

Chrysalis 491

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 491: Why so much pain

After discussing the great escape the conversation turns back to more idle topics. Where did you live on Earth? Wow, I sure didn't live anywhere near there! How did you die? Don't want to talk about it? I'm not surprised! It's probably not surprising that we aren't the type of people who'd want to excessively share about our human lives. Given what I learned from the lord of the Dungeon, Mr Beardy Man himself, put together with the few small hints that I got from the others, I understand that none of us had fantastic lives.

I mean, mine was fine, but Garralosh and these two seem to have suffered some nasty stuff.

Ah well, the past is in the past. We're all monsters now and we need to live the best monster life we can. Which for me means getting the heck out of here without becoming some other monster's lunch so I can reunite with my family. They must be struggling without me, desperate for my guidance and steady leadership...

Don't become delusional, Anthony. They're probably doing just fine without you. In fact, if anyone should be worried, it should be them worrying about me. Our conversation plays out quite pleasantly in the end and we go our separate ways. I notice that Sarah takes a good long look at her trio of escorts before she moves off with them. Perhaps she's actually starting to wake up to the reality of her life here. If she actually does manage to make an escape with Jim, I think she'll find the Dungeon far less intimidating than she did before. Company makes all the difference. If I didn't have the Colony and Tiny, I might have ended up exactly the same as her. Going from being a human living in a society to being a monster incapable of communication is rough to say the least. No one to talk to, even just to vent and destress makes things tough mentally.

Jim had it even harder, slithering around in the soil, completely blind. He plays it off as if it were fine, but I think he suffered a great deal in those early days. Unable to fight, unable to see or talk. Living in a world of complete darkness whilst being so defenceless and clueless. It must have left some scars on him. It would be impossible for it not to. His willingness to throw himself back into the thick of it is admirable, but I feel he too would benefit from having a companion to share the danger with.

It's unlikely to have anything to do with me anyway. If we get out alive, we'll soon part ways. For now, the staying alive part is what I need to focus on. Back in my cell I'm not too shocked to find Torrina waiting once more.

[Do you have to be here? Don't you have something else to do?] I groan.

She quirks one stony eyebrow at me.

[Corun is keeping Tiny alive for the moment so I'd thought I'd stay here and do the same for you. You'd prefer the alternative?]

[No ma'am. Let's get to it!]

As much as I whine, I know she's doing me a huge favour by helping my training. I'm not too interested in dying and this is the best way I can try and keep myself alive. I'd be an absolute idiot to put less than

all of my effort into it. I'll be thrown into another death match in two days, harder than the last one probably. Every level up is critical.

And I am getting them, level ups I mean. Grinding away at two different types of magic at the same time is progressing my Skills at a quick pace. Not only the elemental Skills, but my supplementary mental Skills as well. I've gained two levels in Iron Mind and one in Profound Meditation as well as bringing all of my elemental Skills, bar Air, up to rank three. The third rank is some sort of pivot for the elements, unlocking more powerful varieties of the original shape. Water unlocked Ice magic at rank three and it proves the same for the others. Earth Magic unlocked Stone Magic and Fire magic unlocked Blue Flame. All sorts of new stuff can be done with Stone Magic but Blue Flame just seems to be hotter flame. Still useful, no doubt about that, just less exciting I suppose.

From what I'm told that's it as far as new types of Elements from the base Skills, which is another reason why people don't pursue them very far. You made it to rank three? That's all she wrote folks, move along. For my part, I fully intend to keep pushing. Before the next fight starts I'll have all of them at rank three and be pushing for rank four.

[Any word on my next opponent?] I squeeze out to Torrina during training.

She whips a quick spell at me in case I become distracted but I manage to rip it apart at the last second.

[Not yet,] she informs me, [the second round hasn't finished yet. I think we still have two more days, perhaps a little less.]

Another two days... ugh.

[Is there any chance you could sneak Tiny in here? I'd love to say hi to the big lug.]

[I'm keeping him as close as possible, but it might be tricky to bring him into the compound. I'll see what I can do.]

[I appreciate it.]

And I really do. Not having Tiny and Crinis with me is causing all sorts of anxiety. They're my closest companions! My best buds! It just doesn't feel right when they're not around. I know that some would say they're not 'friends' as such, more 'magically bound slaves' but I hold no truck with that. I don't even subscribe to the Sophos attitude towards pets. Despite the Sophos being so generous and loving towards their pets, they still view them as possessions. I want to go beyond that. I will set them free one day! As soon as I work out how...

[Are you worried about your other pet?]

[Ye - ... what other pet?]

Safe! Just in time!

[Alright then, keep your secrets.]

[I shall! I mean, what secrets?]

That actually gets a laugh out of Torrina, a rare feat indeed. She's quite taciturn usually. In just this manner the training drags on until I'm forced to beg for rest. I take a little time to feed and tickle my new pet and then straight into torpor I go. When I wake up I have a snack of some Biomass, which I have a decent stockpile of, and then I anxiously await the next Golgari through the door. To my momentary delight, it's not Torrina the cold faced training torturer, but Granin who enters.

[I honestly never thought I'd be this happy to see you, Granin.]

He grunts.

[I think we'll fix that in a hurry. Let's have a chat about the next couple of rounds. We need to work out a strategy.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 492: The shape of the days to come

Granin and I end up sitting facing each other. Though in my case 'sitting' is more of a comfortable crouch, which brings us reasonably close to eye level. Although again, in my case, I technically have a heck of a lot of eyes.

[There were a hundred and twenty-eight monsters at the start of this tournament. After just two rounds, we're down to thirty-two.]

Even through the rock on his face, I can see his disgust plain and clear. He looks like he wants to spit.

[Nearly a hundred projects that the Cult had invested in, gone to waste. The amount of effort, care and expertise that has been utterly wasted here is a travesty.]

I'm a little confused. Don't these monsters always end up dying? What the heck do they do with them?

[Usually, we release them into the Dungeon,] he replies after I query him. [Once we've done everything we can, training and raising the monster to the best of our collective abilities, we let them go out to the Dungeon to seek their destiny, hoping that they'll descend to the deepest Dungeon and become the final Ancient.]

[You just let them go? Like, releasing them into the wild?! Surely they all die?]

[We don't know if they're all dead,] he grumbles, [and even that's beside the point. Unless we let them out to fight and grow on their own, there's no chance they'll become an Ancient. The idea that you can keep and control a creature of that sort of power would be insane.]

He makes a decent point there. Trying to hold onto a monster as it grew increasingly strong would be difficult. These aren't pets; they have absolutely no issue biting the hand that feeds them. While many of the monsters are smart and can be reasoned with, eventually they'll get to tier eight or nine and can the Cult keep them caged at that point?

Doubtful.

[Anyway,] Granin waves a hand, [the third round is coming, after which there'll be four more.]

[Four more rounds?! Holy moly.]

[Four. Round of sixteen. Round of eight, Semi-final and Final. That's why I wanted to talk to you. If you go ahead and use your mega spell, or whatever it's called, in the next round, then you'll have to contend with the knowledge of it being revealed for the remaining four. Those monsters that are left are going to be no pushovers either. Regardless of how I feel about this tournament, the winners *are* getting stronger as the competition goes on. Some of these beasts are powerful.]

I hesitate for a moment. The first fight was a piece of cake, but the last round nearly killed me. It was way too close, insanely close. If I have to go through that another four times ... I don't want to go through that another four times.

[What are you thinking? Do I need to hold off further? Wait for another round? I barely made it past the last opponent. If the next one is going to be even worse, then will I even be able to survive without using my most powerful card?]

The crusty old Shaper leans back till his head thuds into the wall and he's looking straight up. The stone head must be helpful sometimes.

[I'm not sure,] he admits. [It's a risk, either way. I'm reasonably sure that we'll be able to protect you in the event your magic leaks out. Is this spell something you can try and whip out mid-battle?]

I think about it. It takes a significant amount of time to create a gravity bomb. Compressing the mana is mentally taxing and draining as hell. I was able to do it against Garralosh mainly because she was incoherent with rage. Perhaps one day I'll have the raw mental strength to crunch out a Gravity Bomb on the fly, but not yet.

[Unlikely. I'd need to prepare it before the battle started.]

Granin sat up.

[You need to compress and prepare the spell? Are you sure it'll hit?]

[Oh yeah. It's hard to get away from it.]

[So it's fast.]

[No.]

...

[You'll just have to see it for yourself, Granin. Try not to be sitting anywhere near it when it goes off.]

He looks at me for a moment before nodding and standing up.

[If there's nothing else, then I'll leave you to train and prepare. There isn't much time, try not to waste any time.]

[What have I done except train, collapse into sleep and feed my new pet?]

[That's what I'm talking about.]

[Gasp! Feeding an adorable little monster is never a waste of time! Is it, little guy?]

Slowly growing every day that passes, the small demon looks up at me with its one bulbous green eyeball and flutters its wings.

[You have food. I desire it!]

Talking already! He's growing up so fast! In fact, my pet speed raising Skill has already grown to three also. It must be accelerating his growth speed more and more as time passes.

[Of course little guy! Food is on the way!]

Like a doting parent, I grab some Biomass and pass to it the greedy demon who materialises his mouth out of the air and starts shovelling the food into his extra-dimensional belly.

[Anthony...]

[Huh?]

[Start training!]

[Oh yeah.]

Back to the grind, I suppose. I need to name this little dude. It'll have to wait for another time, however. I train alone until Torrina returns to push things harder and push my brains to their limits. In the moments where I have the energy to think I wonder if the Colony is training like this, and how well received the methods would be by the Mages. What the heck do they care about pain? That's just how you know you're working hard!

Energised by the thought of my siblings doing what they always do, I throw myself into practice and reap the reward of sweet, sweet levels. Before I know it, the third round is underway and who else would be asked to lift the curtain but the best insect in the Dungeon? (It's not you, Jim.)

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 493: The round that wasn't

It would be a lie to say that Granin wasn't nervous as he shifted in his seat and watched the gates rise to commence the third round of competition. That damned ant had been quite adamant that his spell would be a spectacular one-hit kill for any creature that didn't know it was coming. Granin himself knew of some pretty potent artillery type spells that required a triad to work together for an extended cast, compressing and shaping mana before releasing it in a glorious burst of devastation. Still, such spells were not at all useful in a one on one duel.

As he tried to contain his nervousness, he also did his best to ignore the muttered whispers of the Shapers around him in the stands. Gravus was a notable absentee for this round, and not a single person in attendance had failed to notice. Since the old stone was unlikely to back down on his own accord, there was little doubt that his triad leader had forbidden him from attending. After the campaign, Granin had waged bringing attention to the open bias against his sponsored monster the leading triad had to step a little more carefully lest they jeopardise the legitimacy of their tournament.

Having Gravus blow-up and get into another fistfight would not be a good look for them. Even as he understood their motives, Granin was a little disappointed. Baiting Gravus into another explosion would have served his purposes perfectly.

With a rattle and a crash, the gates slammed into their frames fully raised, and the gathered Shapers leaned forward in their seats as the two monsters emerged from their respective tunnels. From one side came a gleaming ant, barbed mandibles already gnashing at the air. Even from where he sat, Granin could feel the mana concentration within Anthony growing by the second. He was already working on his spell, and everyone could sense it. That happened to include the monster who'd entered opposite. A ponderous mound of dark goop, the Death Creeper was a pain of a monster to kill. Capable of rotting flesh that even approached it, the Creeper exuded a powerful aura of decay that few monsters of the Second Strata could match. As it sensed the powerful build-up of mana within its opponent, the creature wisely began to disperse its mass.

This creature was a tough opponent for Anthony in Granin's eyes. His acid would do little to the beast since the acid itself would dissolve to nothing before doing any sort of damage, and if he tried to close in and bite, he'd be suffering damage just from being close to the thing. Magic was the best way to deal with the Creeper but even that was hard to achieve. Without a doubt, the triad in charge of raising this Creeper had taken the necessary precautions and built magic resistance into the monster from an early stage.

The Creeper didn't appear overconfident at all and moved cautiously, spreading itself out and oozing its way toward its opponent. For his part, Anthony continued showboating and snapped at the air with his mandibles while his antennae swirled wildly. What the hell is he doing?

"Mind if I join you?"

Granin started when someone spoke nearby and turned to see a smiling Shaper standing nearby looking down at him. He frowned a touch when he realised who this was: Inaron, triad leader responsible for raising the Creeper fighting below.

"Sure. Take a seat."

It was a little unusual for competing sponsors to be sitting next to each other during a bout but not unheard of during this tournament. Some Shapers found the process too emotional, whereas others remained quite detached.

"My thanks," came the reply as Inaron took his seat. "That seems to be quite the spell your creature is working on there. The mana feels dense and almost unstable."

Granin grunted.

"His best chance of overcoming your Creeper is overwhelming it with magic. I get the feeling this fight is going to short and decisive either way."

"Oh, I agree. If the spell fails to do fatal damage, then I believe the ant will find itself quickly overwhelmed."

Inaron sounded immensely confident in his assessment, enough so that Granin turned to him curiously.

"You don't believe the spell will be effective?"

Not wanting to appear impolite Inaron simply nodded.

"Indeed. The weak point of the Creeper is its slow movement combined with its poor ability to contest ranged opponents. In the Dungeon, as I'm sure you know, they are typically an ambush predator, not suited to chasing down their prey. My triad and I have put a huge amount of effort into designing this Creeper to overcome those issues. It's ability to resist magical offence and disperse damage is first class."

Granin nodded. He'd seen the Creeper's first two fights, and they went much as Inaron said. Closing in against the monster was playing to its strengths, and it would use its liquid-like flesh to engulf its opponent and allow its death aura to do the work whilst absorbing whatever punishment its victim dealt out in its death throes. In the tournament the opponents of the Creeper had taken the safe approach, attempting to kite the monster and punish it from range. Neither had succeeded. The Creeper had spread itself out across a disgustingly large area and slowly cornered its foe while absorbing the damage sent its way. In both cases, the opponent had been cornered, wrapped up and succumbed shortly after.

The same scene was playing out again, except this time the opponent hadn't even bothered to cast a single spell, choosing instead to pose dramatically. Granin had to resist the urge to slap his forehead. What is that idiot doing?

Inaron almost succeeded in keeping the pity from his face as he observed, "I believe your monster is ready to unleash its spell. I'm most curious to see what it is."

"You and me both," Granin muttered.

Before they had a chance to continue their discussion, the ant ceased his antics and opened his jaws wide. The vast build-up of mana within the creature had reached a crescendo; the spell was ready.

Granin sat forward and watched intently. From what he understood, Gravity magic was able to change weight. Useful, but not in any way as impressive as tunnelling through space. For Gravity Magic to be as high in rank or higher than Space magic, there had to be more to it than that, he just had no idea what it might be. Anthony had refused to tell him and if weren't for the life or death situation the tournament represented he would never have had a chance to see.

"Come on, Anthony. Show me something special." He prayed.

Then it happened.

From between the open mandibles of the ant monster, a ball so dark as to appear almost black flickered into existence. After a moment that stretched out in silence, it blasted toward the Creeper. The uproar was instantaneous.

HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOWLLLLLLLLL.

As the ball shot forward, the air in the combat arena stirred to a mighty wind within a second. A piercing shriek stabbed Granin in the ears, causing sharp pain. Every Shaper watching stood in the same moment as they witnessed the spell fly toward the Creeper. Granin's eyes bulged in his head as he fought against the buffeting wind. All of the air in the room was being sucked toward that damned ball! What the hell was it?!

Even the light around the spell seemed to fade into darkness which made it difficult to discern the edge of the spell. Where did the sphere end and the dark begin? Nobody could say! In response to the

appearance of this shrieking magic, the Creeper had reacted as it had been taught to, spreading its malleable liquid-like flesh out as wide as possible. Like a wave crashing onto a beach, it covered almost half the combat area in its dark body.

It took only a few seconds for the spell to cross the distance. Powerful or not, Granin still didn't see how such a small spell would be capable of destroying that much magic resistant monster flesh.

The ball slammed into the soft flesh of the Creeper and vanished within. For a heartbeat Granin feared that nothing would happen, that the spell had been absorbed and destroyed just like that, but then the body of the monster expanded in an instant and that horrifying shriek stirred the air once again.

A black sphere several metres in diameter appeared, the body of the Creeper around it was just gone, somehow vanished. The pull of the air was even stronger now, the light dimmed even further, and Granin could feel something that stirred in him a deep fear. He was being pulled forward. His feet slid toward the edge of the area slightly before he blinked and braced himself. He could see other Shapers around him doing the same. The spell was trying to drag him in! If he could feel it from up here, what was it like down there?

He only had to look at the Creeper to get an idea. At first the monster had accepted the loss of a chunk of its body, such a thing was normal after all, but as it had tried to pull away from the spell, it had found that it couldn't. In fact, it was being pulled toward it! Granin could see the monster trying to pull its flesh away, but it was useless. With every second that passed more and more of the Creeper was pulled into the sphere where it simply vanished, as if it had never been.

The Shapers watched the whole process in shocked silence until the spell flickered and disappeared. The vast Creeper was nowhere to be seen. The only thing that remained in the arena was a gleaming ant, still posing up on its hind legs with the front two extended wide on either side.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 494: Dangerous Satisfaction

The Shapers in the stands watched in shocked silence as the ant monster relaxed its pose and made its way across to its defeated foe. At first, it didn't seem as if there was anything left after the vortex of doom vanished but when Granin looked closely he could see a small ball the size of his own clenched fist resting in the depression left behind in the aftermath of the spell.

Anthony crawled down into the crater and before the befuddled eyes of the spectators began to drag the sphere back toward his own exit where a very wary triad of guards was waiting.

Even though he was forewarned, Granin was as stunned as everyone else. Anthony had warned him that he wouldn't believe it until he saw it, and he was right! What the hell was that?! The incredible suction, that horrifying dark sphere that seemed to consume the very air itself! The power was beyond his expectations, far beyond! Judging by the look on Inaron's face, he was struggling to accept what he'd just seen also.

"I have to hand it to you, Inaron," Granin tried to play it cool, "I'm truly impressed by the defensive capabilities your monster displayed. Great work."

So saying, he tried to escape from the spectator area by walking casually toward the exit. Unfortunately, he didn't make it three steps before Inaron grabbed him by the arm.

"What in the name of the Worm was *that*?! I've never *seen* that spell before Granin!"

"Oh, that? You know, it's a ..." he groped for some excuse to play it off, "a combination of dark and fire magic. You felt that wind kick up, right? That's from the, uh, flames."

He tried to pull his arm loose but the numbed Iranon still had him locked in a death grip. Glancing around he could see that other Shapers had recovered from their initial malaise and had started to move toward him. If he got stuck here he'd be bogged down by questions and pestering until he crumbled to dust! He couldn't allow it. If he left Anthony alone for that long the insect would be dragged away by Gravus to a separate chamber and he'd probably never find him again. He had to get out, now.

Granin was a Golgari of action. Make a plan, follow the plan, always deliver. So that's what he would do. He turned to face Iranon head-on and placed his loose hand on the Shaper's shoulder.

"Sorry about this Iranon. I'll buy you some Rock Beer next time."

"What are you -."

BAM!

With one colossal fist, Granin knocked the words straight of his colleague's mouth and the sense out of his head. Out cold, the poor scholar loosened his grip and fell back into the seats with a clatter. Finally free, Granin did what any self-respecting mage of advanced age would do. He turned and bolted for the exits shouldering aside all who tried to accost him on his way. Angry shouts punctuated the air in his wake but he didn't dare delay. The moment word of what happened got back to the leading triad, things would hit the fan.

Dammit, Anthony! I know you said it was big, but I never imagined it would be like that!

It took ten minutes of dashing through the tunnels for Granin to finally make it Anthony's chamber. When he arrived he was relieved to see Corun and Torrina already here and no sign of Gravus.

"What the hell was that spell, Granin?" Corun nearly shouted. "I could hear it from out in the corridor!"

"You didn't ask, Anthony? He's right there?" Confused, Granin pointed at the ant attempting to gnaw at the ball of presumably squashed Biomass.

"He won't say anything," Corun grumbled, "just tell me it's his 'special move' and can't be advertised."

[Bit late for keeping it under wraps now, isn't it?] Granin sent to the bug-brained fool. [The whole place is in an uproar! I had to knock out another Shaper just to get here!]

The ant didn't turn its head, but Granin had grown to understand that due to his compound eyes Anthony could still see him, shifting his head just wasn't necessary most of the time.

[It's pretty awesome, I have to agree. Keeping Corun in the dark is just fun, he's practically pouting over there! What a baby.]

Granin froze.

[That's so petty!]

[I'm trying to eat here Granin. What do you need?]

A persistent scraping sound jarred the ears of all present as the giant ant tried to snap and chomp at the ball on the ground in front of it, without much success.

[Is it... compressed?] Torrina broke in to ask.

[Of course, it's compressed! It's been smashed together by the force of gravity! With enough mana that spell could probably do the same thing to the planet as it did to that Creeper thing.]

Granin's eyes bulged.

[What did you say?!] he shrieked.

[Calm down. It would take, like, a lot of mana. Way too much. What you saw then was pretty much as strong as I can handle the spell right now.]

The old Shaper tried to clear his head for a moment. Torrina filled in the silence.

[Anthony, I thought your gravity magic affected weight. Made things heavier or lighter. How does it produce the effect that you created?] She asked slowly.

The ant snapped its mandibles in irritation.

[Explaining gravity is so weird. It's gravity! Besides, I don't have any particular reason I need to share this information with you, do I?]

At that moment the doors to the upstairs viewing are blown open and Gravus barged in followed by six Shapers.

"Everyone out!" He bellowed. "I will be assuming the management of the creature!"

Even from below Granin could see the greed blazing in the eyes of the old cantankerous snake. New magic was a lure that Shapers found hard to resist and it didn't look like Gravus was trying too hard right now. Anthony's gravity magic wasn't too desirable initially, the effects were novel but hardly intimidating. After that display, the story had completely changed.

"Over my dead body, Gravus!" Granin roared as he stomped toward the ladder to climb back to the upper level.

Corun and Torrina had leapt to their feet when the invaders had appeared and when they saw Granin charge forward they leap to back him up. Triads acted together in the face of outsiders and they would do no different now when the stakes were high. Granin was like an angry bull as he surged up the ladder, curses and threats pouring out of his mouth to the extent that even those who entered behind Gravus were looking a little pale. Not the fearless leader though, his face twisted with rage as he beheld his most detested individual flying toward him.

Before the inevitable confrontation could explode the door was forced open once again and the much calmer visage of Irette Plamine entered the chamber.

"That's quite enough, I think," she warned those present.

Gravus restrained himself with a visible effort whilst Granin and his two triad mates finished making their way up the ladder where they then paused, eyeing the crowd distrustfully. The situation was tense, feelings were running high on both sides. So Gravus was absolutely not surprised when that *stupid* ant went and opened his big mouth.

[I'm happy to let you know a little about my magic,] he sent to Plamine, [IF you let me out of this stupid tournament. Good deal, no?]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 495: Deal with the devil - ant

The thing about Golgari is that they're totally covered in stone. It's easy to forget it sometimes, since the rock moves and shifts along with their movements, as if it were a part of them. Scratch that, it *is* a part of them, just not something they were born with. I've been able to get a little detail out of the few members of the species I've spent my time with, and picked up a few other morsels of insight through observation. Essentially, they're born without that rocky outer coating and when they get old enough, fully grown, I assume, they choose a mineral or some type of ore and then bond it onto their skin, forming a second skin.

Although the process seems to bring the stone to some sort of life, making it an actual part of their bodies, you have to remember that these are people with actual rock on the outside of their bodies. It makes reading certain social cues difficult. Males and females aren't quite as distinctive in their body shape, for example. I suppose the rocks sort of round out the edges, making it a little harder to tell them apart. For another thing, changes in expression are hard to read, since their faces tend to be quite immobile. A smile is easy enough, but something like a frown can be tricky since the stone doesn't wrinkle like a human's skin would. Anything around the eyes can be difficult also, the muscle movements are usually small and get almost completely washed out by the second skin.

I mean, this is me speaking as a former human turned insect. I'm sure they have no issue telling all this stuff apart and if I mentioned it they'd look at me like I was nuts. I also can't dismiss the possibility that after spending a significant amount of time around monsters and other ants that my ability to discern humanoid social cues is beginning to degrade in a massive way. I mean, I can tell what an ant is feeling by the movement of their antennae, which is pretty cool. It's trade-offs.

Anyway, the reason my mind turns to Golgari expressions is because I can easily tell that the Plamine lady is SUPER cheesed off. No doubt about it. The glare is there, the eyes are almost hot enough to burn a hole in my carapace, the brows are drawn, I can tell and that jaw is clenched like an iron vice. Holy moly lady, you're going to crack a molar, ease up a little!

I'm not sure what's got her so mad. If they're willing to let me out of this death tournament of death, in which I might die, then I'm happy to trade a little knowledge. It's not as if they've ever unlocked gravity magic in the history of their species, so they aren't likely to get it anytime soon. For whatever reason they've never been able to create pets with it either and I seriously doubt just knowing its possible will cause the system to slip it into the menu for them.

[You seek to *bargain* with the Cult of the Worm?] Even her mental voice sounds as if it were pushed through gritted teeth. How does she even *do* that?

[Sure. Why not? I have something you want, you have something I want, why not do a trade? What I want, just in case you weren't aware, is to leave this place alive and go back to where you, you know, abducted me, a sapient reincarnated person, against my will.]

If anything her glare grows even hotter. Jeez. If this is getting her so mad then imagine if I was talking to Gravus! That moron might have just popped from sheer indignant rage.

[Considering that you are our captive, it would seem that you have a significantly weakened bargaining position, wouldn't you say?]

So far this mental connection has been private, but with her last words I feel her reaching out to Gravus to bring him into the conversation. Not to be outdone I spin Granin into the loop as well.

[Captive. Prisoner. Slave. All great words to describe my situation. The situation you put me in. Because, you know, that's apparently something that you're comfortable with. As for leverage, I'm not exactly sure what you think you've got. If I don't give up my knowledge willingly, how are you planning on getting it out of me?]

[Oh, there are ways, insect!] Gravus kicks in as I knew he would. [I will rip it from your mind if I have to!]

Even Plamine winces a little at the barbarity of that suggestion.

[You want to get in a tug of war with me, Gravus? I notice you brought six other Shapers in here with you, very brave.] I snap my mandibles with a sharp CLACK! [And if you tried it, maybe I'd turn you into a little ball of hardened mush and eat you. Did you think of that?] For emphasis I nudge the remains of the Creeper and let it roll a little before it comes to a rest.

Granin eyes me warily but I don't need any reminding that I'm playing a dangerous game. The risk that they'll simply overwhelm my mental defences and knock me out is very real. I'm gambling that they can't get any real information out of me if I'm not conscious.

Just, let me go you stupid rock people! I want out of here and back to my family! Why'd you idiots bring me here in the first place if all you want is me dead?!

...

That's actually a good question. Maybe I should ask that. After Gravus stops choking on his own spit after I threatened him, of course.

[Not only do you think you're in a position to bargain with us, you now think you can threaten us?] She asks coolly. It appears she's managed to get her temper under control.

[Look, all I want is to leave. I don't want to be here, I'm not a big fan of having to fight for my life every few days and frankly, the hospitality has been very lacking. You want a bit of knowledge out of me? Sure. Have at it. Just let me go. I vanish into the Dungeon and you'll never hear from me again. You seriously don't seem like you want me here anyway. Let's make a deal and we all get what we want. Juicy new magic for you and me out sight.]

Granin clears his throat before he joins in.

[Anthony has raised a valid point, Plamine. Many have made note that Anthony has been deprived of resources and the questionable matchups have raised more than a few brows. It was hardly necessary for Gravus to open his blowhole and confirm the leading triad's bias, but he went and did it anyway so now every Shaper in this facility is aware of it.]

[Do you have a point, Granin?] Plamine turns to face him. I get the feeling she is mentally standing on Gravus' foot otherwise there's no way he'd have kept his mouth shut.

[My point is quite simple,] Granin replies, smooth as silk, [I have gathered the required quorum to move a motion of no confidence in your triad's leadership. Should you push me, or Anthony, to give up his secrets against his free will, or engage in any further blatant manipulation of this *event*, then I'll be forced to push that motion ahead.]

A tense silence descends in each of our respective minds, which I promptly break.

[What's this motion of no confidence? Is it bad?] I say openly, knowing that Plamine and Gravus can hear me.

Granin's lip twitches in amusement and he responds openly as well.

[Very bad. For all of us. Remember that the Cult of the Worm is supposed to be a secret society. Not every Shaper is a member, not even close. If the motion is passed then a high ranking Shaper would be sent to investigate and mediate. It would be rather difficult to keep what has been happening here under wraps at that point. The leading triad would be outed as Cultists, as would I and my triad, and we'd be put to death.]

Ouch.

This move seems to have caught Plamine by surprise, her eyes narrow as Granin explains his ploy and her hands clench and unclench.

[Give us some time to consider.] She says coldly before turning on her heels and leaving the way she came in, followed by Gravus and flunkies.

Great! Now I've got more time to try and eat this stupid Biomass. I refuse to let it go to waste this time!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 496: Idle Monster

It took time and effort, but finally, I have been successful in my quest to consume the Biomass resulting from a Gravity Bomb! After contending with the dense ball of ex-monster with my mandibles without success, I had to apply other methods to try and soften it. Water magic and acid had some effect, but not much on the unyielding chunk but they did provide the impetus that allowed the breakthrough! By first cooling the sphere and then heating it with ice and fire magic respectively, then biting the heck out of it I'd been able to crack the ball open finally. Once such a weakness has been exposed, it was merely a matter of persistence, chomping on the thing over and over again to break off small flakes and shards that I could eat one by one.

The taste is horrendous. Unimaginably bad. But there's little that can be done about that, the pursuit of Biomass doesn't allow for weak stomachs! If I wasn't willing to eat something disgusting, I

would have starved to death long ago. I wouldn't have even made it as long as I did as a human! Something like this is laughable.

Of course, my sub-brains continue their brutal training regime even as I worry this ball of food into manageable chunks. No rest can be allowed if I'm to survive the upcoming rounds. Despite my peace offering to the leaders of this farce of a Cult, I don't think they'll let me have the easy way out. Their greed for knowledge is one thing, their dedication to their idiotic vision quite another. After getting to this point and

sacrificing so many of their own members' projects, would they really be willing to throw the rules out the window to let me go? I'm not sure even the lure of new magic is enough to get my deal over the line.

Even beyond their stubborn ideology is their strange and seemingly baseless dislike of me as an individual. You don't like ant monsters, fine. We do start very weak, it's true. I've been lucky I've made it as far as I have. Yet there seems to be this strange insistence that I wind up dead. Why?! It can't just be because they don't want me wasting resources they would rather see being funnelled into stronger monsters. If that was all they wanted, surely they'd just have to wait until I ran into another creature that I couldn't beat and all my accumulated experience and Biomass would go toward their desired end.

It just doesn't make sense. I feel like there's something missing, and it's making me even more uncomfortable. I don't want to hang around this place any longer than I have to. The sooner I can get out, the

better. The next chance I get I'll need to talk to Jim and see how he's going with his preparations. I may need to rely on my fellow reincarnators to enact our daring escape before things here escalate even further.

I don't dare wait and hope that the Colony will find me. The distance is great and the direction unknown. Even if they're all working hard, and I'm sure that they are, it's too much to ask that they would be able to find me and set me free. No, even if they found me, I'm not sure I'd want them exposing themselves. I've no idea how the nutters in this cult would react to intelligent ants, and beyond that, I don't want to bring the wrath of

the Golgari empire down on my family. Even with all of the promise and strength that the Colony has shown, I don't think we'd be able to survive.

Granted I haven't seen exactly how large or powerful the supposed Golgari civilisation is, but I don't feel like taking any risks. Until I know otherwise, I need to assume it can't be handled by us ants.

Putting all that aside, what do I need to do now? Mutate baby! I've got a whole pile of Biomass stored up after two successful fights and managing to consume the remains of the Creeper has given me quite a

number to work with and I intend to DO WORK. In total I have a whopping five hundred and ten Biomass to spend. These monsters are packed full of juicy goodness and the further we go in this mad tournament the juicier they get.

They're like pinatas filled with candy that lets me improve myself. Eating through all of these monsters is netting me levels and Biomass at a pretty heft pace, which is good! I'd just rather get it done with less risk. Risk is bad.

So what to spend it on?! Excitement is real! I can feel my heart all aflutter! Time to dig into those menus! First thing first, I need to work out what to upgrade. So far the only things I've managed to max out at +25 are my Carapace, Plating, Stomach and Regeneration Gland. There's a heck of a lot left to go. My mandibles are probably a top priority, increasing my offensive power could do with a boost. Although my magic has proven to be the decisive factor so far. Perhaps I should go with my coordination cortex? Improving the performance of my brains would also assist with my training speed, since I'd be able to cast more spells more rapidly.

That seems intelligent! Let's go with that then!

Quickly bringing up the menu, I peruse the options as I think about the direction I've taken my coordination cortex so far. The first two mutations focused on improving the brain's ability to work independently, then I improved their ability to work together and fused it. For the +20 upgrade, I took the Indomitable option, which allowed the coordination cortex to help spread the load of mental strain across my minds to prolong my ability to work for an extended time under stress. When combined with my Collective Will Vestibule, if I ever get back in range of the Colony, I might be able to keep slinging spells forever.

Which had worked well, I have to say. My sub-brains get put through a lot of work, no slacking for them! Letting my coordination cortex help lighten the burden has been good, and I think I'm willing to go further down that line of mutation, especially given my current circumstances. Perhaps next time I evolve, I need to look for something that might give me some of that synergy along these lines. If I can make my brains work harder for longer that'll have a tremendous increase in my magical Skills training speed.

Browsing down the menu, I can't see anything that particularly grabs my eye. In the end, I settle on an option that extends from Indomitable, Unyielding. This option will allow me to push my minds even further. That's 115 Biomass down the gurgler. What's next?

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 497: Keep the train going

The mutation wagon stops for no ant! With one choice locked in it's time to go for the next one, and I think I have just the thing. I thought about it when I was considering my last upgrade, namely my Vestibule. I haven't wanted to upgrade this organ since I'm out of range of the Colony and it provides no benefit to me, but I had an idea. The first upgrade I picked gave me extended range with the organ, which was great. What if I keep mutating it and extending the range each time? It's only +5 right now, and the distance it can reach is significant, beyond a kilometre. Extend the range at +10, consolidate it at

+15 and then take range-extending mutations at +20 and +25, just how far will it reach? As much as ten kilometres?

If the Colony does end up coming to find me, this will make it SO much more straightforward. I can sense them when they come in range, and although I never confirmed it, I'm pretty sure that they can tell as well. Even if they can't, being able to know when they are close will help me time my escape and find my way back to them. It won't help me in combat at all, but it could be critical when the time comes.

My heart aches a little for the other upgrades that I'll be giving up. Increased regeneration being the juiciest of those. I haven't had an in-depth look through that menu, and right now, I can't bring myself to do it. It's just going to hurt me when I see options that I can't take due to my circumstances. Stupid Cultists! Just another reason to get mad at these crazy rock people.

I smash through the menus as fast as I can and lock in the range extending options through to +25, not allowing my eyes to take in anything else. I don't see you, incredible options! I don't see you at all!!!!!!

Sob.

I hate this. But what's done is done. It was the right thing to do. Just like that another THREE HUNDRED AND TEN Biomass is gone. Argh! It hurts! It hurts so bad! Dammit Gandalf, these prices are painful. You cut me to the quick! That's 420 gone so far. With only ninety left, I don't have enough to take an organ to +25, so I close down the menu and confirm my options.

[Do you wish to upgrade your Indomitable Coordination Cortex +20 to Unyielding Coordination Cortex +25 and Ranged Collective Will Vestibule +5 to Endless Collective Will Vestibule +25? This will cost 420 Biomass.]

Confirm it! Let me ascend to a higher plane!

...

FTAGN!

Gah!

I recover from the itching after thirty minutes and give myself a shake. I have to say that the Collective Will Vestibule is a particularly itchy thing to mutate. The weird flesh crystal just gives out a different sensation, it's odd, I don't know how to explain it correctly. Let's just say I hate it and move on. What's my reward for going through the uncomfortable sensation of mutation? More training! Whoo!

That's not strictly true, though, because, after several more hours of pointless grinding, Corun arrives through the main doors with a welcome surprise.

[Tiny!]

[Grah!]

When the gate swings open I'm greeted by the sight of a large, hairy gorilla with a broad grin on his bat featured face. Not the kind of creature to hold back, Tiny runs into my small chamber and tries to pick

me up in a broad hug. Sadly for him, I'm no longer that much smaller than him, also he's a lot taller than me, so all that happens is he squashes one of my legs with his brawny arm.

[Ouch! What are you doing, Tiny!? That stings man!]

His enthusiasm seems undimmed however and he starts slapping me on the back with his massive hands until I manage to shoo him off me.

[Alright, alright you big dumb ape, I'm happy to see you too!]

It's nice to see the big guy again, and since his face is beaming still with that broad grin, I'm guessing he reciprocates. Even after I push off me he doesn't want to separate too far and keeps a hand on my shiny back.

[He's been wanting to come in here for ages,] chuckles Corun, [he doesn't like settling down much, does he? I had to take him out hunting yesterday just so he could blow off some stress.]

I'm immediately worried.

[Is that safe? He's not going to get picked up by more of your helpful Cultist friends or anything is he?]

The young Shaper raises both of his hands up, palms towards me in a calming gesture.

[It's all good, Anthony. The Cult knows he's here, how else do you think I was able to get him in here? They aren't interested in him; they just wanted to make sure he wasn't causing problems, alright? It's okay.]

Well, that's a relief. I pat Tiny on the arm with one antenna.

[You wanted to get out and stretch your legs, Tiny? Good on you buddy. I can't believe you lasted as long as you did.]

He gives me a sorrowful look and grunts sadly. Looks like he had a rough time.

[Corun, could you do me a favour and take Tiny out a few more times? He needs to fight and evolve as soon as possible. I'm hoping it'll help deal with his Shadow poison trouble.]

Running my senses through Tiny, I can tell that his 'issue' is still very much a reality. The Shadow mana doesn't seem to have worn itself out, if anything it's grown more aggressive, wrecking its way through his body and damaging his internals everywhere it went.

I hit him with a heal reflexively, but while it cures his injuries, it does nothing to deal with the poisonous mana itself. Corun notices my efforts and grimaces.

[Yeah, I've been healing him pretty much non-stop while Torrina and Granin have been in here helping you. It's been a massive pain in the rock, to be honest. My healing mana Skill is rising at a solid pace, which is nice, but I haven't had a good night's sleep in a week!]

[That's rough man. Imagine your body was being ripped up from the inside instead. I wonder how'd that go?]

[I take your point. I'll make getting Tiny out for hunting a priority. Since we can't solve the issue through conventional means, it might be possible that his evolution will solve the problem. I might talk to Granin about it actually. He might know something relevant.]

The prospect of frequent hunting and evolution has pushed Tiny toward a delirious level of joy. His grin looks like it's going to split his face and happiness is radiating out of his eyes.

[Oh! Right! Wait for a second Tiny, I have something for you!]

I turn and rummage through my pile of resources and drag out a glowing, spherical gem—quite a sizeable one.

[This is a rare core I made for you! Fuse with it now so you're ready for your evolution!]

He doesn't look quite as happy now...

Chrysalis

Chapter 498: No Tickle

There's not a lot to do when imprisoned. It's lucky that I'm used to this sort of thing, others might have a really hard time. In fact, being confined to a small space without anything to do is almost bringing up nostalgic feelings of my human life. Except this time I'm brought regular meals and have pleasant, non-shouty conversations. It's a plus. After Tiny hung around for a little while and I forced him to absorb that rare core he and Corun headed off for some more hunting. I'm levelling and mutating at a good pace here and I'm keen for my first pet to keep pace with me. I'm sure Crinis is levelling like crazy, wherever she is. When I imagine what she would do to anything that tried to prevent her from getting back to me, let's just say I don't picture it going well for the unfortunate creature.

Claws crossed she manages to level up enough to evolve before I meet up with her again. She's going to need at least that much power if we end up getting pursued by those damn Gulgari hunting parties again.

Corun did manage to speak to Granin and he was fairly confident that Tiny's problem could be resolved through evolution, which would be amazing. The poor dude has been getting his insides ripped up for long enough already. It can't be pleasant. Although he puts a brave face on it, I can tell it's driving him bananas. Since he's out hunting, and with the 'joy' of having a rare core absorbed after maxing out he's going to be fully motivated to level up and evolve, so it shouldn't take long.

For me, I'm back to training and raising my newfound pet! Who I still have to name. The Envy Demon is nearly fully grown now, even if he hasn't physically changed size all that much. The floating eyeball stores 90% of its body in a separate dimension after all, which I'm sure is now packed full of brains. Soon enough he'll be able to start casting magic again and I fully intend to have him grinding healing and support magic as fast as possible. His offensive ability is already way higher than I need it to be, but after chatting with Torrina and Corun the wide variety of support magic out there is making me drool. I had no idea this stuff was possible! Certainly I didn't realise how powerful it could be! This is going to revolutionise the Colony when I get back there. But who will cast the spells? Generals are probably too stupid... maybe if they evolve to tier four? Mages obviously can, but they're primarily offensive in nature... healers maybe?

Gah! I can't decide. I'll leave it to the council to work out. They can do the heavy lifting when it comes to thinking about the way the Colony should operate going forward. That's exactly why the council was formed in the first place!

Still, these different branches of support magic are interesting. Healing magic is an obvious one, restoring health and all that. Mind magic has applications for distracting enemies, which is also great. But Illusion magic, an advanced form of light magic that can create false images, much cheaper and easier than trying to insert thoughts into your opponent's head. Barrier magic exists, allowing the caster to produce actual magical shields with varying properties. Curse magic and necrotic magic to weaken foes or damage them over time.

The options are almost endless!

Ah, little Demon! Your future will be busy indeed! So many skills to train, so little time! I can picture Tiny leaping into battle with a powerful shield defending him from harm. Or Crinis extending tentacles through the ground only to have a forest of illusory dark limbs spring up around the real one. With my plethora of defensive options and healing abilities I'll become truly unkillable with shields and additional healing to back me up! Gweheheheh. It's going to be great.

All I have to do is get out this damn hellhole.

I haven't received any signal from the Colony through the newly expanded range of my Vestibule, much to my disappointment. I'd hoped that as soon as the mutation was complete they would be there, on the edge of my awareness, but nope. Nothing. I just have to keep my claws crossed that eventually they'll find their way towards me.

More practice with Torrina before Granin eventually storms back in to break up the monotony.

[Granin, thank Gandalf in his shiny whiteness of beard and robe! Tell this mad woman to give me a rest!]

[Torrina, lay off the bug for a bit. You can keep torturing him in a minute.]

[Sure.]

The originator of my pain sits down looking not even slightly tired. Surely that's just a ruse! I don't care how advanced her Skills are, there's no way she can keep casting like this when I'm putting four brains into the effort to her one!

[How is she able to do this?!] I demand of Granin. [I'm putting some serious mental firepower into this! She's what twenty years old?! How high can her Skills be?!]

Granin pauses for a second as he descends the ladder down to the bottom of my cell before continuing.

[Anthony, how old do you think I am?] He asks.

[I don't know. Fifty?]

[I'm over a hundred and fifty...]

[You what mate?!]

Perfect! First the Lizard Wizard who was hundreds of years old and now this! Is every sapient race on this damned planet able to live hundreds of years or something?!

[Torrina is more than forty years old and she's been training in the magical arts since she was six. Yes, her Skills are higher than yours, obviously. More importantly, I've got word back from the leadership regarding your situation.]

[Oh! Did they take me up on my offer?]

Certainly it would be the best possible outcome if they did. Getting out of here as soon as possible is all I can think about these days.

[No.]

[Dang.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 499: What comes next?

I suppose I shouldn't be disappointed that they turned me down, but I can't help a little pang of emotion run through my mind. Maybe just once, just ONCE, someone would accept the antenna I offered in trust and then walk away. But no. It had to be this crap again. The last time a sapient surface dweller threw my generosity in my face was the Queen of Liria. I responded to that affront in a sensible fashion. I robbed her and her kingdom blind and took every core in their treasury. I wonder what sort of goodies I'll be able to find in the Cult's coffers?

[I'm a bit surprised they shot your deal down, to be honest,] Granin admits, [you display of gravity magic has put every Shaper in the facility in a tizzy. New magic. New powerful magic. It's a potent lure.]

[Not potent enough, apparently,] I mutter a little bitterly, [what possible reason could they have to turn it down? Honestly. I want to know what would motivate them to deny my request. It's an obvious win-win.]

A complicated expression comes over Granin's face as he considers his answer. The big and apparently very old Shaper slowly paces back and forth as the little Demon watches him with its piercing green eye.

[I'm not sure.] He eventually admits. [Something strange is happening, and I don't have any idea what is it, which bothers me.]

[Bothers you?] I scoff. [How do you think I feel?]

[Not great, I imagine,] he chuckles, [I am sorry that I dragged you into this, you know. I had no idea it would turn out this way.]

I shrug my antennae.

[Just following orders eh, Granin? Not much, you or I could do about it. I don't hold a grudge.]

Not against Granin anyway. The Shapers, in general, were subject to my unending wrath! Or at least, the leadership in this outpost. They've surely earned a place on the naughty list. Torrina and Corun had also helped out as best they could. It wasn't their fault that their Cult had gone down this crazy path. If I got

the chance, I would make the Cult pay but just getting my thorax out of their grip would be enough for me.

[I appreciate it. I mean that. You've been treated badly, it's almost comical. The question is, why?]

[Any thoughts.]

[I've been puzzling over it for the last little while,] he said while stroking his granite chin, [it doesn't make a whole lot of sense when you look at it. They want you in the tournament badly enough that they would pass up knowledge of new magic to get it. So they want to you in their little competition, but they sure as hell don't want you to win it, as evidenced by their repeated efforts to get you killed.]

[So they want me to fight, but they want me to lose...]

[That seems to have been the plan from the beginning. Even now it feels like they're still banking on this strategy to extract Gravity Magic from you. If they can get your core, then they can raise you as a pet and try to learn it that way.]

That's horrifying!

[Would that even work?!] I shriek.

[Probably not.] Granin doesn't seem too bothered by the thought of me being raised from the dead. [Raising a creature as a pet doesn't 'bring it back to life', per se, it brings the body back to life, but a new mind is in there, or the previous mind is wiped clean, we aren't sure which.]

[So even if they did that, I wouldn't know anything in particular about gravity magic since I won't have the knowledge from my own world.]

[Right. They probably assume you have the related affinity Skill, which would make all the difference since the reborn you would know the spell shapes and such. In reality, they'd get absolutely nothing from it.]

[Why don't you tell them that,] I point out, [maybe they'll come back and deal with me then.]

[They wouldn't believe me. The only way to prove it would be let one of them to analyse your core. Feel like doing that?]

[Not really...]

Who knows what shenanigans they might pull if I let them have access to my core?! I'm way too paranoid about it even to allow the slightest chance that they could pull strange play. These are people actively trying to make me dead after all.

[That's what I thought. They still appear to want to try and kill you through the tournament for the time being. The question we have is what is motivating them to want you dead. Initially, I thought it was just because they saw your species as inferior, but now I'm starting to have doubts.]

[You mean you don't think my species is inferior anymore?] Haha! Is the true power of the ant is being spread through my glorious actions?

[Ah, no. Ant workers suck. But at this point, their insistence on your death doesn't make sense if that's the only motivation.]

We spend fifteen minutes pondering the reason and sharing our wild theories, but we don't get anywhere. Granin isn't much of a schemer, and I certainly aren't any good at it. Best to leave that sort of stuff to the Council, in my opinion. In the end, our strategy remains the same. Keep training my magic Skills and obliterate my opponent with maximum force!

[Remember, they're bound to have a countermeasure or strategy in place to counter your spell of doom,] Granin warns me. [I'm not saying don't use it, but the next opponent will be chosen with that spell in mind. I highly doubt they'll be as vulnerable to it as your last foe.]

[What does that look like, though?] I ask him as he turns to leave. [I doubt someone can take that spell apart before it hits, or be tough enough to survive its effects. What are they going to throw at me?]

[Don't underestimate what's possible in the Dungeon. Even something that can appear overwhelming can have weaknesses. Having said that, my guess is speed. They'll put in something that escape the area of the spell before it can land. That's what I'd do anyway.]

Granin leaves Torrina and I behind to keep working on my base magic skills and elemental affinities but I can't help but think on Granin's words. If they throw something fast at me, exactly how fast would it be? How would I deal with it? Some of the monsters I've seen have been pretty damn extreme. A monster designed from tier one to utilise speed as a weapon... just what does that look like?

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 500: The rumble below

Six monstrous ants each the size of large hounds snapped their mandibles toward the human hunting party, the sharp *clack* sounds reverberated through the rock walled tunnel yet Isaac Bird, Chief Guard of Renewal Village, didn't feel threatened. He raised a hand to signal the delving party behind him to halt which they did without hesitating. A small jolt of pride welled up in his chest at his troop's quick response but it was followed by a more powerful pang of loss. He'd trained these men and women with Morrelia, but he hadn't seen that glorious paragon of the female gender for weeks now. If the rumours were to be believed, then she wouldn't be coming back at all...

He couldn't think about his bride-to-be now! There were more important things to worry about. He shook his head slightly to refocus and sharpened his eyes on the monsters before him. A small Colony hunting party, the sort the human delving parties had reported seeing more of over the last weeks. Isaac drew a deep breath through his nose and detected a faint tang of blood in the air. The Colony had been hunting and found success nearby, the ants were defending their Biomass. Isaac signalled to his people once more and began to slowly back away.

Once a respectable distance had been created the ants relaxed their posture and skittered away, leaving a lone sentry to keep watch on the pesky humans. Seeing the de-escalation of the monstrous neighbours Isaac was comfortable taking his eyes off them and turning back to his party.

"Looks like they're going to be blocking off this tunnel for a little while yet. May as well get cosy."

The group seemed to agree and settled in for a short rest, leaning against walls or sitting down on the hard stone. They were becoming used to seeing the monsters in the tunnels as the Colony appeared to be increasing its activity in the surface levels. Far from frightening them, it lifted the hearts of those from Renewal Village every time they came across the sacred monsters performing their task of cleansing the Dungeon. To their minds, the fact that the ants would annihilate all Dungeon monsters with extreme prejudice yet leave the humans untouched was yet more evidence that this Colony of ants was special. Sacred.

If they were to realise the aggressive expansion of the Colony through the upper layers was merely the young of the colony, tier one and two ants working in groups with their academy instructors in order to obtain the Biomass and experience needed to 'graduate', then they might be a touch nervous despite their faith. Considering they were seeing more ants than ever before, this increase of sightings would clue them into just how high the daily egg production of the Colony had climbed. If they were to wonder where the more powerful ants had gone, and why, then that would lead them down some very unexpected paths before they could find an answer.

Increasingly when the humans went delving they would find huge stretches of tunnel had been picked clean, not even a stain remained to show what had occurred. It hadn't taken long for them to realise that this was the tell-tale sign of an ant sweep, which was what they had taken to calling these Biomass raids. They didn't mind too much, the tunnels were dangerous and even though they were here to level up they didn't mind this evidence of the safety of their homes. They may not have had a national army, or the Legion (fat lot of good they'd proven to be) guarding over their Dungeon entrances, but they had something even better!

"Should be a lucky hunt today, Captain," one of the delvers said to Isaac.

The Guard turned to the speaker, Roy Drum, an early volunteer to the Dungeon Delving teams. The ex-farmer was a lean faced, serious sort of person who had the characteristic tan from working in the sun most of his adult life. Didn't do him much good down in the Dungeon though.

"Why's that then?" Isaac asked him.

Roy gestured down the tunnel to where the single ant still watched them warily.

"We've come under the eyes of the Colony. 'Tis a good sign."

Isaac stifled a sigh and nodded to the man before looking away. The fervour with which the members of the village worshipped the mysterious ants remained hard for him to accept. He definitely recognised that the Colony was special, something perhaps entirely new in the history of the Dungeon. An entire community of intelligent monsters that did not exhibit any form of aggression towards people. It was insane, unheard of. It was a fact that the ants had acted to defend the people of the village when they didn't have to. It was enough to make a believer out of him, he just wasn't as far gone as most of the villagers.

In fact, at this moment more than one of his party had begun to kneel and pray toward the watching ant. Exasperated by this display of piety the Guard Captain could only wonder what the watching ant was thinking.

The ant in question, a Brood Tender, was watching the humans with a feeling bordering on contempt. They didn't appear to be doing anything. So lazy! Luckily the ants would be finished soon and this training group would move onto another section of tunnel before making their way down to the Marsh Expanse where the newborn ants would drink their fill of aphid nectar before evolving. The trip through the tunnels and down to the expanse had become something of a rite of passage for new members of the Colony, and the aphids provided a safe and reliable source of Biomass which the ants could use to max out the mutations of the young. Thinking about the foresight of the Eldest made her antennae quiver in wonder. Despite the relative lack of Biomass available compared to the wave, the Colony was thriving and graduating more new members per day than ever before. The new Queens had begun producing young already back in the original nest!

Isaac knew none of this. What he knew was that he had ten villagers-turned-delvers that needed experience and they weren't going to get any here. He gathered a few of the more experienced members of the group around him; Roy Drum, Cedric Malon, Mel Blanc, and had a brief planning session. Predictably, the others wanted to stay and observe the ants until they moved on, but Isaac wanted to move on and argued strongly to get his way.

"We've been down for two days already. Supplies are gonna get thin on the ground soon. We can't afford to waste four hours for the Colony to move on and then wander along in their wake not fightin'!"

After ten minutes or so the group grudgingly agreed and they began to pick themselves up, gathering gear and shouldering packs.

"Come on then, you lot!" Isaac grinned at them. "These monsters aren't going to kill themselves, they need you to provide assistance with the end of your spear! A little gentle persuasion! Make sure you get your point across!"

"Please shut up, Captain." Mel begged. "I can't take another two days of this."

"Insubordination! On my delve!? Get that spear over your head and hold it till I say!"

Mel groaned but raised her hands nonetheless as the others chuckled at her expense. Isaac smiled to himself as he felt the mood amongst the delve become more energised. They had a lot of ground they needed to cover if they were to hit their targets for this delve and Isaac would be damned if he was going to miss. As they began marching again Isaac took the forward position and watched carefully for any ambushes, but he couldn't help his thoughts turning to a certain berserker and just how attractive her enraged glare made her look.