

Chrysalis 531

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Chapter 531: The next generation pt1

She wasn't sure who began it, but the new hatchling was only too willing to join in the cry along with her siblings.

"FOR THE COLONY!"

"FOR THE COLONY!"

"MY LIFE FOR THE COLONY!" She poured her heart and soul into her pheromones as she declared her willingness to sacrifice for her family.

As each ant emerged, fully formed from their cocoons they joined the roar until the brood chamber was flooded with the scent of insect determination. It was rousing stuff, and she felt her heart pound with excitement. The long days and weeks as a larvae and then a cocoon were fuzzy memories for her, but the impatience to contribute had existed even then. Now at last she could run, and chomp, and die!

Seemingly oblivious to the righteous fury burning in the hearts of their charges, the brood tenders continued to pick over the new ants, ensuring that they were clean and helping to cut free any that were still struggling with their string cocoons. When they were all loose the hatchlings continued to vent their excitement and dedication for some time. It was much later when the air was finally clear enough for the tenders to announce what would happen next.

One of the brood tenders crawled to the centre of the chamber and loudly clacked her mandibles to draw the new hatchlings attention.

"Welcome to the Colony, new hatchlings! You are all now precious members of our family. In accordance to the will of the Eldest, you will now be taken to the academy to be taught and trained, so that you may contribute as best you can."

The new hatchling wiggled with glee at the thought of contributing to the Colony. She had to go to this 'academy' place first? Not a problem! She would tear down all obstacles that would keep her from the glorious destiny that awaited. Following the announcement, the team of brood tenders began to shepherd the hatchlings as a group out of the chamber and into the tunnels. The hatchling saw a few brood tenders remain behind and begin cleaning up the broken cocoons, probably preparing the space for the next wave of pupae to arrive.

So it was within the Colony, her instincts told her. Each generation should sacrifice for the next! The new hatchlings chattered amongst themselves as they moved through the tunnels and gaped at the larger, more powerful ants that passed them on the way.

"New hatchlings eh?" One passing ant called, a huge and bulky specimen of an ant with powerful mandibles. "Work hard for the Colony!"

"So," drawled another ant, this one a touch smaller, with a smooth, sloped carapace, "who's going to die first for the colony!"

"ME! ME!" She yelled along with the rest of her siblings as one of the tenders marched over to the small ant and thwacked him sharply on the head with an antenna.

"Enough of that," the tender called back, "let's keep marching! We don't want to be late, they'll call us lazy!"

Lazy?! NEVER! The new hatchling was determined that she would never be called lazy in her entire life! Such a thing was unthinkable! She rushed to the front and started pushing her siblings along.

"Hurry up, you!" She hassled them. "Do you WANT to be called lazy?"

"NO!" They roared and matched her pace, forcing the tenders to pick up their own speed as they chuckled at their new charges' enthusiasm.

After a few more minutes they were guided into a small chamber that smelled different, wild and exciting. There were other scents in here, smells that were not of the Colony. Would they be asked to fight? To kill?! How exciting! The brood tenders ushered them in and directed the hatchlings to settle on one side of the room which sloped down to face a small flat space at the front. In that area a large, powerful ant sat, watching them. Not as large as the ant they saw earlier, but still impressive, this ant gave off a feeling of control and command. Each of the hatchlings felt energised and full of strength in their presence.

The hatchling was almost bursting with excitement now. Surely now they would be led into glorious battle! Any moment now!

"Right!" The large ant roared suddenly, their pheromones flooding the room and battered against her antennae. "What have we got here then?"

"Hatchling class two hundred and sixteen. Twenty students await instruction, general," replied one of the tenders around the outside of the room.

"Good," the 'general' replied. "Bright eager young ants I see. The Colony will have a sure future with this lot."

She preened with pride at the words of the general. She was a good hatchling!

"BUT NOT YET!" Came another roar and she was smacked back into reality. "Right now, YOU ARE WEAK. STUPID. AND UNFIT TO SERVE!"

So domineering were those pheromones that she wasn't able to muster any sort of reply and the rest of her siblings cowered as well.

"Let me tell you what is going to happen," the general began to march back and forth in front of them, poking any hatchling within reach with an antenna to prod them into better posture. "We are going to teach you how to fight. We are going to teach you how to work as a team and achieve maximum efficiency in battle. We'll teach you how to secure food, how to recognise danger, we'll teach you about the threats that abound in this place and how to keep your Colony thriving!"

She nodded, eagerly. This was all great stuff!

"MORE THAN THAT! We are going to make you useful! We'll feed you Biomass, get you mutations, help you form your core and evolve. Not once, BUT TWICE. Only then, has the Eldest deemed you fit to serve!"

The hatchlings shifted uncomfortably at that. Soaking up resources they didn't earn? That Biomass could be used to raise the next generation... Why waste it on them?

"AFTER the colony has done all that, and we've poured all this effort into you, you will have the opportunity to join a caste and begin to work!"

What?! But she was ready to work right now!

"Please," she raised an antenna, "is there no work for a hatchling?"

The general marched up the slope to where she stood and THWACK! Smacked her on the head with an antenna.

"NO! These are the arrangements the Eldest has decreed will best serve the colony! Are you going to argue with the Eldest? With the Queen?!"

"No," she shrank back from the omni-directional death stare of the general.

She wouldn't dare argue against such luminaries of the colony, but at the same time it didn't feel right. Her instincts told her this was all wrong!

"Good," the general snapped. "Once you've evolved you'll be able to join in battle. What are you going to do then?"

They all knew the answer to this!

"DIE FOR THE COLONY!"

"SILENCE, HATCHLINGS!" The general roared.

She stared in stunned silence along with the rest of the newborn ants. What did they say wrong?

"After we pour in our effort, pour in Biomass and experience, you'll die? You'll WASTE our efforts? Are you going to bring this level of INEFFICIENCY into the colony!? No! The only way an ant can work, is if they are alive! Dying when you can live is nothing but skipping out on work, WHICH WILL NOT BE TOLERATED!"

It was hard to argue with that, but somehow, the hatchling still felt that it was wrong... She was to prioritise her own life?

"But... Isn't that... selfish?" She protested. "How can keeping myself alive be worth it for the Colony?"

"Because..." the general loomed over her, "when you die you rob the Colony of the labour you would be able to provide for the rest of your life! We ants operate more efficiently in greater numbers. More numbers, more efficiency! If our colony members keep dying by being stupid, then we have less numbers! Less numbers is less efficiency! AM I GETTING THROUGH TO YOU HATCHLING?!"

She stood firm in the face of the general's overwhelming scent but could no longer muster the will to argue with her elders.

"Yes... general."

"GOOD!" The general turned around and marched back to the front of the chamber. "Below us is the farm! A controlled series of chambers that host several spawn points of monsters common to the first strata of our Dungeon home. We will analyse their characteristics and discuss tactics for the next two hours. Be sure to memorise every word as you will then break into teams of five under the guidance of the brood tenders to secure your first round of Biomass and experience. Then we return here to review. Let's get started..."

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Chapter 532: The next generation pt 2

The training regime was brutal, and the hatchling ate it up. Lectures, followed by practice drills, followed by live practice, followed by a review. The brood tenders patiently explained every mistake, and stepped them through every decision, questioning the young ants' thinking and drilling their sacrificial tendencies out of them. Then more lectures, more drills and the cycle continued. They repeated the same thing five times before they were allowed to collapse into torpor.

The moment she awoke, the hatchling was greeted by the hard stare of another, large and intimidating ant. The general was gone, replaced by a similar sized, but smoother looking ant. Its carapace was thinner and more streamlined, the mandibles not as large. When her antennae picked up the scent, she realised that this was the ant who'd been thwacked by a tender in the tunnels the previous day.

"Finally awake? Didn't realise the Colony was raising such lazy brood."

The hatchling was still tired and hungry, but she wasn't about to appear lazy! She sprung up and poked her nearby siblings with her legs to get them up and alert. The brood tenders around the sides of the chamber watched carefully as the ants came to attention.

"Good. You've been yelled at by a general all yesterday. That's grand and all. Today we'll begin teaching you how to use the greatest weapon the Eldest gave you."

The scout bent one antenna back to indicate her head.

"The story goes that the Eldest was born smart, smarter than any other ant. The rest of us though? Stupid, regular old monsters. Then the Eldest learned a way to create a brand new type of ant. A way to turn all of us into something like them. Just like that, this Colony was born."

The hatchling felt the stirring of awe in her thorax at these words. Able to change the entire Colony? Make each and every member more powerful? Such a level of contribution was... absurd.

"So if you aren't thinking, if you aren't using your Cunning to its fullest," the ant continued, "then you aren't achieving the incredible potential you've been gifted with. So today, we're going to be learning about scouting. I'm a scout, another soldier caste evolution. For the next four hours I'll lecture you on the Dungeon, expected conditions, hazards and dangers, teamwork when moving in the tunnels. Memorise it all and then we'll head out for a live scouting exercise. Understood?"

"Yes!" The hatchlings replied.

She listened intently to every word, devouring the knowledge just as her siblings did. When the four hours were up, her brain ached fiercely but there was no rest. The scout led them directly out of their learning chamber and the hatchlings were once again divided into teams with their brood tender mentor guiding them out into the Dungeon. Once there, they prowled the tunnels, crawling over the ceilings and walls as they practiced hiding, setting ambushes and tracking, then they returned to the nest for another lengthy debrief.

Then another round of lectures.

Then back out into the tunnels. When they were done, the hatchlings collapsed into torpor after shovelling down the Biomass that they were provided. Then they were up again, their brood tender teachers still present, but a new ant had replaced the scout.

"WAKE UP YOU, LAZY GRUBS!"

An explosion of flames erupted from the ant's mouth, causing all the hatchlings to leap awake.

"You've got the mental stats to use magic and every day the Colony learns new and important ways to employ it! No matter what caste you become part of, you need a basic understanding of the Skills and methods employed in the magical arts! First we will hunt for experience and Biomass in the farm, then we will consume mana infused water. This will help you to form your core! By the time we are done, every ant in this class must have formed their core. Then we return for eight hours of Skill training! Be prepared!"

The hatchling wasn't sure how she felt about being able to shoot flames from her mouth, but it seemed powerful, and powerful was good for the Colony! She would learn! The mage wasted no time and immediately led the class down into the farm where they engaged in controlled battles against the monsters that spawned there. Consuming Biomass and raising their basic Skills. Eventually they were led to a pool of water that was fed from above, a steady flow draining down from a gap in the ceiling.

The water tasted electrifying and the hatchling gulped it down greedily. Then more hunting, then more drinking. The moment a student reached level five they were no longer allowed to take experience, giving the rest over to the others. The hatchling achieved level five quickly but continued to aggressively hunt with her team in order to secure levels for her group.

Eventually each ant formed their core and returned to the lesson chamber for an extended grilling session from their mage instructor.

And on it went. The ants were given a thorough drilling in the basic Skills required for each caste. Instructed in the intricate network that made the entire Colony tick. If a single member of their class failed to understand even a part of it, they were sent back for another gruelling day of training. The hatchling worked tirelessly under the watchful gaze of the instructors to teach her siblings and ensure the class completed its tasks.

After a week, they were ready to evolve for the first time. There was huge excitement in the class. They were to be assigned their caste! This would determine the kind of work they would do for the Colony,

what could be more important? The ants eagerly leapt out of torpor to find their teachers were already in position, the general in the centre of the teaching space.

"CONGRATULATIONS! You have taken the first step in not being useless! Each member of this class should have maximum mutations, a core and have attained level five once more. Along with a basic understanding of the roles of every caste in the Colony, this is the requirement to qualify for your first evolution!"

The general and the other teachers surveyed the class with serious eyes. Their antennae monitoring every stray scent.

"In accordance with the wishes of the Eldest there is a limited amount of choice given to you. We will tell you what evolutions are needed, you will sort yourself into groups so that the quotas are reached!"

The hatchling felt conflicted at these words. She just wanted to do what the Colony told her to do. Now she had to choose?

"TEN SOLDIERS are needed! SIX ARTISANS AND FOUR WORKERS! Soldiers to the back of the chamber! Artisans on the left, workers on the right!"

The students began to sort themselves, moving toward a direction that they preferred. The hatchling was frozen in place. She didn't know which one she wanted to do, which one was more important? What if she picked something and another hatchling wouldn't be able to go where they felt they could best serve? Would she deny the Colony access to a talented and willing member?! How could she make this decision? Just tell her what to do!

With a start, she realised that the rest of her siblings had sorted themselves and only she remained standing in place. The general stood in front of her, the overwhelming scent of authority rolling off her in waves.

"What's wrong, student?" she asked.

"Tell me what to do," the hatchling said.

The general looked down at her for a moment.

"If you don't pick, I will pick for you. But be warned, if I have to choose for you, then your task will be more difficult and thankless than any other task. No glory will come to you and your service will not be seen."

The hatchling felt only relief.

"I don't care. Please tell me how I can serve."

"Fine. Walk out of the chamber and speak to the brood tender in the tunnel."

She was shocked.

"What?"

"Go."

Without another word, the hatchling rose from her place and left the chamber. In the tunnel she found a brood tender who indicated for her to follow and then led the way toward a nearby chamber, wherein other students were being gathered, each led by a tender.

The chamber was much like the last, sloped downward toward the front where a flat space for teaching occupied the focal point. Twenty spaces for students were crafted into the slope, but in this chamber, twenty small glittering gems rested in each space. At the urging of her teacher, the hatchling moved to one of the student spaces and looked down at the strange, spherical gem. It was a core, she knew that, but it was larger than any core she'd seen before. Besides, she'd already absorbed all of the cores that she could before evolution. What could she need this one for?

She waited as the chamber filled up and when every student seat was filled the room became still. Shortly after, an ant with a powerful aura of authority stepped into the chamber.

"Greetings, hatchlings," she said without any preamble. "My name is Advant. I'm a Soldier, trained by the Eldest and among the first twenty ants born in the new Colony."

The hatchling quivered in awe. This was a true legend of the Colony!

"You are here," she went on, "because you have displayed excellence in your classes above the expected level, and exhibited the traits the Colony most prizes. Selflessness, dedication, devotion, zeal and drive. For this reason you have been selected to become the second ever batch of special evolution hatchlings. The ants around you will be your team for the rest of your life. The colony has need of an exceptional group of ants and you are to become that group. Absorb the cores in front of you and evolve. After that, your training will get hard. Be prepared. But first, I will name you."

Advant moved through the rows of students and as he passed each one, she tapped them on the head and spoke to them their name. When the mighty soldier reached the hatchling she felt an antenna tap her on the head.

"Your name is Protectant. Serve well."

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Chapter 533: Who's tracking who?

Following the scent trails the scouting parties had put down, it didn't take long for us to make our way through the twisting tunnels to where the Golgari would soon pass. We positioned ourselves in cover at an angle where we could see them coming from a good range. I didn't want to get too close to them. I wouldn't underestimate the stone-people ever again. While the majority of Warriors and Shapers had proven to be unable to damage me in small numbers now, I wasn't going to push my luck. In terms of monsters, I was quite exceptional. 99% of the Dungeon's creations didn't get to evolve in the way I did, with a maxed out core, or possessed this many mutations. I might have started out as a measly ant, but I was starting to become stacked. It made sense to me that the average Golgari wouldn't be able to match me. But something I'd learned from Granin still gave me pause. He'd told me that most of the Shapers in the outpost were just scholars, hardly any were real Dungeon delvers. Stuck in offices and reading books all day, they had polished Skills but not many levels or combat experience.

I even suspected the Warriors I'd fought were of a similar bent. As far as I knew, they weren't members of an official Golgari military or any such thing. If anything, Coriinam Balta gave me the impression of a

pampered youth who'd done far more training than fighting. A show of strength, rather than the reality. Their sword slashes might make a fancy light show, but without the proper OOMPH that raw stats provided then they simply lacked the penetrating power to deal with my carapace. If nothing else, that proved that they were under levelled.

Would that be true for all Golgari? Hell no. These were people who made their home inside the Dungeon. Shapers like Granin had seen a ton of action in the tunnels. I had little doubt he was the highest levelled Shaper inside that outpost. With the walls of the town, there had to be individuals or a group that the others depended on to do the heavy lifting keeping them safe. A militia, a defence force. Heck, maybe a fully blown army. Whoever it was, I hadn't seen them and I wasn't keen to fight them. We'd already had casualties on this rescue mission, just another thing to weigh on my conscience. If I could avoid more death amongst my family, I sure as hell would.

For now, we're only here to observe so we settle into position and wait.

Tiny isn't much good at being still... or hidden, come to think of it, so I end up sending him back up the tunnel a hundred metres or so where he promptly goes to sleep. The rest of us have more patience and watch the tunnel with sharp eyes. As promised by the scouts, the Golgari turn up an hour later, moving fast. We hear them well before we see them, the pounding of stone feet on stone making the sound more like a crunch than a thump.

The Golgari in the lead were huge, even by their standards. A dozen giants strode forth, perhaps three metres tall, with comically large weapons strapped to their backs. And their skin! This was no ordinary true-skin. These folks glittered in the dim Dungeon light from head to toe. They were covered entirely with metal ore! From what I'd been able to pick up about Golgari culture, finding ores capable of holding the mana required to bond it to their bodies wasn't easy. That meant high quality ores were expensive. When I'd asked Torrina how much her own ore was worth, she'd given me a strange look before explaining that asking a Golgari about their true-skin was simply not done. Before I could apologise, she'd laughed and explained it anyway. The reason her own skin wasn't complete was due to the ludicrous expense required to purchase more. She'd made the decision to use a higher grade ore and form an incomplete skin rather than substitute for something worse, but in sufficient quantity. Yet here were these freakin' mutants wandering around, enormous, and covered head to toe in gleaming ores!

Each one of those guys was covered in enough money to buy a Golgari mansion, I had no doubt.

Were these dudes likely to be under levelled? NOT LIKELY. I wasn't going to tangle with them unless I had absolutely no choice. Behind them came a more usual procession of Warriors and Shapers, but each individual wore something I'd not seen before, a dark brown braided rope around their neck that nearly blended into their stone skin. Did this indicate that they were all part of one faction? Or was it something that they'd put on when they became part of this expedition?

Mixed amongst the crowd were other Golgari that didn't match anything I'd seen before. Robed figures with thick staves they gripped in one hand dotted the procession, along with a few shorter members accompanied by what were clearly their monstrous pets. In a small cluster came something that I wasn't sure I would ever see. Golgari wearing armour...

There were only three of them, but they put the fear of Gandalf into me. Why the hell were they wearing armour?! What's the point? Does it mean their true skin is weak? Can't be! Even Granin, who'd

formed his true skin from the weakest, most common ore he could, just because he was a jerk, never wore a stitch of armour. Not leather, or cloth and sure as hell not metal!

I have no idea what this signifies... When they come to the branch before us, the procession halts for a moment and there's a pause as various members converse. It appears as though the robed individuals are being consulted quite heavily, along with the pet keepers... interesting. After a few minutes they ready themselves again and take the path directly toward the colony.

"How do they know?" I wonder.

"What's that, Eldest?" A scout asks.

"They're tracking us. They aren't uncertain of which direction we're in, they know. How?"

"I'm not certain. We need to inform the others."

"Send a scout back immediately."

One of the scouts rushes off to let the rest of our convoy know whilst my pets and I slink back out of sight to stay ahead of the Golgari. They might be tracking the two prisoners that we took. Or perhaps there's some sort of tracking spell on me? I can't find any magic on my person, but there might be a method to hide it, how would I know?! Perhaps they have a way of monitoring Dungeon traffic, like remote sensors they've built into the walls in their territory... Could they be picking up on our pheromone trails?!

Like any good ant, the entire troop has been laying trails everywhere they go, it's how we navigate. Just because the ants in the Colony have better eyes than normal, doesn't mean they've abandoned their instincts. Unlike me, who was human once, the others are pure ants at heart. The pheromone trail is their guiding light!

The more I consider it, the more I think it must be true. The Golgari know they've come out to hunt an ant Colony, and it's not the first time in history one has spawned. What better method of tracking down the nest than following the pheromone trails? Thank goodness I came back here to scout, otherwise they'd have been able to follow us all the way back to the Queen...

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Chapter 534: Run? Fight?

The ancients surfaced all over the face of Pangera, almost equidistant from each other. Wherever they rose, they caused a unique catastrophe to befall those unfortunate enough to be caught in the chaos. Yarrum consumed all in his path, Kygar caused lightning to fall for a month, burning all to ash, Morribolg turned the ground to mud over a vast area, sinking the entire city of Yallowyn beneath the ground in less than a minute. Due to the colossal damage, the sheer scale of death that they caused, actual eye-witness accounts of the ancients are nearly impossible to find. Because they rose so far apart, most kingdoms assumed that they were the only ones to be afflicted by a monster of such impossible might. It was hundreds of years before scholars were able to connect the nineteen creatures together.

Further frustrating the efforts of scholars is the deep layer of secrecy that many shroud the ancients in. Some were forthcoming with their information, sharing all they could of these leviathans to better inform the world of the threat they posed, but others were silent. They hoarded the knowledge of their

experience and enacted strict penalties on any caught sharing it. Over the years, their grip has only tightened. Of Zothoth, almost nothing is known in the broader community. It rose amongst the tribes of the dust plains, far to the west, and they do not speak of him. Lerrewyn arose in the Deep Forests in the south. Were the ancient not seen from hundreds of kilometres away, it's possible that only eighteen ancients would be spoken of, since the Bruanchii have said nothing but its name.

Regardless, the topic of the ancients is a source of tremendous enquiry across the world, in open colleges and within secret societies. There are as many theories as there are scholars, but some have gained credibility over the decades. One such thought, postulated by Xinci, stated that it was possible the ancients each populated a single strata, possibly the final strata of the Dungeon, and each maintained their own territory there. For this reason, they did not rise together, but moved directly up from their own lands. By tracing the locations of their breach back to the centre of Pangera (the diameter of the planet being calculated by the Magio-Scholars in the year 726 AR), Xinci proposed a possible map of the territorial boundaries of each ancient within the final strata. Although this map is far from accepted fact, it does explain many observations. A curious feature of the map however, is that when assuming each territory is the same size, and that each ancient rose directly from their own resting place, there is an unclaimed place in the map, a twentieth territory.

This has led many scholars to speculate that another ancient exists. If that monster surfaced in the Rending, if anyone saw it, then have yet to speak its name.

By the time I was able to reconnect with the Colony they'd already taken measures. All use of pheromones was banned as we once again resumed the long march back to the nest. It was bizarre to experience. It was normal for the ants to make no noise as they travelled, to a human passer-by we would be unnervingly quiet. But to us ants there was a never ending cacophony of communication! Conversations between ants, trails laid by the leaders in the convoy and even the old scent trails put down by the scouts who ranged far ahead of the rest of us all mixed together to assault the antennae. With no pheromones being produced, it was as if true silence had descended on the colony for the first time in its history. As a former human, I probably coped better than my siblings, but even for me it was truly strange.

I had to constantly stop myself from trying to speak with my fellow ants and my antennae were constantly tip-tapping, trying to find the scents that my ant brain thinks should definitely be there. The rest of the ants around me are totally uncomfortable, wandering backwards and forwards as they try to navigate with their eyes instead of their sense of smell. Hopefully we don't have to deal with this for long. If we can travel a dozen or so kilometres without leaving a trail behind, that should be enough for the Golgari to get lost.

Fortunately I still have my pets to speak to!

[Hey, Tiny! How's everything going? Enjoying the trek?]

[Nurrr.]

[It can't be that bad...]

[Raaaa.]

[Fair enough then, you make a good point.]

As a power athlete, rather than an endurance runner, Tiny isn't cut out for this sort of extended effort. He's knackered. Ah well, surely someone else is up for a chat!

[Crisis! My gelatinous horror from the deep! How are you going?]

[I'm not letting go.]

[... I didn't even -]

[I know what you wanted to say, Master!]

My carapace creaks as she squeezes me.

[But I'm going to make sure that you stay safe!]

[That's... That's great. Thanks, Crisis...]

Phew boy. That's going to need some more time. Thank goodness I have Invidia around now! He's just riding around on Tiny's back, so he'll be rested and down for a chat, surely!

[Invidia! How's my favourite greed demon? Getting used to having all the ants around?]

The eye is watching me, lit from within with a rising glow of green.

[The affectionssss of the dark one... They belongssss to you...]

[... I suppose so... why?]

He doesn't answer, but his eye narrows and burns more brightly.

[Is... everything alright there, Invidia?]

[Yessssssssssssssssssssss.]

Okay! Creepy as always! I need more time to get used to this guy. The way he thinks is just different. Having exhausted all options of conversation, I return to marching in determined silence. For about five minutes before I start to go crazy. I just can't walk along here, doing nothing! I want to go back and check on the expedition, see how they react when the scent trails vanishes. The chance still exists that it's me that they're tracing, after all. Sadly, it appears as though the council members are able to follow my thoughts now.

I feel a mind bridge reach out towards me and I allow it to connect. I recognise this ant mind.

[Propellant? What's going on?]

[Sorry to bother you, Eldest. Just wanted to ask that you don't go running off on your own.]

[... What do you mean?]

[I think we both know what the long pause at the start of that sentence means, Eldest.]

[... Maybe?]

[The scouts are watching the Golgari constantly. Burke will go nuts if you rush back there again. She doesn't have enough scouts to cover all the directions that need watching and keep a sneaky guard on you at the same time.]

[Wait. I'm being guarded?]

[Not right now. But the moment you leave the convoy you will be.]

[But what if they're tracking me with some sort of magic we haven't seen yet! There's still too much we aren't aware of, Propellant!]

[We've considered the possibility. The others and I want to eliminate all other possibilities before we consider moving you away from the convoy. Right now, the two prisoners are being led on a roundabout tour through nearby tunnels, we wish to see if the convoy is tracking them. At the same time, the scouts are laying false trails behind us that lead just about everywhere. Only when we've confirmed that these methods are ineffective will we chance moving you off.]

[I don't like sitting here while others risk their lives for me, Propellant.]

[I know, Eldest. Just please bear with it for a little while.]

[... You said all of you agree on this. Even Leeroy?]

[Ah, no. Leeroy is currently under heavy guard in the centre of the convoy. She's tried to escape nine times already.]

The thought that me trying to run off is even a little bit similar to the behaviour of that lunatic is enough to send a shiver down my non-existent spine. I'll wait!

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Chapter 535: A game of cat of mouse

Things weren't going the way they were meant to. When things in the Dungeon didn't go the way they were meant to, that usually indicated something was going very wrong. There wasn't a single Dungeon delver who didn't feel the same way. As chaotic and unpredictable as the place was, there were ways to combat it, knowledge that was sure and tested over hundreds of years. When creepers were around, you packed up and tried to lose them. When Binding Spiders appeared, you burned them out of their nests. When ants turned up, they would mindlessly devour everything they found, regardless of the cost.

So what exactly was happening here?

Ants that invaded a specific outpost, left survivors, took prisoners? It made no sense. Not only did it not make sense, it was completely unfathomable. There just wasn't enough information to hand, particularly with how silent the Shapers were being, to try and draw any accurate conclusions.

This made Ferrox Irron concerned. He didn't like being concerned.

His armour shifted uncomfortably around him as he walked in the centre of the expedition and he cursed. He must have made a mistake when strapping it on that morning. The stuff was a right pain in the true-skin to attach and cost a fortune to maintain, but it had proved its use in battle on more than

one occasion. He ran one hand down the runic inscription on the inner side of the gauntlets. The mana density here wasn't nearly high enough to maintain constant use, but would last for a good ten, twenty minutes of hard fighting if it kept charging at the current rate.

He was getting irritable. His feet hurt, his back hurt, his armour was chafing and the enemy wasn't behaving the way they were supposed to. This was starting to feel like a truly disastrous outing.

"Stellen! What the hell is going on up there?" He demanded of his attendant.

"Lord Irron. There appears to be some manner of disagreement amongst the Seekers."

"The useless mutt managers. What's the problem this time?"

The attendant checked his master with a quick glance, observing the slight frown and general air of disagreeability that hung around the man. He'd told the man not to attempt to don his armour without assistance, but what would a lowly attendant know? He sighed without thinking and managed to cover it with a slight cough.

"Haa-hem! From what I can ascertain, my lord, there appears to be some disagreement about the route we should take."

The irritable feeling that had been niggling at Ferrox flared into full blown anger for a moment before he was able to tamp it down. He'd known this was coming, he'd felt it clear as day.

"Go and tell them to present themselves here so their betters can sort it out," he ordered Stellen before he collapsed into silent meditation.

If he were to get through the rest of the day without doing something he'd regret then he'd need to try and find some calm.

"Why Irron, what troubles you so?" Came a cloying and coquettish voice from behind him.

He jerked around too quickly and his armour grated against his true-skin underneath, scraping against the ore. He cursed. That sort of damage would take hours to buff out of his true-skin. Won't Stellen be pleased. The look on the smug attendant's face as he polished his master would be just another nail in the coffin of Irron's mood.

"Is there some reason you have addressed me, Lady Calytryx?" He managed to push the polite address through his gritted teeth.

"Not at all, my lord Irron," the laughter in her voice said otherwise, "I merely observe that you appear a touch out of sorts. Whatever could be the trouble to dent the jovial attitude of such a regarded noble?"

Oregal Calytryx took great pleasure in seeing her old rival and fellow veteran noble suffering. Retiring to the edge of the empire had been a move they'd both made hoping to be rid of others like them, only to find they now lived within the same circle in the same city! The niggling war had begun immediately and no ceasefire was in sight.

"You know, Calytryx," Irron grated, acerbically, "I've no idea how that husband of yours manages to stay so cheerful, given his circumstances."

"Lord Calytryx is an endless optimist."

"Mired in the bottom of a well."

"He couldn't have finer company."

The two lapsed into companionable silence as they waited for the others to come to them, as proper nobles should. The titles weighed on the both of them, but it was hardly something they were allowed to put down. In a few long minutes, Stellen returned with a half-dozen grumpy looking Seekers, their pets trailing at their heels.

"What's the problem?" Irron demanded. "We have a rather important task to be about, do we not? Why the delay?"

Stellen bowed to his lord, lady Calytryx and the other nobles who listened a few metres distant, interested, but not wanting to intrude if they didn't have to.

"I have spoken to our eminent Seekers and it appears that they do not agree on the direction the quarry we pursue has travelled."

"I found the scent trail down the westward tunnel break, my lord. Strong it was, near made my snuffer sneeze his nose off."

"Please, my lord and lady, this man is a fool. My charges and I found the trail leading to the northeast, clear as day."

"Haven't you both just located divergent scout trails?" Irron snapped.

Both Seekers hastily assured him that they had located the correct trail, far too strong for a few scouts, and the other Seeker had clearly made the blunder.

"This is odd, Irron," Calytryx observed.

"I agree," he nodded, grim. His poor mood was proving more prophetic than he'd supposed. "The possibility exists that both of these men are correct and we are being led on a false trail..."

"Such a thing would be... unusual," his fellow noble observed carefully.

Unusual? It would be completely unheard of in the annals of Golgari history. An ant colony with the sort of intelligence to pull a manoeuvre like this? It didn't bear thinking about. Yet it remained consistent with what they knew of these monsters. Strange behaviour, unusual goals and methods. It would be foolish to think that normal thinking and methods would apply in this case.

"I don't like this," he muttered.

"We don't know enough," Calytryx agreed.

Irron sank deep into thought. If these damnable Dungeon spawn were able to consider the ways in which they might be being tracked and attempt countermeasures then they possessed more advanced thought processes than any hive creature the Golgari had ever encountered. Which meant they would be incredibly dangerous. The possibility still existed that this was all a coincidence, but such a thing was

becoming increasingly unlikely. Irron hadn't risen to being a noble, the most celebrated caste of soldiers in the empire, by ignoring his instincts.

"Bring me the Farseers and the Shapers," he ordered.

In short order it was done. The robed Farseers stood before him in their robes and holding their staves in one hand. Irron tried not to pull a face, the Farseers were a difficult lot to get along with, they always seemed delighted to know something you didn't, but they were necessary out in the Dungeon. The Shapers on the other hand, know-it-all do nothings and scholars. Just being around them set his teeth on edge. The Shaper in front of him now, put in charge of his fellow mages by virtue of his close knowledge of the quarry, was not much like the Shapers Irron had met in the past, but he disliked the man on principle.

"We report to you, as you requested, my lord," the Farseer envoy bowed low.

"What do you want?" The Shaper grunted.

Irron reigned in his temper before he smashed the man into pieces with a single punch.

"It appears the quarry is taking measures to avoid being traced by their scent," he told them. "I asked for the esteemed Farseers so that they might report if their own methods of tracking remained unhindered."

"It is so, my lord," the Farseer bowed once more. "Their feet have touched the Dungeon and so it knows them. So long as it does, we do as well."

That was good news.

"I've asked for the Shaper representative to join us in case there is any new information to share with us. It would seem these ants are behaving in ways that are beyond what we might expect from monsters such as these. Has anything trickled out of that highly trained mind of yours, Shaper? Something that might save Golgari lives?"

"Not a damned thing," Granin grunted.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 536: Being Bait

"Why did I think this was a good idea?"

"I have to say, Eldest, I'm not entirely sure. I wasn't surprised when you suggested it though."

"I get the feeling that's almost an insult, Propellant...."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Eldest. My respect for you knows no bounds."

"I can't tell if you're being sarcastic or not anymore."

"What's sarcastic mean?"

...

"I'm starting to think that you and the others need another round of training. It'll take care of this poor attitude I'm starting to detect."

"Ah, no. I mean. Please. We are... far too busy, Eldest."

"I suppose that's true. You guys have it rough, what with all the expectations that are put on you. I really appreciate all the work that you do."

"We do what we must so that the Colony will thrive."

"As do we all I suppose... You'd better head on back now, Propellant. It won't be long until they arrive."

"Good luck, Eldest. Don't forget the contingency plans and reserves."

Heh. As if I'm going to use them.

"If you don't call on us, we'll probably run out on our own and get killed."

Dammit.

"Did you put Leeroy in charge or something?!"

"Of course not, but we could."

More training is definitely on the cards for the council. Especially Leeroy. That damn fool of ant is nothing but a headache and now the others are starting to weaponize her suicidal tendencies against me. They know I can't allow that moronic ant to get herself, or others, killed. At the same time, they know I'll never allow another ant to put themselves in danger in order to save me. So they're manipulating me into ensuring that I won't refuse to bring out the reinforcements in case something does go wrong.

Haaa. It's hard being an authority figure in a group of such self-sacrificing creatures. Nobody is willing to take a step back, especially when the stakes are high. In fact, the higher the stakes, the more eager they become to throw themselves in the fire.

"Fine. If I need help, I'll ask for it. Okay?"

Seemingly satisfied, the mage turns and dashes up the tunnel to re-join the others. Which leaves me and my pets to face the oncoming Golgari. Not that we intend to fight them, naturally. It might come to that, but only in the very worst of circumstances. The lack of scent trails did seem to mess with the trackers hunting us, but only for a time. The guys with the pets no longer go out to scout nearly as often, seemingly relegated to a minor role as the enemy relies on some other method to track us.

They weren't tracking the hostages, we'd managed to establish that. When the two Shapers were shifted to another tunnel, the Golgari showed no sign of shifting from the path of the Colony. We next checked if Jim or Sarah were being tracked but they showed no reaction to the two of them either. Now it was time to see if it was me they were after. The only way to do that was to dangle myself like a juicy worm down a side tunnel as the Colony continued on their merry way.

Now here we are, my pets and I, waiting to see if the Golgari will divert themselves to follow me, or follow the rest of the ants. Once again the stealth skill comes into play as I wait for the enemy to

approach, and they do, at their own steady pace. The procession is mostly unchanged from the last time I saw it, the various members in the same positions. I haven't seen a supply train yet but I presume it must be toward the back. I can't imagine all these massive humanoids are going to march this far on an empty stomach.

Oh, here we go. Now we come to it. They reach the divide in the tunnel not a hundred metres away from where I hide and come to a stop. It's a little odd to see the enemy in this way, stretching, chatting and working kinks out of their backs as they wait for a decision to be made. I can see where the conferring is taking place. The armoured figures in the centre of the column are discussing quite animatedly. It's hard to make out this far away, but the fact that something is being considered down there is clear.

Perhaps they do know where I am... That's... not a good thing. Not good at all. After a few minutes of waiting, the decision of the column becomes clear. Surprisingly, they split. A small party of fifteen breaks off to move down the tunnel towards me whilst the others continue on their path, unerringly following the colony as they've done all this time. Unfortunately for me, it looks like quite a few beefy characters are heading my way. It'll get messy if we wait much longer.

[Come on gang. Let's get the heck out of here.]

Creeping carefully, we retreat down the tunnel, trying to stay out of sight. But something doesn't quite seem right. These Golgari are moving swiftly. Way too swiftly. In fact... aren't they just charging?!

[Forget the sneaking! Book it!]

No longer bothering to try and hide our presence, we start sprinting down the tunnel in a mad dash! Behind, the Golgari see us and pick up their own pace.

Dammit! Not only did they know which direction I was in, they even knew I was close! How!? There must be a spell or something of the like on me. When and how they put it on me doesn't matter now. The only thing that matters now, is do I turn and fight? Or try to flee? Should I bring the Colony in to be part of the ambush? There's a chance we can overwhelm these guys and thin the column that hunts us. I need to get a look and see who's come to fight me.

I risk a slight turn to bring the sprinting fighters into my view. Oh yeah, they've brought out the big guns. Several of those huge monsters, and even one of the armoured figures. I'm not a fan of this at all! Looks like some Shapers have come also... In fact... they look a touch familiar...

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 537: What are you really made of?

As I flee down the dark, cold tunnel of the second strata with my pets, I try to get a sense of the strength possessed by the Golgari behind us. The first few are just massive. Hulking titans of humanoids that seem way too large to move the way that they do. I know that unlike monsters, size doesn't equate to strength with the sapient races. At least, not directly. According to Beyn, the stats that humans possess aren't linked to their mass, but rather the capacity to channel mana through their bodies. Having said that, he did explain that someone with a larger might stat is going to be bulkier than others. Looking at these behemoths, I'm reminded of his words. They look like the hulk covered in gleaming stone. Or like the thing, but not a joke. I never thought I'd see a non-monster that could arm wrestle Tiny, but here we

are. Comparatively, the armoured figure is smaller, although still a regular Golgari height, pushing three metres. But something about the way they move is giving me the heeby-jeebies. If I had money, I'd be betting all of it that the armoured figures are the strongest in the group chasing us.

Not only chasing, but gaining!

[Come on, Tiny! Pump those ape legs! We need more speed!]

[GRAAAAH!]

The giant ape roars in my mind and out loud as he spreads his wings, beating them furiously in an attempt to build up more speed. It does help, but not enough as the Golgari gain on us. They're doing it so easily too. The expressions on their faces are so calm and confident, as if we represent no threat to them at all.

Good thing that we were prepared for this sort of eventuality. One thing about a hive mind of individually intelligent creatures, there's enough brain power to go around to cover for all eventualities. Certainly, the Colony was never going to leave me hanging out to dry. Not far up the tunnel are our reinforcements, ready to spring from their hiding places and assault the enemy in numbers. Before that happens, I want to try my own mandibles at the fight, see if we can't bring this to a standstill before I need to call out my siblings.

[Get ready to turn and fight!] I call to my pets and they each respond with determination.

[... That means you need to climb off me, Crinis.]

[Oh! Right. Sorry, Master.]

Yeesh. I can feel her reluctantly pulling herself away from my carapace as we continue our mad dash for a few seconds longer.

[Alright... turn!]

As one, the four of us dig in our heels and slow our momentum, turning around to face the enemy. A flicker of understanding ripples through the Golgari eyes as they heft their weapons and prepare for contact. It's Tiny who commits first, as it should be. His face distorts in a raw bellow of rage and delight that shakes the cavern, causing a rain of dust and stone before he leaps high into the air. His wings unfold and brush against the ceiling and he draws back both fists over his head. Those ham-sized fists glow fiercely with bright light before he descends like a god hammer toward the huge Golgari in the front. The frontline stone-people gather in an instant, combining their strength to withstand the mighty blow that's coming.

But the bag of tricks isn't empty yet, not by a long shot. As Tiny falls, his image blurs and shimmers and he appears to slide to one side. Then, with a distorting flicker, there are four Tiny's descending on the enemy! With ease and precision, Invidia weaves an illusion to protect the great ape as he strikes at the foe. One of the soldiers slashes wildly with his oversized blade, bisecting two of the images cleanly, but before he can strike once more, Tiny lands amongst them.

BOOM!

The stone beneath my feet shakes as an explosion of dust fills the tunnel, showering me with pebbles and dust. What became of the Golgari at the point of impact, I've no idea, I can't see a thing. I briefly consider a little air magic to clear the debris, but I decide against it. This is perfect cover for my own approach! Gweheheheh. Fear the ant that you don't see coming!

I lower my body and dash forward, firing off a few acid barrages as I move, trying to avoid Tiny's last known location. Even using mana sense right now isn't helping much, since there are so many bodies of powerful energy present. Oddly enough, it's my heat sense that gives me the clearest indication of where Tiny is, since the Golgari, who are sealed in stone, don't release all that much heat. Behind me, Invidia takes up an unobtrusive position as his green eye blazes with energy. I can already feel the mana around him whirling in an intricate dance as his ridiculous brain power goes to work, weaving many spells at once.

For her part, Crinis is forming up her body from the ooze she'd reduced herself to, all three mouths gaping and gnashing horrifically as her tentacles begin to spread. Not only is she reaching and grasping toward the Golgari, but dozens of limbs are plunging into the darkening shadows around her, sinking into the floor and walls only to reappear closer to the enemy.

This is exciting! The gang, assembled at last, standing united against the enemy with the Colony at our backs. It's enough to really get the blood pumping! I can't help but clack my mandibles in excitement, my six legs blurring as I speed through the tunnel. From my Vestibule come a thousand tiny voices, urging me on, demanding that they be given the chance to fight alongside me. I take that energy and channel it, filling my body with that drive until I feel like my heart will explode.

The Colony is with me!

"FOR THE COLONY!" I scream as large stone shapes loom out of the darkness.

A glint of metal and a sound like a collapsing tidal wave set my antennae blazing as I duck and angle my carapace to receive the blow.

BAM!

My poor legs creak as a titanic strike digs a chunk of diamond from my thorax before deflecting above me. Didn't expect me to be that tough, did you?! Now revel in the power of my mandibles!

Omen Chomp!

The dark energy manifests around my jaws and I clamp them down on the gleaming giant in front of me.

CRUNCH!

Yikes! This guy's tough! Whatever material they used to create that skin, they sure as hell picked a hard one! With my mandibles gripped around the Golgari I spin my body and throw them away, using my far greater mass to send them stumbling backward as I press forward to find Tiny. Crinis has started to take a more active part of the battle now, her tentacles reaching and grasping. Once she latches onto someone they instantly become encircled by a dozen limbs that dig and tear at them relentlessly. I'm fairly sure she has more up her sleeves as well, judging by the strange behaviour of the shadows around here. Things are starting to heat up!

Chrysalis

Chapter 538: The heck are you doing?!

Just in case things start to turn south, I direct my sub-brains to start drawing on my gravitational mana. I'm not confident that I'll be able to subdue this lot, when push come to shove I need a way out. As I try to shape up to the looming shadows around me, the dust that still fills the air is sucked away into a ball, leaving everyone blinking in the sudden clarity. Everyone except Tiny, who keeps swinging his fists and blasting out lightning as if nothing changed.

There are fifteen Golgari in total and they are all moving in to fight. Thanks to Invidia, the fight isn't going to go out of our favour immediately due to lack of numbers. His barrage of mental attacks, illusions and barriers are enough to keep the opponent on the back foot as Tiny wreaks havoc amongst them. Light on his feet, Tiny shows what he can do when he gets serious. Lightning fast ape jabs, the powerful gorilla hook, not to mention the devastating kong upper. All jaw droppingly powerful weapons in the arsenal of his Ape Boxing Skill.

The Golgari respond with the sort of practiced ease that makes me nervous. The largest three, with their gleaming skin and oversized weapons, have regained their balance and move to the front. Even the one I threw is back on his feet, axe swinging through the air. Behind them the armoured guy, along with a group of Warriors and Shapers, are fending off Crinis' tentacles as they watch for openings. Particularly the armoured guy, he's barely having to fight at all, mainly just watching us, or watching me specifically.

All of a sudden the three giants dash forward, covering the few metres between them and me in an instant, their weapons flashing through the air, glowing with deadly light. Hah! No matter how fast you move, I can react! Their blows are coordinated, aiming to cut off my path of escape. It's impossible to angle my carapace to receive all three, so I dodge to my left, legs firing with impossible speed, and tilt myself to one side.

BAM! BAM! BAM!

Two of the strikes crunch into me and I brace my legs once again to absorb the impact as the third slams into the ground beside me. The diamond carapace proves it's up to the task and despite the glittering chips flying into the air, neither of the two great swords are able to puncture through my exo-skeleton. I can tell the two didn't expect to fail to puncture me from the surprise on their faces, but I've only just begun shocking you, chumps!

At point blank range I pump a gravity bolt into the two Golgari elites who managed to hit me. I wish I'd had the time to condense them, but regular old mana will have to do. At the same time I flood my mandibles with gravity mana and shift to the left. The moment it's charged, I reach out and yank the third elite toward me, causing him to crash into the other two. Unfortunately they're so monstrously strong that they hold their ground, even with one of their own falling into their backs. It's enough of a shock to give me the brief moment of time that I need!

POW! POW! POW! POW!

Eat rapid fire acid, fools! Point blank shots fire from the celebrated commercial empire straight onto the front two elites, splattering them with my patented cleaning agent. Having done the deed I do the only noble thing, turn around and run!

[Tiny, deal with these guys!]

[HRE HRE HRE HRE.]

The giant ape's gleeful laughter echoes in my head as we trade places, me running out and him charging in. I don't want to get bogged down with those three, they're tough as bricks and strong as an ox on steroids. I've got chunks missing out of my back! Chunks, I say! Luckily the carapace is healing itself already. No, my business is with the other members of this group. With Tiny supplying the threat and Invidia keeping him alive, I can plough into the softer targets that Crinis has been harassing all this time.

She still hasn't committed her main body, which is smart, until that armoured guy moves, I don't want us to get in too deep. If he's stronger than the big three, I wouldn't want to try taking a hit! More gravity bolts fly as I start to weave together something a little heavier. The regular Warriors are tough, better than the ones I faced before and they move with precision and power to strike at me. Without the sheer strength of the elites though, they struggle to break through my diamond shell. My reflexes fire with insane speed, allowing me to turn, weave and slant my body to deflect blows I see coming a fraction before they begin.

CHOMP! CHOMP!

My mandibles lash out at the press of bodies around me. Every time I grip a Golgari in my jaws, I turn and throw them to sow more chaos, right up until the gravity domain descends.

A dark purple sphere of pure gravity expands outwards with me in the centre, pulling all the Golgari to the ground. They're strong, too strong to fall from such a spell, but it's enough to hinder their movements as their weapons drag their arms down to the ground. Probably my favourite thing about the gravity domain against opponents like these, is the way every blow becomes more difficult for them. With the weight of their own blades pulling them down, my carapace is easily able to deflect normal strikes, buying more time for the diamond layer to heal itself.

Still, things are getting crazy in here. Tired of messing around, weapons are starting to light up as Skills are put to use. The area becomes full of glowing ape fists, blade light and crushing mandibles as I fight my way back to the Shapers. These are the guys who need to get put out of action the most. Without mage support, I'm not as worried about the Warriors. When the potential exists for me to get half knocked out with one punch, I can't fight properly!

Get outta my way!

Protected by the domain and with the armoured figure still just watching the action, I bully my way through the surrounding Warriors to confront the Shapers, only to run into a familiar face. He doesn't look super happy to see me though. Gah! Making contact in this situation is risky, but I'll have to chance it.

[GRANIN! What the hell, man?!]

[I know,] he sighs. [Got recruited just as forcefully as you did.]

[Is that Torrina and Corun over there?]

[Yep,] he confirms. [We're the experts on all things Anthony and ants, apparently.]

BAM! BAM!

Weapons continue to rattle against my carapace as I dodge left and right whilst trying to work out what the hell I'm going to do about my allies being here to hunt me down.

[So what's the plan then Granin? Going to attack me? Kill my family?]

[Honestly? I was hoping we never caught up to you. We aren't being particularly useful right now, but eventually we'll get an order that we can't refuse.]

[Dammit, Granin. You put me in a pretty damn awkward position here.]

[Tell me about it.]

This sucks. I think it's time to bug out.

[Retreat! Fall back down the tunnel and we'll scare them off with numbers! Tiny, get the he-]

CRUNCH!

In a motion so fast I could barely register what was happening, even as I sensed it in advance, the armoured figure drew his sword, lunged forward and crossed the space between us. His blade, illuminated with cold light and glowing runes, punctured my carapace with an alarming rip, the tip of the blade barely sliding past my core as I lifted my legs on one side to shift the angle.

What in the name of heck was THAT?!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 539: Stabbed in the heart! Who's to blame?!

YEEEOUCH!

If someone ever told you that getting an enchanted blade through the gizzards is a good time, let me be the first to assure that isn't the case! The pain is immediate and intense and I throw my body to the side in a desperate roll, keen to dislodge that sword from my guts. Thankfully, the armoured warrior has a grip of steel and the sword pulls cleanly out as I dodge away. Tucking my legs, I spring back up to find the mysterious figure watching me carefully once again. This situation is not cool and I don't approve of it! How the heck did he get through me so easily? Is it something special about the sword? Or something about the fighter himself?! The sword sure as hell looks rad though, covered in glittering runic script and dotted with embedded cores down the blade. I bet that's expensive...

I strain my senses and trigger my healing gland to try and deal with my internal injuries. My pets have already started to retreat, following my order, which has the unfortunate side effect of leaving me high and dry as I lag behind them. Was this his plan? I pour more mana into the gravity domain, pressing down and compressing the energy to increase the strength of the pull.

[Crisis, I need some distraction. Have you got something for me?]

[Master?! Are you alright?!]

[I won't be if you can't give me some cover! Invidia, you too!]

As I speak to my two pets, I'm already moving, assuming that they have my back. If I stay here for a few more seconds, I'm going to get surrounded, domain or no. I watch the armoured figure like a hawk-ant as I start scooching my way back toward the reinforcements and away from the Golgari. The huge elite warriors are turning on me already whilst their leader watches on, blade held loosely in his hand. Thankfully, before they take a swing, a sudden darkness blooms around me, plunging the already dim tunnel in complete black. At the same time, my mana sense comes alight as spheres of concentrated energy flare into life around me. Crinis and Invidia have come to save the day, obscuring me in a visual and a mana sense. Time to DASH!

The moment I realise I'm hidden, my legs explode into motion and I rush forward, keen to get some separation between these rock-people and myself. As nice as Granin is, he's clearly not in control here and I won't rely on Golgari kindness again. Just as I pick up traction, my antennae flicker a warning and I twist my body by a fraction as the runic blade plunges toward me with inhuman speed.

CRUNCH!

Dammit! That freaking hurts!

Once again, with a sickening splintering, that hateful blade has pierced my wonderful diamond carapace and poked a hole in my organs! I need those organs! This guy moves so fast it's beyond belief! How was he even able to locate me? Sound?! Surely that's not possible! At least he made one mistake, which was to attack me from behind.

POW! POW! POW!

Eat acid! At point blank range, the powerful Golgari has no choice but to cop the sizzling liquid right in the chest as I pull away once again.

[Invidia! Shield!]

The restorative fluid from my healing gland is still sloshing through my body from the first strike and my hp slowly regenerates as I gain some distance. After two seconds, a hardened barrier forms between the Golgari and I, granting me some level of protection. Thank goodness that guy didn't chop off my legs! For whatever reason he seemed to think his stabbing attacks would be fatal in one hit, so he saw no need to immobilise me. It's true, I can't seem to defend myself against those strikes, they come too fast and hard for even my hyper-accelerated reflexes. That in and of itself is something I never thought would be possible.

I rush thirty metres back down the tunnel and re-join my pets. I can sense the Colony swarming in their hidden chambers around me, granting me a strong sense of comfort. Even if I can't hold them off on my own, we can hold them off together. Damn my guts hurt. I watch as the darkness fades away to reveal the Golgari, reforming their group as they begin to march towards us once more. Toward the back, Granin, Torrina and Corun walk with their people, grim looks upon their faces.

If I was to guess, I'd think that they didn't want this to come to a bloody end, just as much as I don't. Those three helped a lot in the past and I certainly can't say they'd be spared if an all-out battle were to ensue here. At the same time, I know things won't go as well for me and the Colony if they decide to fight for real. That figure encased in steel is the key. That's clearly the leader here. My acid seems to have had little effect on them, the armour seems just as polished as it was before. It doesn't look as if

the acid was even able to adhere properly and just sloughed off. Please don't tell me that's some sort of enchanted armour!?

A fight is still possible, but I'm going to try another way first.

"Come on out, family! Time for a show of force!"

I call out to the ants hidden around us and they begin to reveal themselves immediately. The core shapers come first, their shadow beast pets sliding from cover and blending into the darkness around them. Then come the soldiers, the scouts, the mages, healers and generals. Hundreds of them crawl out of the walls and floor until they cover every surface, forming a living wall of carapace and mandibles that confronts the mere fifteen Golgari. Gweheheh. Leave it to a Colony of ants to perform a dominant display of numbers!

Some might expect that I would feel ashamed at this overwhelming numerical advantage. Such people are fools! Charlatans, all! Also, they smell bad! Ants need numbers to win, these sorts of odds are only natural. Viva la swarm!

I'll give the Golgari credit, they remain stone faced (heh) when confronted with this intimidating scene. When we show no sign of advancing, they slow to a halt and stand before us, weapons poised. Between the two sides, a stand-off ensues. The two forces are separated by only a dozen metres and the potential for explosive violence is thick in the air. The cold and oppressive darkness of the second strata presses in around us and not a single figure wants to move in case they spark the conflict.

It's into this tense atmosphere that I will need to insert my charm.

With slow caution, I deliberately weave together a mind bridge and extend it to the armoured Golgari. I don't want to startle anyone, so I keep my control tight and the contact light. The spell settles on him gently and I open myself up to the channel with care. Damn, I could cut this air with an antenna, I swear it's that thick. Need to be so careful here.

[What's happening, rock-man?] Gotta keep it light.

Chrysalis

Chapter 540: They really want me stabbed!

A nice, light touch. That's always the correct play. Keep it friendly, no need to shout or get angry, that stuff never defused anything. Believe me, I know. You gotta smile through the screaming, that's how you get your bacon out of the frying pan. So far, signs are good! The powerful Golgari warrior, encased in gleaming metal, is yet to stab me through the face, so let's call the initial salvo a victory!

[You would be Anthony, I presume?]

The mental voice that comes back to me is deep and powerfully resonant. Just by touching that mind I can tell that this guy is not ordinary. There are depths of power here that he hasn't yet displayed. A sleeping aura that boils beneath the surface, controlled and concealed. I get the feeling that if this guy were to really cut loose, not only my pets and I, but also his allies would be impacted by it.

[That's me. One big 'ol ant.]

[You were once a human, were you not?]

[That is indeed the case.]

[Interesting. I presume you choose to surround yourself with these monsters for security, yes?]

He gestures towards the eerily still wall of ants that cover the tunnel walls and ceiling with one hand as I watch him carefully for any sign of motion. If he moves a single toe, I want to see it happening in advance. Come on antennae, don't fail me now!

[I'm not sure what you mean. I've been more welcome and treated far better amongst them than with any 'civilised' race I've come across so far. With the possible exception of the Sophos.]

[Monsters rejecting the Sapient to consort with monsters. I'm hardly surprised.]

What?!

[That attitude may be part of the problem, uh, what was your name?]

[I do not give my name to creatures such as you. Why do you wish to talk with me, creature? We have business to be about.]

This guy has issues. Serious problems in the upstairs department.

[You still want to fight? I think we both know that were we to continue, every Golgari behind you would die, even if you survived.]

It's hard to read the man's emotions, his face being hidden behind the intricate helmet he wears along with the armour. Now that I'm close enough to get a good look, the armour is super fancy. Smooth, burnished surfaces, elegant lines and incredible fine detailing. I'll be shocked if it isn't enchanted. The cores must be socketed somewhere inside the suit, which makes sense. They'd create a weak point where they placed anywhere else. Such a suite must be immensely difficult to make, not to mention pricey. My estimation of this guys' status is rising even further.

[These proud Warriors would be pleased to give their lives to achieve our mission. Which, I might add, is exterminating you and your kind.]

[You really want to test the dedication of your members against mine? I'll give you a hint at how that'll go: they're insects.]

The figure has barely moved, and now indicates indifference with the slightest lift of his shoulders.

[You have killed my people, monster. The city has charged me and mine with the extermination of your kind, down to the last, so that no further infestation will spread to threaten the empire of stone. I know not what you seek to achieve with this banter.]

[Preservation of life? According to your own words, more of your people will die here in this tunnel than have perished at my people's mandibles, so far. If you actually care to keep your people alive, then turning around, and returning to your city, is by far the best choice. I have no wish to kill your people, we seek only to return to our home, far from here.]

The ants around me maintain their eerie, inhuman stillness, all eyes locked on the gleaming figure encased in metal. Even to me, it's a creepy scene. When I include Crinis, all three maws open and dripping with ooze as she gnaws on the air whilst staring at the Golgari, it becomes a touch unnerving.

[Just chill out, Crinis.]

[He stabbed you, Master!]

[I'm aware...]

[Twice!]

[I was there! Just don't attack unless I say, alright?]

[Fine...]

Phew. This situation is bad enough without Crinis going off the deep end and committing us all to battle. Even now the bulk of the Golgari force is still tracking the majority of the Colony, somewhere in the tunnels around us. My fear is that battle has already commenced over there, though I know the Colony is doing all they can to maintain the distance. There should be no chance that they are fighting, but still, I worry.

The armoured figure has remained silent for a few beats and I feel compelled to fill the silence.

[You need to make a decision, guy. Either you turn around and walk away or we fight it out to the death right here. There doesn't appear to be any middle ground.]

[These ants,] he muses, [they don't behave as they should. I presume that's because of your influence?]

[I suppose a little of my personality rubbed off on them, what can I say? On the bright side, they aren't trying to eat you right now.]

He nods and hefts his weapon.

[Hopefully they'll return to their savage selves after you are dead.]

No. C'mon, please.

My antennae flicker a warning to me and I respond on instinct, twisting to one side and the sword slides passed my face and sinks into my thorax.

[Are you serious?! Do you have any idea how many are going to die because of this?!]

Omen Chomp!

My mandibles crunch around the armour, dragging the figure closer to my face.

[There's going to be war! None of your people will make it back to their city.]

He wrenches his blade from my carapace and brings up his arm.

[The Empire of stone is always at war with the Dungeon, monster.]