

Ants Marching (S2, E27)

SFX:

INTRO MUSIC

Rev: Hey, everybody. Welcome to 2020. Not 20/20 like the TV show. We have not changed the format of the podcast to be news. I mean, welcome to 2020. I am here to tell you about the Patreon tiers that have just gone live on our Patreon site -- Patreon.com/TheCritshow.

So our \$1 tier has not changed. The Initiate, the \$1 tier, gives you access to our Discord, and will also give you a thanks on the show and our website. That remains unchanged. Our \$5 tier, The Professional, gives you everything in The Initiate tier. And it also gives you access to our RSS feed, which will give you shows like Tasss's Worlds in Peril game, Hero Salad, Carolyn's in depth look at myths and monsters with Investigate the History, and of course, our just announced Patreon bonus content show, Tales from the Omniverse. You'll also get invited to our monthly live video chat, which we treat like an AMA. The Expert tier is \$10. It gives you access to everything in The Professional and The Initiate tier. You'll also get access to our GM Discord channel, where you can ask myself and Tass and everyone else questions or advice on the games that you run. It's a really nice little spot where you can go in, throw an idea out, ask for some advice, and get feedback from us and members of the community that are part of that tier. In addition to that, you also get an exclusive wallpaper featuring characters or moments from the show, shot by The Portrait Dude. And then the change that we have made here is that once a month, you will receive a one page RPG recommendation. Our \$20 tier, which used to be The Divine, we have now renamed The Big Game Hunter. The Big Game Hunter tier is the swag tier. Three times a year, we will send you some Critshow swag. So far in the previous year, it has included things like calendars, memorabilia from the hunts throughout the show. At this tier, you also get access to the three previous tiers.

Our next tier, which is a new one, is the \$25 tier, and it is The Constructed. In The Constructed tier, you'll receive everything from The Expert, The Professional, and The Initiate, and three times a year you will receive a Patreon-exclusive Critshow t-shirt. I'm very excited about this tier. We have chatted with a couple of artists. We've got a couple of ideas in mind for shirts that we want to make. The thing to note is that The Constructed, the \$25 tier, does not receive the swag from The Big Game Hunter tier. That is for our new Divine tier. Our Divine tier now is a \$40 tier, and you receive everything from The Constructed, The Big Game Hunter, The Expert, The Professional, and The Initiate. So essentially what we've done is we realize that some people might want a t-shirt, some people might want swag, some people might want both. So if you are

someone who wants both, there's a little bit of a discount to getting both of them together.

And then our last new tier is The Founder tier. The Founder Tier is \$70 a month. And for right now there are only four slots available, because The Founder tier is our new Chosen tier. We realized that there were people who wanted to get involved with the games, and the Chosen tier, as we had it before, was just not something we could continue to make more of. So with The Founder tier, you get everything in all the previous tiers listed below it, but you also get a spot at the table for a game that Jake will run once a month. The Chosen tiers we are retiring, but the people that are in those tiers already are grandfathered into that. If they drop that Chosen tier, then we will add additional slots to the Founders Tiers as Tass and I move our game times over to The Founders. Something to keep in mind with The Founders tier is if you want to sign up for that, if you want to get a chance to play a monthly game with Jake -- and in the future, Tass, myself, T.J. -- sign up for that tier, but also make sure that you've got a little bit of availability, because we'll be running those games at nights and on the weekends. Every month, we will give a couple of options for when we can run the games, and we want to make sure that if you're in that tier, you've got some time free to actually play with everybody, so. We're very excited about this, because it gives the community more chances to sit down and play together.

So again -- I realize this is a little long winded. I'm exhausted just from reading it all. But we have The Initiate at \$1, The Professional at \$5, The Expert at \$10, The Big Game Hunter at 20, which is the new swag tier. The Constructed at 25, which is the t-shirt tier. The Divine at \$40, which gets you both the swag and the shirt. And The Founder, which gets you everything listed before and a spot at the table at our once a month game run by Jake. So again, you can head over to Patreon.com/TheCritshow, and all of those tiers are live right now. If you are an existing member, you can switch over to a different tier if you'd like. And if you want to sign up and become part of our community, you can go over and sign up right now to grab one of the slots in these new tiers. So thank you again for listening. We hope that you have had a great 2019. We're very excited for the things coming in 2020. And we just want to say thank you from all of us here. Because without you, none of these things would be possible. So have a Happy New Year, and it's time to let the recap roll.

SFX:

RECAP MUSIC

Rev: Two figures fall from the sky and slam into the ground. Turn and you look, and there are two Formians. One of them has a dark green mark down the side of its face, and the other one has a whip and it is trying to subdue the one with the spear.

Jake: "Whoa, hey, hold on. Hold on. We're not technically in Eternal Colony land right now, so I don't know that you can enforce Eternal Colony laws."

Rev: FORMIAN: Are you harboring this fugitive?

Jake: "I'm not harboring this fugitive. I am currently restraining this fugitive. But I'll pay you for this fugitive."

Rev: FORMIAN: You try to use currency to circumvent our laws?

Tass: Shit!

Jake: [Sighs] "No, I'm not trying to circumvent your laws. I'm sorry. I don't know how any of this works."

Rev: LANDARA: You remember when that first night they came and they drew a line, and you were on one side or the other?

Jake: "Uh-huh."

Rev: LANDARA: It's like that. You didn't cross that line. So in their heads, you're still on the other side of the line.

Jake: "Oh, OK."

Rev: LANDARA: It's once you cross over, you can never come back.

Rev: So you stand over next to TJ and you do your Shapeshift and you turn into a fire beetle. And it starts to fly towards you, and then it seems like it's kind of caught up in the wind, like it's starting to fly away from you.

Teej: I'm going to see if I can't catch him. Maybe the wind's too strong for him.

Rev: You reach out and you snag him. And Tass, from your point of view, there is no Tass. There is only the fire beetle. And this is your life now.

RECAP MUSIC FADES

Rev: We see the desert late at night as a wagon pulled by two camels, with a third one trailing, make its way across the desert. In the front, we see two camels leading this group, and undead and a dwarf each riding one of the camels. It's quiet and cold. And then suddenly we're in a place where it's warm and it's cozy. There's dwarven hair. And inside of this hair is a happy little beetle.

Jake: [Laughs]

Rev: Squirming around inside of the hair, eating little bits of food that it finds. What is the beetle thinking? What is it doing right now?

Tass: Well, this is a nice, comfortable place, but there's not a lot of room. So I think priority one is making like a little hollow in this space, you know? Just a little clear area where I can store food and such.

All: [Laugh]

Rev: So T.J., you are going along and you've been, I assume, chatting with Tass as you go. He's been uncharacteristically unresponsive, but you feel him digging around in your beard, like pushing hair around.

Teej: "Tass, are you, like, combing my hair?"

Rev: He doesn't respond.

Tass: There's a big booming noise. I think I hold very still for a long moment until I feel like the danger has passed.

Teej: "OK. We're getting closer, so just get ready, man."

Rev: And just up ahead, Landara has actually stopped and hopped off of her camel.

Jake: "Is this it? Is this where we wait?"

Rev: LANDARA: Yeah. It should be about a half hour northwest of here. So let him out, and good luck to you.

Teej: "OK. Tass, we're good to go, buddy."

Tass: I have found some what seem like salty dew droplets.

Jake: [Laughs]

Tass: So I think I'm rolling those into balls that I can roll up and have something to drink, when necessary, in my hollow.

Teej: That is my sweat.

All: [Laugh]

Teej: I'm going to comb my fingers through my beard, see if I can feel him in there.

Rev: Yeah. You find him and you pull him out.

Teej: Yeah. "It's time to go, buddy. Which way is it, Landara?"

Rev: LANDARA: That way.

Rev: And she points northwest.

Teej: And I'm going to set him on the ground. "All right, buddy. It's all you. It's that way, towards the northwest." And I kind of point my finger in the direction, like next to him so he can see it.

Tass: [Panic] Oh, god. A beast had me. And now the grip of it has let me go. So I'm going. I'm flying. I'm flying.

Rev: And Tass lifts off the ground and flies to the northwest.

Jake: All right.

Rev: End of show!

All: [Laugh]

Rev: Thank you for joining us on our 47 second episode of The Critshow. We'll see you next week.

Jake: "So how long do we think we wait before, like, we think maybe something's gone wrong and we go in after him?"

Teej: "Well, she said a half an hour, Landara?"

Rev: LANDARA: Yeah. I mean, I wasn't thinking about as the beetle flies, but it shouldn't be ... I imagine, he seems to be moving at a pretty good click.

Teej: "Yeah, maybe ..."

Rev: LANDARA: Look at him go.

Teej: "Forty five minutes, to maybe an hour?"

Jake: "I mean, it would be an hour just to get there and get back. We got to give him some time to explore while he's there."

Teej: "Oh, right. So an hour and a half maybe or so?"

Jake: "I'd say like a few hours. You know, he might take his time. He might have to hide out somewhere."

Teej: "OK."

Jake: "So we shouldn't -- I don't think we should worry for two. I don't think we should move for three."

Teej: "OK. Three whole hours of us just sitting here, coming up with amazing ideas of how to use an Immoveable Rod."

Jake: Yeah!

Rev: And as the two of you look into the distance, you can just barely see the little speck that is fire beetle Tass, flying off into the horizon as the sun is rising. And then you see a bird dive out of the sky and swallow him.

SFX: HAWK CALL

Teej: [Gasps]

Tass: Oh my god! [Laughs]

Rev: So you are inside of this bird's mouth.

Tass: I suppose I'm trying to find any opening at all, first.

Rev: There is not one. And you can feel this big wet thing moving around, and trying to force you in a direction.

Tass: I think I need to try to bite it, for sure.

Rev: You bite down on the tongue, and it doesn't seem to have any effect.

Tass: Do I have anything else? Do I have like a self-defense mechanism of any kind?

Rev: Yeah. So the fire beetle can expel a acidic juice from its hindquarters when it is threatened.

Tass: Oh, yeah. I am going to blast this thing in the mouth with butt goo.

Rev: All right. So you ...

Jake: You don't gotta church it up, son. You poop fire.

All: [Laugh]

Rev: So you let loose of this acid in this bird's mouth. And we're going to cut back outside, from Jake and T.J.'s point of view, as this bird catches Tass in its mouth, lands on the ground, and then explodes.

SFX: HAWK CALL

SFX: POP

Jake: "Oh, my god!"

Rev: And Tass is standing there, covered in the remains of it.

Teej: "Oh, shit!"

Tass: "What happened? Did I do it?"

Teej: "Tass, are you OK?"

Tass: "Where the hell are we?"

Teej: I'm going to run on over to him.

Tass: "What the hell happened to me? There's a feather in my mouth." [Spits]

Jake: "You started the journey and got ate by a bird. Did it, like, hit you in the beetle head and make you forget?"

Tass: "What? I haven't even done anything yet."

Teej: "You were a beetle, dude. Did you, like, become one with the beetle?"

Tass: "Maybe. I'm covered in gore. Oh, it's in my pockets."

All: [Laugh]

Rev: And yeah, I think that as they are saying this to you, like you get these strange little flashes of "Ooh, warmth." Then you remember digging yourself a little home and eating crumbs, and then flying, and being eaten.

Tass: "Whoa, god. Oh, that's very disorienting. I think the beetle took over. I think the beetle took over."

Jake: "Is the beetle going to take over again?"

Tass: "I don't know!"

Jake: "Am I speaking with the beetle right now?"

Tass: "Oh, my god!"

All: [Laugh]

Tass: I'm just picking feathers and goo off of myself.

Rev: So I think, mechanically speaking, just to kind of give a quick glimpse of what happened there. Tass, you had failed that roll to become the fire beetle. You had a hold,

and using the fire beetle's defense mechanism used that hold, which causes you to transform back into your halfling self.

Teej: Which we lovingly call fire butt.

Rev: Yes, fire butt. That was a strange, like, cult thing. We all just chanted at the same --

All: Fire butt. Fire butt.

Jake: "Are you OK? Because I don't have another plan."

Tass: "I -- I don't know. I'm terrified to try that again."

Jake: "What are the odds?" [Laughs].

Tass: "Oh my god. Hold on." And I think I'm just getting out of this generally open area, just back to where we had parked everything.

Rev: Uh-huh.

Tass: And I just want to sit down, and I'm just putting my hands out to just wave everybody off. Like, "Just give me a second." And I want to buckle down and try my Communion of Whispers in this place.

Rev: OK, yeah. So roll it.

Tass: Awesome.

Jake: The spirit comes to you and says, [Whispers] don't let the beetle take over. Good luck.

Tass: Thirteen.

Teej: Nice!

Rev: [Whispers] High Lord Fire Beetle is everywhere.

All: [Laugh]

Tass: There's the spirit of a very sad bird.

Teej: [Sad trombone]

Tass: A very surprised crow.

Rev: Standing on the shoulder of a very sad antman.

All: [Laugh]

Rev: So the vision that you get from this place is of ants grabbing food and clumping it together and rolling it into a ball. And you see them digging, and they take these balls of food underground and store them and then kick dirt over them. And for a moment you get a vision that's like if you took a big chunk of the earth here and just cut it in half. You can see that there is this full tube that goes down in the ant colony, and there are all of these orbs of food and water. And they're buried. They're just completely isolated. But the ants know where they are, and they dig to them when they need to get to them. And you're hit with the knowledge that this must be exactly how their prison works. This is such a weird visualization, but I have to share it because it keeps coming into my head. It would be like if you took a fully decorated Christmas tree and buried it underground and then removed everything except for the bulb ornaments. Like, that's what you see.

Tass: Woof. Yeah. I think I blink out of this with a big heavy sigh. "God damn it. OK, boys. I think I know how this place works, and it ain't great."

Teej: "What do we do?"

Tass: "So the way these creatures work is that they dig down to the places they need, whether it's food storage or whatever else, put the things that they need to there, and then dig out and seal it off. So the prison is like that. It's like the real ants and beetles and such here. That these cells are like these hollows, deep down in the earth. And they dig down to them when they need to get to the prisoners."

Jake: "So every single person is in solitary confinement, essentially."

Rev: LANDARA: That would make sense. I've never been inside, but that sounds like isolation to me.

Tass: "Yeah."

Jake: "I mean, that has the potential to be good. If Grandpa is alone completely, he's not being like watched or whatever, getting in and getting him could go very unnoticed. But we've got to find him."

Tass: "Yeah. Only we had one of these ant guys that had details on this that didn't like the rest of them ..." [Sighs] "I don't mean that as a burn. I know you did what you had to do. There'd be a whole army of ants after us."

Jake: "It felt like a burn."

Tass: "It's more of a, you know, ironic. Like, 'Oh, look at that.'" [Sighs] "Because no, I'd rather not have an army of them after us. So. Yeah."

Rev: It's like a monkey's paw. You got exactly what you wanted, just not how you wanted it.

Tass: "Uh-huh."

Jake: "I mean, can you like -- can you talk to animals and shit?"

Tass: "Yeah, absolutely."

Jake: "Can you talk to the bugs in that area and see, like, if they know where he is?"

Tass: "I can talk to the beetles of that area. So I could try that. And if that doesn't pan out, I mean, there's lots of other things around here that I could study. This is different than what I am familiar with. Even, like, ants in the mountain aren't exactly like this. So I think I would have to study these, because this is a whole different monster."

Jake: "I mean either way, I feel like you need to get close first. Get in that zone, or else you're not going to encounter an ant who's dug across the cell out here, probably."

Tass: "Yeah."

Jake: "I don't know. Maybe you will. Maybe you're lucky. Maybe one of them is on a fantastical journey and he just happens to be out here and he knows exactly what we need to know."

Rev: He happened to just escape from the clutches of a dying bird.

Tass: All right. I think just my first start here is going to be to look around for any other fire beetles I can talk to.

Rev: You actually don't see any fire beetles out here. But you do see ants, which was not something you saw before. And I think that just having communed with the spirits here and having been a beetle for a while, that this territorial element of The Eternal Colony flows down to the ecosystem below it -- that the ants and the beetles and the various things here are very territorial. And so it would make sense that you found ants now, but you do not see beetles. Like, you don't get a sense that the ants would work for the Formians, but that they are somehow comforted by, connected to ... There's something shared there.

Tass: Yeah. "OK, guys. I think I have to take some time here. But I think if I study these, I'll be able to communicate with them."

Rev: LANDARA: I mean, daylight's burning, but I don't think that it's going to make much difference night or day. If we're going to encounter a patrol, we're going to encounter patrol here.

Teej: "All right. Get to studying, buddy."

Tass: "All right."

Teej: "We'll keep an eye out."

Rev: So what is everyone else going to do, while Tass does this?

Jake: I think we should all rest. Because like, myself included, if we're going to get caught, we're going to get caught. And if we're going to sell it, the reason we're not moving right now is because we're not traveling during the day. We need to rest. So I'll pick a spot under something to, like, lay down. I'm obviously not actually going to sleep, but like, I'm kicking my feet up.

Rev: Going to get out of the sun?

Jake: Yeah.

Rev: All right. So everybody sets up their area to rest. I imagine Jake is stretching out one of the tents a little higher so that it's coming off of the wagon, so you've got a shaded area. And Tass is hunkering down underneath the wagon with an ant.

Tass: This might be nonsense, but I'm going to ask anyway. Since these are still ants -- I mean, they're still sort of like things that I would know -- is there a way for me to, like, Defy Danger or something to speed up the process? Since it's somewhat similar to something I know already?

Rev: Yeah. I think that since it's akin to something you have in stock, but you are trying to be this specific kind ... The rules about shapeshifting, and even with talking with animals, are pretty loose in this game. I mean, intentionally so. They're that way in all Powered by the Apocalypse Games.

Tass: Yeah.

Rev: And so the way I've been doing it in my head is that, let's say that you have an ant form. You know, it's not unreasonable. You came from this mountain range. And you are this specific type of ant. And you go further into your continent, you go down into the valleys, you go to the beaches, that you could talk to those. You wouldn't turn into those, but you could still communicate with those that are on your continent. But then it's crossing to a different continent is where, "OK, I've got to study something new to even be able to talk to them." Because I'm kind of thinking of it like a dialect.

Tass: Yeah.

Rev: That essentially you can talk to anything on your continent if you have that form. And then you got to study something else on another continent to be able to talk to things that are akin to that.

Tass: Yeah, I dig that. I feel like, especially even just the basis of the terrain, they work so differently in every other way, besides the fact that they're ants. Yeah, that makes sense. I dig it.

Rev: So yeah, it's going to be Defy Danger with Wisdom. Because I think this is going to be mental fortitude to kind of copy and paste information from one type of ant that you can already be, and then pick up the new different details and fill in those gaps.

Tass: OK. Six.

Jake: Can I help?

Rev: How so?

Jake: By basically going around and like gathering ants and concentrating them. So that he's got a lot in a narrow area to kind of watch, and how they interact with each other, and what they do. Like, I'm just-- I'm creating a colony for him to watch instead of just an ant.

Rev: OK. So you're giving him mass information, as opposed to just one piece of information?

Jake: Yeah. It's like having four monitors instead of one monitor.

Rev: OK. Yeah. Because I'm at the point now where it kills me to have to edit with only one monitor, so I can appreciate that.

All: [Laugh]

Rev: So roll Aid or Interfere.

Jake: Oh, please go good. [Laughs]

Teej: That seems like it's an inner fear, more than an aid.

Jake: Oh, I also got a six.

Teej: Ayy!

Tass: Just gonna mark this here experience.

Jake: So Jake, you are digging in the sand and the dirt, trying to keep these ants in front of Tass. And you're at it for two, three hours. And you notice, once you let up, that the pores on your knuckles where the acid comes out are clogged. They are stuffed with sand. And so you won't have your corrosive damage until you can find someone with the knowhow to help you take these hands apart and clean out those ducts.

Teej: Oh, no.

Rev: Tass, you are able to get this done in just slightly shorter time. It takes you about three hours with Jake's help. And as you turn into one of these ants, the world as you perceive it is totally different. It is almost completely invisible, and it's mostly smells and movement that you can feel. And so I think with your failure comes an unwelcome truth.

And the truth is, is that the ants here and the Formians, they don't need to see you, because they can smell you. And sometimes they can even feel you on the ground. They can feel the tremors that you make. And the thing that you get from this is that to communicate with any of the ants, you would have to be in this form. Because you have to have that kind of mastery over the smell to get the correct information.

Tass: Oof. Yeah, that sucks. But that makes -- I mean, that makes sense. It's not like they're chirping or something at me to understand.

Rev: Yeah, exactly.

Tass: OK. I get the feeling that it won't work this far out, but I still am going to attempt to put out the vibe of like a description of James Tincher, to see if any of these ants find that familiar.

Rev: They do not. Not this far out.

Tass: OK.

Rev: You get back some input about ants that have been that far out, that have seen the Isolation, but they are few and far between.

Tass: Sure. OK, I'm going to drop that form. "All right, guys. So nothing around here knows. But I get the idea that I can communicate with these things. I'll probably just have to get a lot closer. The two problems are, I have to be in art form to communicate with them, and there's the very real sense that if we're in the Formian's zone and digging and stuff, there's just as good of a chance that they will notice us doing that as they would spotting us, you know, visually or otherwise. Like they're sensory. You know, they feel the ground shifting, and stuff like that. So that ain't great."

Teej: "No, it ain't. Gosh, it seems like our choices are becoming more limited as we go in."

Jake: "I mean, if we can get me to him, that's all we need. You know, like if you figure out where he is and you can take some kind of animal form that could get us there quick. You and me go in, get him, teleport out. Everybody else is still far away. We bounce. We rendezvous somewhere else. Like, it's not impossible."

Tass: "Yeah, OK."

Jake: "Can you turn into something that could dig us down there, that wouldn't be, like, suspect?"

Tass: "Yeah. I mean, if we found something. But then I'd have to study that, too. I mean there's certainly nothing in the mountains that's big enough to do that."

Jake: "Yeah. I mean every second we're out here, we're pushing our luck."

Tass: "Yeah. That we haven't been spotted already is a surprise. I mean, we can almost see this place on the horizon, here. But I mean, you know, if it is what I visualized, what I saw in that vision, it's a big hole in the ground, man. Like it's a big thing that we can go in. I just have to get close enough to figure out what branch of that we take to figure out where the pocket is, where he's kept."

Jake: "I mean if we can get in, I can just probably, like, Wreck-It Ralph my way to him. Or at least back out."

Tass: "Right."

Rev: Yeah. I think that holds. With your Unstoppable Force, out would be no problem. Down would be a little hard, because you're, you know, packing earth, but ...

Jake: I just bury him. [Laughs]

Tass: Yeah.

Rev: But I think using it to essentially dig a slanted tunnel to get out? Absolutely.

Tass: "OK. So we figure out a way to get you in. What is that?"

Jake: "I don't especially want to just jump in the hole. Like if he's at like the top, I don't want to fall all the way down the hole and then mountain climb back up to get to where he is, or anything."

Tass: "Oh. Ok. Ok, OK. So, yeah. Just linear, here. I go in, do the ant thing, see if I can find him. Assuming that works, I could try my Thing-Talker for an air elemental? If it is much further down, I might be able to use that to get you safely down to whatever level you need."

Jake: "Yeah. That makes sense. Like either, if it goes all the way to the bottom, to like make sure I don't die on impact."

Tass: "Yeah, exactly."

Jake: "Or if it doesn't go all the way to the bottom, just like whoosh me to the wall I need to be at, so I can start smashing through."

Tass: "Right. And all the while, T.J. is going to watch the camels."

All: [Laugh]

Teej: Actually, while they're having this discussion, I'm thinking about, like, our chances on this. Is there any way that I can, like, look through Estin's book, and maybe even one of the other books, to maybe figure out if there's anything on Isolation? Like a way to break in, or a way to break out?

Rev: Yes. Spout Lore has not been used with the book yet for Isolation. So I think you could totally use it for that while they're having this conversation.

Teej: Nice.

Tass: You going to use one of ours as well?

Teej: Yeah.

Tass: OK. I'll mark it.

Teej: Cool.

Rev: We've now got snapshots of all three of you, just double fisting books.

Jake: Yup.

Rev: What a brainy bunch.

Teej: [Sings] The Brainy Bunch ... All right. That is a ten.

Tass: Yeah!

Jake: Nice.

Rev: So you do find a little bit of information in Estin's book about Isolation. And the interesting and useful thing that you find is that in the vision that Tass got before he saw ants rolling everything into balls. And you know from this book that the prisoners are not just in a sphere of earth, that there is some kind of impenetrable bubble around them that keeps the earth from collapsing in on them, that keeps them from using magic and things like that. So they are inside of a sphere that is buried. And so it is what protects them from outside harm, but also protects the members of The Eternal Colony from them. So they don't strip them of their things. They don't put them in a uniform. It is just the captive, in that orb.

Teej: OK. I let them know that.

Tass: "Do you get the sense from that that it's like an impenetrable orb? Like something that we need to dispel? Or something that we need a specific key for, or something??"

Rev: I think that's simple enough. It's from magic.

Teej: OK. "As far as I know, it is just magic. So I assume it probably just needs dispelling."

Tass: Would Walfus know anything about that? Like magical effects that work like that, and how to make them stop?

Rev: Yeah. Roll Spout Lore.

Tass: OK.

Jake: Don't forget, use a book.

Tass: I think I do want to use a book on this, too. Just with that idea of like, do we even have anything? Like I think what gets the thought going is, what spell components do I need? Like, you know, I don't really know what I'm looking for.

Rev: OK.

Tass: Not even needed. That brings me up to an eleven.

Teej: Woo!

Rev: So the interesting and useful thing that you know about magical effects like this and dispelling them is that most of the time you would just require a wizard. I believe that is a third or fourth level spell for them, Dispel Magic. But there are elements like protective wards, bubbles that absorb damage, that will automatically dispel if they are moved too far away from the source that is powering them.

Tass: OK.

Jake: So all I need to do is keep running at it and pushing it further and further away through the dirt, and eventually it'll pop.

Rev: And then you'll just Defy Danger with Dexterity not to trample him.

Tass: Oh god ...

Teej: "You OK, grandpa?" [Squish]

Tass: Pop. Smear. "OK. So how are we doing this, boys? I'll go see what I can find?"

Teej: "Yeah. Step one, get you inside as an ant, find Grandpa. Step two, get out of there, tell us. Step three, we get in there with Jake just plowing through, you and me for support. Step four, question mark. Step five, profit.

All: [Laugh]

Tass: "All right. Oh boy, let's -- let's do this."

Jake: "And how do we know if the bug has taken over this time?"

Tass: "I am going to literally stand up on my back legs and wave at you."

Jake: "OK."

Tass: "If I don't do that ..."

Jake: "You're the bug."

Tass: "I'm the bug."

Teej: "Before you go, how long should we wait for you?"

Tass: "Oh, god. I mean, if the place is as big as it felt like, it's going to take a minute. I mean, a day or two? I really don't know."

Jake: "OK. I mean, I hate that, but --"

Tass: "Yeah. Me too. Because if I'm, you know, dead soon ..." [Laughs]

Jake: "Yeah, exactly. All right. Well, he's been rotting for 46 hours. Let's go find out what happened. But no, you'll be fine."

Tass: I'm going to give it a try.

Rev: All right. Roll Shapeshift.

Tass: All right. Listen here, you little fucks ... Eleven.

Teej: Woo!

Rev: All right. You get a hold 3.

Tass: I'm going to stand up, give them a little wave, and then start doing a little salsa dance on my way down.

Teej: "He didn't say anything about salsa dance! He's a bug!"

Jake: "The bug took over!"

Teej: "Oh, god."

Jake: "And he loves music!"

All: [Laugh]

Rev: So what is everyone at camp going to do while Tass travels?

Jake: I think back to the original plan of resting, so that we can sell this if we have to.

Rev: So as the group at the camp lays down to rest, the camera pans up to the sky and we see the sun move across the sky. And we pan back down and we see a 20 foot hole

in the sand that just is a straight drop, and it is dark. And we see Tass as a tiny ant at the edge of this hole, looking down. Tass, you have made it to Isolation. What are you doing?

Tass: I guess I want to just be putting out my senses, to see if there are any natural ant colonies around the perimeter here.

Rev: There are ants here. And even as you are at the edge, trying to get a sense of the other ants, you actually get a sense of the Formians. You can feel them moving around below you. You can feel some of them climbing up the sides of this giant hole to get out. You can feel them very far below the earth, moving around, all different shapes and sizes. But there is a pretty large cluster of ants that are interwoven inside of Isolation.

Tass: OK. I guess I want to ... I don't know which way is easier, if just literally walking down the side of this opening is best, or actually digging. But I just want to find the closest set and try to get close enough to communicate with them.

Rev: Yeah, I think going down the inside, you're able to find a small tunnel that they have dug and get into one of their burrows.

Tass: OK. I want to try this again. To put out that feeling of a description, and see if that's something that seems familiar to any of these.

Rev: So what are you describing? Like, if you're just describing what a human being looks like, that's not going to mean anything to them.

Tass: No. What I have in my head, because, you know, scent keeps coming up. And while I know I can't convey it exactly, like there's no way for me to recreate a smell, I think, you know, I know enough about the difference between what our world smells like, what people smell like there, what that, just, difference of an essence is. That I want to try to convey that, to see if they -- if they, like, get this feeling of, yeah, there's something here that's different than the rest of what we know. That could be entirely nonsense. But ... [Chuckles]

Rev: So you put this sense out to them. And you express, through smell, the different smells of your world. And they don't have any response to it. It is confusing to them. And I think that even, in the moment, the thought occurs to you that he's been here so long, he may not smell like your world anymore.

Tass: That is fair. OK, then I want to shift gears and track back the amount of days. I think by now it would be around six? Between five and six days that he would be here. And

see if that strikes a chord. If like the shifting of the earth, or the creating of one of these cells, or even the opening of one, is something that sounds familiar in that time frame.

Rev: The response that you get is no, because they are all moved every day. And they are moved to the same place -- that there is a big opening at the bottom. And in a order they are moved to the bottom, let out. They can walk around, they eat, and then they go back into their cell and are moved back to their location.

Tass: Oh. And that happens more or less at the same time?

Rev: No. Wait -- what do you mean?

Tass: The like, them being let out to walk around and stuff?

Rev: Like they are not let out together.

Tass: OK, OK.

Rev: Yeah.

Tass: Piss. This is hard. [Laughs]

Rev: Yes.

Tass: I thought jail breaks were easy.

Rev: I know. Jail breaks are not everything that The Shawshank Redemption tells you.

Teej: It made it look so easy. Yeah.

Rev: I mean Tim Robbins is just out, walking around.

All: [Laugh]

Tass: OK. Last ditch, here. But here we go. Before I literally just start digging to look at every one of these.

Jake: There's -- I hope there's more steps than that if this one doesn't pan out.

All: [Laugh]

Tass: Nope. This is it.

Jake: I hope this is not the last one before you just dig.

Tass: This is it. So we have that information now, from what TJ looked up, that they don't take people's stuff, right? That they just kind of throw them in?

Rev: Correct.

Tass: So this whole time, I have been assuming that whoever took him prisoner probably had the device that we communicate with, right?

Rev: Mmhmm.

Tass: And that they just saw it lighting up and were just leaning over to play Simon with it, and like nothing was coming through. But now I have this idea that if they're in that magic sphere, that that's just interfering with any kind of magic effects. Like communicating through magic, which this clearly is. So my thought is maybe he has it, he saw something scrambled coming through, and was trying to communicate anyway. Do ants sense magic? Like, could I try to get this sense out of like, hey, has there been any area where this, like magic essence or pulse has come through any time recently?

Rev: So when you express that to them, you know that they communicate off of the smell. What is the smell you're giving them?

Tass: I guess the item. Like, the one that I have. You know, I mean, it has its own smell of just being this item with these crystals. And I'm just trying to convey the memory of it.

Rev: So as you describe to them this eight-sided crystal, each side being made of a different type of gemstone, all of the ants here say, "Oh, yes. We know where that is."

Tass: OK, awesome. Where?

Rev: And they indicate to you where it is located. And it is closer to the bottom, and about 200 yards out. But they say that they have a tunnel that goes by there, and they could show it to you.

Tass: I would love that.

Rev: So Jake, back at the camp, everyone else is resting, trying to get some sleep. What are you doing? You said that you were going to take a rest. I assume you're not setting up watch because, you know, there's the possibility of one of the patrols coming across you. What are you doing?

Jake: I'm kind of kicked back as if I was, like, sleeping. I'm in shade, maybe in the shade of the wagon or something, like reclining. But I don't have to sleep. So I'm just, like, keeping an ear out. And every now and then, like, I don't really have eyelids. So my eyes are just open all the time, I guess.

Rev: Yeah. Oh, that's ...

Jake: Creepy.

Rev: Horrifying.

Jake: Yeah. But I am effectively still watching and waiting, just in case somebody comes up. But I'm trying to do it from a position that looks like I'm resting with everybody else.

Rev: OK. So roll just a straight Wisdom check.

Jake: OK. Seven.

Rev: So you're sitting here, resting underneath the shade of the wagon. And you hear some creaking from inside the wagon, like it's kind of groaning as it moves around, and you hear Trog get out.

Rev: FORMIAN: [Chitters]

Rev: TROG: [Clicks]

Rev: FORMIAN: [Chitters]

Rev: TROG: [Clicks]

Rev: FORMIAN: [Chitters]

Rev: TROG: Hey, we got a problem over here.

Jake: I'm going to get up and see what he's talking about.

Rev: You come around the corner, and Trog is standing there, and there is a Formian maybe 10 feet away from the wagon. And you've just heard him clicking at it.

Jake: "How did -- how did you notice this before I did?"

Rev: TROG: I got a higher roll.

All: [Laugh]

Rev: TROG: I was just kinda starting to doze off and looking out the back of the wagon, and I saw him crest the hill.

Jake: "Did you just speak to him?"

Rev: TROG: Yeah.

Jake: "What did -- what was the conversation?"

Rev: TROG: He wants to know why we're here.

Jake: I want to look to the Formian and start the spiel. Like, "OK, so I don't know -- do you recognize me? I encountered -- I've encountered some of your guys already. Do ... Are you familiar with me?"

Rev: FORMIAN: [Chitters]

Rev: TROG: Yeah.

Jake: "OK. So you probably know, then, that I was there when one of your exiles was killed by one of your guards. And then he left him there and he took off. So shortly thereafter, that thing? It came back. The exile came back. And I know that, you know, he was supposed to be dead, and that you guys weren't happy with him. So I fought him and I hogtied him over a camel. And I was bringing him back to you guys to figure out what to do with them."

Rev: FORMIAN: [Chitters]

Rev: TROG: He says exiles aren't allowed to come back. That's why they're exiled.

Jake: "Well, but you killed him, and then he came back to life. I figured you guys would want to know about that."

Rev: FORMIAN: [Chitters]

Rev: TROG: Yeah, he says that ... He says that exiles can't come back. That's why they're exiled.

Jake: "Trog, does he seem to understand what I'm saying?"

Rev: TROG: I don't think so. Like, it seems that he's got a real rudimentary understanding of what we're talking about. [Chitters in Formian]

Rev: FORMIAN: [Chitters]

Rev: TROG: Yeah. It doesn't seem to translate for him. I say "come back." He doesn't seem to understand the difference between come back from the dead, versus just come back.

Jake: Oh, man. How can I explain like he's five? How can I kindergarten this explanation up anymore?

Rev: And I think, just for the sake of the image here, this is one of the ones with the spears that you know, from your encountering them, must have a much lower intelligence. Because they can't master the common language, and you've seen other ones do it.

Jake: Mmhmm. "Is there any way that I can talk to one of your superiors about it?"

Rev: FORMIAN: [Chitters]

Rev: TROG: He says he can call a superior to take us in?

Rev: FORMIAN: [Chitters]

Rev: TROG: No, wait ... [Chitters in Formian]

Rev: FORMIAN: [Chitters]

Rev: And he raises his spear, and points it at Frog.

Rev: TROG: Oh, no. He says he's going to call his superior to take us in. Not "and" take us in.

Jake: "He's trying to arrest us?"

Rev: TROG: I think so. Is that, uh ... Is that what we want?

Jake: "I don't think we have another choice."

Rev: TROG: Like, would it be better if we didn't?

Jake: "If we don't, everyone's going to know."

Rev: TROG: Oh, like the whole they communicate with each other and know what the other ones know.

Rev: And he has turned to you as he's saying this. And he turns back, like he's going to say something to the other Formian, and [Rolls] his hand comes out from under his apron, and you see a flash of silver. And at the end of the arc, he's holding one of the really nice cutlery knives you all got him. And the Formian starts clicking and falls to the ground, and you can see that he is cut, in one motion, both its antennas off.

Rev: TROG: That's, uh ... That's how they communicate with each other. So if they haven't sent the signal yet, well, I figure it's better if they don't know we're here, right?

Tass: Damn!

Jake: "Trog, what the fuck, man?"

Rev: TROG: Oh, we had to fight these in a war once.

Jake: "Oh, my god." OK. I want to take this thing hostage. Yeah. I don't want to kill it. Because, I mean, I've already made this argument. Like, they're in their place, doing things their way. And it's not my place to, like, stop that. So I don't want to just kill him. He's in my way, but he's not a bad guy.

Rev: Yeah.

Jake: "Trog, help me tie him up. Like we need to gag and bind this guy, and keep him out of sight."

Rev: TROG: Oh, yeah. All right.

Rev: And he does. He goes over to the cart and pulls some stuff out, and you both tie up this Formian.

Jake: And I want to gather up its antenna, also.

Rev: I think as you pick them up, Trog's like ...

Rev: TROG: What are you going to do with those?

Jake: "I want to like, put them on ice. So that once we get out of this, maybe they can be reattached and he's OK again?"

Rev: TROG: Oh. Yeah, all right. I mean, they're real good.

Tass: [Laughs]

Jake: "Like, for eating?"

Rev: TROG: Yeah, yeah.

Jake: "No. Trog, we're not -- we're not going to eat them, all right? We're gonna --"

Rev: TROG: Why not?

Jake: "Because he's a -- he's a dude. He's a-- he's a guy. We have different ... Clearly, we have different standards for this. Because like you -- if you didn't like me, would you eat me?"

Rev: TROG: Yeah.

Jake: "Yeah. See, I wouldn't eat you."

Rev: TROG: Oh.

Jake: "There's just a ... There's a fundamental difference between us, here. And that's OK. But I would appreciate it if you would kind of like honor my wishes. Would you respect how I feel about it?"

Rev: TROG: Like, where do we draw the line? Like, what thinking things can we eat? What ones can't we?

Jake: "This is a very sticky ..."

Rev: [Laughs]

Jake: "We don't need to do this right now. This is a real rabbit hole that we could go down, and it's going to be the rest of the episode."

All: [Laugh]

Rev: TROG: Let's have a chat about it under the shade of this wagon.

Jake: And the camera pulls away.

Rev: Star wipe.

Jake: Fades to black as we come to a complete understanding of each other.

Rev: So Tass, you have been led through dozens of tiny tunnels that are woven throughout Isolation by these ants. And you come to a dead end, and they tell you that you should dig here and you'll find what you're looking for.

Tass: OK. I'm going to start digging.

Rev: Yeah, I think that to do this by yourself might be a hold.

Tass: Yeah, that makes sense.

Rev: So using one of your hold, it doesn't take long before you have cleared a tunnel in the direction that they've indicated. And as you scrape the last of the sand away, it's almost like you uncover a window. There's just a clear barrier in front of you. And you peer inside, and what you see is this large sphere of slightly illuminated energy. And laying on the ground in the middle of it -- looking exactly like he did in the photo you saw

in Margaret's office and in Everett's helicopter -- clutching the colored gem to his chest, is James Francis Tincher.

SFX:

OUTRO MUSIC

Carolyn: The Critshow is a Critshow Studios production, edited and produced by Brandon Wentz with music by Jake Pierle. You can find more information about us at thecritshowpodcast.com. To keep up to date with upcoming live shows, contests, and other special events, follow us at The Critshow on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. For even more weekly content, join us at Patreon.com/TheCritshow.