

Chrysalis 791

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Chapter 791: Evolution

Charge! Pierce!

As ridiculous as it feels, I continue to use the stupid combo of new Skills that I purchased in order to keep leveling them up. Charge is fine, in practice it's very similar to dash with the exception that now it's levelled up to rank three, it's become a proper active Skill that shrouds me in the power of my stamina that shields me when I ram into things. Mandible Spear though? First of all, my mandibles aren't exactly 'sharp'. They aren't pointed. They aren't even remotely spear-like. When I activate the Skill and charge into something mandible first, it feels more like I'm hitting them with a battering ram than a spear!

Secondly, it feels almost like I'm insulting the monsters that I'm fighting. I could charge them, knock them over and finish with one powerful chomp. Instead? I repeatedly prod them with my mandibles, pushing them over in a display that feels more like I'm trying to make fun of them than fight them. It's embarrassing! At least there aren't any members of the Colony here to see me do this... except for the twenty baby-sitters hovering over my head somewhere...

Dammit!

I keep doing it though. For one thing, it's a good way to bring monster's HP down slowly, something I'm not all that good at, and we need weak monsters for the hatchling to get experience from. For another thing, I still hold out hope that Mandible Spear and Charge will fuse into something a little more awesome. If I can manifest a blazing spear of energy as I charge into my foes, how awesome would that be? I have quite a bit of mass at this point, it would be a shame to not use it.

Also, my progress on mind magic has continued quite well. I'm only a few more levels away from reaching the rank which will unlock mind constructs for me! Very exciting... Not only for the constructs themselves, but for the opportunity to check and see what new magic might have unlocked! With any luck, Gravity magic will finally be mine! Allowing me to use more advanced spell forms for the gravity mana I constantly carry around.

"Ha! Level five is mine!" the hatchling crows, standing over the remains of her bedraggled and defeated foe. "Time to evolve!"

"This was a lot harder to achieve back in my day," I grumble as I turn and make my way over to her.

"Maybe I'm just amazing?" she asks, somehow completely seriously and without shame.

"Nooooo," I drawl, "I didn't have anyone serving me almost dead monsters for me to finish off. I had to fight them on my own."

"I asked if I could and you said no!" she huffs.

"Because these things would take your head off it about five seconds!"

"You can't very well not let me fight when I want to and then complain that I'm not doing any fighting," she quite rightly points out.

I sigh.

"Fine, fine. You make a good point. Let's move somewhere a little less busy and get ready for the evolution."

It doesn't take us long to find a more quiet section of tunnel and we settle in.

[Crisis, can you take care of any unwanted guests? This might take a little while.]

[Of course, Master. I'll make sure that no filth disturbs you!]

In a blink, she's gone from my carapace and a forest of tentacles emerge on all sides, blocking this section of tunnel completely from its surroundings. I've no doubt that in a few minutes this entire section of tunnel will be completely empty, all the monsters having run and hidden in sheer terror from the strange creature in their midst. Pushing the insanity and fear of the Dungeon monsters from my mind, I concentrate instead on the matter at hand.

"Do I evolve yet?" the impatient hatchling asks.

At least she asked before rushing into it...

"No. We talked about this. The best evolutions always come when you boost your core a little more than the System recommends. You get a little extra 'spice' in the process. Now this here," I hold up a special core, "is exactly the spice we are talking about. Reinforce your core with this, then you can evolve. But make sure you do what I told you. It might be frustrating to remain a hatchling for another ten levels, but this will pay off in the long run."

I can tell she's not happy about it.

"I just don't want to stay so useless!" she huffs.

"Believe me, this path will make you useful faster, not slower. You really think a tier two mature worker is good for anything around here? Absolutely not. You still wouldn't be able to fight the monsters around here, and you sure as heck wouldn't be able to help with any of the projects around the Colony. By taking the special hatchling evolution, you might remain small and weak at tier two, but you'll get payoffs down the line. You'll be stronger at tier three than you would have been otherwise, same for tier four, and *that's* when you'll finally be of use to the Colony."

"Fine," she grumbles, but accepts the core from my mandibles.

A brief moment of hesitation, then the core dissolves, the energy contained within flowing into her body to join her own core.

"This... isn't very comfortable...." she grunts.

"Sure isn't!" I agree. "Wait till you try a rare core! Now evolve so you don't have to put up with it for long."

The hatchling immediately falls into the listless view of someone fiddling with their menu and after ten minutes she drifts off, starting to glow softly as the process takes hold. Tiny continues to hover over the defenceless youngling, taking the job far more seriously than I expected of him. Giving the big ape a

satisfied nod, I prod Invidia and start a mind magic battle with him to help hone my Skill. He always wins, but there really isn't anyone else for me to practice with at the moment. Just a couple more levels and I'll have the power!

A little less than an hour later the hatchling stirs and we turn to greet her back to the world of the waking.

"Welcome back little one," I tell her, "how do you feel?"

She shakes herself alert before giving herself a quick look over.

"I feel... stronger than before. Better. I suppose."

"You're even very slightly larger!" I encourage her.

She checks herself again.

"Huh. I suppose I am. Alright then, let's get back to it! I want to be useful and I'm not there yet!"

"You sure aren't," I chuckle. "Alright then, back at it."

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Chapter 792: The Mutation Discussion

"Are you really sure that this is going to be important?" the hatchling asks again as we munch down on some Biomass.

"Of course it is! Mutations are extremely important! Supremely important! Raw stats are only one aspect of the strength of a monster, and those are decided by evolutionary tier. Mutations give us access to all sorts of things that can completely change what we are capable of. Depending on the mutations you pick going forward, you'll become a completely different ant! You need to think harder about what you want to do with yourself from this point forward."

Obviously I made the hatchling evolve with maxed mutations for her first go through, not wanting to miss out on that sweet 10% bonus. The amount of evolutionary energy available going from tier one to two was piddly, and ten percent of piddly is, I think, piddly-diddly, but turning your antennae up at free evolutionary energy is a fool's game. And we members of the Colony are not fools!

Having said that, for the first time in her existence, the hatchling had struggled to be decisive when the time came to pick her first set of mutations, so I made some fairly generic suggestions and we went with those. My knowledge of the intricacies of the System has vastly improved since the early days, both from my own experience and from consulting with Granin and his triad. After considering the disposition of the hatchling, what I believed she might need in the future, and potential going forward, I made selections that I think will work out well for her.

I just wasn't going to do it a second time.

I'm not lazy! It's very important that each ant have a clear picture in their mind of the creature they want to be! I'm not going to stand here and imperiously dictate another's future to them. In this Colony, we have the right to self-determination! Not only is it a right, it's a sacred tradition!

"You have to max out your mutations, you need that bonus ten percent energy. And anyway, you're far more capable with mutations than you are without them."

"There's just so many options..." she looks a little blank and I can tell that she's going through the list. "I want them all!"

[Looks like you've got a friend here, Invidia...]

[*Sssheeee can't havesssss them! I will havess them firssst!*]

[I know, buddy.]

"You can't have them all," I tell her bluntly, "you have to pick. Think about the sort of work that you want to do. You want to fight? There's mutations that are great for that. You want to mine? There's mutations for that. Smelt? Be a smith? Care for the young? Lay eggs? Research? Cast magic? There's mutations for all of this stuff."

"How can an eye mutation help me cast magic?" she retorts.

"Mana sensitive lenses, look it up."

...

"Oh."

"I actually took a mutation that helps me absorb mana through my legs," I tell her, lifting a leg for emphasis. "helps keep my core topped off when I'm doing some serious spell slinging. There are all kinds of things you can do. Vibrant is obsessed with speed and has taken heaps of mutations to help her move quicker. I'm pretty sure she actually took mutations to make her carapace more aerodynamic."

"What does that mean?"

"Like... smoother. She doesn't get as much resistance from the air when she's moving quick. She's a good example actually. To become the kind of monster she wanted to be, she had to consider all of her mutations to that end. Her eyes have to be able to see at high speeds, her brain needs to function faster, her reactions have to be quicker, she needs particular musculature in her legs, she adjusted her carapace, she probably has a mutated metabolism and respiratory system to provide the level of energy she needs. On top of all that, she's a powerful soldier with strong jaws and tough defence. This is the kind of thing you can achieve when you really think about what it is that you want."

"What about you, Senior?" the hatchling asks shrewdly. "You don't seem to have specialised at all."

"I'm greedy," I shrug around a mouthful of Biomass, "I really wanted to be able to cast magic, but I didn't want to be too weak in terms of my physical attributes. I wanted the best of both worlds. It's good in some ways, I can cast magic pretty well, and I can fight up close and personal. But I can't cast as well as Invidia over there, since he is completely specialised on it, and I'm not nearly as physically powerful as Tiny, even though they are on the same evolutionary tier as me. There are trade-offs."

"Doesn't sound worth it," she muses, "I think I'd rather be the best at something rather than average at everything."

"I thought you already were the best," I tease.

"I am!" she flares. "I'm just going to be *more* the best!"

"Well. If you want to be exceptional, then you'll need to specialise. Go hard at one thing and focus on it with mutations and evolutions."

"But what do I pick?" she mutters.

"There's an almost infinite number of combinations and specialisations you could go with. If you want to be good at spell casting and mana manipulation, there's a variety of things you can do. You could purchase mana organs and use those, you could go for manual spell weaving, you can specialise in one kind of mana or make yourself more of a generalist. Same with physical builds. You can focus on speed, defence, offense, and you can do all of those in a variety of ways. There really is nothing for it but to get deep into the menus and think about what you find there."

The hatchling takes on a considering aspect as she digests my words. As a champion of the Colony, I'm very keen to see what she decides to go with, what aspect she decides to select. As I look at her thinking about her own future, I get the feeling that no matter what she goes with, it's going to be interesting.

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Chapter 793: Decisions, decisions

The hatchling continues to ruminate over her choices, being far more diligent in perusing the menu lists, looking for combos and asking clarifying questions than I ever was. Not that I had anyone to ask at her stage of evolution! I was a solo Dungeon monster, dammit! Kids these days have it way too easy. But I suppose that's a good thing, I don't want them to suffer as I suffered. Otherwise what would be the point of all that we've achieved? We continue to feed her experience and Biomass as she narrows down her options over time.

As he'd been doing diligently the entire time we'd been in the Dungeon, Tiny continues to watch over her with a keen eye, making sure that she doesn't come to harm, or try to escape. In fact, the escape attempts have dropped to nothing over the last little while. Perhaps now that she feels that she's finally progressing she doesn't feel the need to be elsewhere.

She remains endlessly curious though, asking an endless stream of questions and inspecting everything we come across for herself, refusing to take my word for just about anything. Whenever I give System advice, she always attempts to double check it in her menu, going so far as to make sure she takes a bite out of everything we defeat in order to unlock as many profiles as possible. No matter how small or fiddly the detail, she's keen to absorb and understand it, quite different from Vibrant.

And me...

But I think it's a good thing. If the second champion in the Colony ended up being as empty headed as Vibrant, we'd be in trouble. Although that's not really fair. Vibrant is far from stupid, she simply doesn't sweat the little things, she knows what she wants to do and she goes out and does it. I'm looking forward to seeing what she'll be able to do once she reaches tier six. I expect a truly ridiculous level of speed will be achieved at that point.

Naturally, it doesn't take long to raise the hatchling to level ten and stuff her full of cores and Biomass so that she's ready once again to evolve. Feeding her tier three monsters one after the other certainly takes the time out of it. The downside is that she's only had a few hours to consider her options and what she wants to be in the future, but there's little that we can do about it now, it's time to go for it!

"Alright then little one, here's the special core I've prepared. Make sure you're completely ready before you absorb it, otherwise you'll have to put up with the pain of it longer than you otherwise would need to."

She nods, looking sombrely at the glittering core.

"Made your decisions?" I ask.

She nods again.

"I have. I just feel terrible about all the things that I'm turning my back on. When I make a choice, I throw away so many potential others."

"That's just how it goes, hatchling. As long as you excel in the thing that you find most interesting, I think you'll be alright."

I can tell that her inexhaustible thirst for information and knowledge is behind her hesitation. It's not that she actually wants to be everything, she just wants to experience it, to know what it's like. Which would be a waste of her talents.

"You'll get the same options that everyone gets, the nine basic castes of the Colony. Soldier, scout, general, mage, carver, core shaper, tender, queen and healer. You can pick one of them if you want, but I recommend that you take something that you can shape a little more to your own desires. I can't be sure exactly what special options the System will offer you, since in part it's based on things that are personal to you, but you should get an option that appeals a little more closely to what you envision for yourself. Gandalf is good at sussing out what you want. So you should be fine."

"Alright then, thank you Senior."

I pull back in mock horror.

"Thanks?! From you?! Are you sick?"

"No! It's not my fault if you don't do enough to warrant thanks most of the time."

"Fair enough. Absorb the core and crack on, little one!"

Which she does, the core dissipating into raw energy before she immediately begins to consult her menu, quickly pouring through the options as she grinds her mandibles.

[Back on guard duty Crinis! You know what to do Tiny! Let's get to it Invidia...]

For the four of us, we get back to doing much of what we were doing the last time we were in this position. For me and Invidia, that means more mental warfare. Trying to crack through the little demon's mental defences is impossible, he simply has too many threads running at once, hitting me with a dozen attacks even as he weaves an intricate layer of protection around his own mind, rebuffing

every packet of mana I send across the bridge between us. It's completely exhausting and if we weren't still in range of the Colony, I wouldn't be able to keep it up for long. Thankfully the Vestibule soothes my tortured brains and drives away my headache, keeping me in the game for longer.

Which is a good thing.

Master Mind Magic Affinity (IV) has reached level 40 upgrade available]

[Master Mind Magic Affinity (IV) Level 40 -> Layered Mind Magic Affinity (V), cost 1 sp. At this rank, advanced forms of mind magic will become known to the Skill user, further enhancing their ability to utilise mind magic.]

YASSSSSSSS!

Finally it has arrived! The next big leap in technology has come! After grinding for the omni-elemental construct, and now this, I feel as if after all this time, I'll finally be able to take a step forward on the path of magic. After all, what I've been doing all this time is nothing other than creating the foundation! From this point onward, new unexplored fields of magic await!

[Hold on Invidia! I've finally got it! Give me a minute here...]

I hastily confirm the purchase and then grow still as the pleasant trickling sensation that a Skill upgrade brings washes over my brain. Gradually, the new spell forms take shape in my mind and I finally understand what I have been missing all this time: the mind construct form! At last, it is mine!

Turning into Invidia a little there.

It takes a couple of minutes for the new information to finish forming in my mind and when it does, I'm raring to go. Mind mana construct already working, I spin out the specialised mana that I need and put my brains to work!

Like any new spell form, the mind construct is a complete pain in the business district to create. It'll take a lot of practice before I'm familiar enough with it that I can whip them out on a moment's notice. For now, concentrating hard and taking my time, I put the construct together, linking its maintenance to one of my sub-brains. The moment it slots into place, something strange happens. It's almost like I've grown an extra hand, as if a new limb just appeared within my mind. This time, when I reach for the mind mana, another brain reaches with me and we start working on another construct. How many can I get?!

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Chapter 794: Mind Your Step

After so many years and so much study, you'd think that there would be widespread agreement over the advanced aspects of the System, cooperation across kingdoms providing a deep reservoir of shared knowledge to draw from. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. From the famed Tower to the Academy in Los, these august institutions of learning hoard their secrets like squirrels storing nuts for winter. The deeper initiates are forced to swear binding life oaths to ensure secrecy.

I like to amuse myself by imagining that each of these bodies is protecting the exact same information from each other, never realising that they have nothing unique, but alas that is sadly unlikely. It is for this reason that classification of even the most basic Skills and magical structures within the System are

different almost everywhere you go. When combining this with the System itself being inconsistent from individual to individual in terms of what becomes unlocked and when, teaching someone exactly how Skills will progress throughout their life is a difficult task indeed.

Take magic for example. Essentially all can agree on the basic elements, though they aren't always known by the same name: earth, wind, water, fire. Fantastic, simple, we all get that. Each of these elements has an advanced form, we all agree on that: stone, gas, ice, blue fire. Excellent. The basic elements can also be fused, either by combining the Skills or manually melding the two mana types together during casting. This produces the fused elements: fire and stone form lava, fire and water form steam, fire and wind produce ember, water and earth creates mud, water and wind makes sleet, earth and wind makes dust. All-together, these are considered the 'basic elements' of magic on Pangera. The entry level. The baby stuff. Generally speaking, all mages will advance from working extensively with these elements as soon as they can, falling back on them only for the sake of efficiency or necessity.

So. What comes next?

Come on? Surely someone has an answer that everyone can agree on?! Not a single person? Is it advanced elements? Metal, wood, lightning? Or applications of advanced elements, like explosion magic? Is it Darkness and Light, the two are often considered the entry level to the second tier of mana. Is it Mind magic? Is that even on a tier? Or is it in a totally separate category of its own? This isn't even considering the more in-depth forms, like death or life. It's a fascinating thing to consider, and I personally don't believe that a single correct answer exists. For each individual, the boundaries become fluid. They may not shift much, but they do. Just enough that we can never be sure if we are right in our assumptions. Which is why your homework for today is to devise a mana tier system of your own, justifying your decisions in a two-page essay. Don't whine at me, brats!

- *Transcribed from a lecture provided by teacher Tony Sooka at the college of Helmhelm.*

A brand-new construct, a brand-new aspect of power! Gweheheheh! I'm eager to test this and see how far it can go. Creating the constructs is an interesting process in and of itself. Each construct, despite being essentially a 'fake brain' made from mana, has to be linked to an actual, functioning, organic brain. It only takes a little bit of thinking for me to work out why. Despite being intricate and fiendishly complex, though not on the same level as the omni-elemental construct, there's no chance that a magical construct could ever hope to match the processing ability of literally trillions of neurons linked together. If it were possible to create a mana construct *that* complex and powerful, what need would anyone have for organic brains at all? I should look into that actually... I wonder if it's possible to reset a brain into being completely constructed of energy...

Anyway. So instead of performing all the functionality of a brain, the mind constructs are in fact formed to work *in concert* with one, taking on some of the functions and processes in order to alleviate the strain and enable the mind to perform better than it otherwise could. Naturally this is a bit of a trade-off, since the brain also has to maintain the construct, it doesn't get all of the benefits with no drawbacks.

In the end, what I learn is that for my two smaller sub-brains, two mind constructs each is the limit. I can push them to three, but the strain means that the third mana brain isn't really being efficiently used. The larger sub-brain can handle three quite well, which is handy. So in effect, I've gone from being able

to handle three separate threads at once, to being able to handle seven! A huge leap! Although I can't say that my ability to process mana and spells has more than doubled, I'd say the performance of my sub-brains has increased by roughly fifty percent! I'm incredibly impressed.

It's going to take a heap of practice before I can properly utilise all this, and even more before I can spin the mind constructs up at a moment's notice, but I'm more than happy to put in the time and effort if the payoff is going to be *this* juicy!

[Alright, Invidia! Let's try again, I want to see how well I can match up to you now!]

A gleam of happiness flashes through the little demon's eye at my announcement and he quickly resumes his attack. The barrage of expertly woven mana packets that I've grown so familiar with floods across the mind bridge that he snapped into place in less than a second and I immediately fall into the defensive. But something is different this time! This time I'm having much more luck tracking the many avenues of attack that he's using against me, enough that I can counter most of them.

With a smug clack of my mandibles, I push back against the demon, far better than I ever have before, causing a gleam to flash through that eye and he increases the pressure. Damn demon! He's been holding back on me this whole time?! Despite my foe increasing his own efforts, I walk away from that practice session feeling invigorated and pleased with my improvement. The constructs are working a treat already! I can't wait to experiment with other forms of spell casting with them!

Although it's mega tempting to immediately check the Skill list and see what new mana forms have unlocked for me, I need to be a little disciplined with myself. No matter what I see there, I know for a fact that I'll buy it straight away. Once I've bought it, I'll need to practice it, and the grinding will start straight away. Whilst that may not be a bad thing overall, I know it will be leaving me with a weakness. Having only just learned how to use these mind constructs, I need to practice and get comfortable with them before I move onto anything else! Until I've tested my limits and understand what I can and can't do, I don't want to go rushing off into battle or trying to take on new forms of magic. Slow and steady wins the race! You can't win if you're dead!

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Chapter 795: The path that has been chosen, the name that has been taken

I take more time to play with my new mental setup, slowly growing accustomed to the strange feeling of having more mental power than my physical brains should be able to provide. The more I mess around with it, weaving multiple threads of mana by having one brain concentrate on two things at the same time, the more I feel that my connection to being human really is vanishing a long way behind me. I couldn't even imagine being a giant ant with multiple brains and giant mandibles whilst running around an underground, globe spanning Dungeon packed full of monsters that I fight and eat whilst covered in a shiny, glowing carapace of diamond. But hey, here we are.

Eventually I notice that the glow surrounding the hatchling has started to dim, a sure sign that her evolution is coming to an end. Calling the group together, we surround the little one, ready to greet her when she finally regains consciousness. Or tries to run. Either one.

Only a few minutes later, she wakes up to see all of us looming over her and jumps to her feet.

"Ah! What's wrong?!"

"Just waiting to greet you upon awakening," I tell her. "Nothing suspicious at all."

She doesn't appear convinced, and her scent definitely marks her as suspicious of me, but I pay it no mind, instead taking this moment to examine her a little more closely to get a few clues as to how her evolution has gone. She hasn't increased in size all that much, which obviously means she either invested heavily in mental stats or organs. Considering her origins as a champion of the species, she has a boosted stat baseline to begin with, so I'd be intrigued to see what path she went down.

"You've now become a tier three monster," I congratulate her, "how does it feel?"

"Good! I think... there's still a few things I need to get used to... this change was more severe than the last one..."

She keeps lifting her legs and shifting her body from side to side, still unaccustomed to her current size and strength.

"Considering you went from a hatchling to a hatchling last time, this is obviously going to have a greater impact on you. I can already see you didn't choose any of the normal templates of the nine castes, so I assume you were able to find a few things that caught your interest?"

She nods.

"I did. I think I'll be able to grow along these lines and serve the Colony in a way that is unique to myself!"

"Interesting... you wouldn't mind me taking a look then would you?"

"What?"

"It's a Skill that I have," I explain, "I can use it to look at your status in much the same way that you can. I won't use it without your permission, but it would make it a lot easier for me to teach you if I knew exactly what I was working with."

She goes still for a moment before eventually agreeing and I bring my antennae forward to rest against her carapace, activating Core Crafting in the process. When I filter through the onslaught of data and arrive at the status window, what I see is surprising in several ways.

Name: 'Hatchling'

Level: 1 (core)

Might: 35

Toughness: 30

Cunning: 30

Will: 30

HP: 60/60

MP: 0/55

Skills:

Digging (I) Level 3; Acid Shot (I) Level 3; Grip (I) Level 4; Crushing Bite (II) Level 3; Dash (I) Level 4; Exo-Skeleton defence (I) level 1; Stamina (I) level 1;

Mutations:

Reactive Exoskeleton +10; Draining Mandibles +10; Gripping Legs +10; Weave Focused Eyes +10; Mana Sensitive Antennae +10; Sizzling Acid Gland +10; Improved Pheromone Language Gland +10; Focused Mana Core Lattice; Dungeon Oracle;

Species: Juvenile Seer (Formica)

Skill points: 17

Biomass: 6

"You've got some stuff here that I've never seen before..."

"Heheheheh," she chuckles to herself.

The lattice is something that I've looked at before, essentially a crystal weave that attaches to the core itself to produce an effect. In this case, it'll make her more attuned to mana in the most pure sense. But this Dungeon Oracle... An organ that references the Dungeon itself? Is that a good or bad thing? Then there's her stats. An interesting mix that seems fairly even, but when your mental stats are on par with your physical, it means you went hard on beefing up the brain. Even so, her numbers are a little lower than mine when I reached tier three, which seems odd, since I didn't have the benefit of a special evolution the first time around, nor did I have the bonus from max mutations. Which means she must have dumped evolutionary energy, *a lot* of it, into something else. Which is likely to be one of those fancy organs... It's an unusual decision...

"I decided that I want to be able to know as much as possible about everything!" the hatchling declares, "whether or not that information is hidden with mana or through the Dungeon itself, I'll find it! There's no secret I won't be able to find, no puzzle I won't be able to crack!"

I regard the still small ant before me as she stares back confidently.

"You're a clever one, aren't you?" I ask her.

"The cleverest!" she beams.

"I suppose I ought to give you a name then."

"A name?"

I think for a moment.

"How about Brilliant?"

"Brilliant? As in, incredibly clever? I like it!"

"Don't think your work is over though," I tell her, "your hard work has only just begun. You want to solve the mysteries that the Colony still grapples with? With pathetic Skill levels like yours? You are

absolutely dreaming. Not to mention, to graduate from the academy, ants have to reach tier four nowadays, so you still have a long way to go!"

"How am I supposed to train my Skills when you won't let me fight?!"

"First thing first, we train Dash and Exo-Skeleton defence. Safety over everything. Then comes the basics of magic, mana manipulation and mana sight. Only *after* we've gotten each of those to rank three are we going to work on raising your basic offensive Skills. Besides, judging by your stats, you'll be using magic to attack far more than your mandibles."

"Well... that's true."

"Alright then! I guess it's time for me to pass you on to your next instructor!"

She perks up at that but tries to hide it.

"Oh! But that's such a shame, Senior. You've taught me so much already; it'll be a shame to leave your company..."

"Not to worry! You won't be. This is just for training Dash and Exo-Skeleton defence. If you work hard, you'll get some levels in Stamina as well."

The 'hatchling' looks up at me blankly and I can't help but grin on the inside.

[Crisis? Make her run.]

[Yes! Master!]

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Chapter 796: Poking Our Noses In

It takes a few days, but we finally make it down here. The remnants of the wave are still visible in mana levels and spawn rates that are higher than they otherwise would be, but the never ending streams of monsters bursting from the walls of the tunnels are no longer to be found, which is nice. To be honest though, the spawn rates and mana levels have never really returned to what they were when I was born. If I had to hazard a guess, after the first wave, the mana level never dropped back down to what it would normally be, and this time is likely to be the same.

Are we going to experience a series of waves that will push the mana level higher each time? Is that a normal sort of thing? Somehow I doubt it. Whatever is going on doesn't appear to be what would be considered part of the 'normal' cycle of mana in the Dungeon. I can't decide if this is going to be a good thing or not. The higher spawn rates and frequent waves are only going to push the Colony forward at an accelerated rate, so long as we remain strong enough to protect ourselves.

[You guys ready for this?] I ask my gathered friends.

[Ready, Master!] Crisis assures me.

[*I am alwayssss ready to take!*]

[Harr!]

[Seems good. Let's see what we can see then.]

"Wait a minute! Wait for me!"

I turn around impatiently.

"Come on, Brilliant! What the heck have you been doing back there?"

"DASHING!"

"*Still?! How slow are you?!"*

"I'm only a few days old! Unlike an ancient ant like you!"

"Whoa now, don't call me an ancient," I glance around shiftily, "that word has different connotations around here."

"What do you mean?" she asks whilst trying to stop herself from flopping onto the ground in exhaustion.

"I'll explain it to you later, but yes, I get your point, I am very old compared to you. We'll take a quick break."

[Quick break everyone.]

Tiny slumps over a little in disappointment before taking up his now accustomed rest position near Brilliant, making sure the little thing remains protected as she gathers herself.

"Come on, I brought you all the way down to the third strata! You're going to be the second ant in the Colony who gets to see this. Aren't you excited? Pumped up!?"

"I am.... I'm just.... So tired."

"Crisis worked you pretty hard huh."

Defence training basically consisted of Crisis chasing Brilliant around and whacking her with tentacles, helping to train the Exo-Skeleton defence Skill through repeated impacts whilst making the young ant Dash to avoid getting entangled in a constricting mess. When she failed to Dash in time to avoid her clutches, Crisis made sure she regretted it. The things we need to do in order to raise our young to be strong in this cruel world! It's almost enough to bring a tear to my eye!

"On the plus side, your Skills have come along nicely! It's time for you to start working on what you really wanted to be doing, mana manipulation! You've bought the Skill yet?"

"I have," a little energy comes back into her eyes, "I have bought it, along with mana sight."

"Excellent. These are going to be your fundamentals of magic. I want you to use them as much as you possibly can until your headache gets too bad. When that happens, let me know. You need to keep your wits about you where we're going and I don't want you to get careless."

Just because she has the very basics of self-preservation abilities doesn't mean she'll be able to get away from anything down here. The Demons mean business.

"Is there anything you can tell me about the third stratum? So that I can be forewarned?" she asks, quite reasonably.

"Nope," I cheerfully reply, "at least, not much that I've been able to confirm with my own eyes. In terms of things that I've been told about it, there's rather a lot, not that much of it will be useful to you. In essence, the third stratum is the realm of demons, if there are any other types of monster here, I've not heard of them or seen them. The primary elements are fire and ash, although apparently there are other variants as you get deeper. The whole place is very open, almost the entire thing is considered to be one vast expanse with small offshoot tunnels in the floor and in the side of cliffs. Lastly, the key feature is the pillars that connect the ceiling to the floor. Kilometres high, they are made from an apparently unbreakable stone. The higher tier demons form societies and cities attached to the side or around these formations, one of which sits beneath us right now."

"A whole city of high tier demons?!"

"Yep. I'm not suggesting that we go and pay a visit, but I'd like to get a bit closer and lay eyes on the place. Now, let's get going!"

Impatient with all the delays, I urge Brilliant forward along with my pets and we make our way deeper, to the threshold between the strata. Just like the first time, the shadows, darkness and stench of death boil away as we descend, replaced by the searing heat and burning air of the third stratum.

[How are you holding up Crinis?]

[I-it's better than it was before, but it still feels very uncomfortable.]

[I'm sure you'll be able to manage. Let me know if it gets too bad. We don't need to be here for a long time.]

[I will, Master.]

The tunnel connecting to the vast open space that lies below isn't very long, and we soon find ourselves greeted with a familiar sight. The bridge to the top of the pillar. On either side, the drop falls sharply away, the air filled with ash and fire, I can't see the bottom very well at all this time, but I can still see the pillar as it descends to the floor.

"This... is quite something," Brilliant's scent is almost disbelieving.

"It's different all right."

Nothing to stop us this time, I lead the way, walking forward along the bridge until we stand at the point the pillar connects to the roof above. It's a fearsome sight, thinking that this stone holds the weight of billions of tons. The Colony, the stone, the dirt, the town of Renewal and everyone in it, all of it sits atop this pillar. It's... insane. How the heck is it so strong?! Another mystery of the Dungeon. Far below, I can see the plate with the demon city resting atop it. The haze in the air is so thick I almost can't make it out, but it's there for sure.

Breathing deep, I extend one leg onto the surface of the pillar, making sure to grip tightly with my claw. Confident of my hold, I reach out with another leg and grip tight, repeating the process until I find

myself vertical, the full weight of my massive body concentrated in my claws. It's a strain for sure, but I can take it! I seriously need to train Grip some more...

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 797: Descending

It's a heck of a lot easier for Brilliant to walk down the face of the pillar than it is for me, her light body proving no challenge for her claws. Tiny has a rough time of it, having to climb on the rock much like a human would, using his hands and feet to find holds, but thanks to his unbelievable strength it doesn't prove too much of an issue. Invidia and Crinis have no problem at all, the demon fluttering along beside us as we slowly make our way down, with Crinis attached to the back of my carapace as usual. I have to say, facing directly downward into a several kilometre high drop is intimidating stuff. The air yawns open like the maw of a furious beast, vast and empty. Flickers of flame and ash brush past us constantly, the heat as thick in the air as the mana. It almost feels energising to my body, though perhaps if it gets too hot, I might run into trouble.

Ants can't sweat, so temperature regulation is a real issue. I wonder if it's an issue for monster ants? I can't say that it's been a huge problem before... The cold of the second stratum was unpleasant, to be sure, but as far as I know it hasn't put any ants to sleep. If it did, the torpor police would be having a much easier time than they are. As time passes and we climb further down, it becomes clear that we are not the only monsters on the pillar. Far from it.

Despite the wave subsiding, there are still demons climbing upwards. Nothing like the bottomless swarm that I saw the last time I was here, but still a steady trickle. Perhaps they have sensed that the mana above is still high enough to sustain them? Given that they are only tier four or below, I wouldn't be surprised if they can survive up there, not that they get the chance. Any monsters we come across are blasted off the pillar in short order, either by Invidia detonating them, or me smacking them in the face with gravity magic until their own weight is too much for them to handle. Something that surprises me is that I don't see any evidence of flying demons as of yet. Obviously some of them can, Invidia is living proof of that after all, even though I wouldn't call his stilting flutter anything like actual 'flight', he's still proof of concept. Considering all this open space that's available, the third stratum is by far the best place in the Dungeon I've yet seen for a flying type monster to exist. So where are they all?

Apparently, non-existent, at least in this area.

After an hour of careful climbing, we're still not close to the plate on which the demon city sits, which is annoying but I can see it better than I could before, even make out some small figures moving about on there. So weird, to think of a community of monsters living together in some sort of harmony. The Colony does, obviously, but we are literally one family, as far as I'm aware, the demons don't have anything like that binding them together, so how are they able to do it? Is it simply a case of a high enough level of intelligence means they are able to understand the benefits of coexistence? I guess we'll find out eventually.

We slowly climb down, step by step, resting every so often on an outcropping or when we find a good foothold, just so my aching claws and legs can get their strength back. This far from the Colony, my Vestibule isn't much use either, which means fatigue is a thing again all of a sudden. It's kind of weird to have to think about it again after basically ignoring it whilst I was fighting around the nest during the

wave. Without my twenty bodyguards, I'd have no trickle of energy through it at all. It's impossible that the council was aware of how useful these babysitters would be for me when they assigned them to me, but at least they turned out to be good for something.

[What are you able to make out down there, Crinis?]

[Lots of strong mana signatures, although the ambient mana is still very high, which makes it difficult for me to see much. At the very least I can say that there are some powerful monsters down there.]

[How about that, Tiny? Some strong monsters might be just what you need to stretch after this painful climb, what do you think?]

A savage grin is all the reply I get.

[Just keep a lid on it,] I warn him, [we don't want any trouble.]

"Are we going to keep going down?" Brilliant asks, eyeing the growing width of the plate beneath us.

"That's the demon city, isn't it?"

"Sure is."

"Are we really going to go in there? On our own? Without the Colony to support us?"

I turn to face her, not an easy thing to do, given the circumstances.

"What's the matter? Your thirst for knowledge has dried up already? Your hunger for answers?"

"No! I'm just... Is it normal for us to be out here on our own like this?"

Huh. Unlike me, Brilliant has never been a human. Being so far from the support of the family must feel paralysing. But for me? Something is always pulling me forward.

"No way, no going back now, little one!" I turn back to the descent and continue on my way. "Don't you want to see what's next? Don't you want to experience the adventure?! Ever since I saw this place I've been wanting to take a look, to get closer and see what it's like. There's no way that I'm going to leave without seeing it for myself!"

"And after I've seen it, what about the things that lie below? Aren't you curious, Brilliant? Can you resist the lure of the impossible things that the Dungeon makes reality? How could I possibly throw away this second chance?"

"Are you alright Senior?"

"I've never been better. Come, let's see what the demons have to say to us!"

Moving faster than before, I lead the group down as the demon city grows in our eyes, until we are so close I can see them pointing up at us as we descend. What will greet me when I arrive? Battle? Friendly conversation? Come now, show me!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 798: Low Society

My first impression of Renewal was somewhat mixed, I must say. Having flown from the glittering towers of Derinon, jewel of the Asla sea and metropolis of the age, the relatively humble city that lay before me was rather quaint, rustic and backward. I'm sure you, dear reader, would react likewise if you'd just travelled from the heart of civilisation into the wild frontier! But what one must remember, must keep at the forefront of your mind at all times, is just how little time this city has existed. Not even ten years ago this patch of dirt was naught but shrubs and trees, not a single stone stacked atop another. From that nothing, a wonderful city has sprung into life constructed atop the ruins of the former frontier kingdoms by refugees and... ants!

Landing outside the city limits we caused quite the fuss, a gaggle of curious onlookers poking their noses out of the gates to inspect the newcomers and their flying transport. I was later to learn we weren't the first skimmer to visit these lands, but we weren't far from it, such that the residents were yet to lose their fascination with the creatures. After unpacking our things, my strapping escorts and I made our way into the city, my guards alert to any sign of danger in this strange and mysterious place. Not that there was any need for it, the people were lovely! Such a warm welcome we received as I can hardly describe. Without so much as a ruffled feather we were escorted to a local establishment named 'The Hill of Rest', a fine Inn of good report owned and run by the ever so delightful Mr and Mrs Bellweather.

The two were former refugees from the capital city of Liria, some of the few to escape the tragedy that occurred. I chatted to the two of them gaily, listening as they shared with me the gripping story of their survival, flight and eventual rescue at the hands of the 'Great One'. Needless to say, I was quite keen to discover who this individual might be and eagerly enquired. My two hosts shared a slight smile before describing a large and mighty ant, one of exceeding intelligence, generosity and kindness, responsible for saving many during the wave and slaying the beast responsible for destroying their home.

Mrs Bellweather was quite keen to impart on me the high regard the Great One is held in amongst the folk of Renewal and that my text not disrespect this individual in the slightest! Far be it from me, dear reader, to disparage someone I am yet to meet, regardless if they are an ant monster or not! After a very pleasant meal and a bath to wash off the worst offenses of our journey, I retired much refreshed, ready to tour the city on the following day. And what a city it revealed itself to be! Remarkable, unique and quite possibly the most fascinating destination on the face of Pangera! Judge nothing yet reader, for the best is by far yet to come!

Can I explain what it was that drove me forward? Not really. For whatever reason, the voice that would normally tell me 'hey, Anthony, this is probably a bad idea' is just too quiet to prevent me rushing headlong forward. Maybe this is how Tiny feels all the time? No doubt or hesitation in his mind no matter what odds he faces or how dangerous the path he is on. Unlike Tiny, I know I'm not invincible, I know that running headlong into this city of Demons is dangerous. But I'm going to do it anyway.

I can sense the twenty bodyguards going into hyper-alert mode, their thoughts transmitted to me through the Vestibule. They sense peril here, like a deadly spice in the air, and they want to make sure that they do what is necessary so that I would survive. In my mind, I'm more worried about them than I am about me. They've all been promoted to tier five, which is a step up, but there are a number of tier six monsters in the gathering below us. Even with their perfect evolutions, it might not be enough. No matter what happens, I'll make sure they get out and take word back to the Colony. That's my duty as the Eldest.

Step by aching step, down the pillar we go.

The demon city is a strange place, though 'city' may not be the right term for it. Real estate is at a real premium on the disk of stone that encircles the pillar and there can't be more than a few thousand monsters living there. The buildings themselves are a bizarre sight, given the huge variety in shapes and sizes that demons can come in, no two are alike. In one section, there may be many domiciles piled on top of each other, creating a buzz of activity as smaller demons move in and out, whereas in others there may be just one cavernous hangar in which a particularly large specimen makes their home. As we descend, more and more of the residents take notice of us, looking up and pointing.

It'll be interesting if we have to confront so many demons at once, but it's looking as if that isn't going to be the case. Around the base where the pillar meets the disk I can see a wall, even make out the guards standing at intervals around it. The pillar is guarded for some reason? Interesting...

Another ten minutes of climbing and I finally set claw on the disk itself, stretching my leg out to take my weight so that I can once again become horizontal.

"AHHHHH! Feels so good to be flat again! My poor legs feel like they're on fire! At least I managed to get a level out of it."

"In Grip?" Brilliant asks, shaking out her own legs, "mine levelled three times on that climb."

"Keep raising that Skill," I encourage her, "if you ever get to my size, you're gonna need it at a high level."

Suddenly I feel a bridge seek to attach to my mind and I instinctively rebuff it, shoving the magic away and cutting it to ribbons with my mind constructs. I can't see anyone around me, who the heck would be trying to speak with me?

[Keep an eye out, Invidia. Someone wants to chat.]

[*They have already madesssss an attempt.*]

[You too?]

[Yessssss.]

[How'd that go?]

[*I ripped their magic apartsss!*]

[Nice work. Let's take a defensive position here whilst we rest from the climb.]

Whilst I rest from the climb. Looking around, we appear to be in some form of disturbing garden, judging by the somewhat tasteless décor. Not that there's a whole lot of plant life to be seen. Does someone actually live here? It isn't long before we get our answer, as a grinning demon whose skin erupts in numerous wicked looking blades approaches. Once again I feel a mind bridge being extended, more respectfully this time and I allow the contact.

[The Lord wishes to speak with you,] the demon says.

No greeting? How rude. Still, it appears as if this city is managed by whoever lives here, might as well check it out.

Chrysalis

Chapter 799: Discussions With Royalty

I mean... he's fat. Like. Really fat. I probably shouldn't focus on that too much, considering that this demon is almost certainly seventh tier, the first that I've ever seen. But still, he's like... a mega-chonker.

Atop that bulbous mass of flesh, split through the middle with a grotesque mouth that even now is stuffing itself full of Biomass from trays heaped with the stuff on either side of the figure of the city lord, the shockingly humanoid upper body looks down on us with thinly veiled contempt.

"Why have you entered my city, Insect?" he demands, staring hard at me.

Why is he singling me out? Is it my carapace? The precious diamond that I carry? You can't have it! This carapace belongs to me, certainly, but also to the world! I am merely it's caretaker, shepherding this glorious form through the Dungeon so that uncultured swine might gaze upon my magnificence and achieve enlightenment!

"This is one seriously pompous fatty," I complain to Brilliant, "not to mention rude. The least he could do is offer some of that Biomass to us."

When I don't scent a reply from the little ant, I focus a little more in her direction and only then do I realise that the poor thing is frozen in place, totally overwhelmed by the dominant aura of malevolence rolling off the powerful demon in front of us. A tier three monster standing in front of a tier seven, it's to be expected. I myself haven't experienced that sort of disparity since the first time I laid eyes on Garralosh.

I really need to ask Granin about this strange manifestation of power as I understand very little about it. Is it simply the difference of intensity in the core that causes this effect? Is it a biological sense that's inborn in monsters so that we can tell the more powerful specimens when we come across them? A curious thought. I reach out to the grotesque mound of flesh in front of us with my mind.

[Mind retracting your aura a bit? My sibling here is still young.]

High above the heaving flesh, the demon's eyes glitter with malice.

"I will not," he replies.

I shrug my antennae.

[Suit yourself. Be warned that this might be construed as an insult to the Colony though.]

Those eyes narrow.

"Are you threatening me? In my own city?"

[I mean, in a way? I suppose if you wanted to interpret it that way, then I am. Yes.]

"I could have you shredded to gobbets with the wave of a hand, Insect."

[You'd have to put your food down first.]

The two of us stare at each other for a long moment before I decide to try and extend a claw in peace.

[Look. It seems as if we've gotten off on the wrong mandible. My sibling and my friends here have climbed down from above to take a look at your lovely city and experience the delights of the third stratum. Are visitors welcome in the city of Roklu? That's the name right? If they aren't, we can just as easily leave back up the pillar the way we came.]

Gotta lay on the charm when you're dealing with these types. Although it's taking all my willpower not to reference the demon's vast bulk. It's not like I can even avert my eyes from that heaving gut, I have near three-sixty degree vision! My change in tone seems to have taken this ruler by surprise and he regards us in silence for a moment. I'm hoping this is a good sign. Spirit of adventure is all well and good, but I'd much rather I didn't plunge the Colony into a war on this trip. I'm due for an outing that ends without starting a major conflict.

"I am the city lord of Roklu, Grokus," he finally speaks and introduces himself. "Generally speaking, visitors are welcome, albeit rare, in my city. Visitors from above are even more rare, there are few who would brave the dangers of the descent. I would have you know, that I am already aware of your... colony..."

I could distinctly hear the lack of a capital when he referred to my family. Disgraceful.

"... and I must warn you that any attempt to encroach on my territory will be met with extreme force. I have struggled long to gain my position and I will not surrender it."

I shrug.

[In the end we're just a group of ants,] I gesture towards Brilliant besides me, still frozen in place by the presence of the large demon, [I can't imagine that a city full of big bad demons has much to fear from us, surely?]

Grokus looks at me with one eye cast askance.

"That doesn't seem to be what you were suggesting earlier when you threatened me..."

I clack my mandibles and wave away the suggestion.

[A little bluster in a conversation is to be expected, is it not? We are strangers in a new place, it's normal for us to be somewhat cautious. I for one, have never set claw in a demon city and had no idea what to expect. I certainly didn't realise that I'd be dropping down into the city lord's compound. So I take it we might have your leave to explore the city?]

The giant demon looked down at me and my group a little longer and I take the opportunity to examine his core a little more closely. It's clear that his core holds more energy than mine, but not by that much. Clearly he hasn't benefited from a maxed core at each stage of his development. That doesn't mean I'm equal to him, a gap in tier represents a doubling of potential after all, but he isn't *that* much stronger than I am. With all my allies present, I'm confident we could make a mess of the place, though I expect that's why I detect so many strong demons nearby. Grokus isn't taking any chances with us.

Judging by the way he's looking at me, he doesn't think I'm taking any chances either. A correct assumption.

I sense he doesn't want a confrontation here and now, not in the seat of his power when he doesn't have a clear advantage over us. The tension seems to dissipate from his frame as he waves a magnanimous hand in our direction.

"Provided you mean no harm to me and mine, you are free to roam the city. Be warned however, a demon city is not like your Colony, we tend to not play as nice with each other. I will ask that you stop by again before you leave, I do like to keep track of the comings and goings of those who are within my walls."

I give a friendly wave with my antenna.

[We'll take our leave then. Any chance I can get someone to guide us to the gate? I assume you wouldn't want us wandering around your estate on our own...]

"I would not."

With an unheard mental command, Grokus appoints one of his guards as our guide, the whip-thin demon with far too many teeth flexes its claws around us a little too many times for me to feel comfortable, but it does its job and deposits us in front of a gate which will take us out of the city lord's compound and into the city itself. With the confrontation over with I breathe a slight sigh of relief, releasing the tension that had crept through my carapace. As blasé as I'd wanted to appear, I had known things could go very badly for us there.

Not that they couldn't go badly for Chubs McFattrolls.

I slowly begin to dissipate the Gravity Bomb I had constructed, breaking the mana off one tiny piece at a time from the roiling ball of condensed power inside me. I'd done my best to conceal it, but there's not really any way to hide such a concentrated mass of power. If things had gone badly, Grokus would have copped the blast right in the face, and he could sense it. Being tier seven, I can't imagine he doesn't have any tricks up his sleeve, but surely even he would have a nasty headache after going a round with the unlimited power of gravity.

He certainly has plenty of mass...

Never mind. We've made it this far, infiltration successful! Now it's time to see what we came here for! Demon society thrives on the other side of this gate! Let's go see!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 800: Tourists

"Get back here!" I grumble at Brilliant, "if you don't behave yourself, you're going back in the mouth!"

She freezes in the process of dashing off into the city and turns back towards us.

"Do I even fit in there anymore...?" she asks doubtfully.

[Invidia, show her the mouth.]

He does.

"I see that I would indeed still fit..." she says, the scent faint.

"Yes, yes you would. When it comes to mouths, Invidia is ranked second in our group behind Crinis in terms of size and believe me, you *don't* want to spend any time in there."

"Why is that?" she asks, her curiosity overwhelming her good sense... as usual.

"Because everything that goes in there is slowly annihilated, disintegrating into tiny molecules that are then digested. She doesn't even need teeth to shred her food."

"That's... horrific."

"I think that's the point. Anyway, before we run off into a strange city full of demons that we don't know anything about, how about we stick together as a group and agree on some simple ground rules?"

"Ground rules like what?"

"First of all, you're currently tier three and every entity in the city that I can sense right now is at least tier six. So, to almost every monster in here, you are a snack. Try not to get eaten. Second, let's try not to antagonise anyone, pun not intended. I'm pretty sure the city lord would be more than happy to destroy us if we give him a chance, so let's try not to give him one. Clear?"

"Crystal!" she nods enthusiastically.

Looking down at her clear and energetic eyes, alight with the promise of new knowledge, I just know that this is going to go horribly wrong.

"All right then," I sigh, "let's get going."

[Tiny, watch the hatchling carefully. I get the feeling she'll try to run off at some point.]

He nods seriously at me before taking up a position near the little ant, always keeping her in his eyes. I hope it'll be enough. There's a slight gap between the wall that encircles Grokus' compound, and therefore the base of the pillar, and any other structures, a gap we cross rapidly and find ourselves immediately surrounded by the press of strange buildings and even stranger residents.

There doesn't seem to be any roads, because why would there be, or any sort of planning having gone into the layout of the city that I can see so far, which correlates to the obscene tangle that I witnessed from above. It looks as if the demons just build wherever they please and knock down any building that gets in the way. The neighbourhood planning committee meetings must be quite the sight...

I'm not exactly sure what I was expecting, but the demon city of Roklu somehow manages to defy all expectations. As we move deeper amongst the buildings, more faces poke out to watch as we walk past, each and every one a different shape or size than the one before. The demons come in a seemingly endless variety of types and even if some are similar to each other, there are almost always some differences that can't be put down to mutations alone. Compared to the uniform appearance of my own family members, besides the obvious differences between the castes, this is almost a ridiculous level of diversity. I keep an eye out for demons similar to Invidia and although I see a few that are close, there doesn't seem to be any that I see which are exactly the same.

[Are you one of a kind, Invidia? I thought there'd be a lot more demons similar to you down here, considering how powerful you are.]

[*I do not know.*]

[I suppose it doesn't really matter.]

"ROAR!"

BOOM!

[What the heck is that?!]

A powerful bellow quickly followed by a ground shaking crash rattles through the air and I plant my feet firmly, antennae swaying through the air rapidly. To the side, I see that Tiny has leapt forward and snagged Brilliant off the ground before she could make a getaway, although she was heading *toward* the source of the noise, as opposed to away from it...

[Be cautious... let's go check it out.]

Looking at the demons around us, none seem to react all that much to the disturbance, seemingly far more interested in us than they are in whatever caused it. Feeling my tension unwind a little, I nonetheless keep my guard up as we thread our way through the buildings toward the source of the noise. A few minutes later we find what we're looking for in the form of a large, brutal looking demon dragging away what appears to be whatever is left of the demon he had a disagreement with. The ground is heavily cracked, and a few nearby walls are clearly damaged, but again, nobody seems to be willing to do anything about it. The hulking form of the grey skinned behemoth slowly stomps away out of our line of sight, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

Either that big chap is tier seven or at the very peak of tier six, judging by his core. Clearly a physical build, he was as bulky as Tiny and just as large. Which reminds me.

[No Tiny, you can't go fight it.]

He looks disappointed, relaxing from the impressive pose he'd pulled in order to best display his gorilla physique.

[And you can probably put Brilliant down now.]

[Urr?]

The little ant in question is currently having her face rammed into Tiny's right bicep as he lifted his hands to better flex. Looking apologetic, he gently places Brilliant on the ground, giving her a little pat on the back and dusting off her carapace. I'd roll my eyes if I could.

"Are you alright, Brilliant?"

"I ... think so?" she says, staggering a little as she gets her balance.

I have no idea what just happened. Are the demons here just allowed to eat each other whenever they want? And damage the city? That can't possibly be right... how would they even form a city if living in it provided no sort of safety? Why would any of them live there at all?

[Because living here is much safer than living elsewhere. But you must reconsider your assumption that 'safety' is the primary concern of the city's residents.]

That seems like a reasonable thing to say actually... demons are monsters, much the same as the members of the Colony. But whereas the ants of my family are all related to one another and have an innate desire to cooperate, no such thing binds demons. And considering that, judging from what I've seen, safety doesn't seem to be one of their concerns, I can corroborate that with what I've witnessed in the wild at least. That leads to the question, what exactly is it that demons want?

And whose voice was that?!

With a start, I realise a mind bridge has connected to me, so stealthily, so *sneakily* that I hadn't even noticed it happen?! Who the heck?! All my minds and constructs blaze with activity as I rally my own mind mana to my defence.

[Who's there? Why have you invaded my mind? Is it because of my carapace? It's the carapace, isn't it? So shiny... so marvellous... one look and you were entranced... addicted! Well you can't have it! It's mine. Mine I say!]

[Ah. I mean no offense. Allow me to reveal myself to you and we can clear this misunderstanding.]