

## Chrysalis 481

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### Chapter 481: In the red corner

I don't have that much time to recover before Granin returns to my cell. I suppose I should count myself lucky that he didn't walk in whilst I was mutating, that would have been embarrassing. I'm tempted to ask him about it actually, something I really should have asked the Sophos when I had the chance. My pets don't seem to have any issues when they mutate, and my siblings in the colony don't seem to either. Is this something that only reincarnated Earthlings suffer from? Next time I speak to Jim and Sarah I should ask. I'd rather not ask Granin and have him make fun of me or something.

When he arrives, I can tell something isn't right. His craggy face is even more miserable than usual and he wastes no time in climbing down to meet me.

[Hey Granin, you look like you were carved out of granite. Something go wrong?]

[You're not funny.]

[You have no sense of humour, how would you know?]

Granin sighs and throws himself down onto the only suitable chair in my cell. His stone body thuds down with significant weight and he raises a hand scrape across his brow. This doesn't look good.

[That bad?] I ask, feeling trepidatious.

[It's not great,] he admits, [They're still looking to set you up with unfavourable matchups. After stuffing up the first round, it appears they've become determined to correct the mistake.]

[What have we got? Some brutal physical specimen? Ready to crush me beneath its iron heels?]

[Worse. This time they've gone after your strength. They tried dumb force last time, this round they've gone with a highly intelligent magic using monster. Difference being that its raw stats and Skills are far above yours. You'll have no magical advantage in this one, in fact, you'll be at a massive deficit.]

That doesn't sound good. I've invested a lot in my magic. If this monster is a tier higher than me and even more invested in it, then that's going to neutralise my greatest strength. Does this mean that I need to rely on my physical ability to carry me through? I may have to.

[The other thing I need to tell you is that your opponent is a demon.]

...

[Like... from hell? What does that mean? Pitchforks? Will I get *pronged*?]

Demons? What the heck does he mean by demons?! Have they opened the gate on mars and sprung forth beasts from the very depths of the infernal plane just to roast an ant?! What am I supposed to do?! Where's DOOM guy?!

[No. What's hell? And pitchforks? Aren't those for farmers? Shut up for a minute. Demons are what we call the monsters native to the Third Strata. It's a place of nightmares, ash and fire, in that order. The creatures there attack the mental and emotional weakness that all mortals possess to try and

demoralise us and make us weak. They are powerful, tricky and have a distinct strata advantage over you.]

I'm not sure I've heard him use that terminology before.

[What do you mean by that?]

[You know how the Shadow monsters, like that pet you don't remember, are made of shadow flesh? Since it's a substance that requires more dense mana to create, the monsters of the first strata don't have access to such a thing when they're made. In our trade we would consider shadow monsters to have a strata advantage over monsters of the first layer, they have access to body parts and materials that are ... better.]

[So the same thing goes for the demons of the Third Strata, right? They've got stuff that requires an even higher mana density to spawn. Stuff that I can't even see in the menu?]

A nod.

[Right,] Granin says heavily. [It's going to be hard to overcome the gap. I firmly believe that you have a shot, but I'm not going to say it'll be easy. We only have a few hours before the fight starts. We need to do all the work we can on your magical defences between now and then. If we can squeeze out even one Skill level up, it'll be worth it.]

For the next few hours Granin continuously shaped mana in the air whilst I tear it apart using external mana manipulation. Desperate to make gains I use all of my brains for the task, reaching out and taking hold of the mana outside my body before trying to unravel it. It's gruelling work, but we're successful in gaining another level before my 'escorts' come to take me out to the next match.

My ant heart begins to pound in my chest as I take the now familiar march down the long tunnel, around the bends and past those many other locked cells that house my competition. It doesn't take long to reach the gate before the combat area, the three shapers behind me watching my every move. With a slow rattle the gate opens and I force myself to walk through into the relatively open air and wide space on the other side. Interesting, it appears as if they've repaired all the damage to the outer wall between the rounds. The work was way too complete to have been done by hand. Earth magic? Stone magic? Combination of the two? Some of the obstructions have also made a return, rocky obtrusions that burst upward from the sandy floor. I can see the Shapers watching from the viewing stands, their mutterings barely audible at this range.

Perhaps most importantly I can see my adversary, already present at the other side of the area.

My first thought is that it's a bat. Two leathery wings extend from its body and flap lazily to keep it mid-air. My second thought is that it's small. Really small. The body of the thing is probably only as large as a watermelon, the two wings stretching out to either side of it. My third thought is: 'that is a freaky looking eyeball.'

The 'body' of the creature appears to be little more than a giant, swollen eyeball, rimmed in dark red flesh that is absurdly bright. The flesh doesn't really capture my attention though, since the eye itself is far more striking. It's luridly, sickeningly, mind-bendingly *green*. To complete the picture, the last thing

that comes to my attention are the two thin, dangling arms that drop down from just beneath where the wings connect to the ... body/eye.

All of my senses tune to their fullest. I'm tense, I'm ready. Even so I almost miss the thread of mind mana that slithers toward me from the monster opposite. I don't even have time to take it apart before it connects and I brace myself for an onslaught. Instead, I hear a low, sibilant voice echo in my mind.

*[I see you.]*

Well ... yeah? When I reply, I can't help but lower my voice and mentally 'whisper' back.

*[Of course you can. You're basically just an eyeball with wings.]*

*[I see your family. I see your siblings. The warmth. The support. I see how nice it issssss.]*

I'm just confused at this point.

*[Yes. It's nice. How do you see that anyway?]*

The green eye blazes brighter and the voice suddenly booms in my mind.

***[I WANT IT. I WILL TAKE IT ALL!]***

Seems stable.

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 482: Envy**

The little winged demon continues to idly flap and hovers in place as it glares at me with its maddened eye whilst I try to figure out exactly how this thing is higher evolved than me. If it poured all of its evolutionary energy into mental stats and organs that enhanced its magical ability, how the heck is able to fit all of that into such a tiny body? I know for a fact that my brains occupy more space than the tiny monster occupies and it supposedly has a much bigger mind than I do! Where did all that brain matter go? Does it have access to some sort of mega compressed neurons or something? If so, it's not fair! That sounds like it would be really useful!

Besides that, I need to focus. My sub-brains have already put together the mana constructs I feel I'm going to need for this battle. Firstly, condensed ice magic construct. Since the creature is a 'demon' from the Third Strata, a place of fire and ash, it stands to reason that fire magic wouldn't be too effective, therefore it seems as if ice will be the best bet. Granin supported the decision so I can't be too far off the mark. For my secondary option, I've actually gone with healing magic. If I'm going to get close to this nasty fellow and bite him to death, then I suspect that I'm going to take an absolute battering on the way in. With my newfound regenerative abilities, combined with healing mana, I'm hoping that I'll have enough staying power to absorb the punishment that's sure to come my way.

The real problem I have is that Granin wasn't able to tell me what sort of magic this little beast might be capable of. It's been trained by a triad of Shapers, just like every other monster in this place, but what they decided was the most effective use of that brainpower was I have no idea. I'm going to have to find out the hard way I suppose.

This is going to be rough.

I can't believe such a small monster is giving such an intense feeling of pressure, but even beyond what I've been told about it, the insane looking little bugger just creeps me out. The voice in my head sure isn't helping.

***[Ahhhhh. I know you now. I can see your tasssssste.]***

[You are one weird unit buddy. I think we're done here.]

Before the Shaper in charge of the fight can declare it's begun I reach out to the mind bridge connecting the two of us and flex my will, tearing it to shreds. The feeling of having the mental connection cut so suddenly is jarring but I'm certain it's significantly worse for the mini-demon. A moment of triumph before the start of the bout! Good start. Before I can even finish congratulating myself I sense another mind bridge worming its way toward me. I don't know how he does it but the spell is so hard to sense as if he were using stealth mode or something. Reaching out with my mind I seize the threads and tear it apart once more, but before I'm even done I sense another bridge coming, then another, *and another one after that!*

Holy moly!

Launching into action mode I sink my minds into meditation and put my main mind as well as my biggest sub-brain to work on tearing the spells apart before they reach me. Tense seconds pass as I focus all of my attention on cutting apart the spells that seem to fly at me without end. Every single one of them comes from a different angle, feels slightly different and moves at a different speed. It's impossible to sense any sort of rhythm or pattern and the demon is relentless. Each moment that passes brings the bridges that little bit closer to connecting and redouble my efforts. I focus so hard on the mental battle that I barely register the Shaper sweeping a hand to indicate the start of the fight.

Oh right! I need to atta -.

BOOM!

I fly back from a tremendous impact that sends me reeling, my legs scrabbling in the air as I struggle to gain my balance in the air.

THUD.

I land heavily and try to put my feet under me as fast as I can. What the hell just happened to me? Am I damaged?! What's going on?

***[I sssssee your pain. It's sssso nice!]***

When the heck?! Speaking of pain, my freakin' head hurts! Just ignore it, Anthony! You need to move!

DASH!

BOOM!

Another explosion rocks the position just behind me, once again lifting me off the ground. That first shot *hurt*. Checking my HP I can see I'm already down twenty points, a large chunk has been taken out of my carapace right between my eyes. Yeeouch! Don't want to get hit with another one of those, need to keep moving!

DASH!

I try to collect my thoughts as I move around the outside of the ring. I think this little devil battered me with mind bridges just so I'd be distracted, then bopped me right in the face with a spell the second the fight started. How dirty! This damnable demon is sneaky! I don't think I've ever faced a monster this smart. This is going to be hard.

I decide not to pull the trigger on my healing gland just yet. Internal damage isn't too bad and external damage will be healed over time, I just need to give my plating a little time. If I get hit in the same place again it might be lights out, but I need to risk it to win the biscuit. The biscuit in this instance being some delicious demon meat.

***[Give it all to me. All your thingssss are for me!]***

BOOM!

I can barely see it. The little monster hasn't moved since the fight started and his spells are as fast as lightning. It's a small red orb that zaps out from the eye in a straight line and detonates when it contacts something. I've never even heard of that kind of magic! Dammit Granin, what the hell is this?!

No point getting mad, I just need to focus and get closer enough to chomp the damn monster into shreds. For now, I'll leave the mind bridge alone, it hasn't attacked me across the bridge yet so I'll leave it alone whilst being ready to sever it at a moment's notice. Instead, I'll use the brainpower I have to get my own offence going. If the floaty eyeball wants to talk smack then I'm happy to oblige.

[I've heard eating eyes is good for the brain. We're going to find out if that's true today!]

Eat ice!

Start with the basics, I fling out a shard of ice, aiming to skewer the damned demon and pin him to the wall but before it reaches the target it dissolved to nothing in mid-air.

Dodge!

BOOM!

Another explosion sends sand and dirt flying in every direction and I scramble to keep my feet. Can't stop moving, even for a second. The nasty little creature is clearly aiming for my head, trying to score the knockout punch. As if I'd let you! More Ice!

Weaving condensed mana takes more effort and energy on my part, but it's also harder for the demon to break apart, requiring more effort on his part. Judging from his earlier performance, he can shape a heck of a lot of spells at once when he wants to if I can distract his attention even a little then that's going to help me close in.

This time two bolts of deep blue ice fly through the air like spears. They dissolve once more but I notice they get much closer to landing than the single-shot did. When the monster is distracted breaking down my magic I angle my dash to reach a little closer. I'm coming for you!

[Chrysalis](#)

**Chapter 483: The real master of magic**

The second I put a leg within twenty metres of the demon, it suddenly acts. One of its dangling arms flicked in my direction and three of the red balls flew in my direction at once!

BOOM!

Arrrgh! Pain blossoms along the side of my abdomen as I manage to turn my body at the last moment, protecting my head. The unfortunate result is that my legs are exposed and as the three balls detonate alongside me they are immediately ravaged with pain. That little beast has been acting weak this whole time! I should have known that throwing one spell at a time was way too easy. I've fallen for his trap again. His stupid spells are so fast that I barely have a chance to start breaking them apart before they land. Not to mention he weaves them together with such speed that the moment I sense the mana build-up he's almost ready to shoot. This stupid little gremlin is giving me a headache!

**[You have it. I will taaaake it! Give it to meeeeeee!]**

[Get bent!]

I've no choice but to trigger the regeneration gland. Two legs on my left side are heavily crippled and are impeding my mobility. If I leave it like this I'm only going to be food for more of those ridiculous explosion balls. Just what sort of magic is that anyway?! Once again put on the defensive I focus on dodging and moving in unpredictable patterns as the healing fluid rockets through my system, creating new tissues and connecting them at an absurd pace. To speed the process I fire off my latest Ice Spears and then begin to weave a healing spell to lay onto myself.

Of course, the little demon doesn't want to make life easy for me. Now that the jig is up, he's more than willing to toss multiple spells at the same time but with greater distance between us, I've got much more time to dodge. I watch the demon carefully each moment and I can see he's enjoying this. The sadistic little imp. Even now I can't be sure that he's not toying with me. Regardless, I've managed to survive long enough to get the healing spell off and combined with the effect of my healing gland, my body is knitting itself together at a stupidly fast pace. Watching my HP climb so fast is certainly a good feeling. Granin was right. Stacking effects on top of each other is the way to produce a better effect!

With my legs back under me, I take my distance from the beast to prepare my next offensive. Sensing my defensive posture the monster takes the pressure off and starts talking some smack.

**[Come back to meeee. Is it better where you are? I want iiiit!]**

[Oh, don't worry eyeball, I'm commin' back over there. Don't worry about it.]

The creature's wings do a little wriggle of glee as I talk back to it and the eye widens even further if that's at all possible. I swear that eye is starting to become darker and it looks a little .. Broken. As if it were a window that was starting to crack. No matter. If it means something, I don't know what and there's little point guessing. I just need to focus on my next offensive.

Keeping an eye on my opponent and making sure that I never stop moving, I focus my main mind and strongest sub mind on shaping my next offensive ice spell. Handling the condensed ice mana is difficult and it takes quite a bit of work to put this spell together. Hopefully, it's strong enough to make it difficult for the mini-demon to break it apart.

Once I have the spell ready, I don't fire it immediately. It takes about ten seconds to ready that magic, enough time for my enemy to weave any number of hideous constructs to inflict on me. I've no doubt that he can sense the magic I've built up and he must be ready to retaliate the second I unleash it, so instead, I hold onto it and begin to close the distance between us bit by bit.

Dashing head-on is just asking to get a death ball to the noggin, so instead I angle my dashes to bring me a little closer after each one as the monster and I engage in a little game of chicken. If I can bait out his counterspells whilst still being at a reasonable range then the chances of a successful dodge are much greater, the closer I get the less time he'll have to break my spell apart. My heart is right in my mandibles as the gap between us continues to shrink. The sand flies out from beneath me and out behind me as my legs kick up a trail as I run, getting closer every time I move.

The monster finally decides to act and flicks its hand out once more as I close within thirty metres. The second it does I kick my legs hard and rise into the air, the moment I do so I unleash the spell I've held onto. The spell drops down into the ground in the form of a bright ice blue light that starts to race through the sand toward the monster as I raise my legs high to keep them from the inevitable explosion. The monster unleashed four of the deadly balls of death this time and threw them out in an arc that would have surely caught me had I continued to run forward, instead they detonate beneath me, throwing me further into the air.

The concussive force is absorbed by my carapace plating but even so, I take some internal damage from the blast. Those spells pack a punch! Still, my spell should distract the monster long enough for me to get back onto my feet and close in for a juicy chomp!

I reorient my body and catch sight of my opponent and my spell racing through the ground toward him. To my surprise, the imp doesn't seem too concerned with the ice magic making its way to the sand beneath it, instead, its eye glares at me even harder. At this range I can see that the eye isn't broken but filled with thick, pulsing capillaries that appear like cracks in a mirror, threading their way through the iris. Just as I make this disgusting discovery, something else happens.

The air beneath the flapping eyeball ripples before it seems to unfold, revealing a huge grinning mouth suspended in mid-air, full of gnashing teeth. Just before my spell erupts the mouth opens wide to reveal a bright green, fleshy tongue that unfolds to taste the air as the eye flashes dangerously.

Not good!

POW! POW! POW! POW! POW!

Angling my body I unload a barrage of acid toward the monster as the eye flares dazzlingly bright. The ice magic flares in the ground and a sharp pillar of ice spears out of the ground to thrust toward the flying monster just as a searing beam of bright green light lances out from that eye and pierces my body. The ice pillar stabs home and scrapes the side of the monster, unleashing a spray of sizzling black blood into the air. The shock of the strike throws the monster off balance and the beam sears through my body, cutting a deep gash in me before glancing off into the stands.

OUCH! That stings!

OOMPH!

Hitting the ground stings even worse! Desperation explodes in my mind as I take stock. I'm hurt, I'm hurt real bad. It's only been a minute since I last used my healing gland and there's precious little juice recharged back in there but I fire it off anyway. Every little bit helps! My legs feel weak as I push them beneath myself and start to haul my body behind a rock. Healing mana, do your thing!

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 484: The secret technique of my elders**

Sunk deep into meditation, my mind is cool and composed, the pain ringing on the outside of my awareness. I can take this, I can handle it. Get that healing spell going ASAP and worry about everything else later. I push my legs to drag my damaged body to some sort of cover as my two most powerful minds cooperate to throw together some healing magic. It only takes a few seconds but it feels like an eternity before the spell is complete and my flesh begins to knit back together. It isn't enough though, the damage this time is severe. Whatever that damn eyebeam was, it was strong enough to cut through my carapace like it was paper. I think a piece of stomach is hanging outside of my body. Yuck. I can only hope that the demon was hurt bad enough to keep it from coming over here and finishing me off. I know that my spell managed to slice it, hopefully my acid will help cause a distraction as well.

I hunker down for a few tense moments as I spin together another healing spell to lay onto myself. The second it starts ticking I flex my legs and dash out from behind the rock I'd used for shelter.

BOOM!

Just before the thing explodes. Nice timing, Anthony! Shards of stone clatter off my carapace and fall like rain across the whole combat area in the wake of that explosion. The sand kicks up into a wave of precious vision blocking dust that allows me to jink once more as I reach out with my mana sense to grasp the location of the creature.

Every second brings me closer to full health! Hold on, ant! You can do it! Even as my health increases, there's another problem that is becoming more and more urgent. My stamina is falling. I've been dashing about like a mad thing ever since this fight started and I'm getting pretty darn tired! Although I can keep healing myself and drag the fight out, I'm pitting my own physical stamina against the little demon's mental stamina, and I'm not confident that's a battle I can win.

Before my situation becomes too desperate and I can no longer run, I need to heal up and then bet everything on the next strike! Luckily that last exchange gave me a hint! This is going to get crazy.

I keep dodging about to buy more time as the dust clears and I get a clear view of my opponent once more. The acid does appear to have done some work along with my ice pillar. Dark blood is dripping down the monster's arm and one of its leathery bat wings has a gaping hole. Oddly enough the hole doesn't seem to have any effect on the creature's ability to stay airborne. There must be some sort of trickery there. It still isn't nimbly flying about however, rather just hovering in one place. There must be a reason for that. At least, I hope to heck there's a reason for that.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Seemingly enraged, the creature throws out blast after blast, forcing me to dodge and dash with all of my strength as my healing spells stitch me back together. That eerie mouth that appears to be



suspended in mid-air, attached to nothing, keeps grinning at me, as if it were the Cheshire cat but the mouth was large enough to swallow a sheep whole.

It's creepy!

Still, I think I'm just about as ready as I'm going to get. Dragging this out is only going to make things more disadvantageous to me. The eye appears to be drained of energy, the green no longer as bright and glaring as it was before, but over time it's been recovering. This could mean that the eye can't use its mega-beam laser continuously, having to wait for a recharge. Or it could be a trick. Either way I still have to go for it. Reluctantly, I let go of both the mana constructs I've held onto so far. For the plan I have in mind, I'm not going to need them and if it doesn't work out, I'm still not going to need them!

With all four of my brains free and focused and I hone my senses in on the floating beast with razor sharpness. I can see it all. The heat, the movement, the mana, even that little whisper of the future. I'm going to need all of it for this. If things go well, this scene is going to detonate under the watching shapers like a quake.

Breathe, Anthony. Just breathe. Focus and bring it home.

FOR THE COLONY!

***[I WANT YOUR PAAAAIN. I WANT YOUR FLESSSSH! I WANT YOUR SOUUULLL! GIVE THEM TO MEEE!]***

[I hope you taste nearly as good as you fight!]

Once again the high speed dance begins as I try to close in on the monster, dashing and dodging ever closer as he fires exploding missiles of death my way. With all of my brains on deck, the three sub-brains cooperating with the aid of the coordination cortex, I can follow the flow of the fight much better than before. I sense the spells faster, my body reacts quicker and those echoes of the future are more helpful when I have the available brain power to take them in.

POW! POW! POW!

I weave in acid blasts to keep the monster distracted as I move, trying to throw the monster off its game. Every little bit of attention I can distract from myself will help in the long run! My enhanced reactions are firing on all cylinders and even the eyeball seems to be getting frustrated as his eye glows brighter and brighter and his little gestures get angrier every time he waves his hand. Feeling pressure yet, little demon? I'm coming for you!

CLACK!

I snap my mandibles hard and the sound echoes around the combat area.

CLACK! CLACK! CLACK!

As I race from place to place, narrowly dodging and skirting around the explosions I continue to clack my mandibles to taunt the demon. The eye bulges with rage, the worm-like capillaries swell with fluid as the once smiling mouth now snarls.

GWEHEHEHEH! Yesssss. Get mad, get distracted. I'm coming for you!

As I close to within thirty metres I can sense the time is coming and my mind sharpens to a point like a razor. It's coming, any second now! I'm dashing across the creature, moving from the creature's left to its right at high speed. This manoeuvre is going to be tough as heck. Elders of the past, give me your strength!

The eye starts to flare bright once more as the creature raises its hand. I'm so focused that the limb almost appears to move in slow motion. It raises up and with a flick of that little bony wrist I feel six flares of mana from the monster. Six huh? You were still holding back on me! No matter, I have you now!

Before the small spheres of destruction appear, I can already see them. Little echoes of the future, almost transparent, fly outward in a broad arc, trying to entrap me in a wall of explosions. Every nerve in my body fires at once as I leap into action. My legs kick and dig at the dirt as I try to arrest my momentum and change direction. My body turns to face the monster as I slide. Those ghostly future images of the deadly spells are quickly followed by the real thing as the six spheres materialise and blast outward. My minds are wound so tight I can feel them screaming in pain. I can't breathe, I can't think. All of my focus is on those spells and the feel of my body.

The time is coming! Don't miss it. Miss and I'm dead. Don't die. Don't die! DON'T DIE!

JUMP!

The moment I stop sliding through the sand and feel my claws dig into the ground, I calculate the angle and jump. The future echo of the spells is already right in front of my face, the real thing only a heartbeat behind. As I leap, my legs spread wide to allow one of the spells to pass through them before it impacts the ground beneath me.

The detonation sears the underside of my body and pain sears my minds, but more important than that, the force of the explosion combined with the lift from my own jump propels me straight toward the monster with impossible speed.

[IT'S A ROCKET JUMP FOOL! DOOM GUY LIVES IN MEEEEEEEEEE!]

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 485: Demonically delicious**

My massive ant body hurtles through the air as if I've been fired out of a cannon with my mandibles open wide. The air whistles past, pushing my antennae back against my head with the force. I'm seriously moving now, I can almost taste that demon now! Even as I prepare for the chomp, the monster doesn't appear to have given up. Resentment and anger are accumulated in that eye and it flashes blindingly green once more!

I knew it would come down to this! I've no way to dodge and no way out. Flying head on, if that laser hits me it'll drill straight through my head and roast my brain, I can't allow it to happen!

All four of my brains reach out toward the demon and grasp hold of the immense mana flooding into that eye. Being so close to it, I can feel the weave of mana being concentrated in that eye and even in this situation I can appreciate the sheer skill on display. The dense threads of mana are weaved with such speed and precision it shocks me. The little demon is painting a four dimensional masterpiece with

thousands of individual brushstrokes in a matter of seconds. The mastery such a feat requires is astounding! Not that I can allow it to happen...

Desperate to prevent the spell from firing I use every bit of my Will to take hold of the mana and rip it apart. As I fly through the air, my jaws prepared to crunch, a contest of minds takes place and I'm severely outmatched. As I try to seize the mana taking shape within the eye and break it, destroying the fragile work the demon has created, it tries to lock the mana in place, holding it firm and denying my attempts even as it races to finish the spell before I can bite it.

Once again I'm left in awe at the sheer mental power of the creature. So *this* is what a true master of magic looks like! Even though it has evolved one more time than I have, I really didn't expect the difference to be this severe. How the hell does it pack so much raw *brain* into that tiny body?! It's insane!

It might be an unfair arm wrestle, but it's one that I have no choice but to win! Victory or defeat is measured in a matter of milliseconds. In this strange slow motion world that we occupy I can already see the dark energy that manifests my omen chomp taking shape at the edges of my mandibles. In less than a second they'll expand outward and close on the soft, squishy body of this demon, ending it. I just have to delay the laser beam until then!

Frantic, I redouble my efforts! If you can build, then I'll destroy! RIP! RIP! RIP! RIP! RIP! RIP! RIP! Every mind I possess is working at its maximum capacity, my entire body is screaming in pain. We have to get there in time!

To my horror, my antennae begin to tingle and something I really don't want to see begins to take shape in front of my eyes. From the centre of that bulging eyeball a phantom laser blasts outwards, lancing toward my head, directly between my eyes.

NONONOONONONONONONNONONOONONONONONONONONO!

I'm so damn *close*!

Tear! Destory! Demolish! *Anything!* Like an insane child going to town on a pinata I cannot be stopped, recklessly trying to destroy every piece of mana I can get my mental hands on.

But it's not enough! The Will of the demon is as solid as Iron and the real laser blasts out from the eye, spearing down the trail left behind by its future echo. AHHHHHHH NOOOOO!

MOTHER!

**CHOMP!**

Silence reigns over the combat area as the dust settles. For a brief, paralysing moment I'm not even sure if I'm alive or dead. My body feels dead. Am I dead? Is Gandalf going to speak to me again or will my soul just dissipate into nothing? Geez, my head hurts. The worst part of four brains means four simultaneous headaches is a real thing I have to deal with. It sucks.

If my head hurts... then I must be alive. Surely you don't get afterlife headaches?! I attempt to wiggle my antennae and to my joy I find I can still move them! Aha! I live! I'M ALIVE! Almost unable to believe it, I

start tapping my head all over with my antennae, just trying to confirm that my head still exists. I *swear* I saw that laser zap straight into my head...

Creepily, I find that it actually did. Right between my eye orbs a significant hole has been drilled directly into my carapace. In a thousandth of a second it probably would have tunnelled all the way through and into my brain. My body goes completely weak with relief. That was way too close. Holy moly, I can't take many more of these!

At the same time I can feel a giddy excitement welling up inside me, making me shake with silent ant-laughter.

I live! Against all the odds, I still live! Screw you Dungeon! Get stuffed Shapers! I roll with all the punches and I'm still kicking! This insect is here to stay! BWAHAHAHAHA!

Wait a second... I haven't received the Dungeon notifications!

I roll to my feet and scabble to turn around. Where the heck is the demon?! Heart in my mouth, I rush to where I'd collided with it and breathe a sigh of relief. It might not be dead, but it's not looking so hot. The eye has been crushed and its body is a wreck. It's a minor miracle that it's still alive. The tenuous connection between us still exists and I feel a voice whisper in my mind.

*[I wanted ... your everthinggg.]*

I look down on the now pitifully broken body of the demon.

[You... are freakin' weird man. I can't lie.]

CHOMP!

[You have slain level 57 Luminare Daemon Invidia (VI)]

[You have gained experience!]

[You have reached level 24.]

[You have reached level 25.]

[You have reached level 26.]

[You have reached level 27.]

[You have reached level 28.]

The moment the demon is confirmed dead, something bizarre happens. As if a hole connected to a world of grossness opened, a flood of brain matter and bits explode out the back of the demon's head. The creepy mouth also materialises a connection to the main body and launching out from behind comes a gigantic, distended stomach. In a matter of seconds a huge pile of offal has appeared, steaming in the dim light of the combat area.

Uh ... delicious?

[Chrysalis](#)

**Chapter 486: The shock of it all**

Up in the stands Granin can't help but chuckle in relief as he watched Anthony gingerly approach the disgusting pile of Biomass that had seemingly been vomited from thin air. Perhaps at some point he could have told his charge that demons stored body parts in self-contained micro-dimensions, allowing large and powerful monsters to appear small and harmless, the bulk of their body mass shunted off into a pocket space. The Shapers would dearly love to be able to control such a piece of magic but it had eluded them for eons. The demons seemed to have access to it as a matter of course, simply for being born demons, as if it were a natural part of their biology. Whatever the case, it certainly made them creepy and deceptive enemies to fight against.

That had been close. Far too close. Going into the fight he'd given Anthony a ten percent chance of coming out on top, but even he'd been shocked by the amount of power that'd been packed into that little demon. A monster fully specialised in physical stats with great speed and power would have been much better off than the ant. Not only were his stats lacking, his Skills were also weak when compared to a more specialised monster since he'd spent so much time grinding his magic and mental abilities. This tournament was almost fiendishly set up to target his weakness as a generalised creature. But still, he'd been able to win.

That final manoeuvre had been dreamed up on the border between genius and insanity, Granin was sure of it. Who would think of using the blast from an explosion to propel themselves *toward* their enemy head first? It was insane, tremendously difficult to pull off and almost certainly suicide. And yet Granin was now looking down at a monster cheerfully chowing down on its defeated foe having utilised just such a move.

As the tension slowly drained out of Granin he couldn't help but become increasingly aware of the shock and disappointment radiating from the Shapers around him, particularly from the figure on his left.

"Incredible. A truly brilliant tactical decision." He mused out loud, seemingly to himself.

Gravus immediately blew up.

"Tactical decision?! It was a FLUKE! Pure luck! I've never seen such a disgusting display! That *inferior* creature had been outclassed the entire bout until that - that - *idiotic* display!"

The vehemence at which Gravus spat his vitriol shocked even Granin and he couldn't help but turn to look at the elderly Shaper directly. The old man was visibly livid, chest heaving and eyes ablaze, his hands were gripped in fists so tight his true skin was starting to crack. A sensible and sane Shaper would clearly not poke the tiger and tastefully retreat in this situation. What profit could be had out of provoking a viper like Gravus? Sadly, Granin had never considered himself particularly sensible.

"An idiotic display? Are you daft, blind or both? That *idiotic* display secured victory from a clearly disadvantageous position. I demand you acknowledge the genius that has been displayed before you here today!"

If he was a roused tiger before, Gravus transformed into a volcano now. He turned toward Granin, face twisted with rage and arms flying wildly.

"*Demand?* DEMAND?! You don't get to demand *anything* from me Granin you half qualified excuse for a Shaper! You're just a big a piece of TRASH as that *insect* that you sponsor! You're very presence in this cult makes me *sick*."

Granin blinked slowly. The fire had begun to burn in him now, the other's words had said too much that was usually left unspoken. He took a step towards the other Shaper until they were almost bumping foreheads and his voice dropped to a menacing whisper.

"And why might that be, Gravus? Is it because we get things *done*? Is it because we actually *achieve* something, instead of sitting on our ossified asses in a tower, cowering like a little grub? Why don't you say it? Why don't you tell me *exactly* why you don't want me and my charge here in this cult? Hmm?"

Gravus was too lost in his rage to notice the dangerous glint in the other's eye. Puffed up on indignation and anger he blustered forward, unafraid.

"You know exactly why you're unworthy, Granin! Your family is a TRASH offshoot of a TRASH clan! And you, you are the perfect descendant of that line. The ultimate trash! Don't pretend you don't know it!" He sneered. "Your true skin announces your status for all the world to see! Filthy base stone for a filthy base Shaper! I'm still shocked you weren't abandoned by your family in disgrace but it goes to show how little morals they have!"

Hold onto it Granin. Hold it in. You can't be the first to swing. He took in a slow breath before he returned fire.

"Yet my achievements in the cult are piled high whilst you have done *nothing* to earn your exalted position. I bet it burns you deep inside, knowing just how much a *fraud* you are. What do you know? *Nothing*. What have you done? *Nothing*. You aren't wrong. That insect down there and I are very alike. We keep getting things done *despite* you. Just how powerless are you Gravus? It kills you, but you know it's true. At the end of the day, it's going to be that ant and I standing at the top whilst you and your vaunted clan clap from the sidelines."

"OVER MY DEAD BODY!"

He'd achieved his goal, the old man had completely snapped. With that final roar, Gravus threw aside his dignity, drew back his fist incited the first brawl to have ever occurred in the viewing area of the combat arena. The onlookers, stunned by the vicious display of words between their two colleagues who had been preparing to retire from the arena to spread this delicious gossip, but soon found themselves gobsmacked as they witnessed a full on fist fight. Even more than this, the words spoken on both sides had ignited the passions of more than a few in the stands, and as the fists flew more than a few arguments began which quickly descended into an all-out battle that drew in everyone in attendance.

Down in the pit, the ant couldn't help but pause its meal for a brief moment as it watched the developing spectacle before dismissing them all with a flick of its antennae and returning to its meal.

An hour later Granin was grinning broadly as Anthony finished his meal. Torrina Laksham alternated between looking at the giant ant with an approving gaze and glaring at her triad leader with smouldering anger.

"You *punched* Oridene Gravus. *The* Oridene Gravus?" Corun asked, bewildered.

"I did more than that!" Granin boasted. "I *thrashed* him!"

He chortled delightedly at the memory. Gravus had never worked much in the field, he was a classic scholar, as physically weak as a Golgari could get. Combined with his advanced age, it had never been close to a fair fight. Granin had beaten down on the loathsome spectre until his *low class* granite fists had started to powder.

"And what are your heroics going to do for Anthony's chances in this tournament?" Torrina asked sharply. "Gravus will stop at nothing to humiliate you now!"

Granin harrumphed.

"He was already doing everything he could to make things hard for Anthony. Nothing is going to change except that now everyone knows what's going on since he admitted it openly. If anything, it'll be better now!"

Corun looked at him, wide eyed.

"Do you really think so?"

"Of course it won't!" Torrina snapped at them. "The bias is open knowledge now and so is the grudge. Gravus will pull the whole weight of his triad behind him to settle this now! We're going to get squeezed for every resource between now and the next fight and you better believe they'll be pulling out all the stops to put the hardest matchup they can find in front of us!"

As if her words had punctured him, Granin slumped forward.

"You're right." He sighed. "I know you're right."

He looked up at his two triad members and his charge.

"I'm sorry. I let myself get carried away."

"Don't be sorry, be *better*. We're going to have to pull in every favour and get as many eyes on our candidate as possible if we want to pull through. We need to ensure Anthony gets the best of everything from now on. We need Biomass, training, cores and we need it yesterday!"

Granin wearily pulled himself to his feet.

"Come on Corun. You and I need to hit up the quartermaster before Gravus can wake up."

"YOU KNOCKED HIM OUT?!" Corun shrieked.

"What does it matter now? Let's go. Torrina, you talk to Anthony and work on a plan for training."

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 487: I feel potential here**

The Biomass left behind by the demon was even less appetising in appearance than my usual fare, but that doesn't mean I'm going to leave a juicy pile of Biomass on the floor. I need 'dem points! So I stuff my +25 stomach until the only remnant of that hideous demon is the rather large glowing core on the floor.

After my last match and I obtained the core of the Rhino I did what I usually do with such a core. I pushed my core surgery skill to the limit making edits that I felt made sense until it felt like making further changes was like shifting a brick wall with my eyeballs, then I absorbed it. Surprisingly enough, the monster had contained a rare core, pushing my MP higher by a good chunk. I still haven't maxed out my core for this evolution, so I've been spared the pain and discomfort of pushing my core beyond its limit so far.

But this core. This just might be what I'm looking for. The core is also rare, not surprising considering the sheer power of the monster. I could muck about with the core and then absorb it, but I feel that might be a waste of this opportunity! This monster is exactly what I want! Even the profile seems to suggest that this creature would be ideal for the pet I've been needing to fill!

[Luminare Daemon Invidia: Lesser Envy Demon, This Lesser Demon has shed it's base demonic shell and taken on the aspect of Envy. All Envy demons are supremely jealous and covet what they perceive others to have. To that end they are intensely insightful, able to see that which others would rather keep hidden, and use powerful mental abilities to dominate their opponents through magical combat.]

Even the brutally dominant magic user that I encountered was just the lesser variant?! And what does it mean by 'shed its base demonic shell'. It seems to suggest that a demon doesn't even count as a proper demon until they reach tier six?! My own colony members are considered fully fledged members when they reach tier three! And it's not like it's twice as tough to reach tier six as it is tier three, it's forty levels to get to tier three including core formation. It's *three hundred and twenty* to get to tier six! Monstrous!

Putting aside what life may be like in the Third Strata, the weak physical skills, lack of mobility and focus on pure spellcasting make this monster feel as if it doesn't belong on its own, flying solo. As part of a group, acting as a support caster? Perfection! Eager to investigate the possibilities to their fullest I bring my antennae down to touch the core and activate the core surgery skill. My mind is immediately flooded with the densely encoded biology of the demon.

Holy moly! Granin wasn't kidding when he told me that the creatures from the lower strata get access to some sweet goodies that I'd never clapped eyes on. Dimensional pocket?! They get their own little bag of holding in which to store their own guts! That explains the gizzard explosion when I finally finished the monster off... Still, that's only the beginning.

That sheer brain power was entirely contained within the one mind. No multiple brain shenanigans for this guy. The triad that managed him probably ensured that he'd be able to make full use of the mind construct technique to leverage those raw stats. It goes without saying that the demon has far higher mental stats than I do, whilst its physical stats are fully in tank mode. Some of these organs are just crazy. Eye of Envy? Allows the demon to see *mental state and memories*? Give me a break! That's a thing?! No wonder he was talking all that crazy talk. On the other hand, he's able to look inside and see exactly what support someone would need the instant they need it whilst using his creepy ability to apply devastating targeted mental magic.

The deeper I look, the more convinced I become. This little demon will make the perfect pet to round out my little gang. Without buying more pet related Skills I won't be able to have any more pets than three, but I don't need or want more than that. I'm starting to really feel the pinch in terms of resources to provide for the pets. The sheer number of cores, amount of experience and weight of Biomass



required to keep them as strong as possible is getting hard to find. And that situation is only going to get worse. I need to make sure that I myself keep levelling and upgrading my mutations to keep pace with the threats I seem to continuously run into, which naturally takes away from what I can give my pets. Once I add this little demon to retinue, I think I'll have to stop.

[What are you doing, Anthony? Practicing your Core Surgery?] Torrina breaks into my thoughts.

[Ah. Actually no. I'm examining the core to see if the little demon will make a good pet to round out my group. I think it will fit quite nicely! I need a support type caster and this guy will fit the role admirably well when he manages to train up a few new skills.]

The Shaper stares at me for a moment before breaking out into a fit of laughter.

[What's so funny?] I ask.

[I'm just imagining the triad who raised this monster. They must have worked so hard. The painstaking effort to capture a demon and raise it all the way to tier six, training and guiding its development, only to have it lose to an ant. And then the ant takes all that hard work and turns it into a pet! I hope they never hear about it.]

[If anything, it's a compliment!] I defend myself. [They did a great job on this guy, his mutations, stats and organs work well together to create a powerful and insightful caster. He's perfect for what I have in mind.]

[You aren't wrong,] she agrees, [but have you considered that passing up on absorbing this core will mean that you'll be that little bit weaker for your next fight? Can you really afford to plan for the future right now?]

[I still think it's rubbish that I can't take pets into the fights,] I grumble, [I spent a lot of time and effort on my pets.]

[Whoever brought the most monsters would win. A competition of wealth is not in the interests of the Cult,] Torrina reminds me.

[I know,] I sigh. [Yes I know that the danger I'm in is very real, I only made it out of that last fight by the finest of margins after all. But if I throw away all of my long term goals to survive this tournament, what will I have left in the event that I *do* win? Nothing! I'll be worse off than when I started, having all of my paths to advance cut off.]

[In the end it's up to you. We're here to advise, nothing more. To be honest, I agree with what you're saying. It's one of the reasons that I agree with Granin on this tournament. Pushing monsters to fight or die forces short term thinking and corner cutting. An ancient won't be born in such conditions. The current ancients spent who knows how long growing into their strength.]

[Well said. Alright then, no point holding back, let's make this happen.]

Giving my full attention to the core, I bring my antennae forward and tap them onto the core.

[Compatible monster core detected. Would you like to reinforce your core or reconstitute a monster?]

Reconstitute!

Let the third and final pet be born!

The core immediately emits a blinding light as it melts down and takes on a new form. When the process is complete, a tiny eyeball with stunted, weakened wings slowly opens and looks up at me.

[Hey there little guy. Welcome to the team!]

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 488: Back at it**

A few hours later, Granin barges into the chamber and pushes past my ever watching triad of guards to climb down into my cell. When he reaches the bottom and sees me feeding a little mini-demon, he freezes for just a second before he bursts out laughing.

[You as well?] I complain.

[I mean - I just - ... Can you imagine their faces if they heard?]

Not this again. I'm almost starting to feel guilty.

[He's an incredible piece of work!] I point out defensively. [I didn't even need to do anything to change his core, just fiddled with his evolutions a little.]

[I know, I know.] Granin waves a hand. [I have to say I was pretty impressed they managed to raise a demon so well, it's notoriously difficult to do.]

That's intriguing. Now that I have a demon in my little group, I'm quite curious to learn more about them. The more I know about my team members, the better I'm able to support them.

[Why's that the case? Is it something to do with the basic shell mentioned in the profile?]

Granin nods.

[Demons are a bit of an oddity in the Dungeon. You can effectively think of them as being divided into two groups. The lower-tiered demons spawn as basically brainless, violent monsters who are even more bloodthirsty than your average beast. Sometimes they don't even eat what they hunt, just move onto the next battle to satisfy their bloodlust.]

[What a waste of perfectly good Biomass!]

[I know. As they evolve, they get stronger, but their basic instincts don't go away. All demons are capable magic users basically from birth, even those who focus on it and evolve down the path to becoming like our little friend here,] he gestures to the Envy demon, [get more adept with magic but are still enslaved by their instincts.]

[So they get smarter, but remain mindless killing machines?]

[Basically. They become more cunning killing machines.]

[The Third Strata sounds terrifying!]

[It is. But we aren't done yet.]

[There's more?!]

[Oh, yes. Once they reach tier six, the demons begin to take on aspects and transition to the second group. These are the upper demons. More powerful, more specialised and entirely in control of their instincts. Just as smart as the surface races, they have their own society down there and believe me when I say that it's brutal.]

[Waaaaait a second. You're telling me that when demons evolve enough, they 'graduate' into a fully formed demon society?]

This is shocking news!

[Indeed,] Granin confirms, [ruled over from far below by Arconidem the Demon Lord and author of the Red Truth. The Demon Cities are a massive threat to the civilised people of Pangera.]

[Wait, so you guys don't trade or interact with them in any way?]

[With demons? That's illegal. The penalty is death. The Abyssal Legion wages a constant war on the Demon Cities, trying to exterminate them entirely. To any delvers, the demons are a continual menace. They don't want us down there and hunt down any delvers they find like animals. Thankfully, they spend far more time fighting each other than they do us.]

[Why's that? Aren't they intelligent?]

Granin shrugs helplessly.

[They just like killing. Doesn't matter what it is. If you can't kill the demons in your own city, then the demons in the city next door are fair game. They might be able to control their urges, but that doesn't mean they don't enjoy indulging them. Be careful with your new friend there. He's not able to betray you, but you might find he gets a little erratic if you don't let him cut loose now and again.]

I look at my new pet. The mini-eyeball is quite adorable. He can't support himself on his wings just yet and has to 'walk' around on his little stick-thin arms. When I try to feed him a tiny mouth appears in thin air to start nibbling on the Biomass I offer. Obviously, I'm not feeding him the Biomass from his own former body. I don't know if that has a bad effect, but it's surely very weird.

[Enough about the demon, we need to work out what you are going to be doing between now and the next fight.]

[Keep grinding on my elemental skills? The ice magic turned out to be quite effective.]

Granin frowns, his rocky face turning stern.

[That might do for now, but I feel like we're going to need something else. You're aiming for the rank five fusion, which is unlikely to happen before the end of the tournament, so raising the elemental skills won't be a massive help.]

I hesitate.

[I have a ... uh ... special attack that I can use. If the enemy is taken by surprise, it's basically a guaranteed win. I could use it in the next round to buy some more time.]

Granin stares at me for a moment.

[Is it a Gravity spell?] He asks astutely.

[It is,] I confirm reluctantly.

I don't want to spill all of my secrets. I still don't fully trust Granin and his team. More than that, I don't trust the broader Shaper community even a little bit. Granin thinks for a moment and speaks a few words to Torrina. She nods and concentrates hard for a time before nodding back to her leader.

[Alright, they aren't listening in. I've told you already that Gravity magic is risky, but we might have to pull the trigger on it this time. Even in this short amount of time, Gravus' allies are moving on his behalf. Things are going to get rough for us and the next matchup is going to be a serious problem. If you blow up the next opponent with some powerful unknown spell, then they'll be screaming to have you taken out and interrogated.]

[So... I shouldn't use it?]

[Not necessarily. If I get to work early, we can lay the groundwork for our counter-argument. The leading triad doesn't have universal support in their suppression of you and between now and then we can stoke those attitudes and point to the numerous abuses that start popping up. With a little luck, we'll have enough sympathy on our side that when they try to seize you, we can deny them.]

[You don't sound completely sure that'll work out.]

Granin sits down heavily and sighs.

[I'm not. But our backs are getting pressed harder and harder against the wall. You've set yourself up for long term success, but these monsters have been tuned to be super-efficient at these low tiers. It's not a fair matchup to begin with and the more rounds you win, the more optimised monsters you're going to run into.]

[If I don't make use of every trick in the arsenal, it's going to be almost impossible to win.] I finish his thought.

[Right,] he agrees. [We were going to have to uncork Gravity magic at some point. Hopefully, you've given me enough warning that I can protect you from the fallout.]

He pauses for a second.

[Just how powerful is this spell anyway? Like, stronger than that eye laser?]

Oh boy.

[Granin, I don't think you'll believe it until you see it.]

He shakes his head.

[Alright. I'll get to work right away. We're going to be busy over the next two days. Get right into training and consider your next mutations. You need to get the maximum value out of whatever you choose to go with, so think carefully.]

He says a few words to Torrina before turning to climb the ladder and hustle out of the cell.

[Alright then Anthony,] the younger Shaper speaks up, [you ready for elemental training?]

My brains still ache like mad, and my body is exhausted. But I stand up and shuffle my new pet back a little with one leg.

[Of course. I'm always ready.]

This isn't the lazy holiday I had in mind.

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 489: Meeting of the minds**

I don't get much time between gruelling bouts of training my elemental Skills, but the time I do get I spend playing with my new pet, the mini-demon. He's awkward, unable to fly on his stunted wings and frequently tumbles over when walking about on his weak little arms. Every time he falls his big green eyeball wells up with moisture and I have to soothe him for a while before he can calm down and get back up.

I don't remember Tiny or Crinis being this fragile.

Long dormant, my Pet Growth Speed Skill finally has a chance to level up! This Skill will reduce the time it takes for the little guy to grow into his full, combat-ready form. I'd kind of hoped that it would reduce the amount of Biomass that he'd need to eat to grow, making the whole process a bit cheaper, but instead it just seems to increase the speed he goes through food. He's *always* hungry and the more he eats, the faster he grows.

Not that he's going to get that large. Not visibly at least. He's probably expanding a great deal inside his little pocket dimension.

Eventually, my brains burn out and I have to beg Torrina to leave me be so I can go into some sweet, sweet torpor. I need to rest! I'm completely drained! The second she's gone I make myself comfortable and sink immediately into blessed inactivity, my body goes completely still. Sweet release! A relaxing feeling takes over my body and slowly my minds grow still and oblivion takes over.

SHABAM!

I'm back, baby! For whatever reason, there's no slow recovery from torpor! I was never much of a morning person, I can remember many mornings feeling a touch low energy, but ever since my rebirth I'm just full of beans after waking up! I'm ready! I'm ready to take on the world! I manage to flex my legs and bounce around my cell as if I were shadowboxing for a brief moment before I realise Torrina is in the room and watching me.

[You seem full of energy,] she sounds amused, [ready for more training then?]

Dammit!

This rock-woman has no mercy... Sigh... may as well get into it.

After another four hours of relentless training with only a brief pause to eat and feed my new pet, the relentless monotony of the was only broken when Granin entered the room and ordered Torrina to leave. I can't cry, but I swear real tears nearly fall when I hear his gruff voice. Getting levels and improving my Skills is important, of course, I know that, but the training the three Shapers are putting me through is truly brutal.

Compress the mana, shape the mana, cast the spell, tear apart my spell, start again. Over and over. Not only is it repetitive, but it's also really hard! Not to mention, I have to do this in two entirely separate elements casting two different spells at the same time! Every one of my minds is pushed to the limit for the duration of the training and a painful headache multiplied by four assaults me whenever I stop. It's effective training, but holy moly is it rough.

[Granin, I honestly never thought I'd be so grateful to see you.]

The big Golgari Shaper looks up at me in surprise.

[What's the matter? I never thought I'd hear such words from you. Ah, Torrina has been training you? Hehe. You have my sympathy.]

He looks at me with barely concealed happiness, as if he is drawing great comfort from my suffering.

[She's always like this?! I thought she was only pushing me so hard because of the short timeframe!]

[Oh no,] he shakes his head, [she's crazy. You have to understand that she came from low social status, like me, but she was able to raise herself high through her ridiculous work ethic. She's a well-regarded prospect amongst her peers.]

[Hold on a second. I thought you were considered to be a problematic no-hoper. How'd this bright young star end up in your triad?] I ask pointedly.

Granin frowns.

[That's all down to social standing and politics. Enough about that.] He waves away the matter of Torrina with one hand whilst fixing me with a glare. [Through hard work and bending a few fingers I've managed to secure a meeting for you with the other reincarnators. It wasn't easy, but I even managed to ensure that you wouldn't be listened in on. As far as I'm aware this is the first time that three of you have met together in the history of the Golgari empire.]

[You mean, like anywhere?]

[It may have happened somewhere on Pangera, but we don't know about it. I figured this would be a good chance for you to try and make some allies. James and more specifically Sarah have been here a long time. There are many Shapers who are sympathetic to them. If you can get them to put in a good word for you, it'll have some weight around the outpost.]

Interesting! I have heard that normally there aren't nearly so many of us spawning into the Dungeon so close together. If there was ever going to be a time when a group of us former Earthlings were going to meet up, it was now. A short time later the three escorts arrive and we set off once more on the short journey from my cell to the combat area. Nice to be making this trip secure in the knowledge that I don't have to annihilate anything whilst risking annihilation when I reach the end of it.

After being led into the open, circular arena, I'm pleasantly surprised to see Jim and Sarah have already arrived. The giant worm is sitting in a large coiled loop, his blind head pointing this way and that, whilst Sarah, the immense bear monster is sat on her hind legs, huffing with laughter. It takes me a few moments to connect up to the others with a mind bridge so I can join the conversation.

[What's so funny?] I ask as I skitter up to join them.

[Ah, Anthony! Nice to see you!] Sarah sounds genuinely glad to see that I've managed to survive the tournament so far. [Jim is just prattling on, as he tends to do.]

[It's not about worms is it?] I needle him.

[It should have been!] Jim declares proudly. [Despite being the Cult of the Worm, there's hardly enough emphasis given to all things worm around here. Nobody seems to appreciate this noblest of all species!]

Sarah huffs out another laugh.

[The Cult doesn't worship *worms*! They worship *Yarrum*, there's a difference.]

Jim curls up and flicks his tail with contempt.

[What would Yarrum be without his mighty worminess?!]

[An ancient,] Sarah and I chime in together.

[Bah! Yet more unbelievers in the way of worm! Don't worry, I'm used to it.]

Jim seems insulted by our unwillingness to fully buy into his worm enthusiasm, but I'm not certain how much of his petulance is real or performance. I can't help but feel there's more to Jim than meets the eye. He can't be this upfront, can he?

[So Anthony, how've you been?] Sarah sounds a little anxious as she turns her massive bear head towards me.

[Me? Competing in a tournament of death, filled with anxiety and struggle. Same as usual! Why?]

The giant bear deflates as she hears my words. I can tell that she still feels bad about me having to risk my life on the command of the Shapers. Clearly, her loyalty to this mad cult is still strong, but she disagrees with their actions here. Perhaps there's a little hope for her after all.

[I've asked so many times but they don't want to stop the tournament. It's not right!] Sarah says, despondent.

[Why would they listen to you?] Jim interjects. [We're not equals in their eyes, we're *experiments*. Means to an end. They don't care that we were once people.]

[That's not true!] Sarah protests.

[Sorry Sarah, I have to agree with Jim,] I chime in. [My experience is a little bit more extreme than yours, but do you think that if they found you when they found me you'd be treated any differently? I don't think so.]

I can tell that Sarah wants to argue but there isn't much ammunition for her to use. I think I take a little risk with these two. Nothing ventured, nothing gained after all.

[Look. I don't want to say too much, but there's a slight chance I'll break out of here before the end of the tournament. Any chance you'd want to come with?]

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 490: The Worm Conspiracy**

[Hell yes my invertebrate brother! *This* is what I'm talking about! Leave the crazies to be crazy and let's get out of here. We'll have a way better chance of surviving together than we would on our own!]

Jim the Elemental Worm of Earth is all in. Not too surprising considering he already wants to escape and has made no secret of it. His entire body wiggles with delight as he enthusiastically expresses his desire to get out of crazy town. Sarah is far less enthralled.

[Escape?! Why?!] she says, aghast. [The Shapers have taken care of you for years, Jim! You're safe here. Going back out into the Dungeon, it's insane!]

The giant worm doesn't stop its dance as he replies, exasperation clear in his voice.

[I've been telling you that I want to get out of here for more than twelve months, Sarah.]

[I didn't think you *actually* wanted to leave! Why would you ever want to leave?!]

[We are *prisoners* here. Well-fed and well cared for prisoners, to be sure, but prisoners all the same! Do you think just because they speak to you politely that you aren't a captive? Can you go wherever you want? Can you do *anything* without their permission? You need to wake up!]

[It's better than living like a mindless *beast*. You want to go back to kill or be killed?! Or more likely, spending months at a time hiding beneath the dirt?!]

[Whoa there,] I break in. [Let's just chill for a moment, that got heated fast.]

The two monsters are staring at each other (as well as a worm can stare anyways, I really don't think he has eyes) and Sarah is clearly agitated, her breath booming like bellows as she sucks in the air. From that brief interchange I get the feeling that they might have had this sort of interaction multiple times before, with much the same conclusion. Looks like I need to play the peacemaker.

[Look. I didn't mean to stir up any bad feelings here. Yes, the Dungeon is a scary and dangerous place where you have to fight to survive,] I say to Sarah, [and yes, you are in fact prisoners here kept under the thumb of the Cult,] I say to Jim. [I think we can all agree that those things are true, right?]

The other two former humans grumble in agreeance.

[Great. Clearly, Jim is less intimidated by the thought of surviving in the Dungeon than Sarah is, that's fine. There's no judgement here.] I try to move my antennae in a soothing way. Calming circles, all that jazz. [And it's clear that Sarah isn't as chafed by her restricted freedoms as Jim is, that's also fine. Let's just talk it out, work out where each of us stands and most importantly, not leak this idea to the Shapers and get Anthony brutally murdered, alright?]



I gave them a moment to collect themselves. Why are they getting all bent out of shape? If anyone has the right to be feeling a little tense at the moment, surely it's me!

[Okay, how about Sarah goes first? Is that alright, Jim?]

The worm gives a languid tail wave as a reply, indicating his lack of care.

[Alright then Sarah, tell us how you feel about the escape plan.]

I feel like I'm managing a couple's therapy session for my parents. At least this time nobody's screaming at *me*.

[Okay.] The gigantic bear nods her head and settles back on her hindquarters. She takes a few moments to frame her thoughts before she continues. [Obviously, it's been a long time for me. In the Dungeon, I mean. I had an advantage over the two of you, I suppose. I was reborn as a bear, not an insect. I don't think I was super powerful but I was quite strong and I was able to defend myself pretty well. But, I wasn't very good... at it. Being a monster, I mean. I suppose ... it must sound silly, but, fighting... and killing. I hated it. I found refuge with the Sophos for a time, but I wasn't comfortable there, they didn't understand why I didn't want to fight.]

I nod my antennae sympathetically. They wouldn't make sense of that at all. A monster that wouldn't fight? What's the point of it?!

[When the Shapers found me, I was almost mad from the fear and the violence. I just... I don't want to go back... I don't want to be on my own again.]

A pause.

[Thanks for sharing, Sarah. I think we can all agree that fighting to survive is difficult and scary. I think we can also agree that not everyone is wired to thrive in that sort of environment. I just want you to consider one thing Sarah. If you were to escape with us, you wouldn't be on your own, but would have people to talk to, people who could help share the danger with you. Something to think about.]

This is actually super tiring. I'm not built for this.

[Jim, why don't you tell us your thoughts about escaping?]

[Gladly! I am more afraid of the Shapers turning on me and stuffing me into this tournament than I am of the Dungeon. Simple. Remember, my experience of the Dungeon wasn't great, in fact it was absolutely awful! But I'll take that situation, which I can control, over being fed to some death weapon of a monster.]

Again, a pause.

[Great, I think that's helped clarify everyone's thoughts.]

Talking this reasonably is taking a toll on me. I think I can feel my headache coming back.

[Why do you think the Shapers would force you into the tournament, Jim?] Sarah asks her friend. [They love you here. They've always been good to you.]

[Things are changing, Sarah. I've said this before, but surely you can see it now. Look at Anthony! You never would have thought that he'd be stuck where he is now, would you? He's just like us! Why are you so sure that they won't do the same to you and me? To me, it doesn't make any sense that you ignore this possibility. Maybe you can afford to, since you're strong. If they put me in there, it'll be a slaughter. I can't afford the risk!]

[I have to agree that I don't particularly feel the love that you allude to here, Sarah. They've spent a lot of time and resources on you over *decades*. I feel like the new regime may want to collect at some point.]

She probably feels a little ganged up on with the two of us coordinating against her. To be honest, I don't really care if she decides to join the escape plan or not. We'd have a higher chance of success if she was with us, I've no doubt, but my larger goal is to try and meet back up with the Colony, something I'm not too sure either of these two would be enthusiastic about. One we get away from the Golgari, I'll be striking out on my own.

[Let me think about it,] Sarah finally mutters after a long pause.

[Sure] I say easily. [Just remember, don't get me killed. Please. I really mean it.]