

Chrysalis 801

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Chapter 801: Tour Guide

[I don't see you demon... are you going to show yourself or - HOLYGIZZADIGUP!]

Even as I ask for the creature to show itself, it seems to *blink* into existence on the edge of my vision, shocking me with both its sudden appearance, and bizarre form. A giant eyeball wreathed in fiery tentacles that appear almost more like tongues of flame than appendages of flesh stares down at me like a watchful sun.

[I did not mean to shock you,] the voice in my mind says, [I have been here some time, but have hidden my presence by erasing it from your mind up to this point.]

[Isn't that a bit rude?] I challenge the demon to help cover my unease at having my mind invaded so easily. [You can't go around just diving into people's minds willy-nilly! How the heck did you even do it?!!]

My guard is up. *Way* up. This demon is clearly powerful, a tier seven, much like the huge brute who stomped away earlier. Its appearance is something like a cross between Invidia, Crinis and a bonfire, giving it a disturbing visage to say the least. Instead of the intense green of Invidia's own eyeball, this demon's eye is red, as in totally red. The iris is red, the pupil is a different shade of red, and the white? Let's just say it isn't all that white. Looking into this thing's eye is like looking into a fire in a fire in a fire in a fire.

[It is how I protect myself,] the demon doesn't seem perturbed by my attack, [being a physically weaker creature, I use my mental prowess to hide myself from the attention of those that would seek to do me harm.]

[Seems like it would also go a long way to making it rather easy to *inflict* harm,] I point out.

[That is also true,] it responds, unbothered.

The rest of my party has reacted to this sudden presence with a display of aggression. Tiny has snatched up the hatchling once more, putting his body between the newcomer and Brilliant, whilst Crinis has made herself known by threateningly extending some ghastly limbs from her resting place on my back. For his part, Invidia has continued to hover, *threateningly*, his eye blazing with envious light.

The demon floats in the air with no apparent effort, looking down on me as we continue our stand off for several long moments.

[Sooooo...] I try.

[Ah. I apologise, I was lost in thought.]

A pause.

[Hello?]

[Ah. I apologise, I was -]

[Lost in thought?! Again!? Can you please just let us know if you're going to try and eat us or what so we can either get to fighting or running away?! I'm getting antsy over here!]

Heh.

The eye flickers at my sudden barrage and after a brief pause begins to explain itself.

[I have approached you for a very specific reason,] it starts, [I have spoken to you in the hopes that you will slake my hunger.]

DANGIT.

[KILL!] I bellow and prepare to leap into action.

The eye blinks in surprise before vanishing right before my eyes, causing my heroic dashing leap to end with me planting my face into a wall, knocking the already damaged side of the building in completely. That slippery corona-demon! Where the heck did it go?! I frantically try to sever the connection it has with my mind, but find my efforts are fended off as the creature smothers my attempts.

[I should be clear,] the voice rings out again, [that I hunger not for your flesh, but for *knowledge*.]

As it pronounces that word, I can almost hear the ravenous hunger boiling away beneath that seemingly calm and patient manner of speaking. I pick myself out of the rubble and turn around to find the demon has once more appeared, hovering in the air in exactly the same place as before.

[You hunger... for knowledge? What kind of demon wants to turn itself into a encyclopedia? That doesn't seem to be how you guys operate, from what I've seen so far...]

[What is... an encyclopedia?]

[Oh... Uh. Like a book filled with huge amounts of information organised so that it can be easy to find.]

With a blaze of energy, the eye *ignites*, the flare of heat drying my eyes in a split-second.

[Hot! Hot!]

The fire subsides quickly, and the demon appears as before, hovering calmly above us.

[I apologise,] the voice is once again contained and unruffled, [I have never heard of this concept before. I find it... *delicious*.]

This is seriously weirding me out.

[So... if you don't mind me asking... what sort of demon are you? One that craves knowledge over Biomass? I just don't think I've ever heard of that.]

[I do not mind. It is important that you understand my nature if we are to complete our transaction. I am an Avarice demon, but one of a particular nature. Avarice demons desire to take and hold that which belongs to others, to accrue vast wealth. But the form of that wealth may change from demon to demon. There are some who hoard precious jewels and minerals, such that the humans and those like them are ignited with greed. Others seek to amass slaves, controlling the life and fate of many others.]

Interesting...

[So being an Avarice demon means you have a hunger, but each one of you has a different preference in food?]

The giant eye hovers for a moment.

[That is apt,] it concludes. [This is a fundamental aspect of demonic nature that I sense you may not be aware of. All demons are driven by some manner of *obsession*. The more highly evolved a demon is, the more refined that obsession has become.]

There's something interesting about the way it framed that...

[So is it evolving that refines the obsession, or is it refining the obsession that leads to evolving?]

Is there some element of the demonic monster archetype that is fundamentally different from other monsters? From what I understand, that's not the case, I certainly haven't seen anything like that when examining Invidia, for example.

[The one plays into the other,] the demon responds. [But you have asked an interesting question, one with a *lengthy* answer. Now we come to the nature of my request. I have seen that you are new to Roklu, new to this stratum and have many questions, questions that I can answer. In return, you have *knowledge*, information that I wish to possess. I propose a trade.]

[Since you managed to barge into my mind uninvited, couldn't you just take what you want? Why go through the bother?]

I'm not sure I trust this fire-eye.

[Information *extracted* in this way is incomplete and fragmented. *Unsatisfactory*. I hunger for the whole meal, not a collection of scattered morsels.]

[So... let me get this straight. You're offering to be a ... guide?]

The eye blazes bright once more.

[What is this... *guide*?]

[Holy smokes! It's a person that shows other people around, gives them key information about the place they are in! Chill out a little!]

[*Interesting*. Yes. I propose that I shall be your guide. In return, you shall give me the answers that I seek. I view this as an even trade. Do you accept?]

I mean... I don't really see much of a downside... As much as I dislike having a demon as strong as this one following us around, I don't think that we couldn't take it on if we worked together, provided we can find a way to counter it's ability to vanish from our mind's eye. On the other hand, we stand to gain a lot.

[I guess we have a deal.]

In response to my words, the eye smoulders with barely suppressed hunger.

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Chapter 802: You Can Call Me AI

[A demonic existence can be reduced to a single need: obsession. There are many forms that this desire can take, almost innumerable, but every demon feels it. Provided we are given the freedom to pursue this obsession, we are largely content. Though this does not mean we are peaceful. A slaughter demon has but one desire, and it will seek to fulfill that desire always.]

[So... if a demon is going around killing other demons in Roklu, you just... let it go about its business? That hardly seems like it would be conducive to allowing other demons to 'freely pursue their obsession'.]

[As with anything to do with demons, there are no hard and fast rules. A demon of murder killing others is to be expected, it is its nature, so it is not punished for such. Kill too much, and the demon in question could be exiled, sent across the plains to find another city.]

[Not killed? You guys don't kill as a punishment here in Roklu?]

Judging from what little I saw of Grokus' compound, they *definitely* do.

[We do, but it is generally the city lord who would enact such a thing. It is the right and the responsibility of the strongest demon in the city to enforce their will on it. Those who do not appreciate this burden are free to leave, either to find another city more to their liking, or eke out an existence on the plains.]

[How do you think Grokus has been doing here?]

[I have answered your question,] the blazing eye turns toward me, focusing the full heat of its gaze upon my shiny self. [It is now time for you to answer mine.]

[Fair enough,] I gesture with an antenna, [go ahead.]

The demon, who we've come to know, actually has a name, as do most demons who live in the city, apparently. I was a little surprised at first when he introduced himself, but hey, if a demon wants a name, who am I to go about not using it? So it was that the giant eye wreathed in tongues of flame that hovered around us came to be referred to by his proper title: Allocrix. Or AI, depending on your mood.

[You have mentioned this 'Colony' before. Describe it to me. I wish to *know* more of it.]

[The Colony? I suppose that's fine. I guess I should ask first off, how much do you know about ants?]

The eye roars with flame.

[*Little.*]

I sigh.

[Alright then, I suppose I start at the beginning.]

We continue our somewhat bizarre stroll around the plate city of demons, Roklu, whilst I expound on the ants of the surface world. Tiny insects capable of forming vast mega-colonies, a collective so unified as to act as a single organism as the eyeball in the centre of the aurora borealis listens with childlike fascination.

[You have two stomachs?]

[Social stomach and a regular one,] I confirm, [that way some of our food can be regurgitated later for sharing purposes.]

[*Fascinating.*]

[Alright, that's a lot for one question, obviously you want to know more, but I think it's my turn, surely?]

A pause.

[Very well.]

By this time we've made our way toward the edge of the plate and I have to say, the view is rather striking. The vast emptiness vanishes into the distance, well beyond the point my eyes can see as the heat haze and ash eventually blocks my view. Far, far below, the Plains of Leng, even now a writhing carpet of weaker demons locked in eternal combat, the flats pierced here and there with pillars of rock, mountains with sharp cliffs and flat tops. It's mesmerising in its own way. I can't believe this vast field circles the entire world.

The chaos of Roklu has continued around us, as more demons emerge and begin to resume their normal activities the noise and movement has steadily risen back to what I presume is a more normal level.

[Can you explain what the deal was with that giant demon smacking someone down in the middle of town earlier? Something seemed a little off about it, and you were in that area also...]

I'm quite curious about that incident. The fact that there were *two* tier seven monsters in that spot, when they seem quite rare in the city from what I've seen. In fact, as far as I can tell, there's three.

[That situation... *frustrating.*] Al falls silent for a moment as he contemplates his response. After a few moments he speaks up again. [Demon politics can be simple or complicated, depending on the particular demons involved. When it comes to demon politics, there is only one issue that is fought over, who will be the city lord.]

[I'm going to guess, the strongest demon?]

[Generally, it is so. *Simplistic.* Grokus has ruled over this city for hundreds of years, generally by exterminating any who would grow strong enough to challenge. Now, two demons who are strong enough to mount a challenge have arisen in short succession.]

[I'll jump in and say, you and the big guy?]

[It is so.]

[Pretty darn obvious, isn't it? You three are the only tier seven monsters that I've managed to detect in the city.]

[The only reason you detected me, is because I allowed it to be so. Do you assume that there are none others who are capable of what I can do? *Presumptuous.*]

Oof.

[That's fair enough,] I sigh. [So there are two challengers for the throne? As it were?]

[In a sense,] the fire dims around the Avarice demon as he sinks down toward the floor, seemingly depressed. [I have no wish for the role. The scheming, the fighting. *Nuisance*. I wish only to pursue and hoard knowledge, that is my desire. Mongu'nin does not share my indifference.]

[The big guy?]

[It is so. He actively wishes to challenge Grokus for the position of city lord, but feels he must dispense with me, the other challenger, before he can make his claim.]

[Wait, so he wants to challenge, but won't until he's managed to ... what... kill you first?]

[Yes.]

[Then he'll go and challenge Grokus, and I'm going to assume that this challenge is a fight to the death.]

[It is so.]

I clack my mandibles.

[You demons sure don't mess around.]

[As I said, simple, yet complicated. I have been hiding from Mongu'nin for weeks, just as I have hidden from Grokus and his minions, but the constant attempts to track me down have become... *tiresome*.]

I give Al a bit of side-eye, which isn't hard given the nature of my compound eyes.

[In other words, you wouldn't necessarily be averse to the city coming under new management?]

The eye narrows.

[I would not...]

[More on that later. So, what you're saying is, the big guy, Mongo, is trying to find and kill you, so that he feels justified in going and killing Grokus. Meanwhile, Grokus probably wants the pair of you killed, and is not shy about attempting to make that happen.]

[This is the case.]

[Is it safe for you to be wandering around town with us then?]

Sounds like all the powerful demons in Roklu want Al dead, so I'm surprised he's so comfortable wandering around the city with us.

[In this instance, I am counting on you and your twenty-three companions to dissuade the others from making any moves that might be considered... too bold.]

I suppose that's fair enough. I'm a little shocked that Al was able to penetrate the incredible abilities of my bodyguards to stay unnoticed. However he did that, I'm impressed.

Wait a second... twenty three?!

I rapidly turn to better focus on Tiny and the big ape looks back at me with confusion written plain on his face.

[Tiny! Where's the hatchling!?] I yell, panic creeping into my mental voice.

He looks at me, looks down at his empty hands for a long moment, then back at me. Very slowly, with great care, he lifts his feet and carefully inspects the soles.

[You didn't stand on her you thick shake! She snuck off!]

Because of course she did!

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Chapter 803: Where?!

I don't mind sharing with you, my dear readers, that as much as I enjoy travelling around the wonderful world in which we live, exploring its many incredible, unbelievable sights and relaying them to you in my own quirky fashion, I do miss my bed. Oh! Such comfort! Such bliss! The means with which you have so graciously afforded to me my readers, they have not gone to waste! Enchanted stone-wood frame, carved ever so intricately with doves and vines, the mattress, with its three layered structure providing the perfect level of support and softness. The bottom layer, made from earth infused deep sponge, is my personal favourite. Stern and unyielding, but forgiving and with a warm heart. This is topped by the second, a cheeky four inches of water infused sea-king reeds which give the mattress that slight wobbly feel I love so much. Finally, the top layer, a full, luxurious six inches of tight stuffed down from the Cloud Ranging Sky Goose. It's like resting atop the fluffy pillows of the sky itself, dear readers.

Needless to say, this was not the level of comfort I enjoyed when staying at the Hill of Rest in Renewal, but Mrs Bellweather's establishment comported itself far better than I expected this distance from civilisation. I awoke refreshed and excited, ready to face another day in this remarkable land of ant and human.

After a short yet hearty breakfast, I was greeted just outside the establishment by my guide for the day, arranged by Mr Bellweather the previous day. A chatty know-it-all who would be more than happy to spend hours answering endless questions from an old duck, he assured me. I was quite pleased to find this was indeed the case when the young girl in question, a Ms Emilia Cretherton, greeted us with a warm smile the moment we stepped out the door. The first thing I had to ask was the nature of the particular garment she wore, which included a rather striking set of antennae like attachments to a band she wore through her hair. As Emilia was delighted to share, all members of the community who chose to take the ant related Class line wore such a headdress as an indication to others that they are available to work as translators between the ants and the residents!

A special Class line! I was stunned to hear of such a thing! Especially being shared so openly! Of course, I had to know more. Luckily, the cheerful young girl was all too willing to share. Supposedly, this information isn't even an open secret throughout the city, it was just something that was freely shared. Emilia informed us, quite proudly the dear young thing, that she had reached the first Class evolution, turning her 'Antmancer' into the well regarded 'Antspeaker'. This Class gave her the incredible ability to utilise mana to produce pheromones, which in turn allowed her to communicate with the ants without the need for any sort of mental magic! Incredible! Indeed, this ability was soon put on display as we

made our way throughout the town. Some might have thought the residents would hide their close affiliation with their insect-monster allies, but nothing could be further from the truth. Ants roamed throughout the city, walking right alongside everyone else. The monsters themselves were of various sizes, ranging from large dog all the way up to a bull.

When one of them walked past us, I just had to know, so I turned to our guide and asked if she could please interpret for us so that we might converse with the fascinating creature. My two bodyguards were not at all happy about being so close to a monster they weren't allowed to kill and I was repeatedly warned from this course of action, but I heeded them not! If you have a chance to speak to a giant ant-monster reader, you take it!

Through our interpreter, I was to learn that this particular individual ant (unnamed, though I discovered than many ants choose to take a name, a fascinating subject all of its own) was in town to study the growth of crops. Of crops! She had recently graduated from the ant 'academy' and desired to study agriculture on the surface before attempting to take the lessons learned and apply them below ground. I had to ask, as I'm certain that you are also wondering, reader, what on Pangera an ant would need crops for, and she replied it was for the sapient population living under the care of the Colony, as if it were the most natural thing in the world!

And watching our Antspeaker communicate was a fascinating thing all of its own! Both Emilia and the ant made no sound, all our human translator did was raise one hand, glowing softly with the tell-tale light of mana to produce the pheromones, the scent that the ants use to communicate with one another. Just incredible!

After a brief chat, our ant friend went on her way and we continued our jaunt around town. Fear not, dear reader for there was so much more to see!

Brilliant? I should have named her Idiot! Has her insane level of curiosity not been sated yet? I thought she'd been cured of the worst of it, yet here we are, in the middle of a literal city of demons, and she runs off on us?! If I hadn't been so distracted she never would have been able to slip from our grasp.

[Dammit! We need to find her!]

"Protectant! Are you telling me that none of you saw her sneak off? How is that possible?!"

A rather disgruntled looking Protectant appears behind me.

"Our role is to watch you, not her. Though it is remarkable that none of us noticed..."

"She doesn't even have the stealth Skill! I looked at her core myself! How is it possible that one little ant can be this slippery!?"

Protectant scratches at her head with one antenna.

"Perhaps she has an impeccable sense of timing? Or just pays close attention to everything around her? It's a remarkable talent..."

If the Colony had any need for an escape artist, then this would have been a massive missed opportunity.

"Well get out there and find her!" I roar at my erstwhile security detail.

"But..." Protectant hesitates.

"GO! If she dies do you have any idea what the Colony has lost?! GO! GO! GO!"

[Tiny! Crinis! Invidia! We have to hunt down that damned hatchling.]

I switch my focus to AI, floating patiently alongside us.

[I hate to do this to you AI, but we need to go and find the hatchling who was with us, she's a curious creature who hasn't quite developed a sense of self-preservation yet...]

Something I will *rapidly* move to fix.

The eye flashes with interest.

[A *curious* creature? Such a thing should not be discouraged. I will make myself hidden and assist as I can from the shadows.]

[Alright then.]

Charge! With any luck, I'll be able to find the little interloper through the vestibule before long and we can avoid having anything dramatic happen in the meantime. Even now I can sense the twenty bodyguards scattering from this location, diving here and there amongst the buildings, twists and alleys of the city as they hunt down the scent of the runaway hatchling. Where is she? Where the heck could she be? My attention sinks deeper into the vestibule, seeking, questing for that infinitesimal sliver of energy and regeneration she provides to me.

Got it!

[This way! Let's goooooo!]

Changing directions, my legs grip hard at the ground until stone chips fly into the air. Tiny screeches to a halt before he unleashes a mighty roar, bounding forward like a force of nature, his eyes blazing with electrical energy. The demons in our way scatter like pigeons, unwilling to get in our way.

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Chapter 804: Rumble in Demon Town

In the back of my mind I worry that the king chubster himself, Grokus, might have seized the hatchling the moment she slipped away from us, to use as leverage, or just to eat, who knows? But from what I can tell, the trail leading to the little runaway doesn't lead back to the column in the centre of the plate, in fact, it seems as though it's looping around the outside.

Stupid hatchling! You just wanted to go sightseeing that badly?! When I catch you, I'll dangle you over the edge for a week! See if that doesn't fulfill your need for a good view!

[Master! Do you sense her?] Crinis asks.

[I do! But the trail is weak. Can you see anything?]

[Her mana signature is so weak,] she frets, [it's almost impossible to find her when we're surrounded with so many tier six monsters.]

That's something else to remember, even if they didn't all evolve perfectly, each and every single monster around here is the same tier as us. If all of these demons decided to fight us at the same time... it wouldn't be pretty.

[This way!] I cry as the sense from my vestibule veers sharply one way.

[No! She's looping back! This way!]

A hard turn brings us smack into the middle of a pack of demons coming in the other direction, a variety of shapes and forms, all grotesque and deadly in their own fashion.

[Move it!] I bellow.

CHARGE!

The light of stamina explodes around me as I activate the Skill, sending the pack of monsters scattering like bowling pins. Thankfully they were all the more slender types of demons otherwise it might have been like headbutting a brick wall. Tiny bellows once more, the rock reverberating with his battle cry as he slams his way forward, both fists pounding into the stone. The ruckus we cause is undeniable and immediately there are answering roars and screeches and the demons react to the cacophony. The unfortunate individuals who got to see my incredible diamond carapace far more closely than they might have liked, scramble to their feet/claws/limbs and immediately give chase, shrieking in rage as we run.

Dammit! This level of attention is the last thing we need... Maybe we can lose them.

[Quick! Take a hard left, we'll try to lose them around that corner!]

Stretching the strength of my claws to the limit, I divert my non-inconsiderable weight around a hairpin turn, dashing into an alleyway between two teetering buildings. A difficult manoeuvre that has strained my legs, but with any luck we've managed to break line of sight between us and our pursuers. Now quickly! Onto the trail of the hatchling!

BOOM!

Aaaand Tiny couldn't turn in time and has ploughed straight into the building on the left... that's perfect. Driven even further into his rage by the offending structure, the giant ape lashes out, his powerful arms smashing any remaining wall within reach and turning the stonework into dust.

[Enough with the wall! Come on!] I urge him and he shakes off the bricks and bounds to his feet, leaving a new collection of enraged demons in his wake.

Naturally, with their howling and slashing at the air, they make a perfect spotlight for the first pack of demons, who quickly follow after us. Just... perfect.

[I thought you were supposed to have the fanciest feet?!] I yell at Tiny but he's too far lost in his rage to hear me.

Perhaps losing track of Brilliant, who he'd been so protective of has really tipped him over the edge. Which could be a problem... nothing I can do about it now though. Recapturing the hatchling is all that matters now! How many tens of thousands of new ants have been born between Vibrant and Brilliant!

She might be a handful, and a massive pain in the abdomen, but Vibrant is one of the strongest and most dedicated ants in the entire Colony, with her own high-levelled army to help her protect our family. If Brilliant is even half as capable when she's done evolving and developing her Skills then she'll be an incredible asset to the Colony. An irreplaceable part of the collective that will help uplift all of us!

Most importantly, without capable and selfless champions, how is the Colony ever going to develop to the point that they aren't dependent on me to protect them?! They need to be able to stand on their own six legs! I can't guarantee that I'll be around to help pull the carapace out of the fire every time!

Although an argument could be made that I'm the one who puts the carapace *in* the fire most of the time. Actually, to take that a step further, aren't I throwing myself into trouble and the Colony is the one pulling me out of it? Isn't that carapace in the fire in fact... me?

Ahhh! Worry about it another time! Get. That. Hatchling!

If there's no point trying to hide anymore then who cares about these alleys and gaps? I'm an ant, dammit! I'm going over the top! As I speed toward another building, instead of going around it I simply raise my front legs up and dig in with my claws, racing up the side of the wall and over the top.

BOOM!

Tiny of course doesn't realise what I've done and just runs straight into the building, leaving an ape shaped hole in the wall. Worry about it later! The sound of demonic shrieking and blades striking flesh rings out from below me as I continue running, followed by Tiny's bellow and the harsh impacts of fists striking home with tremendous force. Next thing, two demons are thrown out the side of the building with tremendous force, smashing into a neighbouring building and smashing *that* wall in for good measure. A chorus of growls and shrieks ensue.

Wonderful.

When I get my mandibles on that hatchling....

There she is! From my position on the top of the building, a faint wisp of energy trickles into the vestibule, snapping my attention around just in time for my antennae to catch a whiff of the little ant. With one dashing leap I throw myself across a gap and onto a nearby building where, looking down into the alley, I see a suddenly cowering Brilliant looking up at me.

"Foouunnnd youuuuuu!" I rasp.

"S-Senior!" she stammers, "f-f-fancy s-seeing you here!"

"How dare you run away! In this city of all places! You'll pay, little hatchling! You'll pay dearly!"

The little ant draws herself up, suddenly bold and yells back at me.

"I held it in for so long! *So long!* You expect me to resist it forever?! I WON'T, I WON'T, I WON'T! I have to knooooooooow!"

So screaming, she dashes off, around the corner and out of sight in a flash. Think you can get away now?! When I have your scent?! You're a hundred million years too early to escape from me! In a flash, I'm off, all six legs moving so quickly they blur. I have her now, it's time to secure the capture.

[Crinis! Deploy!]

[With pleasure, master!] the black void attached to my carapace declares.

As I run, her tentacles emerge, latching onto the building around us so she can lift her body from my back. In seconds a writhing forest of thin tentacles is moving across the rooftops with me as we follow close in the footsteps of Brilliant.

"No escape, Brilliant! I'll get you, no matter what!"

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Chapter 805: Maybe it's time to leave?

"ROOOOAAARRRRR!"

A leg shaking bellow rocks the ground, followed a moment later by a giant, winged ape leaping high into the sky before crashing back down on the road beside the building I'm on, crumbling a few walls in the process. I'm beyond caring about the property damage at this point, all that matters is securing Brilliant, the rest we can deal with later.

Hopefully.

"GET BACK HERE, HATCHLING!" I rocket my pheromones forward, blanketing the area with my order.

"No!" my antennae pick up her much fainter reply. "I'm going to see it for myself! You can't stop me anymore!"

"WANNA BET?!"

Her path zigs and zags, crossing between buildings, between demon legs and underneath foundations. I can see her now, everywhere she goes her head ducks this way and that, her eyes taking in everything they see with a feverish, almost vacant stare. Likewise, her antennae are going crazy, whipping this way and that so fast it almost appears as if they'll lift her into the air like the blades of a helicopter.

Like a dog with its head out the window of a moving car, she's going crazy from the stimulation of so much new information rushing into her brain at once. I should have known bringing an ant so curious that she would conduct her own tour of the Colony *as a grub* to an entirely new stratum would be way too much for her to handle. For some reason I thought that after evolving and becoming more intelligent she'd have a better grip on it. Turns out that I was more than a little wrong, I think it actually made it worse.

But I'm gaining ground. With her Skills as low as they are, even if she trained Dash as hard as she did, there's no way she can match my speed. No matter how slippery she is, there's no escape for her now! The nearer she draws, the more I tunnel in until there's nothing I can see but the little ant speeding through the crowded traffic beneath me, no matter the destruction and chaos that is being sown behind.

Closer, closer, CLOSER!

She's practically below me now, her little legs a flurry of movement as she ducks and weaves as only an ant can, flickering from one point to the next. But I see her!

[Crinis! GO!]

At my order, she rockets forward, a writhing mass of barbed limbs that clutch and tear at the buildings as she descends to the ground level, proppeling herself forward until she's right on the heels of Brilliant, her tentacles reaching forward to snatch the little thing into the air. From above I have an almost perfect view of the limbs stretching through the air, seeking, homing in and grasping... nothing.

Somehow that little weasel manages to slip through a gap that I don't believe even exists and rockets up the side of the large building in front. Ha! You think Crinis is the only pet I have at my disposal?!

[Tiny! Invidia! Go!]

With a green flash, Invidia materialises a solid platform in the air in less than a second as Tiny bounds high into the air, both feet slamming into the shield before Tiny uses it to propel himself to even greater heights, homing in on Brilliant like a hairy ballistic missile. Just to ensure the capture, I race up the side of the building so close behind the little monster that I could almost reach out and snatch her up with my mandibles.

Just. Another. Second!

CRASH!

After soaring through the air, Tiny deploys his wings of shadow, now supported by his *much* stronger bones and capable of holding more weight, which is lucky since he weighs a heck of a lot more now than he used to. After gliding for a few moments, he *slams* into the side of the building, raining rubble down on me as the wall collapses under the force of his impact.

Cracks spread like spiderwebs beneath my legs and I have just a moment to think 'well.... Nards' before I'm falling through the air, Brilliant in the air just above me before we impact the ground and I lose sight of her.

Dammit! Gotta get my legs under me! I scramble and scrabble at the air for a few moments before I manage to right myself after a little rocking back and forth. The first thing I see is Tiny, hunched over on the ground next to me.

[Tiny! Did you secure the package?!]

His tightly wound frame unwinds bit by bit until a hand emerges with a thumb proudly extended into the air. A moment later, he stands tall to reveal Brilliant clutched tightly against his chest. The little ant struggles valiantly against his iron grip, but to no avail.

"No! Let me go! I want to see! I want to know! YOU CAN'T HOLD ME FOREVER!"

"Is that what you think?" I ask with a soft scent as I creep closer. "There are things in this world that you've never dreamed off, little one. If needed I'll weave a prison for you out of the fundamental forces of this universe! You really think you can escape me?! I can sense your thoughts! I can smell your impulsive little mind! I'll bury you under the weight of a thousand tons of mass if you think you can walk away from me!"

[*Masssster.*]

[What is it, Invidia? I haven't finished venting at Brilliant yet!]

[*There issss danger here... open your senssssses.*]

What does he mean? Turning around to better see what lies behind, I finally notice the all-out brawl that has erupted in our wake. Several fires already rage between the piles of rubble where fallen buildings have collapsed into each other, dotted by demons engaged in what appears to be all out warfare.

[I guess that might be a problem...] I mutter to the fluttering demon.

[*Not that. Turnsssss.*]

Wait, what?

Suddenly I realise what he meant. From behind, namely, from within the large, final building that we demolished, a powerful aura is surging. When I switch on my mana sense, it becomes clear that a tier seven core is inside, and that its owner is *not* happy.

[This wouldn't happen to be the residence of one Mongu'nin, would it?]

[*I believe it isss so.*]

[Right. LET'S VAMOOSE! Tiny! Do NOT let go of Brilliant even for a second, we are getting the *hell* out of town!]

[*Wheressss do we go?*]

My mind races.

[Down! No way I'm going to try and bust through Grokus' compound with all this going on. Let's find a way through the plate and climb down the pillar!]

A giant flaming eyeball appears out of thin air next to me.

[I might just so happen to *know* a way down.]

[HOLY MOLY! *Stop* with that already! Are you going to show us the way now, or are we going to negotiate? Spoiler warning, we don't have time to negotiate!]

[I will show you. I think leaving town will be... *wise*.]

Behind us, the rubble explodes outwards, showering us with stone and debris as a truly massive demon bellows to the heavens with rage.

[Let's SCOOT!]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 806: What Goes on Above

With her incredibly enhanced vision, it wasn't too hard for Wills to make out the details of the demon city far, far below. Any ant who wasn't a highly evolved scout would find it impossible to see what she could, but for her, it was simple. The advantages of evolving to tier five. Being able to see clearly at long distances generally wasn't something that scouts needed in the regular course of their duties, but with

knowledge of the third stratum, she'd known that it would be a necessary trait for some of her caste to have. Unwilling to leave the experimentation to the new generation, she had been the first to develop her eyes in this way and it was paying dividends already.

"What in the world is the Eldest doing down there?" she wondered.

Smoke was rising from the city in several places, forming a long trail around the outer edge of one side. She could see several buildings had collapsed completely and tiny figures swarmed over them like... ants. The ants would be swarming over there soon enough.

"What do you think?" Advant asked, her scent tense with worry.

Wills chuckled.

"Looks like the Eldest has kicked up quite the fuss already. A good section of the city is on fire already and no I have absolutely no idea why. It's a mess down there, not going to lie."

"Is the Eldest trying to soften their defences before we make an assault? We aren't ready yet!"

"Considering we haven't consulted with them in any way on this plan, how could they possibly be aware what we're going to do, let alone when we plan to do it?"

"That's... a good point."

"Personally, I think the Eldest is just doing what they always do. Making a mess of wherever they happen to be at any given time."

"That's a ... bold way to state your opinion of the Eldest..."

"I didn't say it was a bad thing," Wills smirked. "Wherever they go, there is always something interesting happening, something that pushes the Colony forward. It's impossible for us to be stagnant whilst the Eldest is around."

"That's the truth," Advant agreed as she tried to see what was happening so far below. After a few long moments, she was forced to give up, her eye mutations were dedicated to better track motion in the thick of battle, peering over the edge of the bridge did nothing for her. "Let's head back to the rally point. I don't think there is more to see here."

The two ants turned and began the climb back up into the second stratum alongside their escort. It wasn't long before they encountered more of their kind, a lot more. Carvers swarmed over the area alongside soldiers and scouts as the ants restructured the area around the top of the pillar to better suit their needs. If this was the connection point between the third and second strata, then the Colony would see it defended and fortified to the greatest extent.

"Tungstant! How goes preparations?"

The much smaller carver turned from where she was advising several work crews to see her fellow council members approach. Judging by the slant of her antennae and the irritable clacking of her mandibles, she wasn't in much of a good mood.

"How are they going? They're going, I suppose. What else can you expect?"

"Why? What seems to be the issue?" Wills asked, a humorous tilt to her head.

"Wait -" Advant tried to head off the tirade before it started, but she was far too late.

"What seems to be the issue?!" Tungstant ranted. "How dare you say that to me! If there were ten of me and Cobalt, there still wouldn't be enough to get all the work done! You want us to design and build new nests, you want us to fortify a massive section of Dungeon, you want to construct new farm zones, upgrade the main nest, plan further expansion sites and THEN you want us to come all the way down here to build a fortified position and staging ground the size of the main nest again! Are you outside of your minds! The work is sloppy! It's rushed! It's a disgrace! You think we can be happy with this?!" she gestured with one foreleg toward the massive walls that were rising to block off the tunnels, gates already being levered into position.

"I think it looks like you've done incredible work," Advant tried to soothe her sister. She truly believed what she said. What the carvers and building crews had achieved in a short amount of time was nothing short of incredible.

"It's FILTH! I hate it! I hate all of it! The gates are bad work, not enough time used in the tempering, not enough time used for the enchanting! The stone in the walls isn't fully compressed, nor has it been satisfactorily reinforced with the metal framing!"

That has been an eye opener, seeing how the carvers had designed a system for reinforcing their compressed stone walls by installing a wire framework of their hardest mana infused steel. First the stone had been stripped away, then the frame installed, and the stone literally shaped around it by earth mages. Advant had been curious enough to enquire about the work as it was being done and what she'd learned is that it was a lot harder than it looked. The frame itself had to be designed and built to specification to start with, then had to include tolerance for the stone being compressed around it. This meant the framework had to be designed to squeeze and shrink without breaking as the ants did their best to condense the stone as hard as possible around it. The calculations alone had been dizzying to the soldier.

"Aren't all the other castes doing their best to help out?" Wills reasoned, now trying to calm the storm she had willingly unleashed. "The soldiers are doing all the heavy lifting, the generals are helping coordinate crews, the advance build teams the scouts have put together are working well, aren't they?"

In the press to ever expand the territory, the Colony had realised that it just wasn't practical to send carvers, among the weakest of the castes, far away from the nests to investigate distant sites for proposed nests, or to begin the preliminary digging work in totally unfortified areas. Instead, several teams of scouts had side specialised in basic construction skills, allowing them to make basic assessments and plans, as well as commence simple building practices, like flattening out areas, laying foundations, digging sound tunnels and establishing temporary walls. With this initial work done, the site could be made much safer for the proper build crews to arrive and begin work.

Considering the Colony was already looking to establish new nest sites a wide distance from the main nest, these crews had already proven invaluable.

"I suppose they are," Tungstant grumbled, "we're just really busy is all."

"Isn't that a good thing?" Advant laughed. "You don't want to be busy?"

Tungstant glared at the much larger soldier before she snapped a claw out, pointing down at her own shadow. Curious, Advant looked down before she leapt back with a curse. The shadow was pitch black, deeper even than the darkness of the second stratum would dictate. Rather than a shadow it looked like a portal into hell. As she stared, a ghostly figure of an ant rose from inside the shadow as if appearing from deep underwater. The figure slowly raised one leg in front of her ethereal mandibles.

"Shhhhhhh," came the scent as if from an impossible distance before fading to nothing.

In a blink, the ant was gone and the shadow had returned to normal, leaving Advant trembling in fear.

"A-a-are t-they...?"

"Always," Tungstant confirmed, clacking her mandibles in satisfaction. "I've lost six crews in the last four hours alone. In two more hours, they'll take me as well if I don't stop working."

"Maybe you should take a break?" Wills suggested, trying to maintain her cool.

Tungstant just laughed grimly and flicked her antennae in the direction of the tunnel leading down to their position. Advant and Wills could see columns of ants appearing in the distance, soldiers, generals, mages, core shapers, scouts, marching together in ranks toward this new front line.

"You think I have time for that?" the carver pointed out.

"Let's help out," Advant sighed.

Torpor would take them all soon enough. Might as well get to work in the meantime.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 807: What Goes on Above pt 2

The nest was ablaze with activity, even more than usual. Since the start of the previous wave, the Colony had moved as if a fire had been lit beneath it, one put there by the Eldest member of their family. The race to expand and grow before their enemies returned to challenge them had begun and the ants refused to lose. Already, four new nests had been established and the Queens installed. Those new satellite nests were not even fully complete, but plans for the next round of expansion had already begun. After long discussions and planning sessions between the Queens, carvers, scouts and soldiers, it had been determined that the current design of the Colony's territory should be replicated in a new area.

This was to become the template for the Colony's expansion. A central, heavily fortified main nest, with smaller satellite nests established around the periphery, all enclosed in defended checkpoints that created a bubble of security. It was hoped that eventually each main nest would contain a gate that would allow rapid travel between all of the Colony's territory. This blueprint had been accepted by the council and within a day advance scout teams had been sent to traverse the dangerous tunnels to seek out appropriate sites for this next wave of expansion, this new phase of the Colony's growth.

It was all happening so fast that it was becoming absurdly difficult to keep track of it all. Coolant had done her best to make sure that things were being done as efficiently as possible, but with so many ants working in so many places, it was almost impossible to be aware of everything that was happening at once. Hence the construction of the Antministratum.

It was with a certain sense of satisfaction that Coolant looked out over the open area at the rows of ants working diligently at their stations. It had only been a matter of time since the creation of ant 'writing' that they would develop the next level of this valuable technique: ant filing!

"How goes it?" came a scent from behind her.

The mage turned to see Bella standing behind her, the core shaper a key partner in making this central filing system a reality.

"As you can see," Coolant said with satisfaction, "the work has begun in earnest."

There were a hundred ants currently located here, each one analysing the many slates of work reports that were being ferried in by the numerous pets that had been assigned to the task by the core shaper caste. They were perfect for the role, since one ant with many pets could ferry the records for a wide area of the nest. There were already observers watching and recording all of the work that had been going on within the Colony, it was just a natural step to have that data collected and collated in a central location.

Not that it had been easy to pull off.

"You really think that this is going to lead to an increase in efficiency in the workforce?" Bella sounded doubtful.

"If you didn't think so, then why did you agree to help with this project?" Coolant was irritated.

"It's pretty rare that we core shapers get invited to help with the things that you all have going on," she shrugged, "if we can provide value and prove our worth in this task, then perhaps the others will be amenable to reaching out for our help."

It was a little irritating for Coolant to hear that her sister had committed so much time and energy to a task that she didn't even necessarily believe in, but she saw her point. The core shapers weren't relied on as much as they should be by the others, even when they could provide a ton of value, such as with the Antministratum.

"You'll see, this is going to pay dividends for the Colony in no time flat. These workers here have their antennae on the core of the Colony, they know more about every movement of all of our family members than anyone else. If it's possible to find places where optimisations can be made, it's them."

Even as they watched, the records continued to pour in and the flustered workers raced about the wide chamber with ruthless efficiency as stacks of slates were piled in their work spaces. Antennae wagged furiously as they read and processed the information, making their own summary records and collating the data at an incredible pace. The old slates were then sent for filing whilst the new ones were gathered together and examined by a separate team who compared the work being done about the Colony to the work notices that had been posted for their siblings to fill.

Any difference, whether too much labour had been allocated to one particular task, or not enough to another, was noted and sent up the flag pole until clear, concise data of inefficiencies could be seen.

"There! You see this?" Coolant proudly displayed the fruit of all this labour to her sister, "this is concrete evidence of wasted effort! With our help, this kind of waste can be eliminated from the Colony all together, increasing the amount of work we get done as a collective."

"Yes," Bella pointed out, "but there is a great deal of labour going into *making* that report. This is only a worthwhile exercise if the efficiency you gain is greater than the time lost spent gathering all this information together."

Coolant froze.

"That's... true."

"And besides that, how exactly is the Antministratum going to enforce these efficiency gains?"

"Enforce?" Coolant was taken aback, "I don't envisage that they'll enforce anything. No, they'll make recommendations to help our siblings make more efficient choices, or they'll have some input into the posting of work notices so that the allocation of the workforce is more accurate."

"So you see them as an advisory body?"

"Y-yes."

The core shaper thought for a moment.

"I suppose that makes sense. So where exactly are we using an excess of labour? Which area appears to be the most wasteful?"

Interested in the answer herself, the council member quickly began perusing the slate in front of her with an antenna, picking up the imprinted scent line by line.

"So?" Bella asked after a moment since her mage sibling hadn't said anything.

"The Antministratum..." Coolant groaned.

Bella laughed.

However, after the kinks in the process had been ironed out, Coolant's pet project was able to show its worth and assist the Colony in achieving an even more ridiculous level of efficiency.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 808: A Breakthrough, A Revelation

Beyn stared at the notification in front of him in complete shock.

[You have reached level 20.]

[Your current Class: Antmancer, has reached its maximum level. Class evolution is now available. Would you like to evolve your Class?]

Finally! He'd finally done it! After all this time working alongside the ants of the Colony and assisting his brethren in completing their work, it had finally paid off and he was now the first who would be given the chance to evolve this sacred Class and see the wonders which lay beyond! O blessed day! O joyous occasion!

He wanted to run, to leap and shout his joy to the heavens, but he refrained from doing so only with the greatest of effort. He was currently on patrol with a mixed detachment of human and ants, sweeping away the monsters from within a swamp expanse in order to allow the Colony to return their aphid workforce in safety. It was slow, gruelling work and the humans were tired and drained. Even the ants were beginning to flag, their antennae drooping in a tell-tale sign of insect fatigue.

"Something the matter, priest?" one of the nearby human guards asked him, concern plain on the young man's face.

"Not at all," he quickly replied, not wanting to distract anyone in an active combat zone. "Please, focus on your task and I will ensure that my Skill remains active."

Indeed, the presence of the Antmancers meant a great deal to both human and Colony participants in these patrols, the buff it provided to any mixed group was invaluable and allowed even the relatively green guard force from Renewal to perform well above their level so long as there were ants nearby. The ants themselves also enjoyed the buff, though they needed it less, especially when clearing monsters from here in the first stratum. The speed at which they'd been able to sweep through the various expanses within their territory spoke volumes of the growing strength of the Colony.

"I think we'll be done here in a few hours," another guard commented to the group, her eyes never leaving the surrounding foliage.

Several of them had been injured by underestimating the plant life around here. Only the intervention of ant healers had saved their lives.

"Another day, another expanse," the first guard chuckled and the others laughed along, if quietly.

"There is much noise from the humans," Beyn detected the pheromones of one of the soldiers, a huge soldier the size of a small building who had been up front. "Is there something the matter?"

He was more or less used to it by now, but when he suddenly switched from listening to words with his ears, to smelling them with his nose, it was always a struggle to reorient his mind.

"I will check with the antennae'd one." a much smaller mage said.

This was his cue to step forward. The ants had taken to calling the order of Antmancers 'antennae'd ones' since they functionally had antennae, both on their hoods, and in their capacity to smell and interpret the ant's communications.

In short order he felt a mind bridge connect to his own and the ordered thoughts of the mage intrude on his own.

[Human Beyn. It has been noted that your fellow humans have been making noise. Is something the matter? Can we assist?]

By this time, Beyn had become much more accustomed to addressing the holy workers of the Colony, he hardly ever shouted at them anymore. At first the ants had tolerated it unquestionably, but eventually they'd learned that deafening mental communication was *not* in fact the natural state of human mind to mind speech. This had caused Beyn no end of embarrassment and he had lashed himself at the failure to properly perform his role until he had managed to master his fervour.

... most of the time.

He made a simple bow as he spoke to the ant mage.

[Honoured worker,] the ants were quite pleased to be referred to as 'worker' no matter the caste. In fact, to address them by any other name, subtly implied that they were not, in fact, workers, which displeased them to no end, [we are simply remarking on how quickly we have progressed on our mission today. It is an unusually large amount of territory to cover in such a short amount of time, by our reckoning.]

The mage tilts her head slightly.

[It is only natural,] she remarks, [when many of us work together, we achieve far more than we could working without support. This is the strength of the collective.]

Beyn felt a wave of emotion roll through him at the ant's words. Yes. It was true. This path was so simple for the members of the Colony to walk on, it was their natural mode of life. Whereas others were riven by jealousy and greed, they instead had harmony and peace. He wiped a tear from his eye, this was the truth.

Their estimation of the time needed to complete the task had in fact been too large. In an hour and a half, their sweep had been completed. The monsters were dead, the expanse secure, and the ants began to escort their precious aphid cattle into the open space, planting them on the lush Dungeon vegetation and herding them with antennae to ensure the smaller bugs moved to the best and juiciest parts of the plant.

Work complete, Beyn and his human cohorts parted ways with their ant allies and began the trek back to the human barracks that the ants had constructed for them within the territory of the Colony. It was called a barracks, but in reality the furnishings and accommodation were far beyond anything most of them were used to. The comfortable beds, clean, fresh sheets daily and surprisingly delicious tea were one thing, but apparently at some point an ant had taken great fascination with the art of embroidery, creating the most incredible scenes on the rugs. Beyn himself found it incredibly moving to kneel on the artistically represented ant hill on the rug within his own room as he prayed.

Not that he had time for that. Before he could pray, before he could eat, before he could even wash off the muck from his journey, there was a task that *had* to be fulfilled! He couldn't even bring himself to pause and speak to his brethren, such was his rush to discover what the future had in store for all of them. Once he had confirmed the evolution options for his Class, then he would gather the faithful and speak to them in full!

Breathless, he rushed into his room and slammed shut the door, throwing himself behind the (wonderfully carved) desk as he gathered paper, ink and a quill with his shaking hands. With all at readiness, he gathered his wits and re-opened the menu.

[Your current Class: Antmancer, has reached its maximum level. Class evolution is now available. Would you like to evolve your Class?]

By the Great One! Yes!

[Please select one of the following options:

Antspeaker.

Antbishop.

Antorator.

Antstandardbearer.]

Eager to see what each of the new classes offered, he quickly dismissed the stat gain per level and focused on the unique benefits of each Class.

[Antspeaker: This Class evolution will enhance the passive perception of pheromonal language and allow the Class holder to convert their mana directly into pheromones, enabling direct communication with ant type monsters. A social based Class that will enable the holder to act as the bridge between two peoples. When engaged in conversation between an ant and a sapient, both will be more inclined to look favourably on the other.]

[Antbishop: Your service to the ant is as much religious as it is practical. This Class evolution will enhance the 'United in Purpose' aura Skill and turn it into the 'Fervour of the Faithful' aura Skill. For those that share your faith, the range and benefit provided by the aura will be increased. Be warned, in order to level this Class, it is no longer sufficient to battle alongside ants and people. You must serve alongside ants and believers. An additional Skill will be granted, Ant's Peace, that shall enable you to radiate the selfless nature and hardworking attitude of the ant around you.]

[Antorator: Powerful in both word and deed, the Antorator is a potent motivational speaker, able to persuade and convince people to follow in the path of the ant so long as the insects are present. Speeches given under these conditions will receive large bonuses, allowing you to sway others to your cause. You will become a diplomat, bringing others into the fold of your union with the ant.]

[Antstandardbearer: You have marched alongside the ant and made their battles your own. This Class will give you the tools required to lead your people into a deeper bond of cooperation on the field of battle, carrying the standard of your union. So long as you bear the standard, the effects of your aura will be further enhanced and its range increased. Furthermore, a new Skill 'Rallying Cry' will be gained, that will allow you to raise the morale of both insect and sapient in the heat of battle.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 809: Laying Low in Leng

[How long will the curious one remain imprisoned within the mouth?]

[Until she's learned not to be a massive pain in my commercial zone.]

A wave of heat washes over me from behind.

[What is this... *commercial zone*?]

[You know what? Never mind.]

The already sweltering temperatures of the third stratum inch up a couple of degrees as Al literally burns with a level of curiosity that, being honest, I just can't be bothered dealing with right now. All I'd wanted to do is hang out in the demon city and see what they got up to in there. Is that too much to

ask? Apparently, yes. I'd kind of expected that things would go wrong, I mean, they tend to. Tiny would get into a fight, or Crinis would accidentally mind-control somebody, or Invidia would nab something he shouldn't and then all hell would break loose.

I make it sound as if I'd expected my pets to be the cause of any issues, but I can be honest with myself. I fully expected that I'd be responsible for some kind of drama, be it getting into a fight I shouldn't have, pinching stuff I shouldn't or mind controlling someone. What I didn't expect was a damned *hatchling* to go freaking *crazy* on me!

Now the only way we're going to get back into Roklu is at the head of an army. Good thing the Colony is probably going to assault the place in fairly short order. In the meantime, we'll just have to hang out down here, I suppose. Not that it isn't exciting!

[I ... *dislike* this place.]

Al has a distinctly displeased tone to his usually flat and unemotional voice which surprises me enough that I turn around to face him.

[What about it makes you so unhappy?] I ask. [Isn't this the place that you were born?]

The floating eye of fire swings around the plains around us in one irritated swoop.

[All demons are born of the plains. From the moment we emerge from the spawn points we know nothing but a desperate battle to survive, surrounded on all sides by foes. We consume each other until we piece together our sentience, bit by bit as we evolve. Even those who try to escape the fighting and climb the pillar are thrown back down. Until we reach tier six, we aren't considered a real demon.]

[It doesn't sound like a good upbringing at all,] I sympathise, [but isn't life like that for all monsters? Most of my kind are born within the comfort and safety of the nest, surrounded by family, but I personally was born on my own, one of the weakest creatures in the entire Dungeon. It wasn't easy, but I was able to fight my way up to this point.]

The demon eye glitters.

[It is true that most monsters climb up and survive only by fighting for their lives, though some hide and cower in the dark in order to avoid notice.]

Like a certain *worm* that I know...

[For these reasons, it isn't common for a demon to actually *enjoy* returning to the plains...]

Fair enough I suppose.

In truth, we are yet to actually arrive at the plains themselves. At the moment we are clinging to the pillar a hundred metres above the ground, looking down on the chaos going on below.

[There really are a lot of them, aren't there?] I say, hesitation clear in my thoughts.

[A never-ending supply. Even if you try, for some mad reason, to purge them all, the spawn rate will increase until the numbers return. This is the natural state of the third stratum.]

[The wave is over isn't it? This is the normal rate for them to appear?]

[This is still higher than normal, but nothing like what it was during the wave. When the wave was at its height, they were several metres deep around here.]

We are referring of course to the heaving carpet of infant demons beneath us. Each of the little creatures, with their dark coloured demon skin, two claws and strangely bulbous bodies fights maniacally against any of their own kind they can reach. Seeing how tightly packed together they are, there are a *ton* that they can reach. Some are larger than others, and these seem to ignore the smaller ones as much as possible, seeking out others of their own size to fight.

Looking straight down, it's pure chaos, a frenzy of feeding and fighting that just goes on and on as new demons crawl from between cracks in the ground to replace those that have fallen. When I pan my attention across the wider plains, the scene is replicated everywhere I can see, for kilometres and kilometres, in every direction.

[That's an awful lot of Biomass...] I wonder 'aloud'.

[More effort than it's worth to harvest,] Al comments, [not that you or I would gain anything from hunting prey such as these.]

[I wasn't thinking about us...]

I was thinking about potentially hundreds of thousands of little hatchlings who would be more than happy to feast on these demons. Looking over the vast plains and the unending supply of small demons, thousands might not be enough to consume all that I can see. We might need millions...

[May as well get down there...] I sigh and begin the final climb.

When I finally reach the bottom, I tentatively put my first claw down onto the ground, trying to find a gap I can place my leg without squishing any demons in the process. To my surprise, they almost *flow* away from me, creating space where I won't crush them underfoot. As I bring more legs down, eventually bringing my whole body down onto the ground, the rolling melee continues to shift away so as not to impede me.

[Do they always do that?] I point out the strange phenomenon to Al.

[They will instinctively shift away from those more powerful than them.]

[Weird...]

The giant eye flares in a kind of shrug.

[It is not so surprising. To an infant demon, you are either food for now, or food for later. Anything that is more powerful than themselves is food for later. Better to occupy yourself with the food for now than chase that which you cannot defeat.]

[Huh.]

Tiny drops down onto the ground with a grunt, carefully placing his feet so he doesn't squish any of the smaller creatures, not that he needed to bother, they move aside for him just as they did for me. Just like that, we found ourselves on the plains.

[Soooooooo... what is there to do down here? It's not like you can really go hunting... since there aren't any strong demons about to fight...]

It does seem like this vast wasteland is a bit of a waste of time. Heh. Nothing to hunt but an endless sea of runts? No Biomass, no experience? It's practically valueless to a tier six like me.

[Now you see why we ignore this place,] Al deadpans. [Still, it isn't as if it is completely barren. It is possible to travel to another pillar and find another city which you can investigate. There are also tier fours and fives roaming the plains, though they are generally harder to find. There is also the network of tunnels beneath us that connect to the next layer. Within them, you will find an environment more similar to what you might think of as 'normal Dungeon.' In that region there are rogue demons who have carved out their own portion of territory in the wilds.]

Wait a second.

[You mean the tunnels that connect to the next stratum?]

The eye flares for a moment.

[No. The next layer of the third.]

[You mean there's another place, just like this one, beneath us?! With pillars, and cities and plains?]

[Yes. This is common knowledge.]

Come to think of it, someone might have mentioned that to me in the past... I just... This place is so *huge* though...

[Okay, so how many layers to the third stratum are there?]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 810: Just Can't Keep Out of Trouble

Travelling through the vast plains is strangely peaceful, despite the literal *ocean* of death and destruction happening around us at all given moments. After the first ten minutes, I kind of fell into the habit of not directing my attention downward, and all of a sudden the endless war of the little demons beneath my feet wasn't such a big deal anymore. Every now and again I might get swiped by a wayward claw, but even if they are monsters native to the third stratum, with all sorts of in built advantages over me, they still can't penetrate my diamond carapace or cause any real harm to my legs.

Instead, I take in the sights and enjoy having such a vast open space above my head. From the ground looking up, it's even more incredible to see than it was from the roof looking down. If I trick myself, I can almost believe that the ash and smoke that swirls far, far overhead are clouds in a particularly hot sky.

The temperature is another thing that is bothering me. I'd kind of thought it might be a little cooler down here, since hot air rises and all that. Turns out no. There are open rivers of lava down here. Lava! Ignoring that, the rock itself is boiling hot! My poor claws feel like they're sizzling every time I take a step. Uncomfortable to say the least. Compared to the freezing cold of the shadow sea, I honestly don't know which is worse...

From behind me I hear a muffled 'thump' and watch confused as an infant demon sails through the air in a graceful arc before thudding back down to the ground more than fifty metres away. The little beasts are so hardy that that thing immediately flips itself over with one clawed arm and starts ripping into its closest neighbour.

[Tiny...]

[Hrrr?]

[Did you just kick an infant demon?]

He looks to one side.

[Why would you kick an infant demon, Tiny?]

He shrugs his massive shoulders.

[You're bored?!]

[...]

[I don't care if you're bored! Don't go punting monsters around! First off, you'd get almost no experience from it, even if you managed to kill the thing, and second, we are travelling whilst surrounded by literally millions of the damn things. I really don't want to slow down so you can kick your way through the plains, alright?]

The big ape is clearly frustrated, but nods in understanding. He'd been hoping for more to fight down here, I have no doubt about that. Other than the exciting chase in the city, he hasn't really had a chance to stretch his ... fists. Even if that's the case, there are some behaviours that we simply don't stoop to.

[Not to worry about it champ, I'm sure we'll run into some stuff to battle soon enough. If we keep an eye out, there's bound to be plenty of tier four and five demons running about down here and you can beat up on them all you like. Just be patient.]

The giant bat-faced gorilla shifts his weight from foot to foot and nods unhappily. Poor old lug. He'll be right as rain once we get a good scrap in. Seeing how tightly wound up Tiny is makes me think I should check in on my other friends as well, just to see how they're travelling.

[How's things Invidia?] I cheerfully greet the envy demon. [Enjoying your time here on the third stratum?]

[*The heat issss pleasssant...*] he drawls, his little wings fluttering in the hot air as he closes his eye for a moment.

[I suppose you were raised on the second stratum, so you never got to enjoy this warmth... huh. You don't find it weird looking at all the infant demons around our ankles killing each other?]

The green eye flicks down to the ground then back up again.

[*I am pleassssed I wasss sparred thiss trial...*]

[Makes sense. It seems like a brutal and inefficient way to grow up.]

[...but I wantsss their ferocity and drive!]

The eye glows green.

[Of course you do.]

Looking down at the literal ankle biters, they sure do have a lot of spirit...

[How about you Crinis? You holding up alright?]

[I am, Master,] her voice sounds a little pained. [It is uncomfortable, but I can bear it sufficiently well.]

[Please let me know if you need help or need a rest,] I implore her, [you aren't being a burden when you ask for the help you need, alright? Don't be so selfless that you put yourself in danger, that doesn't help anybody.]

She hesitates for a brief moment.

[I-I will try, Master,] she promises.

[That's all I can ask. You're doing well.]

To be honest, a little selfishness would help Crinis a great deal. Living your life for another being in the wholehearted way that she does just isn't healthy. The ultimate goal to return my pets to independent entities still remains, though I have absolutely no idea how that can be achieved. As far as I'm aware, there's no way for a pet to continue living once its 'master' has died.

[Something is coming,] Al declares as he appears in a burst of flame to my right.

[HOLY ... Would you please *stop* that already?! I'm going to burst my core or something before we manage to get anywhere.]

Rather than respond to my petulant demand, the demon simply points forward with one tendril of flame. Turning my attention in the indicated direction, I struggle to see what he's looking at for a moment, but then I realise I'm looking in the wrong place. He isn't pointing along the ground, where my attention was first drawn, but above it. Thanks to my largely omni-directional vision, I manage to detect a flicker of motion about a hundred metres above the plains. After a few seconds, I realise that whatever it is appears as if it's drawing closer to us.

[Any idea what that might be, Al?]

A pause.

[Al?]

A quick scan of my surroundings informs me that the demon is completely gone.

[Well nards...]

It quickly becomes apparent that the object we spotted is a flat disc that seems to hover through the air by some means I don't understand. Standing atop that disk is a small collection of demons, each of a different sort. Judging by their expressions, they aren't exactly happy to see us.

[Get ready for trouble, gang,] I tell my crew, [this could get ugly.]

A broad grin splits Tiny's face. Finally things are going his way.