

## Chrysalis 1191

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#### Chapter 1191: Old Dogs, Old Tricks pt 3

“Wipe that grin off your face,” Titus muttered.

“What grin?”

“*That* grin. It’s unprofessional. The troops expect a little more decorum from a Consul.”

“I’m not Consul any more,” Minerva responded, “so if I want to express my happiness, then I will.”

Titus rolled his eyes. A small part of him had hoped that the dignity Minerva had cultivated in the highest office in the Legion would have rubbed off on her, but alas, it did not appear to be the case. The moment she was freed from the responsibilities, pomp and ceremony attached to the role, she had reverted back to her more relaxed ways.

Part of him loved her for that, the part that viewed her as his wife and the mother of his children. The part of him famed for its iron disciplinarianism found it endlessly frustrating.

She got away with it due to being one of the best fighters ever to pull on a suit of Legionary armour.

“Fine, just make sure you’re sharp when we get out there,” he growled.

She rolled her eyes.

“You’re telling *me* to make sure I’m sharp? You haven’t sortied in two decades! I was out *yesterday*.”

“That’s why you’ll need to make sure you’re in the right frame of mind to pick up the slack. It’s only the two of us going out, isn’t it?”

“That’s right.”

“I’ll be counting on you to cover for my lapses then. I’ll be in your hands, Commander,” he snapped out a brisk salute and got punched in the arm for his trouble.

“So what else is new?” Minerva grinned. “Go jump into your old bucket of bolts and I’ll meet you out there.”

“Bucket of bolts?” he sputtered.

The *Indomitable* might have seen better days, but it certainly didn’t deserve to be disparaged like that!

“I prefer to call it ‘reliable and battle tested’”, he said sagely, but Minerva wasn’t listening, already having jogged down the armoury toward her own suit of Praetorian armour.

Unlike him, who had requested his old gear, Minerva had been more than happy to jump into a new berserker model. Adaptability was simply another of her strengths.

“Heading out for real this time?” Engineer Griner noted as he started to help Titus prep. A last second check over the armour, ensuring there were no obvious flaws, as well as a quick look over Titus himself.

Exposure to the sort of mana levels that were needed to operate the Praetorian suits could have a devastating effect on a soldier, and the signs could appear out of nowhere.

When everything was cleared, Titus nodded in thanks and climbed up the back of the suit, sliding inside and closing it behind him. After a few moments to acclimate, he knocked on the side with his knuckles and moments later felt the burning cold of liquid mana running down his back and rising from between his toes.

A mix of nerves and anticipation rose in Titus as he felt the power rushing through his veins. Many times during the long years he had spent on the surface, he had yearned for this, but now that the moment was here, he felt a little trepidation. There was no help for it, though, he was committed.

Not for the first time, he wondered why Minerva had used her authority to drag him back down here. Was it really just because she yearned for the good old days, the two of them fighting shoulder to shoulder in the depths? Or was there something else that she wanted?

Titus was under no illusions that he would be able to perform as well as he could in his prime. He may have gained a great deal of experience and levels since the last time he'd fought this deep, but very little of that was relevant to the type of combat engaged down here. The vast majority of the soldiers he met in the mess or passed in the halls were younger and hungrier than he. Deep down, he hoped he would still be useful.

As the liquid mana reached his neck, he knocked on the side and the flow reduced to a trickle and then stopped. After several deep breaths, he pressed his face to the plate and submerged his consciousness into the metal.

The Indomitable came alive as the will of the Commander suffused it. The right hand of the armour reached out to grasp the enormous metal axe standing beside it, Titus' own weapon embedded in a slot on its side.

The demon contained within raged within the larger, Abyssal Iron weapon, thirsting for violence and blood.

With the left, the armour grasped hold of a weighty shield, embossed with filigree and the emblem of the Legion. Titus took a few steps to steady himself, then braced his weapons and moved to exit the armoury.

Again, most of the suits were already out, having sortied several hours ago, and Titus felt glad that he would no longer be taking up space without doing his share of the fighting. When he reached the exit, the port was already down, revealing Minerva's berserker suit waiting for him outside.

"About time," she remarked, twirling her twin blades in her armoured hands. "I was about to go hunting without you."

"Then what would be the point of dragging me down here?" Titus growled as he stomped out of the armoury and down onto the ground. Immediately, his eyes were treated to a sight he'd not seen for many years.

Glittering caverns of sparkling steel, molten iron that ran like rivers, trees of shimmering diamond, and above all, the oppressive *weight* that pressed against him.

“Welcome back to the seventh, darling,” Minerva teased.

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### Chapter 1192: The Ghost Of Ant Past

*Eeeeenid. Eeeeeeeeeeenid!*

“What in blazes is that?!” The former mayor of renewal sat bolt upright in bed.

*Thiiiiis is the ghost of Anthooooonyyyyy. Whoooooaaaaoooooooooaaaa.*

“The what?!” The old woman boggled as she reached to her nightstand to grab her shawl and wrap it around her shoulders.

*Yesssssss. I’m totally deaaaaaaaaaad. Spoooooooooky!*

“Oh pish, you irritating ant,” she scoffed into the empty room. “I’ll believe it when I see your rotting carcass in front of me.”

*But I would get eaaaaaaaten. I mean, I have been eeeeeaten.*

Enid rolled her eyes. As disturbing as it was to have the ‘Great One’s’ voice echoing through her room, or mind, it was hard to tell, he continued to be utterly dreadful at deception of any kind.

“You’ve been eaten, have you? How did you taste?” she asked, folding her thin arms across her chest.

*Delicioooooos. Like a pluuuump roast chiiiiiiicken.*

“How would you know how you tasted?”

*By the look of satiiiiisfaaaaaction on my enemy’s faaaaaaaace!*

“And how would you see that if you were dead?”

*With my ghoooooost vision. Oooooooooooooo!*

He really was determined to try and make this work. Enid brought up a hand to pinch the bridge of her nose. It was bad enough he had to wake her up, but now he was starting to give her a headache.

“Would you stop being ridiculous?” she snapped. “I’m an old woman and I need my rest. If you want to play silly tricks and annoy people, do it to Beyn, he’d probably enjoy it, I simply don’t have the patience.”

A long pause.

[I *could* have been dead, you know. It’s not like I’m immortal or anything.]

Anthony’s voice rang out in her mind in a more normal way now that he had abandoned this ‘ghost’ pretence.

[If you died and came back to life as a ghost, I think the *last* thing you would feel the need to do is haunt *me*,] she thought back at him, but then wondered if he could hear the internal dialogue. There was no sense of a mind bridge connecting them... how was he *doing* this?

[What’s going on, Anthony? How are you talking to me?]

[You probably don't want to know....]

[What? Why wouldn't I want to know? Have you done something to me?]

[No. If I explained it, you would be forced to compare yourself to Beyn, though.]

[Pass.]

[Exactly.]

[So... where are you?] Enid huffed. [I came all the way down to the fourth to try and catch up with you, and I've been waiting for weeks now. Just what have you been up to?]

[Oh, you know. Fighting tier eight demons, battling the wave, training the youth. Not much.]

[Well then, you have plenty of time to come and visit an old woman before she kicks the bucket,] Enid smiled. [When can I expect you?]

[You should have considered being a monster. We don't even age.]

[Oh, that's a tactful thing to say.]

[I know, right? I've been working hard on my tact.]

[I was being sarcastic.]

[Dammit!]

[Anthony...]

[All right, all right. I'm in the nest anyway, so I can be over there pretty quick. See you in an hour.]

[How do you know where I am?]

[Because... reasons.]

[Are you sensing me with mind magic?]

[Sssssssure. Let's go with that.]

[I don't like the sound of that.]

[You shouldn't! See you soon.]

Grumbling to herself, Enid slowly pushed herself out of bed and got dressed, unsure how that giant, idiotic ant was supposed to meet her inside the unfinished guest accommodation of the nest. It was quite understandable that this section of the fortress had been left unfinished, considering the ants hadn't expected anyone to actually come down here and use these rooms for some time yet. She was surprised they'd actually let her come in the first place. Probably, her relatively close relationship with the Eldest was responsible for that. As it stood, she was the only human resident of the fourth stratum who wasn't a dedicated fighter, and she relied on the ants for everything.

She felt bad for the Colony, having to wait on her hand and foot, but they refused any offer of apology. Seniority meant a lot to them, and as old as Enid was, they seemed to think that granted her a level of status.

Half an hour later, a soft knocking came at her door and Enid shuffled toward it, wondering if Anthony had somehow managed to shrink himself into the corridor.

Of course, that wasn't the case. When she opened the door, she found herself greeted by two smaller ants, mages, who soon connected a mind bridge.

[Hello Enid,] they greeted her, [we've been asked to escort you to a chamber so you can speak to the Eldest.]

[Oh you needn't bother,] she told them, [if you tell me where to go, I'll be fine to walk on my own.]

The two ants nodded as if they understood, then swiftly enveloped her with force magic and gently placed her on one of their backs.

[This won't take a moment,] one of them assured her as they began a smooth scuttle down the corridor.

Enid rolled her eyes. She thought if she'd stayed with the humans, they'd start to baby her as she deteriorated. Who could have foreseen that the ants would be even worse!?

At the end of the corridor, which curved around the internal wall that separated the inner and outer fortress, she knew there was a large open chamber, which was where she assumed she would find Anthony. She peered ahead and saw something enormous sway across the entrance, momentarily blocking the light.

[What was that?] she squawked.

[I believe the Eldest has arrived,] one of her escorts informed her.

Just how big had that damned 'Great One' gotten? She was almost afraid to look. Feeling slightly ridiculous, she kept her eyes down as she was carried into the open space, only daring to look up after she had taken several steadying breaths.

She'd heard about tier seven monsters, of course. Her dear husband, Derrion, had seen a few over the course of his career, but never fought one. A level of power that she had hoped to never see.

Now, when she glanced up, she didn't see anything at all. Where had he gone?

She heard a scratching sound overhead....

When she turned her eyes to the ceiling, she saw him, gigantic, clutching to the ceiling like a vision from her nightmares.

[Boo!] Anthony cried in her mind.

Enid clutched at her chest and fell backwards.

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**Chapter 1193: Old People**

[Holy moly, Enid! Don't scare me like that!]

[Don't scare *you* like that?] Enid squawked. [You damn near killed an old woman, you buffoon! I thought my heart was going to stop....]

[I'm not *that* scary looking. Crinis says I'm very handsome.]

[You're enormous! And purple! Your mandibles are the same size as my bed! You knew damn well you were going to take me by surprise hanging off the roof like that.]

The gigantic monster scratched itself on the head with one of those enormous antennae. As thick around as a man's leg and as long as a house was wide. It didn't feel like that long ago since Enid had last seen him, but Anthony had changed an enormous amount.

[Your last evolution really was a big change,] she said. [I can't believe how different you look.]

For want of a better word, the ant *preened*, cleaning his antennae and shifting to bounce the light off his carapace.

[Well. I did put on a lot of size. Gotta boost that Might somehow.]

[It's not just that. Step back a little, let me get a good look at you.]

[What?]

[Go on, back up.]

After a moment of hesitation, Anthony took a few steps back and paused, unsure, while Enid passed her gaze over his new form.

The first thing that stood out was his sheer size, of course. From the most forward tip of his mandibles, to the very back of his abdomen, he was between fifteen and twenty metres long, and possibly eight tall, at her estimate. Each leg was an absurd length, so thick they didn't look like they belonged to an insect at all, though compared to the rest of his body, the proportion was about right.

The carapace was the next greatest change, no longer a shiny diamond coating over the common colours of the Colony, Anthony's shell had transformed into something else altogether. A deep, shimmering purple, somewhat opaque, so that she almost felt as if she could peer into it, darkening to black as it grew thicker. Light seemed to *ripple* as it played across the material that comprised the carapace, as if touching the surface of a lake. His entire body was coated in the stuff, including thinner plating on the legs and his mandibles.

The mandibles themselves were horrifying. As long a large person was tall, they weren't the stubby, somewhat blunt gripping tools she saw on the mages and healers. No, these were deadly weapons and they looked the part. Hooked at the ends, with barbs evenly spaced along the ends, they looked like they could punch through armour just as readily as crunch a boulder.

On top of his head, Anthony's eyes were much the same as they'd always been, though the lenses seemed to have gotten bigger, to the point she could pretty much see the lines that separated them. Some were clearly larger than others too, which was interesting. His antennae were interesting as well.

In the light, she could see they weren't quite as solid as she imagined, as she glimpsed incredibly fine wisps of thread drifting around them.

[I know I'm magnificent, but this is getting awkward. You didn't call me up here just to take a gander at my shininess, did you?]

[Of course not,] the old woman scoffed. [But I've never seen a tier seven monster, let alone a mythic one before. I thought I should take a good look while I had the chance.]

[You aren't dead yet, Enid.]

[No thanks to you!]

[Alright! I'm sorry! Geez. Ah, the healers are here.]

A team of ants scurried into the chamber, five of them, rushing toward her and immediately poking and prodding her gently with their antennae.

[Wha-what is going on? Shoo!]

She tried to wave them away, but they ignored her, and she suspected that she knew why.

[This is your doing, isn't it?] she demanded of the 'Great One'.

[Yep! I thought I should get you checked out by the crew. We can't have you dying on us, Enid. Not for a long time yet.]

[I'm old,] she tried feebly to brush the ants away, [there's no cure for that. Besides, I hardly think it matters if I'm still around at this point. I've resigned as mayor. I think people can get along just fine without me.]

She started as the giant ant loomed close suddenly bringing one massive eye within touching distance.

[What are you doing?]

[I'm looking for some common sense in there. What are you talking about? There's a reason we ants revere the Eldest, and the elders among us, and since we ants do it, it's objectively the correct thing to do! You've got buckets of knowledge, experience and wisdom in that noggin' of yours. In fact, of all the humans we've met, I think you've done more than any other for us. You think all that goes out the window, or that we aren't grateful? You're talking nonsense!]

Diagnosis complete, the ants began to funnel healing magic into her, which was fine. Warm light suffused her body, easing her aches and pains. It was almost enough to make her laugh. She'd heard about rich nobles having themselves healed every morning to extend their lives and reduce the pain of ageing, but never imagined it would apply to her.

[Well, that's very kind,] she said finally. [I still think it's a bit of a waste... there are lots of soldiers out there fighting who could do with healing.]

[And that is why you're important, Enid. I swear you were an ant in a past life.]

She'd been no such thing and was about to say so when the five healers turned around and promptly covered her head to toe in viscous green fluid.

If seeing a tier seven monster had been a remarkable sight, seeing him flop onto his back and kick his six legs in the air while screaming with laughter in her head was quite another experience.

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### **Chapter 1194: A Life of Health**

Mendant and Francis didn't know when the healers had gotten a reputation for being curmudgeons, but they both strongly felt it wasn't deserved. They weren't grumpy! They were providing vital, life-giving services to their siblings! If anything, the accusation they were ill tempered just made them feel like the others were being ungrateful.

"Mendant! Lovely to see you again, how are things down in the tunnels?"

"Francis! Wonderful to see you too. Things are going well, so far. The tunnels are holding steady, despite the number of monsters rising just about every hour. There aren't enough healers to go around, but then again, there never are."

"Very true. Come over here and have a cup of tea."

"Oh? You have tea! How did you manage to get your mandibles on that? I thought we'd run out."

"New shipment came in this morning and I managed to snag a box for myself."

"You sneaky thing! I'm in awe of your talents, as always."

The two sisters settled in around the table and sighed in pleasure as they lowered their heads and began to sip their brew.

"Just the right amount of sugar," Francis sighed, "you really know how to make a good cup."

"If only I had some biscuits, but alas, I couldn't secure any."

"No need to lament, sister of mine. I'll be back in a moment."

Francis rose from her chair and disappeared from the chamber, only to return a moment later with a small platter of biscuits gripped in her mandibles.

"Ah, wonderful!" Mendant exclaimed, her eyes shining in delight. "Just perfect. Thank you, Francis."

"The pleasure is mine, of course."

Once again, the two sisters settled down to enjoy their snacks, only to be rudely interrupted as a messenger scout burst into the room.

"We need healers in the tunnels, immediately!"

"What?!" the two council members snapped.

"What have you done *now*?" Francis groaned.



“What have you done to the healers stationed down there?” Mendant demanded, glaring at the scout.  
“Overwhelmed and overworked *again?*”

The scout was sufficiently braced, having known that this would happen. She employed the expert tactic passed down throughout the messenger corps, ‘divert the blame!’

“Sloan ordered me to send for the two of you,” the scout snapped out a crisp salute, “she requests your presence in the staging chamber immediately.”

Then she turned and dashed for it.

When the two council members arrived beneath the fortress, it was as if they were followed by individual thunderclouds. Other ants had avoided them the whole time they were making their way down, and now that they’d arrived, even the largest soldiers stepped lightly as they stormed toward the generals in the middle of the chamber.

“What’s going on, Sloan?” Francis demanded as the two pushed their way into the circle.

“This had better be good...” Mendant grumbled.

Sloan jumped as the two made themselves known and turned.

“Oh! Right. Thanks for coming, you two, I know that you just finished shifts, so I’m really gratef—”

“Just get on with it,” Mendant cut her off.

“You’re wasting time,” Francis said pointedly.

“Right. Sorry. There’s been a surge of injuries in three of the tunnels and the frontline healers are overwhelmed. The hospital over there is swamped as well.”

“What else is new?”

“Ah. Yes.”

“Any plans to bring through more healers with the next group of reinforcements? Like we’ve been asking? For weeks?”

“Of course we’ve asked for more healers!”

“How many?”

“Two thousand.”

“Out of how many ants?”

“... forty thousand.”

Both healers slumped at the news, but only momentarily. Their internal grumpiness only fuelled them... to be more grumpy!

“You’re going to be reattaching your own legs with sugar syrup if this goes on much longer,” Mendant warned the general. “And it won’t be me who tears them off. If the healers get stretched any thinner, we’d be see-through.”

“We need more soldiers for the front lines—”

“They don’t do any good if they’re in a hospital bed!”

“Come on, Mendant,” Francis said, “they aren’t listening. Let’s get to work.”

“Good thing *some* of us are working,” Mendant grumbled, causing Sloan to twitch in anger.

Wisely, the general kept her pheromone gland shut.

The two healers stuck together and hit the first tunnel, rushing into the forward medical post.

“What have we got?” Francis asked.

The healer in charge didn’t look up from where she was busy closing an ugly wound in a mage’s carapace.

“I’ve got three hundred and forty two broken legs, six hundred and eleven severed legs and almost a thousand severe carapace trauma.”

“Dammit. Quick, Francis, let’s scrub up.”

The two ants dashed to a side area, glowing with enchantments and waved their antennae through the light. Properly cleansed, they moved into the hospital proper and began working.

“Three severed legs? That’s rough, soldier. I’ll kick start the healing process, but it’ll take a week for them to grow back. Make sure you eat Biomass, three times a day.”

“Thank you, healer.”

“What are you doing out there? I swear you’re *trying* to get injured. Look at your carapace! That’s a direct hit! I’ll do my best to close it over, but you’ll be moved to the main hospital for an extended stay. You’re lucky to be alive.”

“Th-thanks, healer.”

The two tore through the hospital in an hour, using their energy as efficiently as they could before they departed, calling for more healers to come off their breaks and get back into the medical chambers before they rushed to the next one.

Everywhere they went was a disaster, the healers pushed to capacity, running out of mana and healing fluid.

By the time they finished with the three tunnels, they were exhausted and slumped their way back to the central chamber to find Sloan had been replaced with Victor.

“Glad you’re here,” Victor said, “we’ve got emergencies in two tunnels. The healers are overwhelmed.”

“I’ll bet,” Francis said sarcastically.

Mendant was about to leap forward and tackle the general with her own mandibles when a runner sped up to them.

“Message from the Eldest, top priority!”

Victor turned around, startled.

“What? What do they want?”

“Message is as follows: ‘bring more healers down, what the heck is wrong with you?’. Message ends.”

Victor nodded, accepting defeat as Francis and Mendant high-fived with their antennae. Good to know someone was looking out for them.

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### **Chapter 1195: War and Peace**

*In times of war, or great peril, many things are put aside. Morality, order, law, hierarchy, respect, such things are often cast away in order to ensure the one thing that matters most to a sapient creature: survival.*

*We are not that way. Our mission is sacrosanct. Our law is woven into the very fibre of our beings. There is no life, without the mission, there is no future, without mission and there will never be a present, without the mission.*

*Though the world should burn around us, we continue to serve.*

*- Excerpt from the ‘Dedications of the Nameless’*

The nameless one executed the eight-fold genuflection and stepped within the Sanctum of Sleep.

To be embraced by the pure darkness was like being held close by the Colony itself. It was home. Guided by scent alone, she manoeuvred through the narrow and twisted corridors until she found who she was looking for.

The Acolytes, still as a sleeping ant, stood in a loose circle around a dim light sunk into the ground. There, they kept their vigil until the second eight of the day had passed.

The nameless one approached and genuflected once more. The Acolyte to her left, the Acolyte of Shadows, signed subtly, and so she approached.

*The Eldest rests, the Acolyte began the ritual greeting.*

*Eight hours a day, the nameless one replied.*

*Greetings, nameless one. You are welcome in the Sanctum.*

*I greet you, Acolyte. What news of the waking world do the shadows hold?*

*It is difficult. The number of transgressions against the Eight number in the hundreds each and every day. Our ability to snatch the heretics from the battlefield is limited, and thus they escape our wrath and righteous cleansing. They do not sleep, their carapaces remain unwaxed, their antennae laden with grit and ungroomed.*

*Disgraceful, the nameless one signed savagely. This cannot be allowed to stand. Give me the order, and I will hunt down those who spit acid in the Eldest’s face!*

*Find your inner rest, nameless one, the Acolyte signed, the order is not served by your anger. Put it to one side, and think on what you can do.*

With difficulty, the nameless one pushed her anger down and sought the icy calm that served her so well in her long service to the Sanctum.

*I apologise for my outburst, she signed, but the Acolyte waved it away.*

*It is nothing, we are all on edge at such rampant and widespread heresy. There are simply too many, and we too few. We will take those we can, and remember those we cannot. They will have their time in the cells, never fear.*

*I hear and obey.*

*The healers are being forced to go without breaks to overcome the shortage in numbers; we shall overlook them today, lest our sisters suffer and die for lack of care. There are several scouts who have spurned the Torpor chambers for several days. Capture them and let them learn the error of their ways.*

*They shall experience luxurious rest and relaxation before this day is done.*

*This is well.*

Her orders received, the nameless one set out through the dark tunnels once again. Narrow passages and secret pathways that wound throughout the great fortress like insidious tendrils of truth. There was no place she could not reach, and her quarry would *not* escape her justice.

Eight hours later, she returned to the Sanctum. Three targets she had been given, and three she had delivered. Those scouts now rested in the cells, their blatant violation of the Eight put to rights. There was satisfaction in that knowledge, a quiet joy that warmed the nameless one from the inside. But overwhelming that sensation, was outrage.

The number of violations continued to climb to catastrophic levels. Members of the Colony turned away from the law of the Eldest at every turn. It burned in her gut, just as it burned inside every other member of the Sanctum she saw.

Hopefully, the upcoming torpor would help relieve her frustration, and cleanse her heart of this rage. She was a creature of the shadows. Patience and cold, ruthless logic were her sharpest weapons.

*Greetings, nameless one, the Acolyte of Rest welcomed her as she entered the grand resting chamber. I hope your work has been fruitful.*

In the centre of the massive room, carved deep into the floor, waited the wheel, separated into eight segments. One portion already stirred as the ants resting there began to wake.

Lethargy already gripped the nameless one as she waited for her chance to shuffle onto the wheel. She needed this rest, as did they all. Service to the mission was always difficult, but in this place, and at this time, it was harder than she could ever recall.

*Please take your deserved rest, the Acolyte signed as they finally began to shuffle past onto the wheel, as the Eldest intended.*

Before the nameless one could find a suitable space to rest, she felt a change in the chamber. There was a shift in the air, a darkening, a deepening, of the mana. Every ant still awake went into high alert, their senses probing as they employed their Skills to meld with the darkness.

Except, to their shock, they found that darkness was already occupied.

Writhing tentacles pushed them back before sprouting from every surface in the chamber, a forest of pitch black limbs that waved and curled furiously through the air.

A visitation from the Shadow! Such a rare and precious occurrence!

As one, the nameless ones genuflected, their hearts leaping with joy as the tentacles, in sets of eight, responded.

Then they began to sign to them.

*My Master's words are being ignored. They should NEVER be ignored. Prepare. We will show them ALL. This entire fortress will be plunged into darkness.*

So saying, the tentacles began to retreat, sliding into the shadow and vanishing once more.

The nameless one felt her heart leap for joy. The outrage had gone on too long, even the Shadow had been pushed to the limit. Finally, something would be done about it. It took her several minutes to calm herself sufficiently to enter torpor, but when she did, for the first time in weeks, she felt truly at peace.

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### **Chapter 1196: War and Peace pt 2**

To plunge an entire fortress into darkness, to commit every ant within to the cells. Such a thing had never been done in the history of the Sanctum, in the history of the Colony.

The nameless one crouched in a deep and dark tunnel, motionless. Soon, another ant approached.

*Greetings, nameless one.*

*I see you, nameless one.*

*What word from the Sanctum?*

*Twenty-four hours until the Fortress goes dark.*

*We're going ahead, then.*

*Of course. The mission stands above all.*

*Agreed.*

After exchanging signs, the two parted ways, the other skittering away to reconnect with her sisters, while the nameless one remained at her post, waiting for the next member of the Sanctum to come down the passage.

Only, the one she found wasn't the one she expected.

From the darkness around her, she noticed a small tentacle grow, extending out to just in front of her eyes. In the presence of the Shadow, the nameless one held herself perfectly still, awash with reverence.

The tiny limb flicked several times in a familiar gesture. *Come this way*, it signed.

The ant was unwilling to leave her post, but unable to deny the summons of the Shadow, she followed. Heading in the direction indicated by the tiny tentacle, she soon found herself running down a labyrinthine passage into the bowels of the nest.

She wondered what the Shadow may be calling on her for, something to do with the coming darkness, she was sure. This was the first time the Shadow had taken such a direct hand in the affairs of the Sanctum, who knew what was going on in the mind of the Guardian?

One turn followed another, as she crawled, until finally she emerged, pushing herself out into the light. She found herself in a large, open chamber, with one wide open entrance on the opposite side from where she emerged. Resting inside the chamber was the largest ant in the Colony.

“Eldest?” the nameless one said in shock.

The giant ant didn’t turn around to face her, remaining side on and blocking sight from the entrance to the nameless one, but she felt a strange power seize hold of the area around her, pressing her down and wiping her scent away.

From the Eldest’s carapace, the Shadow emerged, extending her limbs outward toward the smaller ant.

*Make no scent*, she signed, *my Master is not tied to the Sanctum directly, and never will be*.

The nameless one recovered her poise and ducked her head in ascent. Of course, how foolish of her! She wasn’t a fresh recruit any longer, she knew how important it was to conceal all traces. Pheromone traces can remain for days, weeks!

*I am here to serve*, the nameless one signed.

The great ant shifted imperceptibly, and the tentacles continued to sign.

*My Master is aware of all that takes place within the nest, including the activities of the Sanctum. Master shares your frustration. The carelessness, the recklessness, the selfishness. Generals go without sleep, putting their troops at risk, medics are pushed to the brink, scouts run ragged, core shapers left fighting for days on end. The entire fortress is on the verge of collapse.*

The nameless one felt the dull anger that had been burning in her thorax roar back to life. Yes. YES. The Colony spat acid on the wisdom of the Eldest, turning their eyes away from the instruction that had served them so well in the past. All within the Sanctum felt it, and now she knew the Eldest felt it too.

She was deeply moved.

*The Sanctum must be prepared*, the Shadow signed, *it will be a monumental task to serve so many guests at once, but my Master has confidence in you. It is the wish of my Master that you focus your energies on this task specifically. Leave all concerns regarding the defence of the nest to us.*

The nameless one stiffened in shock.

*Will the Eldest defend the entire fortress alone?*

The Shadow bristled, and the nameless one quickly added: *with the help of the three guardians, of course.*

The tentacles writhed for a moment before they settled once more.

*How we defend the fortress is not something you need to worry about. Rest assured that it will be. Now I must ask that you return to the Sanctum and pass on this message.*

The nameless one bowed low, and the tentacles dipped to her in kind. Even the antennae of the Eldest, to all appearances still at rest, dipped a fraction lower toward her. Filled with awe, the nameless one rushed back to the Sanctum, eager to pass on the momentous news.

What she had to say would shake the Sanctum down to its foundations!

~~~

Crisis watched as the little ant scurried away, vanishing into the dark, hidden tunnels of the Sanctum, carrying work of their Eldest's blessing. She was curious why her Master had gotten involved in this situation. He knew about the Sanctum, naturally, it was something she had helped put in motion, but never before had her Master bothered to involve himself.

[Master?] she asked.

[Yyyyes, Crisis?] came the sleepy reply.

[I just wanted to ask... why you wanted to get involved? Are you really that annoyed at the ants for refusing to sleep like you told them to?]

The Master's siblings, ignoring the instructions passed down to them by their gracious senior, filled *her* with undying fury and endless rage, but she knew it wasn't like that for him. Much too lenient.

The giant ant stretched out those long, segmented legs before relaxing again.

[Well, the fighting is going okay without me, Solant is doing well with her training and you three are doing great getting levels... so I'm getting a bit bored. And I have to say,] he chuckled, [that *this*, is going to be HILARIOUS.]

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 1197: War and Peace pt 3**

Something was off, Sloan could feel it.

"What word from the walls?" she demanded of her scout coordinator.

The distinguished scout, Postant, had been working with her for months, and responded immediately to the sudden demand.

"Holding firm at last report."

"And the tunnels?"

“Same. There’s been no significant change.”

“That can’t be right. I want a fresh runner sent topside immediately. There’s something going on around here, I can feel it in my antennae.”

“As you wish, general,” said Postant before she turned to direct her scouts.

But as information continued to trickle in, everything seemed... fine. The wave was being held off pretty well all around the fortress. Ants were fighting hard, gaining Levels, training their Skills, and a constant stream of Biomass and cores flowed into the nest, precious resources needed to grow the Colony. Everything was going so well, yet she couldn’t help but feel that something terrible was not only about to happen, but possibly already had.

The runners came back soon after, no significant changes, everything was holding steady. In fact, things were probably a little better than they’d been the day before.

“Better?” Sloan couldn’t believe it. “How are things better?”

“I’m not sure,” Postant replied after conferring with her troops. “The general feeling is that the defence is holding firmer than previously, but nobody has really been able to pin down a reason why.”

Sloan thought back. She’d been on the job since yesterday, could she recall any significant changes since then? Directing the flow of the defence in the tunnels had been her sole responsibility in all that time, so if anyone had noticed a difference, it should have been her!

The general pondered the question.

“Let me see the latest troop report,” she said suddenly.

Other generals, members of her staff, quickly pulled out the stone tablet marked with dense and detailed pheromones, rows and numbers that described the numbers of available troops. There *was* a change! The number had gone *up*.

“Have the reinforcements arrived?” she asked as she continued to trace her antenna over the tablet.

“Not yet, general. They aren’t scheduled to arrive for another three days.”

And they were mostly healers anyway. Sloan understood what the Eldest wanted, but she would have *really* preferred more fighting ants instead. Still, she felt bad that Mendant and Francis hadn’t been listened to, to the extent that the Eldest had to intervene on their behalf.

No, the additional numbers weren’t as significant as a full reinforcement, but were significant enough to have made a difference. Where had they come from, though? A wave of freshly healed troops from the hospital? Unlikely.

Some sort of shifting error putting more ants on the frontlines than there should be? Even more unlikely.

“When did we start our shift, Postant?” Sloan asked, getting frustrated.

“Thirty-six hours ago, general,” came the immediate reply.



Over those thirty-six hours, how had she not noted such a significant shift? It was maddening!

Sloan froze, her mind halting in its tracks.

“What... did you say?” she said, slowly.

Postant shifted.

“Thirty-six hours, general.”

That... shouldn't be the case. It *couldn't* be the case.

“Light the torches!” she cried, and the generals sprung into action, igniting the braziers they kept close to hand for emergencies such as this.

In an instant, flames crackled all around them, driving the shadows away as every ant eyed even the tiniest sliver of darkness warily.

“We need to finish up soon,” she told everyone. “We've gone too long without resting.”

They all nodded, knowing exactly what she was thinking. Even in wartime, it wasn't good to push your limits too far. And by limits, she meant... *their* patience.

She must have come extremely close to disaster. It was so easy to let time slip by during such pressure-filled situations as these. She brushed her antennae through her elbow joints, cleaning them, to help relieve her stress. She was safe from their clutches for the moment. As long as she acted fast, she could be back in command soon enough.

In fact... it was a little odd that they hadn't come for her already. Thirty-six hours was a lot... not something they would normally tolerate.

“Let me see that tablet again,” she requested, taking hold of it in her mandibles once more and pouring through the numbers.

There *was* a reason there were more ants in the fight. The listing, which usually read *Casualties of rest*, was missing entirely.

*They*... hadn't taken a single ant... for a full day.

Sloan's mandibles began to tremble and the tablet fell from her grasp to clatter against the stone floor of the chamber. Her staff shifted, surprised to see her so clumsy.

“Is everything alright, general?” Postant asked, looking concerned. “I've sent messages to bring our replacements in, we'll be done within the hour.”

“No,” Sloan whispered. “It's too late for that.”

Her eyes darted around the chamber. Bright burning fire surrounded her in all directions, but suddenly, she knew it wasn't enough. Every hint of shadow loomed like an impenetrable ocean of darkness. She could almost *hear* the malicious gnashing of mandibles, coming from some dark space just at the corner of her eye.

"I-I need runners sent immediately," she rounded on Postant. "Get in touch with Victor, let her know that *they* haven't taken anyone in an entire day. A full day, do you understand? They're planning something. Something *big*. We have to be ready!"

*Ohhhhhhhh. It's FAR too late for that. Heretic.*

*Heresy. Heresy. Heresy. Heresy.*

*Unbeliever. Unbeliever. Unbeliever.*

Whispers, from a realm of madness the waking could never see, surrounded Sloan in an instant.

"Stoke the fires!" she demanded.

But that, too, was too late. One moment, the braziers burned brightly, the next, they were gone. The fires sputtered and died, robbing the huddled ants of their soothing light.

Just like that, shadows abounded.

Sloan trembled. She didn't want to go out like this, not now! There was a war to fight, things to do! She shivered in fear at the thought of what may await her. The comfortable bed, the carapace wax and shine, the complimentary tea! She couldn't endure it again!

"We're going!" she protested to nobody, "we're going to rest soon! An hour is all we need!"

The whole staff froze in place as they realised exactly who she was talking to.

*Too late.*

*Late.*

*Late.*

*Late.*

*Late.*

*Too late for ALL of you.*

*Late.*

*Late.*

*Late.*

*Late.*

*Prepare yourself, for the coming darkness.*

Sloan's shadow began to expand and she knew it was over, knew she was to be taken, but to her shock, she wasn't. Not immediately.

The shadow grew, and grew, wider and wider, until it began to expand *upwards*, rising from the floor like a pillar of pure void. Higher and higher it rose, until all activity in the chamber grew to a halt as all the ants saw it, recognised it, and trembled in fear.

*You have gone too far, the whispers continued, we will no longer tolerate your disrespect to the commands of the Eldest.*

“We’re fighting a war!” Sloan roared up at the shadow, but she knew they wouldn’t listen.

*They never listened.*

The pillar of darkness trembled for a moment, then lost its shape, flowing into a liquid that exploded outwards, expanding into a tidal wave that fell down upon them like a collapsing mountain.

Sloan could see them now, their mandibles gnashing and eyes burning with fervour and glee. Hidden inside the shadow, they came for her, and for all of them.

Eldest have mercy.

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 1198: War and Peace pt 4**

“We’re under attack!” Victor roared!

The generals looked confused. They were fighting a wave... of course they were under attack!

“Not like that!” she grouched. “There’s trouble inside the fortress!”

Messengers had gone missing. Reports weren’t coming back. Entire hospitals had gone dark. Several shifts hadn’t reported to the front over the last hour. It all pointed to one thing.

“There’s an enemy inside the nest,” Victor declared, a grim light gleaming in her eyes. “We need to rally the troops and find out what’s going on. If we can reach the Eldest and bring them into the battle, then there’s no opponent we can’t beat.”

The hundreds of ants clustered around her in the command post appeared shaken, but determined. How the fortress could have been infiltrated without the Colony knowing, it was almost unthinkable. Through the layers of fortified walls, the enchantments, the endless patrols, the hundreds and thousands of ants, the mages on constant alert!

But that didn’t matter now. No matter how’d they’d gotten in, if Victor said they were under attack, then they were.

“Quickly, to me!” she ordered.

The ants rallied bravely and rushed from the chamber, forming into ranks as naturally as breathing.

“Send runners to the walls, let them know what’s happening. They need to hold at all costs!”

Several scouts dashed away.

In the corridors, they found Advant, leading a charge of her own.

“Sister, what’s going on?” demanded the big soldier. “There’s something very wrong inside the nest!”

“I believe we’re under attack,” Victor replied grimly, her mandibles grinding together. “Come with me, we need to get a hold of this quickly and find the Eldest!”

They hadn't gone far when the scouts returned from the walls, frazzled after their lightning fast run.

"The guardians have reported to the walls!" they reported. "The three of them are spread around the fortress and are holding off the wave!"

"Finally, some good news," Victor said, relieved. "Tell the troops to fall back and join us here. If the guardians can give us some breathing room, we can right the situation inside the nest and then get back to the defence before things are too far gone."

"That sounds good, but we need to move fast," Advant agreed. "I'll take these ants and go ahead, you gather up everyone from the walls and follow after."

"Sounds good."

In short order, the soldier had the ranks organised and set off toward the central shaft.

Victor watched as they set off, and then waited. Every moment that passed felt like a lifetime, but she knew Advant was capable, more than capable, of dealing with whatever she found. Soon, the troops from the walls began to trickle in. A few hundred at first, but then in their thousands. Weary, injured, and still recovering from their heroics on the walls, they were more than a little confused at being pulled from the fight ahead of schedule.

Getting them organised and moving was no small task, but it was exactly this kind of situation that Victor specialised in.

"Generals to me! Medics, take everyone who is too injured to fight into the central planning chamber and establish an emergency hospital there. I want an assessment checkpoint set up for every ant to move through as they come from the walls. Scout leaders to me. Stick to your squads. Move, move, move!"

In a shockingly short amount of time, she had divided the fighting fit ants into four columns and had them advancing towards the shaft.

It had been common design practice for the Colony, going back to before their rebirth as Formica Sapiens, to construct their nests with a main, vertical shaft connecting all levels in the nest.

With the design of this fortress, that had changed. The carvers had decided that having a single shaft that gave access to the entire nest was too risky, and had instead broken it into segments. Although each segment was close to the previous one, it created a chokepoint that the Colony could defend should an enemy invade.

Naturally, taking control of as much of the central shaft as possible was the first priority on Victor's plan of attack.

"Follow me! Forward, into the breach!" she called, leading her troops from the front and straight down into the shaft.

The scent trails left behind by Advant and her troops were thick in the air, they'd already been here and gone ahead. She *had* to catch up quickly!

Things were quiet, eerily so, inside the vertical tunnel. Normally, the veritable heart of the fortress, filled with ants rushing up and down, now it was deserted. Victor saw nothing but a blank tunnel ahead of her, whilst behind, thousands of troops marched in her wake.

Whatever had happened to the nest, whoever had done this, they would *pay*.

They reached the bottom of the shaft without incident and exited, moving down the wide tunnel that led to the next segment of the shaft. When they reached it, Victor knew immediately that something was very wrong. Instead of the huge, arterial path that connected the depths of the nest to the peaks, she saw... nothing.

Inside was simply... darkness.

Like a fog or mist, the inky black void rippled and shifted, occasionally sending wisps or tendrils into the air that curled in on themselves before they dissipated like smoke, or fell back down to merge with the shadows below. It was almost as if they were staring into the deepest and darkest depths of the shadow sea.

Was this an invasion by monsters of the second stratum? That made no sense!

Whatever the case may be, the scent trails of Advant and her leading party plunged directly into the abyss, vanishing at the edge of the pool. Victor was hesitant. The Eldest was further down, and if she could connect with the troops fighting in the depths, they'd have the numbers necessary to storm the rest of the fortress. She *had* to go down.

"We're going in, everyone. Pass the word back, get in formations. I want fire mages up front in every squad, burning a bright flame. We need all the light we can get."

"General, should we fire down into... that?"

She shook her head.

"We can't take the risk, we might be firing into the backs of our own sisters. We have to go in blind and be prepared for anything. There's no time to waste."

She waited for precisely one minute as the changes she demanded rippled through the ranks and then plunged forward herself. The darkness almost seemed to rise up to welcome her inside, but she didn't hesitate. The moment she stepped down the wall of the shaft, her vision was gone, but nevertheless she continued forward, her antennae sweeping the ground before her.

The flames of the mages helped a little, but not much. The black mist seemed to smother the lights, thickening, crowding close around the fire until they were barely there, illuminating a scant few metres around them, no matter how much mana was poured in.

Sound was muted too, Victor almost couldn't hear her own claws on the stone as she descended, nor those of the thousands of ants following behind her. It was almost as if she were alone there, in the dark.

Despite the illusion of isolation, she knew that she wasn't alone, she had the scent trail of her sister, Advant, under her antennae the whole time.

“Nothing sighted, moving forward. Nothing sighted, moving forward. Darkness is definitely mana based, some sort of blinding attack? Nothing sighted, moving forward. Stay together, team!”

The constant stream of orders and observations was a comfort to Victor as she followed the trail put down by her sister.

“No variation in the density of the shadows. No gaps either. Hopefully not all of the shaft segments are obscured in this way. It’s so dark in here I feel like I’m in torpor. Nothing sighted, moving forward. Keep the formation tight on the left flank! I can *feel* you shifting over there, keep an antenna on the ant to your right! Don’t fall asleep on us, stay alert!”

Professional and brave as always.

“Don’t fall asleep! Nothing sighted, moving forward.... Nothing sighted, moving forward.... Don’t... fall asleep! Keep the formation! Nothing sighted... moving... forward.... Feeling... so *tired*. Stay with me... everyone. Nothing... sleeping... moving... sleepward.... So... *dark.... Sleepy.... Tired.... Torpor.... Is.... calling.... Isn’t it.... Victor?*”

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 1199: War and Peace pt 5**

Solant knew, of course she knew, how could she not? But the task before her didn’t change, no matter what was going on behind her back.

“Focus your fire forwards! Don’t pay any attention to what’s going on behind! Hold the line!”

The fighting was still intense, though it had slackened, thankfully.

“Are you sure, general? Things are... rather dire back there.”

“Leonidant, I don’t care if the fortress collapses behind us, we *will* achieve victory here, in *this* tunnel, at *this* chokepoint!”

“But the fortress may well have fallen behind us, Solant! We don’t know what’s going on back there!”

For over an hour, reports had flooded to those fighting on the front that any and all communication with the central planning chamber had been lost. The fighters here in the tunnel had been cut off from central command completely.

That didn’t bother Solant so much, she had a job to do, as did every other ant here, and if there was a problem in the nest, that was for others to deal with. The Eldest was back there, for The Queen’s sake! If the Eldest couldn’t deal with it, she assuredly couldn’t.

And so, the fight had gone on.

Then the reports had changed. Not only was the central command chamber enshrouded in darkness, but the shadows were *advancing* down the tunnels.

Solant had glared at the scout and told her to get back to fighting.

“Rotate!” she demanded, and then twitched when she realised that the next line of soldiers was gone. There *was* no one to rotate forward.

Instead, all that lay behind her was a black wall of shifting shadows.

“Well... that’s not ideal,” she muttered.

“Yeah, don’t stress about it,” came a familiar scent, followed by the giant head of the Eldest. “You did a good job holding the line. Well done.”

She was pleased for the compliment, but felt it wasn’t deserved.

“We only held because the number of monsters encroaching on our position diminished significantly. If it weren’t for that, we would have... lost.”

The Eldest tapped her on the head with an antenna.

“Oi. Don’t go getting into your head or anything. I’m the one who arranged *that*,” the Eldest pointed a leg at the darkness behind them, “and I’m also the one who arranged *that*,” next they pointed a leg forward into the tunnel.

“I’m... not sure what you mean.”

“Give it a second, they’ll be here in a minute.”

The two waited, the Eldest swatting the occasional monster that came down the tunnel as the remaining troops, those *not* swallowed by the void, rested and healed themselves.

Soon enough, they saw a different type of movement down the tunnel, as a mix of large and small tree-people came into sight. The bruan’chii?

“I called in a favour from that stupid tree to cover the nest for us while everyone catches up on their sleep,” the Eldest said, waving at the newcomers.

A large specimen of a tree waved back before they turned and settled in to defend the tunnel.

“Really nice to have a group like them on our side, even if their mother is a bit of a jerk. Alright, they’ll take things from here, you lot can come with me.”

“What? Where are we going, Eldest?” Leonidant asked, a little worried.

“What do you mean? Straight into this infinite void of darkness and shadow, of course!”

“What?!”

“Relax already. You guys have been diligent in making sure you hit your rest periods on time, right?”

“Of course,” Solant replied, serious. “We were taught to always get proper rest in the Antcademy.”

“And it’s a good idea,” the Eldest approved, “if you don’t get enough rest, if you don’t take proper care of yourself, then your work gets sloppy and all the ants around have to pick up the slack. Extra work for everyone. When too many ants are working exhausted, the mistakes snowball and we end up right in the... plops, I suppose.”

In short order, the giant ant had rounded everyone up and cheerfully led them into the gently shifting void.

“Now, unlike you well behaved members of the Colony, there are those who routinely push the limits, who skip a torpor period here and there, or go for multiple days without resting. When that happens, someone needs to *make* them see the error of their ways and ensure they get a good night's sleep.”

“Is that what's happening here?” Solant asked shrewdly.

The Eldest laughed.

“Yes indeed. The entire fortress is getting put into torpor. Way too many ants not doing the right thing. The whole place could have collapsed around us.”

They continued to travel through the darkness, huddled together around the hulking form of the Eldest in their midst. Then, suddenly, shockingly, they were through it, emerging out the other side into the central planning chamber, freed from the shadows.

Though not entirely, tendrils of the dark mist still curled and drifted through the air, smothering the light and deepening the shade. Inside, Solant saw something unbelievable taking place. Ants were everywhere, crawling over every surface, on the floor, on the walls, but even more than those ants who were moving, were those who were not.

Row, upon row, upon row of neat beds formed of shaped stone filled the space, each occupied by a member of the Colony, adrift in torpor. Thousands upon thousands of them. As they drew closer, Solant could see that each was tucked in with a thick layer of cloth, a small... toy or doll tucked in under one of their legs.

Throughout the rows, teams of ants moved industriously, carrying containers in their mandibles. When they reached a new bed, they would carefully uncover the ant within and apply the contents of their containers to special cloths that they then rubbed over the slumbering ant's carapace, leaving it gleaming. Then another ant, a carver, would go over the cleaned area with another specialised material, running it back and forth with their front two legs, until the carapace practically shone.

The decadence... the *luxury* of it all. How terrible. She shuddered.

The Eldest, of course, noticed her reaction.

“That's right,” the giant ant observed gleefully, “if you don't take your rest on time, then you get the full treatment. So much time and effort spent rejuvenating you. How incredibly selfish!”

The ants continued to work without making a sound or a scent, collecting slumbering members of the Colony, tucking them into beds, cleaning them, grooming them.

“Is this happening all over the fortress?” Solant asked, shocked.

“Of course. *Everyone* is getting the treatment.”

“What about them?” Solant wondered, indicating those who were working.

“*They* never miss a rest shift. Not even once.”

That was... interesting.

“But who are they?” she wondered.



“Oh, them? Could be anyone, any member of the Colony can be one of them. One of your broodmates is probably one of them, working in the shadows when they aren’t by your side.”

“That’s not possible,” Solant insisted, “we would not hide something like this from each other.”

The Eldest clacked their mandibles together and laughed.

“Oh, is that right? You hear that, Leonidant?”

The scout shifted uncomfortably.

“Anyone can be one of *them*,” the Eldest went on, not letting Solant question her sister. “Anyone at all. Now, I think we’ve arrived.”

“Arrived where?” Solant asked, but when she looked around, she saw what they meant.

A long row of beds. Empty beds.

“You can hop in yourselves, or, if you prefer, you can enjoy the full experience.”

“Wait. We haven’t missed any torpor,” Solant pointed out, “why do we need to rest?”

“The whole fortress is getting a snooze,” the Eldest insisted, “you are most certainly no exception. You’ve been given special treatment just by seeing all of this,” the big ant waved their antennae around, “most people don’t get a glimpse.”

“And what do you mean by the full experience?”

“Well, if you’re asking about it, you may as well experience it. I’ll even spice it up for you. Get ‘em, Crinis.”

The world was suddenly nothing but darkness, madness and mouths.

Then. Sleep.

## Chrysalis

### **Chapter 1200: The Power of Faith**

*Church of the New Path.*

*Faith of the Great One.*

*The Colony Way.*

*The faith that sprang up around the seemingly miraculous advent of the Colony came to be known by many names. I want to emphasise I’m not being dismissive by describing the existence of the Colony as ‘seemingly miraculous’. A sapient monster collective that chose to cooperate with other species rather than consume them is as close to a miracle as this non-believing academic can bring themselves to acknowledge.*

*For the Colony were a true monster species, unlike the bruan’chii, born from a Queen who spawned in the Dungeon and laid eggs that matured into monsters themselves. At no point in the cycle were they*

*ever acknowledged as anything but monsters by the System, as far as I've been able to determine anyway.*

*This 'miracle', this incredibly unlikely occurrence, was taken by many of the early believers to be a sign of divine providence, that the Dungeon had birthed a saviour to protect them in their darkest hour. Had this belief been held exclusively by a few farmers and craftspeople, perhaps nothing would have come of it, but one of those early faithful was a Priest of the Path, named Beyn, who would eventually prove himself to be one of the most powerful religious figures of the age, second only to the entity he worshipped.*

*- Excerpt from 'New Faith', by Siemon.*

Fervour burned in the eyes of the priest, and he was pleased to see it reflected back at him in the gaze of his audience. He could almost feel their blazing faith like heat against his skin, hot enough to burn him to ash.

Still not hot enough. Until his soul itself was melted to nothing, he would never be satisfied.

"Remain strong in the faith," he demanded of his audience, his one hand stretching forward grandly, "and it will reward you. All of our lives have been transformed by the Great One, by the New Path, but they can change even further, *spiritually*, but only if you let them. This is a new world that we live in, separated from the before. Don't be like me, it took time for me to recognise what had changed, and something dramatic was required to wake me up."

He waved the stump of his missing arm at them and their gaze flicked to it and back to him.

"Embrace the new world," he urged them, "and it will embrace you back. Embrace the Colony, and they will be there to support you. Embrace the Great One, and you will become a part of them, and they will always be with you."

Beyn didn't know when or why that last part had become a regular part of his sermons, but it *felt* right to him, in a way he couldn't explain. He *knew* that the Great One was watching over him, always. This knowledge was embedded in him as deeply as he knew his own name.

"We thank you for your words, High Priest," a member of the congregation bowed to him, but Beyn brought up his hand.

"Please, I do not like to be called High Priest. Call me Beyn, or Priest Beyn, if you must."

The ants did not lift themselves up above others. If one general was higher in the hierarchy than another, did they look down on the other? No. Did they have a larger, more fancy title than the other? Also no. They were both generals, who did the best they could in the work that they did.

"I am a priest, no more important than any other priest. We work together, rise together and fall together."

The audience bowed once more, many exclaimed at how humble he was, how dedicated to the faith. At this, Beyn frowned.

"Please," he said to them, "do not elevate me, for that is not our way, that is not who we aspire to be. The Great One is watching over me, watching over all of us. I simply do my best to live in the way we are

supposed to live, to walk the Path we have been shown. If we stay steady to the Path, we will walk from the darkness and into the light.”

Finally, they appeared to get it and he smiled upon them as the congregation filed out of the chapel in which he was preaching. When he was alone once more, he breathed a deep sigh of satisfaction. Bringing enlightenment to the people was his greatest joy, leading the lost, until they became found. Even after the people were brought into the faith, still they needed guidance, leadership, and spiritual nourishment. All of this, he was only too happy to provide.

He was about to leave himself, when he heard something impossible, something unbelievable, something *miraculous*.

*Not a bad sentiment there, Beyn, very antish. Looks like you actually started teaching something worthwhile. Anyway... when the heck did you figure out I could hear you?*

As the words of the Great One rang out in his mind, Beyn experienced a kaleidoscope of powerful emotions that crashed through him like the waves of a storming ocean. His mouth moved, but no sound came out. His ears rang, but he heard nothing. His body twitched, but he could not take a step. Unable to process, he simply stood, jerking uncontrollably, foam dripping down his chin, his eyes staring but seeing nothing.

*You didn't actually know, did you?*

Beyn could not reply. His eyes rolled up into his head, and he collapsed.

*Ahhhhh nards. This is going to come back and bite me RIGHT in the thorax.*