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Chapter 811: Pride Cometh

I make out five demons in total, judging by my mana sense, all of them tier six, thank heavens. If they'd all turned out to be a higher tier than me, we might have just been dead and buried right there. According to the information that I've managed to barter out of AI, the vast majority of demons, the properly sapient ones anyway, are tier six.

Due to the generally short and barbaric lives they tend to live, most don't make it to tier seven, but those that do can be considered powerful, standing above the masses. Apparently, tier eight demons do exist, but only deeper down, where the mana is thicker on the border between the third and fourth strata.

Considering their natural, inborn advantages, a tier eight demon is *not* something that I want to tangle with. Not one bit.

For now, these five demons on their hovering, dark red disc of pure energy continue to move closer at a rapid pace as we spread out to receive them.

When they draw close enough, their momentum slows and the closest demon, standing proudly at the lip of their disc, looks down on us with thinly veiled contempt. It's not easy to judge the expression of a non-human monstrosity, but with enough practice you can get the hang of just about anything.

The demon in question is what I've come to know is a 'pride' demon. A humanoid physique, with more blades and spikes than one would generally see on a person, accompanied by a strangely thin but elongated head with a long vertical mouth that is open more often than it's shut. According to AI, pride demons are considered generalists amongst the tier six demons, equally capable at spell flinging and up close chop-work with their claws and spikes.

After a few moments, I feel a mental connection seek me out and I allow it to snap into place, my multiple mind constructs warily monitoring the connection, prepared to rebuff any assault that takes place.

[FOUL creature,] the demon's mental tone positively *drips* with condescension, [why do you roam the plains within the bounds of the GREAT city of Orpule?]

Uh, what? Even without turning my head, I can still see the enormous pillar that supports Roklu behind us. Is this guy telling me we've left the borders of that city already?

[Aren't we still in the area of Roklu?] I ask back, [and by the by, who the heck are you? Why is it your business where we are?]

The pride demon positively crackles with indignation at being questioned by what it probably considers a 'lowly insect'. From the first stratum no less!

[You admit that you originate from lowly Roklu? Has the fat one sent you to do his dirty work?]

I brighten up.

[You mean Grokus? He really is massively fat, isn't he? I personally am not one for body shaming or anything, but that guy has rolls on his rolls. He must weigh eight tons at least. The dude has so much mass, the first time I met him I almost got caught in an orbit.]

It's nice to see someone else who is equally as discerning when it comes to Grokus' more unbelievable features. The city lord of Roklu *had* to evolve a second mouth, since his first one never stopped eating!

[You do not deny my charge, INSECT! Are you part of the war games? Is this an assault?!]

[Uh, no? I'm not even a demon, why would I be part of your war games? What are the war games anyway?]

With every word I send across the bridge, the demon appears to grow more and more offended. Not that I think I'm to blame. I can only assume that all pride demons are touchy, considering what they are.

[I will not be fooled by your PATHETIC lies! This is clearly a ploy by Roklu to gain the upper hand in our conflict! You will be dispatched in the name of Orpule!]

Before I can even process in my head just what exactly this idiot is on about, he makes a cutting gesture with one clawed hand and just like that, the other four demons on the disk begin to rain hell down on us. Lava, brimstone, ash, all sorts of nasty magic takes shape in an instant and the bombardment begins to rain down on us before I have a chance to shift my feet.

Holy moly! These guys mean business!

KRAKOOM!

A searing flash of light blasts my eyes, sending my poor insect senses reeling as Tiny lifts one crackling arm to the sky and lets loose a devastating bolt of lightning that crackles into the disc, burning away a portion of the energy that sustains it and shrinking its size. Even blinded, I give the ape a glare. There's no way he could charge that up so quickly, he must have been preparing it the moment the demon reached out to me.

Turned out to be a good decision in the end!

[Invidia! Shields up! Crinis, see if you can reach them. But be *careful!*]

[I will!]

With an inrush of mana that is almost audible to my mana sense, Invidia drags the ambient mana together with his immense mind, crunching out shields with the sheer force of his Will before the attack from above can land. As the lava and flaming rocks smash into the barriers, Crinis peels herself from my carapace, dropping her entire body into the thickening shadows beside me.

Looking up, I flex all of my mental power as I prepare to deal with these darned creatures. First thing I'd better do is try to bring them down to the ground I suppose. Good thing I have gravity magic! The next question is, how many gravity bolts can I make with all of the mental constructs at my disposal?

Turns out the answer is many. Drawing directly from the gravity mana stored inside my body, none of my brains are forced to maintain a construct or handle the processing of mana, so each and every one of them gets busy stringing together basic gravity bolts which I immediately fling at my target.

In moments I have a steady fullisade of gravity magic pelting at the offending demons. Not many find their target, given all the mess in the way between our two sides flinging stuff at each other, but some do. Eventually, it's all going to add up. Or at least, it would have if Invidia hadn't taken things into his own hands.

BOOM! BOOM!

Two devastating explosions rock the disc as the envy demon unleashes his potent explosive magic, the energy of his spells tearing into the structure of the disc and shrinking it even more, forcing the demons closer to the ground. The face of the pride demon is even more twisted than before, filled with rage at the mere prospect of having to put his feet on the ground.

Not to worry buddy, before long, I'll have you buried in it.

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Chapter 812: Before The Fall

Hello loves! I must say that on all of my adventures and travels, I haven't quite come across anything like what I saw in Renewal. Monsters and people? Living together in harmony? You'd think me mad if I told you that, absolutely barking! Nonetheless, as hard as it is to believe, you can trust the word of old Tolly. You begged me to come here and report back to you, and that is what I have done! If you were to doubt me at this point, then you might just hurt my poor old heart, dear reader.

We continued our tour about town and our guide, Ms Emilia Cretherton, was a veritable font of information. I had only so much as to twitch a finger in any given direction and she would instantly start to describe the history behind anything and everything that lay in that direction. When we strolled to the wall around the town I was able to drag my old bones up to the top and listened raptly as she explained the intricate irrigation system that the ants had worked on in cooperation with the farmers.

Almost the entire thing was buried beneath the ground to prevent evaporation and was operated by a network of mana fuelled pumps. I had to say that the investment of such equipment and expensive cores in something like farming was certainly unusual.

You know what she said to me?

"The Colony did not think of it that way," she smiled as she explained it to me, her eyes filled with pride as she looked out over the fields that stretched beyond the city walls. "To them, they see farming as a fundamental necessity of our lives, so it was the first thing they sought to help us with, and the one area they put more effort into than any other. Farming is not a dirty, or simple profession in Renewal, Ms Tolly, it is the most important work anyone can do."

When you put it that way, it makes a lot of sense! Next time you're out in the market picking up sweet meats and treats, spare a thought (and possibly an extra coin or two!) for the farmers, dear readers!

After our visit to the walls, I was most keen to see the cathedral up close and personal. The largest building in town, a great stone edifice covered in the most wonderful carvings, this place of worship was something that many of us in the big city had already heard of. Indeed, such open heresy is more than a little uncommon in this day and age! I was most eager to witness it for myself!

The fact that this community, these people, had come to revere the ants who had saved them, was only natural in a way. A very real and physical presence that protected them in the face of very real and physical danger. What surprised me as we approached the cathedral itself, was the fervour in which the people were dedicated to their devotions.

Emelia's eyes were practically shining by the time we arrived outside the grand edifice itself, the girl all too happy to explain with great enthusiasm the manner in which the cathedral operated as the spiritual centre of the people's lives. I was somewhat surprised to learn that there were no daily devotions. No gatherings in the morning or dusk, or both, as I've seen at the church of the path. The reason being that the ants the people had gathered to revere did not consider such an activity as 'work', and therefore dismissed it as a waste of time! I had a hearty chuckle when I heard that! Instead, the cathedral operates all hours of the day and night, its doors open to allow people to visit whenever they are passing by, or might have the time, to offer a prayer or listen to a sermon.

Prominently placed on either side of the grand arch that marked the entrance were two tall speaking stones, shaped ever so cleverly to appear as anthills, I might add. Emelia assured me that no matter the time, two acolytes would be in position, espousing the wisdom of the Great One to the people as they passed by. Even as I watched, small crowds gathered at the feet of the two preachers, who spoke with clear voices and great conviction to their enraptured audience.

I had so many questions!

"Can you give me a sample? A taste, of the wisdom of the Great One?" I asked the dear girl beside me. "What is one thing that is taught here at the cathedral that would be easy for me to understand?"

She thought very seriously for a moment, her brows furrowed in concentration.

"It is very important," she began, "to sleep eight hours a day. No matter how busy you are, or how much work you need to get done, if you do not rest then you will be unable to give your best on the next day. This will weaken the community."

I couldn't help but laugh with delight. The look on her face was deathly serious! I have to confess reader, if I could turn up to a church and get told I needed to sleep more, I'd probably attend with greater regularity!

The speed I can spit out Gravity bolts is actually impressing the hell out of me. Like, I can remember how hard it was when I wanted to cast a single one of these suckers, now I can spit them out at a pace of more than one a second! The mind constructs display their power! Gwahahahaha!

Even more in my favour, the demons appear to have decided that since the purple bolts of mana don't appear to be doing them any harm, they aren't even bothering to dodge, focusing their attention on the more obviously lethal explosions and lightning being sent their way. Not that I mind.

The more shredded the disc becomes, the more engaged the pride demon in the lead gets, until his face is a twisted mask of pure disgust.

[You will DIE for your INSOLENT! WORM!]

Oi. There's only one worm that needs to be destroyed due to its insolence, and it sure isn't me!

[Big talk from a little demon!] I taunt him. [How about you come over here and say that!?!]

The five demons on the platform appear to take my invitation more literally than it was intended and launch themselves at us, leaping off the disc at blistering speeds as they bare their claws against us. With a whoop of delight, Tiny smashes both hands into the ground, crushing a section of stone into dust as he launches himself forward, lightning crackling around his torso. In the blink of an eye, he crashes into the assaulting monsters, using his body to block their path and smacking two of them out of the air with two punches so fast I can't even see them.

The crew of demons are a mixed bunch, the pride demon in the lead is followed by two beefier looking models and two others who are clearly more of a caster variety, judging by the lack of skin on their bones. I mean, Invidia is very small, but he has extremely little in the way of bones and muscle mass, which are apparently not what you want to be stuffing into your pocket dimension. Brain matter? All good. Biceps? Not so much. By all accounts, this appears to be a balanced group of demons, on their way to take part in some sort of war? I'll have to ask AI what it's all about when we're done here.

As Tiny is set upon, the grinning ape being torn into by his five opponents, Crinis rises from the depths, her tentacles snaking out to grasp the demons around their limbs, the horrific buzzing of her barbs rising in the air. The pride demon in particular looks offended by this turn of events, hacking off the limb that grasped him and trying to leap into the air to create some distance.

Unfortunately, he's just *too heavy*.

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Chapter 813: Yes, I Know That's Not How Gravity Works

After being hit with literally dozens of gravity bolts, the pride demon's powerful leap takes him practically nowhere, dragged back down to the ground by his own mass. How do you like that, fool! Smoked by the power of gravity! Man, I cannot *wait* to get my hands on that gravity skill!

Having had my fill of throwing spells at them, I charge, dashing toward our foes, my legs a blur. Unhappy with the treatment her tentacles were given, Crinis is already unwinding more, snaking them through the air toward the pride demon as the confused monster tries to understand why he can't move the way he wants.

Behind him, one of his allies, a strangely serpentine demon, raises itself up, a powerful aura of healing magic gathering around it.

"Exterminate the healer! Rapid take down protocol!"

I'm so surprised to hear the pheromones that my grand charge almost collapses on itself as my legs come within a hair's breadth of tangling against each other. I manage to correct it in time, and hopefully nobody noticed. From thin air, Protectant appears already descending upon the snakish demon along with six of her fellow bodyguards. Before the poor creature can even complete casting the potent healing spell it had been preparing, the seven ants rip into it, their combined weight driving the monster to the ground where it's finished by their mandibles.

A moment later, the ants are gone, leaving behind nothing but Biomass.

That was... different.

In another second, I collide with the pride demon, the force of my charge ripping the monster from Crinis' grip and sending him a dozen metres away, sprawling in the searing stone of the third stratum. Hundreds of little infant demons skitter out of the way as I advance on him, my mandibles gnashing. Behind me, Tiny and Invidia continue to rip into the remaining opponents, the combination of the big ape's awe inspiring offense and the envy demon's perfect support magic (and explosions) being far too much for even their tier six foes to deal with.

Even as I approach the fallen pride demon, my mental constructs do not cease their work, spinning together a dizzying barrage of mind magic packets to fire across the bridge my opponent so foolishly didn't cut off when he had the chance. It's such a strange feeling, to be concentrating on what I'm doing, focused on my approach, on my mandibles, on charging up an omen chomp, whilst at the same time I can feel my brains working, churning away on so many other tasks. My sub-brains are propping up the constructs, whilst the constructs utilise their own functions, as well as drawing on the physical brains that maintain them to weave dozens of threads together at the same time.

It's bewildering, confusing, elating and intoxicating all at the same time.

[Prepare to get chomped, demon!] I holler as I bear down on my demon opponent.

As best he can, he gathers himself to his feet, none of the grace or power one would expect from one of his kind present as the lingering effects of the gravity magic he was struck by continues to weigh him down. As a result, the following confrontation is laughably one sided. With a snarl, the demon slashes toward me, arm aglow with the light of the Skill in use.

Already forewarned, I twist my body to the perfect angle, maximising the thickness of my carapace at the point of impact. The impossible speed of my reactions allows me to adjust my position at the very last possible moment, giving the demon no chance to shift the strike. Even with these preparations the claws dig into my precious diamond carapace.

For all my advantages, there are limits to how well diamond from the first stratum will work against claws from the third. Stupid Dungeon prejudice! I call foul!

Well, he might be able to carve grooves in my carapace, but demon flesh isn't so hard that my mandibles aren't able to do some work.

Omen chomp!

The dark light manifests itself as my jaws close on the pride demon.

Combo!

Activating the chomp combo Skill, I rapidly pump my mandibles, the muscles in my face screaming as my stamina plummets. Omen chomp after omen chomp cuts into the pride demon until the fight has left him. Along with all life...

[Now what the heck was that about?!] I demand broadly.

[I believe I can answer your query.]

This time I don't even flinch when AI appears beside me. Just goes to show you can get used to anything given the chance, even flaming eyeballs of death popping into existence at the drop of a hat.

[I know you're more fire than eyeball at this point, but do you ever close that thing? Can you blink?!] I demand.

[You desire that I close my eye? This request. *Unusual*. Yes... I can do this.]

So he does.

[HOLY MOTHER OF GANDALF! OPEN! OPEN IT!]

A moment later I come back to myself, twitching on the ground. The horror. The sheer horror of it. I couldn't even close my own eyes so I couldn't see it...

[Please never do that again,] I plead.

[Your request is *noted*.]

[So,] I say weakly, trying to dismiss that image from my mind, [you thought you could explain what happened here? Why did these guys decide to attack us out of nowhere? The pride demon mentioned something about a war...]

[You recall our earlier discussion, where we talked about demons and their obsessions?]

[Yeah?]

[Many of these obsessions require violent expression. Murder demons, slaughter demons, cutting demons, massacre demons, death demons, blood demons, torture demons, blade demons, bone demons-]

[Okay. I think I get the picture.]

[In order to give these demons an outlet, it is common for neighbouring cities to arrange a formal war. This also doubles as a means by which the cities can compete for territory and settle grievances. If memory serves...]

I get the distinct impression that AI is somewhat like an elephant. I can't imagine this eyeball *ever* forgetting.

[... Roklu had organised a war with our nearest neighbour some time back. I suspect that this pride demon saw us traversing the plains heading in the general direction of Orpule and believed we were a secret strike force directed to attack the city.]

[That's nonsense! Just the five of us, attacking an entire city? It would be suicide! And what the hell were the five of them doing out here in the middle of nowhere when there's supposed to be a 'war' going on?]

The eye flickers with amusement.

[I believe they were the strike force directed to attack Roklu by surprise.]

That'd be right.

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Chapter 814: A Demonic Crack

After collecting a few choice cores and chowing down on Biomass, all we could really do was shrug and get back to business. Even so, I can't help but feel like this incident is going to come back and bite me in the backside somehow. At least this time I can proudly wave my antennae and declare that it wasn't my fault! How am I supposed to know some random pride demon is going to get it in his head to attack me? There was clearly no getting out of that situation.

Now, where were we?

[How far are these tunnels, Al? It's getting hot out here!]

That's a lie. It's constantly been hot out here.

[If you find the temperature disagreeable then it may be a good idea not to descend any further. The heat will only increase.]

[I'm guessing that you don't have an issue with it...]

[The portion of my body that extrudes into this dimension is comprised of 65.37 percent heat energy. It does not bother me.]

[Invidia, when you evolve, try not to become a floating eyeball of fire, alright? If you really want to pick an element, do earth or something.]

[Hiss flame isss powerful. I wantsssss it!]

[It literally doesn't matter what he has, you'd have wanted it anyway! Just consider, alright? I don't want to drag this kind of heat through the entire Dungeon! I can't even sweat!]

Ants aren't particularly good at temperature regulation internally. Although some colonies are incredible at utilising the flow of air within their nests to control the heat, basically building automated air conditioning systems to make sure the inside of the nest is never too hot or cold and ensuring the air doesn't become stale. Pretty clever for creatures with a brain the size of a pinhead!

Of course, our eternal foes the termites are the best at this sort of thing. Those blind little bugs create enormous mound nests that can bring fresh air all the way down to the heavily protected nesting chamber of their massive, chonky queen.

[Alright then, where to now?] I ask.

[The entrance to the tunnels is this way.]

Al points a tendril of his ever-burning corona to our right and so off in that direction we proceed.

[We've come almost ten kilometres from Roklu already. Are entrances to the tunnels that rare? Seems like they might be more common.]

[There is much lava that flows eternally from hyper concentrated sources of fire mana between the layers. The tunnel entrances are gaps in the flow that are safe to traverse. *Sparse.*]

Interesting. We keep moving along and as we push our way through the ever-shifting carpet of infant demons I take a moment to talk to Protectant.

"Alright then Protectant, you may as well get out here and answer a few questions."

Her response comes to me as light as a breeze.

"Do I have to?"

"Yes, you have to! I'm not going to talk to thin air when I know for a fact that you're right here! Honestly..."

Somewhat begrudgingly, my bodyguard appears on my left. As usual, her posture is a little shrunk, as if she were still trying to hide despite being in plain sight. I wonder if they bother to train their stealth skills at all, considering they rely on a powerful organ to hide most of the time. Similar to AI, the organ in question subtly affects the minds of those around them, acting as a perception filter.

"So, what was that back there? The 'take down protocol'? This a change in the stated policy or something?"

She shifts uncomfortably.

"It's been decided that we'll be a bit more active from this point onward during combat. If we can end fights more quickly with a precision strike, and therefore cut down on the risk that you'll be exposed to, it will be beneficial in the execution of our duties."

"Not to mention it helps you guys get some experience and Biomass on the job," I approve, "I like it."

"It does mean that we expose ourselves more often, which many of us are not happy about..."

I dismiss those concerns with a flick of my antenna.

"You can't just sit idly by and hide whilst I get killed, right? You have to expose yourselves at points in order to perform your role at all. It's just a question of working out when and how much. I think this is a sensible shift. Keep up the good work."

Unused to being praised, Protectant stumbles a little before vanishing from my sight again. I meant what I said though, if they can be a bit more proactive, having these twenty follow me around won't be as much of a pain. It's nice to have more ants to talk to, for a start, something I can't really do if they refuse to show themselves most of the time.

Speaking of other ants.

[Alright Invidia, spit her out,] I sigh.

A moment later we are joined by a rather bedraggled looking hatchling. Brilliant gives herself a quick shake, much like a puppy would, to rid herself of the envy demon's excess saliva before looking around.

"Oo! What's all this?"

In less than five seconds, she's already spotted the carpet of demons crawling around our feet and pounced on one, holding down the struggling creature with her mandibles so she can inspect it more closely.

"Careful, you moron! These little things are dangerous to someone as weak as you!"

I almost spoke prophetically, an instant later the enraged little demon managed to free a claw and took a wild swipe at its captor, threatening to slice Brilliant's face in two.

SPLAT!

With one emphatic stomp, Tiny flattens the offending demon, scooping Brilliant up with one arm and placing her firmly on his shoulder in one smooth motion. That was close!

"You might be tier three compared to their tier one or two, but these little guys have much better body parts than we do. Better muscle mass, harder and sharper claws, tougher skin and bodies. Despite the gap in tier, they're still capable of slicing you up with ease."

The little ant clicks her mandibles in shock.

"Really? That's fascinating!"

"That's the difference between stratum at work," I grumble. "Only by upgrading our bodies can we close the gap. All that means is that you should consider yourself a tier one for the time we are down here. Absolutely everything in the third can kill you. If you're going to keep being stupid, then I'll stuff you back into the interdimensional mouth until we leave."

"I'll try to keep myself under control!" she gives me a quick salute with one antenna that I can't decide is sarcastic or not. I'm still thinking about it when AI pipes up.

[We've arrived,] the demon announces.

In the ground before us is something I wasn't expecting to see, a break in the endless carpet of infant demons. Instead of the rolling melee, a wide crevice in the boiling black rock of the Plains of Leng opens before us which the monsters seem to instinctively avoid, rolling away whenever they draw too close. The walls of the tunnel in front of us glow red as the potent fire mana in the veins that run through the rock flows unceasingly. I can already tell it's going to be absolutely boiling in there.

[Alright then, let's head on in,] I sigh.

At least we won't get caught up in any more bizarre fights between cities whilst we're down there.

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Chapter 815: What Lies Between

Not only do I believe the ancients to be real, but I believe they have gotten stronger, not weaker, over time as some have suggested. I understand the thinking behind the so-called 'cascading mana deprivation' theory, but I consider it optimistic at best, and hopelessly naive at worst. I can almost believe that the great thinkers of the last age were simply never taught the concept of entropy. I suppose it isn't a comforting thought, that one's society and indeed world, are in a state of decay rather than growth, but the stubborn refusal to even consider this meta state of our existence is more than a little baffling to me.

If one accepts that monsters so powerful as to be near to gods exist, then a set of assumptions logically follows. More powerful monsters require more mana to sustain themselves. This much is self-evident and there are none who refute this fact of the Dungeon. The ancients therefore live in the area of the planet with the highest concentration of mana. This also follows logically. It is possible, though dreadful to

contemplate, that more powerful monsters exist, sleeping on some deeper level beyond our experience, but we have no evidence that such may be the case. In the absence of such evidence, we must move forward with what we have.

It is here that the denialists stake their reputations. They believe that since the ancients have not been able to rise from that place a second time, locked inside their own realm since the Rending, that mana levels globally have fallen to a point that does not allow them to do so. They argue that the peak concentration of mana on Pangera occurred during that dreadful event and has since fallen to the 'normal' or 'ideal' levels. In essence, they argue that the ancients peaked too early in life, and now they lie in a weakened state in the heart of the Dungeon without the strength to move.

It is true that, according to the records we have, that mana levels appear to have fallen before stabilising in the time since the cataclysm, but I believe that there is a different cause. I believe that the ancients, the most powerful creatures on Pangera, evolved. During the cataclysm they rose to the surface and destroyed, between them, millions of beings, pushing them past the threshold to evolve to a new stage of existence. This necessitated their retreat to the centre of the Dungeon and explains the lower level of mana that we have experienced since.

There is not less mana being produced in the centre of Pangera. Those nineteen individuals are soaking up so much that it has affected the concentration of energy on a global scale.

- *Excerpt from 'The world is stupid' by Elric the Wild Mage.*

I decide to take the lead in our descent to the crack before us and creep forward with reasonable caution. This is an unknown environment and I don't want to go too crazy before we get a clear picture of what we might run into down here. Sure, I could ask AI all about it, but that would do two things. One, suck all the fun out of Dungeon exploration, and two, require that I answer a bunch of his questions and frankly I'm getting tired of explaining basic concepts of my pre-ant existence. The last time I needed to tell him something I ended up going through half the plot of the Lord of the Rings before he would tell me what I needed to know!

Ain't nobody got time for that!

The tunnels are much like I've gotten used to during my time in the Dungeon with a few major differences. The mana veins here look like molten lava, but not the cooling stuff. None of that pansy dark red lava, oh no, the veins are white hot, almost literally. The mana inside is so thick that it almost seems to flow like lava as well, oozing through the veins before seeping into the air. The rock itself is different, mainly in that its pitch black and steaming hot. I can see the heat waves in the air every time the tunnel stretches any sort of distance. Then of course, there's the lava. The stuff seems to flow like water down here. The further we go, the more of it I find.

Tiny walks behind me, also struggling a little with the heat, but Crinis is the one who is having the hardest time. She's in her usual spot, stuck to my abdomen, but every now and again bits of her slip around the edges, as if her shadow flesh were melting.

[You going to be alright, Crinis?] I ask, concerned.

[I'm alright!] she gasps, [but I'll be thankful when we make it to the fourth stratum. This place doesn't agree with my kind.]

[Already talking about the fourth?] I say wryly, [we have to make it through this one first.]

[Of course, it is only natural that we will conquer these filthy demons, Master! Before long we will make our way down, just as we did before.]

I can only shrug at that. I wish I had her level of confidence.

[Master! I sense food! I mean, monsters!]

Oho! Naturally Crinis' keen senses are the first to detect our prey! It's a little frustrating, but my heat sensing antennae are almost useless down here. Everywhere is hot! They tell me nothing!

[What have we got Crinis?]

[Feels like... something strange. Tier six?]

Delicious experience... let's get it!

[I'll take the lead. Tiny, be careful with the hatchling.]

"Don't do anything stupid," I warn Brilliant, "if you feel an overpowering urge to run off and 'investigate' something, I want you to approach Invidia and throw yourself into his mouth."

"Throw myself in there?!"

"You heard me!"

With the nuisance dealt with, we creep forward, following the curve of the tunnel as it descends and widens until our prey comes into sight. It's... ghastly.

[What the hell is that?!] I cry to Al.

Around the corner I see what I can only describe as a horror. It's *seems* like a demon, the normal demon type of aesthetic is present, at any rate. Some sort of Wrath demon, judging by the bladed arms on the thing, but that's where the similarities end. Instead of normal, healthy demon flesh, what I see is practically an apparition, immaterial and ghostly. The harder I stare at the edges of the creature, the more they seem to fade in and out of reality and it drifts around, its legs almost completely invisible.

[It looks sort of like a ghost...]

I mentally whisper, despite the fact I'm not making any noise.

[Ah, a ghost. *Annoying*. Physical damage will have little effect on the creature, make sure to use magical attacks.]

[So, wait. Are you saying it's an actual *ghost*?]

[No. A ghost is a monster that is created when a demon perishes. Some demons experience their obsession so powerfully that death will not contain it. Their desire fuses with the ambient mana to create a ghost which will mindlessly act in pursuit of its desire. During a wave, many will be born due to the higher mana level.]

[So... a ghost.]

I hate this stratum.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 816: Rhymes With Drops

Sometimes Isaac Bird had questions for himself. Such as 'how the heck did he end up preparing to assault the land of demons alongside a massive army of ant monsters', or 'should he grow a full beard or just stick with a moustache?'.

The latter was probably not as difficult to answer as the former, but each was worthy of careful consideration. 'Take each problem, one at a time,' as Ma used to say.

"How long do you think they're going to make us wait here, captain?" Margun asked from beside him.

Isaac resisted the urge to lean over and spit. He wasn't a country boy anymore, he had to set the standards for his men. If Morrelia didn't tolerate spitting in the ranks, then he wasn't going to either!

He turned to his lieutenant with one brow raised.

"You really that keen to be gettin' your hands dirty Margun?" he drawled. "I don't see what the rush is, they put us up pretty damn well right here, all things considered."

It was true, the Colony had been more than generous, as was their wont, with the accommodations for the human contingent of their war machine. Actually, not just humans, he corrected himself. After the volunteers started to flow from Rylleh there were a few non-humans amongst the ranks now, including a couple of golgari, displaced from their home kingdom.

"You aren't wrong there, Isaac. My feet are just getting antsy I suppose. How are you so relaxed, knowing what's about to happen?"

He laughed.

"I don't understand how you've got the energy to be nervous, Margun. They've had us doing drills and patrols until we drop ever since the wave ended, and it's not like *that* was a happy fun time! If they weren't busy building all this setup around here we'd still be at it I wager. Rather than all your fussin' I suggest you put your feet up while you have a chance."

The other soldier just stared at him.

"We aren't talking about a patrol through the tunnels here, Isaac! We're *invading the third stratum!* You know, the place full of the crazy strong demons? That doesn't worry you?"

Sometime people couldn't see the woods for the trees. Another one of Ma's favourite sayings and her wisdom was as true today as it was the day she passed it down to him.

With great patience, Isaac straightened himself and clapped one hand onto Margun's shoulder, as he gestured behind the man with the other.

"Take a look over there, my friend. Tell me what you see."

Margun rolled his eyes.

"Oh come on Isaac, I'm not in the mood for another of your 'lessons'."

Isaac frowned.

"You've come over here and bent my ear with your plops so you're going to right well listen to what I have to say. Now, out with it."

"*Fine.*"

With a weary sigh, the other man turned and beheld the very thing they'd been staring at most of the day.

"All right then," Isaac continued with satisfaction, "tell me what you see."

"I see the Colony doing a ton of building and stuff. They've been at it for days now, Isaac."

The former captain of the guard slapped a hand to his forehead. That's it?

"You don't see anything other than that?" he asked incredulously. "Bunch of ants building stuff. That's it?"

Margun rolled his shoulders uncomfortably.

"I don't know what you're after here Isaac, you know I've never been the sharpest tool in the shed."

"It 'ain't nothin' to do wit' bein' smart," Isaac drawled, forgetting to control his accent, "and all to do wit' payin' attention."

He took a moment to master himself.

"You see a bunch of ants building stuff. Alright, fine. How many do you see."

"I dunno. Couple thousand, I guess."

"Seems like a lot, right? Do you know how many build sites like this one there are?"

"I think there was ten? One for each of the guard companies?"

"Bingo. Ten of these. What does that say to you?"

"That there's... a lot of ants working?"

"Right. And what are they building?"

"Staging grounds for the invasion."

"Correct again. Now, there are ten of these staging grounds being built. Let's ask another question, how many ants do you think would fit into this one?"

Recognition was slowly starting to flicker in Margun's eyes.

"Around ten thousand, more or less, I would say," he said slowly.

"Which means that the big bad demons you're talking about are going to get hit with an invasion of a hundred thousand, give or take, monster ants along with ourselves. I'm not sure if you're a betting man, Margun, but I know where I'd be putting my money."

Having made his point, Isaac turned back and sat down on the porch that had been constructed around the outside of the barracks. The Colony had gone above and beyond with the facilities, as they always did, and the comfortable beds, spacious rooms and constant supply of tea, with sugar, was a luxury that he'd seldom been able to afford working as a guard in Liria.

"In my opinion," he sighed as he leaned back until his head was resting on the wall, "the demons are in for a world of pain. They might be powerful monsters, but I don't think they've seen anything like what's comin' for them. From what I hear, the Great One is already down there kicking up a ruckus. Chances are there won't be anything left but smoking ruins by the time we turn up."

"The Great One?" Margun raised a brow. "You a believer now Isaac? I didn't take you for the type."

"Aren't you from Rylleh? You didn't see the big guy go to work?"

"I didn't see for myself, no."

"If you had, you might be a little more respectful. If they want me to call him 'Holy ant of king mountain', I'll doff my cap and play along, and you'd best do the same. Don't go stickin' your foot in the plops if you don't need to."

Having passed on his final wisdom, Isaac Bird closed his eyes and let his mind drift until sleep claimed him. The Colony would work him to the bone soon enough, he was sure of it, so in the meantime he'd get all the rest he physically could. He floated away into dreamland with the image of a particular Legionary in his mind and a soft smile on his lips.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 817: Awakening

In the deepest parts of the third stratum the mana was so thick it hung in the air like a soup. Every breath filled a monster's lungs with fire and ash, enough to choke most creatures, or burn them from the inside out. Beyond this, an aura of evil hung over every rock and dripped from every stone, as if the sins of the denizens of this place had been so extreme that it had seeped into every atom, penetrating the fibre of matter itself.

In this place a vast lake of fire could be found. Those that knew of it referred to it as Durgotha, the ever burning. To the more observant, the lake was not one of fire at all, although it may appear that way. The heat that radiated from the vast pit, more than a kilometre across and hundreds of metres deep was enough to ignite a normal monster simply for drawing close, but rather than fire, it was pure fire mana that radiated this deadly heat. So potent it could be seen by the naked eye, the pulsing red mana ebbed and flowed in a slow dance as it was drawn ever deeper, sinking to the bottom before it would shift to the edges of the lake and rise once more.

To many, even to most demons, this was simply a place of great power, a location to be coveted for its incredible wealth of mana. Even so, none dared to approach it, it simply wasn't done. Those that sought to claim the ever burning lake for themselves seldom lived for long, such power was not to be held by

the likes of them. As such, to demons this was a place of fear and caution, best avoided as much as possible. To the oldest and deepest of their kind, this location held a different fear. There were precious few places in the third stratum that would support a tier eight demon, that could provide the kind of mana that they needed to survive. In these select locations, the mightiest of demon kind dwelt, sleeping the ages away as they waited for the call.

Odin Malum crept across the bare stone, instincts screaming of danger. He didn't want to be here, but the god had spoken and he found he had no choice but to obey, his blood, the very cells of his body demanding he acquiesce to the monster he had seen in his sleep. He hated this servile existence, his pride as a lone wolf couldn't stand having an authority stand on his shoulders, but he couldn't see a way out.

He had grown powerful feeding on the lives of those he had defeated, but he could not imagine growing strong enough to kill *that*. Even during his evolution, when he stood before Arconidem, it felt as if his soul was shaking. If he were to find the demon and appear before him in his physical body, it would likely be even worse. Unconsciously, Odin flexed the blades that extended from his forearms. It had been difficult to travel this far and only by drawing on every Skill he'd learned in his previous life and this one had he been able to survive. Now that he was so close to his destination, he hesitated.

It was *so quiet*. Unnaturally so. It took him a moment to realise what it was that was missing.

The infant demons were gone. They didn't spawn in the tunnels between layers he'd been relieved to learn, grateful not to have the little biters underfoot. For whatever reason, they did not spawn here.

Regardless of his growing unease, Odin was eager to discharge the task that the demon god had inflicted upon him, so he dipped into his skills, sunk his profile as low as he could and continued to creep forward. Before him, the slowly churning lake of mana roared with pure heat that threatened to drive even he, a native born demon, back. But he persevered until he had reached the edge.

Once again he hesitated, here at the precipice, but even now when every nerve told him to turn around and leave, his body refused to obey. Instead, he extended one blade and expertly clawed a section of stone free. Using the tip of the saw-like limb, he flipped the freshly carved rock into the air before measuring his strike and batting it out into the middle of Durgotha.

Then, he waited.

In his previous existence as a skilled assassin, Omen had grown used to waiting. Patience was a virtue for any hunter, and he was no different. In fact, in this area, he excelled, capable of waiting for days in cramped locations as his target moved to the perfect position. But now, he struggled within himself as the seconds dragged on. His core throbbed with his burning need to be *anywhere* but here, but his feet remained rooted to the ground by the command of Arconidem. The war raged within him as he fought for control of his own body as the silence dragged on.

And then, it was too late.

A deep rumble echoed throughout the lake as the mana began to circulate more quickly. Before Odin's horrified eyes, a deep shadow appeared at the bottom of Durgotha, a vast darkness that shifted and grew in his eyes. Ever more quickly, the fire mana rotated and thickened as the centre of the pool

dipped down until the entire lake had transformed into a swirling tornado of heat and ash, a massive figure uncoiling in the heart.

Rooted in place, Odin had no choice but to wait and watch as the torrent raged, drawing close enough to his feet that the claws on his toes erupted in flame, burning even his immensely resistant skin.

[You have awoken me, little mouse. Speak. Then you shall slake my thirst.]

Like a bubble filled with evil, the thoughts of the great demon intruded into his mind before it burst, flooding his thoughts with a screaming thirst for death that drove almost all semblance of rational thought from his mind. Odin wilted as he battled to preserve his mind, centring his being around his unassailable core of self.

[I have been sent by the demon god,] he gasped, [with a message for his servant, Torrifex.]

[Ahhhhhhh. I have slept so long. At long last my master has called for me. Speak, little mouse. Tell me what my god would have of me.]

The aura of sin that lay over this place thickened as the great demon woke, stirring until it seemed as if the air itself screamed for blood and slaughter.

[Arconidem demands that you rise and make his children ready for his return. Cull the weak, slaughter the unworthy and burn those who do not belong.]

The thoughts rose almost unbidden from within him, his mind taking on the immense arrogance and cruelty of the demon god himself.

[The time draws near then. I will stand before my master once more.]

With an eruption of pure fire, the figure within the depths of the lake surged to the surface. Odin saw nothing except fire and ash and a thousand blades.

[Come, little mouse. As I serve, so shall you. There is much work to be done.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 818: Tunnel of Love

Translucent spirit demons of vestigial obsession are thankfully less common than more mundane threats in the tunnels. That first 'ghost' was a bit of a pain to deal with, mostly because I was so hesitant to approach the ghastly thing in the first place. Tiny helped by growing bored of my slow creep forward and blasted the thing in the face with a bolt of lightning that caused the creature to shriek and writhe in pain before rushing towards us. It was almost more out of instinct than a conscious decision that I tore into the monster with a blast of ice magic that shredded what was left of the bundle of animosity and mana.

What was more surprising still was that I gained experience for it!

[Even this can count as a monster?!] I demanded of the all-informed one.

[Yes. *Convenient*. They can also level up and evolve, so it is best to be careful in the deeper tunnels, a tier six or seven ghast can be a nuisance to deal with.]

[I bet...]

After than initial encounter, we made good progress through the tunnels, reaping a decent harvest of experience and Biomass as more conventional tier four and five demons stumbled into our paths with regularity. Most of the battles were short and sharp, with Crinis, Tiny, Invidia and I taking turns to engage in the fighting, sharing out the rewards across the four of us. At one point Protectant and her group leapt into action when a second monster charged into a fight when I was already engaged with another target, their increased willingness to be active rearing its head again.

All in all, our trip through the stifling tunnels was quite profitable and I was more than a little pleased with the final outcome.

[Not bad, not bad at all,] I broadcast generally as I perused my status window.

A significant stockpile of Biomass to spend and a few levels tucked away under the belt as well. Can't say I'm sad about the haul overall! Certainly, a healthy return for the time invested. Since we've risen to tier six, this has definitely been the richest hunting ground that we've stumbled upon. I have to thank AI for showing us this place as we begin to make our way out.

[This has been a rather rewarding trip. Thanks for being our guide, AI.]

[It has been no trouble,] the eye gleams with pleasure, [the new knowledge that I have acquired has been ample compensation.]

I slump. This guy isn't happy to ask just one or two questions, he always tries to mine as deep as possible into a topic. On the flip side, I've been able to answer both AI's insatiable appetite for knowledge, whilst also educating the hatchling on a number of subjects at the same time. Brilliant may not be quite as detail oriented as the demon, but she is certainly curious about a broad range of ideas and listens with a keen mind as I try my best to satisfy AI.

[Well, hopefully whatever mess has blown up in the city has died down a little by now. I think we've been down here for about a day?]

[That is my hope as well. *Irritated*. I hope that the various factions have calmed themselves to the point that my return will not once again upset the balance.]

I'm a little more worried about my reception than I am about AI's, considering he can essentially vanish himself any time that he wants to. Seeing as how he's managed to live in Roklu for so long, despite being persona non grata, I suspect he can even hide from the prying eyes of Grokus himself.

[We're heading back to the city everyone,] I inform my team, [keep your eyes open for any trouble, especially as we get closer to the pillar. I don't want anyone dropping bricks on us, metaphorically speaking.]

Using the Tunnel Map, it isn't hard to navigate the winding warren of narrow tunnels that make up this section of Dungeon and before long we loop back to where we first entered.

[Master!]

Crinis' warning comes roughly at the same time as I see them myself, rounding a corner roughly a hundred meters of tunnel in front of us. There's immediately something about the situation that feels vaguely familiar.

[You INSECT! How dare you DEFILE my presence in this way!] the pride demon in the lead bellows at me via a mind bridge that rudely intrudes into my mind.

[Are you serious?] I demand. [You can't be serious right now!]

[A group of SNIVELLING cowards scurrying the cracks around Roklu as the grand war draws near? Don't even DARE to try and convince me you are unrelated!]

I turn to the rest of my group.

[He's not serious, right? What are the odds that something like this could *possibly* happen again? Hey Al! Can you - aaaand he's gone.]

Stupid eyeball!

[Prepare to feel the weight of my displeasure, CRETINS!]

Pride demons really are in a league of their own when it comes to speaking in a way that really grates against the mind. It's like they have their nose in the air as they speak to you, but it's not a nose, but rather their entire consciousness. Filled with a sense of exasperation, I watch as the pride demon leads its small team in a valiant charge towards us, spells already forming in the air between the two groups.

I sigh.

[Invidia, can you snatch up Brilliant? She's trying to escape again. Everyone else, let's pile in.]

I'm coming to learn that a fight between groups of tier six monsters tends to be quite short and sharp, especially since most of the demons we encounter aren't built to endure. Upfront, sharp attacks that front load the damage and bodies that aren't really designed to take a hit and keep coming. At least, not the sort of hits that Tiny can deliver. As the two groups close in on each other, Tiny bounds forward, weathering a barrage of spells that puncture his flesh and sear him, not that it strips the wild grin from his face. It does however fuel the burning rage in his eyes.

Body alight with electricity, the big ape leaps forward, wings unfurled and delivers a deafening screech, freezing the demon offensive in its tracks for a fraction of a second. Which is naturally all he needs to wind back one massive arm and unleash a straight right that knocks the pride demon directly into the next stratum. Not quite, of course, the demon is still alive, but after flying dozens of meters backwards and slamming into the stone wall of the tunnel, anyone would be worse for wear.

As is natural, Tiny has left himself completely open in order to achieve this opening gambit, and had Crinis not anticipated such, he would have been shredded in the following few seconds, especially since Invidia is busy stuffing the hatchling into his inter-dimensional maw and can't shield him right now. Into the breach, Crinis steps, or slithers, or whatever. Tentacles erupt from the unnatural shadows that have formed in the tunnel, threatening to encircle any demon caught unwary and commit their dark works.

With the demons occupied warding away the encroaching limbs, Tiny has the space he needs to regain his posture and bring his hands up, ready to fight. Which is when I burst into the scene.

CHARGE!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 819: Playing Out Once Again

It's a comforting thought that here, even two strata out of date, my mandibles are still capable of getting the job done.

OMEN CHOMP!

With a crunch that reverberates off the walls, the dark mandibles of manifest energy slam shut, causing devastating damage to the poor demons caught within. Before the caster demon can even begin to weave a spell to heal or defend, the bodyguards are already in action, appearing from thin air to execute their devastating takedown strategy once more, leaving no opening as they remove a single demon from the equation.

With no proper front line to hold down the fort, there is little the remaining demons can do, too busy fending off the myriad of tentacles of Crinis to properly protect themselves from Tiny as the big ape wades forward, his mighty fists almost appearing to vanish as he unleashes a blistering combination of punches that shatter the air with powerful bolts of electricity.

Just like that, the fight is done.

I really do wonder if it's too easy? Are these demons weak? Are we strong? Being equal tier, they should have the advantage over us considering the gap between strata. We might have upgraded various parts of ourselves, but we can't hope to match up with them, who are made of better stuff from the moment they were spawned.

I suppose some of the difference can be explained by the difference in evolution. I get the feeling, watching the little ankle biters go at it, that most of them don't evolve with complete cores every step of the way. Their struggle is so desperate that they likely evolve the very moment they feel that they can, particularly in the first few tiers.

Still, it doesn't seem to add up. To sort out my confusion, I turn to the burning corona of all wisdom, Al.

[Is it just me, Al, or are we dealing with these groups of demons a bit too easily? They're tier six after all.]

The demon wobbles in the air for a moment and I just know he's considering what information he'll extract from us as recompense. Luckily, I'm yet to draw on my secret reservoir of media from my previous life. Outside of Tolkien, I'm yet to detail any sort of fiction at all! I have enough juice in the tank to keep this going for a long time to come.

[It is a mistake to think that all demons are created equally,] the floating eye informs me, [some are weaker than others and there could be any number of reasons. Age is a major factor, which directly affects the strength of a demon's Skills and mutations. But in this case, I simply think that you are being underestimated. Most demons have a poor opinion of the monsters who spawn higher up in the Dungeon, generally for good reason. For the most part, they *are* much stronger than monsters like you. When these demons see you, they simply don't see a threat, which is leading them to fight poorly.]

[Makes sense I suppose,] I muse, [it would be like a human seeing a sheep jump up and offer to wrestle. The demons down here probably never even *see* a first stratum monster, let alone have to fight one. Far from having their guard up, they practically have their pants around their ankles.]

[Speak to me of these... *pants*.]

For the rest of our journey back to the plains of leng, I explain the concept of pants to the giant flaming eyeball, who takes quite an interest despite not having any legs.

[Why would some of these pants be... buttless?]

[I'm going to be honest with you, I never did find that out. All I can tell you is that such things do, or did, in fact, exist.]

[*Fascinating*.]

[I guess so? To be honest, I find the variety of demons on this stratum to be far more fascinating.]

[I have lived with them my entire life. I long ago learned as much as I could of my kind. I do not believe that I know all, but that which I *can* learn in this place, I have.]

That tickles my interest a little...

[So you do actually think that there's demons you haven't met? I mean, types of demons? I would have thought that there wouldn't be much you haven't run into by the time you reach tier seven.]

The big eye flutters in the air as if laughing.

[No. I do not venture to the deeper places in the land of demons. I prefer to stay in an out of the way location like this, someplace I can lay low. *Inconspicuous*. This means that I have not encountered the most powerful and most dangerous of my kind.]

[The tier eight demons?]

[Exactly so. Few and far between they are. Even tier seven is rare enough that one must travel far and wide to see even a hundred, and I am certain that more than a hundred varieties exist.]

[I wouldn't be surprised judging by the sheer scope of tier six demons that I've seen.]

Soon enough we reach the surface and once more find ourselves ankle deep in infant demons. As the little biters skitter to the side, we begin the trek back to the base of the pillar that supports Roklu. By the time the city once more comes into sight, it's clear that something major is going on up there. The fire and smoke I remember from when we left is still present, in fact, it's a lot stronger if anything. Also, it's hard to tell from here, but I feel as if there's something different about the pillar?

Yeah, there definitely is. As we continue our march back toward the city, the picture becomes clearer by the moment. Just above the city, a huge floating disc of energy is hovering, much like the one we saw the first pride demon and his posse riding on, but significantly larger. Judging by the flashes of light and abundant smoke, demons on the disc are busy exchanging spells with others in the city below.

As if that weren't enough, there appear to be huge threads anchored to the city from kilometers above, descending down from the city. It's hard to make out from here, but I get a sneaking suspicion that the

Colony is involved, probably climbing down to the city using this method that they've devised to avoid relying on the pillar.

Fast! They're acting way faster than I expected them to! To put all of this together in such a short time... I don't doubt the nameless ones have been busy over the last few days!

Chrysalis

Chapter 820: Scuttles, Schemes and Broken Dreams

Grokus enjoyed being a city lord for a few, very simple reasons. First, it meant that he didn't have to put up with anything getting between himself and the only thing that gave him satisfaction in life, eating, and second it meant that he had a city full of demons who he could force to provide the abundant amount of Biomass he required without having to lift a finger. It had been decades since he'd bothered to check how much Biomass he'd amassed, having maxed out his mutations ages ago, but it was likely to be well into the thousands, perhaps even the tens of thousands, despite the fact he only ate things a lower tier than himself.

Tier seven prey just didn't offer itself up on a plate... not out here.

He had ruled over Roklu in this manner for centuries, content to allow the backwater city to remain a weak and uninteresting entity that none would bother to pay attention to. This way he could continue to feast without pause and indulge his desires without concern, a paradise for a demon such as himself. However, things had begun to change in the last decade. First had been the arrival of Allocrix, a powerful tier seven demon fleeing some trouble from a deeper layer, keen to avoid detection.

As the city lord, Grokus had always acted swiftly to dispose of would be rivals to his throne, but Allocrix was slippery and cunning. The filthy fireball could only be caught by Grokus himself, which would necessitate that he actually move, something he hadn't had to do for several decades at least. It would also mean he had to stop eating! Unforgivable. Before he'd managed to reconcile himself to the possibility of having to physically shift his bulk, another tier seven had arisen, this time from within the city itself!

Mongu'nin had gotten lost on a scouting mission into the tunnels and had not only survived, but thrived under the pressure, achieving the coveted evolution to tier seven and enough power to threaten Grokus' position. If the lord were to stir himself and venture out into the city, there were now two rivals who could move against him, not odds that he liked. So had the long standoff begun, with Grokus unwilling to move, Allocrix not wanting to make a move and Mongu'nin seeking to strengthen himself by devouring the weaker of his two obstacles before trying to conquer the city for himself.

This state of uncertainty hung over the city for years and went a long way to ruining Grokus' appetite before he was finally willing to try and break the deadlock. Out of desperation, he had agreed to host the Church of the Path and provide the... materials for their practices from his own citizens. With a steady source of experience, it was only a matter of time until he grew in strength to the point he no longer needed to fear his rivals and could once again eat in peace.

But then more trouble just kept coming! The attention the church brought to his city was unwelcome, a powerful and ambitious lord rose in nearby Orpule and lately that damned ant! Just thinking of that irritating insect was enough to churn the acid in his gut!

He'd *hoped* that introducing the interloper from the first stratum might tip the apple cart a little, or perhaps even draw the church into cleaning up the problem for him. Instead, the damned invader had just destroyed half the city and fled, but only after stirring Mongu'nin into a rage that lasted for an entire day! To top things off, Allocrix appeared to have allied himself with the newcomers and there were steady reports of suspicious activity at the top of the pillar. Not to mention the growing pressure from Brixin, the neighbouring city lord.

[As I told you before, I know nothing of secret forces dispatched to act against your city, Brixin! If your raiding parties have been destroyed, then it is not by my hand!]

The mind array that connected his mind to that of his fellow lord, far away in Orpule crackled with indignant energy.

[Do you expect me to believe a word that comes out of your mouth, Grokus? Two of my raid groups have vanished, one of them not so much as an hour ago, and you really think I'll accept your denials? INSOLENT. I will not tolerate this insult! I am escalating our formal war to one of *conquest*.]

One massive hand froze in the act of shovelling food into his mouth as he processed this and Grokus cursed internally. Despite the bluster, he could almost detect the *smug* radiating off Brixin from where she sat.

[You've been looking for any excuse to escalate this war,] the enormous demon rumbled dangerously, [I wouldn't put it past you to have destroyed your own raiding parties in order to pull this.]

Brixin was not intimidated. Far from it, this was the conflict she *craved*.

[I am coming for you myself, Grokus. I'm not even an hour away. Make sure you fatten yourself up a little more before I get there.]

The array went dead, and the city lord shoved it away as he resumed shovelling biomass into his maw. Inside, his vast stomach that occupied not only this dimension, but another as well rumbled in displeasure at the delay. He would need his strength soon enough. How long had it been since he was forced to fight?

He turned to his attendant demons.

[Rally the city,] he demanded, [a full invasion will occur in an hour. Ensure Mongu'nin knows who the *real* enemy is.]

If that fool decided to rampage again then all would be lost. This was a bad position to be in, but all wasn't lost yet. If things went well, it might even turn to his favour. He would need to call on the human, Alir Vinting, drag him out of his damned chapel if he had to. With the church on his side, he would have a chance to repulse the attack from Orpule and with a little luck, remove one of his rivals at the same time. If only Allocrix were still in the city, then he would have been able to move against that threat as well...

[City lord! Something is happening above!]

[What?!]

Unwilling to deal with more surprises, Grokus craned the humanoid neck of his upper body back so he could stare directly up the pillar to the area it connected with the world above. It was difficult to make out, even for senses as finely attuned as his own, but something was going on up there. Wait, is something dropping down? At first it was a steady downpour of loose soil, then rocks, then boulders that began to fall, most of them missing the city but a few crashing down on buildings with a resounding roar.

Then came the spears.

Honed pillars of gleaming steel, the four spears fell from above like hammer blows from an angry god, smashing through whatever they landed on and penetrating deep into the stone plate Roklu resided on. Blinking all of his eyes in bewilderment, Grokus stared as four separate cords, each one metres thick, gradually wound up and pulled tight, connecting the plate to the roof high above in four new places. The acid in his stomach roiled unpleasantly.

Just what on Pangera was happening?!