

## Chrysalis 461

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#### Chapter 461: Too much honesty is maybe not so great

I'm a little nervous. What's the story going to be? No matter what I don't think it's going to be something I like. Don't keep me in suspense, let me hear the damage. Just how bad are things going to be. The three guards remain perfectly still during this time, watchful and poised they don't miss a single movement I make. The three older shapers are a little more mobile, but not much. I get the feeling that these Golgari are a little more attached to stone than just having different varieties of it for skin. They are unusually still when they don't have to be moving, as if becoming a rock themselves.

[You know the purpose of our Cult?]

[Absolutely. You desire for a twentieth ancient to take its place amongst the other nineteen. Something about 'closing the circle' or some such.]

She nods her head in agreement.

[That is correct. We seek to empower a monster in order than it may come to dominate the lower Strata and achieve a tier of evolution on par with the existing ancients.]

I'm a little surprised to hear that.

[Do you actually know what tier the ancients are?] The theoretical maximum tier? I wonder how high it is! Ten? TWENTY?!

[No, we don't.]

Dang.

[To our knowledge there have been only two conversations between the sapient races of the surface and the ancients. During the Cataclysm we now refer to as the 'Time of Rending', the mana level in the Dungeon rose to unprecedented heights. When the tunnels connected to the surface, mana from the centre of Pangera flooded the skies, followed a tidal wave of monsters that nearly washed away any remnant of civilisation on this world.]

Yikes.

[Sounds pretty bad. How long ago was this?]

[More than two thousand years ago. When the mana reached its peak, the ancients themselves were able to come to the surface for a time, devastating all that they found. Tales of the destruction they wrought are legend to this day. Scholars debate the history of these events, for not much that was written during that time survives today, but we do not believe the ancients sought to particularly destroy the surface world. In our Cult we are told that they devoured monsters more readily than they did us.]

[Well why not? That's how monsters get stronger after all.]

[The ancients cannot evolve, nor can they level up. This we believe to be true. So why consume so much? Could it be that they sought to help rather than hinder?]

Giant monsters turn up and eat everything and these people think they were trying to be helpful?! Crazy talk.

[Sure...] I lamely agree.

[During this time, two conversations took place. The one you spoke to before spoke of the 'Red Truth'. This is the name given to the knowledge that was passed on from a dialogue between a powerful Kaarmodo Wizard and Arconidem, who rose under their lands. For us, it was Yarrum, the Eternal Worm. A Shaper by the name of Irrin Stelix communed with the great worm before founding the Cult of the Worm in secret.]

[So... what did they say? The ancients, I mean.]

All three of them snap their attention to me.

[That we will not share,] the words are sharp, cutting.

[Sure, sure. No need to get stressed!]

They relax about half a percent.

[Those who do not share our goals are not able to receive the words of the ancients. It is a sacred mission.]

[Of course it is. Gotta ... you just gotta love them ancients. Worms. The whole lotta them. Great stuff.]

I think that works? There was a brief pause in the dialogue. I presume the three of them were discussing my incredible, sincere and fervent love of the ancients and worms. For my part, I continue to remain perfectly still whilst I watch them. No need to give anything away.

[Did you notice anything odd about the last wave?] A new voice breaks into the conversation, younger, a little more light than the others.

[How could I? It was the first wave I'd ever experienced.]

I don't have a point of reference for that. The wave was immensely dangerous to us at first, but eventually turned into a boon for the colony, enabling us to harvest experience and Biomass at an unprecedented speed. By the end of it, I'd started hoping it might stick around. The solid defences we encountered on the way down to the second strata gave me pause though. There may have been more going on beneath us than I had assumed.

[We thought that might be the case. Compared to other recent waves, this was much longer and more intense. The mana levels in the upper strata rose beyond what we would expect, by far, and the duration of the wave was much longer. Even now, the mana has yet to return to what we would consider normal levels.]

[I had noticed that,] I can't help but muse, [it started to rise not long after I was born in the Dungeon and its never gone back to the level I experienced then. I can't say I never wondered why that might be the case.]

There is another brief pause as they confer.

[Indeed. The Cult of the Worm has decided that it is likely another Cataclysm is coming. We never experienced the build up to the time of Rending, since, at that time the Dungeon had not breached the surface and was unknown. We believe that the waves will start to build, as if from an ocean, each one greater than the last and receding a shorter distance until the next arrives until the mana will crash over the surface of Pangera, perhaps for the last time.]

Why the heck would it be for the last time? You have no reason to think that?! Or perhaps they do, or perhaps they want me to think they do! Sneaky.

[That's interesting.] I try to stay focused.

[For us, as well as those who follow the Red Truth, this has precipitated a call to action. The time for the final ancient to ascend is running short. We can no longer divide our efforts and resources in a dozen different directions, hoping that one of our candidates will achieve the final ascension. This approach has failed so far and there is no reason to believe it will serve for the final push. Instead, we are taking a different approach.]

[Oh?] I'm not sure I like the sound of this.

[We have gathered all of the monsters we are currently supporting here in this place. Although it is crude, the Cult has decided that the best way to determine the most worthy monster is through a trial by combat.]

[... soooo ... you want us to like .. Duel? For the right to be sponsored by you guys? What if we lose?]

[Naturally, those monsters who lose will become fuel to speed the growth of the more deserving monster who wins.]

[That's cold. I'm a sapient creature you know? You want me to fight to the death like a slave?!]

[We understand your past, but it isn't your present. Time is short and we have been driven to these barbaric methods. We don't like it, but we have no choice.]

You think you have no choice, but you don't know for sure! By the by, I think that guy is perfectly happy at this turn of events. He's looking at me as if I'm a juicy steak for his favourite dog.

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### **Chapter 462: The Legionaries Tales**

The Legion headquarters in the independent underground city state of Rylleh was a place that Morrelia had never been. This deep into the first Strata, on the very border between the layers, was a dangerous place only the very powerful would tread in small numbers. Her own small mercenary team had certainly never delved this low, choosing to hone their skills in those expanse that they could reach. Compared to her own small team and their desperate struggles to hunt and descend the Dungeon as best they could, the extravagance of power and wealth on display in Rylleh made her sigh with irritation.

All that time she'd spent battering away on her own, trying to struggle without relying on anyone, the Legion had a fully functioning fortress down here to muster and launch delves from. It was connected via a functioning Gateway to boot! Even this was only a small part of the large and vibrant city that lay spread out beneath her.

She had to ask herself if she'd wasted all that time for nothing. Running away from the Legion when her brother had died, had it been the right choice? She'd been so confused, consumed with grief and unable to believe that her brother, always so capable and strong, so personable and careful, could have failed and died. Her father's face when he'd told her had been pale and his voice had quavered ever so slightly, the only sign of weakness she had ever seen from him. Perhaps that, more than anything, had shaken her. She wasn't afraid to die fighting the Dungeon, she risked death every time she set foot beneath the ground, but it was crushing to see and feel what that death would mean to those left behind.

"It's amazing, isn't it?"

Morrelia started at the unexpected voice. Somehow Titus had managed to sneak up on her as she was thinking. She cursed under her breath. How did a man that large move so soundlessly! Just what sort of Skills was he training? She turned as the familiar figure of the commander walked beside her and leaned on the stone rampart that lined the outer wall of the fortress, overlooking the city.

"The first time I came here, I couldn't believe that such a thing was possible. So many different people, coming together to form a city in the Dungeon of all places." Titus shook his head at the memory. "That it was so prosperous, so *safe*. I didn't understand it.. Of course, I went on to learn that many such places exist in Pangera. Many of them much larger and more grand than Rylleh."

"How deep are they?" Morrelia asked, taking her father by surprise.

"The cities? Depends on which ones you mean. Most of the time, the depth depends on the people who founded it. Independent cities like this one are usually in the first and second layer. There's one in the third that I know of. I haven't been there myself but I know the Legion has a presence in that area."

"Really? The third?" Morrelia was surprised. The third layer was supposed to be an inhospitable place of fire and ash, hardly the sort of place you would expect to see anyone living. "Wait a second," she considered for a moment, "does that mean that there are cities even deeper? Non-independent ones?"

Titus smiled down at his daughter. Just talking about the depths of the Dungeon had her eyes afire with the thirst for battle and adventure. He couldn't help but reminisce about his own youth, he'd been much the same, hungry to push further, to delve more, level up and overcome all challenges. That fire had driven him deep, as far as any human had been, alongside his brothers and sisters of the Legion. He'd wanted to experience it all again with both of his children, the death of his eldest son had been a savage blow, but there was a chance that Morrelia might come back around. He resisted the temptation to push her to join once more. He knew her mentality, it was far too close to his own. Pushing her hard would only make her run away. She was stubborn as a brick baked out of a stone that was formed in the core of another brick.

"The Dungeon has many secrets to reveal. There are great cities in the fourth and fifth strata. There's an entire empire that exists in the fifth strata. On flying islands."

"How the heck do you have flying islands under the ground?!" Morrelia was flabbergasted.

"Ha!" The commander barked out one pure laugh before he reined himself in. He snuck a quick glance at the ramparts around them to ensure he hadn't been seen. It wouldn't do for his reputation to crumble because he was caught laughing. He looked back toward Morrelia as she stared at him, disbelieving. "Nobody ever believes me about the islands," he chuckled.

Morrelia's head was spinning. Information of the deep Dungeon was so rare in Liria, these sorts of topics were just not discussed. Anyone who had this information kept it to themselves and used it for the benefit of their own organisation. Even the Legion wouldn't share it with mere recruits. It was beyond strange that Titus would be so talkative about the Dungeon. He'd been close lipped about it since she was an infant, no matter how much she'd begged, he wouldn't say a word. Her eyes narrowed a little.

"What are you scheming, old man?"

Titus' eyes opened wide innocently.

"Who? Me? You accuse me of scheming?"

Morrelia sighed.

"I know what you're doing. Do you really want me to join the Legion again that badly? Appealing to my sense of adventure?"

The eyes of the commander glittered.

"I do," he readily admitted it. Now that it was in the open, he wouldn't step down. "Not only for me, but for your mother as well. It's not easy for us to have a life separate from our children. We wanted to share it with you, but we didn't choose to force you. Instead, we were delighted when both you and your brother leapt headlong into the Legion. What happened was a tragedy, but what made it worse was that you leaving made it feel as if I'd lost both of my children instead of one."

These were dangerous topics, things they'd not spoken about, ever. Emotion surged inside Morrelia, things that she'd suppressed for years came rushing to the surface.

"And can you tell me now, what happened? I know you were there. I know that you know! Do you know how hard it's been, not being sure how your own family died?!"

"He died during the delve. That was the official word of the Legion. You have reason to doubt it?" Titus demurred.

It was painful for him. So painful he felt as if his chest were being torn out, but he didn't let any of it show on his face.

"Of course I doubt it! Do you really think he would have failed in the first strata?! He was far too strong. And *you* were there. How could he die!? How could any of them have died?!"

This was the reason why Morrelia had left the Legion and fled from her father. She simply couldn't believe what she had been told about her brother's death. It just didn't seem possible. It didn't even seem *plausible*.

Titus took a deep breath and blew out the air in his lungs. He could see the pain in his child's eyes and it tested him like never before. No matter how hard it was, he had always shouldered the burden and

done his duty. No matter what it cost him, he would follow through. He could only hope that his daughter was strong enough.

"If you want to know," he spoke slowly and Morrelia hung on his every word, "then you must re-join the Legion."

She stared at him with a cold intensity that crackled in the air. This was the first time Titus had deviated from the official line, even in the slightest. It was the only concession she would receive and it was confirmation that she hadn't been told the entire truth. This was it. She would have the answers she had sought for so long if she signed back up. She turned to face her father squarely and snapped a Legion salute, fist to her heart.

"Reporting for duty, commander."

Titus nodded and returned her gesture.

"Welcome back, cadet."

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#### **Chapter 463: Morrelia Awakens**

The agonising pain had long faded, leaving in its wake a vast lassitude, as if every cell in her body had been ripped apart and now had to pull itself back together. She felt tired on a level that she hadn't known existed. Beyond her bones and down into the deepest recesses of her marrow, she felt exhausted. The spark of stubbornness in her mind refused to allow her to sink into unconsciousness, and though it was the hardest thing that she had ever done, she forced her eyes open. She still lay in the stone basin, the hard stone unyielding beneath her. Above her the dull light of the enchanted stone was slowly fading, pitching the space into twilight. Morrelia grimaced hard and stretched out her hands. Her body screamed at her not to move, every muscle aching, but she wouldn't listen.

With the gradual movement of an invalid, she pulled herself upright and supported her weight against the wall. Below her, the final drops of concentrated mana were draining away, falling beneath, doubtlessly to be recycled and used again to torment the next trainee to qualify for this hellish process. She took a deep breath and slowly turned around, her bare feet shuffling against the stone. When she finally managed to set her feet and took a moment to steady herself, she looked up to find her father looking at her, a rare show of emotion showing on his face. Pride radiated from eyes but also great sorrow and she knew that he was mourning his son all over again in this moment.

"Congratulations Legionary," Titus voice was rough and tired as she was, Morrelia swore she could see moisture in his eyes.

Morrelia could barely find the energy to smile, but she did.

"Thank you commander," she said.

She couldn't remember what happened next. Later Titus would tell her that she'd passed out on the spot, he'd had to leap forward to stop her from smacking her stubborn head against the rock. When she awoke she was in a small room, on a hard bed. As she groggily took the room in, she realised the furniture was austere, basic. The bed was large enough, but hard, unyielding and the walls were unadorned, bare, except for one thing. On a simple steel hook hung the black leathers of a full Legionary

uniform and the moment she saw it she cried. When she gathered herself and put it on, she left her chamber to find her father leaning against the wall in the corridor.

"Come with me," he said.

The two of them travelled in silence through the fortress, neither willing to break the companionable silence that had broken out between them. Both of their lives had changed the moment she had opened her eyes. It was hard for Morrelia to grasp that she had achieved the dream she'd had since she was a child, the dream she'd shared with her brother. She wasn't sure how to feel, or what to say. Likewise, her father didn't trust himself to speak. His chest was full of emotions and he was afraid that if he opened his mouth he'd no longer be able to keep them contained, so he remained silent.

Through the twisted corridors they walked, passed soldiers standing silent and tall on sentry duty, and auxiliaries working hard to fulfill the thousands of tasks that the fortress needed to keep itself running, until finally they came to an inscribed wall covered in carved script. She threw a confused glance at her father and he dropped his chin to his broad chest, his eyes hooded.

"Go and talk to your brother," he instructed.

Morrelia felt her heart beat faster at this command and turned back to the wall, covered in neat rows of names. She stepped closer, her eyes trailing through the list, searching for one that was familiar. The closer she came to the end, the more she began to recognise. Seniors who had gone delving when she was still a trainee, even some in the year directly above her. Finally she found what she was looking for. Romanus Marius. She raised one hand and let her calloused fingers trail through the grooves that made her brother's name. Even now, years later, she felt as if she could never forget his face, his voice. He'd been such a presence, able to lift others up and make them want to be the best version of themselves. He'd been charismatic, charming, somebody people wanted to follow, everything that she wasn't. She'd hated him for that, even as she'd admired him. He would just laugh at her.

"Morr, you're being ridiculous," he would smile and say, "don't you think there are things that you can do better than me?"

She remembered staring at him, dumbfounded. Romanus was perfect! What could she possibly do better than him?! He must have read her expression, because he shook his head, stepped forward and placed a hand on the top of her head. "Trust me, Morr. By the time you're done, I'll be looking up to you."

Lost in her memories, she didn't hear her father step up behind her, his feet slow and heavy.

"This wall," he stated, "carries the names of all of those trainees who didn't survive the baptism."

Shock and indignation filled Morrelia at this and her head flew up to stare at her father. Titus met her gaze and slowly shook his head. Of course he wouldn't lie to her.

"Nobody could believe it. He had passed every trial, every test, every measurement with flying colours. He was so far above the minimum levels, he was practically assured to succeed. Your mother was devastated, I was lost. We just didn't imagine that it would happen to him."

Morrelia still refused to believe it.

"It's not possible! How could I have succeeded where he failed? You can't possibly explain that?!"

There was sorrow in Titus' eyes as he looked down at his daughter. He raised his arms and embraced her as he hadn't done in years. "I don't why he failed. I just don't know. I wish I had an explanation, but even now I have no words. No matter how I searched I haven't found anything to explain what happened. But this is something you need to understand, and something Romanus tried to tell you many times. He believed it, and I always believed it as well. You will be stronger than he was. One day, you'll be stronger than me."

Despite her father's words, Morrelia refused to believe it, but her voice had been stolen away, so she couldn't say anything. Instead she tried to digest the truth that she had tried to find for so long. Despite finally getting the answers she had wanted, all she was left with was bitterness, and determination.

Two days later, the Legion prepared to travel through the gate. They would enter the main legion headquarters, deep below the ground, an impregnable stronghold built during the Cataclysm thousands of years ago.

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#### **Chapter 464: Was dancing to the ...**

Jailhouse rocks on all sides. These people seriously love their stones. I've made that observation before and I probably will again, but it bears repeating. There is clearly a strong physical and spiritual connection between these, Golgari? Golgarin? Gagarin? Something like that. Any information I can gather on their customs, thoughts, patterns, history, anything at all, could prove useful. Because this situation is desperate! There's no other way to think about it, I'm in trouble here. Fighting to the death against other powerful monsters, creatures that have been groomed for however long? Oh no. Anthony isn't going to let anything slip on this one. My mind is laser focused! It's like a laser beamed through a crystal to become a smaller, more focused laser that is then blasted through a person's eye, corrects their vision on the way through, hits the lens and is sharpened even further before melting the brain on the way out.

To that end, I've begun doing all I can to suss out my situation. The first key is to act natural. If the guards are suspicious of me then they'll watch me twice as closely as every other monster, which will make my life difficult. Far better that I appear to be the perfect candidate, cooperative and peaceful. So I've taken some time to engage in typical ant behaviour. I spend an inordinate amount of time grooming myself, which I have to admit is a wonderfully soothing use of time anyway. Cleaning the mandibles, picking out all the gross bits of Biomass that have gotten stuck in the barbed sections. I actually had to use water magic to get that done, blasting the filth off my magnificent face hands with a concentrated water hose. It made a tremendous mess of course, even the guards up above got splashed pretty bad. Another twelve guards ran in, yelling and pointing all over the place. It was quite a sight. I presume they were frustrated at the mess but I managed to use a little fire magic to dry the place out in no time. My display was so effective that another ten guards came in to admire my work. At least I presume that's what they were doing, seeing as they kept yelling and pointing at the fires.

After that incident, my usual number of guards was doubled from three to six, but I don't think it's due to any negative reason. My suspicion is that they want to make sure they catch any other brilliant ideas I have and admire my many talents and capacities. Other than that, cleaning the antennae is always



important and requires careful precision, pulling the antennae through the elbow joints on my front legs with the utmost care, using the tiny hairs in the joint to remove dirt and detritus from the sensory organs. Usually ants would clean each other in teams to ensure that each and every member of the colony is spick and span, not bringing bacteria or mould into the nest. Mould can be a real killer to ants, since the nest is usually kept quite warm and damp in order to create the perfect conditions for rearing larvae. Some types of ants even have small glands that secrete an anti-bacterial that they use to clean themselves! Truly, the ant is the king of the insect world!

Apart from cleaning myself, I've been taking care to spread pheromones around my chamber in order to make it smell a little more like a nest. It's a small thing, but it does soothe me to have the familiar scent around me at all times. It didn't take long to accomplish this so I once again lapsed into boredom. Man this is tough. Being locked up with nothing to do? It's torture! Even as I thought that, I could feel my sub-brains screaming in protest. Naturally with all this free time on my hands, I made sure that each of the sub-brains was grinding hard at my magic skills. Each of them is being pushed to the limit every second, to the point that I frequently have three pounding headaches! Of course, the main mind needs to be kept focused and clear at all times, ready to respond to moments of crises, so I can't use it to train magic skills. That would be insane.

The goal is to grind away at the elemental skills and mana sensing, compression and shaping to bring my all around levels up and get as close as possible to the unity elemental skill. I need every edge I can get for the upcoming battles, I don't think for one second they'll be easy. The only monster I've ever battled that one of these cults supported was Garralosh and I don't want to say I'd be able to beat her again if you locked us in some weird cage and made us fight it out. That Croc was scary! So my sub-brains are on the grind twenty four seven. I'll work them until they burn into sludge and leak out my ear holes!

I hope Tiny is okay...

Granin told me he'd take care of him, and I hope I can trust the guy. The other members of his team were getting quite fond of the big lug, so perhaps I can count on them to intervene if their leader doesn't. Whatever happens, I don't want them to bring him in here. If he gets caught up in this stupid tournament business then I'm not sure if he'd survive. Although ... I wonder if they'd let him participate alongside me? He's one of my pets after all, a part of my strength! Nononono. Don't be tempted, he's better off on the outside. I'll have to make my way out of here on my own.

After two full days have passed since my interview, I feel as if I'm going mad. I took a moment to surreptitiously try to interfere with the walls using earth magic. Since they're made of rock, I presumed they could be interfered with. Naturally it wasn't that simple. The second I did so the walls lit up with runes and I felt a force slam into my mind like a battering ram, sending me reeling. By the time my mind stopped spinning there were twelve guards staring down at me with decidedly angry faces. I can assume they weren't too happy with my supposed escape attempt. I tried to look like the most innocent ant I could, which I think had a solid effect. I fully expected someone to connect a mind bridge and yell at me for a bit but oddly enough no-one did. I'm not sure if this is a good or bad sign.

A day later I got my answer.

The first sign I had that something was changing was the door to my accommodations grinding open. The door itself was an impressive piece of work, thick and banded with strange, glowing metals that

were obviously warded heavily. On the other side of the door six robed shapers stared at me with flat, unfriendly eyes as the six guards from above lowered a ladder and climbed down to take up a defensive position behind me. Still without speaking with me, they gestured for me to follow them before walking backwards down the tunnel leading from my chamber, eyes on me the entire way.

This is looking ominous. Is it round one already? Do I have to fight?! Are they going to execute me?!

I need to be careful...

I stop my sub-minds from spinning their shapes and give them a few moments to rest. They've been working hard the last few days and need a few moments of rest before I can use them to fight. I'm tempted to use my healing gland but I know that it has a limited effect on easing mental fatigue. If I was in range of enough members of the colony this issue would be resolved in just a few minutes, but sadly I can't sense a single ant in my vicinity.

Down the tunnel we walk, then a right at a T-intersection that brings us to another tunnel which we travel down. Every now and again we pass other doors which I give a cursory swipe with my antennae to try and get a scent of what's on the other side. I sense heat behind a few of them, and behind others I pick up some strange smells. Definitely monsters. These must be the rooms of my fellow candidates. I've passed six of them so far, I wonder how many they have locked up here?!

As I wonder about this, we come to a set of broad gates that rattle as they rise into the ceiling above my head. I have to say, this tunnel is quite spacious, able to fit my bulk into it with room to spare. Clearly this area is designed with monsters in mind.

As the gate finishes rising, my escorts back into the open space beyond, gesturing for me to follow. Alright brains, I hope you guys are ready to go. This might be showtime. Inside the space I find an open, circular area of flat ground interspersed with obstacles. Yep. This is clearly a monster coliseum. Looks like it's time to get it on like Donkey Kong. My weary sub-minds begin to pull on my gravitational mana and I begin to condense it with my main mind. I can't risk the weaker minds losing control of the spell, I have to do the heavy lifting myself.

As I'm settling into war mode and getting my game-mandibles on, I feel a tentative and hesitant mind bridge reach out towards me. Is this a test? The guards are still standing around and watching me. I'm confident it hasn't come from them.

Warily I allow the contact to complete and immediately hear a tentative voice echo in my mind.

[It's okay! I-I'm not going to hurt you.]

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### **Chapter 465: The monster in the mirror**

[Not going to hurt me, eh? That sounds like something someone planning to hurt me might say!]

Aha! I'm not going to fall for your games! This is most likely to be a sneak attack! Although my escort still hasn't moved away, standing around in me a rough circle facing inwards, I don't imagine that they'd be too interested in staying around in the event another monster came over and started to throw down. Perhaps they aren't lying?

[Um. I'm not going to attack you. The Shapers wanted me to talk to you!]

[Oh really? If they wanted to talk to me, why wouldn't they just do it themselves?!]

I still can't identify the origin of this mind bridge. I know it's somewhere either inside this circular combat space, or just outside it. I can see other entrances spaced around the outside edge, there's a possibility the individual communicating is beyond one of these. The fact they've been able to disguise their mind bridge indicates that they have a not inconsiderable amount of skill, something to be wary of.

[I think... they mentioned that they thought you would respond better if you spoke to someone like you...]

[Someone like me? An ant?! Are you a member of my colony come to rescue me and suffered capture as well?! Impossible! How could you know where I was?! Are you from a rival colony!? Come forth and I shall exterminate you!]

[Wow, you're an ant? They didn't mention that. I wonder why? You aren't disgusting, are you?]

How offensive!

[I'm an ant! Of course I'm not disgusting! I'm the most noble and incredible arthropod of them all!]

[Okay! Settle down! You're really fiery. This isn't what I expected...]

[Well don't blame me for being a little tense. I get captured, locked up, told I have to fight in death matches and then marched out here without anyone saying a word. *Then* someone starts trash talking my species. I mean, how would you react?]

The distant voice seems to pause for a moment to consider before responding.

[You know what, *I would* be pretty mad. I'm sorry. I should have realised the Shapers would give you the silent treatment, they're often like that. I've been here for a long time, so I've kind of gotten used to it.]

Been here a long time? In what capacity?

[Who are you exactly? You talk about the Shapers as if you aren't one, which makes me think you're a monster, but you also say you don't intend to hurt me, which doesn't sound like something a monster can guarantee right now, considering the whole, 'monsters will fight to the death' thing.]

[Yeah, I don't know a whole lot about that. Look, I'm going to be straight with you, I'm a monster, like you. More than that, I'm a reincarnated human, from Earth! Like you!]

[...]

[Aren't you excited? I know I was when I finally got a chance to talk to someone else like me.]

[...]

[Don't you have anything to say?]

[Uhh, well. First of all, it's a little odd having this conversation when I can't see you. Second, I guess I'm a bit surprised. I really didn't think I'd be able to meet another reincarnated monster so soon.]

[Another one?! You already met one!? But you're so young! It took me decades, dammit!]

[Decades, you've really been here for a while then? Yes, I met with one, she wasn't what I would describe as ... very stable.]

[Ah,] the voice sounded sad, [yes, that happens to some of us. To be honest, all of the people like us that I've met have been a little... odd, from the beginning. Including myself.]

[Indeed, that does seem to be the case.]

Except me, obviously. My life was pretty normal and I would have to say I'm quite well adjusted. Garralosh was crazy in the coconut though, for real.

[Feel like stepping out and having this little chat in person?]

I'd like to clap eyes on this individual, I'm sort of curious to see what sort of monster they happen to be. I also might be able to gauge their strength, just in case their words are a pack of filthy, filthy lies and I might have to fight them in the end. In my compound vision, I make sure to pay attention to my escort in order to witness any change in their behaviour. For the moment they appear, much as they always have, with a stony demeanour (heh), keeping a watchful eye on my every twitch.

[Alright then. I'll come out, just give me a second.]

One of the gateways on the other side of this circular death arena jerks outward. Not a smooth glide, as would happen if people with hands were pushing it open, but a solid *jump*, as if an elephant had just battered it with its head. A large shadow looms in the slight opening before the door jerks again, opening yet wider. A hulking mass of creature shoves its nose through the door and starts to squeeze through.

The head is the first thing I see, obviously. Even though the shape and colouration are quite strange, it's quite clear what type of animal this is.

[You're a bear!]

The pointed nose of the monster jerks up at my words, causing our gaze to meet.

[Oh! Ugh. You really are an ant.]

This ant hate is really rubbing my thorax the wrong way.

[Ant are clearly incredible and amazing. Why the heck would you want to be a stupid bear!?]

The massive bear monster shoulders through the door and ambles out into the open before starting to waddle over toward me. In terms of size, it's significantly larger than I am, bulging muscles ripple with each forward step of those large forelegs. At my needling, the bear peels its lips back to reveal dripping teeth.

[I cannot believe I would need to try and convince someone that bears are better than *ants*. Honestly, what is even with you guys? Why'd you reincarnate as such weird creatures.]

[Hold on there smokey. First, ants are for the win, second, what guys? Third, I kept pet ants, apparently that's enough.]

The bear's steps slow for just a moment before she continues to lumber toward me.

[Pet ants? *Ants*? How do you even keep pet ants?]

[Don't knock it until you've tried it! There's a whole community with tons of stuff out there. Lots of stuff on youtube as well!]

[I had no idea... As to the other guy, there's one more of us here. James. He came in a few years ago.]

Hang on a second. I feel as if I'm neglecting something. Something about the bear. Who told me about the bear? Was it Enid? No. Someone balder... The Sophos!

The huge bear's steps slow until it's within twenty metres of me before it stops and somewhat comically lowers its back legs to sit up facing me, scratching at its chin with one claw.

[Sarah?] I ask.

[Hey! How'd you know my name?]

[Did you happen to spend any time with the Sophos? Little bald skinny guys? Ride around on death worms?]

[I did! Wow. That was so long ago... just after I woke up in the Dungeon.]

[They told me it was fifty years ago!]

[Sounds about right.]

[But you're still in the second strata?! I thought you'd be way deeper! They seem to think so as well.]

The big bear hesitates for a moment.

[Look, let's talk. First, why don't you tell me your name?]

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 466: So Bohemian like me**

I have to wonder what the minders are doing whilst Sarah and I engage in a mental conversation. I mean, are they listening in? I suppose it's possible. I can't sense them at all, but I suppose that isn't any sort of guarantee, considering their higher Skill levels. Perhaps this is all just part of their research, learning about people like me and our monstrous transformations. I can't afford to care too much about it, since this is such a rare opportunity.

Perhaps I've been away from the colony for too long. It's nice to have a conversation with someone who is able to reciprocate my human culture. I've still spent longer as a human than as an ant after all, and the humans I've met here on Pangera have been ... a bit odd, let's put it that way. Sarah on the other hand, seems quite normal, all things considered. Despite freely acknowledging being a bit unbalanced, she comes across as well spoken and measured.

[I wasn't always this steady,] she confides, [in the first few years it was rough, as I'm sure you know. After my ... death ... on Earth, and being reborn here... It's hard at the start. You know what I mean.]

[You're referring to the terror and existential dread of having to fight for survival in a strange world of death?]

[Exactly that.]

[Yes, I recall. I mean, I was a tiny little ant monster. Just about every monster I saw was able to rip me apart. You started out as a bear! It can't have been that bad.]

It's odd to think of a bear giving you the stink eye, especially a giant, elephant sized bear with a distended maw that housed teeth as long as a human forearm, but here we are.

[Look, Anthony, I didn't start this size. I didn't even start as a fully grown bear. I was a cub! A little harmless bear cub!]

I'm immediately suspicious.

[Just a cub eh? A harmless little fuzzy ball of fluff, with the claws, and the fangs. How large were you exactly? Somehow I don't think you were just an average, Earth sized cub...]

[I ... might have been a touch larger than normal.]

[Just a touch, huh?]

[It's not like you were a normal sized ant!]

[How the heck would I have survived if I was a regular sized ant?! Not to mention, I was born outside of my colony! Without it's colony, a regular ant will die in a day!]

[Is that so? I wonder why?]

I will never turn down the chance to educate someone about the glorious world of ants!

[You need to think of individual ants as cells that make up a larger organism when they work together. One ant is not capable of surviving, it needs its brethren to work together to provide context, decision making and safety.]

[So... ants are weak?]

[No. Ants are sophisticated social creatures who are mutually dependent on each other!]

[But an ant on its own can't survive...]

[Not the point!]

[You're a bit weird Anthony,] Sarah laughed at me.

It'd been a long time since I'd heard such a relaxed, earnest laugh. Something about it just helped the tension to unwind a few notches in my non-existent shoulders. It helps a lot that Sarah is such a friendly, sociable person. It's hard to believe that she was deemed nuts enough to have her soul ripped into this planet.

[I don't know what it is, both you and James have such weird pets. No wonder you both ended up in such odd species when you were born here.]

[Odd? He's not another insect is he?]

I will brook no competition for the throne of the greatest insect!

[What? Oh, no. I won't tell you, I don't want to ruin the surprise. They'll probably bring him out to meet you next time. They tend to be a little precious with us. The Shapers, I mean.]

*That* sends my antennae into the air a little.

[Precious? I've been informed that I'll be fighting to the death against other monsters that they've nurtured. It doesn't seem like they're being all that careful with me. Some might say, just the opposite!]

Sarah's big bear head slumps to the ground and huffs with irritation, sending a cloud of dust swirling from the wind of it.

[I know,] she sighs, [something has gotten right into their heads. They've been so nice to me you know. I was half insane by the time I made it down to the second strata. I was lonely, blood crazed and starving. The isolation and constant fighting starts to chip away at your mind and before you know it you're a screaming loony. If I hadn't gotten picked up by a patrol of Shapers by chance I don't know what would have happened to me.]

[What happened?] I was curious to know.

[It was quite surprising to me. At the time I was so on edge and ready to fight, the first time they made contact through a mind bridge and tried to talk with me I went completely mental. I thrashed around, trying to find them but they just backed off and waited until I calmed down before they tried again. It took them three days before I was able to talk back to them, then another three before I agreed to meet them. After that I decided to take them up on their offer and came back here with them. They put me up, feed me, converse with me, taught me all sorts of stuff. It's been great.]

[So why the death blender now? Seems like there has been a clear shift in policy.]

[I know and they just won't talk to me,] Sarah huffs, clearly frustrated, [I've been told that I won't be part of the 'selection' but that they still consider me a strong candidate. They won't even tell me if James will be thrown in! He better not, that would be barbaric!]

[Isn't the whole thing barbaric? I mean, I'm in it.]

[Well, yes! Yes it is! Because we are *people*, not just monsters! They can't do this to us!]

Even after decades as a monster, Sarah still seems to cling to the idea of herself as being something different. A person, a human, a creature who is valued and has worth. She might have been here being coddled by the Shapers for too long. I've already had to learn the lesson, monsters are not the same as people. We're spawned from the Dungeon and that makes all the difference. Other than the ancients, the rest of us are just resources to the surface people. In the end we can only count on ourselves. At least I have my family, the colony, that I can lean on. Sarah had nothing. I feel sorry for her, to be honest. She had to lean on the Shapers to stay sane, but they've made her lose her edge at the same time.

[They absolutely can. I can't break out of here on my own. I've tested a few things already and they are watching me like a damn hawk with binoculars. They can easily force me to fight. Just knock me out,

drag me out here and wait for me to wake up. Or not, just leave me here unconscious to be free experience and Biomass to their pet favourite.]

[They aren't bad people, Anthony.]

I shrug my antennae.

[It doesn't matter to me if they're bad or not, I couldn't care less. My only worry is surviving.]

[Time's up.] A new voice broke into our mental communication.

Clearly the Shapers *had* been listening the entire time if they were able to break into our conversation so smoothly. Spying? Just keeping tabs or were they trying to learn something? The other question, did Sarah know about it? My guards are already gesturing for me to return back the way I came, the gate opening wide for me to pass through into the tunnel back to my cell.

[Nice meeting your Sarah. Hope we get another chance to chat soon.]

[You too Anthony. Stay safe.]

[Ha!]

I can't help but bark out a bit of a laugh at that. Stay safe? It's not really up to me now, is it?

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 467: The rock in my corner**

After my odd little meeting with Sarah I was summarily returned to my room. As the door slams home behind me and the guards take their customary places up above I have to wonder what the point of it was. What were they hoping I'd get out of it? Were they trying to show me they weren't monsters? How nice and good they are? Bit of a laugh when I'm going to get wheeled out of this room and made to fight to the death at any moment!

Did they really think bringing out another reborn human to show me how benevolent and wise they were was going to be enough?! Laughable! I will happily ditch the lot of them to get back to the colony. My siblings would welcome me and put me to work for the family in a heartbeat, mother would slap me on the head for being so foolish as to leave in the first place. Ah, I miss my mother. I was stupid for trying to run away and do my own thing. Who cares if the thoughts and desires of the colony get whispered into my head? Isn't it a good thing? Doesn't that mean I can be more helpful to the colony?! Isn't being helpful to the colony what an ant is supposed to do?!

I hope Tiny and Crinis are alright. Perhaps my stupidity would be easier to bear if it weren't for the fact I've dragged my two beloved pets into this situation with me. Tiny needs constant healing to help him survive the poisonous mana that's invaded his body, he needs me more than ever! He's too stupid to survive on his own! If I hadn't been so worried about lowering his fighting prowess I would have boosted his intelligence ages ago. Now it's too late. And Crinis! Poor Crinis. Such an innocent little blob of death murder. It was hard to give her such a dangerous task, and I know she'll go at it with all her might. Gah! If only I was stronger I wouldn't have been caught and put in this stupid position! My rage is building! Rage at the Golgari! But also, rage at myself!



I sit perfectly still inside my cell and stew. There's a large plate covered in Biomass nearby but I'm in no mood to indulge in it. Instead, my minds are full of visions of myself battling, tunnelling, escaping and getting the heck out of here! Of coming back with the colony and wreaking havoc amongst the Golgari! Twisted dreams of tearing down their cities and plundering their wealth are filling my head! Is it an overreaction? Maybe! But my heart burns at the injustice! I demand vengeance!

I sit and seethe for an hour in perfect stillness. I can even see that the guards are perturbed by my lack of action. They see nothing, not even a twitch of an antenna. It must look as if I'm a statue, something not even living. It's quite nice, the ability of an insect to remain still. Eventually the situation changes though, but not through any action of mine. I hear the sound of the door swinging open in the above area, swiftly followed by shuffling footsteps, as if whoever had entered was dragging their feet.

When I felt the mind bridge reach out to me I felt as if I already knew which voice I was going to hear.

[How's things, Granin my man?]

[... I hate this.]

[I missed you too buddy.]

[Dammit it all to heck. This whole thing is stupid to begin with. I'm stupid, you're stupid, the cult is stupid.]

[Anything else?]

[Me.]

[You already said that, Granin.]

[It bears repeating.]

A minute later the ladder lowers down and a the large, grunting form of my favourite Shaper climbs down into my cell with me, eyed watchfully by the trio of goons up above.

[Uh,] I mumble, [How's Tiny?]

Granin fixes me with a steady glare before responding.

[That ape,] he sent each word with a bite at the end, [eats enough for five monsters the same size. My people can barely keep up with him.]

Typical. That fat monkey only cares about eating and fighting, if he can't fight, he'll eat twice as much.

[Let him out to fight every now and again and he'll settle down. He needs some activity to distract him from eating.]

[I might do that. Thanks.]

[No worries, Granin.]

[Look, I've been meaning to mention this for a while now. We Golgari refer to each other with our surnames, not our first names. Only good friends and family use first names.]

I pretend to be shocked.

[Why Granin, what are you saying? Aren't we the best of friends?]

[You know what, screw you.]

[See what I mean? We have this banter going on.]

Granin Lazus sat down heavily and ran one tired, stone hand over his face. The poor guy, I can sympathise with him somewhat. But hey, who asked him to knock me out and drag me here?

[Why don't you just tell me what you're doing here Granin? I know you didn't come here of your own volition, so the higher ups sent you for something. What's the scoop?]

I watch the Shaper release a pained sigh before he communicated again.

[Yeah. The people running this mad house have 'given' me the 'honour' of being your sponsor for their upcoming murder fest. Before you ask, let me explain. Normally when we bring a monster in and try to support it, one of the Shapers is chosen to be the sponsor. That Shaper and by extension the other members of their triad, are responsible for guiding the monster, securing it resources and generally pushing it as far as it can go down the path of evolution.]

[So you're like... my trainer? What am I, a pocket monster?]

Granin looks at me, confused.

[I don't have pockets. I'm not even wearing pants.]

[Why is that, by the way? Your entire race just hates clothes?]

[Our skin is made of *rocks*. Other than covering our genitals, what would we need clothes for?]

[Pockets?]

The Shaper reached down with one hand to indicate the sizeable pocket sewn into his garment.

[You make a good point. So what comes next?]

[Do you ever move? You haven't shifted since I came in here.]

[I'm trying to weird out the guards above us.]

[I assure you, it's working. Look. I want to say, clearly, that I think this whole thing is insane. If I'd known what they were planning to do here, I never would have brought you in. I've spent my adult life in the cult and although I wouldn't say I'm a huge fan of monsters, I believe the quest to find the next ancient is sacred. What's happening here? This blood sport? It's a betrayal of more than a thousand years of tradition.]

I'm actually touched.

[That's nice to know, Granin. Sincerely.]

[I still don't like you.]

[Aww. You just can't admit I've grown on you.]

[You know what else grows on me? Rock fungus.]

[Where does that grow? Not on the -]

[Yes.] Granin nodded.

[Yikes...]

Between the two of us a weary sort of silence developed. In Granin I had a sort of kindred spirit. A person who thought this whole thing was stupid and didn't want to be involved, yet was forced to participate anyway. Which did beg a question.

[Why you, Granin? Why were you chosen to take on this role as my sponsor? You clearly don't want it, yet someone felt that you were the man for the job. Is it a punishment of some sort?]

[Pretty much.] A wide smile spread across the Shaper's face. [I don't know what you did but you managed to annoy the head honchos. They aren't big fans of you, even if you are one of the rare reborn monsters. They don't think you have a snowball's chance in the Third Strata of surviving against their pet little projects, so rather than waste any resources on you, they put me in, someone they also don't like and don't rate so that you can fail quickly and get eaten by a more deserving monster. Once that's done, I'll get tossed back into the refuse along with my triad of outcasts.]

I'm kind of stunned.

[Don't they realise I'm going to eat them all?!]

Granin grinned.

[I don't think they have any idea who they're dealing with.]

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 468: Strategising**

Granin and I discuss a few things before we get down to the nitty gritty. For the most part I want to learn about his people and what makes them tick. He's a little guarded about some things, but quite forthcoming about others. For instance, he's quite happy to tell me why he's on the outer with his Cult and with the Shapers in general. Supposedly there's been quite a lot of moving and shaking going on within the Cult of the Worm lately. Recruitment has picked up over the last fifty years and the cult has risen to a level of prominence that it hasn't enjoyed at any point in its history.

This influx of people, ideas and energy was always going to cause friction. Granin fell into the 'steady and cautious' camp, the group who wanted to consolidate their gains and take a measured approach, as they always had in the past. Being cautious is never a bad idea for a Cult that isn't supposed to exist in the first place, I suppose. But he found that the ground changed under their feet too quickly, as the 'reckless moron camp' (Granin's words) pushed harder than expected and seized control of the leadership.

[The stupid idiots are so willing to risk what's been built by painstaking effort in the shadows.] Granin moaned to me bitterly. [What kills me the most, is that it's people like me out in the field, loyal to the

cause and dedicated, the bedrock of this cult, that get sent out and sacrificed on poorly thought out and badly researched tasks. The mission to capture you was a perfect example! No proper planning, no backup strategy, no thought of having full control of the delving party. Look how that nearly wound up! A disaster! Back in the day, we'd have observed, made gradual contact, felt out the situation to get a sense of fit. There sure as hell wouldn't have been any warriors involved! Bloody meatheads.]

A constant refrain in Granin's whining is how much the Shapers and Warriors don't get along.

[Tell me a story here, Granin. Why is that your entire society glorifies the Warriors and takes a dump on the Shapers? Seems odd to me. Magic is both awesome *and* rad. Things like that gateway are only possible because of magic, so why the hate?]

I can see Granin consider the implications before he decides to answer me. He's being careful not to give me too much information that I can use against him, but enough that I feel satisfied he's working with me. I'm happy to take the trade, something is much, much better than nothing.

[It goes back to the Cataclysm.] He finally relents and answers me. [Back then, the mana started to rise to unprecedented levels and every society on the surface experienced a magic revolution. Mages were more powerful than they'd ever been before, or since, and they created miracles in that time that elevated the craft to unprecedented heights.]

[But then came the monsters,] I guess.

He nodded.

[Quite right. The Dungeon opened up and the world was destroyed. Us Golgari were always a martial people to begin with. Our natural skills and racial bonuses push us in that direction quite naturally. We're large, I'm not even that tall, the biggest of us can get up to ten feet, heavily built, and our true skin provides us with a strong defence without having to invest in armour, allowing our fighters to focus on weapon skills more than other races. Since the rise of the Shapers was immediately followed by the Rending, the people naturally lay the blame at the Shaper's feet, blaming them for bringing the Dungeon upon them and we've been scorned ever since.]

[But that's stupid!] I protest. [The mana rose due to the Dungeon reaching the surface, not the other way round! Surely they know that!]

[They probably do,] Granin shrugs, [but they don't care. It fits the narrative they want to believe, that's all that matters. Ever since then the Warriors' circle has been dominant in Golgari society and the Shapers have been suppressed. I think the Shapers have been pushed to the breaking point lately, which is why the Cult was able to bring so many into the fold.]

It's an interesting situation. I can't help but muse over it. In my mind, the Golgari empire occupies a vast amount of Dungeon territory no doubt connected by these gates. Without the Shapers, the whole thing would fall into a heap in mere days. Without the gates, the individual cities and outposts would need to travel between each other in order to communicate and share supplies, risking the Dungeon for days or weeks at a time to send the simplest message. Impossible, surely?

Not to mention, this kind of setup will be perfect for the colony! Satellite colonies, connected by magical gateways would allow us to cover more ground with less numbers. That'll become critical since we need

to ensure we farm the Dungeon carefully. Spawn points are closely associated with monster population, if we strip the tunnels bare of monsters in our greed, then the spawn points will dry up, leading to less monsters overall and a dramatic reduction in the XP intake of the colony. We have to be smart about it, farm the right amount, not too much, not too little.

To make this successful, we need to cover more territory! How to cover more territory without clearing out the Dungeon? Gates! GAH! My heart is on fire! If I can learn the secret of these gates then the colony will have a limitless future! I *must* uncover the secret!

[So Granin, tell me how the gates work?]

[No way.]

DAMMIT.

[Look. I don't know why you'd even want to learn about that. Who are you going to use it with? Besides, we've spent enough time on these side issues. We need to get focused on how to prep you for your first fight.]

[Fine.]

I'll wait, but don't you dare think I won't keep working on this!

[So, do you mind if I take a quick peek at your core?]

[No way.]

[I had a feeling that might be the case.]

Granin brings a hand up to rub his stony temple again. Poor guy must deal with a lot of headaches. As if I'm going to let him use a core manipulation Skill on me! He'd be mad to think I'd agree!

[So we have to do this the old fashioned way,] he grumbles, [can you tell me what the focus of your build is?]

[Build what?]

[You're kidding, right? Your build? Your skills and stuff?]

[Oh! You mean like, what am I aiming for with my stats and stuff?]

[Right. What's your focus? Where are you putting in the most effort?]

[Yeah. I'm a bit of an all-rounder, I suppose.]

I mean, It's better not to have something you can't do, right? Cover all the bases, so to speak? Oh, Granin's rubbing his temples again.

[Oh boy. Look, usually it's way better to have a general focus for your build, a specific set of skills and mutations that you stack up to become as strong as possible, then you flavour around the edges. It's about building synergy. You know what synergy is?]

[A conjunction or opposition?]

[No, that's syzygy.]

[Then no.]

[It's when things work together to produce an effect more powerful than the sum of its parts. Like, imagine a lightning monster, right? It develops a lightning mana gland which gives it access to free, premade lightning mana. Then it say, takes a teeth mutation that lowers lightning resistance. So when it bites something, its lightning becomes more effective. It's a basic example, but that's synergy.]

[I think I get it.]

[Right, and that's only a basic, basic example. The same things can be done with Skills. There are Skills that support other Skills, as well as Skills that can work together with mutations. For example, think about that bite mutation we had, you could take the Skill Curse Infliction which would make you better able to apply a curse through your bite, lowering the resistances further. Most people don't know that it works with Bite mutations, it took the Cult ages to work it out. Then you could take a toxin mutation which applies a toxin which lowers lightning resistance applied through the bite, *then* take the Toxin Mastery Skill which allows you to better inject toxins. With a single bite you can slash one elemental resistance by as much as thirty percent, even at low levels!]

[That sounds.... Really impressive actually.]

This is good stuff. The Sophos were never so explicit when explaining these sorts of concepts. Their focus was mainly on the techniques and mastery of manipulating cores, I think they just assumed I would know about maximising gains from appropriate builds! I've been so blind!

[Teach me more, Master!]

[Oh, so now you're impressed? We've been studying this stuff for over a thousand years. This is just the beginning. The unfortunate thing is, we have hardly any research on ant type monsters. I went to the archive this morning and had a look. Pretty much blank.]

[What?! That's morally wrong! Discrimination!]

[Well. Ants are considered a huge menace in the Dungeon which can get rapidly out of control, so they pretty much get exterminated whenever they're found. Keeping a Queen captive is probably too much of a risk, and keeping an individual worker isn't worth the effort, so you can understand why we never bothered.]

[I suppose so...]

Please don't exterminate my family!

[But that's fine. *Other* insect types have been researched to death. I've got full lists of skills and mutations for most of your body types, so let's work through this.]

[Okay then.]

[Chrysalis](#)

**Chapter 469: Putting the ducks in a row**

Granin Lazus looked around the room with thinly veiled contempt. He didn't recognise most of the Cult members who were present. The new blood had flooded this outpost, filling it to the brim until the entire place stank of impatience, ignorance and disregard for tried and tested methods. All these Golgari, some of them with their true skin barely set, looked so excited to be there. Huddled together in their triads their excited whispered fill the room.

"Boss, how's our man looking? Ready to go?"

The insistent whisper of Corun Nium, second of Granin's triad probably drew more attention to them than talking in a regular voice would have done. The sibilant hiss cut through the hubbub around them and drew more than a few curious eyes. Granin just shrugged at them and tried to insinuate through gestures that his second was suffering from a mental ailment and his medication had run out.

"Boss. Hey. Boss!" Like being prodded directly in the ear with a knife, the hissing voice seemed to stab directly into his brain.

"Dammit Nium! Shut up would you!" Granin bellowed.

All sound in the chamber cut off as everyone turned to look at the cause of the disturbance. All they saw was a fuming Granin, a very slightly abashed Corun and Torrina Laksham, third of the triad, trying to shrink out of sight. Far from wanting to hide, Granin openly glared back at everyone who met his eyes until he was satisfied they had registered his anger. Gradually the sound picked up again as the various groups resumed their chatter, only then did he turn back to his second.

"Your damned stage whisper is the least effective possible way of hiding what you want to talk about. Just speak like a normal person."

"Sorry, Boss. I'm just worried. The Cult has never done anything like this before, have they?"

"They haven't" Torrina broke in quietly from the side, "at least according to all the records that I can access."

"That's what I'm saying. Is Anthony going to be alright? How's he feeling? I can't imagine he's in a good place right now."

He did look genuinely concerned and Granin couldn't help but wonder again at how quickly the cursed insect had managed to win over the members of his triad. His own conversations with the creature were irritating more than anything else.

"He's fine," he grunted, "I wouldn't say that he's *happy* about the situation. Far from it. But he's managed to wrap his head around what's going to happen to him."

"Did you find time to talk to him about strategy? About his build? What sort of Skills are we working with?" Torrina asked, her voice quiet but intense.

Granin snorted.

"First off, he wouldn't let me look at his core. Damned ingrate."

The other two members of the triad shared a glance.

"I'm not too surprised by that," Corun said slowly.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Granin huffed.

"Well. You haven't exactly endeared yourself to him. You have to admit, your demeanour is less than friendly at the best of times, and towards Anthony you've been particularly cold."

Torrina nodded in agreement, which soured Granin's mood.

"I haven't been *that* bad," he protested. Then he reflected. "Have I?" he wondered, sounding far less convinced than a moment ago.

The two younger shapers shared another look with seemed to confirm the mounting suspicion that he'd treated the newest member of the Cult's menagerie worse than he should have.

"Look, I did manage to talk to him a fair bit. He was cagey, and there was a lot he didn't want to share, but we managed to find a few things that he can work on before this circus gets started. We three know that he's got a lot more going on under the hood than people expect. He's going to shock some of these morons, I have no doubt about that."

Corun smiled and nodded. This was what he wanted to hear!

"Do you think he's got a chance of winning this thing? That's his only way of getting out alive, right?"

The still expression that came over his leader's face didn't inspire a lot of confidence in him.

"Granin?" He asked.

"I'm not sure he's going to have what it takes to go all the way," he said reluctantly. "I know there's a few projects that the Cult has squirreled away for a long time. If they've been brought here and dragged into this mess then it would be hard to see the ant making it through alive."

"Let's hope he doesn't get put against such a monster in the first round then." Torrina observed quietly.

The three of them fell into a grim silence as they each contemplated the fate of their charge in the upcoming battles. All around them the Shapers of the cult engaged in polite small talk, animated discussion and quiet strategizing about their own prospects in the tournament. Observations, tips and pointers were exchanged as the Gulgari mages tried to predict the outcomes of theoretical matchups and considered the finer points of monster archetypes. The atrium was the perfect space for this kind of thing. A wide chamber with soft and comfortable furniture for reclining in, sconces and columns around which small groups would naturally form. Anytime the Shapers would hold some form of gathering it would inevitably be in a space such as this. Granin hated them, much as he hated all of the formal settings he was forced to endure. He would rather be in the field. Out there he was able to make his own decisions and didn't have to put up with other's idiocy.

A short time later there came a single, loud chime that resounded through the space with unnatural clarity, cutting through all conversation and silencing any words yet to escape from lips. The note hung in the air pure and clean as the chatter ceased as if cut by a knife and all in attendance turned toward the centre of the space where the leading triad had assembled to address the gathering.



## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 470: Opening Night**

Somewhat cynically, Granin noted that it was Biritite Cryslas, the fresh faced youngster who stepped forward to address the gathered Shapers. Presenting the face of change, the new way, as full of promise and youthful vigour. An innocent face atop the monster beneath. Granin couldn't help but curse in his mind. Stuck here in the outpost he didn't have any opportunity to contact his own allies in the cult. The broader picture hovered beyond his grasp. It was possible that the insane bloodsport that was about to take place here was being replicated across cult strongholds all over the Gulgari empire. How many promising monsters, reared with care over years, the culmination of all the research and effort of their forebears would be destroyed in the pursuit of this short sightedness?

"Welcome all. It's wonderful to see so many members of the Cult of the Worm able to meet in such open congress. This is certainly the first time I've been able to witness such a gathering, but I'm certain there will be many more in the near future."

Warm applause greeted these words as Cryslas managed to look both abashed and pleased at the approbation of her fellows. Behind her, the two older members of her triad looked on with approval.

"As happy as I am, as we all are, to witness the strides the Cult of the Worm has taken over the last decade, we must be sure that we don't rest on our laurels. The leadership has determined that a sense of urgency must infuse our work going forward. Our purpose has remained the same over the duration of our existence. To reach that end we have accumulated knowledge, experience and resources through rigorous experimentation and practical application of our craft.

"But now comes the time when we must put these things to use. The pressure is building upon us and we need to apply that pressure to our charges. In the heat of the crucible we hope to create a perfect being. Perfect as Yarrum is perfect. A monster of indomitable strength, unyielding will and inevitable victory. It is our hope, that through the coming contest the final ancient will be born."

More applause, rapturous this time. Many voices called out to Yarrum, called on him to watch over their efforts as they struggled to fulfil his command and break the chains of this world. Amidst it all, Granin and his fellow triad members were a point of stillness amidst the activity. They showed no joy or acclaim, or indeed, any response at all. Ever watchful, Irette Plamine, first in the leading triad in the outpost, took notice of this lack of enthusiasm but quickly dismissed it. The ant would be crushed underfoot soon enough, there was no need to be concerned with Lazus and his ilk.

Cryslas raised one hand and quiet gradually descended on the gathering.

"Each triad here represents one monster in the coming trial, one hope of the cult. I urge that each and every one of you give your all to ensure that your charge puts forward all of their strength. Only through your combined efforts will we be able to crown the most deserving candidate. We have gathered together worthy specimens from cult strongholds across a five hundred kilometre stretch of the empire. An effort that has proven once again the growing might and influence of our cause. Each of these specimens represent the hope and distilled wisdom of our elders and I for one can't wait to see which will be the most worthy!"

Shouts and cheers rose from the gathered shapers as they called out the names of their own charges, each wanting to demonstrate their conviction that it would be their own monster who would reign supreme. Granin had doubts. If his hunch was correct, the leading triad already had a favourite picked out, the contest was an excuse to feed as much experience and biomass to their chosen monster as possible.

"The pairings for the first round have been drawn. To ensure objectivity, my triad and I have randomised the process to the best of our ability. If you have any concerns with the draw, please don't hesitate to speak with Oridene Gravus."

The old Gulgari glared hard at the surrounding shapers as if daring them to bring a complaint before him. Granin doubted anyone would take them up on the offer. Not delaying any longer, Cryslas turned and summoned a block of stone from the floor using earth magic. With another wave, letters began to appear on the stone, revealing the pairings for all to see.

There was immediately jostling for position as the eager shapers pushed past each other to get a better glimpse, as if that they could seize some sort of advantage by finding the name of their opponent a few seconds ahead of the enemy. Although Corun bounced on his heels a bit, their triad waited patiently for the frenzy to die down before they began to push their way forward.

When he finally reached the stone Granin ran his eyes over it dispassionately until he found the name he was looking for. Seeing the opponent, his eyes flickered, then he turned back to his two allies.

"Let's go. We've got work to do."

The two of them nodded and as a unit they walked away from the excited murmurings of the gathering behind them.

They had to trade a few favours to get the information they wanted, but in the end it was easier than Granin had thought it would be. If there was one thing that Shapers were eager to blabber about it was powerful monsters.

"What do you think, boss?" Corun asked, concern written all over his face.

In contrast, Torrina looked much more composed. Granin eyed her appreciatively. It seemed as if she had already reached the same conclusions that he had, but with access to less information. She really was a hidden gem. He'd lucked out when the other triads had refused to take her. She was the most promising young Gulgari he'd seen for a long time.

"They've mucked up," Granin stated confidently. "They wanted to crush Anthony early and use him as food for one of their pet favourites. I expected as much from the beginning. Heartless cretins. Despite the fact he's a reincarnator, they just don't believe that the ant archetype has any hope of becoming individually strong."

He couldn't help but shrug a little sheepishly.

"I have to say, I agreed with them until very recently. Common wisdom in the Cult has dismissed ants as a dead end without promise."

"I think we know that's not true anymore," Torrina stated.

"Don't get ahead of yourselves," Granin warned, "our current charge is far stronger than I would have expected an ant to get, but he's far from achieving the sort of level he needs. We just got lucky in the first round."

Corun was still confused.

"I don't get it, it'd be nice if someone clued me in."

Granin slapped him on the back.

"In their hubris, they've played straight into our greatest strength, putting the heaviest, slowest beast they have up against the ant. All power, no brain." He huffed with displeasure. "No elegance at all."

"Isn't that a bad thing? Big and strong? It sounds like Anthony is going to get crushed like a .... Bug?"

"Not to worry. I think we'll get to see some interesting faces tomorrow." Granin chuckled evilly. "I can hardly wait."