

Chrysalis 1201

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Chapter 1201: Crusade

“What’s going on?” Jern asked, confused.

“Something’s happening in town, I’ve no idea what, though. People just started running!”

That did indeed seem to be the case. Wherever Jern looked, people were poking their heads out of their houses and wandering toward the centre of town, or jogging down the streets after coming from the fields.

“Come quickly!” he heard a voice calling from somewhere closer to the square. “There’s big news to hear! Come to the cathedral!”

“To the cathedral?” Jern asked, confused. “What’s going on over there?”

His friend, Alis, stared at him as if he were being stupid.

“If you want to find out, then we need to go to the cathedral, right?”

“Good point.”

Feeling slightly foolish, he put down his shovel and scratched at his cheek awkwardly.

“Soooo, you want to come with?”

Alis shook her head, sending her blazing red hair swaying down her back.

“Of course I want to find out, I’m only standing around here because I’m waiting for you! Hurry up!”

“Oh,” Jern chuckled, trying to hide his embarrassment as he stepped out of the stables and into the street, being careful to avoid running into anyone. “I’m ready, let’s go.”

The two joined the flowing crowd of people as they made their way toward the largest building in Renewal. The cathedral towered over the burgeoning city; its tall, lavish spires and elaborate carved arches were an awe-inspiring sight, one that Jern frequently found himself gazing at, lost in the endlessly complex lines of the stone. In front of the cathedral, filling the town square, the crowd was abuzz with energy, murmuring and calling to one another, a hundred different conversations fusing into one, persistent roar.

“I feel like everyone in town is here,” Jern mumbled, uncomfortable.

He didn’t like being in crowds.

“Can you see what’s happening in front of the cathedral?” Alis demanded.

“Uhhh, yes? Can’t you?”

Alis glared and kicked him in the shin.

“No! I’m not a *giant*, like you!”

Jern decided not to point out that, even when she wasn't comparing herself to him, she was still considered small.

"Sorry. Yes, I can see. There's a gathering of priests over there. I think the head priest too? And a few ants. More than usual, actually."

His friend made a frustrated noise before she started poking him in the side.

"Lift me up," she demanded, "I want to see."

Jern looked around uncomfortably.

"I don't mind," he said, "but we need to move to the side. I don't want to block people's view."

"Ugh. Fine."

With him leading the way, it wasn't hard to make a path to the edge of the crowd. Once he was confident they wouldn't be disrupting anyone, he reached down and grabbed Alis by the waist, effortlessly lifting her up onto his shoulder.

"Are you steady?"

"Of course I am. Thanks."

She steadied herself with a hand on his head, idly twining her fingers through his hair as she peered intently in all directions, absorbing everything she saw.

"There's a *lot* of mages here," she observed, "and soldiers. That's unusual. There's even a few generals *and* carvers! Why on Pangera would the Colony send them over here?"

"You can tell the difference?" Jern asked.

Alis rolled her eyes.

"Of course, they all look completely different. Look at that one, you see the different orientation of the front pair of legs?"

"Yes?" he replied doubtfully.

"That's a carver. The big ones are soldiers, that's easy, the generals are smaller than them, but bigger than the mages, and they have larger mandibles. The mages can be a little tricky to work out, but they always seem the most curious, and they move around the most. If they're connected to a human with a mind bridge, they usually try and turn their body to face them directly, which is a giveaway. See! That one over there is doing it."

"You really know a lot about the ants, Alis."

She rapped him on the head with her left hand.

"Who *wouldn't* want to learn about the ants? They're our saviours! Most of our town was built thanks to them. And they're so *interesting*."

"If you say so," he said, idly scratching at his leg.

The ants were fine. As far as Jern was concerned, they were regular people who lived and worked in Renewal just like the rest of them. Except they had more legs. He knew about the nests and that there was Dungeon stuff and all that, lower down, but he'd never needed to worry about that. He cleaned stables for a living.

"Wait, something's happening," Alis said, leaning forward on his shoulder, excited.

Jern brought his right hand up, just in case she fell, as he tried to spot what she'd seen. There was a lot of movement amongst the priests, until finally, one of them stepped forward.

"I thank you for gathering so quickly, my fellow citizens of Renewal. And I apologise humbly for interrupting your day, but this news could not wait for the holy day, or be delivered in the next sermon."

"Oh, that's Beyn," Jern nodded to himself. He recognised the voice.

"Shhh!" Alis hissed, rapping him on the head again.

That seemed unnecessary to Jern, since Beyn was so good at talking in public his words felt like they flew into your ears no matter what, but he held his peace.

"I HAVE BEEN WITNESS TO DIVINE INTERVENTION!" the priest suddenly roared, his words rolling through the crowd like thunder. Jern could visibly see people blown back by the volume.

He loved a good speech from Beyn. They were never dull.

"THE GREAT ONE HAS SPOKEN TO ME DIRECTLY. WHISPERED WORDS OF GODLY WISDOM DIRECTLY INTO MY HEART!"

This got a strong reaction from the crowd, and even Alis was bouncing up and down on his shoulder.

"Careful," he warned her, but she ignored him.

"Yes, my people! No pheromones were involved, no mind-bridge. I wasn't even in the same stratum as the Great One, and yet, they spoke to me, assured me that they were looking over me."

The priest was openly weeping now, but there wasn't the slightest quaver in his powerful voice.

"I SAY THIS NOT TO ELEVATE MYSELF, BUT TO INFORM YOU OF THE REVELATION! I believe our faith has been sufficient, our *belief* has been abundant, and this has borne incredible fruit."

A dramatic pause. Jern *loved* a good dramatic pause and Beyn was the master.

"THE GREAT ONE IS ASCENDING! SOON, THEY WILL ACHIEVE A HIGHER PLANE OF EXISTENCE, AND I CALL UPON ALL WHO ARE WILLING TO JOIN ME IN A GREAT PILGRIMAGE."

He took a deep breath, calming himself.

"The journey will be long, and it will be difficult. There is no shame in remaining aboveground, but for those who are able, those who are deep in faith, join me. We will march to every city within the lands of the Colony, and to some who aren't, as we descend through the Dungeon and present ourselves before the Great One. JOIN ME! JOIN ME, AND TRANSFORM YOURSELVES!"

The crowd leapt and screamed in approbation, and Alis was so excited she slipped and fell from Jern's shoulder. Luckily he'd anticipated the problem and caught her deftly. She beamed up at him as he placed her back on the ground.

"This is so exciting! I can't wait to get started!" she declared.

"Get started on what?" he wondered.

She frowned.

"The pilgrimage!"

"Oh," he said, nodding.

"You're coming too."

"Oh," he said.

He *did* like a good, fiery sermon.

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In the fourth stratum.

"DAMMIT!" Anthony cried. "DAMMIT ALL TO HECK!"

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#### **Chapter 1202: Crusade Pt 2**

"Do you really think the ants are protecting us because the Great One approves of our holy pilgrimage?" Alis wondered.

Jern looked at the ranks of ants marching alongside them, guarding the pilgrims on both sides.

"I think... they probably just came along to make sure we're safe," he suggested.

His friend looked up at him irritably.

"That's all? Priest Beyn says it because they are guiding us along our blessed path and into enlightenment."

"All they really do is fight Dungeon monsters for us," Jern pointed out.

Alis scowled.

"Sometimes we have to fight for ourselves, don't we?"

He sighed and hefted the oversized axe on his shoulder. Surprisingly, an ant had given it to him, which had caused people to whisper and point. Eventually, he'd found a mage, (who *did* turn to keep him in front of her, which he tested by taking a few steps to either side), who'd explained that, since he was so large and strong, they'd made a weapon he could use to help protect the pilgrims.

"Yes, sometimes we have to fight for ourselves," he told his red haired friend. "Your fire magic has improved a lot since we left."

She folded her arms across her chest.

“Of course!” she declared, puffing herself up with pride. “I’ve had the chance to turn my flames on Dungeon monsters before. It’s only natural that my Levels are increasing quickly.”

Jern had to agree. Fighting against monsters really was Levelling him quickly. It wouldn’t be that long before his Class maxed out and he’d need to change it into a new one.

“Still,” he said, turning back to look at the long train of pilgrims behind them, “I never expected we would gather this many people.”

“You really doubted how persuasive priest Beyn can be?” Alis scoffed. “Every place we go, we end up with more and more followers. I feel like we got a thousand at Rylleh alone.”

“Good thing the ants are feeding us,” Jern noted.

“Of course! The Great One is with us!”

The young man scratched at his cheek and said nothing. He wasn’t particularly smart, so he was probably wrong, but he figured the Great One was just making sure they didn’t starve to death, rather than urging them onwards.

Not that it really mattered, he was enjoying himself and Alis was having a great time, so he didn’t have any reason to turn around and go back.

“Do you think this next city will be as welcoming as the last?”

“Why wouldn’t they be? We are coming on a holy pilgrimage! They’ve got no reason to turn us back.”

“But... isn’t this city *outside* of the Colony’s territory?”

“So? The light of the Great One is universal! I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

He turned and looked at the ants around them. *They* certainly didn’t seem to be as relaxed as Alis, constantly on alert, with messengers running up and down the column at all times. Suddenly, two of the nearby soldiers turned toward a patch on the wall, their mandibles flexing as they readied themselves. He stepped toward them without hesitation.

When they looked up at him, he tapped himself on the chest.

“Allow me,” he said.

They couldn’t understand his words, but they knew what he was getting at, and stepped back a fraction. Jern hefted the massive axe off his shoulder and gave it a few swings to warm up his arms, then he waited.

A minute later, a frenzied, mad-eyed beast lunged from the wall, spraying the young man with stone fragments. He got a flash of fur, and claws, and a red maw before he completed his swing, smashing his axe deep into the beast.

With a wrench, he pulled his weapon free and stared down at the monster. When he was sure it wasn't moving, he turned to the soldiers, gave a dip of his head, which they returned with their antennae, and then jogged back up the line to catch up with Alis, leaving the soldiers to their meal.

"The ants can take care of that, you know. If anything, you're just taking experience away from them."

Jern rolled his shoulders uncomfortably.

"It must be hard shepherding this many humans through the Dungeon during a wave. I just feel like we should help out as much as we can."

Alis opened her mouth to reply, thought for a second, then closed it.

"You're right," she begrudgingly admitted. "I'll get the next one."

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"Greetings, young ones," Beyn greeted them as he made his way to their fire. "Another hard day following the Divine Path has come to an end. I hope I find you well."

Jern ducked his head in acknowledgement as the priest approached, holy antennae bobbing on the top of his robe. Alis beamed with excitement, clasping her hands together.

"It was fine, thank you, priest Beyn. We did our best to help protect the column and even supported the soldiers as they fought Dungeon spawns."

"Yes, our friends informed me of how helpful you two were today," the priest gestured with his one remaining hand toward the ants, still on duty alongside them. "They are grateful for your assistance. It has been very difficult for them to protect us along this journey, given the state of the Dungeon. I fear we must step up and do more to defend ourselves if we are to make it to the journey's end."

Alis surged to her feet.

"Not to worry, priest Beyn! We are more than happy to do our part. Aren't we, Jern?"

Surprised at being suddenly included, all the young man could do was nod, jerkily.

Beyn laughed warmly.

"With brave souls like you amongst us, my heart is put to ease. Tomorrow we will reach our current destination, and I hope we will be well received, but we must be prepared to be rebuffed. We are outside the lands of the Colony at this moment, and the citizens of Torpin's Rest are not obliged to take us in."

"The Great One will persuade them," Alis gushed, "I'm *sure* of it!"

"Your faith is strong," Beyn beamed at her. "But the Great One may see this as a trial for us to overcome. In any case, I thank you for the warmth of your fire, but I must be off."

They thanked him for his time, but the priest was already moving, walking down the column toward the next fire. He would greet every pilgrim before the night was done, as he did every night.

"He's incredible," Alis sighed.

Jern nodded. He really was.

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Jern winced and Alis bristled by his side, ready to explode, and he felt similar anger boiling from the pilgrims around him, but priest Beyn remained calm.

“Peace, friends,” he said, his sonorous voice rolling over the gathered pilgrims along with the force of armed guards who had greeted them outside the gate of Torpin’s Rest. “We are on a holy pilgrimage and have no desire to anger or quarrel with the people of your city. We simply —”

“Good,” bellowed the man leading the procession from the Dungeon city, draped in his purple robes of office. “Then take your filthy insect masters and leave this place! You are unwanted, heathen monster-worshippers, and the sight of you soils my eyes!”

Jern blinked. He felt that was uncalled for. Alis nearly exploded.

“There is no need for this disrespect,” Beyn said smoothly, but Jern thought he may have detected a slight hitch in his tone. “The Colony are a holy miracle who have saved and uplifted our people. I beg you, do not disparage them, for they have done nothing to you.”

“And they never will,” the man snorted. “Everyone knows the ants are too scared to approach Torpin’s Rest, for they fear our righteous fury! We walk on the true Path, and won’t bow to these *pathetic* creatures. Now, if you can find what is left of your spine, turn yourself around and LEAVE. You are not welcome here, and never will be!”

Jern thought he saw Beyn’s eye twitching, but the priest retained his calm. He turned to the pilgrims and spoke to them soothingly.

“We will leave this place in peace,” he said. “Let us depart.”

“Yes,” sneered the official. “Towards all of you, just like your ‘Great One’. If that pathetic beast showed its face here, we would smash it beneath our shoes like the bug it is!”

Beyn’s calm expression twisted in an instant.

Jern sighed and picked up his axe, rolling his shoulders. Somehow, he’d thought this might happen.

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### **Chapter 1203: Crusade Pt 3**

“We didn’t really *mean* to burn Torpin’s rest,” Alis protested. “People just got a bit carried away.”

“We were lucky the Colony was there to keep casualties to a minimum and help rebuild. Things could have gotten very nasty,” Jern said.

“They provoked us!”

The gentle giant next to her frowned.

“Just because someone teases me, doesn’t mean I should punch them in the face. You’re the one who told me that.”

“That’s... true. Of course that’s true. But they shouldn’t have said anything about the Great One!”

Jern thought for a while and then nodded. There hadn’t been any need to insult their saviour like that. It was almost as if the leader of Torpin’s Rest *wanted* to provoke them.

He stepped over a pile of rubble, and extended a hand to Alis, which she grasped as she clambered over it.

“Then what about Deepward?” he asked.

His friend released his hand and brushed off her dress, trying to pat away the dust and ash.

“Deepward was... a lapse in judgement. I think people were just excited after Torpin’s Rest.”

“Priest Beyn tried to stop them....”

“They really should have listened,” Alis grouched. “Deepward wasn’t *that* rude to us. Still, a little more manners and...”

“And we wouldn’t have burned their city to the ground?”

“Yes... that.”

They came across several ants struggling to shift a beam of charred wood, carvers, judging by the size, so Jern put down his axe and helped them to lift, freeing it from the crumbling bricks that weighed it down. They waggled their antennae at him in gratitude and he smiled back before he picked up his axe and continued to walk.

“At least they were a lot more welcoming when we got to Jagtown,” Alis said firmly, “they let us in, Beyn preached, we rested and then left peacefully.”

“I think they were really scared,” Jern observed, remembering. “People in Jagtown really seemed to want to avoid me. More than usual, I mean.”

As big as he was, people tended to avoid him at the best of times.

Alis sniffed.

“Well, if a little fear is what it takes to bring out some good manners and hospitality, then that says a lot more about them than it does about us!”

He supposed there was some truth to that. If the pilgrims had received a normal welcome, then none of this would have happened. He wondered if the hostile reaction they got was due to the pilgrims, or perhaps because these smaller cities were extremely paranoid living right on the edges of the Colony’s territory.

Having such an enormous and prosperous nest of monstrous ants *right* next to your city probably wasn’t great for your nerves. In some ways, it might have been better if the Colony had just conquered them so they could find out everything was fine and just relax.

“Then we got here, to Blackrock.”



Jern kicked a rock. It skittered across what remained of the shattered street and came to rest against the face of a statue commemorating the mining city's founder. Some pilgrims had pulled it down during the siege.

"Okay, *this* one is *definitely* not our fault!" Alis proclaimed, jabbing him in the chest with one finger. "We were super nice. We didn't show up with any ants. We kept most of the pilgrims *well* back from the gates. Beyn did everything he could to appear non-threatening and harmless. How can anyone blame us for..." she waved a hand at the ruined city around them, "... what happened?"

She wasn't *completely* wrong, as Jern saw it. Beyn, the ants, and the pilgrims had decided that getting into spiritual disagreements and burning down cities was not what the pilgrimage was about, so they'd made every effort to minimise the chances of something going wrong. Every effort to avoid offence, or the appearance of threat had been taken.

Yet the people of Blackrock really, *really* didn't want them nearby. Which was fine. If they'd just said so, then Jern was pretty sure the pilgrims would have turned around and kept moving.

But they didn't just say so. They hung banners on their walls mocking the Colony. They sang songs making fun of Beyn, of the pilgrims and the Great One. If that had been all, it might have been alright, maybe. When the delegation of Blackrock said regretful things about the *Queen*...

Beyn had been forced to let the pilgrims loose on the city. If the *ants* had found out what was said... Jern didn't want to think about it.

He looked over the smoking ruins of Blackrock. Once a large and industrious mining town, now a blasted crater.

"I think we did something good here," he decided, kicking another rock.

Alis nodded firmly.

"I'm glad you agree. We should probably head back to the others. Priest Beyn is probably close to finishing his sermon."

The two wandered back toward the gathering, and indeed, Beyn was in full sonorous swing, preaching his heart out to the huddled and shivering residents of this once-proud city.

"A better life awaits you now!" he proclaimed. "Living in the light of truth, protected, sheltered, by the mighty carapace of the Colony. You will think back on this day and remember it fondly as the day your lives changed forever. For the better! And any who wish to join us on our holy pilgrimage are more than welcome. The time of the Great One's ascendance draws ever nearer!"

The ants were already helping to rebuild, setting up a defensive perimeter to defend against the wave and settling in for the long haul. Eventually, more ants would come to join their column to make up for those who stayed behind.

And some people would join them too. Jern wasn't sure why, but some always did. He could see it in the crowd already. A few shining eyes here and there, some ecstatic gazes filled with wonder. Those people would leave behind everything they had ever known and join the pilgrims in their long march into the depths.

“I just hope we don’t burn any more cities down,” Jern sighed.

He didn’t like the smoke.

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### **Chapter 1204: Crusade Final**

It was strange to be able to *smell* death. It seemed like the sort of thing that shouldn’t *have* a smell. Sure, things like decay and rot, they had a distinct scent, an extremely potent one, but those were distinct from death itself. A function of death, in a way. When a person died in front of you, or around you, there wasn’t a discernible odour, as far as Jern could tell. It wasn’t like the soul leaving the body was something his nose could detect.

Yet, as he stood on the precipice of the second stratum of the Dungeon, he could *smell death*.

He didn’t like it.

“It’s so cold,” Alis shivered as she stood by his side, looking down into the slowly stirring darkness.

“It’s going to be colder once we get down there,” he said.

“I don’t want to think about it. At least it’s supposed to get warmer once we reach the third.”

From what he’d heard, Jern wasn’t confident she would enjoy that heat much more than the cold. He’d conversed with a few ants from the next two layers, and it seemed to him that neither were all that hospitable. Only when they reached the fourth would they find a climate they would consider suitable for life.

“I never thought I’d be standing here,” he noted aloud.

Alis looked at him, and then back down the sharply sloped tunnel. The border between the first and second lay before them, a sharp border in the Dungeon. To both of them, it looked like a cloud of ink that revolved almost imperceptibly, a dark pond he could toss a stone into. After a moment, he shrugged, picked up a small shard of rock and lobbed it forward, gently, just a couple of metres.

As it fell into the ‘pond’, the flat surface didn’t ripple, it wasn’t disturbed in any way, and the sound of the rock hitting the tunnel floor reached him a second later, muffled.

“What did you do that for?” Alis asked.

“I was curious,” Jern defended himself.

“And what if some nasty shadow beast lunges up out of there and rips your head off?” she scolded him.

“You’ve got to be more careful!”

Jern idly considered telling her he was much better at killing monsters than she was, but decided against it at the last minute. Alis didn’t particularly enjoy being reminded of that.

“We should probably head back,” he told her. “Beyn told us we shouldn’t be out here too long.”

“Good idea.”

The camp wasn't far away, constructed in a large cavern formed from the intersection of multiple tunnels. A common phenomenon, he was told. Passages between strata were much rarer than regular tunnels, so there was often a convergence when one was around.

Walls formed of hardened stone were patrolled by armed pilgrims, hundreds of them at a time, and the ants swept the surrounding Dungeon on a never ending cycle. Even so, the effects of the wave were impossible to ignore. Monsters would burst out of the ground inside the camp at all hours; one even emerged from just under the wall, collapsing a wide stretch as it forced itself free.

Still, the pilgrims banded together and fought them off as best they could. It was probably a good thing they'd been doing so much fighting recently. Pretty much everyone was getting used to swinging some sort of weapon around.

Even the old ladies.

Jern and Alis waved to the guards, who let them in without fuss, then made their way towards the back of the camp, where it butted against the cavern wall. They found Beyn not far away, talking with a large group by a crackling fire.

"We must remain here for at least a week," Beyn insisted. "Your devotion is to your credit, Sister Myra, but I will not have members of this pilgrimage lost unnecessarily."

"Won't the Great One protect us from the Dungeon Sickness?" the grey haired woman demanded. "Everyone is certain our lack of symptoms can be attributed to the protection of the holy carapace."

"The Great One has stretched forth their mandibles to shield us from much harm, of that I have no doubt," Beyn agreed, "but for other trials, we are expected to carry the burdens ourselves. The mana thickens precipitously as we descend, and were we to advance to the Shadow Sea without tempering ourselves, then many of us would falter. It takes time, time we can use to reflect and meditate on our profound journey."

Myra didn't look like she much agreed with him until his final words. Perhaps she liked the idea of reflection and meditation since it sounded holy enough for her liking. She thanked the priest for his time and moved away, much of the crowd going with her.

The two young pilgrims approached and Beyn smiled at them.

"Ah, Alis and Jern, how fare you today?"

"Fine, father," Alis gushed. "We were just outside the camp looking at the tunnel down. Are we really going to have to wait a week before we can descend?"

The priest looked grave and nodded.

"Yes, I'm afraid we must. Even more may be necessary, though I hope that isn't the case. The devotion of these people burns strong, and I would hate to force them to delay on their holy journey. Dungeon sickness is a very real and truly dangerous concern. There are many in the camp who have been suffering silently. Were it not for the aid of our ant sisters, then I'm afraid hundreds, maybe more, would have fallen already."

He looked to his right, where the ants had dug out a large space from the cavern wall and created a low-mana zone within. All of them had been expected to spend time inside, slowly letting the mana in their bodies out, then stepping back outside. By filling and emptying themselves of mana, they would gradually adapt.

“You and I are probably due to go back in, Alis,” Jern told her.

She huffed at him and then tried to cover it with a cough, not wanting to appear difficult in front of the priest. Then he remembered something.

“Oh, Beyn,” he said, “I need to advance my Class and I thought I should do it today. I was hoping you could advise me?”

The one armed man smiled and brushed at his robe.

“Why of course, I would be delighted to. That has long been my calling, after all.”

“C-can I get your advice as well then, Priest Beyn?” Alis squeaked.

“You need not ask. My knowledge is always available to my brothers and sisters in the faith. Please, tell me of your builds so far.”

There wasn't much to tell, Jern was still, at this point, a simple Labourer, and Alis had been a Mage Apprentice, the most basic of the introductory mage classes.

The priest nodded thoughtfully as if this was all deep and interesting information.

“And what sort of Classes do you have available for the change?” he said.

Jern had some interesting choices, probably based on the more militaristic Skill levels he'd been gaining. Things like 'Soldier', 'Bruiser', 'Axe Wielder'.

“Oh, there's something weird here,” he said. “What's a... 'Templar of the Great One Initiate'? I don't think I've heard of that one.”

“Oh,” Alis said, “I have that too. Have you... heard of... that? Beyn?”

The priest's eyes were bulging from his head and Jern thought he might be starting to froth at the mouth.

“A MIRACLE!” he roared.

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### **Chapter 1205: Beneath the Waves**

*The sub-surface Conglomerate is a loose confederation of brathian cities, kingdoms, merchant houses and roaming caravans that live in the waters of the Fourth Stratum.*

*The Endless Lake.*

*Brimming with life and water mana, the Lake is the ideal environment for the brathian to dwell in, though they are capable of living on land as well as beneath the waves. Historically, their people lived in or around freshwater sources outside the Dungeon, and the more peace-loving amongst them still do.*

*Within the fourth, however, is where the majority of the brathian of Pangera now make their homes.*

*- Excerpt from 'On the People of the Fourth' by Tir*

The crushing pressure of the waters abated as Theraz slipped within the pearlescent barrier erected by his people. Knotted muscles loosened and tension drained from his scales as he smiled for what felt like the first time in weeks.

In reality, it had only been a day or two, but the extra life mana thanks to the wave seemed to press in on him. The waters of the Endless Lake were vibrant, filled with energy and life, but the mana was so *thick*. When he swam, he felt as if the weight of the mountains that towered in the sky above was pressing down on him.

The added weight of the unending tide of monsters did nothing to help the feeling abate.

"Welcome home, Theraz. How did you find the current?"

"Piris, I should have known you would be waiting for me."

"Of course, I would not want you to lose yourself amongst the fish and become confused."

"Do I look like a fish to you?"

"Am I supposed to answer that?"

His cousin grinned at him mischievously and Theraz shook his head.

"I have returned from an important scouting mission for the Satrap, and you wait for me here on the border of our lands simply to throw insults?" he shook his golden-scaled head. "What will your mother say?"

She shrugged, her legs drifting as the waters shifted.

"What does she always say? 'You need to do better! Stop wasting your time! Cease flapping your fins! I don't listen anymore.'"

This was a little disturbing to hear. Had his aunt and cousin really fallen out so badly? He'd had no idea.

"Let us not talk of this anymore," he cut off the conversation. "I must return to speak with your father, and I do not wish to hear any more of this familial disrespect."

Piris frowned but fell silent as the two swam close to the sandy bottom, darting between the lush plant life and drifting weeds as they moved deeper into the water claimed by the brathian.

Soon they came across the outer farms, tall fields of hornwort and lotus stretching high above.

Patrols of soldiers swam in organised lines, ever vigilant for monsters spawning within the barrier or for those crazed beasts who pushed through the siren song and attacked.

Beyond the farmland, they came upon Crelios proper, dome-shaped houses made of sandstone, neat gardens and enormous corals. Small fish ducked and darted everywhere, hiding in sponges embedded in roofs and walls. The brathian were everywhere, their vibrant scales of many hues glittering in the dim,

shifting light. In the distance, the heart of the city loomed, towering sand structures rising from the lakebed, along with the enormous sponge fronds that rose hundreds of metres towards the light.

“We should pick up the pace a little,” he suggested, “I don’t want to keep your father waiting.”

His cousin nodded, and the water began to twist in front of them as they employed their mana. Soon, they were rocketing through the lake, a short jetstream swirling behind them. They only slowed as they approached the outer reaches of the city centre and were approached by the guards.

“Theraz! Finally back, I see. I was worried we were going to get sent out to find you soon.”

The old brathian lowered his spear and indicated the dull, faded sheen of the scales on his arms.

“I’m getting too old to go beyond the boundary, it’s a good thing you found your way back.’

“You’re as impressive a beast as I’ve ever seen in the Endless Lake,” Theraz grinned. “I can’t imagine a day when Mozla the magnificent will be forced to retirement.”

“Then you lack imagination.”

The old warrior turned to the guards on patrol with him.

“You two escort the young master and mistress back to the palace. I’ll finish up out here.”

“Not keen to visit the palace again, Mozla?” Theraz chuckled.

The old man made a face.

“I hate that place,” he said flatly, and Piris stared at him in surprise. He noticed and grunted. “I’m too old for them to bother punishing me for my disrespect, little one. There are a few advantages to being a grey-scale like me. It’s not your family that flaps my fins anyway. There’s just too much... faffing about. I feel like someone has to announce you before you can enter the toilet.”

She giggled.

“That’s almost true. For mother and father, at least.”

“Good. Now hurry up, I need to get back to work.”

Theraz was made to reflect on Mozla’s opinion as he spent the next two hours being passed between dignitaries (each of whom required that he be announced before being permitted to enter their presence). Access to the Satrap wasn’t easy, even for his nephew. When he finally made it through to the inner palace, he’d begun to yearn for the open waters beyond the barrier again.

“Young Theraz, my nephew. Welcome!”

Satrap Umizan was... on the large side... for a brathian. Considering he spent all day lounging on his throne while dealing with administrative affairs, it was somewhat to be expected. The endless supply of sweetfish brought to him by his female attendants didn’t help either.

“Father! You promised you’d stop snacking this week!” Piris scolded him.

“Oh! Piris! I... didn’t see you there!”

The Satrap attempted to hide a plate of fish behind his throne with one hand and failed spectacularly.

“Don’t tell your mother...”

She narrowed her eyes and folded her arms across her chest.

“Please?”

“Satrap,” Theraz grinned, “I have returned from my scouting mission at the forward enclave. There is much for us to discuss.”

At once, Umizan’s demeanour changed and he straightened on his throne, a cold light gleaming in his eye.

“Good. I need to learn more about our new neighbours. These... ants.”

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 1206: Down to Business**

“This... ‘Colony’. I don’t like it, Theraz, but it’s new, and new can be either good or bad for business. What I need to know, as soon as possible, is which it’s going to be.”

“Well, the first thing I can tell you is we aren’t going to be able to dislodge them easily.”

“Really? That mountain has changed hands so many times recently I was starting to think it was impossible to hold. First that tree had her roots all over it, then the ka’armodo seized it for whatever reason and now these ants are setting up shop! I don’t like it when others set up shops next to mine, Theraz.”

The Satrap didn’t get as disgustingly wealthy as he had by tolerating competition, after all.

“We are directing as many of the lake monsters as we can toward their fortifications, and so far they haven’t made a dent. Worse than that, since they’re monsters, all we’re really doing is flooding them with Biomass, experience and cores.”

“Are you suggesting we cease the siren song?” Umizen muttered, leaning his cheek against one of his hands. “Your father had the same thought.”

*My father is a lot smarter when it comes to fighting.*

It wouldn’t do to say so out loud, of course.

“Any and all matters regarding the Divine Guardian Beast are for you and you alone to decide on,” Theraz replied smoothly. “I am merely reporting the progress, or lack thereof, being made.”

“Fine,” the Satrap grumbled to himself. “After everything I’ve spent on her, you’d think she could deal with squishing a few ants.”

“She isn’t fighting,” Theraz reminded him, “she’s just using her song.”

“Should I send her up? Make a direct assault?”

Clearly hesitant, the Satrap suggested it anyway and his nephew suppressed a sigh. Anything expensive was an asset, and the Siren was *incredibly* expensive. His uncle wouldn't risk her unless he had a very good reason.

"I don't think that would be a good idea," he replied. "I've seen... I'm not sure how to put this.... I've seen a very powerful ant monster, a Mythic one, tier seven or eight probably, it was hard to tell from the waterline. It came out of the mountain and scared off a sky dragon."

He shook his head.

"It was massive. Highly evolved and highly mutated. If there are more like that in the mountain, then those ants aren't going anywhere."

At the mention of the monster, both his cousin and uncle had leaned forward eagerly, though for very different reasons.

"Do you think it's strong?" Piris gasped. "Could you beat it?"

"Do you think it's valuable?" the Satrap breathed. "Could you capture it?"

"To answer both of you: yes, I think it's strong *and* valuable. The carapace sparkled under the sun like a jewel and I could feel the mana thundering in its core. Secondly, no. I could not beat it, certainly not alone, and capturing it would be even less likely, since that's the only time it has come out of the mountain. Fighting through a fortress guarded by hundreds of thousands of ants isn't something we can achieve."

"But they're just ants," Piris and her father protested together.

Theraz shook his head.

"Please put that thought from your mind. They aren't 'just' anything. If a group of monsters conquered a mountain and turned it into an impregnable fortress in a few weeks, you'd have a good deal of fear and respect for them, right? I implore the Satrap to not be blinded by what they are, but focus on what they've done. This Colony is *strong*."

The older, pudgier brathian leaned his scaled cheek on one of his open palms, eyes narrowing.

"There's an *awful* lot of money sitting in that mountain, nephew," he said, a hint of steel entering his tone. "We've confirmed that those monsters are tier five, some tier six, and they *all* have a core. Every single one of them, and there's hundreds of thousands of them, maybe more, according to what I've read. When we include monster parts we could salvage, that's a fortune equal to what I've amassed up to this point in my life, and I'm *disgustingly* wealthy. You understand what I'm saying, Theraz?"

The young man felt a chill run down his spine.

"You have to be alive, to enjoy the privileges of wealth, Uncle."

The Satrap sat back with a huff.

"That's what your father said."

"Then he agrees with me?"



“He’s warned me off interfering with this Colony directly. ‘You have enough money, brother’, and ‘what’s the point of taking a risk like that,’ and ‘how many brathian are you willing to sacrifice to get richer’. I’ve heard it all from him for days.”

“Those are all valid questions, Uncle.”

“My fear isn’t only about missing out on a fortune, nephew. Those ants represent such an enormous pile of cash that others are *bound* to come to get it. I worry about someone else taking it and supplanting our people from our dominant position in this area of the stratum. These monsters may be a threat, yes, but if someone conquers them and is even worse? What then?”

“We are not so easy to displace from our position in the Lake,” Theraz assured him. “If it comes down to it, my father and I will give our lives to protect our people, and the rest of the Scale Guard alongside us.”

Umizan considered him for a few long moments before he clapped his hands together before his paunch.

“Excellent! We will put aside the expensive and draining prospect of war and focus on that which is more profitable. Jolly cooperation! It’s time for diplomacy, Theraz. You and your father will be part of my envoy, of course.”

He’d probably intended on this outcome all along. Dealing with his uncle was exhausting at times.

“Of course, Satrap,” he bowed.

Piris snapped and rushed to her father’s side.

“I want to go as well! Father! Let me go!”

“What?” he boggled. “You want to go into that den of *beasts*?”

He blinked, then sighed.

“Of course you do. You take after your mother too much, she always has to be having an *adventure*. My daughter, the *real* adventure is commerce!”

She went to protest, but he raised a hand.

“If we can receive assurances from the ants, then I will consider it, but if you go, I will have double the military presence at the outpost. Keep that in mind. In fact, if you’re going, your mother might as well go along. She’ll be furious if I keep her home and let you out.”

*Taking the Satrap’s wife and daughter to a mountain full of monsters*, Theraz despaired. It was madness.

“Is there a problem, nephew?”

“Not at all, Satrap.”

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 1207: Sweet Slumber**

Ah, it’s nice to see everyone looking so lively in the fortress.

“You’re looking good there, siblings! Such gleaming carapaces!” I greet a squad of ants moving to the frontline.

They duck their heads in shame and rush past me, trying to conceal the beams of light reflecting from their exo-skeletons with their antennae.

Gweheheheh.

Everyone is metaphorically shining with good health while also *literally* shining from the torpor police’s patented wax and shine. I’ve never seen such a well-groomed group of ants.

“Make sure you don’t miss your next torpor session!” I remind them as they flee into the distance.

The reinforcements arrived yesterday to find the fortress still in the process of waking up. Quite an odd sight, I wager. With the added numbers, including a solid bolstering of the poor, overworked healers, things are running much better in the fortress. Getting a good snooze into the tired and bedraggled defenders has done them a world of good as well. Thanks to this escapade, the fortress has a decent chance of not collapsing during the wave.

I mean, I could *probably* have held off the wave if I went all out, but I’m a limited resource. I can’t be everywhere at once! Maybe once upon a time, I would have tried to take all the burdens onto my own back and promptly messed everything up, but I’ve matured!

We’re ants, dammit! If we don’t grasp the concept of teamwork, then nobody on this planet does!

I was able to reach out to the tree without too much trouble, and she was loath to lend me her children at first, but I told her I absolutely didn’t want any of her freaky gardens popping up around the fortress, so she should just let the kids out to play.

After bickering back and forth for a while, she eventually caved, which I knew she would. For one, the bruan’chii are insistent on repaying the debt they owe to the Colony. The tree herself is weak to the pleading of her dear offspring, so she had no choice but to give in.

“Sloan, feeling well rested?” I ask.

The general jumps a foot in the air as I approach stealthily.

“I am! Y-yes. Thank you... Eldest... for noticing.”

“How could I not notice? You’re shining so bright!”

“Haha... ha.”

None of the other generals want to look in my direction, too ashamed to front up to my obvious taunting. Which is good. I draw a little closer to Sloan.

“You understand why I had to do what I did, right? I’ve warned you before about pushing too hard and asking too much. This fortress was on the brink of collapse right at the point the wave would shift to its most intense. I would have been able to save it, probably, but how many would have died? Ambition is good, but failure is not. This isn’t only on you and Victor, it’s the responsibility of the entire Council, and

every ant working under you as well. If we don't learn our limits, then we're going to lose and lose big in the future."

Despite sounding harsh, I'm being perfectly sincere and honest, which is exactly how my siblings want their criticism. She nods slowly, though I see it's difficult for her.

"I... understand, Eldest. We will do better."

"I hope so! I really don't want to have to keep poking my antennae in and messing with everyone else's business. You're supposed to be so much better than me at running this stuff."

Well, I have the advantage of being able to 'see' what every ant in the entire fortress is up to at any given moment. If Sloan had access to perfect information like that, she would have seen the problem just as fast as I did.

"I understand. You won't be troubled in future, Eldest. I swear it."

"Hey, you can trouble me as much as you want, we're siblings after all. As long as it doesn't involve the imminent collapse of a nest, you know, I'd prefer we avoid that."

I turn to go, then turn back.

"But if a nest *is* going to collapse, please don't hesitate to call on me, in the event that I don't know about it already."

"We will."

"Good. Great. Good luck with the defence."

Now I turn away and head off to give her and the other generals some space. They've got a lot of work to do to get the defence organised again. Some sort of handover with the bruan'chii will be necessary, I suspect.

In the meantime, I've got a little free time to try and work out just what the heck is going on in my Nave.

Sending my consciousness inside the organ, I sink within the cathedral I carry about, entering through the Vestibule along with the torrential flow of Will, until I rest among the rows of seats, each occupied by a spirit form of the person who has taken up residence here within me.

Beyn is here, obviously, along with the nameless ones, and Enid, and many others. To be honest, I haven't even finished going through all the chairs because... I don't know. It's weird. Michaelangelant is probably in here actually, I should hunt down that darn sibling of mine.... She's got something coming her way!

It's a little disconcerting is all, to realise how much Will you've accumulated from an individual, or even that they've been giving it to you at all. If it were only ants here, I probably wouldn't mind, but the humans being in here is weirding me out.

At any rate, the place was full, I knew that much from my last visit here. It was full, no seats left, and I haven't mutated it to increase the available chairs. So, in theory, nobody else should be appearing in here.

So why oh why, are there two shining, golden figures standing along the wall?

From what I can see, it's a young woman and one *huge* young man. This dude is *built*. He must be seven feet tall! Holy moly man, how are you affording shoes?

More importantly, what are they doing in here? In the Nave, glowing all golden, standing against the wall like soldiers standing guard?

Do I have to talk to them? I have to talk to them, don't I?

The last time I did this, Beyn started some stupid crusade, the idiot. In fact, this probably has something to do with him, I'd bet my mandibles on it. Ah well, nothing for it.

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 1208: Golden Globes**

Jern woke with a start.

"What was that?" he mumbled sleepily.

*It's me.*

"Who's me?" he wondered as he rubbed at his eyes.

*Anthony.*

"Who's Anthony? Can I go back to sleep, Anthony?"

*You were asleep? Sorry about that. I don't sleep much.*

"So... can I?"

*No. Well... you can in a second, I just need your attention for a minute. Two minutes. Look, I'll be honest with you, five minutes probably, then you can go back to sleep.*

"I'm really tired, Anthony. Can this wait until the morning?"

*I mean... it could? But I've already woken you up, so we may as well do this now. Can you go and get your friend?*

"Wha... what? Which friend?"

*The other golden glowy person. The girl.*

"Alis?"

*Sure.*

"You don't know?"

*Well, I haven't spoken to her yet, I figured I'd just talk to one of you and then you could get the other.*

"She's... she's in the girls' dorm. I can't go in there."

*Dammit. Look. Just put some pants on or whatever and I'll get her to meet you outside. I want you to be able to talk to each other while I figure this out.*

Jern blinked a few times and rubbed at his eyes again. The fuss over the new Class he and Alis had unlocked had gone on for *ages*, and frankly, he was exhausted. He didn't need this right now. He looked down.

"I'm already wearing pants."

*Good man. Go stand somewhere Alis can come meet you. Oh! If you see Beyn, do NOT mention that I'm talking to you.*

That was odd.

"Why, are you a bad person? Does Beyn hate you?"

*Hah! I wish. No, he doesn't hate me. He likes me too much.*

"He loves you?"

*I would REALLY prefer we did not use that phrasing. Alright?*

"Okay. Okay. I'm getting dressed, I'll stand outside."

*Thanks, I appreciate it.*

He pulled a coat on as quietly as he could so as not to wake those still sleeping around him before he crept to the door.

There was no nighttime beneath the ground, no sun that travelled across the sky, something he was still getting used to. Outside, the light from the Dungeon veins was the same as always. Patrols of humans and ants were constant, and several gave him odd looks as he ducked low under the door frame and stepped out.

Shortly after, Alis found him, similarly stumbling with fatigue. He poked her in the arm and she glared up at him, a little fire returning to her eyes.

*Alright. I think I can talk to both of you at the same time.... Yep. I can. Nice. Hey, how are you two?*

Jern shifted his feet but Alis glared at... the air?

"I'm tired," she snapped.

He agreed.

*Look, I'm sorry I woke you up! Sheesh! You've only got yourselves to blame, showing up all shiny in my Nave the way you did. I certainly didn't invite you.*

Alis sighed and pinched her brow.

"Look. Could you perhaps just explain to us who you are? And how are you talking to us? This doesn't feel like a mind-bridge."

"It doesn't?" Jern wondered. Then he thought about it. Then he nodded. "It doesn't," he confirmed.

*I'm Anthony. I mean, that's my name. Which you've probably never heard. The Eldest? The... ugh... 'Great One'. Does that ring any bells?*

"The Great One?" Alis said sceptically.

*Yep. Call me Anthony. Please.*

Jern frowned.

"Should we... kneel or something?" he asked Alis.

"No! Wait, you believe it?"

He shrugged. Why not?

"The Great One is on the fourth stratum according to priest Beyn! They couldn't possibly talk to us! And *why* would they talk to us?!"

*Well... under normal circumstances, I probably couldn't. And I AM on the fourth stratum. As for why... that's what I want to know! You guys have a Class change or something recently? Something ant related? You're on the pilgrimage right?*

"How do you know where we are?" Alis hissed, eyes darting at the darkness around her.

*I would really prefer we get through this without me having to talk to Beyn. Between the three of us, he can be a bit... intense. And loud.*

Jern nodded. That was true.

"I like a good fiery sermon, though," he said.

*Whatever floats your boat. I find it hard to enjoy them since I'm typically the subject.*

"I can understand that," Jern nodded.

*This guy gets it. How about you, girl? No? You seem to just be getting angrier. Fine. FINE. Have it your way. Wait a second.*

They did.

There was a strangled scream from somewhere in the camp which caused everyone to turn and grow tense. Was it a monster? Was someone hurt? Before anyone could investigate, priest Beyn sprinted out of a tent, shirtless, and stared wildly around the camp until he spotted Jern and Alis.

He charged toward them as if they were salvation itself, his eyes bulging and red. Jern found it... somewhat frightening.

"Listen to the Great One," the priest choked out, sounding as if his throat were constricted by a pair of giant mandibles.

Then his mouth began to twitch, followed by his whole body. Soon, he was spasming wildly, as if he desperately wanted to say more, to do more, but was prevented, until, with a despairing cry he spun and ran back to his tent, vanishing from sight.

*See what I mean? The guy just needs to relax a little.*

*“He’s been under a lot of pressure,” Jern defended him.*

*Alis’ jaw was still working, shock plain in her eyes.*

*“So... you actually *are*... the Great One?”*

*Yep. That’s me. Anthony. Hello! I haven’t got your names yet.*

*“I... I... I...” Alis seemed to be broken.*

*“I’m Jern and she’s Alis,” he said for her.*

*Nice. Now, if you could just explain to me if you’ve had a Class change to something ant-related, that would be great. Then you can go back to sleep and all that.*

*“I... I... I...” Alis was starting to worry Jern.*

*“We recently advanced our Classes and were offered Templar of the Great One Initiate, which we took. There was a huge fuss. The Class benefits were a bit weird as well. The stats are strong, but the effect gives us an improved connection to the Great One, and marks us as defenders of their sanctum? Your sanctum? I guess?”*

*Ohhhh nards. There’s going to be more of you soon, isn’t there?*

*“Probably.”*

*Stupid priest! Forget I said that. I’m just frustrated. Alright, I think that’s all I need for now. Thanks very much for your cooperation, Jern. And Alis? Alis? Snap out of it!*

*“I... !! Uh. Sorry!”*

*Good. Don’t turn into another Beyn, I beg you. Chill out. Okay. You two can head back to bed now, thanks for your time. I’ll probably get in touch again... soonish. Try and learn as much as you can about your new Class so I can ask about it.*

*“You don’t know about it?” Jern asked, confused. “It doesn’t come from you?”*

*No! I don’t control the System! Who told you that? Nobody controls that. That I know of anyway. Maybe the wizard? I can neither confirm nor deny that someone controls the System of this world. Now go to bed.*

## **Chrysalis**

### **Chapter 1209: Pet Talk**

*The System is responsive to changes in environment and circumstances, that much is known. What is less understood, is why.*

*Many have tried to predict how the System will adapt to new circumstances, but to my knowledge, they have been confounded every time. Kingdoms rise and fall without ever seeing a unique Class develop within their territory, whereas some people are given access to one for seemingly innocuous reasons.*

*Famously, Dillip Crant, a sheep herder from a small village on Mount Grattagan, was the first to unlock the rare 'Cloud Stepping Shepherd' Class. When scholars tried to discern what had led to the unlock, they were baffled and eventually concluded that an earlier incident in which Dillip fell from a great height and survived while herding sheep had done the trick.*

- Excerpt from 'Intricacies of the System' by Xinci

Yet another problem the priest has caused me.

Well, I'd like to say that, but ultimately the blame rests with me, and I can't get away from that. As much as I'd like to.

Whatever these... Templars? Whatever they are, and whatever they do, it's outside of my control at this point. I'll just have to rattle along and hope it doesn't blow up in my mandibles. In the meantime, there's stuff to be about in the fortress!

"Hihi Senior! How are you doing? Did you sleep? Did you force *me* to sleep? That wasn't very nice!"

"Hello there, Vibrant, it's nice to see you looking so rested and refreshed! You even remembered to talk slower."

"I don't like sleep-sleep," she shivered. "Standing still for that long is unnatural!"

"You need to go into torpor regularly, you moron," I give her a stern glare. "These rules exist for a reason."

"You don't have to follow rules if you can outrun them! Bye-bye!"

And *paff*, she's gone in a cloud of dust. Or at least, she *tried* to leave.

"Senior! Put me down!" Vibrant cried.

"Gweheheheh. Think you can run away from the rules, do you? Maybe I should send you back for *another* snooze in the shadows. What do you say?"

The big soldier's legs blaze so fast they kick up a storm of wind, but it's no use since I've lifted her off the ground using a gravity well.

"Gaaaaaah!"

"You'll never be able to run away from me, Vibrant," I cackle. "So be good and get regular rest, or else I'll have to come and find you."

"Fine! LetmedownIdon'tlikeitwhenIcan'trun!"

I release the spell and she drops to the ground with a thud. She flicks her antennae at me angrily and then vanishes into the distance, accelerating so quickly she vanishes like a cartoon character.

I can only shake my head. Vibrant will never change, that's for sure. My next stop is to drop in on Crinis, Tiny and Invidia. Each of them is battling down in the tunnels, grinding their Skills and Levels, preparing for their next evolution, and I'm keen to see how they're going.

[DIE, YOU FILTH! HOW DARE YOU ASSAULT THE HOME OF MY MASTER! DIE! DIEEEEEEE!]



Crinis is letting her inner thoughts out as she unleashes true horror upon the creatures of the wave. I feel sorry for the monsters that run into her. The tunnel has been turned into a mass of writhing tentacles that snatch up everything that draws near and brutally cut them apart before shoving the pieces into one of her three mouths.

[How's it all going, Crinis?] I call to her.

[DIEEEE—Master? Oh! I... I didn't realise you were here. Everything's fine! Just... fine!]

[You seem to be having fun.]

[I'm just... happy to be doing my duty!]

[I think something is trying to sneak past you.]

[What? YOU FILTH! DEAAAAATH!]

[Good job! Keep it up, Crinis, I'm proud of you!]

[Heheheh.]

She giggles to herself as I turn and leave. Deep down inside, she really loves being a terrorising murder ball. Good for her. Tiny is, quite naturally, rather enjoying himself. His current assignment is to sit in a tunnel and punch the heck out of every monster who comes at him, something he is particularly skilled at.

[How's it going, Tiny?]

[Fun!] he replies, as he snatches up a weird golden snake and delivers a brutal uppercut straight to its jaw.

Oof. That looked like it hurt.

[You aren't letting yourself get too worn out or injured, are you?]

[No,] he replies with confidence, knocking on his armour with one knuckle.

[Just make sure you take care of yourself. I worry about you, you big ape.]

[Okay.]

He gives me a double thumbs up before he turns with exquisite grace, balanced perfectly on the balls of his feet, and fills the tunnel with lightning.

[Try to keep an eye on him,] I ask the healers stationed well behind where Tiny is operating. [He'll keep fighting until he's on the brink of death and not even realise it.]

[We have been, Eldest. We heal him every time he sits down to eat.]

I think for a minute.

[That's a lot of healing. Good work.]

[Thank you.]

And of course I drop in on my favourite floating eyeball and find him doing what he does best, exploding everything that tries to hurt him and being envious.

*[The other tunnelssssss are better. I wantsss them.]*

[They're exactly the same as this one, I promise you that.]

*[I havesssss your word?]*

[It's all yours, buddy.]

He thinks for a minute.

*[Gooooood.]*

BOOM! BOOM!

[Looks like your explosions are getting even more potent. You get a new rank?]

*[Yessss. I wantsss all the ranksss.]*

[Nice work! Keep practising and you'll get them all. Put that big brain of yours to use!]

We pause the conversation to allow a little time for him to blast what appeared to be a mole covered in molten silver with his green laser of doom.

[You must be getting close to evolving now, right?]

His green eye flashes bright.

[Yesssssss,] he practically purrs, his tiny little arms wiggling in delight as his wings flap lazily.

[Awesome! I'm going to have to get those demon cores ready for you three. Exciting stuff!]

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 1210: Fish Talk**

To be honest, I find the thought of my three pets evolving more exciting than my own prospect of evolution. I can't wait to see how the three of them turn out. Especially Invidia. The demons are super weird in the way that they evolve, and the little dude has been stuck at tier six for a heck of a long time. His Skills have come along really nicely, since he grinds a heck of a lot more than Tiny, and more than Crinis even.

His mastery of mind magic in particular is stunning. It'll be interesting to see if mind magic turns into anything else as it goes up in rank.

I'll need to settle down and look at my own Skills and mutations soon as well. I've got some big decisions to make, especially in regards to my Nave. Things are going funky in the cathedral, and I need to try and work out a more clear direction. Not to mention the more powerful mutations I've been offered at +35. I'm keen to see what sort of effects I can get on some of my other organs.

I'll have myself fully maxed on mutations way before I even need to think about my next evolution, which will be nice. Geez, my next evolution, heading to tier eight... I have no idea what sort of insane

options I'm going to be offered at this point. In fact, I won't have an option to continue my current, multi-part evolution. I might be offered something that finally takes me off the paragon path.

"Eldest, Eldest!" One of the scouts rushes up to me and I see it's Wills.

"What is it?" I ask as she runs over.

"There's something going on up top. They want you up there!"

"Eh? What do you mean 'something'? There isn't any more information than that?"

"I'm not sure. There was some weird activity down on the shoreline that the scouts found suspicious."

"Suspicious? More suspicious than the endless swarm of sea monsters sprinting on their fins at our walls?"

"Different," the scout snaps back, frustrated. "Something *different* than a horde of sea beasts sprinting at our walls. I'm not sure exactly what it was, but it was deemed worrying enough that we decided to send a runner to get you."

"And you came yourself because?"

"I'm the fastest scout in the fortress."

"Fair enough, let's go then."

Following along behind Wills, I rush my way up the disconnected central pillar until the two of us reach the walls. The fighting is still constant up here, and the din of battle shakes my antennae as the ant defenders subject the endless press of monsters to a buffet of acid and devastating magic. Without any ceremony, the two of us press through the rows of ants until we reach the front and Wills points with one extended leg.

"Down there!"

I look.

I pause.

I look again.

"That *is* weird."

"Right?"

There's a flag... a *really* big one, standing tall on a long pole formed of some sort of glimmering blue stone and rising out of a frothing, bubbling patch of water.

"Yeah, okay. I understand why you got me now."

"What do you think it is?"

"Well, either someone is playing a joke, or they're trying to make contact with us."

Probably the latter, since I don't think anyone is going to stick their neck out during a wave just for laughs.

"So... should we respond? Do we put together an escort to bring them into the fortress?"

"We do *not* need this right now. Who is reaching out during the middle of a wave? They've got a lot of confidence, or they're just nuts."

Still, the question remains, what's the right thing to do in this scenario? We have a diplomatic contingent, but there aren't any down here on the fourth stratum at present, why would there be? All we've been doing is fighting and building. We don't need anyone to smooth talk the tree, since she pretty much only talks to me.

Only one thing to do, then.

"I'll take control of this situation. Clearly, I'm in the best position to represent the Colony to... whoever we've got here."

The question is, how do I go about it? Show of force? Humble? I need to get a bit closer if I want to extend a mind bridge, but would they welcome being connected to a monster in this way? There's a lot of questions, but I can already tell that I'm just going to do things in the most straightforward manner in the end.

That means getting out over the wall, stretching out a mind bridge as far as I can, and then seeing what happens next.

So that's exactly what I do. With an empowered gravity domain extended out around me, I can pretty much shrug off what the monsters can do to me, especially when the Colony covers me from the wall.

Surrounded by bellowing, maddened beasts, I approach the oversized flag waving gently in the breeze and stop once I'm roughly five-hundred metres from it.

Using my senses, I try to detect any mana source in the vicinity of the flag, but it's hard to get a good reading. The water itself is so rich in mana, and the monsters all over the place don't help either.

With a shrug of the antennae, I start to weave a bridge and extend my mental connection toward the general area, then start broadcasting.

[Hello out there from the Colony. We noticed your flag and assumed you wanted to have a chat. Can we interest you in tea and biscuits? Are you seeking friendly negotiations?]

Finally, I feel someone latch onto my bridge and it snags onto them, connecting us mind to mind.

[Greetings, ant. I am Olivis, and I come as a representative of the Satrap of the Brathian Island Conglomerate.]

The who?

[Well, hi and hello. Obviously, first contact between new peoples is always a little awkward. It would be helpful if we could figure out what each of us was looking for. Non-aggression agreement? Assistance against the wave? Trade?]

I can feel a ripple of humour from the mind on the other side of the bridge.

[You just said the magic word,] she chuckles.