

Chrysalis 451

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Chapter 451: The latest candidate

It was to us that the Ancient the world would come to know as Yarrum The Eternal Worm would come. Deep below the Mother Mountain, the Everworm rose during the time of Rending and our elders did contend with that great ancient.

We were arrogant in that time. Our bones were as strong as the stone in which we made our homes and our cities rose high to the sky and deep beneath the ground. As the Eldest of the children of Pangera, we saw this world as ours to inherit and control. From our great fortress capital Marrazan we projected our strength outward from the Mother Mountain and forged the first great surface empire.

As the mana rose and the calamity befell us, the first sign of the doom to come was a faint grinding echo reported by the deepest miner Triads. For weeks the sound grew louder until even wisest and most powerful of our Shapers in their towers high atop the peaks couldn't sleep for the incessant noise. As if the mountain itself ground its teeth, the sound was said to drive some to despair as it grew louder day by day. Despite this warning, it was a great shock to our people the day Yarrum came. Who could have possibly been prepared for such a thing?

If you go to Marrazan today, and should you be granted entry to the lower tunnels by the Sentinels, there you would find a place guarded by the strongest of our race, watched over by the most powerful of the Shapers. The Zirakkan'nolia, the Gateway to the Underworld. No portal or working of spatial magic, the Gateway is a three hundred metre wide tunnel and stretches beneath the city to an unknown depth. Some speculate the tunnel, created by the Everworm as it rose to the surface, leads directly to the centre of the world. If any have been able to measure its depth, their findings have been kept hidden.

Why Yarrum chose to rise to us we don't know. Why the worm chose to descend the same way it came up, we don't know. The ancient empire battled the worm for many years before the lowering mana levels forced it to retreat below. In that time, only one of the earth kin was known to have exchanged words with the ancient, Igniun Faranon. The greatest of the Shapers in the ancient empire, she sought to commune with monster for reasons she kept to herself.

Whatever she learned, she did not share and retreated from the public eye. When the war was finally over and the campaign to reclaim the homeland of the Kin began, she vanished entirely. To where, to do what, is still not known.

Excerpt from 'The Fall of the Ancient Empire' by Shaper Scholar Raknos of the Iron Circle.

Granin Lazus leaned heavily on his staff as did his Triad mates beside him. The difficulty of such a mental working was high and the strain was considerable against normal foes. That the triad had been pushed to such an extent against a single foe was testament to the strength of the individual monster they had tackled. Granin himself was shaken from his brief encounter with that alien mind.

Images of swarming ant monsters crawling through tunnels, walking over the top of each other, their antennae always moving. Chambers filled with heaving larvae, glistening eggs and an endless number of monster bodies being brought in to feed their ravenous hunger. Most striking had been the fleeting

glimpse he had seen of what he could only assume was the Queen. A monstrous creature of immense size, an alien intelligence gleaming in its' eyes.

It was enough to make his granite skin feel brittle.

"Are you well, Ternate Lazus?" Corun Nium, the second of the Triad asked.

"I need a moment to recover, Nium. The mind of the monster was bizarre and alien. I learned more than I wanted to, I think."

"Knowledge of the monster?" the second leaned closer, "surely that is valuable to us? Were you able to confirm we have found the right creature?"

Granin frowned and lowered his voice.

"Do not speak not of this now. Not all are with us."

Nium pulled back, properly chastened by his Ternate. Fortunately, the younger Golgarin Mind Shaper was spared having his blushes seen by the dark basalt he had chosen for his true skin.

The third member of the triad, Torrina Lakshan, stood quietly, recovering. The strain of their group working was showing on her face.

"Take the time you need to recover your strength, Lakshan," Nium told her, "the other triads will need more time to properly subdue our target."

The weary Mind Shaper looked toward her elder and nodded her understanding. Nium couldn't help but grunt. Not one for many words was his youngest apprentice. Feeling his age, he scratched at his granite coated arms and groaned aloud as he sat on a nearby rock outcropping.

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The beginnings of a headache were starting to grind the stones in his old head and there was no escaping it. He'd pay a high price for the shaping he'd undertaken this day. In some ways he couldn't wait to lay on eyes on the monster who'd needed a full triad of Mind Shapers to knock it out and managed to avoid capture from two triads of the Golgari's famed warriors.

"Hopefully this creature will be the key we need," he muttered to himself.

For the next ten minutes he and his fellow triad members rested and recovered their strength as each fought to stave off the pain that blossomed in their heads. Conversation sputtered to nothing as none among them would cope well with speaking in the midst of their suffering. Stone skin they might have, but stone minds they did not!

Not far away the shriek and clang of combat continued as the other triads fought off the myriad creatures lured down by their quarry's ingenious call. The Shapers were left out of it, thankfully. When another five minutes had passed the noise finally dimmed and Granin felt in control of himself enough to summon his team and move to meet the creature he had helped to capture.

Still weary, he did his best to conceal it and trudged toward the others.

He was quickly confronted by an angry pair of eyes that belonged to the leader of this expedition, an experienced delver with a powerful sword arm and solid skills. Granin didn't like him. The other had chosen limestone streaked with silver as his true skin, a laughable indulgence of vanity. It made the Golgari warrior shine with colour and reflect the light like liquid metal, but the stone was brittle and weak.

"About time you crawled over here. Some of us have been working."

Granin ignored the pup. He had eyes only for the monster, the next candidate to attempt to bear the Red Truth.

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Chapter 452: Face to ... thing

Granin felt hopeful in his heart as moved closer to the creature. He had anticipated this moment since he had been informed a new ancient candidate had been identified. Even better, one whom the Abyssal Legion was ignorant of. He'd had to exert a great deal of effort, alongside the other members of the cult, to put together a few delves to search the Second Strata beneath the ruins of Liria and by some miracle they'd found it.

Golgari stood in their triads around the monster, their weapons drawn and eyes darting attentively. Several bore exterior damage to their true skin, a testament to the difficulty they had endured, but Granin focused his attention on the creature. It was large, larger than he expected. Six thin, dark legs rose from the second of its body segments before they bent sharply back down to the ground. The mandibles looked barbaric. Long and jagged, with spikes for gripping, ridges for crushing and tearing and judging by the broad head, plenty of muscle mass behind them. Surprisingly colourful for an ant, the monster's body was a rust red colour, but the gleam of light off that carapace showed it had been coated with another substance. Most disconcerting were the eyes. Multifaceted and unblinking, those eyes stared in all directions at once, watching all of them. He felt certain a fierce intelligence and powerful will to survive resided there.

Surrounded by six warriors with blades drawn and held down by weighted netting, Granin didn't doubt for a second that the monstrous ant would be desperate to escape. He would need to communicate with it, and soon, to prevent tragedy from occurring.

"Are you listening to me?" an outraged voice broke into the Shapers' thoughts.

The old Shaper suppressed a sigh and turned away from his magnificent catch to address the younger Golgari. He reminded himself to be patient, that out in the Dungeon, it was not he who made the decisions. One false move could undo the work that the cult had done to get to this point. He wouldn't let it come to that.

"I apologise, Warrior Balta. I was distracted by the monster you and your brave men and women have been able to capture. Your family's reputation is clearly well deserved."

One didn't become an Elder Shaper without a century or two worth of schmoozing practice under the skin. His smooth words had the desired effect as he witnessed the puffed up scion of a wealthy house swallow his anger at being ignored and allow his childish temper to be tamped by the praise directed to his family.

"So long as you understand who is the leader of this expedition."

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"It is you, of course," the words came easy to the wily shaper's lips, "as the highest levelled warrior among us, the responsibility is yours."

The Shaper smoothed over the rough stone and placated the younger warrior, inwardly muttering at the ridiculous necessity of it. Calm now that the proper deference had been shown, Coriinam Balta gestured with one glittering hand to the restrained monster.

"I'm not sure why it was so necessary I come out here to restrain this... thing. Should I remove the core?"

"No!" Granin exclaimed before he moderated his tone. "No," he repeated, "it is not for the core that the Shapers sought to capture this monster. Now that we have it we are to transport it via gateway to the field academy beneath Ogrinnore."

The silver flecked face of Coriinam twisted at the incredulous nature of these instructions.

"Transport the creature? Has your true skin turned your brain to granite? This monster wasn't easy for us to capture! How are we supposed to march through an expanse and bring it with us? Just kill the thing and be done with it!"

As if you could have caught it without us, Granin grumbled internally. He interjected to cut off the hot-headed idiot before he took a sword to the precious specimen, keenly aware that all this time they were being watched by the unblinking eyes of the monster.

"Whilst I defer to your command in the field, Balta, I will have to remind you that the Shapers' circle has provided the funding for this delve and set the terms. Should we return without the creature alive then that would surely become a blemish on your record."

Balta's eyes widened as he felt outrage boil up inside him. A blemish? On his record!? Unthinkable!

"Fine!" He spat. "We will bring the creature back, alive! But I will ensure it is crippled for the journey. I won't accept arguments on this. The safety of the triads is my highest priority."

Being a vengeful little ass is your highest priority. Granin controlled himself and refrained from speaking. So long as they could get the candidate monster back to the cult, all would be well. Hopefully it wouldn't be too angered by the limestone idiots antics.

"If you will allow me, leader, I would like to have a moment to work my craft on the creature. I may be able to intimidate or dominate it into cooperation."

Balta grunted and turned away, displaying the contempt for Shaping that was so common amongst his class. This suited Granin just fine. The less eyes on him for this moment, the better. He took a breath and closed his eyes to centre himself. His head still throbbed from his earlier exertions and this was a risky thing to do. If the monster attacked him, it would be difficult to fend it off in his weakened state. The fact that the ant was capable of mind magic was one of the few things the cult knew about it.

Granin steadied his breathing and centred himself before began to weave a mind bridge between himself and the creature. He didn't try to hide what he was doing and the giant ant watched him from only ten metres away, perfectly, disturbingly still.

An old and experienced Shaper with extremely high Skill levels, it didn't take him long to form the connection. He was hesitant to solidify the link, but he couldn't hesitate for long, who knew how much time Balta would give him?

[Do not be alarmed. I only mean to speak with you. I do not mean you harm.]

The ant didn't move or react in any way. Not even a twitch of its long and dangling antennae. Finally, a voice echoed back in Granin's mind.

[You've got a strange way of showing it, rocky.]

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Chapter 453: Custody

A fearsome pressure was exerted from the powerful monster. Even surrounded and tied down with heavy weights, Granin couldn't help but take a step back as that voice echoed in his mind through their link. He swallowed hard and sought to quickly clarify himself.

[You've spoken to one of my order before. A Kaarmodo, named Ivran'tep?]

A pause.

[The Wizard Lizard? You know him? You're a member of his... conclave... thingy?]

The Golgari shaper felt his skin itch. The tone of the monster was light, airy, but from it he sensed a dangerous and potent air. The dichotomy of impressions was enough to put him on edge.

[Yes and no. I don't have much time, so I must speak quickly. Will you give me a moment?]

[Do I have much choice?]

[You do. It's not our intention to force you, but circumstances have forced my hand.]

[Alright then, Stone Man. I'm listening.]

Granin secretly took a calming breath as he put his thoughts in order.

[My people are called the Golgari and among us those who wield magic are called Shapers and we are regarded beneath those who employ the warrior arts.]

[Stupid.]

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[I won't disagree, but it is important I explain this so you understand the dynamics of this hunting party and the reason we have sought you. I must urgently tell you that I am not in charge of this expedition and not all of my people here are members of the cult. I want you to come alive, but others would be

happy to see you dead. I encourage you to cooperate, even though it may not seem to be in your best interests, as otherwise you will surely perish.]

He was mostly thinking of the imminent arrival of their moronic leader to break the legs of this precious specimen.

[Keep talking and I'll think about it.]

[... As you say. Let me quickly tell you how I came to be here. The cult enclave where I study was contacted by Ivran'tep because we were the closest members to where it was assumed you would travel. He told us he had identified a promising candidate monster and that we should attempt to be aware of your progress and growth. Normally the matter would drop there, it's not our policy to attempt to force a monster to ascend, but circumstances have taken a dramatic change recently.]

[So you and the Kaarmodo are members of the same group?]

A brief hesitation. How to explain several thousand years of interconnected history between secret societies?

[Sort of,] he hedged, [you could think of us as branches of the same organisation. More accurately, my cult and the conclave are separate entities that share common purpose.]

[You want to raise the twentieth ancient.]

[Exactly. So we cooperate. Since you were known to be coming into our sphere of influence, he passed his knowledge of you onto us.]

[Which led to me being hunted down like an animal... how?]

[I was getting to that...]

"Step aside, Shaper," came the cold and superior tones of Balta.

Stifling a groan, Granin raced to inform the monster of what was happening.

[This idiot is the warrior leader of the expedition. I cannot overrule his commands in the field, even though I represent the people who funded it. He has demanded that we cripple you for the journey.]

[Journey? Cripple?! Talk fast rock-face. I can take this guy down and all of us will go with him if I don't like what I hear!]

Such a claim was bold, but considering the strange magic the monster was able to employ, not impossible.

[He wants to break your legs, I think. That will make it harder for you to escape as we transport you back to the custody of the cult. No further harm will come to you on this trip, I give my word.]

[What about after this trip? I suppose it's all beach chairs and milkshakes after that? I'll trust you, but I want something in return.]

[What?!]

"Lazus. Step to one side so I can ensure the safety of our expedition. You wouldn't want to be accused of standing between a warrior and the execution of their duty, would you?"

Granin cursed under his breath.

[What is it, monster? Quickly!]

[Find my pets, heal them and bring them with us.]

[Done.]

The old Golgari broke the link and stepped away from the giant ant before he turned to the warrior leader, dipping his head in a show of respect.

"I have been able to subdue the monster to some degree. You will find it cooperative. I do not believe that it is necessary to inflict harm upon it. The Circle of Shapers seeks to bring the beast in alive, after all. My triad are more than willing to take over responsibility for the safe handling of the monster."

Coriinam Balta was in no mood to placate a member of a lesser profession. He waved a hand dismissively in the older Golgari's face and promptly ignored him. He stepped toward the monster and unsheathed his blade, the soft ring of steel resounded in the air and the low light reflected from the perfectly imbued blade. Balta was eager for this moment. Not only had the monster embarrassed him by escaping from in front of his face, he'd been forced to rely on the Shapers twice. Once to locate it again and twice to ensure it was captured. He would strike back now to put both offending parties in their place.

Granin stifled his protests as the blade struck twice, the sword light flashing expertly along each side of the monster, severing its legs cleanly.

Balta wasn't sure what he expected the creature's reaction to be, but he was sure it wasn't what he got, which was, nothing. The creature remained perfectly still, its antennae still, its eyes alert and staring. There was a moment of tense silence as the warriors waited for a violent response from this beast, but none was forthcoming. Disgruntled, Balta sheathed his blade and it was at that moment the ant gradually opened its mandibles and then snapped them shut.

Clack.

It repeated the gesture with the same deliberate pace, over and over.

Clack... *Clack*... *Clack*... *Clack*... *Clack*...

As each sound rang out like soft, repeated laughter Balta's face became uglier. Finally he snapped and ripped the blade from his sheath in a rage.

"You dare to mock me, beast?!?!"

The great two handed sword swept down faster than the eye could see, the blade light flashing out in a blinding arc to slice directly into the face of the ant. So unexpected was this behaviour that all stood frozen in shock as the blow struck home. Granin himself was filled with despair that turned to relief and the light cleared to show the ant stood as it had before, a small scratch carved into its carapace right between its eyes. Even as the stunned crowd watched, the small groove began to heal itself, filling up

with a thick fluid that began to harden into fresh exo-skeleton. This time, Granin could not contain himself and burst out at the expedition leader.

"Balta! I insist that you refrain from attacking the creature. We are specifically tasked with returning it, alive!"

The silver speckled Golgari warrior stood breathing heavily with rage still in his eyes as he witnessed the poor efficacy of his strike. Even with its legs severed, the creature seemed to watch him, completely unafraid. Before the shocked eyes of the hunting party, the mandibles once again slowly opened wide before snapping shut.

Clack... *Clack*... *Clack*

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Chapter 454: Not a fan

"Are you alright, Granin?"

The old Shaper raised his head wearily to meet the concerned gaze of his youngest triad member. Torrinna Laksham gleamed in the darkness of the Shadow Realm, a product of the ore she'd been able to obtain to form her True Skin, an infused variant of Manganese she'd stumbled on by chance. He tried not to glance at the padded leather armour that covered her left leg. He should probably be grateful the warrior circle left her any of the precious material at all, but he couldn't help but feel bitter and suspect they'd ensured that she wouldn't have enough to form a whole skin. She was tough as nails though, more than willing to bear the shame of being incomplete in order to utilise the enhanced properties of the ore to enhance her Shaping. The Circle had high expectations of her, as did the cult.

"I'm fine," he muttered, waving away her concerns. "When you get to my age these jaunts in the Dungeon become more taxing on the system."

A pair of serious eyes looked down on him as he rested after his recent exertions. The confrontation between Balta and the monster had put everyone on edge. The creature appeared more than willing to try to get under the silver fool's skin and being a puffed up warrior, the glorious leader was unwilling to endure what he saw as an inferior creature's mocking. In the end, his own triad members had been forced to restrain the enraged warrior before he'd thrown himself upon the restrained monster in a blind rage. A ridiculous display for an esteemed member of the warrior Circle and a complete embarrassment for his family. Granin was hoping they'd settle for paying off the members of the delve to keep it quiet rather than resort to more ... extreme measures. Not that the monster cared.

"I don't think I've ever seen a creature with such a low sense of self preservation," he burst out.

Laksham raised one stony eyebrow.

"You expected the candidate to cooperate after we chased it down and abducted it? I think he's being well behaved all things considered."

Granin was a little taken aback.

"Him? That sounds a little familiar. Have you been communicating with the specimen much, Laksham?"

He knew she'd been speaking to it via a mind bridge, as had Nium, the second of the triad, it was necessary that he himself not be the only one making contact with the creature. But now he began to suspect that they may have been speaking more than he assumed.

She shrugged.

"This is the first time I've come into contact with a proper candidate. You can't blame for being curious. What if he's the one?"

"Don't let your imagination run wild," he rebuked the young shaper. "It's not a proper candidate yet. I'm not certain what the leadership is planning right now, this isn't the sort of action that we would normally take. I do know that the cult hasn't decided to throw our support behind this creature yet."

"You really shouldn't refer to him as an it. You know as well as I do that he's a Sapient creature. He was a human before he was reborn here as a monster, he deserves to be treated with some respect."

"I won't hold him being human against him," Granin retorted, "you need to recognise that whatever it was before, it is now a creature of the Dungeon. A monster. We may have a different opinion of creatures from the Dungeon than most people, but there is still a certain level of caution that I recommend in you. They don't play by the same rules we do and we must always be cautious in our dealings with them."

"I am always careful," Laksham stated, her gaze steady and calm.

Granin rolled his eyes and pushed himself back onto his weary feet. He wasn't about to argue with the young Shaper, he wouldn't win even if he tried. She was a stubborn as an actual rock, this one. It wasn't a problem, she was smart and cautious, he could trust her to make good decisions. It was the other Shaper in his triad he was worried about. Nium could be a little more impetuous and things might get complicated if the monster was able to sway him into doing something stupid.

"It's almost time to perform the healing again, isn't it?" Laksham spoke suddenly.

Granin groaned.

"Dammit, I'd almost forgotten. Could you handle it this time? I need to go find Nium."

A nod was his only reply before Laksham moved away into the darkness surrounded them, making her way toward the monster's ape pet. He almost envied the ease with which she was able to sense it out. At her age he hadn't been able to wield a fraction of that sort of skill. Pushing his misplaced jealousy aside, Granin moved back toward the rest of the group. They weren't far away, the warrior triads stood close together keeping watch over their cargo. The monster seemed to be behaving itself, its antennae looping in slow lazy circles as its legless body remained perfectly still. He wasn't sure how, but he just knew that it was paying close attention to him the moment he walked into sight. It was unnerving being around a creature whose line of sight was impossible to track.

He quickly wove a mind bridge to his fellow Shaper in order to communicate privately.

[Nium, has the specimen told us where it's other pet has gone?]

[Not a word about it. Denies everything. I feel like if I keep asking, he's going to start denying even having a second pet.]

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'He?' Granin grimaced.

[I know for a fact that they communicated when the ape came in for healing. All I want to know is that there isn't some creature out there plotting an ambush or some desperate rescue attempt that will get people killed.]

[Come on, Granin. He's not that stupid. This is a highly intelligent monster we have here, he knows he isn't getting away. He's quite pleasant once you get to know him.]

[Right. I'm going to limit your contact with the specimen for the rest of this trip.]

[What? Why?!]

[You're getting too close to the specimen!]

[To Anthony?]

[You know its name?!]

[Of course! Me and Anthony are buds!]

He couldn't help but sigh and pinch his brow. Did young members of the cult lack caution towards monsters completely these days?! The idea of the cult was to raise up a new ancient, yes. That didn't mean that they make nice with every monster to fall into their hands!

[That's it! No more communicating with the monster for you! Go help the slightly more sensible member of our triad to heal the ape pet. I'll deal with this.]

Breaking of the connection he re-wove the mind bridge toward the monster who sat still and innocent looking as a thousand kilogram lamb.

[Trying to make my people sympathetic?]

The antennae flicked in such a way as to elicit exasperation.

[I've been dragged around legless for days now you stone headed stone head! You can hardly blame me for reaching out for a chat! How much longer until we get to this gate anyway?]

[Two more days. You make sure you behave until then.]

[I'll be good.]

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Chapter 455: Gateway

The pain Granin had been experiencing in his head had only grown more pronounced as they continued to travel toward the Golgari gateway network. Having banned his two fellow triad members from conversing with the specimen, he was forced to take responsibility for all communication onto his own shoulders. This had quickly proven to be both irritating and exasperating. Being dragged, legless, through the expanse and into the tunnels over a period of days wouldn't do anyone's mood any good

but Granin was starting to believe that the creature was diverting its frustration into annoying him and trying to provoke Balta at every opportunity.

Like the time the leader had walked behind the monster, a foolish move as it turned out. From seemingly nowhere the creature had unleashed a blast of sticky acid that had etched away the Warrior's True Skin before they'd been able to remove it, an affront that had driven him almost berserk with rage. No matter how many times he warned the monster that antagonizing a powerful and connected individual like Balta was a bad idea it didn't seem to care. After the acid attack came more clacking laughter every time the warrior came near. Balta had attacked the monster twice more, the second time managing to cut through the carapace and draw blood. Not that the creature seemed too perturbed, the injury was healed in minutes.

During this period of observation, Granin took copious notes. His role as a member of the Circle of Shapers and member of the cult meant he was well versed with documenting monster characteristics, not to mention his superiors in the cult would expect a full report of the monster. Initially he'd had some doubts about the capability of the creature, an ant was historically pathetically weak by itself. Terrifying in large numbers, to be sure, but amongst the Dungeon's most unthreatening creatures when battled alone. That this specimen had managed to accrue such strength and powerful evolutions from such a weak base was fascinating. Of course, the reborn monsters, those whose soul had been reborn, either experienced an accelerated start due to their greater than the average monster intelligence, or burned out spectacularly, unable to adjust to their new existence. The cult had found several such creatures over the centuries, not many compared to how many were created by the Dungeon, but they were documented obsessively when they were found. Several had been sponsored by the cult but none had been able to achieve the seat of the final ancient.

Granin didn't hold much hope for this particular specimen, but he was starting to think more of it than he had at first.

[Any chance you remember where your second servant went?]

[You know, I honestly don't remember having a second servant... Me and Tiny, that's the way it's been for a long time.]

[You know I could stop healing your ape friend, how long do you think he would last if that happened?]

[I could kill you, me and everyone here with one spell. Let's play nice, eh? Aren't you trying to cooperate with me? Holy moly, there's no need to get your knickers in a twist. Make sure you heal my ape and bring him along with us and I'll have another reason to go along with what you say. Accept the leverage I'm offering you!]

The blasted creature had a point.

Despite the obvious intelligence, impressive defensive ability and magical prowess, he wasn't sure the monster would be successful in receiving the support of the cult. They'd been cultivating monsters of their own, they had prospects they'd been supporting from the shadows for a long time, it wouldn't be easy to supplant these established prospects.

Although something different was brewing at the cult. The air had felt tense lately, ever since the strangely extended and potent wave had occurred. Granin wasn't close enough to the upper echelons to

have an inkling what they were thinking, but something about the atmosphere was growing colder, people were on edge and a flurry of urgent meetings had been arranged. That in and of itself was unusual, the cult was a secret society after all, mobilising the members quickly and quietly wasn't easy.

"Final checks! Shapers to the fore!" Came a loud call.

Granin looked up to see the triads in defensive position around their quarry. The creature was close to motionless as usual, the only sign it was paying any attention was its slowly waving antennae. It had taken five days since the capture of the monster to get to this point, far longer than it would usually take. Forced to drag the creature through the expanse and into the tunnels to get here, it had not been a journey that anyone had enjoyed. He began to suspect that even Balta began to regret his impulsive decision to hack off the monster's legs.

They'd finally made it. Before them stood a seeming dead end, a tunnel that ended in an innocuous wall like a billion other tunnels in the Dungeon.

[This is a gate?]

[Break off this connection, I need to concentrate for this.]

[You're the one who opens it? What kind of magic is this anyway? Spatial?]

[Be quiet! This is hard!]

[Makes sense, I suppose. Puncturing a hole in space or time or whatever should be difficult.]

[I'm not talking anymore.]

[Oh, right! Gotcha! Good luck stone man.]

Granin, Nium and Laskham gathered together facing the end of the tunnel and raised their hands. He focused hard and reached out to connect his mind to that of his second, Nium. What made this even more difficult was that he wouldn't be able to draw on the assistance of Laksham, since she was occupied concealing the great ape they'd been forced to heal and keep alive in the shadows over the journey. This meant that the two of them would need to work even harder to Shape this working.

Still, Granin was an old hand, under his guidance they reached out to reveal and then activate the runes etched into the tunnel wall. Enchanted monster cores buried into the wall came alive and began to funnel mana from the Dungeon and fuel the Gate.

The runes formed a circle around the edges of the tunnel wall and gradually a pinpoint of pure light appeared in the centre. Here in the second strata, such a thing was blinding and Granin had his eyes firmly closed. He needed to work with his mind, not his eyes.

With the assistance of his second, he reached through the hole with his mind and entered the in between space, a blank world of white that seemed to stretch forever in all directions. He expertly oriented himself and directed his thoughts toward the direction he needed and honed in on the mind reaching back toward him.

Like people clasping hands they locked onto each other and began to solidify the link, forming a bridge of pure mana between the two gates.

"The gate will open in five seconds," he ground out, "we'll hold it for twenty, no more than that."

Balta nodded. This was Shaper business and he had no place sticking his nose into it, not that any warrior would lower themselves to do so.

"Grab the ropes and haul!" He commanded and the hunting party leapt to follow his order, hauling the monster toward the gate, picking up speed as the tiny circle of light widened to occupy the entire circle within the runes.

The light was blinding and the monster struggled weakly as they dragged it forward, unable to protect its eyes. Fortunately it didn't last long. In just a few seconds the warriors had dragged it through and vanished into the light, they would appear instantly on the other side.

All that was left were the three shapers and their hidden guest.

"Are you ready, Laksham"

A terse nod was all Granin got to acknowledge his words and he nodded back. Seconds later she was gone, followed by Nium. The final remaining Shaper, Granin grit his teeth as he held the gate without Nium assisting him and walked forward slowly so as not to break concentration. The moment he stepped through the gate melted behind him, as if he had thrown himself from a cliff that had collapsed the instant his feet left the ground he felt a rush of adrenaline as the pathway began to collapse behind him. For a dizzying second he felt as if he might be lost in the between space but then he was through and sucking in a deep breath to calm his pounding heart.

"We made it home."

The monster watched him with glittering eyes, it's thoughts inscrutable. As the members of the delve stretched and began to relax, their attention was seized by a strange popping sound. Turning toward the creature they saw that its legs were regenerating at a visible rate. In only a few minutes it was able to stand on its own.

Clack

After a single snap of the mandibles, it sat back down again.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 456: Escaping?

The gate emerged into a dark tunnel, the tell-tale black veins of mana threaded through the walls signalled that they remained in the second strata, but Granin knew they have travelled a great distance. Over a hundred kilometres in fact. The delving party were now firmly within the territory claimed by Galgarin the empire to the east of Liria, beyond the great lake. They stood in a near empty tunnel, almost identical to that which they had left on the other side, with the exception of a small outpost that hosted a team of Shapers on rotating duty. Having connected the gate, the triad of Shapers responsible for this side of the gate nodded politely to the delving team, curiously eyed the enormous ant they had dragged through with them before retreating behind the outpost door to rest.

Granin heaved out a breath as he let the terrible feeling of being the last through the gate to leech out of him.

Balta was having none of it.

"Let us be away. I want to arrive with the beast at the warrior's circle to turn in the request and retire. Let's move!"

After snapping out his orders, the prideful warrior turned and began to march away, leaving the others scrambling to follow his wishes and seized the ropes attached to the netting to drag the monster away. Granin sputtered for a moment in shock before he threw off his lethargy and raised his voice.

"Warrior Balta! The request does not require us to return the creature to the Warrior's circle but to the Shaper's outpost beyond the city!"

The moment he heard the older Golgarin speak, Balta turned on his heel and strode back toward the Shaper. The moment he was close enough he slammed his fist into Granin's stomach, his fist grinding into the hard granite skin. Instantly overwhelmed by the warrior's strength, Granin collapsed to his knees gasping for breath. Balta looked down on him dispassionately, shaking his fist.

"Do not gainsay my orders in the field, Shaper. Thanks to your wretched circle, the city is still an hour's march from the gate, which means I still have complete authority over this delve. If you seek to countermand my orders one more time, I'll have you put to death for insubordination. Do you understand me?"

Mind racing, Granin tried to understand what was happening as he coughed and tried to catch his breath on his hands and knees. To one side, Nium knelt beside him and placed a hand on his back in concern. What was Balta up to? He was within his rights to flex his authority here, he was technically correct to state that they were still in the field and that he still held absolute command over the delve. But why bother? The request required them to return the monster to the Shapers outpost. Why would he want to drag it all the way to the Warrior's circle? When he attempted to hand in the request, he would be refused and have to turn around and take the monster back out of the city and to the outpost as was required.

As Balta turned to march away, Granin saw him glance toward the monster and his heart dropped in his chest. This idiot warrior. He wanted revenge. In the Warrior's circle the Shapers would have no allies, no one they could depend upon to help. Balta would have a number of ways he could delay them long enough for his clan to "invite" the warriors to rest at their compound, naturally taking the monster with them. Once it was there, it would never emerge and they would say an accident occurred, pay reparations to the Shapers and forget about it. If Granin tried to object inside the city, then he would be "invited" as well, along with his triad and they would share the fate of the creature.

The warriors hefted their ropes and began to drag the monster after the swiftly marching Balta but the moment the ropes became taut they jerked to a halt. They looked back confused, only to see the monster had dug in with its regrown legs and was refusing to move. The warriors shared a confused look before they redoubled their effort, only to see the monster working even harder to resist, using its considerable size and strength to resist the pull. Eight Golgari warriors then began to engage in a ridiculous game of tug of war with a massive insect. The warriors were powerful, filled with the strength the Golgari were famous for and although it was slow, they began to make progress.

Clack!

The ant unleashed an irritated clack of its mandibles and decided to change the playing field. The ground shifted and dirt began to fly as it employed Earth magic to dig itself into a hole in a matter of seconds, causing the warriors to curse under their breath. Balta continued to march away, confident that his arrangements would be followed and ignorant of the growing mess getting further and further behind him.

If the monster could hold out against the warriors, then Granin had a chance of completing his task yet. He turned to Laksham who was clearly straining to maintain the glamour she had cast over the ape monster.

"You won't be able to hold on for much longer Laksham. Run toward the outpost and try to reach the circle there. If we can get enough people here then we can take the monster there ourselves. Go!"

Quick on the uptake, she understood what the older Shaper was trying to say and turned to run immediately. Still on the ground, Granin forced his tired mind to weave the threads of mana required to connect his mind to the monster's.

[You need to tell your ape to go with Laksham and cooperate.]

[What the heck is going on here stone face? The silver guy is being more of a douche bag than usual!]

[I told you provoking him would have consequences! He's trying to get you taken to the Warrior's circle so he can have you killed off! You need to hold out until we can bring more of my people here to take custody of you!]

[Alright, fine. Sure I can't kill him?]

[If you kill him there's no saving you from the vengeance that will come!]

[Okay, okay. Sheesh. I'll turtle up here.]

"Nium," Granin whispered to his second, "Go after Laksham and help keep her safe, then return with the Shapers. Once Balta comes back, we'll have to follow orders or he'll cut us down. Better there were only one shaper here than two."

"Are you sure you're alright?"

"I'll be fine! Get out of here!"

The younger Gulgari took off like a shot and by the time Balta finally realised nobody was following him and returned, both he and Laksham were out of sight. Eyes filled with rage, it was clear the leader knew what had happened. He couldn't delay any longer, if the monster wasn't going to cooperate, that was all the excuse he needed.

"The creature is attempting to fight back! Destroy it! Shaper Granin, invade the creature's mind and annihilate it! This is an order!"

"Without the support of my triad it will be impossible, warrior Balta!" Granin tried to demur.

"If isn't done in five minutes I'll declare you a traitor and put you down myself!"

Coriinam Balta was in frothing rage at this point. His eight foot frame quivered with anger and his sword leapt from its scabbard, flashing sword light toward the monster before he had even finished speaking.

[This guy has serious anger issues.]

The creature sounded wryly amused as the blows began to rain down on it, even cutting through the defensive layer of dirt it had created. The other warriors quickly joined in, surrounding the creature from all sides and hacking at it with abandon.

[If I don't incapacitate you in five minutes he's going to kill me too. He's lost it!]

[You really are a pain in my thorax, you know that? You could have just left me chilling in the expanse. Would that have been such a bad thing? But oh no, had to capture me and drag me back to you stupid cult. Why would I even want to be an ancient?! I was happy back with my colony. Should have stuck with them, then I wouldn't be in this mess.]

[You'd really want to live with a collective of mindless monsters?]

[Mindless? Well ... yes, mindless. But they didn't kidnap me and get me jumped by a pack of stone skinned sword maniacs!]

[I take your point, but how are we going to get out here?!]

The warriors continued to pour strikes onto the hardened carapace of the monster as sparks flew everywhere. At this range it was difficult for the warriors to inflict real damage, especially since the monster was wily, never giving them a good angle or allowing them to close the distance. The creature defended itself as best it could without fighting back, shifting its body to deflect blows and trying to disrupt the footing of the enemy by shifting the earth beneath their feet, but it was being worn down.

[Only one thing for it I suppose!]

That was all the warning Granin got before the ant exploded out from its hiding hole with extreme speed, rushing toward him and snatching him up in its mandibles. Bolts of purple mana flew out from the creature to strike against the warriors repeatedly, one bolt every few seconds. Granin strangled a cry in his throat as he saw the monster fight back, but it didn't seem as if they suffered any damage from the magic.

[I'm just slowing them down. Although....]

POW! POW! POW!

Acid flew from the creatures bulbous backside and coated Balta from head to toe as he readied another strike against the monster. Then they were off, speeding down the tunnel as bolts of magic continued to fly back at their pursuing warriors.

[So which way to the cult?] the bright, positive voice of the monster rang inside Granin's head.

Dangling from the jaws of this giant ant, he could only think that his headache had grown significantly worse.

Chrysalis

Chapter 457: Run! To Captivity!

[Stop wriggling!] Came the irritated thoughts of the monster.

Granin resolutely continued to wriggle. He wasn't about to remain locked in the jaws of a monster that wasn't under his direct control!

[If you don't settle down I'll either drop you and leave you for the silver surfer back there, or I'll start to wonder who your cult would rather see turn up alive, me or you!]

The Shaper couldn't help but splutter at that.

[You really think they'd welcome you after you killed the cult member sent to capture you!?!]

The two of them were still speeding away, the six legs of the ant flashing with incredible speed to propel the enormous bulk of the creature forward. Behind them the nine warriors, led by a Balta so irate he was practically frothing at the mouth, or that might be acid, chased them through the tunnels.

[Split up ahead! Left or right? And you know what? I bet it wouldn't be the first time a cult member was killed by the monster they were supposed to look after. I can imagine Garralosh going through a few such as yourself...]

[Left! And I assure you that isn't the case!]

Despite his bluster, Granin couldn't help but reduce the effort he put into his wiggling dramatically.

[Much as I thought... Cosying up to monsters is rather risky work I would imagine.]

[Don't question the sacred mission of the cult!]

[Look, I'm not questioning it. I'm just sayin' that monsters tend to want to eat things that will give them experience. By the by, just out of curiosity, what level are you?]

[Not that high! Low actually! I barely have a class, in fact!]

[... Relax, buddy. I'm not going to eat you. You do notice me carrying you to safety right now? Are you experiencing all of the not being eaten that is occurring at this time?]

[... I am.]

[Right. Let's remember where we are right now. We are in a place tha - left or right?]

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[Right!]

[Great. We're in a place where I have no idea how to get back to where we were before. We could have travelled to the other side of the world for all I know. Not to mention you have my ape, and let's presume that there's a whole massive load of you stone-heads about the place right now. You understand what I'm getting at?]

[How are you casting all this magic while talking?]

[Multiple brains my man. Divide and conquer. Why?]

[Multiple brains?! You have more than one brain?!]

[Of course. I can devote an entire brain to thinking about how annoying running away from you stone folk is a massive pain in the business district at all times! Useful, no?]

[Wouldn't it be better to learn the Split Thought Skill?]

[The what now?!]

Granin bit his tongue (metaphorically) at that. Naturally the monster read into his sudden silence.

[Interesting... Wouldn't mind telling me how to unlock that would you?]

[I'd rather not.]

[Oh nooo. My mandibles are slipping.]

The powerful jaws holding him aloft flexed dangerously, pinching him around the ribs, but Granin was unmoved.

[I won't! I said too much already.]

[Tch. Cheapskate.]

[Left up here!]

[Right. Damn, these guys are persistent.]

Sword light continued to flash around them as the warriors gave chase, their powerful sword skills required the monster to skitter from side to side with insane reaction speeds to dodge or tank hits, focusing on keeping its legs unharmed. Bolts of purple magic flew out every few seconds, disrupting the followers' formation and occasionally scoring a hit.

[What does that spell even do?] Granin asked, bewildered.

[You want information from me but won't hand out your own? That's cheap, man. I'll share, that way at least one of us is a nice guy. It makes them heavier.]

[Makes them heavier? Is that... what kind of magic is that?]

[I think I'll keep that little titbit to myself. I do need a few strong cards up my carapace, after all.]

Granin could admit to himself that was fair enough. He didn't know what the cult had planned for this monster, honestly no idea. With the strange currents at play, it was probably for the best if this creature was careful with its secrets. It wasn't as if everything had gone according to his own plans up to this point.

[You really are keeping ahead of them fairly well.] He couldn't help but sound impressed.

[If you lot hadn't knocked me out, you really think I would have been caught so easily? I'd love to know how you did that.]

[You know mind magic don't you?] Granin was confused.

[Not as well as I thought I did apparently.]

The pursuit was hot and dangerous, but somehow Granin felt himself engaging almost against his will. Perhaps the threat of imminent harm was enough to lower his guard and make him open up to the creature.

[This is one of the things the cult could help you with. Developing your skills, teaching you secret unlocks and mutations. We have over a thousand years of history and research trying to get monsters to be as strong as they can possibly be.]

[It's not like I have much choice is it? I have to rely on you guys now. You've not given me a whole lot of choice on that front.]

[I suppose not.] Granin paused to reflect for a moment. [It's not usually like this, you know. You were human once, we know that. Normally we would reach out and speak to you, negotiate, see if your goals were aligned with ours. We don't strong arm intelligent monsters like you.]

[Something changed eh? We'll find out soon enough I suppose. Holy moly! Do these guys ever run out of stamina?!]

[Not likely. Our racial bonus helps us out on that front.]

[Racial bonus?! What the hell...]

[It's not like you monsters don't get your own perks. I don't get stronger by eating, for example.]

[Apparently you get strong just by being born.]

[Take a right here and slow down. You might start to see others of my kind, so be careful.]

[Slow down? I'll get chopped to heck!]

[No, you won't. We're close now and Balta knows it, he can't keep following for long. My people will come to meet us soon. It's over.]

[Alright then, you're the boss. I hope my ape is okay.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 458: Changing Circumstances

It is something of a fascination of mine, I admit it Beoram. Do you not feel the same? Such brief conversations have such far reaching consequences. Two, separate, strong minded, high level individuals, in positions of authority and respect come into contact with these ancient murder machines (I know you consider it blasphemous but let us not quibble about the facts. Yarrum is projected to have devoured hundreds of thousands of my kind at least) and everything changes! They drop their previous positions and begin to work against (in many cases) their own society, and risk bringing the wrath of the immensely powerful Abyssal Legion down upon their heads!

What in the good name of Pangera did they say? Oh, I know what you'll say Beoram: "We know exactly what they said, it's in the book of the Red Truth" and roll your eyes at me as you always do. But you have to admit that there is no way to ensure that the revelations of the book are complete. Something could have been left out! How would you possibly know? You can't just go on blindly assuming that the author was a good and reliable narrator without proof! And when it's literally a book about a conversation between two entities, it's impossible to confirm any of it! Now don't you send me another letter filled with your threats and nonsense about disrespect. I've been a member of the Cult for eighty years! Eighty years in the field mind you, not putting my heels up and theorising like some I might add. My dedication to the cause is beyond question. All I'm asking is that you seriously engage with the question.

I just can't imagine what form that dialogue took. Mind magic was involved, naturally, was there manipulation on either end? Both individuals were (reportedly!) among the most powerful and high level magic users our respective societies have ever produced, certainly capable of mental warfare. Then again, the ancients were absurdly powerful beings akin to gods. Even if mind magic wasn't a particular strength of the Ever Worm, it can't be ruled out that it could dominate the mind of a mortal.

It can't be helped Beoram, I can't be cured of this feverish curiosity. I burn to know the answers to these impossible questions! Sadly, most of my compatriots share your own (very unscholarly) lack of rigor on this subject. Holy texts should be subjected to the same level of academic scholarship as other works, if not more! Your continual refusal to see this is a definite point against your academic reputation! At least with me.

- *Letter from Scholar Poran Alact to Beoram Sallis'tan in the year 1432 A.C.*

Granin trudged through the halls of the Shaper Circle outpost, still rattled by his journey pinched in the mandibles of a giant ant. Luckily the creature had sufficient control not to pierce through his true skin. Granite may not be the most expensive material to replace, one of the reasons Granin had made the practical selection, but having to walk amongst his peers with a damaged skin would be shameful to say the least.

He could be grateful ... maybe grateful was too strong a word... he could *acknowledge*, that Balta had finally seen the light and backed off before he'd been confronted by the twenty Shapers who'd rushed out to meet them. He hadn't been sure that would happen, especially after he was drenched in acid. A battle in the tunnels between the warriors and Shapers would have been a major incident to say the least. Still, the look of poorly suppressed rage on Balta's face as he'd been forced to back down made Granin doubt they'd heard the last of the incident. No doubt the senior Shapers were in a tizzy over the issue, and the cult would be shaking their heads at the unwanted attention.

"Granin Lazus, here to see the Leading Triad." He pulled up outside a wide and imposing pair of double doors, the dark wooden beams inlaid with strips of polished stone.

Two tall Gulgari Shapers dressed in ceremonial robes draped from their waists down, leaving their upper bodies bare stood on either side of the doors. As one they turned to open the doors, their hands latching onto the stone itself and their powerful frames shifting the weight with ease. Inside was a tasteful office, drab in many ways, except for the long stone table that held three aged Shapers, papers and open books piled high in front of them.

"Ah, Lazus. Nice to see you again." Spoke up the woman in the centre, Irette Plamine.

"Plamine, a pleasure as always." Try as he might, his tone came out wry and tired. He'd never done well speaking to authority. Probably the reason he remained in the middle ranks.

"You may speak freely here Lazus. The cult has moved decisively to ensure that every post in this place is held by our people."

Granin was impressed.

"That must have meant calling in a lot of favours."

"Of course it did, but the leadership of the cult has determined that the time has come for bold action." Broke in the surly voice of the wizened Shaper to Plamine's left. "What we don't need right now is unnecessary tension with the blasted Warrior's Circle! What were you thinking?!"

Damn ant!

"I think you'll find that it wasn't my idea to provoke or attack the Warrior Leader of the delve, Gravus. The specimen we acquired made that decision all on its own."

Oridene Gravus, so old his true skin had begun to crumble, waved a hand dismissively.

"It sounds like this creature is more trouble than it's worth!" He declared. "We should feed it to one of our more promising specimens and be done with it!"

"No need to be hasty," soothed the third member of the triad, "from the intelligence we received the creature was quite promising, also a reborn soul. Not something we should so casually toss aside."

The youngest member of the triad and usually the most reasonable, Biritite Crysas attempted to play peacemaker. A role she was well suited too.

Gravus huffed.

"Those damned lizards wouldn't know a good stone if we threw it up their nostrils. Tell me Lazuz, how do you think the creature holds up?"

Granin visibly hesitated and Plamine broke in to ease his mind.

"Do not worry overmuch, Shaper Lazus, the fate of the creature you captured will not rest on your words alone. We will follow the process as best we can in these trying times. It will receive an interview and assessment before this triad will make a decision."

Somewhat mollified, Granin gave his honest thoughts.

"The creature is difficult. Cagey, untrusting and holds back information regularly. Much of this can be attributed to the sudden and violent manner of capture which bypassed all the normal protocols."

A loud harrumph erupted from Gravus, it was he who had authorised this mission and its conditions.

"Nevertheless, I've found the monster to be surprisingly capable. It's certainly not afraid to cause a stir, has a huge variety of mutations and Skills, even a high level of core shaping which it has used to grow two quite formidable pets."

"Pets? A waste of resources, surely!"

"Shaper Gravus. As the first of this triad I will order you to hold your tongue if you continue to interrupt," Plasmine had run out of patience.

"As I was saying. Pets, two of them, although one has gone missing and we are unable to determine where it went. The creature itself refuses to say a word on the matter."

"Hardly relevant if it failed to get through the gate," Plasmine spoke dismissively.

"Quite so," Granin agreed. "I merely raise the pets to indicate the wide variety of capabilities the creature has. The magical skills it has demonstrated are quite well developed and I'm aware that it has invested heavily in raising its abilities in this area. I discovered through dialogue it actually has multiple brains..."

"Wouldn't utilising the relevant skill be more efficient?" Asked Cryslas, baffled.

"It would, but it has ... *had* no awareness of the Skill until I asked the same question."

"It sounds like this monster has a range of curious abilities. I'll be curious to see how it performs in the upcoming trials."

"Trials? What exactly is being planned here, Plasmine?"

"The Cult has decided that our time is running out. A new ancient must arise soon if we to fulfill our destiny and reach beyond the confines of this world."

"What?! Isn't that a little sudden?!"

"We believe this to be true. All of our candidates will be put to the test. We *must* have a final specimen behind which we can throw all our strength!"

"And the rest?"

"Fuel for the fire."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 459: Locked up

Not sure what I expected really. Did I think I would be confined? Yes, obviously yes. You can't just capture a monster and then let it wander around willy-nilly. A few questions are bound to be raised. Why the hell do you have a monster walking around, please kill it until it's dead, for example. Particularly if you're going to be supporting and strengthening said monster. I can't imagine most of these stone people are likely to be big fans of the endeavour. The whole 'Monsters v Everyone else' dynamic has been fairly well established by my experiences up to this point. For whatever reason these crazy nutters want to make a new big bad monster to go to the centre of the world and hang out with the other nineteen ancients.

I'm not keen on the idea. I want to support my family and help to develop the greatest empire of ant monsters that ever existed. Other than that, I want to sleep a lot. It's not too much to ask is it? I suppose there are other things I'd like to do. I wouldn't mind meeting up with another reincarnated human such as myself. One that isn't completely nuts, that is. Garralosh wasn't what I would describe as particularly

stable by the time I met her. Although you could make an argument she wasn't too well held together when she was a human. Yikes.

It'd be nice to be able to chew the fat with someone who's had similar experiences is all I'm saying! I mean, they're unlikely to be an ant, so that sucks for them, but just because they aren't a member of the greatest species doesn't mean we couldn't get along and have a good chat. How's the Dungeon been treating you? Which Biomass flavour is favourite? How much do centipedes suck? That sort of thing.

I'm kind of hopeful they might have one here in this compound. From what I gathered, there's a few monsters tucked away here. 'Specimens' as that stone man would put it. Since they study individuals like me when they come across us, there's a chance one is kicking around nearby. Maybe I should try and reach out with mind magic? No, shouldn't risk it. The people around here seem strong at mind magic and not afraid to use it in nasty ways, something the Sophos never did since they probably never felt threatened by me.

After meeting a sortie of stone-folk who were friendly and dressed in robes that were tied around their waists (what is it with these people and being bare chested?! Why the shirt hate?!), I was promptly surrounded and escorted with all haste toward their compound. The 'outpost' was basically a fortress carved into the wall of an open section of tunnel, hardly small enough to be called a measly outpost!

Before I had too much time to take in the sights, I was bundled into a downward leading tunnel and shoved into what is essentially a cell. Don't get me wrong, it's quite a nice cell. Not on the level of what the Sophos provided for their pets, that was practically a day spa for monsters, but it's not bad. A little bit of space to move around in, even for me, some food and water provided, a cosy spot of soft materials to snooze on. No windows whatsoever and obviously hardened walls to repel physical attacks.

Above me on walkways that looked down into my cell, three shapers stood still as the stone that made up their skin and watched me carefully at all times.

No privacy! Good thing I don't need to use a toilet or shower. I'd be embarrassed! I have to say, it even makes me nervous to sleep. I've no doubt that all three of them are powerful mind mages, capable of launching fearsome strikes to knock me out if I'm doing something dodgy. I've actually attempted to speak with them a few times but I haven't gotten any reply, they rebuff my mind bridges and fray them before I can connect.

So, there isn't a lot to do, basically. If they want to win me over to their side and get me to work for their ultimate goal of raising another ancient, they need to make a bit more effort! I'm sure they will eventually. I suppose I just need to rest until they're good and ready.

I did consider running away, a few times in fact. The thought of carrying Granin away as a hostage had been sorely tempting, but ultimately I thought going along with the Gulgari Shapers had been the safer bet. I have no idea where I am, or how to get back home, or how many hunters would chase me or anything about the situation at all.

From the moment they caught me in the expanse I've been in their power. I can only hope Crinis is able to complete her mission and perhaps then some help might be able to find me. I can't feel anything from the colony at this moment, none of their energy is reaching me, so I know they're some distance away.

Either I manage to convince the Golgari to let me go, which I don't feel is likely, or I prove to them that I'm useful in fulfilling their grand mission. The only other option is escape and I'm not certain I'll be able to survive that. Haaaah. This sucks. If only I'd stuck with the colony and helped them expand, I wouldn't be in this stupid mess! Yet another instance where avoiding my responsibilities has come back to bite me right in the profit margin.

You'd think an ant would learn.

Faintly I can hear the sound of stone shifting above me and a few moments later three new shapers enter with their rocky chests on display to look down at me.

As an insect can, I stare back at them without shifting my head an inch, remaining perfectly still. If it unnerves them at all, they give no visible reaction, only watching me silently. It's hard to tell, but I believe the three newcomers are older than the other three. Something about how brittle their outer skin is, or is it perhaps a little pale and ossified? Regardless, they feel like authority figures, something might be happening here.

Sure enough, after some waiting a mind bridge is formed and extended out to me. With nothing else to do my mana senses are fully attuned and for this reason I'm able to detect something strange about the way this bridge is formed. I don't think it's malicious in any way, but I feel as if it is woven between all three of them, and *by* all three of them at the same time. Is this the method that Granin and his team used to attack me?

[We extend a greeting to you, reborn soul. We apologise for the abrupt manner of bringing you to us, but circumstances have pressed us into desperate measures.]

The three of them stare down at me like hawks. The words are friendly but the eyes certainly aren't.

[Nice to meet you folks! Gosh darn, I really hope I can be an ancient one day!]

Hah! Got 'em.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 460: Honesty is refreshing

They seem to be the bigwigs around here, unless I miss my guess. These three radiate that sort of aura. Although I can't say I approve of the way they are looking down on me like I'm some sort of roach who they might want to squish. I'm a much more valuable sort of insect than that, thank you very much! The ant is far more noble, far more dignified than any runt that hides under your fridge! Their cold and calculating eyes don't fill me with warm feelings, something tells me that this conversation isn't going to be one of my all-time favourites.

Because I'm certain they're here to chat. They need to evaluate the merchandise after all. Otherwise how could they make a sound judgement as to its value. These nutters only care about one thing, which is making a monster as powerful as possible and launching it at the centre of the Dungeon in the hopes that it breaks through all in its way to ascend to the most powerful tier of monster that apparently exists. As much as I enjoy a good cannon, I'm not convinced that I want to be a cannonball!

I'll have to wait and see how much of a choice they give me. I don't think I can break out of this place, so only rescue or following their instructions is left to me at this point. I can't help but curse my poor

decisions that led to this outcome. Maybe if I'd been more vicious and fought to kill from the beginning then I would have escaped, made it back to my colony and been safe there. But nooo, peaceful Anthony wanted to slip away without causing enmity. Well where did that get me?! Clutched in the palm of these cultists!

Patience, Anthony. No need to fly off the handle. Need to make a good impression on these fogeys so they don't immediately knock me out and feed my precious Biomass to some hyena they've had locked up here for the last hundred years.

[Your enthusiasm at the prospect of achieving the dream of our fellowship is certainly inspiring,] came the dry tones of who I presume to be the leader of these three, the woman in the centre, [but you must understand that we can't take your dedication at face value? A more solid contribution is required to demonstrate your sincerity.]

[But I'm so sincere. Off the scale even. I want to be an ancient so bad, I already defeated a candidate out of sheer jealousy!]

Anthony, you're smoother than a greased snail! This couldn't be going better.

[We've heard of your triumph over the beast known as Garralosh. I must ask, were you not perturbed to destroy another of your own kind?]

Ohh. Tricky question. Don't want to seem too bloodthirsty, also don't want to appear too peaceful. If I explain that she threatened my family, then I may be pressured to explain why I would step up to the plate for a colony of 'brainless' ants. The less time spent discussing the colony the better. I get the feeling that the attitude Granin displayed toward my family would be a heck of a lot less flippant if he realised what I'd done to make them more intelligent.

The last thing I want to do is unleash some sort of crusade against my family!

[Garralosh threatened me directly and travelled a long way to hunt me down. I refused to hide from her forever. I don't relish the fact I had to take her down, but I also don't regret it. She forced the issue onto me when she could have left well enough alone.]

[You don't take responsibility for your actions?]

[I didn't say that.] These people are tricky! [I said I have no regrets with my choices.]

[Interesting.]

The three of them stare down at me for a moment, possibly consulting amongst themselves as I sweat internally. What exactly do these people want from me? If I knew that, then I'd have a much better idea of how to answer them.

[Monster,] a different voice this time, gruff and full of ire, [what do you believe makes the most powerful creature?]

An odd question... I mean... How would I know? I have my own ideas, of course, but I can't say with any kind of certainty that they'd be the best possible ways. Why are you asking me buddy? You're the one with hundreds of years of monster rearing knowledge at your beck and call! Maybe that's the point, he wants me to admit that they have the knowledge and expertise that I don't. An interesting play. The

shaper in question is almost glaring down at me, so intense is his stare. What I did I do to get you so worked up, old man? Shouldn't I be the one who's annoyed?!

[I don't know.] I answer honestly. [How could I? I've been a monster for under a year, and before that I spent less than fifteen years as a human. I didn't know I could get mutations until I upgraded my first body segment to plus five. I didn't know how cores worked until I had one. I didn't know how reconstitution of cores worked until I tried it. Outside of some information and tips I picked up along the way, I've been flying blind ever since I was reborn here.]

[Interesting that you admit it so readily. Does that mean you would be willing to submit to our guidance?]

[Happy to take advice. You guys have a lot of information to draw on, obviously.]

The Shaper frowned.

[I did not mean advice. I mean that you would exclusively develop along the lines that we prescribed for you.]

[Ah, I see. Heck no.] I refuse firmly.

He seems a little taken aback by my abrupt refusal and stares hard at me.

[Care to elaborate on why?] The first speaker comes back into the conversation, filling the gap left by her associate.

[It's my life, my body and I'm the one who'll make decisions regarding my own future. Didn't the original ancients develop that same way?]

[We don't know how they developed. They grew to power in a time before the Dungeon had breached the surface of this world.] She sounds thoughtful as she considers my words. [I won't say that your argument is without merit.]

I can tell that angry man wants to interrupt then, and maybe he does on a more private line. Regardless, a few moments later I hear the leader's voice again.

[I would like to explain to you what is going to happen here going forward.]

[Hit me. My body is ready.]