood chambers.

An Asura Bear was a cursed creature at its core. Truthfully, Sarah couldn't remember even choosing the evolution, so lost in the rage and fear was she at that time that it's possible she hadn't made a choice at all. Yet somehow, the form she had chosen was so devastatingly suited to her that it succeeded in tipping her over a precipice that had taken her a decade to climb back up. She could feel herself teetering on the lip of that cliff now, her psyche balanced on the edge of sanity and that pit of mindless violence in which she had dwelled. The problem was, deep within, it was *so hard* to care.

Next to her core, in the centre of her massive frame beat the asura heart, the powerful mutation that gave her species its name. It provided incredible strength, but at a cost. The heart fed on her negative emotions, her rage, pain and fear, magnified them, liquified them and send them pumping throughout her body until every inch of her frame was suffused with them. She could feel it now. The pain of betrayal, the anger of broken trust, the fear of losing herself again. She could feel it all echo through every cell of her body until she was drunk with it.

And it made her *strong*.

She could barely see the gorgari in front of her, her vision had long since faded from red to black. There was a chance her wild swipes did just as much damage to the Colony as it did the target of her wrath, but she didn't, *couldn't* care. Maybe her eyes had been injured, or perhaps she was already so far gone that seeing what she hit just wasn't important to her anymore. Regardless, she could feel the devastation wrought every time she struck out. Flesh was parted, armour split, metal cracked and bones splintered. It was like wine on her tongue. Fresh Biomass between her teeth. She needed more.

There was pain, somewhere. Her entire body ached, but she couldn't tell why. It didn't matter. She could still swing her paws and bite with her muzzle. That was all that mattered.

The Queen watched everything from a distance with worry growing in her heart.

"Will she be alright?" she asked the healer by her side once again.

Frances clacked her mandibles.

"I don't know," the healer was uncharacteristically short, the stress of the situation causing her to constantly rake her antennae through the elbows of her front legs. "Mother, *please* retreat. We've not been able to fully heal you and this area isn't safe," she pleaded.

"I will not," the Queen replied, her tone sharp. "Cease treating me immediately and go help the others. The bear appears on the verge of collapse, why do you not treat her instead?"

"I cannot reach her, and even if I could, we can't be sure she won't just kill me on the spot. We've already had a number of ants wounded by her in this fight."

"And so?" The Queen demanded. "Is she not lost to her rage as she has been before? Why do we not help her?"

"We aren't strong enough!" Frances was growing exasperated. No matter how she tried, she was unable to persuade her mother to leave this dangerous area and it was making her desperate. "The only one in the Colony who could hope to stand up to friend Sarah is the Eldest and they aren't here!"

"But I am," the Queen stated and pushed herself to standing.

The healer watched her mother rise with growing horror.

"Mother, no!" she cried.

But it was too late, the Queen stepped forward once, twice, then waded into the thick of battle, the rampaging form of the bear firm within her sights.

Outside the nest.

"You won't retreat?" Titus asked.

"We will not," the Grove Keeper replied.

The standoff between the two sides continued as Titus weighed his options, his mind churning furiously. There were only two paths he could take that he could see. He could stand down, order his Legion to

retreat, and possibly secure the release of his daughter in the process, or he could fight. He had promised not to take action against the Colony, and he would not, but the bruan'chii were another thing entirely. If they were able to hold off the children of the mad tree here, and the Legionaries succeeded in breaking into the nest, there was a chance they could still accomplish their goal. His grip tightened around the haft of his axe.

"You don't leave me with many choices," Titus ground out, his anger beginning to kindle in his chest as he weighed the lives of his soldiers in his mind.

"That is our intention," came the answer. "The mother will take everything from you that she can. So far from your metal mountain, there is nothing you can do to resist her."

"Is that so?"

Even as they spoke, the number of figures who emerged from behind the Grove Keeper continued to rise as more of his people stepped forward. Fortunately, there was only the one Keeper, the tree wouldn't be able to support more than that this high in the Dungeon.

"Haaaaa. It is so," the Keeper replied.

Titus brought up his axe so that he could hold it in a two handed grip.

"Let's find out then," he said grimly.

Deep in the Dungeon.

A chasm plunged downward, filled with an impenetrable darkness. There was no movement here, no living thing would dare set foot so close to the home of the hungry one. To do so was certain death, this was instinct so ingrained that it seemed as though monsters were now spawned with it. For a hundred years, no monster except those that had the misfortune to be born in the area had existed in this place, and those that were spawned here did not live for long.

From somewhere deeper, though it felt not that far away, an inaudible *thump* rippled outward, like a silent thunderclap. The wave of invisible pressure swept through the rock and the darkness, swept through the chasm and continued on its way, outwards through the strata.

Silence reigned once more.

For a few moments, it seemed that nothing would happen, but this was merely the calm, the storm was sure to follow. And follow it did. The mana in the area drained away rapidly, thinning to less than half of what it had been only a few moments ago, but then it came roaring back. Like the tide which retreats only to crash back in fury as a tidal wave, the mana flooded outward with a tangible roar, suffusing every rock, every twig with a dizzying amount of power.

Then there came a stir. Slowly at first, then with growing speed, the great chasm began to close. There was a great cracking sound as hundreds of tons of stone shattered into pieces, the two walls finally crunching together with a deafening crescendo. Then, after a moment, they parted once more. Visible here and there now that the dirt and rock had begun to fall away were massive, triangular ridges, each one stained a deep red. If an observer stood far back enough, it would be easy to guess what they were, teeth. Hundreds and hundreds of teeth.

An aura filled with a terrible madness exploded outward, driven by one, insatiable urge.

HUNGER.

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When the gates finally fell, they fell with a resounding 'boom' that echoed from the walls of the tunnel. Might seem a little excessive to knock the damn things off their hinges, but that's what the Legionaries decided to do anyway. Perhaps they felt the width of the nest entrance was a reasonable width for them to engage in and I have to agree. The tunnel approach to the nest narrows as it approaches the gate, stays the same for a short distance before it opens out into the chamber beyond. To be honest, they're probably just happy not to see yet another gate waiting for them in the distance.

Once the gates are down, it takes the Legion a few minutes to reorganise their formation before they once again begin their approach.

Boom!

What the heck was that?! The vibrations of a colossal impact roll through the rock beneath my legs and my antennae waggle through the air in confusion as I try to pick up the source. It didn't happen within the nest, that's for sure, whatever it was that caused that, it surely originated outside the gates.

"Eldest! Can you sense what that was?" Burke rushes up to me.

"I'm trying to work it out," I reply distractedly as I focus on watching the approaching soldiers whilst reaching out with my mind.

The distance is too far for me to reach, even with my relatively high Skills, but there are definitely fluctuations in the mana further down the tunnel, behind the approaching force.

"I can't be sure," I respond tersely as I set my mandibles, "but it seems like something is happening at the rear of the Legion forces."

"Like what?!" Burke is baffled.

"How the hell am I supposed to know, Burke? Maybe put a scout on it?"

"There's an army between us and that location!"

"I noticed!"

The two sides have already begun to accelerate towards each other and I join my brethren, using all three pairs of legs to synchronise three separate dashes to achieve maximum speed.

CRUNCH

The two fully braced armies smash into each other as both sides activate their Skills, spells and everything else they have at their disposal. Armour and carapace are dented, cracked and splintered as neither side holds back any of their strength, the Legion on the precipice of victory, the Colony on the edge of annihilation. My carapace absorbs numerous blows in the first few seconds as weapon light blooms all around me. Only my future sight and heightened reflexes keep my antennae attached to my

head as my body makes the minute adjustments necessary to absorb all the strikes with my diamond exo-skeleton. Precious diamond carapace. Where would I be without you? If I could, I'd kiss that precious stuff, but thankfully for my dignity such a thing is impossible.

By this point, my sub-brains are fairly cooked and I've released the omni-elemental construct, opting instead to deploy a simple gravity domain over as wide an area as I can, hoping the already tired Legionaries will suffer under the added weight of their armour. It's hard to tell what sort of effect it's having, but then again, it's hard to get a good visual of the battlefield when I'm doing the dirty work here in the front line. Shields and the flashes from enemy attacks are pretty much all I can see at any moment!

The fighting is savage and relentless as I chomp everything in front of me until my jaws ache with a constant throbbing pain and the barbs on my mandibles begin to crack and splinter. My regeneration gland is running dry again already and my helpful healer friend had to pop up and top me off within the first five minutes of the conflict.

"For the Colony!" the cry rises from somewhere behind me.

"FOR THE COLONY!" a thunderous wave of pheromones crashes through the battlefield, stunning my antennae with its intensity.

Within the egg-laying chamber, the Queen once again pushed herself to the forefront of the battle, shouldering aside the children who tried to block her way. She would not be denied by them, not this time. Unwilling to put up any real resistance to their mother's advance, the soldiers and generals gave ground the moment they felt her push against them. If she wanted to go to the front, none were prepared to go all out to stop her. What were they supposed to do? Fight their mother and drag her from the front whilst also fighting the golgari?

So it was that the Queen reached the place she had wanted to be, right by the side of the bear who appeared to be on the brink of death. Covered in wounds, her fur matted and dark with her own ichor, the friend of the Colony fought on as if she felt none of it, a seemingly never ending roar bellowing from her maw. The giant ant reared back, her antennae bursting into light so bright it chased away the shadows in the chamber before she unleashed a vast pulse of healing magic that swept through the ant forces, though a great chunk of it was absorbed by the bear.

Wounds visibly knit before her eyes as the body of the raging beast soaked up the healing power and regenerated itself, but the bear didn't seem to notice, no change came over her at all. The golgari certainly noticed. They had been on the verge of finally bringing down this monstrous entity, only for it now to get a sudden boost of health. Despair gripped their lines which was only made worse when the Queen activated her war form. Drawing energy from every ant in the room, she grew in size until she loomed over the enemy who shrank back from the mighty visage before them.

The Queen had changed from her fight with Garralosh. Unable to protect her children in that fight, she had taken steps to ensure she would not be found lacking in strength. Her daily hunts had helped to level her combat Skills, the extra Biomass she had taken in was spent to improve her body for fighting. Never again would she allow the enemy to bully her children.

"GET OUT OF MY NEST!" she roared.

Her mandibles glowed bright and manifested two enormous jaws that extended from her own before slamming shut, crunching the front rank of the golgari. With the Queen returning to the battle, the tide had shifted in the Colony's favour. After having matched the strength of the demonic bear for so long, and grinding out the battle against the endless ants, the sudden appearance of a powerful tier six monster was too much for them to handle and they began to pull back from the front, drawing their forces back into the tunnel through which they had come.

That's when things changed.

Sarah's endless roar of mindless rage had only grown louder as the fight had gone on. Now, she found nothing in front of her to rend, so she turned and lashed out at the first thing she saw. The claws raked down the side of the Queen and carved deep gouges in her carapace. Taken by surprise, the Queen was slow to respond and before she could turn her gigantic body another swipe ripped a chunk of exoskeleton away, spraying the air with ichor.

"DEFEND THE QUEEN!" the Colony became frantic at seeing their mother attacked and rushed forward to protect her.

"GET BACK!" the Queen demanded as she faced down the maddened bear. "She does not know what she is doing!"

With her mandibles between them, she was much better able to ward Sarah away, lunging forward to ram the bear and put her off balance. Whilst it prevented her from taking any more serious wounds, everything the Queen did only seemed to drive the bear deeper into her rage, increasing her strength until her claws ignited with a murderous red light that seemed to tear at the fabric of reality, as well as fill the Queen's mind with gibbering voices of anger with every swing. The Colony watched paralysed in the moment as the Queen struggled to fend off the mighty creature, and the golgari, sensing a change in their fortunes, stopped their retreat and waited to see what might happen.

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Chapter 684: The Siege pt 30

Grove Keepers were unreasonably strong. How exactly they were born, the Legion wasn't sure. They weren't monsters, as such, none of the bruan'chii were. They were not spawned of the Dungeon and unlike the ants, they weren't created by a 'parent' monster through the traditional means. This was why the Legion didn't really have a problem with the wood people per se, but rather their murderous, meddling parent. Naturally the bruan'chii were unwilling to sit by and allow the Legion to destroy the source of their entire race, and so conflict had ensued. Throughout the decades of battle, the Legion had learned many lessons, one of the most important being: Grove Keepers were unreasonably strong.

The gigantic tree creature brought one ponderous wooden fist down in an overhead smash that would collapse a house but Titus was undaunted. Timing his footwork perfectly, he Dashed to one side before pivoting and Dashing once more, forward this time, his axe raised to strike. The Keeper moved with deceptive speed and grace, pulling his left leg back and rotating his body to sweep his left arm in a wide arc to catch the commander before he could unleash his blow.

Without pause, Titus brought the axe down, using the enormous power of his wrists to divert the blade to the side where it collided with the offending arm, releasing a shockwave that rumbled the stones around him.

"Haaaa," the tree rumbled with its impossibly deep voice. "You are a strong one."

Titus reset himself, his eyes absorbing everything in an instant. The blow had been shallow, without the full weight of his Skills or Might behind it. Even so, he had carved a deep wound through the bark of his opponent from which leaked a thick, golden sap. The commander breathed deep, soaking the mana surrounding him into his body and sending it circulating through his mana channels at a furious pace. As if awakening to a craving he had long put behind him, no matter how much energy he poured into his body, it still wanted more. The amount wasn't the problem, but the purity. Once he had become acclimated to the mana in the deeper strata, the thin stuff this high up would never be enough to truly top him off. Nevertheless, he would make do with what he had.

He approached the tree with caution, unwilling to be caught off guard. With a flick of his wrist, his axe ignited with red light, a powerful aura rising from the blade. In an instant, the vines and growth around his feet lashed out from the wall, a thousand barbs reached for his flesh and sought to twist within his armour.

"HAH!"

With a mighty roar, energy exploded from Titus' body and the vines were incinerated to ash before they could reach him. Seeing the green growth burn sparked anger within the eyes of the Grove Keeper for the first time and he stepped forward, his body suddenly illuminated with thousands of runes and shone with green energy.

"This place has been claimed by the mother-tree!" the giant roared, pushing forward with both hands.

A wave of energy erupted from the keeper and the growth around them went *mad* as it drank in the power he emitted and exploded with growth. Twisted shapes of flowers filled with fanged jaws and vines as thick as a man with barbs that dripped with virulent, orange poisons erupted all around Titus within seconds, yet he did not retreat. He took a deep breath and poured his energy into the axe in his grip before he swung it in a wide arc around him.

A wave of force erupted from the edge of the blade that annihilated the growth in a ten metre radius centred on the heavy armoured Legionary. The Keeper hummed out a low growl and stepped forward again, drawing his hand back for a mighty blow. Titus' face bore no expression, still carved in lines of iron as it always was and he watched the strike come before he shifted his feet again and prepared to intercept it. The demon sealed within his weapon howled with glee as he slashed out once more, putting the weight of his armour behind the blow and grunted with satisfaction as he felt the weapon bite deep.

Still, Grove Keepers were known for their potent regeneration and Titus knew it would take too long for him to bring down the bruan'chii to stop his Legionaries from falling at the hands of the others. Instead, he delayed and hoped that the battle within the nest went well for his people. Determined, he raised his axe again and waited for the other to make the next move.

Within the egg-laying chamber, the Queen was stuck in a battle for her life. The enraged bear, though smaller than the Queen in her war form was still significantly stronger, the power of her rage driving her

might to incredible heights. Whilst the giant ant was permanently on the defence, unwilling to unleash any bite that would deal significant damage to her opponent, Sarah did not hold back, attacking in an endless, mindless rush that never ceased. The Queen knew that this couldn't go on forever, there was only so much ground she could give, only so long she could drag out the fight, before her larger form expired and she would be reduced to her normal size. Without the bonus stats she gained from drawing on the strength of her children, she would fall quickly to the bear.

"Whatever it is you want to do, you need to do it fast, my Queen," Brendant warned her from nearby. "We will not sit by and watch her destroy you, friend of the Colony or not."

"There must be something we can do to reach her," the Queen argued, "haven't you done so many times before?"

"We have, but never have we seen her so far gone that she would attack us. It is what she feared would happen, but we were unable to persuade her from battle for long."

The soldier shook her head with genuine grief. Sarah had been a loyal friend to the ants and had bled for them many times during the invasion. Without her, the golgari would have done far more damage, and advanced far more quickly than they did. It pained her to see the bear lost to the madness she had feared for so long. Even so, she hardened her heart. There was no life, except perhaps that of the Eldest, that she would put before the Queen's.

"Get a mage!" the Queen demanded. "Connect my mind to hers. Let me try to reach her."

Ever ready to obey the commands of their mother, Advant didn't need to say anything before a small team of mages leapt forward to weave the necessary mind magic. In only a few seconds the connection was established and the Queen could feel her thoughts match with those of the once-human, Sarah.

[Sarah,] she called, [you do not need to fight.]

The maddened bear did not react, nor slow in its assault. Wild swings of those deadly claws slashed through the air and threatened to rip the Queen apart if she didn't dodge.

[We will not hurt you,] the mother of the Colony spoke again, [there is no need to embrace your rage.]

She searched the bear in front of her for any flicker of recognition, any hint of the person within, but she saw nothing. There was nothing to indicate that she had even been heard. It was difficult, unlike the meddlesome one, the Queen did not have the mastery over mind magic necessary to project her mind into another being's consciousness. All she had were words. Words, and actions. Instead of retreating, instead of trying to fend away the vicious claws that tried to end her life, the Queen did the unthinkable, she lunged forward. She didn't bite, or dodge, or defend herself at all, instead, she brought her antennae down on the bear's head and allowed her healing mana to flow through them whilst those dreadful claws tore into her.

"MOTHER!" Brendant cried in horror. "Attack!" she ordered, "get in there and save the Queen!"

[It's fine now,] the Queen paid no mind to her mounting wounds as she sought to reach out to the rage-filled soul in front of her. [You are safe, you are protected, you have done well.]

The ants swarmed forward to defend the heart of their family but the distance they had kept in order to respect the Queen's wishes cost them precious seconds. Again and again the mighty bear slashed with her paws and snapped with her maw until the Queen's carapace was cracked and rent. All the while the Queen continued to pour her healing magic into the other and repeat the same soft words of praise. As Brendant rushed forward to attack the bear and sell her life in the defence of the Queen, she was shocked to find that Sarah was slowing down. Her swipes became less damaging, with longer pauses in between and the deathly aura was fading from her claws. As one, the Colony's charge slowed to a halt as the Queen continued to soothe the bear, whose endless roar had finally begun to fade, receding until it was scarce more than a whimper.

The Queen was exhausted and on the verge of collapse, but she watched the light return to the eyes of the one who had helped save her children with joy.

[You are safe,] she said, [you are protected. You are home.]

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Chapter 685: The Siege FINAL

By Gandalf I'm tired.

BAM!

Stop hitting me, dammit!

DOOM CHOMP!

Just like every time I activate the Skill, a team of Legionaries with heavy shields leap forward, activating a host of abilities and anchoring against each other.

CRUNCH!

Despite my mandibles biting deep into the metal slabs these muscle heads call shields, I once again am not able to penetrate through and deal real damage. Stupid tin cans! Eat acid then! I drop my thorax low and raise my abdomen so I can blast the a-team in front of me with a face full of burn juice before resetting my position in the formation. The ants on my left and right depend on me to protect their flanks and if I extend too far or drop back a bit I expose them to unnecessary danger, something that's happened a fair bit over the course of the battle.

"Need a heal?" I scent the pheromones of my designated healer friend behind me.

"You've recharged already?" I'm a bit shocked.

"Nope. But I've found another healer who can top you off if needed."

I find it a little suspicious how capable and seemingly high level the healer who was placed behind me in the battle line turned out to be, and now, when healers are needed desperately all along the line she just so happens to have another of her caste waiting in reserve?

"I'm totally fine," I lie, "get that healing where it's needed."

I can almost hear the shrug of antennae behind me and the little ant burrows back down into the soil as the fight rages on. A few more exchanges and I see Tiny off to my right getting battered in the chest. A salvo of fireballs and charged arrows strike him right in the chest plate, knocking him off his feet. The big ape howls with rage but he's so exhausted he can't keep his feet any longer and topples over, scattering the Colony members beneath his feet.

[Invidia! Crinis! Make sure Tiny gets out of there in one piece.]

Desperate to make a distraction, I charge forward into the ranks of the Legion once more, shoving them back with my bulk. Only this time, I don't retreat quickly, instead, charging out again, snapping my mandibles for all I'm worth and blasting everyone I can see with gravity bolts. It's been a miracle that Tiny made it this long, he's not exactly built for endurance. Without the armour protecting him, I'd have ordered him out of the fight ages ago. If I actually survive long enough, I'm going to find Smithant and personally thank that little genius. I'll have to see if she can find any see-through materials when I get my own armour. I can't have my magnificent carapace obscured for any reason!

BAM!

Although, I could probably do with some extra shielding now... The Legion forces are quick to capitalise on my poor position and close around my flanks faster than Vibrant eating breakfast. My senses sharpen to their finest point as my antennae, reflexes and muscles move in perfect synchronisation, deflecting and dodging every blow I can and diverting others to clash against my carapace. Precious diamond carapace, saving my bacon once again!

Truth be told, the Legionaries are moving a bit slow, certainly they lack the oomph they usually do. The battle has been long as just as the ants have grown weary, even these indomitable humans have grown tired of the constant effort. Trying to fight your way through tens of thousands of monstrous ants is going to take it out of you, no matter who you are. Although the gravity domain and bolts that I'm firing out might not seem like they have much of an effect, I'm confident they are keeping me alive right now as the soldiers targeting my life find it that little bit harder to move and swing their weapons.

Chomp! Chomp! CHOMP!

I thrash around desperately and I'm pleased to see that my distraction has done its job. A chance to put down the indescribably attractive ant that I am has lured the Legion away from the area Tiny fell and the Colony has rushed extra numbers to shore up the line as Crinis drags her fellow pet away whilst Invidia heals him out of any immediate danger.

[Great work!] I call back to them. [Once Tiny is safe, please come and rescue me...]

[MASTER!]

I'm going to get told off pretty bad by Crinis after this. Perhaps death *is* the answer. No! Can't think like that, need to live!

From behind the lines Victor watches the surge offense of the Eldest falter as they are quickly surrounded. The loss of the great ape guardian has been keenly felt in the lines, but there is nothing for it, the Colony has no choice but to press forward!

"Get in there and fight!" she orders every ant in reserve forward. "Follow the Eldest and battle for the Colony!"

"FOR THE COLONY!" comes back the roar as the ants, only recently healed from their injuries plunge back into the fray once more.

Unwilling to be left behind, Victor herself runs forward to join the conflict. What does it matter if she were to fall here? After this, there are no more plans or strategies that she needs to look over. Either they stand here, or perish. Sensing the frantic energy of these final moments, the human allies join with the surging ants as they charge forward with their final gasp of strength. All the while, the Eldest rampages throughout the Legion ranks, throwing their weight around and absorbing an absurd amount of punishment as they seek to disrupt the enemy's battleline.

"Break through!" Victor roared as she lunged forward, her mandibles chomping as she hurled her body into the soldiers in front, buckling their line as the next wave ran over her back to crash in again.

Every available ant had joined the charge and all along the line the scene of fresh troops surging into the Legion shields and swords was repeated. Soldiers, scouts, mages, healers, every ant present on the field of battle had joined this final assault in the hopes of finally breaking through. The enemy realised quickly what was happening and redoubled their efforts, fighting as a cohesive unit to stave off the wave of ants who had arrived.

The ferocity of the battle had reached a frenetic peak. Neither side was willing to take a backward step and in three short minutes Victor had witnessed hundreds of acts of selfless courage, skill and sacrifice from both sides. In the middle of it all, the diamond ant burned bright, like the flare of a candle on the verge of going out. No matter how the ants pressed, or how much ground they gained, the Eldest remained always beyond reach. As if psychically linked with the Colony itself, every time Victor surged along with her siblings, the Eldest would also plunge deeper into the sea of Legion troops. Unable to reach their progenitor, the first of their kind and most selfless defender, the ants of the Colony only grew more frenzied, charging again and again into the enemy line to shove them back, heedless of their own injuries.

Victor could see the Legion's strategy play out. They wanted to absorb the charge, give ground and let the Colony's spirit break along with their momentum. In that moment, they would seek to return the pain they had endured a hundredfold with a counter charge that would shatter the ant formation and break open the nest once and for all. Even knowing this, there was nothing Victor could do. All they could do was follow in the footsteps of their progenitor, the first of their kind, and charge into the blades of the enemy.

Suffused with the boost of their human allies, who roared and screamed as they raised their shaking arms and ran on unsteady legs, the Colony unleashed its true ferocity on the Legion. For one moment, one shining moment, Victor thought they would break. The Eldest was unstoppable and no matter how they tried, the Legionaries could not bring them down. Wherever they went, the Legion formation buckled and broke, opening gaps through which poured hundreds of giant ants within seconds as they bit and crunched whatever they could find in their need to reach their saviour. After driving so deep, and causing so much disruption, Victor saw the line on the verge of collapse and felt hope surge from deep within her core.

But like an illusion, it rippled and was gone, the gaps closing over before her eyes and the wall of shields re-established itself and the ant's charge finally faltered. A moment later she saw why. The Eldest had collapsed, one of their legs finally getting caught and had been severed at the joint and their momentum had brought them down with a crash. In just a few moments, the Legionaries would descend on the prone form of the strongest ant and there was nothing Victor could do about it.

And that's when it came. A tidal wave of mana that tore through the tunnel like a scream. The Dungeon veins latticed through the stone seemed to pulse and writhe as the walls began to shift as monsters took shape within, soon to be spawned and emerge.

Both sides stopped instantly and Victor could almost curse as the joy surged within her. Now?! The wave comes NOW?! Even ten minutes earlier and he wouldn't have had to endure this mad rush of disaster. Without a word, the Legion forces pulled back and marched a brisk pace, their fatigue only showing in rare places as they vacated the battlefield, taking their wounded with them. After a second, Victor rushed forward to support the Eldest and soon the giant ant was hoisted onto the backs of a few strong soldiers so they could be transported back to the nest.

"Just like that?" the Eldest echoed Victor's own thoughts, "they pick up and leave?"

No one replied for a long moment as the mana continued to surge around them, filling the tunnel with an intoxicating level of energy. Then the Eldest began to laugh, both in scent and in thought as mind magic spilled out of them and into every ant and human in reach. It was as if a bubbling wellspring of relief and gladness had burst into being within all of them and none dared to speak lest they disturb it and snuff it out. So it was that Eldest was silently escorted back into the nest, laughing joyously all the way.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 686: The Bell Tolls for Thee

Titus was relieved to find Morrelia had been returned as promised not an hour after the Legion had withdrawn from the battle. The instant the surge of mana had arrived, Titus had stood down in his fight with the Keeper and the bruan'chii had stood aside. The purpose of the tree-people had been to stymie the Legion and their mission had been accomplished. The Keeper had been gracious, but the leaves had not, rustling with obvious happiness at seeing her enemies fail in their task. Titus didn't care. Including the auxiliaries, hundreds of good Legionaries had been lost in this endeavour and even the safe return of his only child couldn't completely snuff the morose feeling in his chest.

Legionaries fight monsters and died doing it all the time, he knew that it was just a reality of the world, but he was never able to completely shut away the pain of *his* soldiers dying under *his* command. His wife would just say he lacked maturity, but then she was always more suited to command than he was. She was in charge of the whole bloody Legion at this point after all.

"Morrelia," he said, embracing his daughter when she reached him, "I'm glad to see you are safe."

She'd been escorted back by a group of humans led by Enid Ruther to the end of the tunnel that led toward the nest. Titus had recalled all his troops to this point and was still waiting for some of the further out groups to come back. He pushed his daughter back so he could look into her face and saw the mixed emotions there. Happiness, shame, guilt. No doubt she blamed herself for losing control of

her berserker skills in the midst of battle and getting captured. She had so much promise, if she learned from her mistakes she would be a commander before too long.

He reached up and placed a hand on her head.

"Your mother will be so pleased to see you again. If you'd died just before she finished her commission, I fear she would have collapsed the Iron Mountain down on her own head."

It was a poor attempt at a joke and the more Titus thought about it, the more realistic a scenario it seemed. Watching the expression on her father's face shift from joking to a glum realisation made Morrelia laugh and the knot inside her eased slightly with the release of tension. She had betrayed the Legion, but she believed it had been for the right reasons. With any luck they would never return and the Colony would continue to be peaceful and cooperative with everyone they came across. If so, she would never have to regret too strongly the decision that she had made here.

"I hope you and your people are able to retreat safely before things get too crazy down here," Enid said. Then she frowned. "I also hope you never come back."

It was far more grace than he could expect to receive from opponents he'd been fighting not an hour previous.

"I thank you for your words," Titus nodded, "I do not know where the Legion will send us next, With this new wave coming so close on the heels of the last one, there will be problems all over Pangera. We defend many remote communities from the Dungeon and our people are stretched thin."

"I know the work you do to defend the helpless and it is appreciated around the world," Enid snapped, "if only you'd devoted yourselves to doing *that* instead of coming here and trying to kill people that didn't need killing. I've lost a lot of good folk and so have you."

The commander could only shake his head.

"The two tasks are one and the same. We came here to protect people from what these monsters will become. I hope you realise the mistake you have made before it's too late."

With nothing left to say to each other, the two sides parted ways and Titus got back to organising his forces, counting the dead, ensuring the injured were cared for and arranging logistics. He would need to get his Legion to a gate as soon as possible and he was determined that none would be left behind. After two more hours, every head had been accounted for and the Legion began their march. They were exhausted and drained, but none complained. Better a hard stretch of travel now followed by rest than a never ending battle against the monsters who were already beginning to spawn from the walls.

Enid sighed as she watched them go before she turned back to walk up the tunnel to the nest. Already the ants were swarming over the ruins of their once pristine tunnel, trying to re-establish their defences before the wave hit in force. It was amazing the damage that good people with bad ideas could do, she reflected. Though doubtless Titus would say the exact same thing about her. Not wanting to dwell on such depressing thoughts, she instead turned her mind to the things she would need to do next and the list quickly grew.

First of all she would need to contact the families of those who had fallen. An unenviable job, but a necessary one. She could remember many times her husband would take on this duty, informing the

loved ones of those who hadn't made it back from a delve. Shoulders square, Enid walked briskly. There was work to be done.

When the High Blade Balta had awoken he had instinctively felt that they had lost. That *he* had lost. Not only the duel, but the expedition, his reputation and that of his house. When confirmation came from contacting the Abyssal Legion that the reincarnator yet lived, he knew that he had been ruined. The reputation he had staked, the favours he had called in, all for nothing. Less than nothing. The wave wouldn't finish the ants as some of his advisors hoped, he was sure of it. In fact, he was scornful of those who were prepared to think it. The ants had been stronger, far stronger, than he had expected and thousands of golgari had been lost in the tunnels. When he returned to the empire the disgrace of this failure would haunt the house of Balta for years. He felt so frustrated he could burst.

Full of spite and bitterness, he barely paid attention as the lesser nobles arranged their swift retreat back to the nearest gate. They would need to travel hard and even then they wouldn't make it before the monsters started to spawn. Yet more trouble awaited them. When they finally began to move, the golgari expedition was a silent and morose column of warriors and shapers each lost in their own thoughts. Such was the manner of the defeated.

Inside the nest, the Colony had not paused to rest for even a moment. The council had launched into action only to find that their various caste members had already leaped into their work. The carvers were everywhere, in the tunnels, working on the gates, shaping stone and metal with the assistance of the soldiers who were doing the heavy lifting, many of them injured. The healers worked frantically, trying to turn over as many wounded as possible in as short a time as they could manage. If an ant was eighty percent healed, they were out the door, Biomass, time and their own regeneration would take care of the rest. The more severely damaged Colony members were overflowing the more long term wards within the nest and tunnels were co-opted for emergency treatment areas.

The Colony had lost many over the duration of the conflict. The final toll, when it was eventually counted, was large, over ten thousand members of the family had fallen in the fighting. Fortunately, the Queen's had not ceased egg production during the long siege and the total population of the Colony hadn't much changed. Even so, many excellent ants had fallen and they were mourned. The Colony grieved in the only way they knew: work.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 687: What was lost, what was gained

Legs are something I grow back easily enough. The cracks and damage to my carapace is going to take significantly longer, especially considering how I'm totally out of juice in my regeneration gland. The inner plating will help a ton though and before too long, I'll be back on my feet and out there working with my siblings in no time.

...

BUT I DON'T WANNA! I'm tired dammit! The Legion has been gone less than an hour and I still don't have a full complement of legs! Give me a break! Please! Where are the mandatory rest enforcers? I have an emergency situation for them?! Actually, I think I spot one over there, what's she doing? Lifting rubble. Dang. I suppose in these dire times, even the strictest of Colony rules must be waived to some degree. Until I get all of my legs back, I'm stuck sitting in the middle of the chamber within the gate

whilst a flurry of work gets done around me. At least I get to 'listen' in on the various reports as they come in.

The brood chambers have been secured, though it was apparently quite difficult to defeat the golgari. I have only sympathy for the soldiers and scouts who had to go in there. Trying to fight amongst the brood without injuring them? A nightmare scenario. A few clutches of eggs were totally destroyed, as well as many larvae. Even though the damage was contained to just a few rooms, the losses could be as many as a thousand. The eggs are kept fairly bundled up after all, there are hundreds of them in each egg chamber.

The very thought of the losses suffered by the next generation makes my blood boil and I'm sure every ant in the Colony feels the same. If it weren't for the wave, I'm fairly confident a team would have been launched to chase down the stone people and end them. I'd have gone. Just thinking of the adorable grubs who never managed to reach maturity... I wonder if the Colony will let me retire and become a full time grub tickler? There's a need that I can fill! The grubs deserve only the best tickles!

Bah. No chance. The Queen would chase me out of the brood chambers in a matter of minutes. It was a relief when a passing brood tender was able to let me know that the Queen was alright. For some reason I'd thought she'd be safe in the egg-laying chamber, but trust the Queen to find some way to nearly die whenever there's a major fight going on. Apparently, she nearly died twice this time, which is a new record. Her injuries were fairly major and they don't think she'll be back to egg-production for a few days, which must be serious. Sarah has apparently holed herself up in the chamber with the Queens and is refusing to leave, though she needs some serious healing as well from what the tenders tell me. I'll have to pick myself up and get over there for a visit, once I can walk that is.

As for that traitorous ringworm, there hasn't been any sighting. He's so damn good at hiding in the stone and soil of the Dungeon, it'll be a nightmare to find him. With the wave going on, I doubt the Colony will have the antpower to spare looking for his treachery laden backside. The second he turns up, he's going to be food, I swear it on the lost grubs! What he hoped to achieve with his betrayal, I've no clue, and I don't care. Justice will find him eventually.

Knowing how bad he is at fighting, I've little doubt he's burrowed himself as deep and far as he can from any tunnel or expanse and he'll stay there until the wave is passed. He lived a long time that way, I don't expect his habits are going to change now.

"Hey Eldest, slacking off I see?"

"Brendant? What do you mean?" I gesture down at my missing limbs. "What exactly are you expecting of me in this situation, eh?"

"Not much I suppose," she clacks her mandibles, seemingly feeling quite chipper. "The council wants to have a full meeting in a few hours, once we get a better sense of where we stand. The wave is going to be a real problem and the nest is in pretty bad shape right now."

"What about the other nests?" I ask, "have we had any word of how they are travelling?"

"Runners are on the way as we speak. We should hear back before the meeting."

I'm nervous about those other nests. They're smaller and less well protected than this one. Even if the golgari and Legion left them alone, I fear that the wave will be a huge challenge for them to overcome.

"What's the most important undertaking right now? What's got the highest priority?" I'm curious about what they're focusing on.

The big soldier thinks for a moment.

"Probably moving the hatchlings up to the surface training grounds. If we don't manage to move them before the wave really picks up, it's going to be a nightmare to shift them later. There's thousands of the little sisters packed away under the Queen's chambers and they need to get to the academy as quickly as we can manage."

"I guess we can restart the farm project as well," I muse, "they were able to provide a ton of Biomass during the first wave. And I guess we need to secure the surface nests as well. There's no guarantee that any nasties that climb up from below will bump into us here, they might get all the way to the surface..."

Holy moly, I'm starting to see the sheer body of work in front of us. Brendant sees the realisation flicker in my antennae and clicks her mandibles in understanding.

"Get well soon, Eldest," she says, "there's plenty for you to do."

Great. She skitters off to organise more escort groups for hatchlings and I continue to flop about as the small stumps that will become my new legs continue to sprout. Before much time has passed I feel a familiar mind reach out to me.

[Not looking so hot over there, kid. Not exactly like the mighty ancient I had in mind.]

What the?

[Granin?!]

I use a few legs on one side to spin my body around and face the big shaper standing behind me with his two triad-mates by his side.

[What the hell happened to you, you old brick head?] I cry, [I thought you were stuck with the golgari?]

He pulls a face.

[Bah. It's all politics. I wanted to stay and help out with the cult and try to clean up the mess we were left with when the city found out about the stupid games they were playing. Instead, the Balta clan went nuts, demanded they be given the rights to hunt you down as a matter of honour and drafted me into the expedition. Typical warrior circle rubbish,] he spat. [On the fringes of the empire, the houses can do whatever they want and get away with it, the interior doesn't care. I swear, the whole golgari race has been in decline ever since the cataclysm. Too much pride isn't healthy, especially when a giant worm shows up and eats everyone.]

I can tell the old shaper is deeply irritated, so I let him grumble for a few seconds before I follow up with another question.

[So what's your plan now? You going to hang around.]

[If you'll have me,] he shrugs. [I'm not good for much but I happen to be an expert in monster evolution, between the three of us here, we can be a big help. The later evolutions are very different from the first, the options really widen up.]

Wot?

[MORE options?! You have to be kidding me! The menu lists are a mile long!]

He chuckles.

[Oh boy, you're not going to like this then. Good thing you have us around. No rush, there's still time until you evolve again. What's your level anyway?]

Uhhh, good question. I've been pretty much ignoring the System messages for days now. I'll take a quick peak.

HOLY MOLY! Seventy three?!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 688: Close to power

My reaction must have given something away, Granin was always quite good at reading me. Amazingly so considering I don't have facial muscles and therefore no expression to speak of. Perhaps his many decades of experience working with monsters has given him some sort of sixth sense in matters such as this.

[What's your level?] he asks.

[Bit rude, just up and asking like that, isn't it?] I feel exposed.

He grunts.

[Keep your false modesty. There's a whole nest of ants here who need your strength, so out with it.]

[Seventy three.]

[That's close,] he whistles, [you're going to need that consultation before too long. With the wave coming, those levels and the Biomass requirements should be filled pretty quick.]

He pauses our conversation for a moment to turn and speak to Torrina and Corun. The three of them converse in rapid tones for a moment before he turns back to me.

[Sounds like you haven't exactly been availing yourself of the help I sent you,] he says sourly.

I feel a little guilty. The two golgari cultists had abandoned their people to come and help me because they, along with Granin, saw potential for something great in me. I've just never been much of a careful planner. Or a deep thinker. Or patient. Hang on a second. Am I just stupid?

[Don't think about it too much,] Granin sighs, [I know you can't be bothered thinking about this stuff. Since you aren't going anywhere until the little stumps wiggling on your side grow a bit more, I may as well explain a couple of things.]

The big shaper lowers himself to the ground and sits in front of me, looking at me face to face.

[The thing you need to keep in mind, is that monsters are stronger than people.]

That doesn't seem right. That Titus guy was crazy strong! He carved down one of the frickin' gates by himself! As if sensing my protest before it arrives, Granin raises a hand.

[I know, alright? Just stop thinking for a minute and listen. Yes, individuals can become very strong. You might even say monstrously strong,] he smirks before he settles and continues, [in the legends, during the Rending, the great golgari heroes were supposedly capable of truly ridiculous feats. One of the first shapers was supposedly so strong in earth magic, he could conjure a mountain to smash his foes with. Whether or not that's true, none can say. Now whilst that strength might seem impressive, the number of golgari, human, folk or any other race who manage to achieve that kind of power are less than one in a million. Way less. The other indisputable fact is, no person has ever matched the kind of strength that the ancients possess, and each of them, is a monster.]

[How many *billions* of monsters does it take before one rises to the level of an ancient?] I say sceptically, [all you've really told me is that monsters have higher potential.]

Granin waves a hand.

[We're getting a little side tracked, talking about the ancients. What I was more trying to emphasise is that, generally speaking, a monster is stronger than a human or golgari. Strong monsters need teams of strong people to bring them down. Eventually, some monsters get powerful enough that large teams of up to a hundred are necessary. You've probably met a few like that, surely?]

Garralosh, obviously, but she was a special case, being a reincarnator like me. I've seen strong monsters though. The giant whale fish thing I glimpsed in the first expanse I visited in the second strata, or the giant spider mama who was such a pain in the butt. Seeing agreement in me, he continues.

[Right. At the moment you're tier five, once you reach tier six and above, you've joined the ranks of the elite monsters, the type that very few people can hope to match one on one. They exist of course, especially the deeper in the Dungeon you get, but you're on the precipice of real strength.]

He gives me a second for that to sink in.

[The other thing you need to be aware of is how the options will change starting with your next evolution. You probably noticed looking at your eyeball over there,] he gestures toward Invidia, [that he has mutations and abilities that haven't been available to you. Am I right?]

I nod slowly.

[That's true. I figured it was because of the strata we originated from. As a demon, he gets access to juicier stuff than me, since I'm just an insect from the upper layers.]

[That's true. The deeper you go, the 'juicier' the options a monster will get by default. However, the playing field is meant to be level in the Dungeon. Sapients and monsters alike, everyone is supposed to have the same chance to succeed. This means there must be a way to balance this discrepancy.]

[I'm assuming your about to tell me what it is?]

[Obviously. It's called the Rescindic Principle of Mutable Advancement in the academic circles. We mostly just call it a cash in.]

[... a cash in.]

He nods.

[Yes. Basically, you trade in all your current mutations on a particular body part in order to upgrade it to a better base model. Once you evolve at +25, this option will become available to you.]

[What do you mean by better base model?] I'm confused.

I can tell Granin is passionate about this stuff, the more he explains, the more animated he gets and I'm starting to get a little lost. Seeing the dazed emotion in my eyes, he settles himself.

[Let's use your carapace as example.]

[Not my carapace!] I try to cover my glittering shell with my antennae and fail miserably.

[Bear with me, alright? You'll like this.] He soothes me with a gesture. [Your carapace started out as the default exo-skeleton that all insect monsters in the first strata have access to. The thickness might have varied, but you ultimately had the exact same protection that the centipedes had.]

How revolting.

[Now, you've made excellent improvements and your diamond carapace is extremely durable, I think you picked very well. But what if I told you, it's possible to revert your carapace back to +0, but instead of starting over with plain jane regular chitin, it could be diamond from the get go?]

Wait... that would mean...

[Right,] he affirms. [Then you could upgrade it from scratch again, adding more and more diamond mutations along the way. By the time you got back to +25, your carapace would be twice as tough as it is now. Not only is this a great way for a monster such as yourself to power up, it's also a necessary step for you to compete with monsters in the deeper layers. Unlike you, they were spawned in an environment with far higher mana concentration, so they get the good stuff right out of the gate.]

[But the amount of Biomass that would take!] I protest, [it's insane! I'll struggle to get everything maxed before I hit level eighty as it is. Then the next evolution won't be until level one-sixty. And the Biomass to take everything from zero to +30 will be bonkers!]

It just doesn't seem feasible, and it appears that Granin agrees.

[Which is why you don't reset everything. That's stupid,] he says, [at most, I recommend that you do two of your body parts. Some of these resets will probably appear in your evolution choices as well, and those count too. Say you get one cash in from your evolution, then during the process, cash in one other thing. Also keep in mind that there are better cash in choices available at +30 than there are at +25, and so on. If you want your carapace to be as strong as possible, you either need to reset it every evolution, or wait until your reach tier seven or eight before you cash in.]

My mind is spinning. The number of possibilities this opens up is nuts...

[I told you it was going to get crazy,] Granin grins. [Look at the envy demon. You could make your internal structure mutable at your next evolution, then chomp away until you get it to +30. The next

time you evolved you could cash in and change it to the same as his, the pocket dimension. No matter what breaks through your shell, your organs would suffer no damage. It's a handy one to have.]

He stands up and brushes off his granite exterior.

[I'll have a word with you about the choices you could look at first when it's time for you to evolve. In the meantime, I want to have a word with the rest of the leadership. There's a council or something right?]

[Uh, yeah?] I'm confused. [What do you want with them?]

[I want to make sure they know how important it is to funnel resources to you,] he says flatly, [one tier six powerhouse will do more to protect the Colony during the wave than a thousand tier threes. If they'd concentrated their efforts on you, you'd be tier six already and this siege would have gone much better for you and your whole family. You wouldn't have been able to take on the Legion single handed, but they would have had to have been very careful about what they chose to put in front of you. From here on out, it's the big leagues, Anthony. Especially this high up. If the Colony is going to survive, they need strong members, and they should start with you.]

... I think they wanted to do that ages ago, but I told them no... I won't mention it though. Might as well keep that tidbit to myself.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 689: The Breaking Wave

The process of 'peeling', or 'folding' Dungeon veins in order to create low mana density zones within the Dungeon was possibly the most important technique developed in the history of sapient habitation of the world below. Without this method, it would be difficult enough to live at any depth during times of normal mana concentration. During a wave, it's impossible to exist as any settlement would be forced into a constant state of warfare as monsters leap from the walls, roof and floor.

Though expensive, labour intensive and requiring specific materials to achieve, the technique has been a foundational pillar of every major city and gathering place within the Dungeon, even in the upper strata. The method itself makes use of the Dungeon veins' own behaviour, wherein they invade and extend themselves into every available space.

Evidence exists that societies were performing the 'folding' technique during the latter stage of the Rending, as the various surviving empires and militaries began to extend their reach into the lower levels. It isn't known if the factions spread the knowledge amongst themselves or if the method was derived separately by each, but those who were able to first grasp the process and make use of it enjoyed a significant advantage in the territorial struggle that followed.

- *Excerpt from page 25 of 'Territorial disputes and sovereignty in the Dungeon', by Cicero.*

Tungstant's brain was spinning with a heady combination of exhaustion, exhilaration, grief, relief and worry. There was so much work for the carver caste to do and so little time in which to accomplish it that she honestly didn't think there was much chance it would be completed in time. What she needed to know *yesterday*, was exactly how much they *could* get done, and exactly what state the nest's defences would be in by the time the wave hit for real.

"How long until the gate is ready to go?" she asked with as much patience as she could muster.

The team in front of her launched into a long and detailed explanation of the structural integrity of the gate, the need to forge new brackets and anchor them to the wall, the re-shaping and compacting that needed to be done to the rock until she cracked.

"Just estimate a time!" she barked. "I know there are challenges, I know it's complicated, and I know you're working as hard as possible, just give me your best guess. Please."

The lead carver on the job sized up the council member for a moment, her antennae scratching the top of her head.

"It would take days to get the gates refitted in any proper way," the ant said finally, "there's just too much damage to the brackets and getting new ones fitted can't be rushed."

That was far too long. Monsters would be storming up the tunnel in less than an hour! The carver clacked her mandibles to settle the uneasy team around her.

"Instead, we go fast and nasty. Stand up what's left of the old gates, patch them up as best we can and mould the rock around them to hold them in place. It's bad work, but we can get it done in a few hours, worry about the rest when we get a chance."

Tungstant and the other carvers bristled at the suggestion and even the one suggesting it looked somewhat disgusted. If there was one thing the entire caste hated, it was sloppy craftsmanship, and that extended to all circumstances and projects, even emergencies. In this situation though...

"Get it done as fast as you can," she told the team. "If you need help from the mage caste, make sure you put in a request quickly, they've been cooking up something big over there and you'll need to get in early if you want the extra help."

One of the carvers flicks an antenna dismissively.

"They can't handle earth magic as well as we can," she said, "I'm sure we'll be fine."

"Fast work, not good work," Tungstant grimaced (which for an ant, involved flexing the mandibles and tilting the antennae in an unsightly angle). "If the extra mage support will get the job done faster, that's what we care about right now. We can do emergency patch work after the fact if necessary."

They all grumble but accede to the wisdom of the decision in the end. A renewed frenzy takes over the worksite as the new direction is adopted and the carvers get to work establishing the leverage they'll need to get the gates standing again. With that relatively minor fire put out, she was able to turn around and rush back into the nest, already considering the next emergency she needed to take care of.

Right! The council meeting!

Suddenly remembering that she had that chore to deal with, she changed direction sharply, making her way to the designated council chamber as quickly as she could. A part of her was irritated at the idea that important work was being delayed for a meeting of all things, but she understood the necessity of it. Without proper coordination, the complex machinery of the Colony couldn't function properly, especially in a crisis like this. Most of the time the Colony ran itself just fine, her siblings were perfectly

capable of making decisions regarding what needed doing, and how. But sometimes the overall macro plan needed to be considered and the council suited that function.

She raced in to find most of the members already gathered. Even the Eldest was there, although they were still somewhat lacking in the leg department. She rushed to her seat and no sooner had she plopped herself down in it, her thorax resting comfortably in the carved grooves than Cobalt flicked a quick query her way.

"How's things looking with the gate?" she scented quietly.

"Not great," she replied, just as softly, "but I think we'll be able to hack together a rough solution in a few hours that should hold for now."

The other carver pulled a face and Tungstant had to stifle a laugh. Some things were consistent for all of them.

"I know we're all very busy," called Coolant from her end of the table, "so let's try and get through this as fast as we can. Before we start, is there anything you would like to say to the group, Eldest?"

All twenty members turned their eyes to the Eldest who fidgeted on their chair with the sudden attention.

"Ah, me? Say something? Anything? Like what?"

"Whatever you want," Coolant replied, a little exasperated.

"I suppose I can," the Eldest said and then paused for a moment, clearly gathering their thoughts, "first thing I want to say is that I'm proud of all of you. Yeah. You've done a great job and as a family we've come so far since the time you were born. I know I could never do the things that all of you do every day and I guess.. I just wanted to say how proud I am. Every member of the Colony is incredible, and so are you. Don't forget it."

The last sentence is a little more firm than the others and each member felt an implicit threat, as if they would suffer dire consequences should they dare forget how much the Eldest was pleased with them.

"Second thing I wanted to say was that... the upcoming wave is going to be a challenge, obviously. There's going to be a huge amount of monsters banging on the gates and flooding our territory. It's going to be hard, it's going to be exhausting. And so soon after we just overcame the greatest threat we've ever faced. The creatures we'll see, probably from the third strata, are going to be stronger than anything we've encountered before. But I wanted us to look at this wave in a different way. For all the challenges we'll face, this wave could be an opportunity. More monsters means more experience, more Biomass. The last wave forced us to escape to the surface, we weren't strong enough to hold our ground, but even then we were able to farm and benefit a great deal. This time, we have nests, we're deep, we have tens of thousands of members. We can do so much more than we did before. We're not going to retreat. We're going to step forward. This wave is going to give us cover from the Legion, and the golgari and we need to use the time to get so strong they won't even bother trying to mess with us. That's all I wanted to say."

There was silence around the table as the Eldest settled back into their seat. The Eldest had gotten more steady the more they had spoken and in the end had spoken quite clearly about the direction they

envisaged the Colony should go in. Tungstant found the message inspiring. Instead of a threat... this was a chance. If they became so strong that even the Legion would be too hesitant to attack. If that happened, they would get even more space, and then use that space to grow even more powerful.

The glorious future of the Colony was shining brightly in her mind in that moment, and in the minds of all the others who sat around that table. Except the Eldest, who was wagging the stump of a leg back and forth.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 690: Turing over a new leaf

Discussions progressed at a rapid pace after my initial, rather embarrassing speech. There was a ton of things on the go around the Colony and still too much that we didn't know. The status of the two satellite nests was still unknown, how exactly we were going to handle training the surge of hatchlings heading up to the surface, the huge amount of wounded that still needed caring for. Several things were easy to take care of. We made sure to issue an emergency recall of all aphids who were currently deployed in the expanse within our territory. It wouldn't be safe for them to remain in place during the wave and I'm fairly confident most of them were brought back to the nests before the siege anyway. Prioritising the expansion of the colony's capability in the metallurgy space was a no-brainer and the carvers were directed to get back onto this process as soon as the defences were done.

Cobalt and Tungstant had worked with their caste to design a truly ambitious system for the delivery, sorting and smelting of ores that would increase the capacity of the main nest to produce ingots by tenfold should it get off the ground. Securing a supply of raw ore would be difficult during the wave, but it was important the Colony work to position itself to come out of the onslaught in the best possible position.

In the middle of discussions, I dropped a bomb.

"I'm not certain that tier three is enough for our graduates anymore."

My pronouncement was met with a stunned silence and I quickly raised my antennae in a placating gesture.

"I know, I know. Getting so many ants to tier three so quickly is already a massive task. There already aren't enough cores to go around, Biomass is in constant demand and as the number of satellite nests increases, so will the number of hatchlings in need of training. I get it. The challenges are real. I want to ask you though, do you really believe that tier three is enough to contend with what we are facing right now, and are likely to face in the future?"

The council members all consider my words carefully as I speak and Victor pipes up after a few moments of thought.

"From the perspective of a general, a tier four in the warrior caste is more than twice as useful as a tier three. The evolutions of the general caste are better fighters, provide more beneficial auras and even their raw stats make them better planners. Soldiers, it goes without saying just how much a soldier can gain in terms of defensive ability, jaw strength, regeneration and speed in that one evolution. Scouts are the same, I'm sure you would agree, Burke and Wills, are much more capable at the fourth tier."

"Getting them to tier five would be far better than getting them to tier four, but that doesn't mean it's feasible," Propellant objected. "Obviously a mage is far better at controlling spells with an extra evolution under their belt, but the bottom line is, experience and cores, where are you going to get them from? If we end up pushing more ants to evolve faster, but without providing the necessary cores to increase the available evolutionary energy, then we'd be crippling rather than helping ourselves."

"I agree with that point," I tell them, "in fact I want us to put a higher priority on maxed cores for every evolution as well."

More silence meets my second announcement.

"Look," I say, resting my two antennae on the table much like a human putting their elbows down and steeping their fingers, "we aim to get smarter and better in every aspect of Colony life, all the time. Am I right?"

The other council members could only agree.

"Raising the brood to be as strong as possible is the most fundamental and important duty this Colony undertakes. There is nowhere and nothing more deserving of innovation and improvement than this. We need more experience? Let's think about how to make it happen. We need more cores? Let's explore ways we can make it happen! I know the brood tenders have put an enormous amount of work into their curriculum and their methods of instruction for the hatchlings, they haven't stopped trying to improve. It's the rest of us who need to lift when it comes to supplying the raw materials. During the wave, I don't think this is going to be much of a problem, but going forward, I think this is a change we have to make."

The two brood tenders on the council, Theresant and Florence, both clack their mandibles in gratitude that I acknowledge the hard work they and their entire caste has put in, something the rest of the council immediately echoes. After more discussions and apportioning of work, the council breaks up and everyone rushes back to doing what needs to be done. Everyone has their role and their own special task assigned to them, even me, which is why I find myself outside the nest looking curiously at the overflowing vegetation that has taken over this section of Dungeon.

Scouts had reported the strange phenomenon, as well the presence of unknown creatures lurking amidst the growth not long after the siege had been lifted, so naturally the council decided to send me to stick my nose in and investigate.

Using all the senses I have available, I step forward slowly toward the abundant plant life that has seemingly sprung from nowhere but I order my three loyal pets to stay back. This stuff could be poisonous, or worse. I get a really weird feeling from the plants. I'm not sure if it's the mana flow, or the way they look... but something about it just rubs me the wrong way and I find myself very reluctant to push forward.

Good thing too, because only a few moments later a gigantic creature who looks like five tree-trunks arranged in a vaguely humanoid shape stomps around the corner and approaches. At first I want to give the monster both barrels of a fire ball but slipping along in his wake are creatures that I recognise much more clearly.

Branchies! What the heck are branchies doing down here in the Dungeon?!

Almost eagerly, I spin together a mind bridge and reach out only to find another mind probe toward mine first.

[Ah, hello?] I start out with a classic.

[Greetings, friend insect. It is nice to see that someone has come out to see us, at last.]

Come on, man/giant tree thing! We've got stuff to deal with in the nest, give us a break!

[I apologise if there has been any offense,] smooth, diplomatic, and most importantly, smooth. Like a buttered snail surfing in a tub of grease. [There has been a great deal to do within the nest and the scouts reported the presence of this... plantlife, not that long ago.]

The giant wooden guy waves a creaking arm.

[No offense, was caused,] the mind that touches mine is strange and complex. It feels deep and old, yet at the same time, young and childlike. [We wanted to remain to speak with your people before we retreated back to our grove. I am a Grove Keeper, and I can better keep my people safe in the seat of my mother's power.]

Feels like there's a lot to unpack there.

[Your people? Are you referring to the people behind you? I think I met some of them while I was up on the surface. Not these people exactly, you know, but... people.]

Those giant eyes blink slowly.

[Yes,] he finally answers, [a small group of the Bruan'chii had made their home in the Lirian forest. They told the mother about you and she has extended her roots through this area in an attempt to seek you out. In the end, it was pure happenstance that you stumbled into one and she was able to determine your position.]

Bruan'chii, eh? How... convenient. Wait, his mother has roots? As in, literally a tree?

[So your mother was looking for us? Is it possible that I ask why?]

Please don't be a psycho killer tree, please don't be a psycho killer tree. I do NOT need that in my life right now.

[Because we were able to recognise you for what you were. A traveller from another world, just as she was.]

[Another reincarnated soul?] I'm shocked, [how about that?]

Wait a minute. All of us transplanted souls are a bit... on the iffy side, sanity wise. Might as well ask a probing question.

[Would you say your mother is... how to phrase this... a rational and calm sort of individual?]

The giant tree-person hesitates and the leaves around me break out loud rustling that almost sounds like laughter.

[No,] comes the answer, [no I would not.]