

Chrysalis 1211

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Chapter 1211: Commerce

The best way to ensure peaceful cooperation with your neighbours, is to make sure it's far more profitable to continue living together than it is to go to war. Wars are expensive, messy affairs after all. Pay for arms and armour, pay for training, pay for wages, food, transportation and shelter. And after you've paid for all of that, what does your soldier go and do? Dies! They die! Investment is lost on so many levels that it makes my heart bleed.

And for what? Territory? Raw natural resources?

Those raw resources are the cheapest possible form of that substance. After the artisans get their hands on it, the enchanters have worked their magic on it, then you have something of worth! Being the person to dig it out of the ground is hardly a privilege.

Embrace your neighbours, and profit. Only fools and fanatics go to war.

- Excerpt from 'On Ruling' by Satrap Umizan

Eran Umizan, wife of the Satrap, wasn't an easy woman to impress. She had seen rivers of gold. She had seen a pagoda of pure sapphire gleaming with fractured light beneath the waves. The fortress constructed by the ants lacked the elegance, lacked the sparkle and shine that she had grown accustomed to, but still... there was something about it that she found *impressive*.

Was it the scale? Certainly it was enormous. The ants had provided an escort, welcoming the diplomatic envoy from the Conglomerate within their mountain, opening the vast gates to allow their safe passage. Within, they found cavernous halls with high-arching ceilings and grand passages that dwarfed the brathians within.

Perhaps it was the time frame? She knew that the ants hadn't been here long, a month perhaps? What they had put together in that period was nothing short of remarkable.

The precision? Every line was perfect. She leaned close to inspect the walls several times, and to her trained eye, she could find no flaw in any of them. The stonework was perfectly smooth, without chip or indent. The angles seemed to stretch out into infinity. Every arch, the neatest possible curve, every corner exactly ninety degrees.

A strong argument could be made for the art. She hadn't expected to see it within a monster's den, but it was everywhere she looked. Frescoes, statues and carvings decorated almost every surface. Each depicting glorious scenes of ant triumph, or incredible landscapes dotted with ant workers tending to crops and fields, or battle in the tunnels. Perhaps had they been formed of gold or silver, or carved in-relief from a diamond pane, they would have moved her more deeply, but there was still something about them that soothed her heart.

"They wish for us to sit," her advisor, the Court Mage, Irisod told her, gesturing toward the round table before them.

The table was carved of stone directly from the mountain itself, a part of the room as much as the walls. The chairs, thankfully, were more comfortable, made of gleaming wood that thrummed with earth mana, and appropriately cushioned.

“Thank them for their hospitality,” she replied and sat, dignified.

Her flowing robes fell back from her shoulders, exposing the shimmering blue scales of her upper arms as she folded her hands in front of her.

There were several ants in the room, but not as many as she expected. The large one remained, though the monster was forced to curl its body up so as not to dominate the space. Certainly, it couldn't fit around the table.

Eran took a moment to examine the rest of her diplomatic mission. Piris, predictably, was vibrating with excitement, staring at everything around her with wide eyes. Thankfully, Theraz had taken her words to heart and stayed by the girl's side, keeping a tight grip on her arm and reminding her of proper behaviour.

Her guards were as stone-faced and prepared as she should expect, given their perilous position. Should their hosts turn aggressive, it was up to them to hold on long enough for the Siren to arrive from her position in the waters outside to secure a path home.

The mages were similarly grim-faced as they monitored the area for any hint of danger and communicated mentally with the ants.

Irisod leaned close once more.

“They are offering refreshments, Eran. Are you willing to accept?”

“It would be rude to decline.”

“What if they offer Biomass?”

“Then we gracefully excuse ourselves from partaking.”

It was a valid point. What would the ants offer besides what they themselves ate?

Shockingly, a smaller ant entered with strangely formed front legs, gripping a tray in its claws as it walked on the other four. With a strange insect grace, the tray was slid in front of her to reveal a steaming cup of tea, along with a buttered scone.

A confused Irison spoke in her ear again.

“They apologise for not being able to offer cake and a proper selection of biscuits. Apparently, they don't have direct contact with their other nests and are short on supplies.” She hesitated. “They are surprisingly sincere in their apologies.”

“They take hospitality seriously, then?”

“Apparently so.”

Discreetly, she leaned forward to inhale the fragrance of the tea, allowing her necklace to hang close to the food. No reaction. Unpoisoned, then.

With exquisite motions, she lifted the cup and brought it to her lips, allowing herself a sip of the liquid. She considered for a moment, then took another.

"This tea is incredible," she murmured. "By the waves, where did they get this?"

"You want me to ask them?"

She hesitated. Would it be taken as a sign of weakness to be asking questions already? Surely not.

"Please do."

She managed not to jump in her seat as several ants clacked their mandibles, breaking the hushed silence in the chamber, though her guards lacked the same level of self control. Several swords were halfway removed from their sheaths as Irisod hastily spoke aloud.

"They were expressing happiness," she said clearly, "the Eran enquired where they sourced their tea and spoke of its quality. The ants were pleased, as they grow the leaves themselves. Apparently, the drink is a favourite with their Queen? Among their Queens. Please excuse me."

"So they have more than one, then?" she mused as she took another long sip.

"Should I ask?"

"No. They are ants. Asking after their Queens will likely lead to trouble. Let us deal with those in front of us."

These negotiations would be amongst the most interesting of her life. First contact with an entire new civilization of monsters. Who knew what could come of it? Most importantly, did they have anything to trade?

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Chapter 1212: Brilliance

The ability to create functional gates was perhaps the greatest leap forward in magical technology since the time of Rending. Safely securing travel, even at significant expense, between strata, between cities, and finally connecting the civilisations in a meaningful way, changed life on Pangera forever. No longer were the civilised races forced to huddle in their cities, with only the mightiest of warriors able to leave or travel with any reliability.

Trade flourished. Cultural exchange blossomed. Alliances were formed and cemented. The gates are the greatest defence, and the greatest weapon against the Dungeon.

- 'Forward March - Advancing society post-rending.' by Arcurial

Assistant was worried.

"It's nothing, she's fine," Experiment told her tersely.

"Are you sure?"

“Of course I’m sure. Now focus on your job.”

Above them, perched on her station overlooking the experimental portal and the entire workspace, Brilliant flopped listlessly. Her legs dangled uselessly as her antennae shifted this way and that, seemingly without purpose.

“We’re almost ready for the next test,” Experimentant reported up to their leader. “Repairs are complete, in record time, the power banks are charged and our monitors are reading steady.”

“Of course the repairs are complete,” Brilliant sighed, “there was barely any explosion at all last time.”

“That’s not a bad thing, remember?” Experimentant griped acidly as she continued to direct the rest of the team.

“It’s boring.”

“We’re on the verge of creating a breakthrough in portal technology for the Colony, and all you have to say is ‘it’s boring’?! We might even succeed on this attempt!”

“That’s exactly the problem,” Brilliant said, completely devoid of energy. “We *are* going to succeed on this attempt. There’s no mystery, no excitement, no risk of anything blowing up, no sense of the unknown.”

Her legs wiggled fitfully before she resumed her listless flop.

“I just can’t feel any interest now that we’ve succeeded.”

“But we *haven’t* succeeded,” Experimentant snapped. “I don’t see a stable gate here in the chamber, do you? How about you ensure that you’re correct before you just... do whatever it is that you’re doing?”

“I’m already sure I’m correct,” the leader groaned. “Did you forget who I am? I’m Brilliant.”

“Fine. Be that way. Assistant, do we have contact with the destination?”

“The s-s-signal is coming th-th-th-through.”

“Stop your shivering. It’s going to be fine!”

“I-I-I’m just excited!”

“Weak,” Brilliant called.

“You be quiet.”

Experimentant took a deep breath and looked carefully around the chamber once more. The team were busy preparing the gate, ensuring the many, many enchantments, reading devices and sensor arrays were all operational and reading correctly.

Around the outside of the room, the vast powerbanks hummed with energy, the mana within churning as if begging to be released. Even the liquid mana tanks were half full, enough power to blast a hole in the dimensional weave should they so desire.

But they weren't going to blast a hole, they shouldn't need to anymore. As their tests had gone on, Brilliant had refined the process more and more, narrowing their focus and adjusting the method from a battering ram between dimensions to a handshake through space and time.

In the last test, they'd successfully established contact between the sending and receiving gates, but failed to stabilise it before there was another manifold collapse with only minor blowback.

"We begin the next test in one minute!" she announced to the room. "Clear the gate!"

"Gate is clear!"

"Begin recordings!"

"Recordings started!"

"Activate weave monitoring!"

"Activated!"

"Connect the powerbanks!"

There was a loud *thunk* and a rippling of energy within the gate.

"Connected!"

"Charge the shields!"

"Charged!"

"Assistant, are our coordinates locked?"

"Th-th-they're locked! We're holding s-s-s-steady. S-s-s-signal is still clear!"

"Initiate the handshake!"

Power crackled within the gate, sparks of dimensional energy flickering and leaping into the air.

"I-i-i-initiated!"

"Everyone into the bunkers! Go! Go! Go!"

There were over a hundred members of the team at this point, and they turned and *dashed* into the waiting cages that lined the room. Experiment grabbed Assistant and dragged her along as she ran.

"W-w-what about Brilliant?" she stammered.

"No need," Brilliant waved back at them lazily as she gazed down into the crackling rift.

"You heard her. Now run!"

As the chamber thrummed with power, the two threw themselves into the cages before scrambling to turn around and see what happened. Led by channels carved into the floor, the vast reserves of arcane energy streamed toward the gate. The sheer density of power caused reality to bend and twist, sending lightning sparking and writhing through the air.

The gate itself flickered and then rang like a gong, a deep intonation that rumbled through the chamber and rattled the ants inside their own carapaces.

“Here it goes,” Experimentant whispered.

There was a sound like inrushing air before the gathering purple energy within the gate suddenly *exploded*. Not outward, but *forwards*, as if tunnelling deep into the floor, except it wasn’t; it was tunnelling through dimensions.

“Come on. Come onnnnn.”

Above it all, Brilliant continued to gaze down into the rift, devoid of interest or energy.

Like a whirlpool, the dimensional energy drained down and down endlessly, forming a tunnel that would hopefully connect to the exit point.

Then, suddenly, it stopped. The whirlpool of energy ceased, grew still and stabilised. Huddled in the cages and protected behind powerful shields, the many members of the team boggled, not quite willing to believe what they were seeing.

Where was the explosion? Where was the detonation or life-threatening collapse or dimensional void-monster threatening them from the beyond?

“Wait!” Experimentant demanded.

Everyone tensed.

“Don’t go early. We don’t know what could happen next.”

They continued to watch in silence, waiting. At any moment, the entire thing would collapse and blow up in their faces. It always did. But as the seconds ticked by, and nothing continued to happen, a tiny whisper of belief began to grow in Experimentant’s heart.

“Yaaaaaay,” Brilliant huffed, then proceeded to clap her legs together beneath her, sarcastically. “I did it.”

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Chapter 1213: The Goods

Negotiations were always a delicate matter. There were many things to consider, after all. What was culturally and economically acceptable to both sides? What did each side want from the other? It was around these things that discussions would focus.

The first thing Eran Umizan needed to discern was what it was the Colony *desired*.

“Do they need food?”

Clearly, they had an interest in foodstuffs, as evidenced by the tea and scones. There was a brief consultation.

“They don’t,” Irisod told her. “Apparently, they grow all of their own food. Their own sugar, wheat, tea leaves and everything else they consume in large quantities. For satisfying their hunger, they generally use Biomass or... aphids? I’m not sure what those are.”

Interesting.

“We can negotiate a price for access to our gates?” she suggested. “Would they be interested in discussing terms for such an agreement?”

The price would be *hideously* expensive, of course. If you couldn’t make your own gates, then you were at the mercy of whoever was in a position to offer you access to one.

An ant entered with another tray covered in delectable-looking slices of layered cake, each topped with a swirl of pink cream. Eran’s brow went up as the tray was carefully placed before her, and another was distributed amongst her retinue.

Again, no poison.

“I thought they were short on supplies?” she asked her Court Mage, quietly.

“Apparently, they just developed their own gate.”

“What? When?”

“Just now.”

“As in...?”

“As in, during this discussion.”

“And the first thing they used it for was...”

“To bring us cake, yes.”

She stared down at the delicate confection, each layer as clearly defined as if cut by a razor. On closer inspection, she could see glistening fruits embedded in each section, strawberries in the red layer, and peaches in the orange. She took her fork and bit into it.

It was delicious.

“Please thank them for the food,” she said, then turned and glared at her daughter. “Piris! Manners!” she snapped.

Her daughter had seized upon her dessert and begun stuffing her face with it in a most un-decorous manner. The girl flushed under the withering glare of her mother and licked the cream from her cheek.

Eran tapped a finger to her chin. The Colony, as she now knew they preferred to be called, were an interesting case. They didn’t want what most she negotiated with wanted, as they were monsters.

“Are they interested in jewellery? They could adorn their Queens with the finest gems the fourth stratum has to offer, cut by our expert crafters.”

They seemed both protective and absurdly doting on their Queens, considering they seemed to have developed an entire culinary culture around serving their ant mothers sweets. Perhaps they would be interested in decorating them?

“They are mildly interested. To be more clear, they don’t think the Queens will like them, but they are willing to offer some, just in case.”

“Very well.”

It was something. She would ensure a selection of the highest quality pieces were brought to the fortress as quickly as possible.

“Out of curiosity, are any of you talking to the large one?” she asked of her Mages.

“Not currently, no.”

“Interesting.”

She pondered a moment longer. Would they want arms and armour? None of the ants she saw around her were wearing anything of the sort, though she saw some wore clearly enchanted rings metal rings around where their legs joined their bodies.

There was some level of industry in the Colony, clearly.

“Would they be interested in purchasing equipment from us? Our forges produce materials of the highest quality. Particularly, for metals and woods infused with water mana, we are the best to be found on Pangera.”

The ants rarely ever moved. No expressions crossed their faces and she had to constantly remind herself that she was looking at their skeletons. They *couldn't* move them. The level of stillness went beyond just their heads, they barely moved *at all*. Only the antennae shifted and twitched, but she couldn't begin to interpret such movements. Her negotiating partners were a blank wall. Another thing she had never encountered before.

“They... hmmm.”

“Out with it, Irisod,” she demanded softly, no hint of her irritation crossing her features.

The mage looked troubled, perhaps even a little offended.

“Don’t you dare show anger,” Eran warned. “Cultural differences can give rise to offence where none is intended. Tell me what they said.”

“I apologise. They suggested they would love to purchase a sampling of our wares, but only so they could study them. The ants are confident they can make superior works themselves, given time.”

Brathian pride would suggest that their mastery over the waters would never be questioned, since they were the only sapient race to live in it. They absolutely did have a far higher affinity for water mana than any other race, and were extremely accomplished when applying it in enchanting. She could see why Irisod might have been rankled by such a statement, but Eran was intrigued.

They had that much confidence in their own craftsmanship? It took decades to develop those skills to an acceptable level, longer without training and guidance. The Colony was young, yet they didn't seem foolish.

Perhaps she was approaching this from the wrong angle.

"What sort of things would they be prepared to sell to us?" she asked.

The Court Mage looked surprised, but relayed the question as asked.

"They... aren't sure. Is there anything in particular that we are asking for?"

Eran looked around the room at the ants.

"I am interested in everything. If they are confident in the quality of their craftsmanship, then I would love to see what they make."

They were confused. Even without any facial expressions, she could tell they were confused.

"They made this furniture," Irisod conveyed to her. "They have a reasonably large community of artists who specialise in carving and produced all of the artworks that we can see."

A pause.

"The produce used for the food and drink we've consumed was made by them. Ah, one moment."

An ant entered with a flowing carpet held in its mandibles, laying it across the table.

"They furnish their own fortresses for guests such as us, which includes weaving these carpets."

A glorious pattern formed of marching ants decorated the rug, each woven in a glittering golden thread that radiated a gentle warmth. They *enchanted* the carpet?

Another ant rushed in bearing metal bars.

"They forge these themselves on the third stratum," Irisod said as the bars were placed in front of her.

They radiated heat. Fire Iron.

Then they brought bows. And spears. And swords. Then side-tables. Closets came next. Fine ceramics followed the furniture, then bespoke cutlery.

Slowly, an endless variety of high-quality goods piled up on the table, and Eran Umizan could smell gold.

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Chapter 1214: Mountain Forge of the Fire Ants

Perhaps there is no species on Pangera more suited to mass industry than the ants. They're addicted to work and have an endless level of focus when applying themselves to even the most mundane of tasks.

Combined with their numbers, it's little surprise they were able to achieve what they did.

- Excerpt from 'The Antdustrial Revolution' by Niahm

"Clear the crucible!" Smithant roared.

“Clear the crucible!” her call was echoed around the cavernous hollow within the mountain.

She leaned back to look high overhead, more than two hundred metres up, where another carver met her gaze. Smithant raised the flag she gripped in her opposable claws and waved it.

For several seconds, nothing happened, then a dark red glow suffused the opening at the apex of the cavern. That light grew stronger and brighter as each second passed, until finally, the molten iron reached the opening and began to fall.

Immediately, the temperature in the entire cavern rose precipitously, to the point that Smithant’s carapace began to smoke. Were it not for the many mutations that allowed her to resist high temperatures, she’d be taking damage just from the heat.

As it fell, the liquid metal reached the first of the heat-infusing rings, the discharge of energy feeling like a physical impact. The rods, sunk dozens of metres into the cavern walls, transferred heat from the lava pools trapped in the rock. At the wall, they glowed cherry red, brightening to pure white where they met the ring. As the metal fell through, it glowed ever brighter as additional heat was dumped into it.

The temperature rose yet again and Smithant could *hear* herself starting to sizzle. Three rings to go.

As the liquid fell, it passed through each of the heat-infusing rings in turn, and each time, the liquid glowed brighter and brighter, until it was white hot and so bright Smithant had to turn her back.

Were it not for her protective enchanted metal equipment, her eyes would have boiled out of her head.

The pour of liquid from the ceiling ceased just as the first drips entered the crucible below. Smithant could identify the exact moment as a dull roar shook the cavern. Fire Iron didn’t like to melt. The more the ants heated it, the more obstinate it grew, but eventually it would break.

The super-heated iron from above completed its pour and Smithant waved her signal flag again. Seconds later, she heard a resounding clang as the lid slapped shut and, thankfully, the temperature began to drop once more.

“Ignition,” she called, and her orders were repeated down the line.

It wasn’t visible from where she stood, but she could certainly hear it when the gathered mages drew in their power and unleashed it. There was a rush of air followed by the roar of flames as the teams worked together to produce the hottest fire they could and blasted it into the crucible.

The gigantic furnace weighed over a thousand tons, but under the tremendous forces they subjected it to, it shrieked like a human kettle. The air inside had been superheated to such a degree that regular iron would be reduced to slag in a second. Yet for Fire Iron, it still wasn’t enough.

She turned and signalled for a final time, and the teams of carvers went to work. A vast network of pipes, levers and dials had been constructed around the crucible, and it was to these the nimble crafters of the Colony set their attention.

“Pressure is rising, but within tolerable limits!” one reported.

“Oxygen levels are falling.”

“Temperature is holding steady!”

“Release the valves!” Smithant ordered.

Clunk! Clunk! Clunk!

In sync, the ants pulled three separate levers, causing the pipes to shiver as they became pressurised. They huddled around their dials, checking the readings. All the while, the crucible shuddered, rocking the entire mountain beneath their claws.

Satisfied with what they saw, the carvers grasped the release valves in their mandibles and, with perfect timing, turned them at exactly the same moment.

Superheated, flammable gases flooded the chamber, igniting in an instant and causing such a roar that the crucible lid tried to *jump* from its housing, causing three of the locks pinning it in place to shatter.

“Check the readings!” Smithant demanded.

“Holding steady!” came the reply.

All they needed to do was hold firm. There was no metal the Colony could not tame, no matter how wild and unruly the mana contained within.

They held their nerve, and after several agonising minutes, the shaking subsided, the ear splitting screeching dimmed, and the crucible settled into place once more.

“It’s done,” Smithant announced.

The carvers all looked at each other. Then they sprinted down the stairs to the lower level, climbing over each other in their haste.

They arrived just before the pivotal moment. With casual precision, the smith in charge swung the chute into place, locking its position with deft twists of the mandibles, before she turned to the crucible and hauled back on a lever.

Eighteen steel locks, each a metre thick, groaned as they peeled back from the round opening just above the chute. Blazing gases hissed out, still so hot they shimmered in the air and emitted tongues of flame before they dispersed. After a few moments, Smithant got what she came to see.

From the opening came a molten iron like none she had ever seen. Even as a liquid, it glowed a deep, rust red. The fluid trickled out at first, but the flow increased and steadied as the chute filled. The entire chamber glowed with that light, and Smithant could almost *smell* the rich fire mana in the air.

From the chute, the molten iron flowed down into the moulds where it would be formed into ingots. Soon, they would arrive in her forge and she would shape them into powerful new tools for the Colony.

“How much did we get this time?” she asked the foreant.

“About ten tons, it looks like,” the soot-covered ant replied. “Not as much as we would have liked, but we’re still tinkering with the process.”

“That’s better than they’re doing at the other smelters,” Smithant assured her. “There’s a reason I only came to visit this one.”

“Good to know we’re doing the Colony proud,” the foreant acknowledged, gazing back at the crucible. “If you don’t mind, though, I have a suggestion for something you could develop for us.”

“Oh? If you have a need, I’m happy to hear it.”

The foreant jerked an antenna toward the enormous crucible.

“I need you to find a way we can use Fire Iron to line the crucible. The metals we’re using aren’t up to the task, despite all the measures we’ve taken to mitigate the heat. This one is good for probably ten more firings, but after that, the damage will be too great for us to use it safely.”

She clacked her mandibles in frustration.

Smithant was already considering the problem, her mind a mess of hammers, sparks and sizzling metal.

“I’ll get right on it,” she replied absently, her head already at the forge.

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Chapter 1215: Hard Negotiations

[I really don’t think this is appropriate, Anthony.]

[What do you mean? You used to be a merchant, didn’t you? You’ve negotiated for us a ton of times and been fantastic at it. What’s the problem now?]

[I was negotiating with towns and cities that you’d conquered! It’s not exactly hard to force a fair agreement down their throats when there’s a set of mandibles locked around them!]

[I’m *fairly* sure there weren’t ants standing around with their jaws poised to behead your negotiating partners....]

[Not *literally*, you oversized ant! I’m just saying I had the upper hand in those talks. And I was only talking to other merchants and petty city lords, not brathians!]

[What’s the difference?]

[Brathians are... different! They’re just different!]

[I mean, how have you even met brathians? I thought you’d never been this deep in the Dungeon?]

[I haven’t. There’s brathians at every level and also on the surface.]

The old woman sighed and pinched her brow. How could she explain this to this obstinate insect?

[The brathians are *famous* for being skilled negotiators, even in Liria. They cut hard deals and would sell the scales off their own back for the right price.]

[So they’re ruthless when it comes to money. So’s just about everyone who doesn’t have six or more legs. The bruan’chii excepted.]

[It's pretty much a religion to them! They don't even live in kingdoms or empires. They form trading blocs, caravans and conglomerates instead. Their leaders are usually the best and most successful traders. I got fleeced by the brathians I met on the *surface*, what do you think is going to happen to me down here?!!]

She felt a headache coming on. Then an enormous antenna attempted to rest comfortably around her shoulders.

[Too heavy,] she grumbled.

[Sorry. Look. Ultimately, if you fail to come to an agreement, we don't really care. It seems like they want to peacefully coexist with us, so that's great, they just want to strike some sort of deal for our goods. If we can nab some cores in exchange for rugs and furniture, that's great! If not, they can get stuffed! Alright?]

[Wait,] Enid frowned. [They want *your* goods?]

The giant ant shifted a little.

[Well... it's not like they make anything that we're all that interested in. We don't wear clothes, don't eat fine cuisine, are only interested in ant-themed artwork and besides that, we make all our own stuff already. Even if there was something they could do better, we'd just figure out how they did it and then improve it from there.]

[So, they want to buy goods from you... and then onsell them to others at a markup?]

[Probably? I have to level with you, Enid, the sum total of things I know about business and money mainly involve loans and legs.]

[You lent people your legs? Can ants do that?]

[Let's go with yes. My point is, nobody in the Colony has any idea what they're doing with currency or trade. Alright? We depend on your wisdom and expertise once again. If you feel like you can't succeed, then just stop, tell us you can't do it, and we'll all move on with our lives.]

The old woman sighed, having known from the start she would eventually give in. The Colony had done so much for her and her people, and asked so little in return. It was extremely difficult for her to ever say no to their requests, especially when they came from Anthony himself.

[Fine. When are the brathian arriving?]

[Oh, they're here already. They've been waiting for us to finish this conversation.]

[WHAT!?!]

Ten minutes later, a bedraggled and flustered Enid shuffled into the meeting hall, her back aching and her face flushed from the sudden attention.

[How did you even keep them occupied while I was coming?] she demanded of the big ant sitting idly on one side of the chamber.

[We just told them we were waiting for our negotiator to arrive.]

[So you DID just keep them sitting here?!]

[We told them ants have their own pace of doing things and that seemed to mollify them. That and the cakes and teas.]

The Colony certainly did have its own pace, and it wasn't slow.... Rather the opposite, the ants worked at breakneck pace at all times.

If the guests were mollified at all, it was probably the confectioneries that did the trick. How the ants managed to bake so well when they couldn't possibly have high ranks in the Baking or Cooking Skills was beyond her.

Trying to give at least *some* semblance of professionalism to her side of the negotiations, Enid approached the table and sat as gracefully as she could. She even managed to stifle her little groan as the weight came off her knees.

To her left and right, several members of the Council had gathered, Sloan and Advant, namely, with Anthony still slumped comfortably in the corner. Across the table sat an array of *clearly* high ranking brathians, bedecked in gossamer silks that seemed to float in the air and adorned with tasteful, jaw-dropping jewellery.

[You didn't tell me they were dressed so well! I would have tried to spruce up a little!]

[They are? I can't really tell.]

The people of the water, as they were sometimes called, the brathians were mostly human in their appearance, except for those elements of their physiology that adapted them to their aquatic environment. They were covered head to toe in scales, which varied in colour between families. There were several hues represented at the table, including a deep, shimmering lilac which was incredibly eye-catching. They didn't have fins, as such, but possessed webbed hands and feet, along with membranes on their forearms and calves they could use to propel themselves through the water at tremendous speeds.

"Greetings to you," she bowed in her seat, "I am Enid Ruther, a human, formerly of the surface kingdom of Liria. I was once a merchant and trader, so the Colony has called on me several times in the past to negotiate on their behalf."

The lilac-scaled woman seated directly across from her returned her bow and smiled. To any other race on Pangera, introducing oneself as a lowly merchant would have you dismissed in an instant, but not to a brathian. Merchants were the folk they respected the most.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Enid. I was beginning to fear there would be no haggling at all on this venture, since the ants are so disinterested in profits."

She sounded scandalised by the very concept. As if she'd met humans who didn't believe in breathing. Enid chuckled in sympathy.

"It isn't that they aren't interested in profits; there *are* things that they want, but in general, they are incredibly insular, in the sense that they don't believe anyone can make *anything* better than they can.

Why would they bother to negotiate a long-term deal with you, when they believe they can purchase samples of your goods and replicate them in a year or less?"

The brathian gave a polite smile, clearly dismissing the ants' ability to produce works of the same quality as her own people, despite all that she had seen.

"I am Eran Thouris, wife of Satrap Umizan and the leader of this delegation. I have already gathered that the Colony does not wish to purchase goods, though I hope to change their minds. Instead, I wonder if we would be able to purchase from them. There is much they produce, but as I understand it, they don't have a market to sell to?"

Already, Enid could feel Eran's Skills reaching out to ensnare her from across the table. Doubtless, she was an incredibly powerful negotiator, able to twist deals to her favour no matter the context. It would be madness for Enid to try and go head to head with her. The only way to extricate herself from the talks with a satisfactory result was to be as direct as she could be.

"The only thing the Colony wants from you is cores. No currency, no goods, only cores. If you draw up a list of the goods you want, we will attach prices we think are reasonable, and we can use that as the basis of our agreement."

Eran Thouris, of course, knew what she was trying to do. Her eyes sparkled across the table.

"So straightforward. I'm sure there's room for discussion as to the goods, the volume of trade, and price. After all, the prices will dictate what we want and how much of it we are prepared to purchase."

So much for the easy way out. Enid felt the old fire in her chest begin to burn once again. It had been a long time since she'd had her back to the wall in a trade. Her gaze heated up.

"Very well. Let's talk."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1216: Talks Conclude

Truly, there is nothing so terrifying as being put in a social situation with someone who has mastered the Skills that impact those interactions. Masters of Speech, Negotiation, Persuasion, Hagglng, Diplomacy, Intimidation, the other related Skills, the many, many fusions, and those who have levelled the various Classes which give bonuses to one's words.

To the unprepared or undefended, these people can talk them into, or out of, almost anything. Naturally, this can prove difficult for normal people to navigate, but at the higher level of diplomatic and trade negotiations, every empire, kingdom or conglomerate comes heavily armed, metaphorically speaking, to the table.

- Excerpt from 'The Power of the Word' by Zathus.

Enid felt like she had been wrung dry of every ounce of water in her body. Her eyes were dry, her skin felt parched and itchy. Even her tongue felt as raw as sand in a desert.

Still, she clung to the table, her teeth clenched and a rictus grin entrenched on her face.

Her opponent, seated opposite, could not have appeared more relaxed. The brathian sat comfortably in her chair, sipping tea and cutting small wedges from her double-layered chocolate cream surprise with the side of her fork. When they had gotten down to discussing prices, things had gone about as well as Enid had expected.

Which is to say, she'd been torn to shreds.

She was far from an expert on brathian culture, but she knew enough to know who and what she was dealing with. Eran Thouris was who she was negotiating with, but Eran was not her name, but her title. This was the title given to the person the conglomerate trusted as their commander in battle. Of course, which battlefield did the brathians take most seriously? This one, the negotiating table.

"Now of course, we are yet to discuss the risks of transportation through the fourth stratum," Eran smiled pleasantly, "nor the burden of suspicion that will be placed on my people for cooperating with an emergent race of monsters such as yourselves. Naturally, these difficulties must be compensated for, which can be reflected in the price."

Her words were so *persuasive*, so *reasonable*, it was almost insidious how easily they snaked into Enid's mind. She resisted.

"You come to the Colony asking for trade, and then demand compensation for it?" she rebuffed, forcing the words out from a throat that constricted to prevent her from speaking. "If you want to trade, then trade. If you don't, then leave. The Colony doesn't care."

Eran Thouris leaned forward, a look of polite exasperation on her face.

"The Colony stands to gain thousands of cores every month. I'm sure they very much do care about that. Considering they are producing these goods already, with no market to sell them to, they stand to benefit the most. All I'm asking for is that my people receive a fair share of the profits."

Again, it all sounded so *reasonable*, but Enid knew from personal experience that the brathian would happily slice the amount they needed to pay the Colony down to the bone if she could. After all, the cheaper they acquired the goods, the more money that would flow into the coffers of her conglomerate.

The old mayor knew when she was beaten, and in truth, she'd been beaten a long time ago. All she'd done was run a desperate defensive action, pushing off the woman's demands and holding as much ground as she could, but eventually, she would be worn down and forced to concede to her conditions, which would see the Colony earning a pittance for everything they sold.

Thankfully, she had a secret weapon, one that no negotiator could hope to win against.

"At this point of our talks, I would like to bring in a member of the Colony to give their input on our final discussions," she managed to force out.

She reached a trembling hand onto the table and took a sip of tea to soothe her ragged throat.

Eran Thouris pursed her lips, looking thoughtful.

"Are you not empowered to negotiate on their behalf?" she enquired.

“It was made clear to me that they would have the final say over any terms we settled on,” Enid replied, truthfully.

Being honest was critical in talks at this level, since there were many who could detect lies and turn them against you. Skirting the truth was an artform as old as time for merchants of all levels.

“Very well,” the brathian conceded, as if she were the one giving permission.

She didn’t have a choice, she *had* to accede to this request; since the Colony had the final say, they had to be included in the talks. Enid permitted herself a small smile. She turned to the giant ant who now lay, legs splayed, against the wall of the chamber, and pointed to her head. A few moments later, she felt that vast mind reach out to hers.

[Hey Enid, how’s it going? You look.... You’ve looked better, I have to say.]

[How rude,] she sniffed. [Who do you think I’m enduring this for? I told them I was going to bring you into the talks at this point since you will have final say on everything.]

[Oh? Why me? I don’t think I’m equipped for this, Enid. I don’t exactly have a mind for logistics.]

[Don’t worry about any of that. Just know that you will be put into direct mental communication with their representative, Eran Thouris, which she will only agree to if her mages can join as well to ensure she is protected.]

[Who’s going to protect me?] the big ant asked, and Enid scoffed.

[Do you need protection?]

[Probably not....]

[Fine then.]

“And who are you bringing into the conversation?” Eran asked with unwavering confidence.

Enid gestured toward him.

“The Eldest of the Colony. The Eldest is highly regarded within the family and the others will follow their words.”

Eran eyed the gigantic monster while the mages behind her grew extremely agitated. Connecting the mind of their leader to such a monster was an obvious risk, but there was so much money at stake, the brathians could hardly refuse.

So they didn’t.

[Hey, nice to meet you. You want stuff, we want cores. This shouldn’t be too complicated.]

Enid smiled. Let the games begin.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1217: Talks Conclude Pt 2

Already, Enid could detect the faint signs of tightness around Eran Thouris' eyes. She controlled her face. She didn't want to appear smug during the negotiations.

[I am simply communicating the many difficulties that we will incur in order to facilitate this transaction,] Eran patiently explained.

[Hey, if it's too hard for you, we can just call the whole thing off,] Anthony replied cheerfully. [We don't want to impose. No need to endure any hardship on our account.]

It was already the fourth time he'd suggested ending the talks in three minutes of dialogue.

[Wouldn't it be a shame for your Colony to miss this opportunity to gain cores? I can only imagine how precious they are to you and your family.]

[Oh, of course. We need, like, infinity cores.] The giant ant shrugged his antennae. [But if this doesn't work, we'll figure something else out. We're pretty creative and hardworking. I mean, we're *ants*.]

[But since this opportunity is here in front of you, don't you want to make the most of it?]

Anthony scratched at his carapace with one antenna, confused.

[I mean, sure? I'm trying to understand if you want this trade or not, if I'm honest. You won't stop talking about how hard it is for your side to make it happen and compensation, so I suggest we call it off, and then you won't stop insisting on how the Colony will be missing out. I've told you several times already, there's no need to worry about us, we're doing fine. If anything, it sounds like your conglomerate are the ones who need help. Is there anything we can do for you? You need food? Protection? We can have fifty thousand ants deployed in an hour if you need them. We... uh... just can't go underwater. Yet.]

Enid laughed and then disguised it as a cough, patting herself on the chest and picking up her cup to sip her tea. There was a bare hint of floral notes to this blend, with *just* the right amount of sugar stirred in.

In one fell swoop, Anthony had punctured through Eran's talk of difficulties by questioning the strength of the brathian Conglomerate, and then threatened them with an army fifty thousand strong which would arrive at their territory before the delegation returned home. Best of all, he hadn't intended any of it.

Perhaps it was because he was a monster, or just because he was Anthony, but he was maddingly immune to the effects of social Skills. Enid had never noticed any effect from her own, and it seemed even someone as talented and highly ranked as Eran couldn't make a dent in him. The frustration was starting to mount, Enid could detect a slight darkening of the scales around the brathian's neck.

[Well, perhaps we should go over some of the prices your negotiator and I have established so we can find some common ground. I think you'll find they are most fair.]

[You've got a list or something, Enid?]

[Yes. Yes I do.]

The old woman grimaced. It wasn't a list she could be proud of. She'd held on as best she could, but that didn't detract from the absolute drubbing she'd received.

[Firstly, let us look at the household items, starting with the carpets. Naturally, we need to take into account the weight and delicate nature of such goods when transporting them, as well as finding customers for your... unique designs.]

Eran launched into a detailed explanation of the many costs involved in collecting, checking, storing and transporting the goods, but Anthony was shifting uncomfortably after a minute.

[We can do all of that,] he said, a little irritation bleeding through. [Show us how you want it packed and we'll get it done. We can transport it and provide the security ourselves if it's so difficult. How many guards do you need for a caravan? Ten? Twenty?]

The brathian permitted herself a small smile.

[We would usually have two hundred guards, minimum, for a caravan of any value.]

The giant ant wagged his antennae in confusion.

[I was talking thousands. Ten thousand, or twenty thousand guards. You only need two hundred? That's... not many?]

Eran blinked.

[Let's not worry about all the talk about difficulties,] Anthony said, smoothly attempting to divert the conversation away from boring details. [Just give me the percentages. In terms of how much you will sell the product for, what percentage will the Colony earn?]

[Such a crude manner of examining commerce does not take into account the many nuances involved...]
Eran sputtered.

Which is exactly why Anthony likes it, Enid thought smugly to herself.

[I assumed you might want something like this, so I took the liberty of enquiring after these numbers. I have them here if you want them.]

[Oh? Thanks, Enid! Hit me.]

[H-hit... you?]

[Tell me the numbers.]

[Oh. Well, for the carpets and rugs, the Colony would receive twenty percent of the final sale price.]

Ants never moved much, when they didn't want to. Aside from assiduously cleaning their antennae, they weren't moving all that much during these talks, but right now, Anthony grew perfectly still. He didn't move *at all*, for a long, awkward moment.

[*Twenty?*] he said, finally, his mental tone curiously flat. [We harvest the raw materials, do all the Skilled labour, enchant it, bring it down to the fourth and we get... twenty percent?]

The gigantic ant actually stood, turning to face the brathians directly, his enormous and menacing mandibles pointing directly at them. The scaled guards were *not* pleased with this development, though the Eran herself remained admirably cool.

[Are you wanting to break our legs as well?] the ant demanded.

Eran blinked.

[No? Why would we want to break your legs? We don't want to hurt you at all.]

[Then why do I feel so much pain right now?]

He communicated to Enid directly.

[These aren't fish, these are *sharks*!]

[I tried to warn you,] she said. [Commerce is their life. They love the process of making money just as much as they love the wealth they generate. They'll squeeze as hard as they can.]

[Sheesh.]

He reopened communication to Eran.

[Yeah. I'm thinking we get eighty percent, since we do all the work? You can skim twenty off the top for your trouble. Sound good?]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1218: Talks Conclude pt 3

As it turned out, it did not 'sound good', to the brathians.

[Twenty percent! That's usury,] she declared flatly.

[Isn't that the percentage you were offering us?] Anthony pointed out.

[This was a number we arrived at after a lengthy discussion of the costs and risks of conducting business. I would be happy to go over them with you....]

Anthony scratched at his head as Enid did all she could to contain her smile, regardless of how hard it threatened to creep over her face.

[We are the ones making the stuff,] he insisted. [Without us, there's no trade for you to profit from at all, you'll have no goods. All you have to do is receive the stuff and take it somewhere you can sell it, which is something you already do. As I understand it, you have a network of caravans, merchants, markets and stores already, so you don't have to establish anything new, this is just another source of goods for you to plug into your pipeline.]

Eran tried a different tack.

[It's true we have an exceptionally successful business spread over multiple strata, and a strong presence in some of the biggest markets in the fourth stratum, including the Silver City. We deal with many, many suppliers as well as create our own artisanal products for sale. This isn't a trade that we *need*,] she spoke with just the right amount of deprecation, insinuating that she was doing them a favour. [Access to our conglomerate is worth paying a heavy price.]

Surprisingly, Anthony nodded.

[That's persuasive, you've done a lot of work and we would benefit from that. We can't have hard work be unrewarded.]

Eran Thouris eased ever so slightly in her chair. Clearly, she thought she was finally getting somewhere. Enid knew better.

[Soooo. You can have twenty-five percent,] the Ant announced with an air of finality. [That seems fair to me.]

The brathian reeled, but collected herself a fraction of a second later. Enid was impressed. This woman was *tough*. Dealing with Anthony was enough to send a teenager grey.

[You added *five percent* in recognition of our input?] she sought to clarify, a little coldly.

[Of course not,] Anthony replied reasonably. [Before, I was giving you twenty percent, but fifteen of that was just because I'm nice. Now I think you actually deserve twenty five. It's a totally different calculation.]

There was open confusion on the face of the brathian negotiator now. Her Skills weren't working as they should, and the direction of the conversation had gone far from what she had intended. Enid almost felt sorry for her. It was only going to go downhill from here.

She threatened to walk away from the deal if the percentage wasn't better. Anthony didn't care.

She demanded they begin negotiating prices at fifty percent, no lower. Anthony threatened to walk away.

She tried to talk down the quality of the produce and thus diminish its price. Anthony didn't believe her, stating anything his siblings made was either the best in the world, or soon would be.

She tried to emphasise the power of the conglomerate and the influence they had. She hinted they could ban the Colony from ever trading in the fourth if they so chose. Again, Anthony didn't care. The ants were perfectly content making things just to decorate their nests and insisted they would find other ways to procure the cores they needed. He made it clear in no uncertain terms that he considered this deal to be the Colony doing the Brathian Island Conglomerate a favour, and not the other way around.

She protested. He shrugged.

She needed. He got bored.

She marshalled her words and went into battle, eloquently and viciously. He stopped listening.

It went on for *hours* with the giant ant growing more and more irritated and the brathian delegation growing more and more desperate. Finally, one of them cracked.

[Fine! You can have forty percent, alright? We'll pack and ship the goods to you ourselves, you can station people here in the nest to make sure it's done to your satisfaction and then you can deal with it from there.]

A major concession from Anthony's perspective, an insulting offer from his opponent's. Eran Thouris' mouth tightened to a thin line. Before she could say anything over the mind-bridge, Anthony cut her off.

[Considering we are doing all of the creating, and you are only doing the selling, I consider forty percent to be just shy of robbing us. I'm going to emphasise this point. Take it or leave it. The conditions aren't going to get any better than this. In fact, if you agree in the next thirty seconds, I'll extend the conditions of this deal to five years before it's renegotiated and throw in a fine set of knives delivered directly to your door. If you don't agree in thirty seconds, then we shake hands and go our separate ways, it wasn't meant to be.]

Finally, the ant had reached the end of his patience and Enid knew that he had bent as far as he was going to. She caught the eye of her opponent across the table and gave her a subtle nod. He meant what he'd said. Eran needed to think and think quickly.

She smiled and sipped her tea.

[It seems as though we have a deal,] she said.

The brathians around the table and in the chamber looked pained, as if they'd just been forced to digest something truly unpleasant, and honestly, Anthony radiated the same kind of energy. A successful negotiation, nobody was happy!

It all worked out better than she'd expected.

Chrysalis

Chapter 1219: Back to Business

As nice as it is to sit down, eat tea and cake with our neighbours while discussing the inherent superiority of ant-made goods, there is still a wave going on. It's not like it's a big deal, there's just this globe-spanning disaster in the form of endlessly spawning monsters, savage and berserk, desperate for Biomass and experience.

So, with the ink barely dry on our trade deal, the brathians returned to the waters of the lake, vaguely promising that less monsters would assault us from the shoreline and promising to return when the wave ended. Which was all well and good, there were a lot of ants pulled from the frontlines to help with the negotiations and they needed to get their abdomens back into the fight.

I decided to chat with Enid for a while before she went back to her rooms.

[I can't believe you got them to agree to such terms,] the old woman shakes her head.

[What?] I reply, indignant. [We're practically getting robbed! We fight the monsters in the Dungeon and control the territory necessary to collect the raw goods. Then we process it all ourselves, then we do all the work shaping it, turning it into something of use, and enchant it! If that's not enough, we agreed to bring everything to the fourth stratum, AND pack everything according to their standards, AND drop everything on their doorstep! What else are they after? Blood?!]

[I think, technically, you don't have blood, you have ichor. Which they would want if they could get it, yes.]

Enid lent back in her chair and chuckled. I leaned in a little closer to inspect the old woman, she really didn't look well. The talks had drained her, she was as shrivelled as a prune.

[I'm not saying the Colony doesn't do a lot of work, but transportation and access to markets are expensive. Most producers are lucky to see thirty percent, if that.]

[For thirty percent, I would have told them to get stuffed and set up a market on the shoreline. They're dreaming if they think the Colony can be taken advantage of. There's no war we can't win, even an economic one.]

[You're probably *most* dangerous in an economic conflict,] Enid observed, her tone heavy with fatigue. [There's going to be millions and millions of you soon, so many workers, who effectively work for free.... You can afford to sell so much cheaper than anyone else.]

Hmmm. That's a good point. The workers in the Colony don't draw a salary, as such. They get housed, fed, educated, provided resources, but don't have anything like purchasing power of their own. I mean, they're ants, they don't feel the need for any reward, they work for the betterment of the family. If I offered them some sort of reward, cores for example, as payment for their work, I honestly think they would just donate them to the hatchlings.

[This is a problem,] I told Enid. [The workers of the Colony *should* get some sort of reward for their efforts.]

Enid shook her head.

[There's nothing they would accept and we both know it. I don't see anything wrong with what the Colony is doing. The workers don't get paid, but it isn't as if they're being exploited. The profit, if you want to call it that, of their work is accumulated by the family, not any individual.]

I wasn't satisfied, but what she said made sense.

[Well, thank you very much for your time, Enid. I can see that this wasn't easy for you.]

The old woman sighed and tried to push herself up from her chair, but failed.

[Damn. I feel so weak. No, don't fuss!]

She snaps at me as I approach, concerned, but she only waves me away.

[It was fun. I haven't engaged in a proper battle like that for many years. Were I twenty years younger, my blood would have been boiling after such a defeat, but I'm just tired. I'll need a lot of rest after all this.]

[Lots of rest is the least you're going to get.]

[What do you mean?]

Enid's face begins to change as understanding of what I mean starts to dawn on her, but it's too late. Her chair is seized by a team of ants and lifted into the air while she's still on it. Maintaining perfect balance, they begin to carry her away, to the medical ward if my guess is right.

[Anthony! Where are they taking me?!]

[Quick medical check, I expect. You can expect only the finest treatment after all you've done for the Colony today.]

[I don't want this! Just send me back to my room!]

[Sorry Enid... the mental... connection... appears to be... breaking up!]

[That's not how a mind bridge works!]

[Oh. In that case, sorry, I can't hear you, I already cut the connection.]

[YOU'RE STILL TALKING TO ME!]

[Damn, you're sharp. I'll catch up with you soon, Enid! Rest well!]

Still squawking indignantly, Enid is carried away to the hospital by her personal team of dedicated healers. As if we won't take good care of someone who works so hard for the family.

Well, this was all an interesting distraction, learning about a whole... conglomerate of brathians living in the lake next to us. We've barely scratched the surface of everything that's going on in the fourth stratum, but I guess we'll have more time to worry about things like that after the wave is finished.

It's not the right time to be adventuring all over the place. We have a wave to deal with, I have a little champion to train and there's three pets who need to evolve.

In fact... if the gate is operational....

I head down into the nest and find the gate-room. Sure enough, it's crackling with energy, a rather lethargic-looking Brilliant stumping about the place, poking at this and that with her antennae.

[Hey there, Brilliant! You actually did it! Working gate technology. This might be the single biggest contribution anyone has made to the family! Are you happy?]

She barely turns towards me.

[You doubted me? It was simple, I'm... Brilliant... or whatever.]

She's so flat! Where's her usual energy?

[What the heck is wrong with you? This time?] I loom over the tiny ant and prod her with a foreleg.
[Where's your get up and go? Your gusto!]

[I'm just feeling bored. We had the gate thing pretty much figured out a week ago. There's a ton of fine tuning still to be done. It'll be months before we get our mandibles on all the little efficiencies needed to minimise the mana requirements.]

She sighs and kicks at a pebble.

[There's just no adventure in it. It's not exciting to me anymore.]

I look at her, confused.

[So... why are you still doing it?]

[I have to!] She throws up her antennae with a hint of her old vigour. [There's nobody else as good as me at working with dimensions, only I have the evolutions and mutations that allow me to see the weave!]

[Do you *have* to have those abilities to do the fine tuning? I thought you had a whole team helping you up in the second stratum.]

[I do, but they aren't good enough to do the work without my supervision,] she groans. [They just aren't...]

[Brilliant,] the two of us say together.

I tap her on the back.

[Yeah, so you start up a second team. One group can work on smoothing out the gates, and the other can work on something new. Mana cannons. Or enchanted rocks that walk around and smash things. Or creating islands that fly. Or short distance teleportation devices. Oh! Do you think you could create something that makes scouts invisible? That would be cool and save a *ton* of evolutionary energy. Self-repairing nest walls? Ooooo, could you siphon power from those other dimensions? And you're like a Dungeon Seer, right? You should train up a team of those and see what you can learn about the Dungeon. There's tons of things the Colony doesn't know about, which we really need to know about.]

The more ideas I pelt her with, the more Brilliant begins to vibrate, intense energy building up inside her carapace.

[But... but... so many.... So many ideas! I must pursue them all! I MUST UNDERSTAND EVERYTHING!]

[In that case,] I tell her, [you should set up more teams.]

[I will! And I will lead them all! Because I'm BRILLIANT!]

[Of course you are.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1220: The Price of Doing Business

"Do not discuss what we have seen or heard until we return home," the Eran warned her people as they made their way out of the grand ant fortress.

Here on an expedition, her word was law and even her daughter knew better than to cause trouble for her mother at this moment in particular. The brathians were silent for the remainder of the journey. They marched in silence through the enormous tunnels of the fortress, didn't breathe a word as they exited the vast gates and continued to keep their mouths shut as they were escorted by the ants through the monsters and down to the shoreline.

With dignity, they bowed to the ants, turned and walked into the water, their clothing floating around them as they walked deeper and deeper.

Once they were fully submerged, Eran Thouris gave her people a significant look and began to swim, weaving her magic to propel herself and the entire group through the water at an incredible speed. Enormous monsters churned through the water, closer than any would like, but the song of the siren filled the lake around them, and the monsters ignored them completely.

On they swam, through the murk and out into the brathian territory, passing through the barrier without difficulty.

“May we speak now?” Theraz asked cautiously.

“You may converse,” came the terse reply, “but no details about the negotiation or what we’ve seen. The Satrap will want our unfiltered thoughts.”

“That was so exciting!” Piris exclaimed. “An entire empire of ants! It’s incredible! And that fortress? How long did it take them to build it? Almost no time at all!”

Theraz swam closer and nudged his cousin with his elbow.

“We aren’t meant to be talking about it yet.”

She turned and stuck her tongue out at him.

“But it was so interesting! Have you ever seen anything like it?”

“No, I haven’t, but I know to keep my mouth shut before we meet the Satrap. You can talk all you want about it once we arrive.”

Piris rolled her eyes, but quietened. She flitted about in the water, finding it difficult to contain her excitement, but she managed to bottle it up long enough for them to arrive before the Satrap.

The moment the door to her husband’s chambers shut, Eran’s smooth expression twisted in anger as she ripped the necklace from around her neck and blasted it through the water against the wall.

“DAMN INSECT!” she roared. “Forty percent! FORTY PERCENT! I haven’t felt this humiliated for two decades.”

The Satrap jumped in his seat, his expression growing faintly terrified as his wife showed her rage so publicly. He glanced toward Theraz, who shook his head in warning.

“Papa! It was so amazing! You won’t believe how clever those ants are. They can make all sorts of things, and they served us incredible cakes, and tea, and the fortress was unbelievably huge, and there was an ant there who was enormous!”

“That’s nice, my precious jewel,” he smiled at his daughter before turning his concerned expression back to his wife.

“Darling, please. The delegation and court magicians are still present.”

“They saw the whole thing! The creature was immune to all of my Skills. A mutation? Some sort of evolution? We were completely swindled!”

She clawed at the water around her, fingers tearing gashes through the lake.

Satrap Umizan flinched on his throne and turned to Theraz.

“Was it really that bad? Do we owe them money?”

He sounded as if he thought they’d demanded his head on a plate.

“No, nothing like that,” Theraz said, his palms up. “There was a negotiation for the rights to trade the Colony’s goods to other markets, and they demanded a high percentage of the final price. My honoured

Aunt did extremely well against the initial negotiator, an old woman the ants brought in to speak on their behalf, but when the monster entered the talks... my understanding is that it didn't progress nearly so well."

Her scales were still flushed, but Eran managed to get control of herself and gave a strangled laugh.

"That's one way to put it," she said bitterly.

At that moment, Theraz' father entered the chamber, nodding to his brother. Marzban Corozan was powerfully built for a brathian, who tended to be slender and swift. Scars could be seen through the scales all over his arms and chest.

"Theraz," he said, his deep voice reverberating through the water. "I would like to hear about the threat that has shown up on our border."

"Not yet," Umizan broke in, frowning, "I need to hear about these trade negotiations first. Mages, Eran, gather and speak to me," he demanded, clapping his hands.

Minutes later, he sat, pensive, considering what he had heard.

"High quality merchandise, able to be produced cheaply and in mass quantities. In such variety? This is interesting, interesting indeed."

"I am deeply sorry, my Satrap," Eran bowed low, shame written all over her face. "The final terms are dreadful for our people. I will accept any punishment."

"What? No, that's nonsense, my wife," the Satrap declared absent mindedly, then jumped when she raised her head to glare at him. "I mean it! Against a monster who was immune to your Skills, you achieved the best deal that you could. In fact, I would go so far as to say that you may have done something incredible for the future of this conglomerate."

She frowned, puzzled, as the Satrap rose from his throne, his hands behind his back.

"This could play into your concerns as well, brother," he announced, as he began to drift back and forth in the chamber. He held up a hand to stall Marzban before he could speak.

"I need to hear from the others first. Olivis? Float forward, I need to hear from my Dungeon Seer."

"I am here, Satrap," the Seer bowed as she moved to the front of the delegation.

"How many ants in the fortress?"

"Hundreds of thousands."

"And they have gate technology?"

"They claim to have invented it while we were present. I believe those claims to be true."

"There must be millions of them already.... They had a human negotiator? Was she a captive?"

"I do not believe so, my lord. She was well cared for and claimed to be an ally of the Colony."

The Satrap pondered these words.

“It’s possible you just secured the future of us all, my wife,” he said, and went on to explain. “They can already produce goods of a high quality, in high volumes, at exceptionally low prices. What do you think would happen to us if they ever managed to bring them to market? They’d undercut *everyone*. Prices would collapse, markets thrown into chaos, trading kingdoms would topple off the face of cliffs! It would take years, decades maybe, but it would happen. If they continue to grow, expand their territory and increase their expertise, they would eventually dominate commerce on Pangera!”

Everyone gasped. The brathian trading conglomerates collapse? How dreadful!

“But we have been saved. We will control the prices when the Colony’s produce goes to market. Of course, we will extract the full value of their work, take a healthy percentage for ourselves, and in so doing, make ourselves invaluable to the ants as their trading partners. We will make profit, ensure our safety, and prevent calamity! This may prove to be the best-worst deal you have ever struck, my wife!”