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Chapter 521: Rescue from the dark

The proud Golgari scion charges headfirst toward me, his fancy blade dancing in his hands. This guy really is stupid. Baited so easily, by a monster no less. I suppose I should consider myself lucky that he's diving in so recklessly, it's what I want after all. What I didn't expect was that the rest of the triads in front of me would leap into action the moment he stuck his dumb neck out.

Don't underestimate the power of little rich kids, Anthony! These other Golgari are probably all on the payroll! A personal protection force for the 'young master' as he goes out to seek retribution for the wrongs that were done to him. Despicable. If the Colony jumps out then he'll get to see the true meaning of borrowing the power of your family! It's getting less likely I'm going to get the outcome I want here. Nothing for me to do now but knuckle down and win this battle however I can. If I can do that much then the other ants won't need to get involved.

[I don't think you want to do this, pebble boy,] I warn as I flex my mandibles. [You couldn't handle me last time and I'm a heck of a lot better since then.]

[Taste my blade you trash!] He roars back and slashes at me with blinding speed.

Accurate and sharp, his sword light flies toward me, cutting a line straight through the rock where it intersects the ground. Impressive, as always. Let's see how well the 'ol carapace holds up against this one? Tucking my legs and rotating my body, I present my abdomen to the blade and let it hit me as I return fire with acid!

POW! POW! POW!

A rapid fire blast arcs out, causing the charging Warriors to dodge, losing their balance and momentum.

BAM!

The blade slams into me and I rebound through the air a little before landing comfortably on my six legs. The cut has carved a groove into my shiny diamond shell but nothing to write home about. Even my last opponent in the tournament was able to do more damage than this.

[If I give you a hundred free strikes, you might even manage to wound me,] I mock and pump mana into my mandibles.

His expression twists with rage as he wordlessly shouts and unleashes another slash, closing the distance to try and apply his blade to me directly. This guy is way too easy to bait. He's not even bothering to try and block or sever the mind bridge between us. Surely there's a reason for that? Or are these Warriors really so fixated on physical Skills that they don't learn any type of mana manipulation at all?!

In the time it takes my mandibles to charge, six blades of light are already streaking through the air toward me. The strikes are well placed, boxing me in so that I'll have to accept the blows no matter which way I dodge. Which is fine. If they want to try and whittle me down one blow at a time, I'll

outpace their damage with my regeneration. If they want to try and wear me down, they'll eventually learn it isn't going to happen with so many Colony members here.

I leap to my right and tuck my left legs to accept two blows before I land. The blades slam into me, cutting deeper than junior's but not by much. Their slashes move slower and may not be as sharp, but they seem to have more 'oomph' behind them. Perhaps a difference in technique or maybe they're simply older and have greater Might? Regardless, my defence is holding up strong. Time for a little offence. The moment I land, another wave of slashes is on its way, but I outmanoeuvre them by turning to the wall and dashing straight up it! My claws dig into the rock and I fly up the round wall of the tunnel until I'm upside down, looking down on the bewildered faces of my foes.

I suppose I must look a little odd, hanging upside down at my size. I'm not a mini little ant like I used to be, after all. I'm close to the size the Queen was before she evolved, so basically a minibus. Well, no need to look up here so foolishly, why don't you Warriors come and join me?

YOINK!

I pick a member of the group who's isolated to one side and try to drag them to me with my infused mandibles. With a cry of shock the chosen Warrior falls toward me, rising from the ground as my mandibles flex in preparation. The other's shout a warning to each other and their blades erupt in light at the same time, sending out a barrage of slashes towards me at once.

Dang it. More countermeasures?!

Unable to remain in the same place, I dodge to one side but I'm hampered by the strain being upside down puts on my claws. My Grip Skill just hasn't come along as fast as it needs to. I can't shift my weight quickly and it shows as more blows slash out and slice into my carapace before I can right myself. Dangit, the ceiling may have been a tactical mistake. Nothing for it now but to try and make the best of it.

Eat fire, suckers!

My sub-brains are always busy and now they've cooked up a juicy fire-mana construct and now I bring it to bear in the form of a raging flamethrower that erupts from between my mandibles. Feel the heat of my wrath! As I direct the flames toward my foes, my business district, open all hours, continues to rain a barrage of acid on the Golgari. Watching them scatter beneath me as I cling to the roof is certainly gratifying. Gweheheheh. Dance for me you pitiful scum!

BOOM!

GAH!

THUMP!

Oof. More people want to join this dance already?! Where the heck are you guys springing from? When I was enjoying myself roasting my opponents, another triad of Shapers must have arrived and taken umbrage with my activities. Rather mean spirited of them if you ask me. If I hadn't reacted fast enough I might have been slightly cooked myself. As it was, the blast of fire they sent my way was enough to blast the rock beneath my claws, resulting in a short but painful drop.

Legs flailing in the air I quickly right myself to see the forces arrayed against me. Holy moly, they really didn't want to let me go this time! Not one, but two triads of Shapers have joined on this front, and more Warriors have appeared from behind, putting pressure on Tiny and Invidia. If any more than this turn up, we are going to be in serious trouble...

Each of my brains is racing, flushing hot with exertion and my senses are strained to the limit, but even so I almost failed to notice the concentration of mana beneath my feet thickening. Trying to catch me by surprise? I don't think so?! I throw myself to one side, but even so I'm too late. My antennae tingle in warning but before I can move, the ground beneath my feet erupts in a wave of black that blooms outwards in a circle around me.

What the?!?!

In a flash the dark substance snaps onto my carapace and wraps itself around me, binding and blinding me. No, dammit! What the hell is this?!?! Some sort of shadow magic?! Wait... CRINIS?!?!

[I've found you, Master! This time, I'll NEVER let you go!]

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Chapter 522: The Creeping

[DAMMIT CRINIS! I can't see!]

[It's fine!]

[How is it fine?!]

[IT JUST IS!]

[No! How the heck can I fight if I can't see the enemy?! What is even happening?!]

[I'll fight for you! You don't need to do anything!]

[Are you kidding me?! There's no way you can take them all on by yourself!]

[Watch me!]

[I CAN'T!]

I'm currently entombed in a shell of Crinis after all. Not only is she covering my eyes, she's covering all of me! How is she even doing this? She sent her entire body through my shadow in a flash! So much faster than she was able to use the Shadows before. This can only mean one thing...

[You've evolved!]

[Of course, Master! Did you think I would rest before coming back to your side?]

[Well... no. I didn't.]

My Vestibule tingles with energy, causing panic to spark inside me.

[Wait, Crinis! What's the Colony doing?!]

[Oh, they're coming! They'll be here any minute.]

Through the liquid shadow flesh of Crinis' body I can sense the ongoing battle. Thuds and impacts ripple through her form as she takes damage that had been directed at me.

[Why are they coming?! They need to stay hidden!]

[Once they got this close, they didn't seem to want to stop. I think they're almost here.]

[Dammit, Crinis! At least let me see what's happening! That's an order!]

Reluctantly, the flesh parts and lets the light in once more, blinding me momentarily after the pitch black Crinis had inflicted on me. She appears to have gone through a few changes whilst I was gone. A writhing mass of flesh and tentacles rises from my back like a pillar, three separate mouths gaping and gnashing at the air as she sends her limbs twisting through the air toward the Golgari. For their part, the Warriors and Shapers are firing a literal barrage of strikes her way, the savage light from their weapons cutting into her flesh dozens of times.

[Crisis! Are you alright?!]

[I'm fine! Don't worry about me, Master. I'm here to keep you safe!]

[You need to get off me, Crinis. We need to end this fight before the Colony arrives!]

The wall to my right crumbles as a huge pair of mandibles break through the stone.

"LEEEEEEROOOOOY!!!!"

Somehow loud enough that the scent reaches my antennae despite being almost totally covered by Crinis, the war cry of the dumbest ant in the history of the species floods the tunnel as a HUGE soldier bursts through the wall and dives headfirst into combat. The Golgari are dumbfounded for the smallest of windows before they move to respond. That's Leeroy?! She's big! Some of the Colony members must have hit tier four whilst I was away. What an exciting development! No wait...

"What the heck are you doing?!" I scream, but since my pheromone gland is covered, they don't smell a thing I'm saying.

[Get off, Crinis! I need to fix this! NOW!] I bark at her.

But it's already too late. Maybe it was too late the moment I was captured. Once Leeroy has made her entrance, a dozen similar holes open up from all angles of the tunnel and hundreds of ants swarm out of them. The Golgari are overwhelmed in seconds, buried under an avalanche of insects. Only a few have the intelligence to flee the second an ant is seen, the rest fall victim to the relentless crush of the Colony. Before I can count to ten, the tunnel is awash with ants crawling over every surface and all signs of conflict are done with.

Dammit.

"The Eldest has been secured!"

"West tunnel, clear!"

"East tunnel, clear!"

"Move, move, move! Don't stop those claws! Scouts every hundred metres for a kilometre in all tunnel branches!"

"Prepare to close the emergency tunnels! Earth mages at the ready!"

"Has the council been notified?"

"They're on the way!"

Why the hell are they coming here?! As the tidal wave of pheromone conversations wash over my antennae, finally freed from Crinis' death grip, I feel the welcome buzz of my family wrap around me once more. The Vestibule is completely alive now, whispering to me the needs and desires of every ant within range. It's overwhelming at first, but when I hear the council members are coming this way, I lever myself to my feet.

Crinis has pulled back a little after I yelled at her, but she's still clinging to my abdomen, stuck to me like putty from a hell dimension.

[Tiny, Crinis, Invidia. We need to get moving.]

[Yes, Master!]

[Harrrr.]

[Yesssss.]

They each respond in their own way and gather around me as I begin to march through the tunnel.

"Anyone tell me where my friend Jim went?" I ask the ants nearby.

"The worm? You should find him a few hundred metres down the tunnel. Take a left at the branch," a scout replies.

"Thanks."

At least I think that was a scout. Judging by the long antennae and sleek carapace design, it would be weird if they were a soldier. As time passes and I move further away from the site of the battle, the number of ants congregating actually increases. More and more of them are flooding out of the nearby tunnels and climbing out of small emergency tunnels that they've dug every second until I feel as if I'm inside the nest, rather than some tunnel goodness knows how far away.

Naturally, every ant is busy. Hustling here and there, securing their own patch of territory, covering their own personal angle, all to ensure that I return to the Colony safely. It's enough to bring a lump to the throat. They sacrifice so much for me. I have to stop letting them down, or what would be the point of me? The oldest and strongest member of the Colony can't keep dragging it down like this! I'm the Paragon, dangit!

[Master, who is this... creature?] Crinis breaks into my thoughts.

Oh, right! I didn't make introductions.

[Crinis, this is the final member of our group, Invidia. He's an envy demon from the third strata. He'll be in charge of support magic and eye lasers. Invidia, this is your older sister, Crinis. She's in charge of being terrifying and tentacles.]

The little eyeball with wings looks up at the now massive Crinis who performs a truly horrifying manoeuvre. Her mouths, which had been facing forward, invert through her body and appear on the other side before they open wide, displaying her razor sharp fangs. A single tentacle extends from the gelatinous blob of flesh her main body has become and Invidia reaches out a stick-thin arm to shake it.

[Welcome, Invidia. Let's protect the Master together.]

[It ssssshalll be ssssoo.]

Introductions complete, they return to their normal positions, Crinis clinging to my back and Invidia floating along behind me as Tiny brings up the rear. I notice that Crinis is still yet to detach herself from my back since she arrived.

[You didn't really mean it when you said you'd never let me go, did you Crinis?]

[...]

[Come on, Crinis! Was it really that bad!?!]

[Yes.]

[...Really?]

[Yes.]

[... Alright then.]

There's an argument lost. Well, she did a great job getting the Colony and coming back to find me. If it keeps her happy then I can't complain.

[You did well, Crinis. I might not have escaped if not for you. You saved me.]

[...]

Aaand she's out.

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Chapter 523: The early Colony gets the worm

When I finally come across Jim, he's shivering up against the wall of the tunnel as dozens of ants keep watch on him, some literally on top of him.

[Jim! You made it out, alright I see!]

[Anthony! Thank the- WHAT THE HELL IS THAT?!]

[You mean Crinis? She's my pet.]

[THAT is your pet?]

[For sure, she's great. Anyway, why are you shaking like a leaf in a storm? Something wrong?]

[Every cell in my body is screaming at me to escape from these ants. I swear they are tasting me in their minds. They look hungry, Anthony!]

[You can't tell if an ant is hungry by looking at them, Jim.]

[I can sense it.]

[No you can't! Besides, what would be the point? We ants are always hungry.]

[Nooooo. Don't eat me, Anthony! I have a family! My poor worm children!]

[You aren't going to be eaten, Jim!] I scoff at him. [If the Colony was going to eat you, you'd be eaten already! Just relax for a second.]

[It's hard to relax when literal predators are climbing on you.]

He has a good point. When it comes to insects and small organisms, ants are just about kings of the hill. Worms are just one of the near infinite number of things that ants will prey upon as they seek out the protein they need to raise the ravenous brood.

[Just take a minute to appreciate your achievement! You're free! You made it out! If you want to, you can slither into the wall and vanish. Back to the Dungeon!]

[I'm too exhausted to take it in. I think I need to rest before I can enjoy it. Besides, I can't feel at ease knowing what Sarah is going through. If she doesn't fight, then isn't she just going to get eaten. It's not right...]

He's got a point. He said before we left that he wanted to go back and rescue his friend. Now that the Colony has exposed itself, there isn't much reason not to back and try to bust her out. If it's going to happen though, it'll need to happen soon. The Golgari will get word of an active ant colony soon and will start to mobilise their no doubt considerable resources against us. We need to get in, hit the outpost and get out before that can happen. If we pull the Colony all the way back to Liria, perhaps there's a chance they never find us.

[I'll let you rest here then. I'm going to go talk to the leadership and see what we can do about getting Sarah out.]

[Leadership? What do you mean? What's going on with these ants, Anthony?]

[It's... a little hard to explain. Let's just say, I made ants as smart as people?]

[You did WHAT?!] The worm explodes.

I get defensive.

[Hey! I just wanted to help out my family, you know?]

[So you made giant monstrous ants with the intelligence of humans? Do you have any idea what you've done?!]

[... made a super cool Colony of ants?]

[Oh my god. I can't take it anymore. I'm going to sleep.]

Having said so, the giant worm goes totally limp and flops on the ground under the watchful eye of his ant protectors. What's his deal anyway? I don't see how smart ants are any worse than smart apes or smart rock-skinned people. In fact, aren't they just better? I mean, I'll take my current family over my old one in a heartbeat. No time to worry about that now. I need to find whichever members of the Council were foolish enough to come all the way out here. Wherever 'here' is. Time to plan a quick smash 'n' grab and then we are marching home!

I find the usual suspects gathered nearby, waiting for me to turn up for a chat. They dug out a convenient meeting chamber for us to use so we don't block off the tunnel, which still has a ton of traffic moving through it as ants go about their work.

"Eldest, it's wonderful to see you again!" This from Burke.

"It's pleasing to see that this operation was a success." Sloan tips her antennae at me.

"You must have gone through a lot, Eldest! You didn't happen to pick up any new magical secrets, did you?" Propellant asks eagerly.

"I've learned a lot. About a heap of things, which I'm happy to share a bit later on."

Phew. It's all a bit overwhelming. The situation has changed so quickly that I need a moment to adjust. The Vestibule continues to pump me full of energy and keep me fresh, but the emotional fatigue is something it can't help me with.

"It's great to be back with you all. Thanks for coming for me."

"Of course we came to get you! Through great danger and GLORIOUS battle we have made our way to sacrifice ourselves to secure your freedom!"

"Shut up, Leeroy."

"Yes, Eldest."

"Haaah. Where even are we? How far from the nest have we come?"

"I can field that," Burke chips in, "we're approximately a hundred and thirty two kilometres in a straight line across the surface from the nest. In terms of movement through the tunnels, we could probably triple that number."

"HOLY MOLY."

That's a heck of a long way.

"How did you guys even manage to find me?"

It seems like an impossible mission. Three hundred kilometres of tunnel? In a matter of weeks?! What the heck have they had to do in order to cover that sort of ground?

"It's not as bad as you think," Propellant chuckles, "the Colony has kicked quite a few things into overdrive since you last were in the nest. We are covering quite a lot of Dungeon territory every day. We need to in order to keep the graduates and larvae fed and growing."

"I suppose the two new Queens are running at capacity now?" Victorian and Antionette will be pleased to finally be performing their role. It's something they've wanted for a long time.

Leeroy twitches.

"TWO Queens? What do you mean. There's like... six?"

SIX?!

"It's true," Burke shrugs her antennae. "It's been a little while since I was last home. But the Tenders were setting up a second nest for the Queen in the second layer and a new group of less mature Queens were being raised in the original nest."

Somehow when she says 'the Queen', it's still obvious who it is that she's talking about. So we have more than one nest now? And a nest in the second strata?! That's impressive as hell!

"That's incredible. I'm so grateful that you've been able to do all this."

"What do you mean? We're just working."

Of course. Just doing their jobs, what else would they be doing. Thankfully they consider their work running hundreds of kilometres to drag their troublesome Elder out of trouble.

"Things are going to get dangerous here soon. An empire of people called the Golgari live in this area. We're on the outskirts of their territory now."

"We've seen the signs, even observed them a few times. They look tough," Burke observes.

"They can be very strong," I agree, "and once word gets out that we are here, they'll put together some serious firepower to hunt us down and eradicate the Colony. I'd rather we didn't fight them and just retreated."

"Sensible," Burke observes.

"UNACCEPTABLE!" Leeroy shouts.

"Before we do that though, I have something I want to get done...."

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Chapter 524: Diversions

"How was I supposed to know he was going to escape?" Granin said. "You think he was likely to admit such a thing right before he attempted it?"

"I've had reports that much of the mental communication between yourself and the ant were shielded from prying. Why would that be?" Gravus rumbled, uncharacteristically keeping his temper in check.

Granin's eyes widened.

"Because, as my charge, and as a reincarnated individual, Anthony had those rights within the cult. I swear by the Worm, you boneheads don't even remember what he is!"

"He was a monster under the control of the cult," Gravus growled.

"He was an individual under the care of the cult," Granin ground out.

The two old Shapers glared at each other, openly indulging in their mutual dislike. Granin felt his knuckles itch with the desire to punch this sorry sack of a stone right in the face again, just to prove a point, but he restrained himself. He was being interrogated and didn't particularly want to drag the rest of his triad down with him.

"And I suppose the frequent meetings with the other reincarnated individuals under our care, leading to the escape of one of them, had nothing to do with your machinations?"

"Machinations?" Granin snorted. "The only plotting here has been going on in the vast space between your ears. It's natural for them to want to communicate with each other, given their shared history. Each of those meetings was approved, by your triad, and, just maybe, James was eager to escape because he feared being forced into combat to the death. You know, like you did to Anthony, and then to Sarah."

Gravus puffed up with indignation.

"You know very well that the specimen known as Sarah volunteered for the role. She has relied on the Shapers for many years, it's little surprise that she wants to give back."

Silence hung in the air for a few long seconds as Granin stared his adversary in the eyes coolly. It was hard to believe the old blowhard would be able to spit those lines with a straight face. If it were Granin, he expected the shame would be enough to melt him down to slag.

"There's a few rumours going around the outpost," Granin said, "ugly rumours. People are talking about Sarah, about how scared she was of returning to the Dungeon. There's even speculation ..."

He leaned forward conspiratorially.

"... that some disgusting piece of trash, threatened to send her to the third strata and leave her there if she didn't agree to participate in the Dungeon and murder one of her own kind."

"Terrible," Gravus said through gritted teeth.

"Shocking," Granin forced through his own rictus grin. "It's this kind of disgusting conduct that gives Shapers across the empire a bad name."

The two returned to their silent, hate filled staring contest whilst behind them Torrina and Corun rolled their eyes. He couldn't help himself, this leader of theirs. If he wasn't so busy sticking his nose into messes and stirring the pot, he'd have been inducted to the leadership decades ago. But, if he was able to practice that kind of restraint, he wouldn't be Granin, and they wouldn't respect him nearly so much.

Behind Gravus, his own triad members sat, equally frustrated, though they were more disciplined and didn't show it on their faces. It had been a long, tiring night for them as they tried to organise the pursuit of the escapees and manage the increasingly shrill demands of the city, and of the Warriors network who supported them. When word came back a few hours ago that the majority of the triads

sent out had been destroyed by an overwhelming force of ants, the entire city had exploded. A few things had begun to happen at once. Officials scrambled to put together a suppression force. Warriors scrambled to insert themselves into that force in order to reap glory and rewards. Shapers rushed to get out of that force in order to avoid having their study routines disturbed, not to mention all that nasty danger that would be involved. But the most fierce and determined competition was surely the intense round of blame shifting that occurred amongst the leadership circles all over the city.

Warriors and Shapers were dead. An ant colony was on the city's doorstep and nobody knew about it. The citizens were in an uproar, every Circle in the city from the Merchants to the Crafters was up in arms. The Noble circle had, to this point, been mercifully silent, but for how long nobody could guess. Yet another reason to find someone to point the finger at when things got grim. Naturally the leading triad in the outpost had come to the most logical conclusion in regards to their own scapegoat. Granin and his triad had been working closely with the specimen in question and had agitated on its behalf most aggressively. It was very plausible that they knew the extent of its plans.

Plamine leaned forward, her elbows on her desk and her hands laced beneath her chin.

"It's going to be difficult to convince the city that you had no knowledge of what was going to take place, Granin," she managed to sound regretful. "If or when they come here asking questions then we are going to need to have some answers for them. What should we tell them?"

"Through your own idiotic policies you pressed intelligent and dangerous creatures against a wall, forcing them to make desperate choices that have endangered us all?"

"I don't think we'll be saying that," Plamine smiled.

"Why start being honest now?" Granin grunted.

Cryslas stepped forward and inserted herself into the dialogue.

"If you don't want to be detained then you are going to have to give us a compelling reason. Is there anything you can say in your own defence?"

Corun yawned widely and Torrina stifled a chuckle. The two of them immediately drew glares from the leading triad opposite, but they couldn't bring themselves to care. Not to say that the threat to their own freedom and safety wasn't real, it absolutely was, but these individuals no longer held any awe or fear for them. They now saw them as Granin did, foolish and desperate Golgari who'd made a mess and refused to clean it up.

Granin too was tired of playing games.

"Detained? That's a big word to be throwing around so casually..."

"Casually?" Cryslas snapped, "do you think anything about the current situation calls for such a relaxed attitude from you? Shapers have died."

"Yes, they have," Granin muttered and his eyes burned with rage as he stared at the idiots who'd caused this mess. "Let's make something very clear. Very obvious. If you try to have me and my triad detained, we are going to have a little civil war right here in this outpost."

"What are you talking about?" Gravus spat.

"You can only be so incompetent, for so long, before people start looking to kick you down a peg. You three have been so transparent with your manipulations, so brutish with your methods, that even the die-hard idiots are finding it hard to justify supporting you. I have the numbers to remove you from office right now if I wanted to."

"You're bluffing," Plamine said.

"It'll take you an hour to confirm I'm right. So why don't you scurry off and do that. Once that's done you can let me and my triad members leave this outpost and get busy trying to pin your mess on someone else."

Granin remained calm to the end, though his immense disdain was plain to see. He still had no idea how such fools had reached such a high post within the Cult. They'd had standards once upon a time. What had happened?

Cryslas, Gravus and Plamine shot each other a worried look. If what the crusty old fool said was true...

"We'll have a brief recess before we reconvene this meeting," Plamine declared before the three of them marched out together.

The silence in the room stretched out for a few minutes before anyone spoke.

"We going to get the heck out of town, Granin?" Corun asked.

"Absolutely. I have no idea what Anthony has planned, but I have no intention of being here to see it."

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Chapter 525: The Fear

Sarah was afraid. Although, just saying that didn't mean much. She may as well have said "Sarah was breathing", because she was always afraid. Always. She'd been afraid for so long that she no longer remembered what had first caused her to fear. She no longer remembered what it was that she feared the most. Her life, her first life, was mostly a haze of half-remembered pictures and blurred faces to her now, but somehow she could still remember the fear. It had been cold, and hard. It stabbed deep into her heart when she was young and never left, it carved out a space inside and made itself at home. She'd died afraid and been reborn afraid, the Dungeon was just yet another thing for her to fear. This terror was more visceral, hot and red, and she had nearly gone mad with it. She could remember days when she'd barely had a human thought, lost in the snarling, biting, tearing rampage that sparked when she was pushed to the edge by the things that haunted her new life.

It was strange that she'd been reborn as a bear. They were strong creatures, deadly, powerful, capable. All things that were so far from her own existence that she couldn't imagine applying those terms to herself. On the verge of breaking down, tilting on the last crumbling precipice of her sanity, she'd thrown herself on the mercy of the Shapers and they had taken her in and healed her. Fed her, talked to her and with tender care had pieced her near-shattered mind back together. It had taken years before she would talk to them in sentences. More years before she would stop waking up roaring and snarling as she bashed down walls. She didn't trust the Shapers on a whim, they earned that trust over decades.

Which meant it hurt even more when they'd changed. James had seen it long before she had. He was wary of the new faces, the rule changes and shifting atmosphere. He'd tried to warn her, but she'd been

too scared to listen. She felt safe here. The ever-bubbling cauldron of fright within her had been reduced to a simmer. Sometimes she was even able to pretend that she wasn't afraid at all. That had all changed when Anthony had arrived. Just an ant, but he'd been everything that she wasn't. So sure, so confident. When she looked into those bizarre, fractured bug eyes of his she'd not sensed the slightest fear in him. The Dungeon held so little fear for him, it was crazy. She'd begun to wonder what it was that made him so different to herself. She was stronger than he was, she thought. Probably by a lot. So why? Why did he thrive where she didn't? What did he have that she lacked?

She didn't have an answer to that question, even now.

The gate rattled before her eyes as it raised and she stepped slowly into the combat arena, her head hanging low and listless. She didn't want to be here. The sand shifted and slid beneath her paws, the glaring eyes of the Shapers seemed to burn into her fur and the charged energy in the air pressed down on her. A whine built in her throat and she couldn't control it until it whimpered out of her muzzle. She could smell the bloodlust from her opponent rise sharply at the sound. It sensed weakness. The creature was a blade beast, a rare creature found in the first strata, usually in areas with a strong concentration of mana. The recent rise in density had caused a spike in such monster spawnings and the Shapers had sprung into action at the prospect of capturing such powerful creatures. With four huge blade arms attached to a powerfully muscled body, covered in spikes and pointy protrusions, the blade beast was a horrific opponent for most creatures. Faster than it looked, durable as all get out and almost inexhaustible, they terrorised most monsters from the first strata.

She didn't want to fight it.

She didn't want to go back to what she was when she fought things like this, didn't want to retreat back into the madness and savagery that protected her from her cowardice. But even that would be better than going back out there. She'd never been to the third strata, but she'd approached its edge, only once. She shivered at the memory. She couldn't go back there. She couldn't stand it.

In her heart she was still confused. Still hurt by what was happening and just unable to understand it. Why was she being made to fight? Why were the monsters fighting at all? Did Anthony and Jim escape? She hadn't been able to see them for days. All such thoughts were pushed rudely aside as the battle commenced. The blade beast stepped forward and she raised her head. Her sheer size and bulk gave the monster pause. It didn't want to approach directly, wary of her flaws and fangs. Instead it began to circle around, huge glittering blades slicing through the air in a display of dominance.

Sarah's heart pounded in her chest and her body trembled as the monster closed in. Her vision swam and she could barely focus as her confusion and desperation paralysed her. She didn't notice the unease ripple through the Shapers watching from the stands, she wasn't cognizant of the impacts shuddering through the stone around her. Nor did she hear the scraping and grinding that seemed to echo through the walls.

She sure as hell did notice when a hole opened up in the centre of the arena and a familiar looking ant head popped out of the ground.

[Stupid... SAND! UGH! That'll be in my carapace for days... Hey! Found her!]

The ant was suddenly lifted into the air as a huge worm shoved its way through the hole.

[Sarah! Hey! We came back to get you! Are you alright?!]

The words echoed in her mind but she just couldn't process them.

[Jim? ... Is that you?] she wondered.

[How many other giant worms do you know?! Don't answer that, I might get jealous. What the heck is that thing!?] He screeched.

The blade beast had stepped back, cautious at the appearance of these new monsters, but now that they turned toward it, the monster prepared to assault them all at once. Sadly, it never got the chance. The sand beneath its feet began to sink away as a new hole opened up beneath it. Its blade arms scrabbled at the air but to no avail as a host of mandibles reached up to drag it down below sight.

[I wouldn't worry about it,] Anthony said.

The worm turned its blind head towards the unmoving bear once more.

[Come ON, Sarah! We need to get the heck out of here! You aren't still planning on staying are you?]

[No?] She muttered. [Jim, what's happening?]

Only now did she start to notice the chaos erupting around her.

[I just brought the family in for a quick smash n' grab.] Anthony said.

Sarah latched onto one word.

[Family?]

The ant's antennae seemed to wobble with joy.

[Oh, I think you're really going to like 'em!]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 526: The SAS of Colonies

We get in and we get out. That's the fundamental truth of this raid and I'm going to stick to it like a sticky substance applied to another, less sticky thing. There must be a better analogy, but I'm too pumped up to iron it out right now. It takes a little convincing but eventually we get Sarah down into the tunnel and fleeing with her buddy Jim. With her mental state as muddled as it is, I don't want her hanging around for the rest of what's going to happen around here. Namely, robbing the facility blind and running off with the loot.

We don't plan to destroy the Shapers themselves in the process, but it's inevitable that a few get caught up in the crossfire. I've made peace with that, seeing as they didn't particularly care if I myself was broken in the course of constructing their super monster. Leaving the arena, I crawl back down under the surface and immediately I'm covered in a goop like darkness that wraps itself around me.

[Master! I've completed my task and returned to you.]

[Yes... I noticed. Good job, Crinis. Did the other Shadow monsters get out safely?]

[Most of them did, Master. I believe that between the pets and I we were able to secure almost all of the cores.]

[Great. I'm sure you managed to make yourself plenty distracting up there.]

[What are you saying, Master?] A dangerous note creeps into her tone as she questions me.

[Ah... Nothing! Just that you have a very striking appearance!]

[Why thank you!]

[ACK! Don't squeeze me!]

I'm glad I sent Crinis with the Core Shapers as part of our distraction. Not only would she be able to support the others and the show of force that much more terrifying, it gave me a bit of time without being choked. I quite enjoyed that time. Sadly, it's over now, and as I make my way through the tunnel, it becomes clear that Crinis has no intention of relinquishing her grip.

The network of tunnels dug throughout the outpost are swarming with the Colony as ants rush to complete their objectives. After securing Sarah, I only have one more stop on my schedule: the leading triad. I don't intend to rub my freedom in their faces or anything, as nice as that would be, I just want to be present to make sure they don't cause any problems for my siblings. As irritating as those three were, I have to respect the power and authority that they possess inside the outpost. If anyone will be able to rally the Shapers against us, it's going to be them.

So with Crinis attached, I rush through tunnels and burst out into the corridors of the Shaper outpost, tracking my target. Pandemonium reigns everywhere I can look as ants ransack rooms and herd shellshocked Shapers into corners, keeping them isolated and confused. Nice to see my instructions being followed, not that I doubted it. If we can avoid heating up the inevitable Golgari counterstrike any more than we already have, then I'll be pleased. No need to throw more fuel on to that fire. I instructed the Colony to put them down with a vengeance if they tried to fight back though. With the element of surprise on our side, not to mention a rather ridiculous numbers advantage, it was never going to be hard for us to overwhelm the place.

[I still can't believe these scum held you prisoner,] Crinis bristles as we rush through corridors not quite large enough for my frame.

[Settle down, Crinis. Most of these people had nothing to do with that decision. Let's just leave them be.]

[You're too nice, Master. I still think you should let me spend some time with a few of them. They won't ever come after us again!]

As she imagines getting her tentacles on the Shapers I can feel her barbs start to form and grate against my carapace. I shudder to think what would happen to any Golgari that falls into her clutches. Is there a Geneva convention on Pangera? Any laws regarding being partially rendered by a void beast from the depths of madness and despair? Probably not, now that I think about it. This world doesn't muck around when it comes to the war between surface and Dungeon creatures.

[Do you have any idea where Tiny and Invidia wound up?] I ask.

[I haven't seen them, but they shouldn't be far away. Can you reach them?]

[Tiny! Invidia! Where did you guys wind up?]

[RAAAAH!]

[... Invida, where are you right now?]

[We have found the rest of the monssters. Sssssoon, we will take their everything.]

... So I'll take that to mean they've broken into the monster cells and have started fighting the remaining tournament contenders. That's some juicy experience and biomass right there and I don't intend to let it go to waste. My siblings would be able to overwhelm them, of course, but the casualties would be unacceptable. Better to leave it to Tiny and Invidia. Those two working together will be able to crush any one monster, no matter how well designed it is.

All of those precious resources, I'll be taking them for my pets, thank you very much! Muahahahaha!

[You remember the plan, Crinis?]

[We find the leaders and give them pain.]

...

[Wait.. No?]

[We find the leaders and I will give them pain.]

[No!]

[You're too nice, Master.]

[Stop choking me.]

If I didn't have a carapace I'd have been torn to bits by Crinis' unconscious tentacle flexing. It's a pain that she's like this, but I feel so bad for sending her off on her own that I can't bring myself to say anything about it! I can only pray in my heart that she'll get over her abandonment issues soon.

"These corridors are confusing! Where's a damn scout?!"

"Right here, Eldest!"

A wiry ant sticks her head out of a nearby doorway and salutes with an antenna.

"Have we located the leadership yet? I'm getting twisted about in these damn corridors."

"We haven't, but the only remaining pocket of resistance is up two levels. We theorise that those you're looking for are there."

"Resistance?! Still?! I'm on my way!"

Don't worry, my siblings! I'm on my way! The need to protect my Colony rages like a fire in my core and I lean back on my hind-most legs to begin chomping at the ceiling.

[We're going up, Crinis!]

[I'm with you, Master!]

[Stop choking me!]

After the reinforced rock around the outpost, chewing through the floors is nothing. A couple of bites and the rock cascades down around me, bouncing off my carapace and Crinis' exposed flesh. Reaching up, my claws grasp hold of the stone and I pull my large frame through the gap and I attack the ceiling once again. I can feel it now, in my mana sense. There are dozens of spells being worked above my head. This won't do!

CHOMP! CHOMP!

The ceiling collapses around me and the sound of battle begins to batter against my antennae.

"What the heck is going on up here?!" I rage.

"Eldest!"

"The Eldest is here..."

The ants react with surprise as I burst my way through and some of them even freeze for a second before they resume their tasks. That's unusual. For an ant to forget their work for even one second is odd.

"Eldest, glad you made it," Burke calls from nearby. "Join me over here for a second."

The air is awash with pheromones as the Colony battles the foe, making it difficult to pick out each particular scent. I suppose people talking over each other is much the same situation. The area is a ruin, rooms smashed apart and walls crumbling in every direction. It appears as if the two sides are separated by a solid stone corridor and I've surfaced on the ant side. Spells are being constantly hurled toward the ants, who've bunkered down behind cover and retaliate with acid barrages when they get the chance. Classic stalemate.

Burke is nearby, clinging to the ceiling and keeping a close eye on the enemy down the corridor from behind a pillar.

"What's going on?" I demand. "Any casualties?"

"A few," she admits, "those spells are no joke. The healers are doing what they can but we lost a few in the first barrage."

"I'LL KILL THEM!"

"Hey, Eldest, remember your own plan?"

"Oh... right."

"This is slowing us down and we need it resolved right now. Judging by the heavy resistance, we have to assume that something or someone valuable is down this way. Think you can break us through?"

"Burke, you shouldn't ask stupid questions."

"Of course, Eldest."

Chrysalis

Chapter 527: Barging In

Anger boils inside me at the thought that these moronic Shapers would dare to kill my siblings! Outrageous! They've nobody to blame for their current circumstances but themselves, I've no pity for them at all. My attitude toward the Golgari is hardening at a frightening pace. If I hadn't had such positive experiences with Granin and his triad then there's a possibility that none of the Shapers would have made it out of this assault alive. I suppose that's a dark thought, but these people are messing with my family! That's not something I can allow anymore.

[Crisis, do you think you could jump through to the Shadows in the next room?]

[I'll need a distraction. They'll be on the lookout for a tactic like that.]

[Not a problem. I can give you all the distraction you'll need. Keep your senses open and wait for your chance.]

[Right, Master!]

...

[That means you need to climb off me and move to the side.]

[... No it doesn't.]

[Yes, it does! What's the point of me drawing their fire and creating a distraction if YOU are the one being hit?!]

[But...]

[No buts! Get your nightmarish gloom over in that corner and wait for a chance!]

Grumbling and full of reluctance, I'm finally able to get Crisis to climb off of me and out of sight in a corner where she huddles pitifully, small tentacles extended in my direction trying to latch onto my legs.

I avoid her feeble attempts with ruthless precision, she'll be glued back onto my carapace before too long anyway, I need to enjoy this brief moment of freedom whilst it lasts. Troublesome pet dealt with, I approach the fire zone at the end of the corridor, an area covered in ants clinging to any piece of cover they can find and blasting acid at the mages whenever they get the chance.

"No mage support?" I demand a nearby soldier.

"They got tied up on other floors keeping the peace. They're the only ones who can talk to these people, after all."

Makes sense.

"Have negotiations been attempted here?" I ask.

"No. They opened fire the second they saw us!"

Hmmph.

"Well, it's time they got what they deserved for it, don't you think, soldier?"

"Yes, Eldest!"

I hunch out of sight and wait for the next barrage of spells to fly down the corridor. It arrives after a few seconds, a wave of fireballs, bolts of ice and other more esoteric magics that detonate, shatter and otherwise peter out against the rubble without finding a target. In the next moment the ants step from cover or raise their abdomens to unleash their formic acid spray.

POW! POW! POW! POW!

Solid jets of sizzling liquid streak through the air down the corridor to splatter against something out of sight and the ants begin to duck back down again in anticipation of the next wave of spells. This is the time I choose to spring from my cover and unleash my own barrage of acid!

POW! POW! POW!

A rapid fire trio of shots fly down the length of the corridor and impact against what is definitely a magical shield of some sort. The Shapers, who'd been preparing to return fire, are shocked to see their precious shield begin to bubble and steam as my acid begins to eat into it. I follow up with a solid blast of flamethrower magic as I charge down the corridor, my bulk taking up almost the entire space.

I'm not intending to harm the Shapers with this magic, I doubt they could be harmed by magic on this level, but I'm hoping it prevents them from seeing me coming. Flames belching out from between my mandibles, I race down the corridor like a freight train, but as expected, it only takes a moment until I can feel my flames being broken apart by the highly trained mages I'm attacking.

BOOM! THUD!

Spells begin to fly through the flames in the other direction, slamming into my carapace with impressive force. The best I can do to protect my eyes is lower my rear legs as I run, creating an angle to protect the top of my head, but the damage adds up. It's not as if they can miss me after all. I'm a giant ant-fish in a rather small barrel at this moment. As long as they don't get a lucky shot, it's unlikely that they'll be able to puncture my carapace in a single shot.

SHING!

... Or not!? My momentum crumbles for a moment as an almost clear shard of ice flies through my flames and lodges deep in my carapace. Ouch! Someone put a huge amount of mana into that thing! But it's only enough to slow me down for a second. The corridor is only twenty metres long and after another two strides I burst through the opening and slam bodily into their melting shield, mandibles snapping.

The room has nine mages inside, three full triads, not to mention the exact people I'm looking for! I can see Gravus' face blanch as he realises exactly which ant has come to pay him a visit. Gweheheheh. I've been wanting to see you, Gravus!

CHOMP! CHOMP! CHOMP!

My mandibles flex and shatter their barrier with sheer force as I use my legs to knock the mages around, disrupting their formation. With all of their focus on me, that's more than enough of an opening for

Crinis to work her magic. The floor darkens to midnight black and a forest of tendrils rise as if growing from the floor itself. In moments, they thicken into powerful tentacles, latching onto the Shapers and curling around them as the dark mass of Crinis' main body forms in the centre of the room, her mouths gnashing hungrily at the air.

I think two of the Shapers just passed out from sheer terror... the rest are tightly bound and aren't liable to be doing much of anything until we decide to let them go.

Luckily not the three that I'm hoping to talk to!

"Get in here! Hustle now, I'm doing all of your work!"

Shashashashasha.

After I call out to the Colony they flood down the corridor and in moments the Shapers each have a set of mandibles around their neck whilst yet more ants comb through the room, a fairly plush looking study with an impressive desk on one side. There has to be some juicy loot in here, I hope we find it.

"Get some mages up here, I want them to check for any enchanted items," I say to a passing general and she snaps out a quick salute.

I probably didn't need to say anything, no doubt they'd already sent for mages to sweep the area, but I like to feel as if I'm useful. With that taken care of, I gleefully spin together a mind bridge and prepare for a chat with some of my favourite rock covered people.

[Irette Plamine. How nice to see you!]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 528: Bringing the Shapers home to visit

The leading triad each stare daggers at me as my siblings sweep through their office, crawling over the walls. They probe every surface for potential valuables leaving no stone unturned. Already various items have been snatched up in greedy mandibles and carted away under the disbelieving eyes of the Shapers. I doubt this is how they expected a monster invasion to go, most of them seem to scarcely believe they're still alive. If I'm being honest, that's not an unreasonable state of mind for them to be in.

[I don't suppose you thought you'd wind up in a situation like this, did you Plamine?] I can't help but taunt a little.

The once powerful Shaper is a shadow of her former self, looking frazzled and worn down, as much a person with solid rock for skin can. She glares at me fiercely before replying.

[It seems we were right to treat you as a monster and not as a person. Your actions reveal the beast that you are.]

Her mental communication is loaded with venom but the sheer arrogance of her words robs me of the ability to address her tone.

[You don't think stuffing me in a cell and trying to kill me has motivated my response in any way?]

[You should be thanking us,] she sneers, [you gained much from the Cult of the Worm, did you not? Our experience and knowledge, levels and Biomass. You were happy to take those things from us. Look how you have rewarded our hospitality.]

[You're out of control, lady.] I clack my mandibles. [You had so many opportunities to prevent this outcome. You could have left me alone in the Dungeon, but no. You could have treated me with dignity, but no. You could have taken my bargain when it was offered, but no. You're going to get the bad ending that you worked so hard to achieve.]

[You speak as if you are the only thing that mattered, but there are many points of view, many shifting alliances. Even if we wanted to change our policy, there were existing considerations you know nothing about.]

I shrug my antennae.

[So? I don't have to take into account your situation, only my own. If someone else has driven you to this point, then blame them, not me.]

I give her a friendly pat on the head with one claw and she flinches away from me. Gravus looks like he's about ready to explode with rage, but perhaps the mandibles around his neck are helping him hold it in.

[Now that my family is here, we're going to ransack this outpost, take everything we can use and leave you with a smoking ruin. Them's the breaks, I suppose.]

[My people will hunt you down, monster,] she spat, [and when we do, I'm going to be there. I rip your core out myself and reincarnate your corpse just so I can desecrate it.]

Well, that's just nasty.

[Your people are indeed going to be coming for us, which is why we're trying to move quickly. But, you know what? I'm not that certain that I want to leave you behind anymore.]

Obviously a Golgari can't really turn pale. They can turn a bit grey, though.

[You wouldn't!]

[Why not? Like you said, Shaper knowledge is invaluable, I'm not going to arrogantly say that I've learned everything you guys happen to know. Also, when your people come for us, they might hesitate just a little if we have some of their own held hostage.]

[And why would I cooperate?]

Plamine is attempting to appear strong, but I can tell that she's rattled. Not that I blame her. She's facing the prospect of being dragged off by a ravenous horde of insect monsters.

[The only way you get to go back to your people alive is if you keep me happy. If you don't, I'll be feeding you to the larvae. They get ever so hungry.]

I can't help but get a little overdramatic with the threats. Luckily, I think she bought it.

[We'll take the younger one as well,] I add as an afterthought.

[What?!] Plamine screeches in my mind but before she can blink, I've tasked two soldiers with taking away her fellow triad member who doesn't appear to be very amused by the situation, if the kicking and screaming is any indicator.

[I'll kill you!] Plamine rages.

I stare at her carefully but the emotion appears genuine. Interesting. We might be able to use this leverage.

[Cooperate with us and we won't harm a single stone on her skin.] I promise. I don't need to say what'll happen if she doesn't.

Plamine is dragged out of the room by another soldier whilst being carefully watched by a Mage as the rest of the Shapers nervously watch. Not seeing any reason to keep them in suspense, I open up communications with them.

[Hey there folks. It's Anthony, in case you didn't recognise me. I'm going to take those two with me when we leave for hostage purposes. You'll probably get them back, we'll see how it goes.]

A pause.

[Maybe don't kidnap and try to kill the next sentient creature you run across. Bit of advice there... What else? Ah, we'll leave you all alive, no worries there.]

They all sag with relief.

[... I should have mentioned that first. Sorry. Catch you all later then, please don't hunt us down... Bye.]

I awkwardly cut off the communication and turn to the scout next to me.

"Burke, are we done in here?"

She nods.

"Looks like it. Other floors are reporting their tasks are complete as well."

"Great." The tension drains out of me a little. "I'm done with this place. Let's go home!"

[Tiny! Invidia! Finish eating in a hurry, we are getting out of here!]

[Harr?!?!? NOM! NOM! NOM! NOM!]

[You don't have to message me that you're eating! Just eat!]

Damn ape! That's a disturbing mental sound.

I mean, how do you even convey the sound of chewing through mind communication? Actually, I don't want that question answered. As we leave the chamber, Crinis unwinds her tentacles from around the remaining Shapers and once more latches onto me, her body goopifying itself as she adheres to my carapace.

[I'm back, Master!]

[... I noticed.]

[Did I do well?]

[Absolutely.]

She wriggles with glee and I can feel my carapace crunching as she exerts her strength unintentionally. Geez. She's a lot stronger than she was before. Quite the evolution she undertook. I'll have to give her a core a good look over once we get some breathing room and a bit of downtime. At this point it's hard to say when that might actually happen. Maybe we escape cleanly, maybe we get caught in a long, running battle with the Golgari. Ugh, I hope not.

As I rush back down through the holes and tunnels an ever increasing tide of ants joins me, legs blurring in a flurry of movement. Many carry objects in their mandibles, cores, valuable materials, a few have even got books. No idea what they intend to do with those. Can we even read? Our eyes aren't exactly made for hyper-focus on one thing. Well, I'm sure they know what they're doing better than I do.

I pass our two prisoners on the way, each being herded by a collection of ants each, soldiers and mages for the most part. I can tell they're trying to move slowly, but the ants are not having it, prodding and snapping at them constantly. In this manner, we retreat from the outpost and back out into the Dungeon tunnels, a very full Tiny and Invidia slotting in with the procession.

From here, it's a long journey back to the Colony. Hopefully we figure out spatial magic on the way, could help the trip along.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 529: The trek

When the Colony gathers in the tunnels outside the ravaged outpost, we quickly take stock before we march through the tunnels. It's quite an inspiring sight to me, the long column of ants pouring through the tunnels, obliterating everything they find. My pets and I bring up the rear and it's great to finally get a chance to take a peek at their cores and admire the upgrades that they've achieved. Some good evolutions for Tiny and Crinis, and I can see that both of them have been working hard at improving their Skills. Invidia has also been putting in work, judging by the increase to his magical abilities. Considering the short timeframe that he's had, his improvements in the magical fields that I've instructed him to work on are impressive. Although, when you take into account the sheer grunt he's able to put behind his spells, it shouldn't be that surprising.

"Quite a good haul it looks like," I observe to Burke when she drops back to scout the rear of the column.

"Agreed. The wealth of cores we were able to obtain has got the Core Shapers drooling."

"Was there anything other than cores that we got our mandibles on?"

"Oh yes. We cut apart and dragged away anything enchanted as well as a collection of mana empowered materials. The carvers and mages are going to be very excited. Not to mention those two prisoners you picked out. If we can extract anything useable from them then they might even prove to be the best part of the haul."

I'm a bit doubtful.

"You really think they're going to hand over reliable information? They aren't exactly willing co-operators."

"There's a few things that we can try

"Did I see books getting carried away? What the heck are we going to be doing with books?"

The smaller ant wiggles her antennae indecisively.

"I'm not sure on the books, you might need to talk to one of the mages about that one. If I was to take a guess, I suppose it might be for trading with the humans in the village."

I have to think for a second.

"You mean Enid and Beyn's lot? What will they need with these books. We don't even know if many of them can read!"

Another shrug.

"It's worth a shot. It's entirely possible that the mages have some method in mind to read the texts themselves. I'm just guessing here. If you don't have any more questions, Eldest, then I'm going to scout. Pursuit should have started by now."

"Good point. Stay safe."

With a flick on an antenna to acknowledge my words, Burke vanishes into the dark shadows of the second strata, covering our retreat and hunting for signs of the Golgari. They must be out there somewhere, ready to hunt us down. We exposed ourselves by going back to retrieve Sarah and raid the Shaper outpost, but I have to hope it's going to turn out to be worth it.

Then it's back to marching along with the column. We cover ground quickly, as a nearly tireless army of ants should. Tiny is the first of my own group to grow tired. Hardly unexpected since Crinis is being carried by me and Invidia is hitching a ride on Tiny's shoulder.

[Any chance you can cast something enervating on Tiny, Invidia? Big guy's lacking a bit of pep in his step.]

[I don't know thiss magic. Can only heal.]

[Fair enough. Going to have to tough it out big fella.]

[Hrrrrr,] he whines in the back of his throat.

Despite his reluctance, Tiny keeps putting one big, ape foot in front of the other until the column is called to a halt. Hunting parties immediately peel off to try and secure Biomass for the group. Energy is low and it needs recharging! Shortly after the stop, the members of the council who are present find their way back to me for a chat, minus Burke of course, she's still out scouting.

"How far behind do you think they are? We set a good pace. I wouldn't think those meatbags would be able to keep up with us." Propellant proposed.

Bella the Core Shaper shook her antennae.

"Don't underestimate them Propellant. They were able to capture the Eldest, I think they could handle you easily enough."

"No need to bring that up," I groan, "but yes, they can be very capable. Especially when their Warriors and Shapers are working together. It's possible they have other castes that they can deploy in battle and I just haven't seen them yet. So we have to be cautious."

"Agreed," Sloan cuts in. "The scouts have been deployed, along with a contingent of our Core Shapers and their pets to keep an antenna out behind us. We marched hard for the last few hours and we need to rest before we continue. I want to ensure that we stay well rested and well fed for the journey. If they manage to catch us and start a fight, I don't want a single ant to be in poor condition."

I like the sentiment. Keep our energy up, stay alert and push hard. Sounds like the Colony's regular attitude, to be honest.

"What about torpor? We need to rest at some point," I point out.

All of the members of the council look uncomfortable when I mention the hated word: 'rest'.

"Let's think about it later," Sloan clacks her mandibles, trying to move the conversation on quickly.

"Sloan... There's no point trying to keep everyone rested and then not let anyone sleep. We have to rest if we're going to be in fighting shape."

Except for me, since the Vestibule kept me supplied with all the energy I can spend. I won't need to rest until my mental fatigue piles up to the point I need to pass out.

"How long do we think it's going to take to make it back to the nest?" I ask. "Probably take a little less time than it took for you to get out to me?"

Sloan nodded her antennae.

"We think it'll take a week of hard marching, but only if we don't get interrupted by pursuers."

Which is likely. As if to fulfil that prophecy, Burke ran back into view at the end of the tunnel and approached us.

"They're coming," she announced, "an hour behind, maybe less. There's a lot of them, and I think they mean business. They look decked out for a war."

Not unexpected news, but still unwelcome.

"Do you think we can lose them in the tunnels?" Sloan asks.

"I'm not sure," Burke sounds hesitant. "It's almost as if they're tracking us. If they keep coming straight, they'll run right into us."

Well that's not good.

"We might have to cut this break short," I warn the others. "I'm going to go back and take a quick look."

"Be careful, Eldest," Propellant warns me. "We only just got you back."

"Not to worry, I'm not exactly keen to land in their hands again. Just going to have a cheeky peek and then I'll be right back."

Burke sends a few scouts to escort us with a flick of her antennae and we head off to see exactly what the Goglari have sent after us.

Chrysalis

Chapter 530: The royal Hunt

The Queen almost felt young again as her mandibles crunched through a writhing shadow centipede. The experience notification rang in her mind but she hardly listened, too eager to chomp down the waiting Biomass before moving onto the next target. She felt a savage joy at being back on the hunt, taking the risks her children were so willing to face and putting them on her own carapace.

Meal complete, she raised back up and searched for another tunnel she could attack. That's when the Brood Tender at her side spoke up.

"Mother, it's time to head back to the nest. You should have hit your quota by now," Theresant reminded her.

The Queen started.

"Already? How long have I been out?"

"It's been three hours, Mother. If anything, we are past the time you were supposed to return."

Checking her available Biomass, the Queen was surprised to find that her daughter was correct. She was beyond the required number to produce her next clutch of eggs.

"I apologise, child," she told Theresant, "let's return."

The Queen turned her bulk around and began the trek back to her nest within the second strata. The Colony had laboured long, battling against the shadow beasts to carve out a secure space they were comfortable placing their precious Queens in. Only to find that their Mother insisted on leaving the security of the newly constructed fortress to secure her own Biomass.

The Queen couldn't help but sigh as her escort settled in around her sides. It's not that she minded the company when hunting, but she felt it was a waste of resources. She was perfectly capable of holding her own out in the tunnels without aid, which meant the soldiers and scouts would be free to secure territory, or gather food for the other Queens, but she'd been forced to compromise. When she'd told Victor that she would go out battling on her own, the poor girl nearly went into torpor from shock. Nothing was stopping the Queen from simply walking out anyway, her children wouldn't stop her, but she didn't like to worry them. So a mixed escort of fifty members was agreed on to accompany her whenever she was outside of the Colony.

"Did you enjoy your hunt, Mother?" Theresant asked.

"Very much, child. I feel as if I'm contributing to the Colony again," the Queen hummed.

Theresant could only shake her antennae. Giving birth to almost every living member of the Colony didn't count as a contribution? If that's the case, every ant was being far too slack! Thankfully for the

brood tenders, none of the other Queens showed the slightest inclination to leave the nests, happy to perform their task in the safety and security that the Colony was only too happy to provide. Mother, on the other hand, had been spawned fighting and alone. The only time she'd felt as if she were fulfilling her potential was probably in those early days when the Colony consisted of only a single member and she'd had to gather Biomass and construct the first nest by herself. A monumental effort which left every one of her children in awe.

As they marched the Queen happily watched as her escort picked off the few monsters they encountered along the way. With her Biomass quota achieved, there was no need for her to monopolise the food or experience. She had no need to evolve again in the short term, and the Colony demanded more powerful members now that they sought to control another strata. It was pleasing to see the number of tier four children she had now. No longer was the troublesome one the lone standout, though she felt certain that particular child was pushing close to tier six by now. Once that happened, the Queen would no longer be the highest evolution in the Colony, which would be a strange feeling. Thinking of that particular ant caused her antennae to twitch. She felt sure that they were doing something foolish, somewhere in the Dungeon...

In fact, nothing was more certain. Nonetheless, she hoped that the efforts to return them safely were proceeding well. She had every faith in her children. They had achieved so much, after all! Not the least of which was this second nest.

The approach to the second nest was marked by the elaborate carvings that were etched into the walls as their small convoy approached. The carvers had begun taking their caste name quite seriously once the secrets of earth magic had begun to be known to them, they never seemed to stop carving! A combination of magic and their front claws was used to create these images and the Queen had to say she found them ... nice.

Scenes of the Colony at work, learning, fighting, growing, scouting and teaching covered the walls, the troublesome child featuring prominently, as did she herself. Then the tunnel began to slope upwards and they began to encounter the outer defences of the nest. Layers of raised walls and ambush positions were frequent for the next few hundred metres, then they approached the first 'gate'.

This was a concept the humans above had given to the carvers and they had been fascinated by the idea. A tunnel, with a door? It sounded ludicrous at first, but as the humans had explained it, Tungstant had become enamoured of the concept. Not just a door, but a powerful door! Made from strong materials and designed to repel intruders!

The gate loomed before them now, a glittering construction of enchanted metal with the proud image of an ant head carved right in the centre. From above, antennae poked out of holes as the sentries kept watch.

"I'm just coming back to lay eggs, child," the Queen called up. "Could you open the gate please?"

"Of course, Mother!" Came the call. Followed quickly by "It's Mother! Get the gate open, quick!"

The Queen shifted her legs and tried not to chuckle at her children's enthusiasm. They did step too carefully around her sometimes. In a trice, the gate swung outward to reveal the cluster of ants who

worked the mechanism to open them. The Queen had no idea how it worked, but Tungstant had assured her it was very clever.

More tunnels layered with obstacles for foes needed to be traversed before they came to another gate, this one double layered and even more impressive. Once navigated, they at last reached the inner sanctum, the nest. The Queen welcomed the sight with a warm heart as her children bustled energetically around her. Of course, not all of these ants were her children, not anymore, but she still thought of them that way, and they all still called her 'mother', which is all that mattered really. There were many smaller tunnels within the nest, but the Queen stuck to the main, larger thoroughfares as she made her way to the brood chambers.

"Ah, hello Mother!" Came a scent she knew well from a side chamber.

"Tungstant? Still working, child?" The Queen welcomed her daughter.

"Of course! Never a slack moment, eh Mother?" the carver twitched her antennae in amusement.

"Besides that, I can't rest until the nest is finished!"

The Queen was confused.

"I thought it was done already. You've done so much," she gestured to the carvings that covered every surface within the nest.

"Not at all, Mother! There's still so much to be done! We're compacting the ground!"

"Compacting... whatever do you mean?"

"We're trying to make it harder to dig through," Tungstant explained. "If another colony wanted to invade us, this will make it much harder for them to tunnel past our gates and avoid our defences. It's tough work though. I wish we'd thought of it before we started construction."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," the Queen encouraged her, "you've done so well."

The Queen continued down the chamber, leaving her busy child to her work and soon found herself in the very heart of the second nest. Surrounded by enchanted chambers filled with brood, the laying chamber was occupied only by the three Queens and the brood tenders. Even her escort had taken up a position outside, not willing to disturb the brood in any way.

This was sacred work, the very future of the colony!

Antionette and Victoriant looked up happily as they saw the Queen return.

"Welcome home, Mother," they chorused along with the brood tenders in the chamber.

"Hello again, my children. How goes the work today?"

"All done," they both replied happily.

The two younger Queens radiated contentment and happiness with their days task complete. Once their quota of eggs was reached, they had done all they could for the colony and tended to engage in idle gossip and play with the brood to while away the hours.

"How was your excursion, Mother?"

"Satisfactory, child," the Queen replied as she began to commit her Biomass towards producing her next clutch. "You two are welcome to join me any time."

"Oh, not for me thanks," Antionette shivered, "I couldn't possibly fight like you mother."

"Didn't the troublesome one train you to fight?" The Queen asked, surprised.

At the mention of their 'education' with the Eldest, both young Queens froze in place and didn't reply. The Queen sighed. Some trauma was difficult to overcome. It was probably the distaste for battle they experienced during their training that pushed these two into becoming Queens in the first place. Nothing to do about it now. She shifted around the chamber as she waited for the eggs to be ready, already thinking of her next hunt.