

Chrysalis 831

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 831: Confronting our demons pt 8

The closer I look, the more certain I am. It isn't much, a scratch under any other circumstances, but considering that Grokus has managed to keep himself entirely pristine for the duration of this fight, something has definitely changed.

[You know, I don't think I will, surrender that is. I have a suspicion that things might just be turning to my advantage.]

[Nonsense,] the huge demon scoffs, [unless you have another of those spells in you, then it's merely a matter of time before you are devoured from the inside out.]

[You so sure about that? Your left claw isn't looking its normal self.]

I can almost see the massive city lord hesitate for a moment before he raises the claw to inspect it more closely. Sure enough, the damage has not been fully healed, a split running along the topmost digit.

[Impossible!] he gasps before he can stop himself.

[Not healing as much as you'd expected eh? Perhaps something has gone wrong?] it's now my turn to taunt the much larger monster as my brains race to think of what could possibly have happened.

[Tiny, scorch him! Give him a blast of lightning!]

All too happy to unleash violence at the slightest provocation, the ape lets loose an arc of lightning that plays across the city lord's flank, burning a groove in him and filling the air with the scent of sizzled Biomass. Crucially, the damage remains, healing, but far more slowly than before. An idea begins to take shape in my mind and I can't help giving voice to it.

[You've always been eating Grokus, eating and eating away, but where has all the Biomass gone? You really expect me to believe you've just been racking up thousands of Biomass points for no reason? I don't believe it.]

I circle around the still form of Grokus, watching him through my multifaceted eyes as he stares back at me.

[You've got some sort of Biomass regeneration storage, don't you? You've been packing it away into this regen gland for decades and then pretending you were invincible. Every time you get damaged in any way, you heal up in an instant and pretend you were never hurt in the first place. You can depend on your impressive bulk to prevent you from having anything too critical being wounded in one shot, and your aura does the rest of the work, since you can outlast your opponents based on your bank of Biomass.]

I continue to circle around the big demon as I lecture, expounding on my theory as his eyes narrow.

[It's unfortunate, so, so unfortunate, but you just happened to run into your natural enemy in this situation: my gravity bomb spell. Not only is the damage outrageous, but it sits in place for an uncomfortably long time. You were regenerating the entire time, weren't you? That must have sucked.]

Like, that must have *really* sucked. The moment you healed, it was all ripped away just as fast. How much Biomass did you chew through in the duration of that spell? Must have been a lot. Must have been ALL of it, in fact, because as of right now, you aren't healing the way you were before.]

I turn to face him head on.

[In fact, right now you're barely healing at all.]

Grokus doesn't say anything for a long heavy moment, flexing his massive claws as his jaw works, chewing over my words in silence. Which is right when I take a massive hit of damage. I stagger to one side as it feels as if my stomach has ripped itself open, triggering an emergency release of regeneration fluid. Despite the added energy being provided through the Vestibule, my regeneration gland is still running close to empty after being used too close together. I heal, but not nearly enough.

[Perhaps you boast too soon, little insect!] despite being rattled, the city lord still manages to sound as pompous as ever. [You may have worn through my reserves with your magic, but I am still standing, and so long as I am you will continue to suffer. Unless you can finish me off in the next few minutes, you will have no hope of being victorious in this battle! Without you to save them, I will rampage through your kind until I am once again stuffed with Biomass!]

I pick myself up and stiffen my legs to hold my body firm.

[I mean, yes, that would be the case if I was here by myself, but I'm not, am I?]

I turn to the Colony.

"GET HIM!"

Over ten thousand ants are within range of my pheromonal cry and they do not hesitate.

"FOR THE COLONY!" floods the area as each and every one of them rushes forward heroically and a rain of acid and spells falls down from above.

Not to be left out, I charge forward also, pushing my aching body to the limit to zig and zag left and right. Focusing my mind, I watch carefully. Listening to the hidden signals emanating from my antennae I watch the now desperate city lord like an ant-hawk. When he swipes at me, I'm more than ready and dodge appropriately, closing the gap in an instant. Mandibles wide open, I lock my jaw and prepare to strike.

[It's over, Grokus!] I bellow as I bite down onto his arm.

Weakened he may be, but the massive demon still represents a great threat to my siblings, which means I want to keep his focus on me as much as possible whilst I remove his ability to harm them. Without the use of his arms, he has only his aura to rely on. Which will work, given enough time. I mean, we're racing against the clock here.

[Come on Tiny! Crinis! Pour it on! Give it everything you have!]

Not needing to be reminded, Tiny and Crinis leap into the fight with gusto, ripping and tearing, punching and smashing with all they can muster.

[I refuse to let it end like this!] Grokus bellows in my mind. [I have ruled for hundreds of years! I will not be brought down by an insect from above!]

DOOM CHOMP COMBO!

Mandibles pumping, I continue to avoid the grasping claws of my weakening foe whilst outputting as much damage as I can.

[You've stagnated for hundreds of years,] I scoff at him, [too scared to move forward and too blind to see it. Worry not, you're only the first city lord who will fall to the Colony. I assure you, you won't be the last!]

With a roar that flattens my antennae back against my head the massive demon raises both hands above his head before bringing them down in a colossal smash that cracks the stone for metres in every direction, but the blow is so telegraphed I didn't even need my future-sense to dodge it. Leaping over the top of his arms I run up onto the bulbous flesh of the demon and bare my mandibles once again.

With the help of thousands of ants, all attacking furiously and without fear, we bring the demon lord down, even as my insides tear themselves apart. With relief I feel the menacing aura effect finally fade away and with joy I hear the voice of Gandalf ring within my mind.

[You have slain level 53 Luxuria Daemonium (VII).]

[You have gained experience.]

[You have reached level 7.]

[You have reached ...]

GWEHEHEHEHEH! Gimme 'dem levels!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 832: Fallout

The immediate fallout from defeating the city was a little odd as an experience. The remaining demonic residents of Roklu were a little bewildered by the whole experience, and some were less than pleased at being ruled by monsters from so much higher in the Dungeon than they themselves, but those opinions were soon changed by the overwhelming numbers and might that the Colony brought to bear.

You might be a high and mighty tier six demon from the third stratum with nothing to fear from a tier five ant from the first, but you better believe you have something to fear from a hundred thousand of them! Demons are smart enough and are capable of acting quite logically when not in the grip of their own particular obsession, so the writing was quite clear on the wall to the majority shortly after the conquest was finished.

Shortly after Grokus had been defeated and I was sitting atop the resultant Biomass recovering, Invidia and Al made their way back to us. The two of them look particularly smug, especially for a pair of demons that ganged up on another to achieve their win.

[Everything went well on your side?] I ask the pair of them.

[Sssssatissfactory,] Invidia purrs.

[Indeed. I am pleased with this outcome,] Al declares, his voice as flat as usual.

[You don't really sound it. In fact, you sound completely bored.]

[With my mind now freed from the concern I have carried for decades, I am at last able to pursue my desire for knowledge to the utmost. I am ecstatic,] Al says, his voice totally devoid of emotion.

[I could almost believe that you were making a joke. So no issues with big Mungo?]

[Mungo'nin?]

[That's the guy.]

[He was a difficult opponent, as expected. Thanks to the aid of ... Invidia, we were able to overcome his defences at the final moment. Without any help, I fear I would have been unable to measure up to the task.]

[Well, you got what you want, the city has been liberated from the control of Grokus, the demon who was trying to hunt you constantly is dead. What are your plans going forward? As you said, you're totally free now.]

The eye of fire watches me for a brief moment.

[I believe I will continue to shadow you for a time longer. I have been able to harvest a great deal of fresh information from you in exchange for mere scraps of guidance. This is a transaction that pleases me. *Delicious.*]

[Thanks for asking for my opinion on the matter... welcome aboard I guess.]

Come to think of it, I don't really have much of an idea as to what is going to happen in the near future. The Colony is likely to keep aggressively expanding, both within the third stratum and above. What role they expect me to play in that process, I'm not sure. I could probably just keep exploring, wander around the tunnels and grind for levels and Biomass, the hunting down there was *quite* profitable for me. Someone should investigate the deeper layers of the third stratum for the family as well, just so that we know what we're going to run into.

I don't think there's any way that I'm going to be able to get out of having to call a council meeting, not to mention attending it. Sigh. I really don't like getting bogged down in the administrative details, it certainly isn't my strength! I guess it wouldn't hurt to check in with Granin and the crew, see how things are going about the place. We also need to work out how we'll manage to keep the peace in a demon city that's run by ants. Something tells me that they won't adapt to our rule quite as easily as Rhyllleh did.

For now, it's probably safe enough to just chill out and eat Biomass. I'm interested to check out the core that Grokus left behind as well! I know his core is close in quality to my own, but perhaps he managed to tip over the line to reach the level above rare? Only one way to find out!

"I think we're in the clear," I tell the ants around me. "May as well dig in once we get the city on lockdown."

A nearby general snaps out a salute with one antenna.

"As you say, Eldest."

[Actually, where the heck is Brilliant?]

Invidia opens his mouth and spits out a shivering little ant.

"I can see through space..." she whispers.

"No, you can't. Come over here and eat."

"Oo! Food!"

Once again, the Colony has successfully overcome a challenge and expanded its influence! I'm sure there's all sorts of juicy resources in the third stratum that we'll be able to harvest along with the experience and Biomass we can gain from culling the local demon population. The real question I have, is if we're going to be able to administer and recruit a population of demons. They might be a bit nuts, but they're certainly powerful. If we can add them to our ranks and have them work with us, rather than against us, that'd be a pretty big step in securing a future for our family.

[All right then Invidia, Al. You want to come down here and get some chow with us? No point letting all this Biomass go to waste.]

Al's eye flares with energy and his voice practically purrs.

[I would be delighted to partake in this particular feast.]

[Is that because Grokus gave you such a hard time?]

[In part.]

Ah well. I'm sure the previous city lord of Roklu has a long list of entities that wouldn't mind taking a bite out of him. Along with a large detachment of ants, Tiny, Invidia, Crinis, Al and I dive into the feast. And what a feast! What Grokus did do well, was eat and invest in his mutations. Fully upgraded at tier seven, he is absolutely packed full of Biomass. It almost feels as if every bite is giving me a point!

"Look out above!"

"Huh, what?" I ask.

"Incoming! Get in formation!" the cry rises from the ants around me.

[What the heck is going on?] I demand over my mental channels.

[Something is approaching,] Al announces, [I can sense several demons drawing closer.]

[Strong ones, master! I think there's a tier seven! Maybe more than one!]

Oh shoot! What the heck is going on!?

I cast my senses out and sure enough I can detect them too! I spin about to better see and it doesn't take long before I spy a disc approaching from the distance, drawing rapidly closer each second to the very location we are standing on. This... This can't be good...

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 833: Diplomacy

Seriously? Another demon city lord showing up now?! What did I do to deserve this? Seriously!

The new arrival looks down on us and the half-consumed remains of Grokus with an imperious gaze that does little to make me think this encounter is going to end peacefully. She appears to be a type of demon that I haven't seen before, a semi-humanoid torso that appears almost skeletal, with four long arms that end in scythe-like claws she looks a little reaper-ish.

On the disc with her are a number of other demons, several of whom may also be tier seven, judging from the strength of their cores. I set my feet and keep my antennae swirling in order to react to anything that happens. The air has become tense between the two sides as we wait for the new arrival to make an opening gambit, but it's not looking good for us.

We're just off the back of putting down two tier seven demons, and it sure as heck wasn't easy. Now this chump shows up with her posse. The timing sucks to say the least.

All of a sudden, I feel the weight of a powerful mind sweep through the remains of Grokus' plaza, pressing down on me with its sheer *hunger* for authority. This is a demon that wants to rule, not be ruled. Just as quickly as it came, the pressure is lifted and for a few confusing seconds I stand about, tense as a bowstring as nothing happens.

[Ah,] Al's mind brushes against mine. [There appears to have been a misunderstanding. This new arrival has assumed that I am in command as I am the highest level of monster present on our side. I have attempted to correct this by informing her that she should communicate with you instead, but she refuses to believe it. I encourage you to reach out to her yourself and clarify what has happened here. As I understand it, she has arrived in the hopes of battling Grokus for the rights to control the city.]

She's a bit late for that! Irritated at being dismissed, I spin together the bridge necessary and throw it at the demoness above without much decorum. Once it snaps into place I can't help but allow some of my poor mood to slip into my tone.

[Hello there. Welcome to Roklu, city of demons which has very recently come under new management. What exactly can we do for you?]

The eyes within that gaunt head flash with internal fire as the demoness slowly turns her head toward me.

[Yes, hello. I'm an ant. The last city lord who looked down on me for it is currently indisposed,] I point down with one leg at the mound of Biomass beneath me. [My Colony has conquered this city fair and square. If you want to take it from us then you're going to have to fight us for it.]

Should I really be declaring that? These demons are scary! I don't want to be fighting them at all if I can help it! Dammit, Anthony! Shut your mandibles, you idiot! The demoness ponders my mental message for a brief moment before sending anything back my way.

[This is... disappointing,] her thoughts are like a sharp hiss, like nails being dragged down a chalkboard. It sets my carapace to crawling just hearing it. [I had hoped to engage in a battle of conquest to bring

Roklu within my control today. As arranged between Grokus and myself, this was to be the day of our formal war.]

[Oi, Al. Help me out here. What's a battle of conquest when it comes to a formal war?]

The fiery eye flickers.

[It means that the city lords had agreed to cede control of one or both cities to the winner of the formal war. It is unusual, but some city lords desire to shore up their power, wish to command greater territory or resources, or perhaps feel an innate need to conquer. In such cases they will usually find ways to pressure their neighbours to agree to a battle of conquest.]

[Why don't they just attack and take over? Why do they need their opponents to agree to it?]

[Agreements between demons are ironclad. Rulership of a city is a matter for an individual city. For another to oppose their will upon it, agreement must be secured.]

[You guys are fussy about the strangest things.]

Fortunately, mental communication occurs at the speed of thought, but even so I can tell that the demoness above me is growing impatient. Better play it cool Anthony. You *don't* want to fight again today if you can avoid it.

[I apologise for being unaware of your schedule,] I say, [the Colony chose to invade today, ignorant of the customs and requirements of demon-kind. It's a little unfortunate, but what has been done cannot be undone. Since the demon with whom you secured your agreement is no longer the city lord, I presume your declaration of a battle of conquest is no longer valid?]

That's about as smooth as I can possibly be. Nice going, Anthony!

[I must agree,] she grates back at me. [Though I am now considering if an agreement is necessary to conquer this city now that there is no city lord in place.]

[What do you mean?]

[Who is the demon in charge?] she demands.

[There isn't one. The Colony is in charge.]

[Your Colony is not a demon.]

[True.]

[So, who is the city lord?]

[The Colony?]

I flick my mind across to Al.

[I'm guessing that city lords have to be demons?]

He hesitates.

[Yes. Partnerships exist between demons and other races, but those are generally agreements between the city lord and the other party. Demons are not ruled over by others. As a group we struggle with ... *law*.]

I bet. A group of maniacs, each obsessively dedicated to one aspect of living or the world around them can't possibly be an issue to herd or direct in any way.

[We are yet to formally decide on the identity of the new city lord... officially,] I turn my attention back to the demon.

[I see. So, the position is vacant?]

[Al. What the heck happens when a city doesn't have a city lord?]

[I don't know,] the eye flares with sudden interest.

[Don't get curious *now*! Dammit!]

[It is what I live for.]

Argh! I turn back to this new city lord.

[Perhaps we might be able to reschedule a formal war of conquest? That would give us a little time to have things sorted on this end. Wouldn't want things to be anything less than official now, would we?]

Her eyes narrow as she ponders.

[No, we wouldn't.]

[Any chance I could get your name, by the way?] It seems all tier six demons have names.

She gazes down at me imperiously.

[My name is Brixin. Very well, we have an agreement. I will return in seven surface days to this city to contest the right to rule it in a formal war of conquest. Be ready for my return.]

So saying, she gestures with one sharp looking, emaciated arm and the disc spun in a one-eighty and they jetted off again before I could even think to get a word back in.

[I'm... Anthony, by the way?] I sent that thought out into the void the bridge between us had previously occupied.

Well, one week? That could have gone worse!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 834: Council Meeting

As I watch the disc containing Brixin and her cohort of demons fly back to Orpule I breathe a sigh of relief. That was close, too close! We might have been able to win, but most likely only with the sacrifice of many, many lives and that is a price I am simply not willing to tolerate.

My siblings will fight for the Colony and in that process some of them will perish, I've come to terms with that, somewhat, but I will never accept my sisters utilising traditional ant tactics and choking the

enemy with our own dead. I've worked hard to make it so that would never be necessary, and I'll be damned if I allow them to go back to it now.

Not after we've come so far.

Determined to move quickly, I do something I usually hesitate to do and start issuing orders.

"Get this Biomass stored away and make sure that the core is secured. I want to have a good, hard look at it later and it will be valuable as heck, so make sure it isn't lost. Secure the city and I want to see every council member within ten kilometres of this location before an hour is out. Just point them to wherever I happen to be."

The ants around me all salute quickly before rushing to complete their tasks. This whole situation has put *another* deadline on us and I'm not particularly happy about it. Of course, I knew that we had to move fast, I was just hoping that we could set the clock ourselves, rather than have it be set for us.

Wanting to make sure that me and mine are out of the way of the individuals doing the actual work, I take my pets and Allocrix closer to the pillar and wait for the council to arrive. As time passes, more and more ants flood down the four huge wires they constructed, how they'd managed it I have no idea. The city became flooded with healers and carvers and huge groups of core shapers and their pets who immediately descended to the plains below to establish a perimeter around the base of the city.

The moment they arrived, the healers rushed to render aid to all who had been injured during the fighting, ant, demon or human. The carvers set to repairing the damage that had been done with their usual gusto, the city echoed with the constant rumble of earth magic as buildings were reset and roads smoothed out once more. Through it all I could see the remaining local demon population watch it all happen with somewhat bewildered faces.

[How do you think the demons will react to being managed by ants?] I ask AI, my only resident expert.

He ponders for a long moment before he replies.

[I don't *know*,] he says with that odd note of hunger in his voice.

He doesn't know, but he's *very* keen to find out and slide that new brick of knowledge into his wall of obsession.

[But you can hazard a guess or two I'm sure,] I encourage the fiery eyeball, [you must have some thoughts as to how it may go.]

[It is difficult to say because I don't believe it has ever been *done* before. I have interacted with other races, and I get the impression that they don't particularly *want* to rule demons. They are happy to occupy territory, to trade or seize resources, but they don't want to control *demons*. Why would anyone bother?]

[You guys are powerful monsters who can think for yourselves, good allies to have on your side in a scrap, surely?]

[Demons have been *hired*, certainly. If you understand what our obsession is then it isn't hard to come to an arrangement that will involve a fair exchange for a particular demon's services. We ourselves have come to such an arrangement.]

[So, people will treat demons like particularly weird mercenaries, but won't actually try to rule or control them. I'm going to assume because it's just too damn hard?]

[If a slaughter demon follows its nature and kills a human, they tend to get upset about it. From a demon's perspective, they did nothing wrong.]

[I can see how that's going to be a challenge to deal with...]

Before long, the council members I had asked for start to arrive. Tungstant is here, Burke and Wills are both on the scene, along with all the soldiers and both generals. Looks like the Colony wasn't mucking around when they decided to launch this invasion, all hands were on deck! There are others, of course, Bella is here, along with Mendant, representing their respective castes.

"How is everyone?" I greet them all when they've finally assembled. "Everyone doing well?"

"Can't complain I suppose," Advant shrugs her antennae.

"WELL I CAN!" I spray the area with outrage.

"I can only guess that the lot of you have worked yourselves until your carapace is wearing thin to make this invasion happen, and it was successful, well done, but now you've got another demon city wanting a conflict within a week and you're going to have to work yourselves half to death again in order to stave it off!"

I glare at them all.

"It's not sustainable!" I declare.

"Being honest with you Eldest," Sloan says, "we *have* to push hard in order to ensure our survival. If we don't secure the resources and territory that we need to fight off those who would seek us harm before they come back to do it..."

I point one sharp antenna at the much smaller general.

"You think I don't know that, Sloan?! You think you're giving me new information right now?!"

I'm tempted to unleash the power of THWACK, but I restrain myself by a hair.

"Obviously I know that, but if you are all pushing yourselves to the brink every day, then what do you think will happen when something *does* go wrong? We are going to be attacked at some point. A nest will be infiltrated, our defences will get tested, Golgari will sneak in and destroy our brood, the legions comes back and siege a new nest. It WILL happen. Nothing goes right all the time. And when it does happen, what state are you going to be in? Is every single one of you going to be down here? Pushing on the front lines? Dragging the Colony to the brink of exhaustion?"

I stare at them all.

"It's difficult, but you have to walk the fine line between going hard, fighting for our future, and holding something in reserve for when things go wrong."

My words seem to resonate with the group in front of me as their antennae waver through the air in slow, thoughtful circles.

"Anyways," I sigh, "what we really need to do right now is work out exactly what we're going to do to defend ourselves against this attack from the nearby city of Orpule. If we lose, then the territory that we've gained will be gone almost as soon as we took it!"

A discussion quickly erupts amongst everyone, and I can tell that Vibrant in particular is talking at a million miles an hour. After a bit of back and forth, it's Wills who puts forth an interesting suggestion.

"If I'm not mistaken," she leads with, "this war of conquest is for control of a demon city, right?"

"I believe so," I confirm.

"Then, if we win, don't we gain control of their city? Orpule?"

"Ah... maybe? I mean, I guess that sounds, right?"

"So... isn't this a way that we can gain more territory and control? Rather than just running at cities and rolling over them like we did here... we can use this... formal war? As our mechanism to gain more territory."

I think for a minute.

"That sounds... smart?"

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 835: Fancy Stylin'

The meeting dragged on for another hour before a reasonable plan of action of attack was determined. We had to consult AI fairly frequently throughout the process, trying to determine exactly what is and isn't allowed in a formal war between demon cities. In the process we got a bit of an overview on the history and practical application of this particular demon tradition. Allocrix doesn't have any idea roughly when it started, the practice is nearly as old as demon kind itself, or at least so he claims.

According to the burning eyeball himself, there was such a time that the third stratum was filled with demons who as of yet didn't have any boundaries or structures as to how to lead their lives. Much as one would expect, it was complete chaos. Or at least, it was more chaotic than things are now supposedly. I did have to ask him one burning question at this point in the conversation.

[Who exactly imposed the rules on you?]

[What do you mean?]

[At one point you had no rules, and then these traditions were... put in place, for want of a better term, then there must be someone who came up with them, right? An individual or group that was the origin point. Or were they just cooked up at some point and spread throughout demon society over time?]

[Ah, you ask who is the origin of our traditions. Arconidem.]

[Arconi-who?]

[Arconidem, the demon god.]

[I didn't realise you demons had a religion?]

I mean, how does that even work? They're literally referred to as demons... or is this why they're referred to as demons? Allocrix stares at me like he's looking at an alien.

[You don't know who Arconidem is?]

I try to think.

[It might ring a bell? I get the feeling I've heard the name before.]

[I believe you might.]

Is that *humour* I hear in the big eyeball's voice?! A shocking development.

[Arconidem the demon god is one of the nineteen ancients and the progenitor of the demon race,] he informs me in his usual flat tone.

[Ah.]

Well, dang. I probably should have remembered that. Granin and his apprentices had drilled me on what is known about the nineteen ancients, which isn't much, generally speaking. In fact, from what I understood, most people in Pangera can't name them, and many don't believe that they exist in the first place. Which isn't a ringing endorsement. Although the existence of the Cults throughout the civilised world means that at least some people are keeping the, uh, *dream*, alive?

[Wait a second. He was the progenitor? Of all the demons?]

Al blinks. Which is quite the sight, thankfully it's too quick for me to see... *it*.

[It is known that he has made the claim. As to the truth of it, who can say?]

[But don't you guys all spawn from the Dungeon? Like, there are millions of demons spawning out there as we speak?]

[Ah, I understand you're confusion. Arconidem claims to be the very first demon, the one that the Dungeon used to pattern the rest of us. Again, who can say? As to the title that Arconidem claimed for himself, he is so powerful that there could be considered functionally no difference between him and a god.]

[But how would you know how powerful he is? I'm going to assume that you've never seen him? Like, how could you?]

[I have seen him.]

...

[WOT?!]

The big eye nods.

[Some demons are taken to see Arconidem when they evolve. I would describe it as a type of vision, rather than physically seeing them. The experience was... haunting.]

[Yeah I bet.]

It's a bit of a shock to realise that I'm not the only one who gets to enjoy these 'wonderful' trips to elsewhere when evolving, or even that it's not a reincarnator thing. Apparently a few of the native born demons get to experience the same level of joy that I do, having their soul circle a drain and sink down to goodness knows where to speak to someone you don't necessarily want to see. I wonder if the Gandalf I see might end up being one of the ancients as well? They haven't given me a name... I suppose it might be possible? Although, from memory I think they might have denied it? Or at least suggested that they and the ancients are not one and the same.

Just in case, I might ask about it.

[Any chance you can describe what he looks like for me?]

The fire dims around Al a little.

[I often get asked this question. Arconidem looks much like a larval demon...]

[Hah!]

[... gigantic and seated on a throne formed of his own flesh.]

[... ah.]

For a moment there I was stuck with the thought of an all-powerful ancient who was about the size of my eyeball.

[Well, I've certainly never visited anyone like that.]

Al eyes me. Which is an intense experience, let me tell you.

[Why would you have?]

[Good point! Moving on!]

A pause.

[What's he like?]

[I don't want to discuss it.]

[Fair enough! You can't blame an ant for being curious. We're talking about one of the ancients here after all.]

Actually learning of someone who actually managed to communicate with one of those dudes is freaking me out a little. I always kind of imagined the ancients as being so far away that they could never be reached. It feels like one of them just reached out from the depths of the Dungeon and poked me.

Revelations of gigantic monsters as old as time, the planning for the upcoming conflict went smoothly enough until everyone knew what they had to do over the coming days. Even if they weren't happy about it.

"I still don't understand why I can't be there for the main battle!" Leeroy whined. "You don't want the Immortals at the front, leading the charge, headlong into tier seven demons who will cut us to pieces as fast as they look at us? Why not?!"

I look at her.

"You know damn well why!"

THWACK!

"Ouch!"

"Instead of complaining and sulking that you were left of the last battle, why not try and do something actually useful for your family in the next one? Something that doesn't involve throwing your life away in the hopes of perhaps, *maybe* chipping a demon's claw as they separate your head from your thorax!"

"I still think I could have been in the last battle..."

"How the heck are you supposed to climb down the cable when you're wearing full armour?!"

THWACK!

The soldier pulled away from me, furiously rubbing her head with one antenna.

"I could have fought without it!"

"Oh, really? And you think you would be trusted not to charge blindly forward as if you were wearing it?"

"I'm not stupid!"

Every Council member present turns to her in confusion.

"I'm not!" she protests angrily. "I would have made a tactical assault!"

Prepared to give her a chance, I ask a leading question.

"Would this 'tactical assault' have involved, in any way, you rushing forward, on your own, into impossible odds?"

...

...

"No?"

"You don't sound entirely certain about that."

"Alright fine. Yes."

THWACK!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 836: New Bling

Our plans made, the council disperses, Vibrant disappearing over the horizon before I can so much as blink. Although... that could be a long measure of time, since I can't blink. I'm actually starting to forget what it was like to close my eyes, to be honest. I mean, how long can you go without eyelids before you forget how they felt? I've been in a carapace so long, I'm starting to forget what skin felt like! It just

seems so weird to me now, being squishy on the outside and hard on the inside. How does that make sense? Don't you want the squishy stuff protected? Not to mention the possibilities for shiny perfection that I have embraced through mutation!

Even the demons reject the true doctrine of exo-skeleton. In fact, almost all monsters do... No, I must reject this line of thought. If I continue to follow it I might wind up having sympathy for the centipedes and that is simply something that cannot be done. Spiders... maybe. Centipedes? Never.

Naturally the moment that their leader runs off, a large detachment of suspiciously speedy ants races in pursuit. Now that she's evolved to tier six her follower count has significantly increased once again. Each and every one of her loyal troops is a peak specimen of the Colony, heavily mutated and experienced in battle. Just another example of the powerful influence a champion can have on those around them. She may be a handful, but Vibrant has proven her value to the family a hundred times over. I have high hopes for the next champion also, even if she continues to be a pain in the abdomen.

Speaking of the devil, she's currently playing with Tiny, the giant trying to herd the hatchling with his hands as she schemes to get past him. Despite his massive size and quick reflexes, she almost manages it a few times, faking him out and playing mind games with the poor sod. Though the more I watch, the more I begin to suspect she's conditioning him for an eventual escape.

Just a constant pain.

We remain close to the pillar for the time being, but I'm already getting a little bored. We have things to do and not much time to do them, most important of all, continuing to train and level up the hatchling. Getting her up and running, contributing to the Colony and dedicated to her own niche as soon as possible is my main focus for the time being.

"Alright then Brilliant, time to get busy."

She pauses in her game and turns toward me.

"What do you mean?"

"Did you think we were done? You're not even halfway to as evolved as you need to be! Your older sister is tier six! So am I! What exactly are you supposed to do running around as a piddly tier three?"

"What do you mean? I'm useful already!" she declares, her antennae waving wildly.

"At what? Annoying me or escaping? Those are the only two things I can see that you excel at."

"Oh yeah? What if I told you that my mana shaping skill is tier four?"

"I'd tell you - ... Wait, what?"

"I've been practicing inside Invidia's mouth! No time is wasted!"

"Even mine is only tier five..."

She puffs herself up proudly.

"Told you I'm the best!"

"How are you the best if my Skill is higher than yours?"

"Well," she deflates again, "it will be higher soon!" and then she fires back.

"You know what, I'm starting to believe you. Are you practicing now?"

"Yes, of course."

Dammit! I can't be overtaken by this damn hatchling! What about my pride as the Eldest! Desperate not to be outdone I immediately order all of my mental constructs to start spinning mana, any form, any spell, I don't care! Just get to work!

Still, as I look down on the smug little thing, I can't help but be impressed. I think this might be her talent after all.

"Keep up the good work, Brilliant, but as I said, we still need to level you up. That's going to be our next port of call."

"NOT YET!" comes a wave of pheromones from above.

A few moments later there's a slip, the scent of fear and then a crash which quickly reveals itself as Smithant, covered in various bits of metal plating stuck on her back, legs flailing after her unfortunate fall.

"Ouch! Someone help me up?"

Crinis quickly obliges with a tentacle extended from her place on my back.

"Thanks. I heard you'd shown up here Eldest and I didn't want you to go running off into the third stratum again without having a chance to give you what I've been working on all this time! Down here! Hurry up!"

The last part she shouts up the pillar to a trio of ants carefully picking their way down the vertical slope, each of them laden with more metal and bits and pieces.

"Just how much stuff did you bring?" I ask a little warily.

Don't cover up the diamond!

"Oh, it's not all for you," she informs me, "I've got things for Tiny as well, as well as a few pieces for Vibrant, is she still here?"

"Nope."

"Damn. I was hoping to catch up with her."

"Good luck with that."

"Anyway, let's start getting this stuff sorted out."

The moment her focus turns to the metal it's almost as if the mad ant in front of me starts glowing. She coos and clucks over her work like a mother hen as she uses her mandibles and front claws to pick through the pieces, taking some from her helpers.

"This is what I was able to put together for Tiny. We still can't work with the Legion metal very well, or at all, and there certainly wasn't enough to make a full suit for him, but this should help him."

What she was able to come up with was several individual pieces that can be strapped to Tiny's arms, legs and shoulders. Forearm guards, a chest plate and some reasonably fitted and padded pieces protect his thighs. It's pretty good work, all things considered. And when we take into account his immensely dense bones, the lack of helmet and knuckle protectors isn't nearly as big of a concern as it once was. Just having something to protect his heart in the event something slips through between his ribs is a big relief.

Tiny seems much happier with this smaller and more focused set of pieces than he was with the more complete set he had on before. After scratching at the straps and pulling at the padding underneath the armour a little, he seems fairly content, even rapping his knuckles on the forearm guard to test its strength.

"Well he seems happy at least," I observe, "and I am as well. Great work, Smithant."

She stops fussing with the straps and turns back to me.

"It wasn't easy, but I'm happy with the work. As for what I made for you, have a look!"

With the air of an artist whipping a cloth off a new statue, she throws a series of pieces down onto the ground in front of me. At first I'm a little startled, they appear to be, rings? Weird ones?

"Soooo. What are they?" I ask, confused.

"Well, you said you didn't want full armour and there isn't much I can make that would protect you better than your own carapace, certainly not to the extent that would justify the weight, so I went in a different direction and tried to produce the most pure alloys I could and pack them with the strongest enchantments I could. What you see here is a masterwork of enchanting, by our standards anyway."

She sounds a little deflated at the end, as if not catching up to the rest of the world in a couple of months was somehow a massive failure on her part.

"Nonsense," I tell her, "a masterwork in the Colony is a masterwork the world over. Tell me what they do."

"I think you'll like this Eldest. Should work well with your current Skill set."

It doesn't take much to get Smithant pumped up again, as soon as her attention turns to the task of explaining her creations she is immediately obsessed.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 837: Tunnelling

I'm not really wearing armour. It's more jewellery than anything else. Which *isn't* something I wanted to point out to Smithant. She takes immense pride in being a smith, specifically in being an armourer, since she doesn't make weapons. In fact, she takes an unhealthy amount of pride in that, such that pointing out how she has basically made what amount to a series of necklaces. Not that they go around my neck, instead they fit over my legs, basically tightening around the area where my legs meet my carapace, which means that I have six of them overall.

Apparently Smithant tried to create some more to attach around the base of my antennae but couldn't find a way to fit them to an ant without irritating the heck out of them. With antennae as sensitive as mine I imagine the problem would have been even more acute. Still, she was very satisfied with the work she'd been able to do, work that was only possible thanks to a breakthrough she had with her Skills. With whole teams of specialised carvers dedicated to mastering the craft of armoury and enchanting, it's a minor miracle that Smithant still manages to be at the head of the pack.

It goes to show that individual talent is still a thing, even in a world like Pangera with a Gandalf run System in place. I have to wonder if some of my struggles developing certain Skills are simply because I'm not personally suited to them, or perhaps I just get distracted too easily... most likely the latter.

After we get the equipment from Smithant, there's nothing for it but to climb down out of the city again and make our way toward the tunnels between layers. Obviously that means running through vast fields of larval demons who continuously try to tear each other apart, even as they flow away from us as we walk past.

In a small way, my newly enchanted gear helps with this, since one of the functions provided is to reduce friction. It isn't a huge amount, I'm a heavy ant boi after all, but it's enough to make a noticeable difference. I do a few test charges as we travel and it takes a little getting used to, but the reduction in drag is certainly there. A little extra speed, a little extra lightness on my claws, certainly nothing I'm going to turn away! If this is what Smithant was planning to give to Vibrant, then I have to laugh a little. The second she finds out she could be going faster, Vibrant is going to go nuts trying to track Smithant down and beg her to hand over the rings.

Though I'm not the only one who got new stuff.

[How about it Tiny? Feeling comfortable.]

[Hmmm,] he ponders as he continues to poke, prod and scratch at the straps that hold the new armoured plates to his body. After a few moments, he shrugs.

[Can't be that bad,] I tell him, [you managed to keep the full set on before, this isn't even close to being as restrictive.]

[Hrrn,] he grunts.

[You think so? I think you'll get a ton of use out of it. Getting cut less is a good thing, no matter how you slice it.]

He rolls his shoulders and huffs.

[Invidia is not your personal heal battery,] I scold him. [It's not his job to exclusively follow you around and stop you from getting killed. He had to do that in the past because you weren't smart enough to stay safe, and had almost no protective measures in place. With your bones being as tough as they are now, I feel a lot better about you not getting carved to pieces, but you still have to worry about blood loss, about muscle tears, about a million other things that can pull you down during a fight. You need to learn to defend yourself better and this armour can help with that.]

He's silent for a bit, pondering, before he nods a little sullenly.

[I'm not saying don't be aggressive,] I say, exasperated, [just maybe block once in a while, alright?]

[When do you think I might be given equipment, master?]

[Honestly, Crinis, I think we need to work out what would be the best way for you to wear it. Right now you're more or less whatever shape you want to be.]

[I could manifest some limbs permanently, that would be trivial.]

[I suppose so... alright then, next time we run into Smithant I'll get her onto it. I'm sure she can think of some enchantments that would be relevant to you. Goodness knows what they might be, but hey, I'm sure they exist.]

[Maybe something that enhances my shadow affinity?]

[That'd work.]

It takes a while to reach the tunnels and once we do we plunge right in. It's hunting time and there's a lot that we need to get done. I need levels and Biomass, as does Tiny, Crinis and Invidia. Most importantly, Brilliant needs levels and Biomass.

"Can I fight yet?" the hatchling asks.

"Absolutely not," I laugh at her. "Do you have any idea where we are? This is the third stratum! If we were on the FIRST you'd still be pathetically weak. Down here you might as well be a gentle breeze compared to what we're fighting. You'll need to be tier five, *at least*, before you can even contribute, and even then, magic only. If you get close enough to a demon to bite it, you're basically already dead."

"Damn," she kicks at the ground in frustration.

"Look, your time will come soon enough. Stuff your face with this Biomass, keep amassing experience, and before you know it you'll be evolving and ready to go. Now come on, we don't have that much free time before the assault, we need to get busy."

So saying we plunge further into the tunnels, seeking out the juicy prey that we didn't manage to get to. It's also handily filling in my tunnel map as we explore new regions of the passages. We're careful not to get too low though. Whatever is going on deeper in the third, I sure as heck do *not* want to be kicking that hornet nest before we are good and ready. I know my limits and I think I've made enough trouble lately.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 838: The Bear Market

[It's so damn hot!] Sarah complained.

[Of course it is,] Granin snorted, [it's the third stratum. Place is nothing but ash and lava.]

[You might be fine,] the giant bear grumbled, [but I'm covered in fur. If I was a rock person like you, maybe it wouldn't bother me so much.]

The old shaper harrumphed.

[For starters, I am not a rock person, I am a goglari who has bonded with a true skin, a layer of ore that covers and melds with my natural skin. And I think you'll find that mental toughness, rather than heat resistance, is responsible for my tolerance.]

Torrina rolled her eyes and joined in the conversation.

[Actually, our true skin does provide a huge increase to our ability to endure extreme temperatures. It's one of the reasons the goglari were so successful expanding to the third stratum in the centuries after the cataclysm.]

The giant bear turned her head and fired a glare at the leader of the triad who did his best to ignore the threat of being stared at by a truly vicious tier six Asura Bear. Particularly one equipped in the way that this one was.

[The armour probably isn't helping the situation,] Corun observed helpfully. [I know I'd be hot under all that.]

It was true that the padding and weight of the armour, nearly two tons of it, were doing little to improve the situation. As if being a furred animal wasn't enough, she had layers of cloth and steel covering her to the point she felt as if she were sweating literal buckets every second.

[I need to hydrate,] she gasped.

[I think you need an enchantment to help manage the heat issue,] Torrina observed.

[That's a valid point, actually,] Granin observed. [Usually a first stratum monster is a little more resistant to the environmental changes as you descend through the layers, but I think this is something of a special case. Sarah is much better built to tolerate the cold than she is the heat. If Smithant is still about down here we should approach her to make those adjustments.]

[I'd really appreciate it,] Sarah said.

The four of them looked out from the platform on which they stood for a moment, taking in the absurd view of the wide open space that opened up before them and extended in all directions as far as their eyes could see. The harsh glow of lava burned into their eyes and the taste of ash lingered on their tongues, making their welcome to this place an altogether unpleasant one.

[I hate this place,] Granin grumped, [it's put me in a bad mood. Sorry if I come across as dismissive, Sarah. I'm just grouchy.]

[That's alright,] she sympathised, [I'm much the same as you.]

Torrina could only shake her head at the two of them as she glanced over the side of the platform for a moment.

"I don't know how you do that," Corun shuddered. "I'd get vertigo."

[We should be down in another five minutes or so,] she informed the group. [Pretty quick trip, all things considered.]

[It's impressive the Colony managed to get this lift system in place so quickly,] Sarah said, looking up at the massive rope system that connected them to the ceiling so far above.]

[There's a lot of things that impress me about the Colony, but their ability to get stuff built quickly is starting to become just a normal expectation from my point of view,] Granin shrugged. [How many times do they need to pull off the impossible before I just start to expect it from them?]

A short time later the platform finally touched down into the city and they were able to unpin and open the gate, allowing the heat affected bear to stroll out and then slump onto the ground.

[Alright I'm here, take it off now.]

It took nearly ten minutes for the trio to unbuckle all the straps, by which time the platform had already ascended halfway back to the roof.

[Oh thank goodness,] Sarah groaned, [that is so much better.]

[You didn't have to come down here,] Torrina reminded her, [this was your choice.]

The big bear rolled her shoulders uncomfortably.

[It just doesn't feel right, sitting up there, enjoying the benefits of the Colony's achievements without contributing anything. They work so hard whilst I sit around and what? Play with the grubs? It's not right,] Sarah repeated herself as she finally pushed her body back onto its feet.

[That doesn't mean you have to fight,] Corun reminded her. [It didn't work out so well last time did it?]

Sarah flinched a little but then held firm.

[It didn't go terribly,] she defended herself. [I helped protect the nest ... and if I hadn't, who knows what would have happened? It went bad at the end,] she shuddered, [but I think I can control myself better now.]

[I think you can too,] Granin told her, his usual gruff tone just a hair softer than usual. [You just need to remember not to get carried away.]

As they moved through the city, it was heartening to Sarah to hear many of the mage ants and others reach out to her as she passed.

[Friend Sarah! Welcome! You missed a great fight!]

[Sarah! Had enough slacking? We welcome your assistance!]

[It will be good to fight by your side once more! Now that you are finished being lazy that is!]

Sarah pouted, no mean feat for a bear. She wasn't lazy!

Still, as they continued their walk there were many ants who waved or approached the bear to give her a friendly tap on the shoulder, communicating their welcome even if they weren't able to form a mind bridge and speak with her directly. By the time they had made it to the staging ground around the central pillar, the Asura Bear's eyes were wet, as was the fur trailing down the sides of her muzzle.

The golgari triad politely avoided looking too closely or remarking on it in any way, instead they chatted to each other about the work the Colony had done, already rebuilding the city to the point that it was hard to see any signs of the invasion at all. The area around the pillar, once exclusively the domain of Grokus' compound, had been co-opted by the Colony to become their planning and organising centre. The wall that had encircled that section of Rolku was gone, instead an interlocking series of chambers had been constructed which already had begun to look somewhat nest-like. It was almost as if the carvers couldn't help themselves, given that this was their most frequently used design.

There they found Sloan, the general in charge of the defence of the city, pouring over maps and surrounded by a hundred other generals and scouts, each waiting patiently to say their own piece.

Despite the crowd, Sloan noticed immediately as they approached and rushed out to welcome them.

[Friend Sarah! Granin, Torrina, Corun. Welcome all of you,] the general greeted them once a bridge had been established. [We thank you for coming. If you are willing, there is much that you can do here for us.]

Sarah nodded her big head slowly.

[I will do my best,] she promised.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 839: Express Train

"Whoooooooooooo!" Vibrant cheered as she raced across the Plains of Leng, delighting in watching the larval demons leap from her path just in time to miss her flashing legs.

The air was boiling hot and seared against her carapace as it drove her antennae back. The smell of ash and molten rock smothered her senses as the terrain flashed by but Vibrant cared little for any of it. The rush of pure speed was what she craved and these wide open plains gave her an opportunity to run as she had never had a chance to before.

"Weeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!" she hollered, her legs flickering so quickly they couldn't be seen, her brain flashing just as quickly as she processed the barrage of visual information that flooded her eyes each second.

Far behind, though not as far as one might think, her followers were working hard to keep up as best they could. Their job was made far more difficult by the fact that they'd long since fallen out of range of the aura that boosted their own speed, since their leader had raced so far ahead. Still, they too yearned for speed, just as their leader did, and their hearts were thumping with joy as they raced across the plains as a unit, desperate to keep up.

When they eventually did so, they found Vibrant standing rock still, staring up the target of their current mission. Emilia the general was among the first to arrive and boldly approached their uncharacteristically still leader.

"Vibrant? Is everything alright?" she asked.

The large yet sleek soldier twitched her antennae as she recognised the scent.

"Emilia, glad you caught up!" she laughed. "Have a look up there, it's a little different, isn't it?"

Obedient to the whims of her leader, the general leaned back and looked up at the demon city of Orpule far above. Just like Roklu, it was situated on a disc of stone that extended out from the pillar that supported the roof of the stratum so far above, but it was immediately clear what Vibrant was referring to.

"It's much larger, isn't it..." she observed.

Not only was the plate on which the city was situated larger than that of the city that the Colony had conquered, there was more than one plate! The second, which hung beneath the first, in its shadow so to speak, was much smaller than that above it, as if it had only begun to form recently. Which raised the question, how did a demon city expand? Or was this a sign of a more powerful and ambitious leader driving her population to greater heights and expanding the influence of her city?

"Remember, we need to be careful," Emilia made sure to remind her glorious leader. "There are tier sevens here that we cannot fight."

"I know that, Em-em!" Vibrant cheered. "We can have a look around, deprive the city of resources, keep an eye on things and make a general nuisance of ourselves in the meantime! Which means we get to run! Lots! This is going to be a fantastic mission!"

Seeing her so happy, the hundreds of ants who made up her followers were emboldened. When Vibrant was happy, things were generally going well. They might be hectic, or even dangerous, but usually manageable. When she was serious, that was when they knew things were going to be bad.

"OOOOOOKAAY!" Vibrant yelled suddenly, waving her two front legs about in the air for emphasis. "First thing we do is run around and see what we can see! Let's keep an eye on the city as we do and make sure we keep our distance! Let's also make sure that we go super-fast! Do your best to keep up with me everyone, I don't want anyone falling behind! We can regroup here after we get a couple of laps in, make sure you scan the area carefully! Let's go!"

Although she spoke at her usual breakneck pace, a combination of similar mutations among her followers and familiarity with this speed of communication meant that they perfectly understood what Vibrant had to say. As one mind, the group set off, speeding across the plains and running a broad circle around the demon city of Orpule. They were noticed, because of course they were. Nearly a thousand monstrous ants running rings around the city were bound to be seen, that was the point.

When they came across any demon more evolved than tier three, the group set upon it, devouring their hapless victims in a matter of seconds, before setting off once again. The experience and biomass were welcome, of course, but more than that any evolved demon was a potential recruit for the enemy. If one of these were to reach tier six and gain their full awareness, then to Orpule they would go, recruited for the enemy. So long as they were at war with the Colony, then they would be deprived of all resources.

After a few hours it was clear that those watching from above realised what was happening and a sortie was sent forth, powerful demons that included a tier seven foe in their midst.

"Leader!" a mage called, racing toward the front of the pack. "I sense a powerful foe approaching!"

"Veer off!" Vibrant laughed as she turned and sped away, leading her group to flee from the city.

Unable to catch up, the demons pursued hopelessly for a time before they gave up and returned to the city. The ants turned around the same moment the demons did. To the enemy, the message was clear, if you go back, so do we. Chase us forever, or not at all!

Unwilling to commit to trying to catch these damned elusive insects the demons opted to return to the city and so Vibrant and her troops returned to running laps. They kept a watchful eye on the city at all times, looking for any who sought to come or go and continued to deny any demons the chance to rise to tier six around the city.

Once again, the demons sallied forth and once more Vibrant laughed at them as she raced away.

"Slow-Slow!" she taunted with glee as the demons flew along in their wake.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 840: Long Overdue Upgrades

The tale of the Colony's expansion is one of conflict, it is true, though many point to that as the sole factor, as if everywhere we trod there was nothing but war and death. Perhaps it is easy to view us as the enemy if that were the only way we have been described. Even a cursory examination of the facts, of the actual events themselves, is enough to put that lie to rest. In truth, the Colony, through the Eldest, held out an antenna in friendship as often as it did not. Where we were rebuffed, conflict surely followed.

The third stratum and the history of our intervention there is a perfect example of this. Although we fought and fought hard, we also built bridges and sought allies where they could be found. Thanks to the Eldest we were more successful at bringing the local monsters to our cause than almost any who had bothered to make the attempt prior to our arrival there.

The record I have gone to such effort to preserve shows that the true strength of the Colony is not displayed by our cleverness, our might or our appetite for work, but in our ability to have all of those things and still build alliances.

It can be hard to tell if the Eldest, in their guidance of the Colony, was exceptionally greedy or altruistic. On the one claw, they always pushed further, deeper, reached for more, and on the other, they were always prepared to share. Perhaps it is this dichotomy that makes them, and by extension, the rest of us, so hard to understand.

- *From the personal notes of Historiant.*

There's nothing quite like a feast at the end of a successful hunt. Perhaps it's the remnant of the primitive hunter in my brain, but chilling with my crew after a huge feast and just letting the drowsiness that follows wash over me is such an amazing feeling. My abdomen is full to bursting with Biomass and my entire carapace is practically sagging with lethargy as I digest.

Tiny is in a similar position, his ape belly bulging as he leans against the tunnel wall, a satisfied smile on his bat face. Crinis is, for once, not currently attached to me, instead sinking halfway into a shadow as she finishes chomping on the last remnants of her meal whilst sending feelers out into the surrounding area to warn us if trouble comes.

Al didn't eat nearly as much, which was interesting, since he claimed not to need it. I assume he's close to maxing out his mutations or has already done so if he's willing to turn his imaginary nose up at free

Biomass. Brilliant can barely move. Her carapace is so bloated that it practically drags on the ground when she tries to walk and more than once I've seen the little ant come close to regurgitating the precious resources that we have secured for her.

I made it my mission to feed her until both of her stomachs were as full as possible. It takes a lot more Biomass to fully upgrade at tier three and she needs to pack it in as much as possible! Our time in the tunnels beneath Roklu continues to be fruitful in terms of the Biomass and experience that we've amassed. A healthy number of tier five prey can be found down here, or at least, they *could* be found down here. Now that we've run through the place over a couple of days, I wager it's going to take a while before more demons filter down here from above. We even ran into a tier six, likely not affiliated with any city, down here hunting. Since they chose to attack us on sight, I don't suppose there was any opportunity to engage in peaceful dialogue.

Invidia hovers in the air nearby, his eye almost closed as he lazily flaps to keep himself in position. A feeding Invidia is always a somewhat horrifying sight as the food vanishes into the mouth, that *also* vanishes. With him and Crinis eating next to each other, it's almost enough to drive a monstrous ant sick.

[All right then gang,] I announce to my pets. [If you have the points, it's time to upgrade if you haven't already. Go over your available Skills, see what you can find that might spark a bit of joy.]

Then I turn to Brilliant.

"How are you coping little one?"

"So... full..."

I can sympathise, I'm fairly stuffed myself, but not to the same extent that she is.

"I know it's not pleasant, but we want to max you out as soon as possible, so you're just going to have to deal with it. Since we aren't going anywhere in the short term, take some time and purchase the mutations that you want. Make sure you give thought to the overall balance of what it is that you want to do. At +15 you get to fuse your two mutations or emphasise one, so keep in mind how you want to be able to function going forward, alright?"

"Alright, senior, I will," she groans.

A few seconds later and her eyes glaze over in the manner that lets me know she's scrolling through the endless lists and menus that the System provides us. Given that I have a large store of points banked away, from several hunts as well as from consuming Grokus, I should get to spending also!

Ignoring Skills for the time being, I check my Biomass and can't help but clack my mandibles softly at the total. One thousand five-hundred and forty six?! Are you serious?! That is a heck of a lot of Biomass! I knew I was piling up a fair bit back there, but holy moly! That's amazing! I wonder if demons are more Biomass rich than monsters from above? Or did Grokus just provide that much? A fully mutated tier seven is no joke when it comes to the sheer amount of Biomass that's been spent. To take an organ from nothing all the way up to +30, which is my current max, costs over four hundred and fifty Biomass. To upgrade from +30 to +35 costs another hundred and sixty five *per organ*.

With this ridiculous stockpile of Biomass, I'm going to be able to make a HUGE dent in my mutations. Let's get to it! Oho! The joy of upgrading oneself, I'll never get tired of it.

I hastily bring up my status to confirm my current position.

Name: Anthony

Level: 18 (Rare) (VI)

Might: 205

Toughness: 180

Cunning: 145

Will: 100

HP: 360/360

MP: 530/530

Skills:

General:

Master Excavation (IV) **Level 6**; Expert Grip (III) **Level 15**; Expert Stealth (III) Level 8; Tunnel Compass (IV) **Level 4**; Iron Mind (IV) **Level 33**; Master Stamina (IV) **Level 11**; Still Meditation (IV) **Level 15**; Snap Dash (IV) **Level 21**;

Mana:

Mana Craft (V) **Level 45**; Condensed Mana (IV) **Level 31**; Finer External Mana Manipulation (IV) **Level 22**; Mana Hoarder (IV) **Level 27**; Layered Mind Magic Affinity (V) **Level 13**; Directed Mana Sensing (IV) **Level 19**; Expert Healing Magic Affinity (III) **Level 19**; Omni-Elemental Affinity (V) **Level 25**; Advanced Mana Masking (III) **Level 10**;

Pet:

Further Pet Communication (III) **Level 11**; Core Crafting (IV) **Level 15**; Pet Growth Speed (I) Level 5;

Defensive:

Grandmaster Exo-Skeleton Defence (V) **Level 24**; Master Dodge (IV) **Level 28**; Master Endure (IV) **Level 8**; Expert Grace (III) **Level 18**; Advanced Mandible Parry (II) **Level 5**;

Mutations:

Senses:

Sharpened Perimeter Eyes +25, Future Sight Antennae +15 (Twilight Filament);

Defence:

Complete Diamond Carapace +25, Braced Healing Inner Carapace Plating +25;

Physical:

Hardened Rapid Absorption Legs +25, Mana Flooded Mandibles +25, Frequent Potent Regeneration Gland +25, Loud Convincing Pheromone Gland +25, Vast Hungering Stomach +25, Lock Hyper-Twitch Musculature +25, Coordinating Instant Transmission Sub-Neural Network +25;

Acid:

Propagating Mana-Feasting Bind Acid Gland +25, Guided Hyper Pressurised Scattershot Acid Nozzle +25, Thickened Draining Acid Concentration Gland +25, Exhausting Thickener Acid Stimulation Gland +25;

Mental:

Unyielding Coordination Cortex +25, Main brain, Sub-Brains;

Mana:

Compressing Unending Gravity Magic Gland +25, Empowering Collective Will Vestibule +15 (Soul Crystal), Purifying Communal Spirit Nave +15;

Species: Colony Paragon

Skill points: 33

Biomass: 1546

My Skills are coming along nicely. A few upgrades here and there haven't really hurt. Mana Craft has started shooting up since I began competing with Brilliant, and I don't plan to stop until I hit rank six! At least then my rank will match my tier. If I want to see serious improvement in my new Skills, I'm going to have to dedicate more time to grinding them. Using Mandible Spear in an actual fight just feels so stupid though. Charge I've had a use for, but that one? Ugh. Looking at my organs, obviously nothing is fully upgraded as of yet, but I'm tossing up between starting to take things to +30, or getting the newer elements of my body up higher from +15...