

## Chrysalis 511

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#### Chapter 511: How to outwit a scholar

The Shapers are professional monster wranglers with over a thousand years of experience in the craft. They're smart, industrious, coordinated and would have put an extreme amount of thought into ensuring that none of their captives escape. Which raises the question, if you are one of those captives and you do want to escape, how exactly should you be going about it?

There are a number of schools of thought on the matter. Careful planning, strategic application of force, pitting wits against wits, all classic stuff. Hard to work alone, obviously, so you might reach out to allies, put a crew together as it were. Once everyone gives you the 'You daughter of a Queen, I'm in' you start piecing together your plan bit by bit under the watchful eye of your captors. It's exciting, riveting stuff that makes for amazing intellectual competition.

The other way to go is to acknowledge that your captors are smarter, better prepared, willing to invest a hell of a lot more energy than you are and so you need a different approach. How do you defeat the opponent who has more wits? Don't engage in a battle of wits! That would be freakin' stupid! No, instead you punch them the face way harder than they think you can. Then, you leg it.

Jim and I, we may not be the sharpest set of tools in the shed, but we are smart enough to know that we aren't that smart. Which counts for something! Therefore, our escape plan does not hinge on an elaborate scheme, meticulous timing or coordinating watches. It involves the two of us digging our way out, faster and better than the Shapers could possibly expect us to. Which wasn't hard for us to set up, all things considered. They've never examined my core, thus they don't truly know what I'm capable of, and my training has proceeded very quickly, especially in my particular area of focus: Earth Magic.

My worm compatriot isn't a prisoner in the technical sense and has some limited freedoms which he's used to test the boundaries of what he can get away with when tunnelling about the place. He also has refused to have his core checked for over a year and so far no Shaper has pushed him on it. What we've learned is that the compound does in fact have measures in place to prevent monsters from digging out. Magically hardened stone, barriers around the cells as well as a few other nasty surprises. Combined with the constant surveillance is quite enough to contend with.

The great worm of Earth had already been hard at work, manipulating the ground around him to create small micro tunnels that he hoped were undetectable to the Shapers who no doubt kept an eye on such things as the soil and stone integrity around their facility. It was a rare feature of his earth attuned class that he was able to manipulate soil and stone at such a range but he'd had to be careful and work slowly. If things worked out the way he wanted them to, those micro tunnels would mean he could dig through at twice the speed he could into unprepared ground.

Which meant that all I had to do was dig my own way out of my cell and meet up with him. In order for that to happen though, I need to get Granin and Torrina out of my hair.

[So Corun has Tiny out on a hunting expedition? Hope that's all going well.]

[From what I understand it's been good. Your pet has been eager to get back out hunting, Corun thinks he wants to test his new abilities.]

[No. He just loves punching things.]

[Ah.]

Granin huffs with irritation from his position to the side on his chair.

[What are you so mad about, Granin? In fact, why are you even here? Are you sure you don't need to take a long walk or something?]

[No, I don't, and I'm irritated because I don't know what is motivating the leadership of my own cult anymore.]

[Your cult?]

[You know what I mean!] He throws his hands into the air, frustration plain on his stone covered face. [I just can't understand what is happening here and it's slowly driving me mad. Why are our traditions being thrown out after so long? What exactly are we hoping to achieve here?]

[We? You still put yourself on the same page as the rest of them?]

[Of course I do you blithering insect! I don't have to explain to an ant the idea of loyalty to the collective, do I?]

[You do not.]

Granin relapses into his muttering pensive thinking pose whilst Torrina watches from the side, concern marring her features. For my part, I'm having an internal debate. Has this situation been good? No. How do I feel about the Cult of the Worm? Not great. Who was the cult member who put me in this sucky scenario? Granin. But he and his triad have been good to me. They've worked harder than they could have ever been expected to and Granin has put himself on the line to try and help me. If possible, I don't want them to get caught up in any trouble on my account. How to warn them without letting them know what I'm planning? And what if I end up coming back for Sarah? What about the Colony? This could get messy.

[So, Granin. How's things?]

[I'm trying to think over here.]

[Right. I get that. Just hear me out for a moment. If, by some strange chance, I managed to escape from here, what would happen to you and the gang?]

[Us? Punishment, but nothing too dramatic, why? You finally sorted out an escape plan?]

[Of course not. I'm not smart enough for that.]

[True.]

Why you..... I'm calm.

[Let's just say that I did escape. All I want to say is that it's probably not a great idea for you to stay here in this compound. Just in case.]

Granin unfolds his hands and looks at me seriously.

[Are you seriously trying to suggest that you would be able to threaten this entire compound full of mages?]

I think about the number of ants I'm sensing through my Vestibule.

[No?]

He sits for a moment and thinks before opening his eyes and looking right into one of my own.

[You didn't deserve the sort of treatment you've received here, Anthony. If I'd known what was going to happen to you, I'd never have brought you in.]

I'm touched.

[Thanks, Granin. That means a lot. And thanks to you Torrina, you've helped me out a lot.]

The young Shaper walks toward me and puts one hand on my carapace, the metal in her skin shimmering in the low light.

[You are a special monster, Anthony. Perhaps one day you'll ascend and fulfil our dreams.]

[Yeah, unlikely.]

[Let's get out of here, Torrina. I think Anthony needs a little alone time.]

So saying, Granin and Torrina climb up the ladder and exit my cell without looking back. Strange though it may seem, I hope I see them again. They're good people.

[Alright Invidia, are you ready?]

[Freedom. I shall have it!]

[Damn right. Get that illusion cracking.]

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### **Chapter 512: Daring do**

The plan isn't complicated, which I hope means it's more likely to succeed. Once I have the space to myself, Invidia begins to weave an illusion around me. The image I ask him to create isn't anything too fancy, just an shell of myself, cast around myself. The only part of the spell that extends beyond that covers the floor for thirty centimetres beyond my feet. The moment the image is in place I weave together an earth mana construct and start pumping energy through it, taking hold of the now dark brown mana and using it to create a spell of my own.

A spell that I direct downward, into the stone beneath my feet. The Shapers above can sense the mana being utilised, but they've been sensing me and Invidia cast magic down here for days on end. The only time spells aren't being created in this cell is when I'm asleep! But I won't be able to conceal what I'm doing for long.

In order to divert their attention I have Invidia practice some of his louder spells. We aren't allowed to damage the room, but he can set off some smaller explosions here and there. As he does I begin to tunnel downward, the stone and rock breaking under the strength of my earth drill spell. Earth mana is

interesting in that it allows you to move and shape soil and then stone into almost any form you please. As I push open a space downward I compact the soil to the sides as much as possible to avoid having to bring too much to the surface. The Shapers are wise to this sort of magic though, they've packed the dirt incredibly tight around the cells. After only a minute the dirt begins to rise and spill out around my legs.

This is going to be tougher than I thought. I'd hoped to be able to carve out a space the size of my body in order to hide myself in it before the signs of my digging became too apparent. Ah well, nothing for it then!

I renew my magic assault on the ground, chewing away at the stone beneath my feet until chunks of stone begin to spill out between my legs. Thanks to my training and relatively high rank in earth mana, I'm able to make rapid progress. Of course, the stone chips appearing out of nowhere are a slight giveaway that something fishy is going on. The triad of Shapers looking down at me step forward as one to peer intently into my cell.

Too late, fools! Muahahahaha!

Desperate joy surging in my heart I pull my legs close to body and drop down into the widening gap in the floor, face first. Engage earth mandibles! One of my sub-brains begin to direct more mana from my core into my earth affinity construct and then pushing it into my mandibles which begin to glow with a russet stone colour. Ha! The mandibles aren't just for yanking people across battlefields, I can infuse any type of mana I want! Once the mana builds up in my mandibles I begin chomping away at the dirt like a maniac, the empowered jaws shearing through the stone as if it were butter.

Dig! Hear the roar of my soul and dig to freedom!

They aren't going to let me do that, are they?

BOOM!

From behind I can sense the concussive release of mana as spells begin to detonate in the cell.

[How're you holding up, Invidia?]

[The barrier will hold, for now.]

[Nice work. Try to hold them off as long as you can.]

[Yesssss.]

[Focus, buddy.]

The eyeball is following the plan and formed a dome shaped barrier over the entrance to our escape tunnel after following in behind me. He probably won't be able to hold off their barrage for long but if I can get us far enough underground then it won't matter.

CHOMP! CHOMP! CHOMP!

With relentless energy I work my face hands and rip into the stone even as my sub-brains direct their spells to shape and split it. Now this is digging! With my earth magic I don't even have to bother shifting

the rock after I shatter it! No more trips back to the start of the tunnel for me! Dig, Anthony! Dig as if your life depends on it!

The attack on my mind comes suddenly and stabs home like the point of a knife. I can feel my consciousness rock from the blow as darkness begins to swim on the edge of my vision. This is the exact same technique that Granin used to knock me out when I captured. Unfortunately for these suckers, I'm not going down as easy this time!

I pass control of my body over to a sub-brain and use the entirety of my main mind to focus on my mental defences. The attack they're using is an advanced application of mind magic and one that I can't quite execute yet. What's more, the three Shapers are coordinating to perform the strike, three advanced mages focusing their minds in harmony to cast a single, powerful spell. It's little wonder the I and any monster of my tier wouldn't be able to handle it alone. That's just way too much mental firepower to handle.

Luckily I'm no longer alone!

[Drop the barrier, switch to mental defence!]

[I will take their pain!]

[Stay creepy.]

As I cast my senses out to try and sense their next strike, Invidia does the same. But, since he has more than enough processing power to spare, he also goes on the offence.

[They hold me off. I WILL have their mindsssss!]

A task that he throws himself into with relish. As powerful as he is, I still don't expect Invidia to succeed in breaking down three mages. All he has to do is buy a little time. Every second a veritable blizzard of stone chunks flies out the back of the tunnel and into my cell as I burrow free.

Here it comes!

My external mana senses tingle as compact spell zips toward me through the stone. The moment I sense it I try to take hold of the spell and break it apart with my mind, shredding the threads that hold it together. Invidia does a better job than I but between the two of us we still aren't able to destroy it. The spell is expertly constructed and dense with mana. At best, we're able to take a third of the mana out of it before it strikes my mind.

YEEOUCH!

My brains ring as if struck like a bell but I manage to hold onto consciousness and continue digging. Ha! Two was enough to put me out last time, but not now! I swear, when I evolve next I gonna pump my Will to an absurd level. No way I'm letting myself stay vulnerable to this sort of attack. The next few seconds are tense as I furiously dig whilst sensing in all directions, trying to work out where the knife will come from.

Above me I can sense a flurry of mental mana as Invidia steps up his assault on the mages, trying to bring one of them down.

Dig, dig, dig! Shouldn't be far now!

BAM!

Another blow stabs toward my mind which I once again strain to break down without success. My vision swims in front of my eyes and my mind wavers on the verge of shutting down under the assault. My legs buckle for a moment but straighten again the next as I stabilise. The energy pouring out of my Collective Will Vestibule pushes back against the pain and steadies my mind. The Colony isn't about to let me fall at the last hurdle!

With a mighty chomp the stone in front of me crumbles away from me, starting a chain reaction that cascades the rock down into an open space. When the ground beneath my claws gives way I fall downward and land flat on the top of my head.

[You gotta be more careful when you tunnel straight down. That's amateur hour.]

[Seriously, Jim? You're going to critique my tunnelling technique now?]

[You're right. Let's go... Worms rule.]

[Dammit, Jim!]

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#### **Chapter 513: Flight for freedom**

I scramble to right myself just as Invidia drops down the tunnel and onto my back. Luckily that extra-dimensional heft of his doesn't translate to actual weight, otherwise he might've put a crack in my carapace.

[Which way?] I say to Jim.

[Um... Um... this way!]

[You don't sound super confident.]

[It's going to be fine!]

There's an unusual note of panic in the worm's thoughts as he wriggles this way and that before throwing his head into a wall and chewing through it at a ridiculous pace. In a few moments his entire body is gone and all I have to do is squeeze into the tunnel he's dug.

[Just stay calm, Jim. Everything's going fine!] I try to soothe my associate.

He's wanted this for a long time but now that we come to it, he seems to be falling apart a little. As long as he can hold it together long enough for us to reach the outside tunnels we'll be alright.

Another mind stab comes my way, but significantly weaker than before and with Invidia's help I'm able to break it down before it strikes me. Perhaps we've managed to put enough distance between the Shaper's and ourselves to make manipulating mana more difficult for them? Whatever the case I'm glad for it!

With my demon pet following along behind, I start to use my earth mana to collapse the tunnel behind us as we dig. Don't want those nosy Shapers following too easily. I don't doubt they can shift the dirt using earth magic, same as I can, but every little bit helps. I'm not sure what the Shapers will do if they happen to catch us again, probably not anything too lethal, although I'd rather not put that thought to the test. They've been trying to tenderise my juicy flesh since the stupid tournament started after all.

The going is a bit slower now as we're well out of range of Jim's prepared micro tunnels. Still, if I had to have anyone on my side to chew through reinforced stone, it would be Jim. He's incredibly quick, using a combination of his own earth mana and raw chewing power to break down the stone and chow down on it.

At first I wasn't sure what was happening to the rock and I had to ask him.

[You actually eat the stone?]

[Heck yeah. Delicious!]

[I refuse to believe that rocks are delicious.]

[You're missing out. Also I can break it down into earth mana inside my body.]

[You can what?!]

Turns out that as long as he's eating then he can keep churning out his earth magic. The dude turned himself into a literal digging machine in order to break out from the Shapers' control. That's the level of dedication he has and I respect the hell out of it. The two of us endure some tense moments as we tunnel our way out, constantly waiting for the other shoe to drop and a horde of ticked off magical stone people to clobber our faces in.

But... it didn't happen. For the next ten minutes, Jim works his magic and gobbles down stone as I trail along behind him, collapsing the stone and anxiously waiting for an attack that never materialises.

[We should be almost there!] Jim calls back to me.

[Seriously? They haven't followed us at all!]

[Maybe they don't want to keep us that bad?]

[They kept you locked up for freaking years, Jim! You really think they're just going to let us walk away?]

[All I can tell you is that the stone is getting softer. We shouldn't be far away from a Dungeon tunnel. I think we're beneath it, I'm gonna start angling up.]

Nice. All that's left for me to do is meet up with Tiny and then head towards the Colony. The progress of my siblings has slowed over the last day, which makes sense. If they came close enough to recognise that there's an entire Golgari empire operating in this section of the Dungeon, then they'd be suicidal if they didn't hit the brakes and start to think things through a little more carefully. Now that they can sense me moving toward them (I hope), it should be easy to reconnect with my family.

And Crinis! Hope that little bundle of existential terror has been doing well without me around. She's a bit nervous at the best of times. Having to go it alone for such a long time is sure to put some stress on her nerves.

[BOOM BABY! We out!] Jim cries with glee.

[Seriously?!]

[Letsa go! I've been waiting so long for this moment! Screw you, Shapers! I'm a free worm!]

[Move your slithering butt, Jim! Invidia and I want out!]

[I will take this freedom!]

[Damn right!]

[Alright, hold your carapace.]

Jim slides his body forward and I dash out to embrace the sweet, sweet free air. At last! I was only locked up for a period of weeks but that was long enough to know that it sucks! Monsters were born to be free! We did it! And it was freakin' easy!

[That went way smoother than I expected] I wonder out loud.

[How could you doubt my incredible powers?] Jim scoffs, still wriggling with joy.

[Just hold on a second.]

I take a moment to check our surroundings. It is quite a wide tunnel space that we've broken into. The area is open to an unusual degree, no debris or columns at all. It almost looks as if the outside of the tunnel has been shaped. In fact, not far from where we broke through the floor is a wall that is elaborately carved.

[Hey Jim, what's up with that wall? Looks weird.]

[I'm blind... What are you talking about?]

[It's got all these... pictures and recesses and stuff.]

[What do you mean?]

[I mean... carvings. Super elaborate carvings.]

[Of what?]

[Golgari? I think?]

Not easy to make a carving of rock people on a rock surface I suppose.

[Oh. Now those recesses are lighting up.]

[Like how?]

[Like... with lights?]



A pause.

[Those wouldn't be windows now would they?] Jim asks in a decidedly tense tone.

[You know what? I think they are. They put them in as watch areas around the gate.]

[GATE?!]

[Well it's opening up now. Very impressive piece of stonework. Not sure how your hearing is but I can absolutely hear shouting.]

[WE NEED TO RUN!]

[I already started, worm breath. Next time can you not tunnel us in front of a Golgari city?!]

[I CAN'T HELP BEING BLIND!]

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#### **Chapter 514: Pay the bill**

A crash resounded through the room as Irette Plamine hurled her glass across her private study. The crystal vessel struck the ornate carved stone bookshelf built into the wall and shattered, flinging shards across the room. The only other person present, the youngest member of her triad, Biritite Cryslas, flinched as her true skin repelled the sharp slivers and tried to pacify her leader.

"Th-They can't have gotten far, we still have tracking spells attached to the two of them, we'll know where they are shortly."

Plamine rounded on the younger Shaper in a fury, her hands slashed through the air as she spoke as if she were attempting to strike down the reality around her.

"Know where they are? Oh, I know where they are. I received word two minutes ago that they surfaced not a hundred metres outside the gates of Stonehall!"

"No!" Cryslas gasped.

"Oh, that's not all! They hung around just long for every guard on the wall to spot them before fleeing. They'll have geomancers trace their tunnel straight back to us!"

Plamine's eyes were wild with rage as she explained to her triad member the depth of the disaster that had just taken place. That stupid bug! All it had to do was die and their backers in the city would be happy. How could they anticipate one pitiful insect would be so difficult to kill?!

"Can we insert our own people into the city's search party? They must be a Shaper, right?"

"They never use anyone who isn't totally loyal to the Warrior's circle! Don't be so stupid," Plamine said.

She resisted the urge to strike her contemporary. She needed to be calm, there had to be a way to salvage this.

"I-is there a chance we can count on assistance? Fr-From our ... backers?" Cryslas hesitated to suggest.

Her only response was a growl that emanated from deep within her leader's throat. Their 'backers' had proven to be far more trouble than they were worth. The money and resources they'd provided had pushed their faction to the top of the Worm Cult in only a few years, but the moment that had been achieved, the demands started to roll in. Ever since, they'd been tying themselves in knots trying to meet their outrageous demands whilst also advancing the proper agenda of the Cult, a delicate tightrope that had taken an immense amount of skill to navigate.

"They won't help us," Plamine said bitterly, "they'll cut ties the moment they sense the stone is crumbling. If anything, we can expect them to be the loudest amongst those seeking to bring us down."

Cryslas stepped forward, filled with energy.

"Then why don't we pull them down with us?" She hissed, suddenly fierce. "We have enough compromising material to drag them through the mud for a generation. They'll have to help us!"

Her leader slowed her pacing as she tried to think.

"That would be... "

Dangerous. Risky. Madness. Not to mention a matter well above her station in the hierarchy of the Cult.

"I'd need to contact the leadership. But we don't have time! DAMN IT!"

At that moment, Oridene Gravus burst into the room, rage written all across his face. Plamine flung a hand up to point right between his eyes before he could speak.

"Not a word out of you! Not. One. If you hadn't been so blatant we could have moved quietly against that blasted creature a week ago! Like we'd intended!"

She turned back to Cryslas.

"Your idea has some merit. I'll reach out to our contact and try to put pressure on. I'll need the two of you with me to present a unified front. We're playing a dangerous game now and we don't have much time."

She strode behind her desk and pulled out a drawer filled with enchanted communication crystals, each nestled in its own pouch and clearly labelled. Gravus turned to the other member of the triad, his brow furrowed.

"They were spotted outside the city," Cryslas filled him in, her voice terse, "the city might be able to trace them back to us."

His eyes grew wide.

"If they think we were raising ants in here..."

"Exactly!" She snapped. "We'd be finished. The entire Worm Cult might get pulled out by the roots by the time the Warrior's Circle is done with us!"

"But they were the ones..." he spluttered.

Cryslas leaned in and jabbed him in the chest.

"You and I know that, Oridene. But are they going to own up to their part in it?"

His expression soured as he contemplated the likelihood of that ever happening. They'd be only too happy to send their 'allies' into oblivion if it kept their own noses clean.

"It's ready," Plamine announced, "Oridene, Biritite, come join me."

The crystal glimmered with a bright light as it was placed into its carved holder in the centre of the quartz desk that dominated the study. The triad took their places for the call, Gravus and Crysas flanking Plamine as she sat in the seat of her office and stared down domineeringly at the crystal.

It wasn't long before the matching crystal was activated and a projection of the Golgari at the other end appeared in the air above the crystal. The triad as one shrank back instinctively from the withered Warrior whose image had appeared.

"This had better be important, Plamine. I've little to waste on the likes of you," he sneered.

Irette Plamine swallowed and steadied herself. No matter how far she rose, or how much she detested them, a lifetime of submissiveness to the Warrior caste was difficult to overcome.

"We have an issue that will soon become yours as well."

A frown creased the already aged face.

"Oh? This had better be interesting." He warned.

"We've had two specimens escape from the outpost," she stated, "one of which was the monster you asked us to put down."

His eyes bulged.

"It still isn't dead?" He raged. "You were told to kill it the moment it was in your hands!"

"It wasn't expedient to do so."

"Expedient?!" He glared, "I have little care for what you consider 'expedient'. You were told to get it done and so you should have done it! Who do you think holds your leash?"

Irette forced her anger down and strove to remain calm.

"We are not able to act as we please here in the cult. Certain customs still need to be observed. Just because an old family in the Warrior's Circle wants something dead doesn't mean we will leap to obey! We aren't your assassins."

"You are our servants, bought and paid for!"

Gravus was trembling with rage by this time and Crysas covertly reached a hand around to grip his arm. If he blew up at their contact then there was little chance they would secure the assistance they needed.

"Well, this is about to become your problem," Plamine snapped, "since the two monsters who escaped have turned up outside the city gates!"

"They what? ... ah. There will be a search for the insect. The city is going to get involved and you don't want it being traced back to you... I see. I presume you want me and those I represent to intervene on your behalf?"

"We think it's time for the old clans to step forward and get their hands dirty. We wouldn't be in this situation if one of your scions didn't lack even the slightest element of control!"

There was a pause.

"Watch your words Shaper. Don't forget who you are, and who you are talking to. We can make you disappear overnight with a snap of our fingers."

"You might be getting yourself a little dirty with the blowback from such a situation. It's so hard to stay clean these days."

...

"I'll contact you again in an hour. If you haven't got a lead for me by then I'll bury that entire outpost and leave you to the Dungeon. You hear me Plamine?"

"Clearly."

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#### **Chapter 515: Fly, you fools!**

[Worms are stupid.]

[I said I was sorry already...]

[They look disgusting and they eat dirt.]

[I know, okay? I know.]

[They're soft and don't have a carapace which makes them less shiny.]

[Not all ants are shiny! Only you are shiny!]

[Are you talking back to me?! Invidia, I think he's talking back to me!]

[*Sssstrange. It should be shame.*]

[Yeah, you're supposed to be shame! Aren't you, Jim?]

[... yes. I am shame. Can we PLEASE discuss this another time? Like, when we aren't being ACTIVELY chased?!]

[I suppose...]

As much as I enjoy reminding our resident worm that he and his entire species are massive failures who the world would most likely be better off without, we do have something of a situation on our claws. After we popped up outside those massive stone gates, we hightailed it back underground but it wasn't long before we started to sense signs that we were being followed.

Luckily, Jim was able to retrace the tunnel that I'd collapsed a lot faster than he could dig through solid rock, but we couldn't follow that all the way back, we'd just end up in the Shaper outpost that we'd started in. Which meant that we needed to dig our way into another Dungeon tunnel, a job for which we needed Jim's now suspect earth senses to try and find.

[Look, I found a tunnel, didn't I?]

[Just not the right one...]

[I was close!]

[Close to a city full of Gulgari...]

[I'll be quiet.]

Every few seconds I can feel pulses of magic radiate down through the ground, trying to home in on us. I'm not sure if these are some form of mental attack or if this is just a location spell of some sort? Monster detection? Perhaps trying to sense vibrations in the rock? Either way I'm not a huge fan. Jim and I are using every technique we can to speed up our tunnel digging. He's biting and utilising his earth magic to its limits as I do the same from just behind him. I've put Invidia on tunnel collapse duty so I can focus more completely on assisting the digging. It's hard to manipulate the mana that far ahead of myself, Jim is a long worm after all, so I need to put real effort in.

Another pulse! They're coming quicker now... Does that mean they're homing in on us or are we getting further away? I wish I knew!

[How far, Jim? We can't be far, surely!]

[Not far! I've found another tunnel, probably... twenty metres dead ahead!]

[Poor phrasing given the circumstances!]

[Agreed!]

There's a rising panic in the worm that is worrying. The more danger we get into, the more unsettled he becomes. Being a sheltered creature, not having to fight for so long, having his meals brought to him, it must have killed his edge. Although, judging from his history, this guy was never the most aggressive of monsters since his rebirth.

[Hold it together, Jim. We're gonna get there!]

[Right!]

Also, it would be super great if I could not have worm butt in my face sometime soon, I'm well over it. It takes a couple of minutes for us to drill our way through and with a joyous cry, Jim rushes into the dark tunnel in front, shouting with glee.

[We did it!]

[Get down, Jim!]

I blast out of the tunnel with Invidia close behind, my mandibles wide.

CHOMP!

The shadow centipede shrieks as my jaws shear it apart and it falls to one side, twitching. Stupid centipedes! They pop up every time I don't want them to!

[What the hell was that?!] Jim cries, panicking.

[Shadow centipede. They're new. Stay alert, Jim! You're in the Dungeon now. What do you want to do? Try and hide in the walls or do you want to come with me?]

He hesitates.

[Look, I don't care if you want to go alone, I really don't,] I assure him, [I've got places to be and you'd rather hide, it's fine. I just need you to make a call very, very quickly.]

The giant worm shudders for a moment as he struggles to decide.

[I'll come with you. I'm still too close to try and hide here, they'll be able to find me before I get too far.]

[Let's go!]

HAZZOW! I'm off!

[Invidia! I want you to blast anything that looks like it's going to get too close! Alright?]

[Yesssss.]

[Let's hustle!]

When you don't know if an angry team of eight foot tall rock people are going to leap at you from the shadows, motivation to run isn't hard to come by. Invidia isn't the fastest, so I pile him onto my back and start dashing down the tunnel. I don't know exactly how to get to the Colony, but I can sense a general direction that I need to travel in.

Jim does his best to keep up, but he isn't designed for flat out speed. In terms of tunnelling through the earth, nobody could hope to match him. Over rock though? He's sluggish at best. Which isn't the problem that I thought it might have been. This is the Dungeon after all. You can't get far without running into monsters, a hazard which Jim isn't the best qualified to deal with. So it falls to Invidia and I to tear into the creatures that try to prevent us from fleeing.

As we rush through the dark, cold tunnels that twist and turn I use my Tunnel Map to ensure we're moving away from the Golgari city we stumbled into earlier. Obviously not somewhere I'm keen to return to. Neither in the short term, nor ever, if I'm frank. Robbing the Lirians was a laugh but tussling with the Golgari is not on the cards.

Chomp! Chomp! Chomp!

I cut through the second strata shadow creatures that inhabit these tunnels with Invidia casting support magic on me. The support spells make all the difference as my enemies reel from his dizzying mental attacks, are rebuffed by his shields or straight up detonated by his explosions. The support caster I always wanted is finally here and it feels so damn good.

[This way, Jim! Keep hustling. I think we're nearly there!]

[Where exactly is it that you think is going to be safe? I thought we were just trying to get further away from the Golgari?]

He sounds a little suspicious, which I can't blame him for. As far as he knows, there isn't any safe place anywhere in the Dungeon.

[Look, I'm an ant.]

[... yes?]

[Where do you think an ant would feel safe? Supported? Enveloped in the warm love of their family?]

[You don't mean...]

[You're going to meet the Colony, Jim!]

The shuffling worm comes to a screeching halt.

[You want to betray me?! Turn me into ant food? Is that it, Anthony? I can't believe this!]

[Wait, what?]

The worm shifts its head from side to side, as if looking for a way out.

[What do you think is going to happen to me when I get surrounded by ant monsters?!]

[... what?]

[They'll eat me!]

[Jim, they aren't going to eat you if I tell them not to. Trust me, they aren't like what you're thinking.]

[Oh, so they aren't a ravenous horde of killing machines?]

[....]

[Aha!]

[Look, they might be a ravenous horde of killing machines, but they're also intelligent and very serious about what I say to them. Perhaps to an unhealthy degree. So don't worry about getting eaten. They'll help you, they'll even protect you. Protect both of us.]

He wiggles a bit, clearly unconvinced.

[Look, that is where I'm going. If you want to head your own way, I'll say good luck to you. You make the call.]

It doesn't take him long to make a decision. The Colony is going to have a visitor!

[Chrysalis](#)

**Chapter 516: Closing in on closing in**

For the next ten minutes we make our way through curving tunnels, obliterating monsters whenever we come across them and leaving the Biomass on the ground. It hurts to leave food behind but what can we do? The Dungeon will feast on the remains of my hard work today. Well, I say hard work, but battling with Invidia on my side is a whole different story. The shields, the illusions, the damaging spells that get thrown out at the perfect timing. It's almost rude. He's just so damn fast with it. Having poked at this core, I know the little dude's numbers are insane, and I've been on the receiving end of that processing power as well, I have a very deep appreciation for his strengths. When I get Tiny and Crinis back, the gang will be complete and nothing in this Strata will be able to stand against us. We'll mow our way through it like a plague.

Speaking of my pets, where the hell is Tiny? It's not as if I could set up a rendezvous point with Corun, but he should be in this general area, right? Trying to hunt down my missing bat-gorilla, I curve our escape path to bring us a little closer to the outpost in which we were imprisoned, just trying to pick up signs of his presence. It's not like I need to run into him directly, as long as I get close enough I'll be able to detect him. Stuff like this is why I need to advance my pet Skills more! If the range on my pet communication Skill was higher then I'd be able to find him so much easier.

[Tiny! Where the heck are you, you dumb gorilla?! Eating. I bet you're eating somewhere!]

That would be like him, stuffing his face whilst I'm trying to track him down. Maybe I can use that to try and find him? Considering he just evolved, he'll be wanting to fight and eat as much as possible to improve his mutations (also because he's a glutton) and test his new abilities. What I need to do is try to find sections of Dungeon that he might have cleaned out.

Jim and I come to an intersection. We've been moving through a wide arterial tunnel which is typical of those I've seen so far in the second strata. The dark, poisonous plant life, the stone coral and the ambushing shadow creatures who lurk around every corner. When we come to the crossroads where the tunnel branches in three different directions, I pause and consider my options as Jim slithers up behind me.

[What's wrong?] He says, weary.

[Just thinking of the best path to travel. Not sure exactly which way I want to go.]

[You don't? I thought you could sense your 'family' or whatever.]

[I can, just trying to pick up another straggler on the way.]

[Really?! Are you sure this is the time to be running around on these side quests when we need to get our monstrous backsides to safety?! You do realise the Golgari will be hunting us by now, right?]

[Of course they are. Don't worry, we'll be fine.]

[Maybe you'll be fine, but they'll take me easily. I don't want to go back, Anthony.]

[Alright already, just chill out for a second.]

I turn back to the tunnels and make a quick assessment. The branch to the right definitely seems more quiet than the others. If a hungry, giant gorilla had recently run through one of them, it was likely to be



that one. Problem is it appears as if it'll take us even closer to the outpost than we are now... I'll have to risk it.

[Alright, this way,] I say to Jim, not bothering to mention the little details like our proximity to the Golgari.

We take off again and he follows behind, but I'm definitely feeling the pressure now. This is taking time that we don't have and it's with immense relief that I start to notice damaged areas on the tunnel floor and walls. Normally this wouldn't be much to take notice of, monsters damage the walls of the tunnels all the time, but these crater-like indentations are suspiciously fist shaped.

Quick! We pick up the pace and rush through the tunnel, making great time since we don't have to fight anything, but unfortunately it's taking us in the wrong direction.

"ROOOOOOAAAAR!!"

BOOM!

A deep, primal roar echoes off the walls followed quickly by a resounding crash. This sounds promising!

[Full speed ahead!]

I dash forward as another bellow shakes the stones. Something big is fighting up ahead and judging by the sound it isn't being too subtle about it.

[Tiny!] I call through my Pet Communication Skill. [Tiny, is that you?!]

[Rrr?] Comes the confused reply.

[Nice! Stay put buddy, I'm coming to find you!]

[Raaaa!] He responds happily.

After another minute of mad running in which Jim lags behind, I come across a gigantic figure munching on what appears to be some sort of spiny urchin creature.

[Tiny?! You got huge!]

He grins down at me with me glee and slaps his chest proudly. It's true, he's grown a lot in his last evolution, and his size isn't the only change. His colour has changed. His fur had been turning increasingly white over his past evolutions as he turned into a kind of super-silverback but now his hair has turned pure black barring lightning bolt shaped streaks that run down his shoulders and back. His arms and shoulders are even thicker than before and unless I miss my guess there are some wings poking out from behind his shoulders?

[Tiny, can you FLY!?!]

[HAARRRR!] He roars, standing up and flexing in a display of strength.

He does have wings! It's just... he isn't likely to be flying on them any time soon. When he unfolds them they stretch to an impressive ten metres across, but compared his sheer bulk... I doubt he could even

glide with them. Maybe after another evolution they'll be fully grown and he can use them properly. For now, he seems incredibly impressed with himself and his new wings.

[Lookin' good buddy. Great to see you out in the Dungeon again.]

[Hrrrrn,] he hums in agreement.

[Alright, we need to get going and get going fast. Are you ready to make a run for it?]

He nods and starts to lumber up to just as a tired and wheezing worm wriggles into view.

[What... the heck... is... that?]

[This is my pet, Tiny.]

I turn to the ape.

[This is Jim, he's a friend and he's coming with us. Oh, also we have a new team member! Tiny, meet Invidia, he's fully grown now! Invidia, meet Tiny. He's like your elder brother, I suppose.]

The little eyeball narrows as he looks up at the gigantic, five metre tall ape.

[I will be large one day. Larger than you!]

[Hrrn?] Tiny cocks his head to one side.

[Invidia, you should remember that you're actually a heck of a lot larger than you look. Like, ninety percent of you is stuffed into your dimensional thingy.]

[Ah, yessss.]

The eyeball now looks smug as he turns away from Tiny on his spindly little arms and flutters back to my side.

[Alright, let's get the heck out of here, we don't have time to waste.]

With introductions made, we turn and flee back in the direction we came, moving away from the Goglari who are no doubt hot on our heels.

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 517: Pursued**

We make good time as we flee once more, this time with the hulking form of Tiny stomping along behind us. It's nice to have the big guy's powerful presence with the group once more. Sometimes a problem just needs to be hit really hard, and while Tiny might have his faults, that is certainly something that he brings to the table. In spades.

In terms of speed, he still can't keep up with me, but at least he's faster than before. What's surprising is that he uses his wings when he gets the space. They flare out from his back and stretch much wider than I'd thought was possible before they push down with tremendous force, giving the giant ape a bit of lift, leading to a burst of speed. It's quite impressive when it happens, which isn't often in these more narrow tunnels.

[So what happened to Corun?]

[Harr?]

[Wasn't he supposed to be with you?]

My understanding was that Corun would take Tiny out hunting in the tunnels; it's not as if he could just let Tiny loose in the Dungeon without supervising him.

[Arrr. Bek.]

[He went back?]

[Hnn.] A nod.

Strange...

[Did he say why?]

Shake of the head. Huh. Perhaps he got a message from Granin letting him know that I'd be making my great escape? Or maybe he'd just known all along? I suppose it doesn't matter now since we've managed to meet up and escape. What happened before isn't especially relevant. Better to focus on getting ahead of the Golgari and getting back to the embrace of the family. I'm coming Colony! Just wait for me!

I can still feel them out there, pouring energy into me through the Vestibule, providing the fuel to push me further. There are so many ants in range, I'm still not tired, despite all the running I've had to do. Looking at Jim, he's struggling. He just isn't made for long-distance travel.

[You alright there, Jim?]

[... fine.... I think... how much further?]

[Not long. Another ten minutes, I think!]

[Oh boy...]

[Come on, you overfed worm! You've had it too soft for too long. Time to toughen up!]

He doesn't bother to reply, instead focusing on wriggling a little faster as he slithers forward. It doesn't take long to make it back to the junction, and this time we branch away from the outpost and head towards the ever-increasing signal coming from the Colony members nearby. Our progress immediately slows as we have to deal with the monsters who've taken up residence in the tunnel, but it doesn't have much of an impact. With Tiny along with us, we burn through these lower-tier creatures with ease, smashing them aside and moving on without breaking a sweat. The only hold up is when I have to convince Tiny not to stop and eat.

[Let's go!]

[Harr?!?!] He communicates his confusion and outrage at the mere suggestion we leave food behind with just a grunt.

[We're being chased by the Golgari! You know, those stone people! Do you want to be caught again? I sure don't!]

[Hrraaaa...] He sighs dejectedly and grabs a quick chunk of Biomass to stuff into his mouth as he runs.

[Good enough!]

Even though we move as quickly as we can, I can't help but feel a growing fear that we're going to get caught. In my opinion, the perfect result would be to escape back to the Colony without seeing another Golgari. If they catch up and we have to fight, then there's a solid chance that I'll have to injure or destroy them, since I sure as heck don't want them to take me back. If they end up losing warriors in the process of tracking me down then that's likely to light a fire I'd prefer stayed unlit. The more resources they pour into trying to track me down, the higher the chance of them running into the Colony and then attempting to exterminate it.

Having an entire empire of giant rock people sending a force to squash my family would be less than ideal. If that happened then... Geez, I don't even know what would need to be done? Relocate the Colony? Fight back? Go deeper into the Dungeon? Go higher? Who even knows?!

Focus, Anthony! Get your head in the game, man! Let's get my big fat abdomen to safety as fast as possible and then I don't have to worry about it!

Unfortunately, it doesn't go that way. After five minutes of desperate running and battling, they finally catch us. The first sign is a tingle in my antennae warning me of impending danger. On reflex, I leap to one side and ...

CRASH!

Narrowly dodge a figure that falls from above with the force of a collapsing building.

[Keep running!] I shout to Jim and the pets before I turn to see someone stand amidst the dust and stone.

It's a Golgari Warrior, easy enough to tell from the oversized sword and fancy looking outer skin. As the light plays over the ore that covers him, it glitters like a rainbow. Is this another moron who chose his skin for aesthetic purposes and not for defence? I whip together a mind bridge between the two of us to try and gain some advantage.

[Hey there, sparkles. Looking pretty.]

Heh. Nice start. The Warrior doesn't respond, launching another attack that brings his enormous blade around in a circle before it slashes out toward me, exploding with sword light that flies off the edge and cuts the stone between us. Warned by my fore-sense, I'm able to dodge to one side and chomp out with my mandibles.

SNAP!

He falls back; face settled in fierce concentration.

[Not need to rush so much, sparkles. They want me alive, don't they? Where are your buddies? Everyone knows you Warriors can't do anything without two friends to watch and clap.]

"AAAAAHHHH!" He roars as he winds up his next swing.

Maybe I touched a nerve there? His blow is so telegraphed I don't even need my mutations to dodge out of the way. As I leap clear, I make sure to leave a present behind.

POW! POW! POW! POW!

A rain of acid pours down on the Warrior, focusing on his legs. The acid sizzles away at the stone and begins to gum up, hindering his movement. At the same time, I fire off the mind magic package my sub-brains have cooked up across the bridge. It's not the same as the devastating mental attacks the Shapers used against me, but it's enough to send this Warrior reeling for the second that I need to flee.

[Later, sucker!]

Gweheheheh. As I run, I continue to fire acid in a wide spray that not only hits the Warrior but sprays across the ground, sizzling on the rocks behind me. If I'd stayed, I might have been able to defeat that Warrior, but with the Gulgari it always pays to remember that they work in teams of three. If you find one, the other two surely aren't far away. They must have spread out to cover more ground, but now that they've seen me this area is sure to be crawling with Warriors and Shapers before long.

Need to cover as much ground as possible before that can happen—time to DASH.

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 518: Triad in front, triad behind**

[Haul that monkey butt, Tiny! We need to move, move, move!] I shout as I zip after my pets.

Invidia has seized hold of the big ape with his stick-thin arms and clings to his black fur as Tiny leaps and bounds forward with all of his strength, making the little demon flap like a flag in a high wind. Lagging behind as always is Jim, and I catch up to him in no time.

[Jim! You need to pick up the pace! The Warriors have caught up to us!]

[What?! How many? He shrieks.

[Just the one.]

[Did you ... finish it?] He asks, desperately.

[No time. Doesn't matter anyway, there'll be more in the area, which is why we need to move.]

[I'm trying, damn you... I'm not ... built for this!]

His thoughts come with gaps breaking up each sentence as if he doesn't have the energy to think coherently anymore. The stress of the situation is having a distinct effect on him as well. I'll try to reassure him.

[Don't worry, Jim. Just a few more minutes and we'll make it to the Colony. I can sense them, hundreds, maybe thousands. Just keep pushing, and we'll get there. I won't leave you behind. If the Gulgari catch up, I'll hold them off with my pets, alright?]

[O-Okay...]

[Good worm. Keep at it!]

Contrary to my slithery associate, I'm bursting with energy. The more we flee, the more the Vestibule pays off, replenishing my energy and soothing my aches. We continue to run, but it's a nervous thing, with my antennae focusing more behind me than in front of me. Thanks to my particular brand of compound vision, it's not a big deal to focus in all directions. It won't take long for the Warrior I left behind to catch up again, that mental barrage is something he can probably shake off in a few seconds at most, and I don't expect the acid to be much of a hindrance. It does affect stone, but not nearly as well as it does biological matter. The amount I hit him with won't do much damage. If it slows him down for another second or two, that's a win.

I keep the mental construct suspended in my mind in case I need a bit more of that brand of magic. It's plenty useful for distracting and disrupting enemies without doing anything too lethal to them. If I'm forced to it though, I'll abandon it for a more direct form of persuasive magic. Fire, maybe.

In front of us, a pack of shadow creepers poke their heads up before hissing in our direction as we rumble toward them.

[Leave them!] I shout. [I don't care if they attack us. More chaos is better, and we can't afford the time!]

All I get is a grunt from Tiny as we continue to sprint past the pack who, thankfully, leave us alone. If they get tangled up with the Warriors, then I'll be a happy little insect but based on my knowledge of the monsters they'll probably let them through and try and tangle with all of us once things get messy. I hate those things!

A flicker of something catches my eyes and a ripple of feeling twitches in my antennae, and I throw my body to one side.

BOOM!

Where the heck are these guys coming from?! I can't even sense them until they're almost on top of me!

[Keep running!] I holler and follow my advice as I regain my feet and dash forward, my legs a blur as they move faster than my eyes can track.

Gogogogogogo! WHOA!

BOOM!

Another one!

I right myself and start to dash off once again before a blade of light erupts from the shadows on my right, cutting off my path of escape. Don't underestimate me, you punks! Do you think I'm going back to dance for your amusement?! Don't make me laugh! I throw myself forward directly into the line of the blade and allow it to strike my side as I pick up speed, angling myself to protect my legs.

OOF!

The strike shatters against my carapace, leaving a shallow slice in it but the sheer force is enough to make me stumble for a brief moment, which isn't enough for the triad to catch up as I spin my legs and rush away once more. They're going to have to do better than that if want to get through my diamond

carapace! You want to try and cut it with a sword?! Pure madness. That's precisely the kind of attack that it's specifically designed to ward off! Muahahaha!

I like to think of my carapace as medieval armour. When a soldier or knight was properly kitted out with padded wool, leather and chainmail, it was pretty much impossible to hurt with them a sword slash, which was the entire point. To deal damage, you needed to use either massive blunt force, like a heavy axe or hammer, or punch through it with a powerful stab. That's precisely how my diamond carapace works, whilst also being way shinier. I'm incredibly resistant to cutting, and thanks to my inner-plating, I'm pretty damn hard to crack with blunt force. The last way to try and get through is with a powerful stabbing attack, which is something I'll need to address at some point in my evolution.

If these guys want to fling more sword light my way, I'm more than happy to take them. Just don't cut off my legs, I need those.

Dash! Need to get more distance. I'm frantic for every last metre of space of I can get. Each step brings me that little bit closer to safety and a little further from not being in control of my destiny. I won't have it again! I refuse! Damn stone-heads, just get out of my way already! Their stubborn refusal to let me go is driving my anger toward them to rise, to the point where I don't even mind if they reach the Colony alongside me. That will just mean that none of them will return to their stupid city!

Arrrgh! No! Bad Anthony!

I throw on the brakes and screech to a halt as I call out to my pets.

[Tiny, Invidia! With me! Let's try and put these three down quickly! Non-lethal if we can manage it!]

[Yessss.]

[HARRRR!]

I'm not sure if Invidia is especially delighted or is just saying yes, but Tiny is clearly pleased to get a chance to punch some stone people in the face. I just can't let them find out about the Colony. I've brought disaster down on their heads already, and I refuse to allow it to happen again. I'll knock down these three and then flee to safety.

[Keep going in that direction, Jim!] I yell at him, [It won't be long until you find them! Tell them I sent you and you'll be fine!]

[... alright.... Then...] He wheezes.

Hopefully, he still has the energy to whip up a mind bridge, the poor worm. I don't want to get eaten because I ran him ragged trying to find Tiny... He slithers off into the distance as my pets, and I go face to face against the three suddenly wary Golgari Warriors. The tunnel isn't wide enough for much manoeuvring, especially with Tiny in here. There's little choice for them but to come right at us if they want to.

But... they don't. When we stop, ready to fight, the Golgari simply stop and watch, weapons at the ready.

What are they doing? Aren't they trying to fight us? Or are they just?

BOOM!

Waiting for reinforcements... dammit.

## Chrysalis

### **Chapter 519: Fight for freedom**

Of course they don't want to fight, why would they want to fight? All they have to do is keep us here until more of their stupid triads show up. If I was them, I wouldn't fight me either! Argh! What the heck am I going to do now? My mind spins as another triad of Warriors straightens up behind us, trying to box us in. Two triads are here now, and I don't doubt there are more, including Shaper triads, on their way to track us down. I'm guessing if we try and fight these guys they'll just retreat and delay whilst keeping their eyes on us until enough show up that they can put us down.

I can't afford to wait! I need to force the action to happen right now!

Gravity mana floods my mandibles and they begin to glow an ominous purple. I turn to face the Warriors behind us, blocking us off from the passage Jim has retreated through. They brandish their weapons and ready themselves for battle, but they won't be prepared for what comes next!

YOINK!

I pull the Golgari positioned in the centre and he falls toward me in a rush. Mandibles open wide, I prepare to 'welcome' this guest to the battle but am interrupted when the other two members of the triad dash to their ally and throw themselves bodily at him, weighing him down. Interesting. Perhaps they were told a few things by the Shapers before they came out? If so, they work quickly. Even if they didn't fall into my mandibles, I've still created an opportunity. The three Golgari in front are lying tangled in a heap, unable to protect themselves.

[Tiny! Keep those three of our backs whilst I deal with these punks. Invidia, help me get these three out of action, but no fatalities.]

[Master, are you ssssure?]

[We don't need to give them extra motivation to hunt us down. I want them unable to fight, but still living. That means explody magic is on the shelf.]

[... Understood.]

He does love a good explosion. Orders transmitted at the speed of thought, we pounce toward the Golgari who are leaping to their feet, but not quickly enough. My mandibles open wide and I snap them shut without activating any Skills. Somehow, my target manages to twist away and I follow as Invidia launches a blizzard of mental strikes against the Warriors. Easily spinning together three separate mind bridges, he packs each of them with dense blocks of mind mana and pummels the Warriors with them while he conjures illusions of monsters attacking from the shadows.

Under that sort of barrage the three have little hope of organising a fighting retreat as I close in. Sorry about this, stone-people, but I can't have you finding the Colony.

CHOMP! CHOMP! CHOMP!



And just like that, three proud Warriors have been shortened. Their tough exteriors cause a bit of trouble, what with the stone skin and all, but ultimately they fall prey to my mandibles. They shouldn't be following us around any time soon.

[Heal them,] I command Invidia, [just not too much. I don't want them to die, but I don't want them to spring up and start dancing, either.]

The eyeball stares at me for a second.

[Isss that likely?]

[... The dancing? No!]

Invidia throws his little arms up in the air and deftly weaves his magic as roars and crashes resound behind me. Tiny appears to be enjoying himself as blades of light slash at his body and he responds with blasts of lightning and stone shattering punches. He's holding on well for now, this might be a good chance to disappear.

[Keep holding them off, Tiny! I'll try and vanish and then we'll get you and Invidia out!]

"ROOAAR!" He bellows, throwing another haymaker.

I think that means he's got the plan. Maybe.

[Invidia, back him up, make sure he doesn't annihilate anyone.]

Time for me to split! I'll get myself out of here, make sure Jim is safe, then extract my pets without drawing down further heat! It's perfect! Things could not be going better!

FWOOSH!

BOOM!

A massive fireball explodes right in front of my face, searing my antennae with heat and causing me to scuttle backwards. Yeeouch! What the heck was that?! I let my guard down for one second and now I'm getting bombarded with spells!?

[More of them, Massster!] Invidia hisses.

Then he does a neat trick which I need to get the hang of myself, he uses our mind bridge to send a snippet of information, much the same way I use it against enemies to distract and deceive. Instead of working against me however, he sends me an image of what he can see, another triad rushing down the tunnel, flinging spells at Tiny. Dammit! Those idiot Shapers have arrived! This makes things much more difficult...

My senses tingle as I detect the early signs of more magic being thrown our way.

[Snuff it out, Invidia!]

Charged balls of fire streak through the air towards us, endangering the wounded Golgari just as much as us. These idiots don't even know they're here! Working together, Invidia and I reach out our minds and seize hold of their magics, ripping them apart at the seams until they failed, falling to pieces and

fizzling out in the air. How the heck am I supposed to escape into obscurity now? If I leave Tiny and Invidia to fight these guys on their own, there's no way they'll be able to hold them off, especially if they aren't allowed to utilise lethal tactics.

This situation is rapidly turning against me and I'm not hopeful I'll be able to get out of here with a happy ending. It might be time to start getting rough with these dang Golgari, I'm tired of messing around.

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 520: A new kind of mayhem**

Gah! This is just getting worse and worse. I refuse to get pulled down by these damn Golgari again. I can almost feel the stony morons closing in from every direction. The tunnels must be loaded with these hunting triads, Warriors and Shapers alike. If they sent out four triads to hunt me the first time, how many are they willing to send out now? I'm dangerously close to not caring if they make it back to their city alive. Any outcome is better than them learning of the Colony's existence. Even more concerning, I can feel my siblings converging on this place. A thousand tiny points of light fluttering in my Vestibule, each creeping closer to me with resolute will. Stay away you morons! You need to protect the family!

[Tiny! Let them have it!]

...

"RUAAAAAAAAHHHH!"

Freed from the shackles I placed on him, the giant ape freezes for a second before unleashing a shattering roar of pure savagery. His dark fur crackles to life and ribbons of electricity begin to spark across his body, coiling and twisting around his arms like jagged snakes.

[Invidia! Back him up!]

My little envy demon's eye narrows to a slit as he floats closer to the conflict, seemingly unimpressed at being tasked with babysitting his 'older brother'. Tiny is certainly not prepared to wait for him though, positively drooling at the prospect of cutting loose on these stubborn foes. The triad of Warriors facing him sense the change in the air and brace their weapons as the Shapers in the distance send another wave of offensive magic over their heads.

Tiny smashes his fists against his chest and roars once more. The power of his bellow is enough to shake the rock above our head. His eyes blaze red with fury and the crackling lightning rises to a chattering crescendo before he hunches forward and ... vanishes. Only to reappear fifteen metres away, fist poised to strike down on an unsuspecting Golgari wielding a massive two-handed hammer.

What the HECK!?!?!?

A sudden explosion of wind erupts a second later as Tiny's fist lashes out, wreathed in crackling energy. That fist is twice as large as that Warrior's head! You really aren't holding back now, are you Tiny? Fortunately for the stone covered fighter, the punch never connects. His nearby ally reacts just fast enough, flashing out a blade of sword-light that crunches into his own triad member, sending him crashing metres away as Tiny's brick of a fist slashes through the air, an explosion of electricity flaring into existence where his opponent's head had just been.

Two fireballs arc through the air and home in the ape before he can reposition but Invidia is ready. In a mind-bending display of mastery, the air seems to warp as he grasps the ambient mana with his Will and forges it into a barrier.

BOOM!

The sound is deafening and dust flies as the walls shake from the force of the impact, but Tiny stands unharmed as the smoke clears, fists held at the ready. I'm still endlessly impressed by the ease at which Invidia is able to manipulate the mana outside his body. For most mages, this is their bread and butter since, unlike monsters, they don't have the capacity to draw in and store mana to nearly the same extent. The ambient mana in the air, especially in the Dungeon, provides all the fuel they need to power their spells. Unlike most monsters, and much like myself, Invidia has been trained to use mana the same as a Sapien mage would, and his expertise in handling external mana far exceeds my own. This Skill allows him to utilise Barrier magic, something I haven't even scratched the surface of.

[Nice work, Invidia. You're the best, dammit!]

I can't help but get jealous.

The eye gleams with an unknown emotion at my words.

[Your praisse. I will have it!]

Still creepy though.

Even Tiny seems impressed by his new sibling's ability. Where he'd expected to tank those spells head on, he now stands completely unharmed and raring to go. A devilish grin splits his face and he launches himself forward once more, fists ablaze with light. He snaps out a sharp one-two combo, sending blasts of energy radiating toward the closest Warrior who'd just saved his ally.

Fist-light!? And so fast?!

His Gorilla boxing has evolved to a new level I see! All too happy to have someone else covering for him, Tiny launches a continuous, blistering offense against his hapless foes. As always, his fighting style leaves himself completely vulnerable, totally heedless of personal defence. Into this gap, Invidia seamlessly steps... floats? Barriers at clutch moments, illusions of lightning and monsters creeping out of the shadows combine with an endless mental onslaught to disorient the enemy and keep Tiny safe. Not to mention, the moment that Tiny does get hurt, a wallop of healing magic is going to hit him right in the face. THIS was the reason I was so intent on securing the services of a monster like Invidia. I'm tough enough to take the hits. I designed myself for that purpose after all. Crinis is smart enough not to get in over her head... most of the time, anyway. But Tiny can't. He can't manually control his evolution and even if he could, he'd only pack on more muscle and probably a fist on top of his existing fist for double the punching. His unstoppable offensive strength made him a powerful monster, but a vulnerable one. With Invidia here to cover for him, he can at last truly stretch his wings and fight the way he wants to.

Tiny has finally been unshackled!

The combination of the two monsters is so dominant that even when the Shaper triad is able to close the distance and join the fight proper, they still aren't able to turn the tides. Bit by bit, my pets batter down the Warriors and fend off the Shapers, the Golgari unable to suppress their rampage.

It's enough to bring a tear to the eye of any proud ant, if I were able to cry. Unfortunately, I don't have the time to do that, since another two triads have looped around behind us. Don't you guys have something better to do? Like, anything at all?! Why all this fuss for an escaped ant and a useless worm!? As Tiny and Invidia hold down the fort on the other side, I posture aggressively to ward off these six. They seem hesitant to engage, perhaps happy to wait for an even greater numerical advantage?

Actually... I think I recognise that sparkly fellow... He looks more eager than the rest and possibly more stupid as well... I whip together a mind bridge and try connecting to him on a hunch.

[Balta? Is that you? Did you miss dragging me around so much you wanted a second crack at it?]

As my words meet their target the individual in question explodes with rage and rips his oversized blade from its sheath.

[Insolent beast! This time I'm here to rip you limb from limb! You'll die screaming in agony before I'm done!]

[You really are stupid... I let you go last time and you come back for more? Come on then, stop hiding behind your friends and attack.]

He doesn't rise to the bait and smirks at me.

[Do you really think I'm that stupid?]

[Yes.]

Ah. Now he's attacking.