

## Chrysalis 501

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#### Chapter 501: Trade

Enid Ruther couldn't decide if she was more tired or invigorated. The council meeting had run late, again, until even Bertold the guild leader had been nodding in his cup. And yet not a single member would say they'd left the gathering anything less than upbeat. Perhaps it was true what her husband used to say and people truly did see the best of each other in the darkest of times. Unlike Derrion, she'd never been forced to confront those dark moments battling in the Dungeon, instead she got to see the best her people could offer now, after their homes and families had been destroyed in such a brutal manner.

To juxtapose such suffering with the incredible community that had sprung up in the middle of nowhere was at times completely jarring, yet unless she was thinking of it consciously it all just felt so natural. Of course the Gorion family would lend their meagre spare supplies to the Tirin's who'd just arrived with nothing but the clothes on their back, why would anyone ever think that they wouldn't?! Or that the builders would happily shove away their dinner and start levelling ground and cutting beams the second Enid knocked on their door and said new houses were needed. She didn't say they were needed immediately and hastened to tell them so but they just shrugged, grinned and got to work.

She'd never seen such an unselfish work ethic in all her life and every day she woke up expecting to find it gone and replaced with more normal greed, but it clung to the community like a stubborn virus. By now even the neighbours were starting to notice the unflinching generosity and dedication of the people, Enid herself had been questioned on it more than once.

[No,] she'd been forced to say, [it isn't normal for people to work like this.]

[Curious,] the ant had stared up at her with its unblinking eyes as it pondered her words, [you wouldn't describe humans as... lazy ... would you?]

The insects were normally almost totally void of emotion, but somehow she could sense just how repellent the concept of laziness was to the creature. Which made sense, she supposed, ants were not exactly known for being relaxed and slack creatures.

[Humans can be lazy,] she admitted, [just like any other creature...]

The ant stared at her for a long moment.

[... almost any other creature, I meant to say. Obviously the Colony is excepted from such... weak... fleshy concerns.]

She swore the ant's antennae wiggled a little at her acknowledgement. Thinking back to that conversation caused a slight chuckle to break through the old woman's gruff exterior as she walked through the cool night. In some ways the insects of Anthony's colony were highly intelligent and curious creatures, full of questions and full of an insatiable thirst to learn. In other ways they were like children, incapable of deception and completely certain of their own point of view. Would the monsters become old and jaded, as so many mortal species did? Or would they continue forward forever sure in themselves?

Needless to say, Enid wouldn't live long enough to find out. It was a miracle she was still going, all things considered. At nearly seventy years of age, she was easily the oldest survivor of the disaster. Which was surprising since she'd not gained a whole lot of toughness across her lifetime. Perhaps it was Will keeping her old bones moving?

She rapped at the door of the bowyer and pushed her way in without waiting for a response. A rush of warm air blew past as she stepped blinking into the newly made workspace. Wood chips and shavings covered every surface and the air felt thick with it, causing her to cough as she waved a hand in front of her. What she didn't see was her damn craftsman.

"Aarran Yewman! Where the hell are you? I told you I'd be here after the meeting!"

From another room came the scraping of a chair across the floor and the overweight, balding bowmaker stumbled into the room.

"Keep it down Enid, you old crow!" He growled in his low, rumbling, voice. "I just sat down to eat my dinner, I've been waiting around out here for more than an hour."

"Hardly my fault if the meeting runs long, is it?" Enid re-joined. "Have you taken a look at it yet or have you been slacking?"

Mumbling to himself about the apology Aarran knew he was never going to get, he limped across the room to his work bench and reached up to pull down a long stave of wood from an overhead rack.

"Slacking? Unlike some people who sit around all day and call it work, I've been busy. Take a look at this."

So saying he tossed the stave toward Enid, forcing her to catch it out of the air with a squawk. The moment she had it in her hands though, her eyes sharpened and her merchant's instincts took over. The wood was smooth, the grain fine. The flex was perfect as well. She brought it closer to her eyes and noted with excitement the slight gleam that ran through the wood.

"This is good stuff."

"Aye. That it is," Aarran agreed. "Those ants have some good stuff in their mandibles there, I'd have worked with wood of that quality probably three or four times in my entire life, and I've been cutting bows since I was five."

A recent addition to Renewal Village, Aarran was a master Bowyer from a kingdom neighbouring Liria, Holt. It seems that before she came south the hated Garralosh wasn't too concerned if she crossed borders and her monsters had rampaged through many of the border kingdoms. The outriders had ranged far and fast to bring word of this refuge to everyone who could make it and even now more people were flooding in, seemingly by the day. Enid had finally started delegating as much as she needed to and for now things were holding together.

"What sort of enchantment do you think the wood will hold?" She asked.

She had her own opinion but Aarran would know better than her. This was his particular area of expertise, after all.

"Just about any basic enchantment of Earth, Water or Wood affinity I would think. Ice arrows would be a good one, but there's a heap of options. Problem is, I can't do the enchanting myself. Have you lined up anyone to do it for you?"

His tone said that he was doubtful she'd managed that. Several craftsmen were working hard to develop their enchanting skills but none were far enough along that she'd be willing to let them work on such precious material as this.

"Well, that's the thing. I think I have found someone to perform the enchanting, but they need to practice first. I've been asked to provide some practice staves for them to work on. Do you think you could supply them?"

"Well, sure." Aarran folded his arms. "How many do they want?"

"A thousand..."

"A THOUSAND? Where the hell do you think I'm going to find the time to make that many?! And who could possibly have a thousand cores to spare making practice bows?!" The irate bowyer stared at her as if she were daft, which was fair.

Enid sighed. She knew this would happen.

"I know you've only been here a few days, Aarran, and I appreciate everything you've been able to for us..."

"Aye."

"... did you happen to talk to Priest Beyn yesterday?"

"... Aye."

"And what did you think? About what he had to say."

The big man hesitated for a moment.

"It's... hard to take."

Enid nodded.

"I know. By all that is holy, I know. But it's all true. You've seen them around, you know the Colony means us no harm. More than that, they have acted out to help us in a huge number of ways. This is one of them. They've offered to perform the enchanting for us."

The craftsman's eyes widened to an almost dangerous degree.

"The ants?! Enchanting? In return for what?"

"That's the thing. They just want the experience and Skill levels. Apparently they've been enchanting like crazy down there. Unlike us, they have the resources to burn testing and experimenting and they are actually getting somewhere!"

"There has to be a price, Enid." Aarran rebuffed her, not willing to trust monsters. "What could they possibly want."

"Knowledge. Before he left, Anth- ... Their leader told me that the ants would help us in return for access to our knowledge. If they ask a question, make sure you answer it, that's all."

The old man nodded slowly.

"And what happens when we have no more knowledge to give?" He asked. "Do they abandon us? Or worse? I spoke to Beyn and I've been in that church he built. It ain't natural, Enid. Quite a few newcomers are nervous about it. People are worried that we trust these monsters too much."

Enid sighed. This was a recurring issue that cropped up with every new group of refugees who settled here. After some time, they would acclimate, or more likely, Beyn would talk them around to his way of thinking. But then another group would come and the whisperings would start all over again. It just felt like each time it happened it took longer from the rumblings to settle down. Some people just flat refused to believe that an ant brought down Garralosh and saved them from the horde. Enid didn't even blame them, it seemed crazy. Perhaps if Anthony was here then it would be easier to convince them. Things just seemed to happen when that creature was around.

"Just think about it," Enid told him. "I have assurances that they can do what we want. I'd rather not have to order you Aarran, but we need to make the most of this. These weapons will not only make us safe, they'll secure us financially. For years. If you agree, then deliver whatever you can to Beyn in the morning and start working on the rest."

Not bothering to stay and argue, Enid turned and left. It was late and she was cold. Her own blankets awaited.

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### **Chapter 502: Holy ground**

Beyn Antseeker, for that was now his name, tread forward with reverence. This was a sacred place, and one toward which he felt only the deepest respect. They were all around him now and he did his best not to disturb their paths and they moved passed him with purpose. They were always so sure of themselves, the Path was clear before their multi-faceted eyes and their many legs could not stray from it.

[Hurry your step, human. There is much work to be done.]

Ah!

[I apologise, holy one. I was distracted, also it is difficult for me to carry these with only one arm.]

It was true. Currently, Beyn was carrying an arm load of ten unstrung bow staves in a delivery to the Colony under his one good arm. There had been tremendous excitement amongst the faithful when the offer of the Colony to enchant weapons for the Village. Such a thing was yet more evidence of the righteousness of their cause. How could anyone continue to hold doubts as to the nature of this Colony, to the sanctity of the Great One? Such an offer only put more fuel on the fires of faith and Beyn had immediately held a public gathering to preach in the Village square, praising this news to the heavens.

Enid had been quite annoyed with him at that. Considering the transaction hadn't been finalised and the craftsmen in particular had not yet agreed to take part. Beyn had scoffed at such meagre constraints. Such things would be swept away by the current of destiny that had seized them all in its waves!

She'd hit him after that and he had executed a tactical retreat. It was frustrating to Beyn that none were closer to the ants, or the Great One in the village than Enid was, yet she held herself back from truly embracing the new Path. She'd never been particularly religious and Beyn had many disagreements with her acting as her Priest, yet he believed that deep down the faith burned strong within her.

How could it not? She had witnessed the miracles of the Colony from just as close as he had!

[Are you sure that I shouldn't carry them for you?] His escort flexed her mandibles to demonstrate their willingness to help.

[I must decline,] Beyn hastened to say. [The agreement stated that we must deliver the material to you directly and I do not intend to shirk my work.]

[That's good then.] The ant nodded its antennae and continued to lead the way toward the nest.

Even though this particular Mage had no idea why the council had agreed to let this human inside the nest she would do her job and escort them properly. If he so much as looked at a brood chamber he was getting chomped.

The Priest was quite aware that he was in danger. He knew a great deal about the Colony, more than the ants suspected in all likelihood. He couldn't help it, he was endlessly curious about this manifestation of a miracle, as were his followers. Once the ants had begun to interact with the people of Village in an attempt to learn what they knew of production, construction and civilisation, the faithful had begun an earnest campaign to learn about them. There was nothing malicious in their hearts, they simply yearned to grow closer, to learn anything they could about the object of their reverence.

And so when they were approached by the Colony to share their knowledge, they did so gladly and when they felt they could, they politely, respectfully and tactfully asked questions back. Most of the time the ants would refuse to answer. They didn't seem to particularly trust humans and were, quite naturally, very insular. It was to be expected, after all. Divine monsters they may be, but the nature of the Colony was to be loyal to itself. Even so, every drab of information was hoarded, analysed and ruminated on. Every utterance of an ant was taken as holy gospel, to be studied and dissected.

In this way, tiny tidbits of information were accrued in order to paint a picture. A blurry picture, with giant gaps. But a picture nonetheless. For instance, they learned that it was the will of the Great One that directed the Colony to interact so closely with the Village. They also learned that the Colony was actively making use of their newfound knowledge as much as possible. Enchanting, forging, building. Every day the ants would come back with more detailed questions, as if they'd taken what they'd learned that day, tried to apply it through the night, then come back for more insights.

But the holy grail, the most coveted prize of all, besides further words with the Great One, was to have access to the nest. They craved it! Oh how they craved it! Even though he knew it was a pipe-dream. As if the ants would ever let them inside their most precious abode! If there was ever to be a chance, it would be through the strengthening bonds of cooperation between the two communities. This exchange had provided an in and Beyn Antseeker was determined to seek with all his strength!

[Hold up there, human Beyn.] He was warned by his escort and he stopped.

After a few moments of silence another, larger ant emerged from the ground to his right. He started. He hadn't even noticed the opening in the ground and yet now a monster had just sprung from it.

[Greetings, human Beyn.] Came another voice. [My name is Cobalt. Please follow me.]

A name?! A named ant?! They'd heard whispers of this select group of individuals but there had been precious little information about them.

The ant... Cobalt... turned around and vanished once more beneath the ground, leaving the wary Priest little choice but to follow. It was awkward, he was unbalanced due to carrying his cargo under his one arm and the low ceiling, clearly not made for creatures of his height, forced him to stoop.

But he persevered. Indeed, his heart was alight with joy! He would gladly walk over hot coals in order to get even a glimpse into the inner sanctum of these holy creatures! As he shuffled through the tunnels, it was clear that he wasn't being shown anything the ants were not prepared to allow him to see. He saw no young, no sign of the Queen that had been sighted during the battle against Garralosh. Instead he saw something even more shocking. Chamber after chamber that had been shaped and purposed for crafting. Forges, complete with stone floors, magically operated bellows and ventilation. Enchanting chambers filled with cores and decorated with special, ant comfortable stations in which the creatures could work.

[Your weapons will be enchanted here,] Cobalt finally stopped and indicated a particular chamber with his antennae. [Please leave the staves and bring another load at this time tomorrow. We are confident we will have worked out the process after a week, maybe two.]

Not daring to speak, Beyn lay down his burden and bowed deeply towards every ant he could see before he was escorted out. Though his face was calm, his heart burned with renewed fervour. He hadn't dared to imagine they could come this far. What could they be but divine?

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### **Chapter 503: Round four**

There's been a notable increase in spectators between rounds. When I had my first fight there was hardly anyone about to watch the spectacle but now, here in round four? Someone's getting popular! The observation area is packed.. Standing room only. It makes sense in a morbid way. One hundred and twenty eight triads had an entrant in this tournament and now only sixteen were still working. All those idle hands means more stone layered bums in seats I suppose. Not to mention all of the triads who manage the surviving monsters are here to scout. When there's only eight fights, it's not hard to make it to all of them and keep an eye on the opposition.

With this bumper audience I'll need to ensure I put on a show!

No wait... Why the hell would I do that? Just focus on not getting dead and surviving long enough to escape! Don't do anything unnecessary, idiot! Trying to snap back into focus I shake off the surprise I felt at the size of the crowd and worry about what's in front of me. The gate hasn't risen to let my opponent in yet, so I still have some time. Best get myself fully prepared. Sink into the meditation skill, get my sub-brains prepping some mana. Our intel spoke to the speed and dexterity of this opponent, so we decided a Gravity mana focused strategy would help even the odds. I've also whipped up a Fire mana construct

just in case. The wide range of the flame thrower spell and general explosiveness should help catch out my more nimble opponent.

Oh ho! Here we go. I stretch out my six legs as the gate opposite begins to rattle as it rises to reveal the creature behind it. It looks... just as weird as I was told. It's tall, probably as tall as Tiny, but thin, like, really thin. It looks like it hasn't eaten anything in its entire life! Emaciated is one thing, but this guy is pushing it to a new level. He kind of looks like a shadow beast was crossed with a sloth. He has gangly arms tipped with long, curved claws that cast a wicked gleam. In fact, I suspect they are actually glowing, though it's hard to tell in this lighting. Could be an elemental mutation, or perhaps a mana infusion that aids cutting power? Could be something new they added to help deal with my carapace. The creature has a narrow face with a particularly non-threatening mole-like pointy face. Something tells me the teeth he's packing in there are the real deal though.

As it strolls into the arena the creature stretches its limbs languorously in a nonchalant display. Considering those limbs are made from shadow flesh those stretches are a little disturbing, the limbs bending too far to be normal, the flesh extending far more than it should.

Alright there, buddy. No need to put yourself on display. Oh look, the Shapers are eating it up. Chumps. So much pointing and muttering going on up there. Get with the program guys, where's the ant love? I can't help but clack my mandibles in irritation. Stupid sloth monster, stealing my limelight. I'll get my revenge by eating him, I suppose that'll have to do. One final check of my skills and constructs. Everything looks good. Time to start weaving and compressing my first spell.

As my sub-brains get busy focusing on casting, I watch the opponent like an ant-hawk. The biggest threat this monster poses is his insane speed and lightning fast attacks. No elemental damage, no magic or super fancy tricks. Granin speculated that the triad who created this beast designed it to make best use out of its rubbery, shadow flesh by creating a beast that could push its body past breaking point, literally shred its own tissues to achieve speed and power that would otherwise be impossible. The unique properties of shadow flesh means that the monster can regrow and replace the damage far more easily than I can heal. Even Crinis utilises similar mutations that allow her to just 'pump' more shadow goop into damaged areas to replace what's been lost.

It makes for an intimidating prospect. I'll need to be careful. Well... of course I do, it's a fight to the death.

I know the battle is going to start in a few seconds so I waste no time unleashing my first spell before the Shapers declare the fight has begun. It's a defensive spell which is apparently allowed. Before my opponent can move a muscle my Gravity Domain expands outwards in an ever revolving sphere centred on me. I'm not actually sure if the spell penetrates through the ground... I might need to investigate that.

In a loud voice, the Shaper announces the start of the battle and I nearly flinch even sunk into meditation, my mind hyper-alert and focusing on my foe. I'm not sure what I expected to happen. I think deep down I imagined him disappearing like a cartoon character, only to appear behind me looking smug whilst I appear foolish and confused. Not that such a thing would work on me anyway, I can see behind me! MUAHAHAHA.

No, instead the monster continues its casual behaviour and strolls toward me, it's movements languid and relaxed. I don't know if this guy is overconfident or if this is how he always acts. Oh well, no reason not to execute the plan. With my condensed Gravity Domain slowly revolving around me I engage my brains again and draw out more Gravity mana to shape into spells. Thank goodness my Gravity Mana Gland contains so much of the precious juice. Granin and I theorised that it would be a key element in slowing my speedy opponent down. My first attempt is gravity spear, the old favourite.

I settle my feet and try to get low. No point trying to contest this creature in speed, I have no hope of winning such a contest and running around is only going to open up blind spots. Instead, I'll force him to come to me and act like the mountain against his wind.

As the monster draws closer I snap my mandibles open and unleash the spear in a straight line directly into the creature's face. See if you can act smug now! Contrary to my expectations however, the creature casually leans to one side and allows the spear to brush past its lithe frame. Damn thing barely broke stride!

That spell moves pretty damn fast. Not like, a bullet fast, we aren't talking Neo levels of dodge here, but still, fast. It felt like he just swayed out of the way of an arrow I'd fired at his face. Maybe if I aim lower, go for the middle of his body, then he'll have to at least move a little more.

Drawing on the combined power of my two weaker sub-brains I throw together another spear and cast it as fast as I can. By this time the monster is within thirty metres of me, having walked his way straight toward me from the other side of the arena. The moment the spear is unleashed I raise up my profit margin and unleash a barrage of acid.

POW! POW! POW! POW!

The spell streaks forward whilst overhead the acid arcs into the air before spreading and starting to fall. I tried to arrange the four shots in a spread around the monster's current location. Let's see how you dodge now...

Almost as if in slow motion, the monster's eyes sharpen and it bends its legs. Then, with a flicker of light, it's gone!

WHAM!

A tremendous impact slams into my side, but I'm ready! My legs absorb the shock and I angle my carapace to allow those long, curved claws to slide off my side with a screech. My mandibles open wide and snap shut in an instant but the creature is already gone. With a kick of his legs he pushes off the ground and almost glides through the air to land more than ten metres away.

So fast! So damn fast! Without my enhanced reflexes and future sense, I'd have had no idea what had even hit me! That's how every fight has gone so far for this monster apparently. One hit kills. Even then, he aimed for my eye, the gap in my defences. I had to perform a tiny dash to bring my head out from under that strike and have it clash on my carapace instead.

Now he's just standing outside the range of my Domain looking at me with his head cocked, as if he's shocked I'm still alive. This monster is irritating in the extreme.



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### **Chapter 504: Speed. I am not speed**

This cocky monster is going to catch these mandibles, just as soon as I manage to get a hook on him. The strange thing is how he was able to enter and exit my gravity domain so easily... Is it a question of mass? True, he's thin as an anorexic stick on an Atkins diet, but I'd assumed that he'd be dense, like Crinis. That shadow flesh can be packed pretty darn tight. I'm starting to suspect that they may not have done that in order to avoid hampering his speed. Which means that gravity magic may not be the answer to my problems. Or perhaps it still is? I may just need to think outside the box. Regardless, I still have tricks I haven't shown off that I can use.

I take a moment to check on the damage to my carapace whilst my opponent is still pondering the meaning of my continuing existence. Looks like he managed to gouge a chunk out of my beautiful diamond skeleton. I shouldn't be surprised considering the strength behind that blow. If my carapace was any weaker he might have blown a hole right through it. As it stands the damage is already being repaired by the inner-plating below, the grooves left behind from the claws are filling up with a clear gel-like fluid that will soon harden into new carapace. It'll take a lot more than this to break down my defence!

Carapace is love! Carapace is life! Diamonds are forever! Gweheheheh.

Trying to catch the monster unawares, I blast off a quick Gravity Spear but to no avail. With another seemingly casual movement, the monster is able to step to one side and avoid the spell, which fizzles into the ground behind him. He must have very high levels of the Dodge Skill, possibly even precognitive abilities similar to my own. He just makes dodging look so easy. That slight movement seems to have been the signal for him to start back up again. The monster leans to one side and begins to walk, rapidly picking up pace until he's sprinting at an insane speed, looping around me in a circle. Sand flies up in a curtain, thrown into the air by the creature's feet as I wonder what he's trying to achieve. I can't get dizzy, bud. I don't have to turn my head to keep my eyes on you...

He is staying out of the range of my Gravity Domain though, which is worth noting.

Not willing to wait for the enemy to make the first move, I draw out my fire mana and weave together a particularly nasty spell. The monster is moving almost too quickly for me to get a solid lock on it, but that shouldn't matter for this spell. It only takes seconds for me to piece together the lines of magic and power them. Within moments my mandibles open wide and a sizzling hose of flame erupts from in front of my face! Burn, sucka!

A hiss of pain reaches my ears before my antennae tingle once again. Acting on instinct, my nerves fire at once and my body twitches to one side.

**BAM!**

Another sharp impact! Once again the beast was trying to stuff its claws straight through my eyes and into my head! Nasty! My shift was enough to cause the strike to fall on another part of my head, no major harm done. I don't turn off the flames and keep pouring more mana into it. I've now got two spells of different Affinities going at once, quite a difficult feat. Without the training I've received lately, this would be far more difficult. My brains are truly flexing their power now!

My carapace starts to warm up as I spin in place and blast my surroundings with blazing flames. The sand sounds as if it's cooking and begins to glow a bright red as the creature leaps left and right, trying to avoid the heat. Too hot for you, mole face? I've got plenty more where this came from! The torrent of fire continues to pour out from in front of my face as my minds strain to control the flood of mana powering the Spell. I angle my body left and right but the opponent is just too slippery, unleashing a hiss of rage before nimbly dodging away, jumping over or ducking beneath the Spell and sprinting to find another angle to approach.

Whilst I keep the fire magic flowing, the monster is hesitant to approach and seems content to wait me out. Unwilling to allow my mana reserves to fall too low, I reluctantly let the spell drop and start watching my enemy closely. The fire magic was effective and I know for sure I scored a hit. That might not mean much, considering the creature is known to have powerful regenerative abilities, but I'll take the minor victory.

In fact, so far this match is going fairly well. I might not be able to put damage onto the monster in front of me, but he hasn't been able to do much to me either. All in all, I'm feeling pretty safe! Wait, don't think that, Anthony. That's a flag right there.

No sooner do I think that thought than the monster opposite seems to come to the same conclusion. His current tactics aren't working and right now it's going to be a race to see if I'll run out of Mana before he runs out of Stamina. Considering how draining it must be to move at that kind of speed, I can't see me losing that race. In other words, the monster and I appear to decide simultaneously that it's time to take this fight to the next level.

The monster's eyes flicker and it leaps away from me. Once it lands, the beast opens its strange, pointed mouth and screams, before its entire body begins to turn red, as if the blood within its veins has boiled in an instant.

Is this your secret powerup moment? Are you about to unleash your final technique?! I don't think so!

Unwilling to let the monster have any time to itself, I flood my mandibles with Gravity Mana and prepare to unveil my next trick. With a mental shout of 'GET OVER HERE', I YOINK the creature with a powerful pull and it's light mass causes it to fall directly toward me. I can see the shock in its eyes as the ground no longer feels like the ground and it falls directly toward the eager jaws of its foe. But it's not the face hands I want my enemy to catch, but a bit of heat.

As the creature falls toward me, my mandibles open wide and fire boils out from before my face, submitting my enemy to a glorious roast, one which it doesn't appreciate judging by the horrific screech of pain it emits.

Then it completes its journey and slams into my head, clawing and biting like a mad thing having a bad day. As soon as it latches its hands onto me the beast pulls itself away from my head and starts to go to town on my back with a flurry of enraged strikes.

**BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM!**

With horrific, unimaginable strength far beyond what I have felt before from this thing it batters away at my carapace with its elongated, curved claws, tearing chunks out my diamond shell with every strike.

What's more, I can see that the creature's own body falling apart with every movement. Ichor begins to burst out of its limbs and drip down onto my exo-skeleton where it sizzles and steams.

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### **Chapter 505: Gaining Traction**

The diamond carapace will never yield!

...

I hope! In the meantime, let's not put it to the test and get this freaky mole monster off of my back! As it continues to wail on my precious shiny exterior, I try to flip him off by flinging myself left and right— sand flies as I move with vigour but to no avail. I don't know if he's got glue on his feet or something, but he's managed to dig right in up there. I can't even turn my head around to bite him since I lack a neck and all that.

The answer will have to come from private industry! Even with the monster standing on me, with my newfangled accessories back there, I'm able to lift my abdomen enough that I can get an angle on the beast.

POW! POW! POW! POW!

A rapid-fire barrage of acid! Behold the might and efficacy of my latest product!

"HSSSSSSSSS!"

The creature sounds like steam escaping a vent as the acid clings to its body, seeping into its already open wounds and burning at its flesh. As it's distracted, I try to fling it off once more, and whatever tension it was holding in its feet breaks. It flies from my back and lands heavily nearby, writhing in pain.

Chance!

I've been hoping for this moment! My sub-brains have been busy crafting the often underutilised inverse-gravity bolts! I have two in the chamber and ready to fly, and once I see the monster land, I unleash them. The two blasts of purple magic fly home and strike the monster right in the centre of its mass. Rather than celebrate I take a second to inspect the damage I've sustained.

It's not a great picture. The carapace across the back of my abdomen and thorax has taken a shredding. Deep gouges that cut almost the entire way through to my body cover me, each weeping the clear gel released from the inner-carapace plating. In terms of HP, I haven't lost much, only twenty points so far in the fight, but if this creature manages to cut through my defence, I don't think he'll need to do it a second time. The power contained in each of those strikes is no joke!

The question I have is, do I risk using my regeneration gland to patch up my carapace or wait in case I sustain massive damage later in the fight? I don't want to waste usage of the organ, only to find my legs have been chopped off in the next minute. Then again, I don't want to save it at then get cut in half from one swipe of those horrible claws.

Deciding that prevention is better than recover, I trigger the gland as my sub-brains spin up another set of inverse bolts. I've had way less practice with this form of the spell, and it shows, the relatively simple magic taking up to ten seconds to form. To save on brainpower, I drop the Gravity Domain. The low

mass and high power of the monster made it ineffective anyway. Now that my strategy has flipped less gravity rather than more, it no longer makes sense to spend resources on it.

POW! POW! POW! POW!

The acid barrage doesn't stop for love nor money, and the creature rolls desperately away as the rain of high-quality merchandise continues to fall. The monster is still suffering the effects from overtaxing its own body, but even as I watch it stand and heave for oxygen, its wounds are starting to heal. It's triggered whatever healing capacity it has. I'm not too worried about it; this was something that I was always going to have force out at some point and getting done just as I've used mine makes me feel comfortable.

It continues to roll away from my acid rain, delaying until it manages to return to full health no doubt. But this presents another opportunity. Taking careful aim, I wait for my chance and fire out my second set of anti-gravity bolts just as the creature is about to finish one dodge roll. Even now, it's still damn quick, and its high dodge Skill allows it to evade one of my spells, but I'm delighted to see the other smack home.

After three bolts the effect should be starting to show now, surely.

After being struck, the mole-monster seems to have had enough. It's burning red flesh, and sizzling blood appears to demand it leap into action and so it does! Only... it doesn't. It tries to dash to one side and build up speed for another of its devastating killing blows, yet something is different. Its legs are spinning, but it isn't able to get the kind of speed it expects.

Gweheheheheh.

Are you feeling a little light-headed, maybe? Perhaps a bit light in the body? Having some issues getting your feet to stick in the sand the way you want?

MUAHAHAHAHAHA!

No traction for you!

"HSSSSSSS!"

Once more, the monster lets out a steam-like hiss. It's not in pain this time; it's expressing pure frustration. Whilst still moving quickly, the creature isn't moving anywhere near the sort of speed it was able to achieve before. Although my spell isn't affecting it powerfully enough to lift it into the air, the inverse gravity bolt has reduced the pull of gravity on it to the point where it can't get the sort of traction it needs to generate that blistering pace.

Not fast enough now, monster!

I snap my mandibles with glee, and for the first time in the fight, I begin to push forward, hunting for my foe with my mandibles. Uncertain and confused, the monster tries to dart left and right to escape, but I'm ready. My fire mana construct has been humming away in the background and drawing deeply on my mana reserves I pull together a demanding spell. Right before my enemies eyes, a giant wall of flame erupts from the ground. The heat is oppressive, even to me. But it's so much worse for the shadow monster. It flinches away instinctively which is enough to grant me a brief opening.

BAM!

Another inverted gravity bolt hits home as I close in with a Dash. Get ready for a chomp!

CRUNCH!

Dammit! The creature slithers away from my mandibles like an eel, its absurdly high Dodge allowing it to evade even in such dire circumstances. I don't believe you can keep it up forever, monster! Sooner or later I'm going to get you!

The monster seems to understand the same. Rather than try and create distance, it instead closes in, angling to my side to avoid my jaws. I'm not going to let you! The wall of fire is still burning, fuelled by a constant stream of fire mana pouring out of me and with my back to it, the monster can't circle all the way around. I turn rapidly to keep it in front of me, and once it closes in on the wall, it's forced to stop and come at me directly.

CHOMP!

I missed again! Where the heck did he go?!

I look around frantically only to see a flicker of movement above. He jumped! And he went way, way higher than he expected...

Using the explosive power of its legs, combined with its lightened body, the monster has flown almost thirty metres into the air, nearly high enough to touch the roof of the arena! I think he wanted to leap onto my back and try once again to stab through my eyes or something, but he didn't expect the spell to affect him in this way.

It's a fatal mistake. I have all the time in the world to reposition myself and prepare my jaws at the point of landing. Frantic, the creature lashes at the air to try and change its path of descent, but nothing helps.

Omen Chomp!

CRUNCH.

It's over.

[Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 506: Getting too far**

The announcements of the Bearded One ring within my mind as my speedy foe falls to the ground, neatly bisected by the omen chomp.

[You have defeated Level 2 Regulus Bestiae saltus]

[You have gained XP]

[You have reached level 36.]

[You have reached level 37.]

[You have reached level 38.]

[You have reached level 39.]

[You have reached level 40.]

[You have reached level 41.]

[Basic profile unlocked.]

[Regulus Bestiae Saltus, Clawed Leaping Beast (VI). This modified version of the Leaping Beast excels in rapid movement and decisive strikes. Unsited to extended engagements, its preferred strategy is to kill from the shadows with a single blow. Its powerful musculature and advanced claws give it the strength and penetrating power to tear through almost any defence.]

Heh. Almost any defence. Just not the Diamond Carapace!

Still, that was actually scarier than the final result showed. If my carapace was weaker, or if I didn't have the inner-plating, then there's a good chance the monster could have pierced through and minced my insides. Or if I didn't have my future-sense or rapid reflexes, then my carapace wouldn't have mattered as the creature would have stabbed me through the eye on its first attack. In the end, it was actually a bad matchup for the Leaping Beast. I was uniquely resilient against its preferred strategy and even possessed the means to slow it down long enough to damage it. Against most monsters I wager it would be able to finish them before they could blink. The Shapers were so focused on the Gravity Bomb that they picked my opponent based on that spell alone. Foolish!

No matter. It's done, I survived another round. Hopefully my enemies amongst the Shapers are grinding their teeth watching another of their precious favourites go down in flames. More Biomass for me! And honestly, the experience is really piling up! Six entire levels from this guy! Juicy! I'm already past the halfway mark for my next evolution, which is frankly ridiculous. It wasn't that long ago I evolved. Am I going to get to tier six before Tiny can make it to tier five? That'll really irritate the big ape. Heheheh.

Pleasantly lost to my own thoughts I amble over to the Biomass and begin to drag it back to my side of the Arena. Soon enough the gates are opened and we're on our way back to my own cell. This will buy me a little more time, maybe another day, possibly two. I imagine the time between rounds will shrink, since there's far fewer fights in each round. In fact, going into round five, how many monsters are left? If we started with one hundred and twenty eight... there's only eight left once this round is done?! Holy moly! So I'm a quarter-finalist! Whoo!

Wait, I don't care about winning this thing, get me out of here! Although a few more levels wouldn't hurt...

No! Focus, Anthony! Get back to the Family. You can get levels in a heap of different ways, forget about the incredible wealth of Biomass each of these monsters represents. Speaking of which.

NOM NOM NOM NOM NOM.

[Already eating, you pig!] Torrina's teasing mental voice connects to mine.

[I'm starving. All that training drains a ton of energy.] I reply calmly as I continue to chomp away.

[I've got good news for you, Anthony. Corun told me that your pet evolved this morning.]

[What? Already?!] There goes my plans to double evolve before Tiny catches up.

Even so, this is great news! My first pet has reached my level once again!

[What about his mana poisoning? Was that resolved?] I ask anxiously.

She nods and smiles.

[Apparently so! It even appears to have had an effect on his evolution. In a positive way.]

I almost sag to the ground with relief. Tiny's ongoing internal injuries had been a huge source of stress for me, and him I'm sure, and to know that it's been dealt with is fantastic news.

[Things are turning up Anthony today, Torrina! When do you think I'll get a chance to see Tiny? I'd love to see his new form. What's his species? No wait, let me guess... Black Mountain Storm Gorilla? Shadow Fist Electric Ape King?! DARK PRIMATE OF THE STORM?!]

[Settle down a little! I don't know what it is, you'll have to wait until Corun can bring him in. We might be able to bring him in tomorrow. I'm not sure what they're planning to do with the schedule. Things might accelerate from this point on or they might slow down. It's all down to the whims of the leadership and who knows what they're thinking.]

Stupid thoughts. They're thinking stupid thoughts. They don't seem too capable of any other kind, that lot. Their lack of capacity to understand the greatness of ants is merely the greatest and most obvious of their failings. Morons. I have no time to ponder their many flaws today. Today is the day to celebrate!

Or it would be if I could work out what this stupid itching feeling is. Am I mutating?! No, that's ridiculous, surely I'd know if I was mutating. The itch isn't that severe, either. It's like a tickle mixed with an itch mixed with a whisper. I can barely feel it at all, it's so minor, but it's persistent, as if someone were scratching with the tip of a single nail at the edge of my consciousness. Whatever it is, it's irritating as heck, but also strangely familiar. Have I felt this before?

I grow still and stop eating, causing Torrina to look at me curiously.

[Something wrong, Anthony?] She asks.

[Uhh... ] I mumble, distracted.

That single nail has been joined by another. Then another. Then another. Then ten more. Then twenty more. Then a hundred more. Then a thousand more. Deep inside my carapace my Vestibule sparks to life and begins leaking energy into my body once more. It starts as a trickle but as the seconds pass it grows to a steady flow. My entire body tingles with a new energy.

Slowly, I lower my head back down to my Biomass and take a bite. In the back of my mind I can sense a flood of connections reaching out across space to whisper in my ear, each of them saying the same thing.

"We're coming."

[It's nothing.] I take a slow bite.

[Nothing at all.]

## Chrysalis

### **Chapter 507: Imminent escape**

Ohhhhh boy. It's the Squad! The Team! The Gals! The Sisterhood! The Family! The Colony is coming to get me! I feel giddy, it's almost like I'm being broken out of prison. Wait, that's exactly what's happening. Need to stay cool. No need to let people know what's happening. As far as they're concerned, business as usual. Which means, training, eating, mutating and getting ready to fight the next battle. I'll need to try and meet Jim soon and see if he's ready to progress with his escape strategy. Should probably check in with Sarah to see if she wants to come with us. I sort of doubt it, considering how reluctant she was last time we spoke.

In my mind the ideal scenario is till that I escape and make my way out to re-join the Colony. If those crazy ants bust into this place... it'll get real messy real quick. And not just for the Shapers. I can't imagine an invasion by thousands of ant monsters would be swept under the rug. Once the word got out the Goglari would pull together an extermination force. Hundreds, maybe thousands of those damn Warriors, with Shaper support and who knows what other tricks they've got stashed away under the rug. It would be a disaster, one that I'm keen to avoid.

Gotta get busy. Not wanting to waste time, I throw my brains into training even as I chomp down on the Biomass in front of me. Torrina raises an eyebrow at me.

[So keen to train today, Anthony? I can feel you working your mana.]

[Things are only going to get tougher from this point on. Can't afford to stuff around. Gotta train, then mutate.]

[Alright. Granin will be happy to hear it. Give me a second and I'll help you.]

[Sure. Any chance I'll be able to get another meeting with Jim and Sarah? I'd like to have a word with them soon if it's at all possible.]

[I'll talk to Granin. He's the one who can make it happen.]

[Thanks, I appreciate it.]

After stretching her mental muscles for a few minutes, Torrina is ready to start sending magic my way and I fall back into the familiar patterns. Weave my Spells together whilst tearing hers apart. Stretch the minds, push to the edge. After the first hour my training partner seems to notice something is different.

[Are you in good shape today, Anthony? You seem to be holding up better than usual.]

[I'm good to go for ages yet. I'm not even tired!]

[... that's what I mean.]

Oh. Of course, the Vestibule! The sweet healing energies of the Colony are flooding through my system, soothing my pains and taking away my fatigue. Once again that boundless energy is flooding into me. In fact, way more energy than I'm used to. How many ants are coming here right now?! I know that they've been hatching more than before, but what the heck? How many members does the Colony even have right now? Two thousand? THREE thousand?! Yikes. That's gonna be a lot of mouths to feed. I hope the



council is managing to raise them all properly. I don't want them cutting corners and not giving each ant the chance to achieve their potential!

Speaking of which. I wonder if any ants have reached tier four. That'll be cool to see. And Crinis! Sweet Crinis the ever faithful, over-zealous pet. She must have evolved by now, surely. What sort of cuddly eldritch horrors await, I can't wait to see!

After a few more hours of training, Torrina excuses herself to go find Granin and pass on my requests. This gives me time to brush myself into tip top shape for the upcoming escape. I'll need to arrange something with Corun for Tiny as well. Take him out for another hunting trip perhaps? Then I can meet up with him outside the facility. That could work.

Alright, time to get down to mutating.

After chowing down on all of my foe I've got three hundred and nine Biomass to play with, which is enough to get some serious work done. After the last fight, where my enhanced reflexes and rapid response musculature played such a key role, alongside my antennae of course. I think I want to focus on pushing these body parts closer to perfection.

The nerves and muscles are both at +15 at this point, and it'll cost me one hundred and eighty Biomass to push both to +20. Which will leave me just enough to push my antennae up to +25. Nice!

Let's hit those menus!

After confirming my intentions with the System I hit up the menu for my nerves and admire the plethora of options. The endless creativity of the options never ceases to amaze me. I mean, it's nerves! What the heck can you do with nerves?! Make them faster, right? But oh no, there's so much more. Broader nerve paths to allow more signal load, vastly increasing the number of sensory nerves in the extremities, regenerating nerves that reconnect themselves when damaged, memory nerve packets to pre-package muscle memories, muscle fibres along the nerve paths so that they can move. What the heck is that?! You can transition the nervous System to a liquid state, turn it into metal, whatever you want basically. It's crazy.

The memory packets are tempting, but I wouldn't know what sort of thing to chunk into that memory. Also I'd be worried about performing actions without actually intending to. I don't want to be involuntarily chomping things. Instead, MOAR speed is what we want. Thus the Transmission sub-neural network +15 shall become the Instant Transmission sub-neural network +20. Capable of truly hair raising speed!

Onto the musculature. My efforts so far have been to enhance the ability of my muscles to make rapid motions. An explosive release of power, rather than a sustained one. This means I can move faster and snap my mandibles quicker, which is all great. It means I haven't been able to increase my staying power. The mutation wouldn't help in a wrestle, or any extending chomping. It's all in the initial bite! Combined with my neural network, it's allowed me to make very quick responses and that's kept me alive more than once. This is the sort of synergy that Granin was talking about. Each mutation working together to create something better than the sum of its parts. No need to change gears now!

Ignoring the many tasty side options, I hone in on perfecting the response time of my muscles and thus my Blink Musculature +15 will become Hyper Twitch Musculature +20.

Now for the antennae.

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 508: Mostly Chatting**

That's two of my mutations out of the way, time to bring it home with the final play. This one's straight forward. The infrared detection has been useful, there's no denying that, but the future-sense has been literally life-saving. In the unfolding menu there remains a thousand and one options of other things that I can upgrade my antennae to detect, air, electric current, mana, life (how does that work?) amongst others. I have to say though, something more interesting than the literal future is unlikely to pop up. During my last mutation I pumped up my capacity for future sensing and I'll do so again now. Perhaps after this mutation I'll entertain branching down another path, but for now I'm pretty sold on it.

I look through the menu and select Far-sight Oracle Antennae +25, costing me another 115 Biomass. This level of expense is really painful. Confirm those mutations! Let's get this over with!

...

BLAMAMATION!

Gawd almighty! Why the heck?!?! ACK!

Once again I dissolve into a twitching mess on the floor as my body is wracked by waves of horrific itching. My antennae in particular are the worst this time around, my head and indeed my brain are affected by the change and let me tell you, having your brain start to itch is less pleasant than it sounds.

It passes as it always does and I'm back on the go before ten minutes is up. Which is a good thing since Granin wanders in shortly after that.

[Another round, another win, Granin. Isn't this supposed to be hard?] I boast.

[Yeah, yeah, yeah. Let's not worry about the myriad of factors that fell your way to help that win happen. If anything, I think that creature was one of the better designs in this tournament. Certainly better than some bug.]

... Now of all times might not be the time to be throwing shade at my species, Granin.

[Don't go all still on me, I'm joking you touchy insect! You did great.]

Ah.

[Compliments, Granin? You aren't behaving like yourself.]

The big Golgari reaches the bottom of the ladder and settles down in a seat for some face to face chat.

[Well, perhaps I'm starting to feel like we might actually win this thing. Which is good news, since I'll feel less bad about having forced you into it when I captured you.]

[... I'll be alive as well.]

He waves a hand.

[Sure, that too. Torrina bumped into me and said you had a few things on the go. You want to meet with the other reincarnators? What's brought that on?]

Need to watch my words a little here.

[Well, each round is another chance that I might finally die and so it'd be nice to get a word in whilst I still can. There's a lot of things I haven't asked them yet. Like when they died on Earth. Why the heck didn't I ask when they died?]

I can finally get confirmation of the passage of time between Earth and Pangera!

[You're thinking about the time difference? It's inconsistent. We've looked into that, ages ago.]

Dammit!

[I'll do what I can but there's been some strange rumblings about those two lately, especially Sarah.]

I'm confused.

[What do you mean, rumblings? What's going on Granin?]

He shrugs, a look of distaste flickering over his face.

[I don't know enough to elaborate right now. It's complicated. Look, exactly who is in charge of the reincarnators is usually up for debate since they're technically "guests" of the Shapers. As I said, working with the Shapers is usually a partnership, that's how it's meant to go. In our case, we haven't pushed the reincarnators we found and formed relationships with into becoming Ancients the way we do with other monsters.]

Seems a little odd. We start with quite an advantage over most species after all.

[Why's that? There must be a reason.]

[Several, in fact. First is that none of the existing Ancients are reincarnators, as far as we know. Certainly it wasn't until several hundred years after the cataclysm that the first reborn souls were found by the Cult in its various forms. This leads us to believe that the appearances of your people didn't start until well after the Dungeon was formed.]

[How long did it exist before it broke the surface, do you think?]

I'm not sure why, but I'm curious.

Granin just shakes his head.

[You ask that question around the right scholars and you'll start a fist fight. Short answer, nobody is sure, but a long time. The second main reason is that nearly all of you are reborn in the first strata, thus limiting you to basic Beast type species until you evolve to a high tier, a milestone that most don't survive to reach.]

[Nasty. Wait. So it's possible for me to 'upgrade' in some way. I might get access to the goodies that the monsters in the lower strata get their claws on?]

A nod.

[Yeah, of course. How else would you have any chance of descending. The Dungeon is a real pain in the backside, but it's scrupulously fair to monsters. Theoretically, every species has the chance to descend to the centre. It's just harder for the upper species since they start behind the curve of the creatures below them.]

Huh. Well that's interesting. I wonder what sort of options will pop up the further I go down. Perhaps Shadow Ant? Daemon Ant? Whatever is in the fourth strata?

[Hey Granin, what sort of creatures live in the fourth strata?]

He snorts.

[You haven't even made it out of here alive, or even set foot in the third strata, and you want to learn about the fourth?]

[Come on. I'm just curious.]

[Sure you are. The fourth strata is a doozy. As if any of them aren't. Mythic Beasts. Think of the sort of stuff you saw in the first strata, but with the power turned up about a hundred times.]

[So like.... Really, really big Gorillas.]

He just shakes his head at me.

[Listen, your pet? He's not even a quarter the size of some of the things down there. Let alone you. If you want my advice. IF you manage to survive this mess, then take a little time in the second strata to accumulate a bit of strength. The third isn't a cake walk by any stretch and the Demons there are smart and tough as nails. You'll want to be as prepared as you can be.]

Wise words.

[What do you think about that Invidia?]

[You have knowledge. I shall have it.]

[Yeah, yeah. We were just talking about your home strata. You want to get back to Demon... Town... or whatever?]

[I will follow the Master.]

[Well, yeah. You know what? Just go back to practicing healing.]

[Level ups. They will be mine!]

Going to take a little adjusting to get used to the little guy. Still, his eye is glowing with what I hope is delight as he weaves spells together with enviable ease. As long as he's happy.

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 509: Worm Your Way In**

Booms and thuds shake my cell as the battles continue out in the arena. With my Meditation Skill blunting outside influences my magic practice continues smoothly as Torrina batters my mind with her expert magical handling. To make things even more rude, she suggests that I order Invidia to participate

in the training and somehow I'm talked into letting Invidia attack me with mental magic. After just ten minutes under their combined assault I'm ready to beg for mercy, which Torrina doesn't grant. After thirty minutes I want to collapse on the floor like a puddle, which Torrina refuses to allow. I could just order Invidia to cease his mind magic but somehow I feel like if I did that I'd lose.

[I was blinded by the sweet lure of levels! Damn you Torrina!]

The harridan in question frowns at me.

[If you still have the mental energy to whine at me then we aren't working hard enough.]

[I HAVE FOUR BRAINS DAMMIT. IT'S NOT THAT HARD TO THINK THINGS AT YOU.]

[Way too much energy. I'm going to increase the pressure.]

[Nooooooooo!]

Me and my big... Brain... The presence of the Colony within the range of my Vestibule is working against me now. Even as my brains strain to their breaking point, the cursed Vestibule is refreshing them with nourishing energy from my siblings. The end result is that I last another two hours before the threads of magic twist out of my grasp and collapse into nothing.

[I'm out! No more!]

Torrina nods, seemingly satisfied with my efforts.

[You've done well this time. Much better than before.]

[Guess I'm finally getting the hang of it! Ha! Ha... ha.]

[Hmm,] she eyes me suspiciously before leaving the cell to get some rest.

Speaking of which, time for me to do the same. Invidia and I snack on some Biomass and I have to whop him with an antennae when he tries to take my food. He didn't even bother eating his own food first, he didn't want his own food, he wanted mine! Being an Envy Demon must be a massive pain in the backside. He's almost totally incapable of being happy with what he has. That's rough.

Following the food it's time for torpor. I'm so out of it I could practically hibernate. I'm done. Time to snooze...

HAP! I'm up!

Wasn't out for too long either. The Vestibule continues to do its work, turning me into an inexhaustible dynamo. Along with all that energy has returned the persistent whispers that drove me to separate myself from the Colony in the first place. To be honest, I'm still glad to have them back. I'll take it over the complete silence that I endured before.

Awake once more there is precious little to do in my cell until Granin turns up some time later. When he sees me up and about a look of surprise flashes over his face before he climbs down to my level.

[I hate this stupid ladder. I'll bet the other monsters have cells with stairs...] he grumbles as he moves hand by hand down the offending contraption.

[Wait, there are better cells than this one?]

[Of course there are! This is the sort of holding area we use for dangerous, uncooperative samples. Why do you think you have those three chuckleheads up there?] He jerks a thumb at the triad of Shaper guards whose presence is so constant it almost doesn't register on my mind anymore.

[Typical. There has got to be some sort of phobia to explain this prejudiced treatment.]

[I didn't expect you'd be up this quick. Thought I'd have to wake you.] Granin sighs as he settles himself down onto his seat.

[Oh? Something that needs attention?]

He nods.

[Managed to setup that meeting, but it'll only be with James, I'm afraid. Sarah is off limits right now.]

[What?! Why?]

He holds his stone covered palms up toward me.

[I have no idea, officially. I haven't been told why she's been isolated, only that she has. I can make a few guesses as to why, as I'm sure you can too.]

A cold fear blooms inside me as the first thought to strike is that she betrayed the escape plan, but it quickly fades. No, I don't think she would betray us. Much more likely that the jerks who keep jerking it up all over the place have continued their jerking ways of jerkhood.

[They're forcing her into the tournament, aren't they?] I say.

[I can't be certain, but that's what I think as well. I don't know if it's because they want you dead or if this was their intention from the beginning, but I feel almost certain that your opponent in the next round is going to be Sarah.]

Well, that sucks.

[What do you think my odds would be if it actually turned out to be true?] I ask.

I really want to escape before that happens, but if I have to fight her I'd like to know where I stand.

[None.] Comes the blunt reply.

[What?! Really?! What about my magic, my defence, my Gravity Bomb?!]

Granin slaps a hand to his forehead and drags it down his face.

[Look, I don't want to go into all of the details right now, but yes, none. She's way more powerful than you, with far higher levels in her Skills and her species is both rare and dynamic. She's also just much older than you and the other monsters in the tournament. If she actually enters and decides to fight, then she'll win. It's that simple.]

Yikes. She didn't seem all that intimidating when I met her, but she wasn't exactly flexing her strength or anything. Granin's the expert on these things, I'll just have to trust that he knows what he's on about. Which means I need to get the heck out of here, as soon as possible!

[Alright then, off to see Jim!]

With my escort leading the way I once again make my way to the arena to find the worm wriggling his way through the sands.

[Hey, Jim!] I call out. [Have you heard what's going down with Sarah?]

I get a nod from the tail. At least, I think it's the tail.

[Yeah. No. Kind of? The friendly Shapers I talk to have gone quiet on her and I've not been able to get into her compound to speak with her for two days now.]

[She has her own compound?! What the hell man.]

[Don't look at me, I won't know you're doing it. Blind and all that.]

[Look, I've been told that she's most likely been forced into the tournament and she'll be my next opponent.]

[Ouch. You have nooo chance.]

[Thanks, worm breath. Appreciate the vote of confidence.]

The big worm slithers itself into a complicated knot, clearly agitated.

[Look, she's tough. She was strong before she got here, right? Her problem isn't in Stats or Skills, it's mental. She's a freakin' beast when she wants to be.]

[Which is why I need to get out of here stat. How are things with the plan?]

[They've been better. I'm being watched, pretty damn closely, but I think I can finish by tomorrow.]

[Tomorrow?! That's going to cut it mighty close.]

[I'm doing what I can, alright?! This isn't easy work. In case you haven't noticed, we're literally surrounded by mages.]

[Well, at least you won't have to tunnel Sarah out, not much chance of being able to bring her along now.]

[Yeah.] Jim deflates at the thought. [She's a good egg. She deserves better than this. I wish I could have made her listen to me.]

[Not your fault, Jim. Look, if we can get out, there's always a chance we can come back and get her, right?]

[Right.]

The worm and ant conspiracy is ready to be launched!

## Chrysalis

### **Chapter 510: The Horror**

It wasn't easy to explain how they knew, but they did. A tantalising feeling, as if their minds were connected across a great space to something that collected all those thoughts like a whirlpool of the colonies wants and needs. The moment Vibrant placed a leg within its range, she could sense it.

"Finally!" She yelled with delight, slapping her followers around with her antennae enthusiastically. "That silly Eldest really went a long way but not far enough to escape from us!"

"Please, Vibrant," came the urgent whisper from a general within her squad, "it isn't wise to refer to the Eldest as silly! Or to suggest the Eldest ran away."

"You think weird, Emeliant," Vibrant assured her trusted follower, "That's why I like you."

Still unused to having a name, Emeliant was caught between the joy of being acknowledged by her leader and the fear of getting in trouble for her irreverence.

She worried too much, something that Vibrant found immensely amusing since Vibrant didn't worry at all.

"Stop your fussing! If you keep twitching your antenna like that, I'll have to take your name back."

Emeliant froze.

"C-can you do that?" She whispered.

"What? No! Geez, you need to relax a little. Let's go kill some monsters. We've almost made it!"

So saying, Vibrant dashed off with incredible speed, leaving Emeliant and the rest of her squad in the dust. This was the treatment they were well used to by this point, and they rushed to catch up, the less physical castes climbing onto the backs of the tier four soldiers and scouts in order to keep up.

Knowing they were following behind, Vibrant didn't go all out but instead comfortably rushed toward the front lines, her connection to the Eldest growing stronger with each stride. She'd travelled a long way to take part in this conflict, and she wasn't about to let it end before she got her slice of whatever had kept the Eldest from them.

She'd been in another zone entirely when word the Eldest had been detected rushed through the Colony. One ant passed it onto the next and word raced hundreds of kilometres into the deepest tunnels and most defended nests. At once, without any need to consult, the Colony's entire expansion process halted as ants began to reassign themselves to this new front. The regular business of the Colony continued, of course, but every ant not dedicated to producing, raising or feeding the young had barrelled through the tunnels, moving east. Always east. As a trickle turns into a flood, so too did the movements of the Colony as one group ran into the next which ran into the next.

Now thousands of siblings poured through the tunnels within range of the Eldest, each burned with an inner flame that only grew brighter the closer they got.

Thankfully, the council had stepped in and taken things in hand.



"Whoa there, Vibrant. Got a second for a chat?"

Vibrant screeched to a halt, dirt and rock flying as her claws dug in.

"Hey-hey! If it isn't Burke! You look... different."

The scout wiggled her elongated antennae proudly.

"Pretty good! Tier four brought a few unusual surprises. We're still trying to work out the optimal paths for the rest to follow, it's taking longer than we thought."

"As long as we get it right, the Colony will prosper in the future."

"Exactly."

The scout leader's new form was larger than before, but not by much. She was dwarfed by some of the tier four soldiers, which were being called majors. She was sleeker, more streamlined and her colours had become more muted. In fact, it almost appeared as if she was blending into the rock behind her. Her antennae were the other major change. Far longer and bristling with minute hairs they looked as if they were several times more sensitive than they'd been before.

"I just wanted to stop you before you went barging in. Things are sensitive on the front lines, we can't move as we want."

"Why not?" Vibrant queried.

Moving cautiously wasn't exactly her style, but she'd been forced to adapt as part of the council.

"We've found evidence of a civilised race occupying these areas."

"Are they the ones holding the Eldest?"

"Likely so."

Vibrant fell into thought. No matter how fast she was, there was some trouble she just couldn't outrun—exposing the Colony to a group more organised and powerful than the Lirian kingdom would be a very large serving of fast-moving trouble.

"What was the decision?" She asked.

Burke relaxed slightly. It was never a sure thing that Vibrant would listen when the council asked her to do things. She was strangely... independent. Always serving the Colony, but in the way that she thought was best. To this point, the council had never found any of her decisions to turn out poorly, but they still worried.

"We've sent in teams of core shapers. Their pet shadow beasts can scout more openly and arouse less suspicion than we can. Tunneling crews have also been set up but we need more mage support. Some passages are hard to avoid and we're concerned that our cores will be detected if we get too close."

"That's all great. But what do you need me to do?"

"You are your team are going to be best utilised as messengers. The tier four scouts have been allowed to go forward, they have the Skills and mutations to get away with it, we hope, which means we're short on fast legs."

"I've got plenty of those!" Declared Vibrant as her weary followers rushed into view.

Just as Vibrant was about to greet her squad and cheer on their new role as hard running scouts, something else emerged from the tunnel behind them, startling every ant present with its speed and malevolent aura.

A deep pool of shadow flashed across the ground before it seemed to sense the open space and stilled. After a few seconds the pool darkened and a forest of black tentacles burst forth. They grasped and twisted through the air, gripping onto anything they could before they snapped taught and pulled.

From out of the pool emerged a horror. An amorphous blob of flesh with three mouths filled with barbed teeth that crackled with malicious energy. A terrible screech arose in the tunnel that set every ants antenna afire with vibrations.

"SHHHHHHAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!"

Each of the mouths wailed independently in a strange cacophony that caused Burke to shiver uncontrollably, though she could not explain why.

Vibrant displayed a very different reaction.

"CRIN-CRIN!" She whooped and rushed toward her friend.

[WHERE IS THE MASTER?!] Crinis roared. [TAKE ME TO THE MASTER!]

[Whoa there! Hold on! We can sense the Eldest. They aren't far away!]

[Haaaaaah....]

The giant ball seemed to deflate, the slashing, tooth covered limbs retracting into the body as if rapidly shrank.

[Why can you sense them when I can't.... It's not fair!]

Vibrant dashed over to pat Crinis lightly on the head with her antenna.

[Not long now, Crin-Crin. Won't be long now.]

[Where is the enemy, Vibrant? WHO is the enemy?]

The poor horror was clearly agitated, her tentacles writhing and twisting in knots. Every now and again she would lose control and her ripping teeth emerged to rip great chunks out of the stone around her. Vibrant continued to soothe her friend as she told them what they knew.

[I will go and scout at the front lines.] Crinis declared. [I'm a shadow monster so I won't be suspected.]

Burke wasn't too sure about that, but she wasn't prepared to put her word against one of the Eldest' guardians. The tentacled horror slithered down the tunnel toward the east with jaws gnashing eagerly.