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Chapter 851: Ambition

When Morrelia awoke her entire body was screaming in pain. This extent of muscle soreness wasn't something she'd experienced many times in her life, even in the worst of her training sessions as a trainee legionary. She grit her teeth and forced herself to rise, forcing her protesting limbs to yield to her will, the pain she shoved down deep into her chest and fed it to the fire that constantly burned there. She'd known that hell awaited her if she chose this direction and she wasn't going to shy away from it now that she felt the sting of her decisions.

A splash of cold water followed by a vigorous scrubbing to ensure no grime, blood or ichor remained on her skin before she launched into an hour long session of stretches and exercises designed to prepare her for the next excursion into the third stratum. It was agonising and she whimpered in pain more than once, but she grit her teeth and followed through to the end. Another splash of cold water to wipe away the sweat and then into her leather armour. Breakfast had been delivered to her tent and she scoffed it down quickly, her body desperate for energy and sustenance. The baptism the Legion had put her through meant she didn't need to eat as much as a regular person, the mana that burned in her veins made sure of that, but the brutal regime she was putting herself through meant that her muscles craved calories and proteins.

When Morrelia finally emerged from her tent, she already radiated the intense focus one would expect from a warrior in the field. She managed only a few strides before a familiar face settled in beside her.

"Myrrin," she greeted her friend without breaking stride. "Haven't seen you for a little while. How've you been?"

"Busy!" the younger woman laughed as she lengthened her stride to match that of the berserker. "Since reforming your father has had the entire legion put through its paces! The drills are endless!"

"Nothing wrong with sharpening the blade before battle."

"I just got back from battling the wave! I'm plenty sharp!"

"Where were you stationed?" Morrelia finally turned her head to take in her friend, curious to see what had changed.

Though she'd completed her initiation before Morrelia had, Myrrin was younger by several years. Being introduced to full membership had forced her to rapidly grow up however. There had been a hardening in the carefree young girl that she could remember signing up to be a trainee back in Liria. It was the same transformation that hit all of them in time, the soft edges buffed out to be replaced by sterner stuff. Battling the Dungeon wasn't an occupation for the meek, only the strongest could survive.

"I was in the second stratum, close to Yerryn," Myrrin pulled a face, "I've seen enough of shadow beasts to last several lifetimes."

"I hear that," Morrelia chuckled.

The two of them continued to stride through the camp at a brisk pace, saluting any superiors they came across but not bothering to stop. Their relentless pace puzzled the ranger until she was forced to ask.

"What's the rush, Morr? I hear they have you on some rough schedule, but you only got back yesterday!"

"And it's time to get back at it," she said, her face hard.

Myrrin's mouth dropped.

"You can't be serious! I've been told thousands of times how dangerous it is to overexpose to the Dungeon! You need to take a break."

There hadn't been any breaks for weeks. Morrelia didn't pause in her stride.

"This is my decision. I need to push if I'm going to succeed in my goals and that means killing monsters and polishing my Skills. I don't have the luxury of holding back, I need to make up for lost time."

The other elites within the Legion didn't walk away from service like she had, they'd been battling ever since they'd passed their initiation alongside their brothers and sisters. If she wanted to stand shoulder to shoulder with them, if she wanted to rise above them, then Morrelia had no choice but to run herself ragged, despite the risks.

"I don't understand what's going on here, Morr," Myrrin grabbed hold of her friend's arm and dug in her heels, finally succeeding in stopping the other woman. "Talk to me."

A flash of irritation flickered through the berserker's mind before she suppressed it. She sighed and gestured for the two of them to sit down in a quiet area of the camp.

"I'm not trying to brush you off, but I really do have a patrol I need to meet up with soon, so I'm going to be quick," she explained. "I've been pushed forward to participate in a training program for officers and deep Dungeon Legionem Abyssi. During the wave I was basically part of an accelerated development program where they had me fighting pretty much around the clock."

"And you still are," Myrrin pointed out.

"I still am," she confirmed. "That's largely because of the path I chose to pursue. During my last Class promotion my father laid out several different ways I could progress. Heavy armour, berserker or try to develop leadership skills to complement what I already have."

"And what did you pick?"

"All of them," Morrelia grinned.

Her friend stared back at her for a long moment before she started laughing and shook her head.

"That's just like you Morr. Your appetite is bigger than your stomach!"

"Can you blame me? If you had a chance at wearing praetorian armour you wouldn't take it?"

"So why not just choose to follow the heavy armour route?"

She shrugged.

"I didn't want to leave my Berserker Class in the dust, it's been with me my whole life. It's part of who I am."

"Alright then, so why bother trying to incorporate leadership Skills?" Myrrin said, exasperated. "Aren't you just making things difficult for the heck of it?"

Morrelia rolled her eyes.

"I'm not exactly enjoying this schedule. I'm in pain constantly, tired constantly, on edge constantly. It's rough. But I decided it wasn't enough to just be a killer for the Legion. I wanted to be a leader for the Legion. I want to have a say in when and where I fight. I want to know that I'm picking the right battles."

With so many opponents to face, she didn't want to see the Legion wasting lives throwing themselves against the Colony any more. It would be a long time before she was qualified to make decisions like that, but she didn't want to accept that she would never have that authority. Their enemies were too great for them to be wasting energy any further.

"So from what you're saying, you've basically picked the most difficult path you could possibly have picked?"

"That's right," Morrelia sighed as she pushed herself up from her seated position. "Obviously not the smartest decision I could have made, but it was the only one I felt I could be happy with. The reason I'm going on so many patrols is to quickly level through my leadership Class and polish the accompanying Skills as fast as possible. This way I'll be ready to transition to something that can combine all of my strengths. At the very least, I'll be qualified to learn all that they have to teach me."

She reached down and helped pull the younger legionary to her feet before they once more resumed their march to the armoury. Morrelia needed to get her Abyssal armour on before she could head back out into the Dungeon and she had intended to use the little time she'd had left to give it a thorough inspection. If Myrrin helped, they could look over the suit and she'd only be a few minutes late. Going out into the field without making sure of your equipment was a cardinal sin within the Legion.

However, as the two young woman made their way to the imposing and well defended building in the heart of the camp they found a small delegation waiting for them. Without any discussion, a uniformed centurion stepped forward and addressed them.

"Is one of you Legionary Morrelia Faronicus?"

"That's me," she saluted, her fist crashing into her heart.

The officer nodded.

"Your deployment has changed. Pack your gear and meet us here in an hour."

"Yes, sir!" Morrelia saluted again before she turned on her heel and ran back toward her tent as fast as she could.

Myrrin watched it happen with a dazed expression before she turned back to the centurion.

"Where is she going? If you don't mind me asking, sir."

The armoured man flicked a glance at her and she couldn't help but feel as if her entire service record had been summed up by this person in that moment.

"She's going deeper. That's all you need to know, Legionary."

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Chapter 852: Running Rings About the Place

"Have you seriously been running this entire time?"

"Yep-Yep! I don't feel right unless my legs are moving. You feel the same, yeah? You have to move! Standing still is like dying, I can't stand it! Being still is just - "

"Enough! No matter how fast you talk, I don't have enough time to sit around and get chattered to death!"

I shake my head slowly. Vibrant has been evolving into more and more of a speed demon to the point where it's getting hard to interact with her in a normal way. When every inch of her has been mutated with speed in mind, including her brain, it's only to be expected I suppose. It just goes to show how extreme a monster can get if they allow one aspect or concept to completely take over their evolutionary path. I have no idea how fast she'll get before she's done, but I imagine it's going to be pretty damn fast. If she keeps going like this all the way to tier eight or something, I doubt most monsters would even be able to see her. Especially since her Dash Skill reached rank six.

"So, you've done your job then? No reinforcements have reached the city, none have left?"

"That's right! I've been sure to check that no demons have been able to climb up the pillar and none have climbed down! No prob!"

"What about those flying disc things? Have any of those left, any of them arrived?"

"Oh sure-sure! Heaps! But there's nothing I can do about those, right?"

"No, there isn't. You *were* supposed to keep track of where they went and where they came from though..."

"Whoops! Haha! I forgot about that!"

"Vibrant!"

"If you don't mind me breaking in, Eldest, I have kept track of the information that you are asking about," a nearby general spoke up.

"Yay! Thanks Emilia. I know I could count on you to keep track of this stuff. I don't have the patience, or the time. Hah! Isn't that hilarious, you'd think I'd have more time than anyone due to being so fast but I'm always thinking about going fast or running which means that I guess I'm always going fast either in my brain or with my legs or both! I suppose I'm just not thinking about anything that's all that important. Ha! Hey Crin-Crin!"

The dazzling rush of machine gun pheromones from Vibrant finally subsides when Crinis extends a few tentacles to start tickling and poking the big soldier and the two are rapidly caught up in a game of tag

with Vibrant vanishing from my sight as she dashes from place to place as Crinis pops tentacles up through shadows created by the ever-present demon larvae.

"So you've been tracking the comings and goings?"

"That's right, Eldest. I have all of our observations recorded on a scent tablet as well."

"Good work general," I approve, "any particular point of interest? Any one location where more discs have gone than others?"

"I think so," she wavers her antennae a little to show uncertainty. "The traffic seems rather spread and we aren't sure if Orpule is dispersing forces that will converge on our city closer to the date or if they're gathering allies."

"They could just be hunting," I suggest, "squeezing out some extra levels before the conflict."

"This is also true."

"Alright then, show me what you have recorded, and I'll have a quick think."

She gestures to a nearby soldier who is carrying packs slung over her back, one of which contains the tablet. After drawing it out, I flick my antennae across the surface rapidly. There's been quite a bit of movement from the city, looks like they aren't willing to sit back and wait for us, which is fine. The more forces they send out of the city, the more we can hunt them down before the time runs out. Battling in the field is perfectly acceptable according to their traditions, so there's no foul. Gweheheheh.

They've sent groups out on discs in pretty much every direction, but slightly more to the west. It's possible they have a staging ground of some kind out that way, or perhaps the best hunting grounds are found over there.

"Okay then, we have a destination. I'm going to head west. Keep up the good work general!"

[Come on Crinis, time to go.]

[Yes, Master...]

[I'll make sure you get time to play with Vibrant after this assault on Orpule is done. I know you two haven't gotten to see each other much.]

[Thank you Master!]

The two of them are friends from way back. I can still remember mini-Crinis and hatchling Vibrant getting up to hijinks. It's a shame that they don't get to hang out more. In fact, this is one of the few times that Crinis has shown a willingness to do something other than what I've told her to do, which I definitely need to encourage! Tiny is a bit more likely to act independent, but when he does it's only to fight, eat or sleep... which I don't feel like I need to encourage at all.

[Time to hit the road gang.]

[There are no roads here,] Al points out.

[It's an expression. I just mean, it's time for us to run.]

[I will not be running. I have no legs.]

[I know that! Let's just get going!]

Getting our legs moving, or wings, or however the heck Al moves, we rush onwards in our chosen direction, leaving Orpule behind us in the distance. The vast Plains of Leng open up, with the endless carpet of demons rolling out before us.

[You have any idea what they might be looking for out this way, Al?] I ask the flaming eye.

[I cannot be sure. My knowledge of the area around Orpule is... *lacking*.]

And it's bugging him, I can tell.

[Well, maybe you'll learn something on this trip.]

As we run, we make sure we annihilate any tier four or above demon we come across, falling upon the hapless monsters with ruthless aggression, absorbing the experience and consuming the Biomass. Despite being lower tier than me, it's clear that demons provide more Biomass than prey from the second stratum did. With the stomach mutations that I have, I get a reasonable income from just picking on tier fours. Quite the side benefit.

As we travel the remarkable terrain of the third stratum continues to roll by. It's not as if the plains are completely flat, don't let me give that impression, there are huge pillars and mounds of stone the thrust upwards a mighty way without ever coming close to touching the roof. These too are covered in demons, the constantly shifting surface almost makes them seem alive.

After a solid hour of travel, we find ourselves poised in front of another cleft in the ground, one that emits heat like a boiling cauldron.

[Not another demon crack!? I bet they've gotten down there again, haven't they? Creeping around in the tunnels filled with powerful demons and ghosts. Gah!]

[You've been down one of theses before?] Sarah asks as she eyes the opening in the ground with a wary eye. [And did you say ghosts?]

[They are not 'ghosts',] Al huffs, [they are ghastrs. The lingering obsession of demons that has fused with ambient mana.]

[So that's a ghost,] Sarah and I say at the same time.

I sigh.

[Well Sarah, we're going to be putting your enchanted cooling system to the test. Things get a little spicy down there. And by spicy, I mean boiling hot.]

The giant bear droops.

[Probably beats all this running,] she says. [I'm not built for endurance. Let's just get to it.]

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Chapter 853: There's a bear in there

"GRRRRRRRRRR. GARRRRR!"

With another stone shattering roar, Sarah brings the full weight of her body behind a vicious slash of her right forepaw, rending the sorry ghastr that had risen in front of her to pieces. Far from her valiant and intimidating voice, her thoughts are rather less impressive.

[AHHHHH! I hate these damn things!]

I can totally sympathise.

[It's the way they float right? Sends shivers down my spine.]

[And the look in their eyes! It's so freaky!]

She's not wrong. The ghastrs are beyond even regular demons when it comes to their obsession. Normally the obsessions drive the behaviour of the denizens of the third stratum, but for the ghastrs, there is literally nothing else. They are a maddened ball of living energy that contains a single thought, which makes them a little... manic.

[Good experience though,] I note. [Even if they don't leave behind any Biomass.]

It's an interesting dichotomy, the relatively rich reward in xp as opposed to the total lack of food they leave behind. Since their bodies consist entirely of mana, it's not like there is anything that could be eaten anyway.

Which leads me down an interesting line of thought. I mean, isn't *my* body made of mana? And every other monster for that matter? Born from the Dungeon, it's not like we were created from anything else. You could make an argument that I came from the Queen who had to sacrifice Biomass to create my egg, but then I could just turn around and say, where did the Queen come from then? She came from mana. I suppose the Dungeon must create the Biomass that makes up our bodies out of mana, meaning they are two distinct substances. I wonder if it's possible to learn that. Is it possible to learn a mana speciality that will transform the pure energy of the Dungeon directly into Biomass?

That would be pretty nuts if you could do it... You'd be able to create monsters at will. Maybe the reverse is also possible, turning Biomass into mana. If it's possible at all, I'm sure it's some high tier nonsense, nothing that I could touch at my current level. I need to keep my mind occupied with the types of magic that I do have access too. Namely, force magic. As we make our way through the tunnels, I rely on this branch of spell exclusively, which limits my input to the fighting but sure as heck contributes to levelling it faster. I've already managed to raise it to rank three which is helping to unleash a tiny portion of the mana type's potential.

Force bolt!

This basic spell snaps out of ball of pure kinetic energy. When it hits something, they react much the same as if they've been punched. The more mana I pack into it, the harder they get punched. Against the stronger demons, it's basically just a tickle at this point, they shrug it off, but that certainly isn't all the tricks that I've developed with this mana type. The force spear is an interesting one, the pure lance of kinetic energy acts much like a regular spear would, except its totally invisible of formed entirely out of energy. Not sharp enough to cut through a demon... yet the spell is still useful for slipping damage

through narrow windows. Anyone not carefully watching the mana around them could find themselves stabbed awfully fast.

The force domain isn't too amazing, it acts similarly to the wind domain in a way, but whereas the wind domain rather predictably creates a rotating sphere of wind, the force domain is invisible and exerts a 'push', forcing opponents away from me. Useful to keep distance between me and other monsters, but at the level of its current strength, it'll only really be able to force out much weaker monsters. Something like Grokus would barely notice it at all.

Applying force mana to my mandibles is another thing entirely. The mana has no obvious or flashy effect, but it does allow my jaws to close with even greater force than before, the added kinetic energy really slamming my mandibles together with an amazing CLACK. Anything caught in between is going to be in for a bad day, especially if I activate doom chomp at the same time. Gweheheheh.

As I continue to grind my Skills at play with different abilities the group descends further into the tunnels, trying to sniff out traces of the demons who left Orpule. Despite our best efforts, it's actually the hatchling who manages to get a sniff of their trail first.

"I think I have something!" she announces to me after we finished off a quick fight against some tier four demons.

"Oh? What have you picked up?"

"My Dungeon Oracle is picking up some strange whispers. Give me a minute."

"How does that thing even work? Does Gandalf talk to you or something?"

"Stop stinking the place up! I'm trying to think."

How rude...

"Some tier six demons came through this place. They were headed... that way!"

"How many?"

"I... I can't be sure. More than five."

"Hmmm."

We need to be careful. If we assume that in our previous encounters with demons, they were taking us lightly, as Al suggested, then we can't act as if every fight against a group of tier sixes is going to end up as an easy stomp. If they take us seriously, then things should be much more difficult than before. Tier sixes are capable of all sorts of shenanigans after all, I should know! This is why we brought Sarah along, also so she get some experience fighting against third stratum opponents.

"So, how does the Dungeon Oracle work anyway?"

Brilliant hesitates.

"It's... a little hard to explain. It's kind of like a whisper, straight into my mind. I 'hear' little snippets of information, or I sense things that might have happened in the past. Usually all of pertaining to monsters who were spawned or move through the area, or about the flow and movement of mana."

"Strange," I muse. "So, you get a little window into the past? But only in the realm of information that the Dungeon itself can provide?"

"In a way. I don't fully understand it yet myself."

"Alright. We'll proceed as if your information is correct. Keep your... ear... to the ground but don't get too far forward. You're still eminently squishable to monsters around here, so don't do anything stupid."

We advance carefully, following the directions of Brilliant and on the way, I try to word Sarah up on what we're in for.

[So, just to be aware, demons are freaking crazy.]

[Anthony, I've been alive in the Dungeon longer than you have. A *lot* longer. I'm sure it's going to be fine.]

[I know! I know. You're the senior in terms of experience in this world...]

Even if she spent a lot of her life in captivity.

[... but just be aware that the demons are a little more... out there than the shadow beasts. Tier six demons are sentient remember? It's a different sort of battle.]

The big bear stumbles for a moment before she recovers her footing.

[I almost forgot about that,] she says. [They are intelligent, aren't they?]

[I mean... I'm not sure I'd say intelligent... but they can think for themselves...]

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Chapter 854: I Spy a Spy

As we move through the narrow and boiling hot tunnels we start to see evidence of the demons' passage in the form of littered Biomass and visible signs of damage on the walls. Claw marks, deep gouges in the stone and even scorches along the floor, not an easy feat in this lava filled place. Whoever we're tracking must be packing some heat, in the literal sense.

[Tiny! Try to keep it down!]

"Harrr?!"

[Shhh you damn ape! We're trying to be sneaky right now!]

"Oooooorrrr."

Despite having the stealth abilities of a mack truck that's been loaded on a train, Tiny does seem to understand my point and stops randomly punching the walls whenever he gets bored. Having inspected his core, I know he followed the directions I gave him pre-evolution and ensured that he remained at the level of Cunning that I insisted he not fall below, but I swear to Gandalf he acts even dumber than that when he can get away with it.

It's as if he would *rather* be stupid so he just shuts off enough brain to achieve the desired level of dumb. Next evolution I'm going to insist he set his Cunning to fifty! He can discuss philosophy instead of punching walls all the time! Hah!

"Down this branch. I don't think we're that far behind them," Brilliant tells us.

"Great work. Keep your head down for the next bit, I don't want you getting caught up in the fighting."

[Brilliant says we aren't far behind them now, so we should be ready to fight at any moment. Anyone in particular want to go in first?]

Tiny's hand shoots up.

[Anyone else?]

Despite wearing armour, I still don't want Tiny to throw himself in the line of fire. He's not a tank and he never will be. The only real candidates for going in first are me or...

[I don't mind,] Sarah says. [I-I guess there's no better way to get used to fighting demons than to throw myself into it, right?]

[Well said, Sarah! Not to worry, we'll all be here to back you up. You aren't going in alone.]

[Thanks.]

[Tiny and I will make up the second wave, with Invidia and Crinis running support. Al, you hang back and keep an eye on the hatchling, we'll reserve you for our trump card in case the fight goes bad.]

[I will watch the little one.]

I have a thought.

[When I say *watch* the hatchling, I also want you to make sure she doesn't get hurt. It's more than just looking at her.]

[I see.]

After some more creeping, we finally get a bead on the targets. The first sense to trip is actually my antennae. The monsters don't necessarily emit that much gravity, but even those tiny fields are enough to set my senses a tingling.

[I can feel them. Two hundred metres, maybe less. Keep an eye out Crinis.]

[I will!]

A few minutes later.

[I see them! Seven demons! Some of them are quite strong...]

[Alright, we should be able to handle that many. Invidia and Al, help me suppress our mana signatures. We should be able to sneak up on them, at least a little closer.]

Dampening mana and preventing it from being seen at a distance is a highly technical and difficult process. My own Skill sin this department aren't great, and Invidia's are only a little better despite his

greater brain power. Al on the other hand, is a freaking expert. The guy spends most of his life floating about completely undetectable to everyone around him. If I hadn't repeatedly stressed how unnerving and creepy it is having him pop out of thin air all the time, he'd probably be invisible right now.

With the three of us working together, we manage to dim the glow of our combined cores to a significant degree, allowing us to sneak even closer to the group of Orpule demons. After we poke our noses around a tight bend, we manage to lay eyes on them for the first time.

[Al!] I mentally hiss. [Take a peak and tell what sort of demons you see. I want to know if there are any exceptionally dangerous types.]

The floating eyeball flickers and vanishes before (I assume) he wanders to the edge of the tunnel and has a look around the corner.

[There is a pride demon who I assume is the leader of this group...]

[Why always pride demons?]

They seem utterly incompetent to me. Overconfidence and arrogance are quite literally their defining features!

[They are one of the few types of demon who cares about leadership. Most others cannot be bothered with it.]

[That... makes a lot of sense.]

[There are two slaughter demons in the group, along with a blood demon. There is also an envy demon and a grudge demon.]

[A grudge demon? I don't think I've seen one of those before.]

[They are not very common, but they are immensely difficult to kill. I do not believe we will be able to manage it.]

[Are you kidding?! Aren't you tier seven?!]

[In this instance I must draw the line between *defeating* a demon and *killing* it. The grudge demon will not be hard to defeat, but we will not kill it. It will escape, and grow stronger as we feed its nature.]

[You mean, it'll have a grudge against us?]

[Yes.]

[Well that's just great. And wait, did you say an envy demon?]

I turn to Invidia.

[Looks like we found one your people! How do you feel about that?]

[I will takesssss everything from them!]

[Yeah... Yeah I suppose that's about right.]

It's wrong to think that demons of the same variety feel any kind of kinship with each other. They aren't 'clans' or 'siblings' in any way. To be honest, having multiple entities who are chasing the same obsession is probably a inconvenience to a demon. If you've got two slaughter demons working together, that's literally halving the amount of slaughter that they get to enjoy!

Maybe enjoy is not the right word...

[There's one more, right? What else we got.]

[The last is an excess demon.]

[Isn't that what Grokus evolved from?]

[Correct.]

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Chapter 855: Sarah Meets her Demons

With a mighty bellow Sarah burst around the corner with myself and Tiny right on her four heels. The demons responded quickly, the two closest, both of the slaughter demons, turned towards us in a flash, transforming themselves into a spinning whirlwind of death before I could blink. I should clarify that I mean very fast there, some human idioms will take longer than others to go away.

Behind them the more spell oriented of their group get to work, the grudge and envy demon putting their minds to work with a level of force I can feel even from here. Not that Sarah minds. Armour or not, she barrels forward with the unstoppable momentum of a freight train, her paws thudding into the ground so hard it shakes. A product of the first stratum she might be, but she is still an absolute unit and I think the demons are just as susceptible to being flattened by a ten ton bear as anything else I've ever fought. It's clear from the outset that our opponents have been warned about us. Sarah might come as a surprise, but a giant ant, a couple of demons and a big ol' monkey aren't exactly difficult to spot.

With how close we managed to get to our targets the mad charge is over in seconds and Sarah crashes into the demon's ranks like a tsunami of furry muscle. The slaughter demons are nimble and lithe, nothing like the chubby or bulky sort of demon I've seen a lot of. From looking at them one could be forgiven for making the assumption that ninety percent of their bodies is some sort of blade, but that would be nonsense, the true percentage comes closer to sixty percent, or so I'm told.

They slide around Sarah's charge, attempting to dig into her flank as she barrels past them but Tiny and I don't let them, rushing to meet them head on. Agile as a fish they change tack halfway through their strikes and divert them towards us. I rely on my foresight and heightened reflexes to catch the blade on the perfect angle of my carapace, deflecting much of the force of the blow before I bring my mandibles to bear, already having infused them with force magic.

Despite my flawless defence, the red-stained blades of the slaughter demon are unbelievably sharp and still manage to remove a small chunk of my diamond carapace. These guys are proper deadly. My force empowered mandibles snap forward with devastating force crunching together with a piercing sound that rings through the tunnel but unfortunately they close on empty air, the demon having danced backwards out of my reach.

Tiny's approach is a little different than mine and I can't really say if he does better or worse. Carrying all his momentum forward he leaps, unfurling his wings and beating them down in one great thrust to give himself as much speed as possible he hurls through the air like a furry bullet. Rather than fend off the demon's strike, he simply sticks an arm out and allows his opponent to cut halfway through it, the slaughter demon displaying consummate skill by avoiding the forearm guards and penetrating deep into the flesh. Except that Tiny cares little for the wound, a wild grin spreads on his face as the blade of his foe becomes stuck on his impossibly tough bones. Light flashes across my eyes as Tiny unleashes his coiled right arm, delivering a devastating punch straight to the chops of the demon, sending the creature flying backwards.

Did he manage to land a punch? Yes. Is his left arm totally useless? Also yes.

Sarah continues her forward press, her jaws snapping and front claws slashing at anything that gets close enough. Already I can feel the rage building in her as a number of minor wounds are inflicted, her anger is like a physical presence with its own rhythmic heartbeat, one that can be heard thundering through the air as she fights. Behind us AI and Invidia put their minds to the test, pitting their force of will against our opponents who are trying to force the mana around us to yield only to them. Invidia is also kind enough to fling some healing magic at Tiny, hopefully enough to close over the wounds.

The front of the fight quickly devolves into the traditional monster versus monster gnashing and slashing but the demons are craftier than most opponents. Sarah's offensive finally runs into a wall in the form of the blood demon, a horrific looking entity who appears to be half red liquid and half roiling demon-flesh. The creature burbles and hisses as its body literally boils, slamming itself into the bear and sizzling her skin and muscle, further enraging the savage bear who begins to slash and tear blindly, hoping to rend the fluidic monster in front of her.

The slaughter demon in front of me is as difficult a foe, its body and mind appear heavily mutated to be nimble, its limbs bend at impossible angles as it flings out blades like whips. I push forward, relying on my foresight and reflexes to protect me as I pepper it with spells. Force magic isn't strong enough to do the job that I need it to, the hard skin and condensed muscles of the third stratum monsters is way too tough for the pure bolts of kinetic energy to do much, but I have plenty of other tricks up my sleeve. What's interesting about the slaughter demons is that they don't have all that much mass.

With a lurch of my minds I dump the force magic from my mandibles and pump them full of gravity mana whilst peppering the monster with a series of ice spears. It slices through them with ease but the distraction buys enough time to fully charge my jaws as I lock them in place.

YOINK!

DOOM CHOMP!

Strong as an ox with a great weights routine, the slaughter demon reacts with alacrity, forcing its claws into the walls and digging in with its blades to prevent it falling into my mandibles, but so long as it can't dodge backwards, there's no escape. With a shattering crunch the dark mandibles of energy slam shut on my foe.

COMBO!

Once I have the wiggling little blighter in my grip I refuse to let it go, my jaws pump open and shut at a rapid pace, blurring the edges of the mandibles in my vision.

"HARRRRRR!"

Wreathed in lightning, Tiny bounds forward to aid Sarah against the blood demon as his initial opponent recovers from the devastating right cross to the face it experienced at the start of the fight. Unwilling to allow its ally to be outnumbered, the pride demon steps forward, its noble physique a sharp contrast to the nightmarish frames of its allies. Before he can get too far, Crinis makes her move.

In a flash the light is sucked out of the tunnel and a dense forest of limbs begins to extend from the walls and out of mid-air. Twisting and seeking, they stretch toward the demons, phasing out of physical existence as she tries to grasp their minds and limbs.

The demons counter immediately. Before my eyes the darkness shatters and a dense ball of roiling blood winks into existence before it begins to expand. Over the span of a second the blood demons pours an immense amount of mana into it before tying off the spell and unleashing it on us. The moment it does so a tidal wave of frothing red liquid explodes outwards, turning the tunnel into a raging flood ground in an instant.

With almost no time to prepare my brains spin on overdrive. As Tiny unleashes every ounce of lightning mana within his body into the oncoming tide, my minds grind out lava magic and I weave faster than I ever thought I could. A counter wave of molten rock is formed, rising up in front of Sarah just before the blood hits and the tunnel is seared as a blast of red steam and super-heated liquid sprays across everyone.

When the mist clears the tunnel is an absolute mess, pools of blood and hissing black lava are everywhere. Standing in the middle of it all is a gigantic bear. And she is *mad*.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 856: Asura Bear

In that brief window of stillness, as Sarah stood soaking and burned in the tunnel, the demons heard something that they would later wish they had never had the misfortune to hear. It started as a low growl in the back of the great bear's throat, a rumble that shuddered through the air and rattled against my carapace. But it didn't stop there, it quickly grew in volume and intensity until it became an endless bellow of rage and madness that drowned out every other sound.

Her claws and teeth glittering with a violent red energy, Sarah's aura rises in intensity until I feel as though it's trying to press me against the wall. She did *not* want to be caught in the middle of the blood and lava collision and her temper is flaring something fierce.

If I can sense it, then the demons certainly can as well. There's a certain wariness to their movements now as they prepare themselves to continue the fight, but I don't think they're ready for what's coming. The envy and grudge demons are still locked in a battle of mental supremacy with AI and Invidia. The grudge demon is a rather hideous sight. Almost like a billowing cloud of menace and ill will surrounding a hunched, grim looking entity. Despite what Allocrix had to say, it doesn't appear all that difficult to destroy, but I'll have to take his word for it.

In an attempt to block our path and protect the more vulnerable members of its group, the greed demon finally steps forward. I can see the traces of Grokus in its shape and form, although not nearly as corpulent it still has a significant amount of pure mass. Perhaps it will be able to stand its ground in front of an enraged Sarah.

"GAUUUUUUUUU!"

Or not. Her anger having reached its peak, the bear lashed out fiercely, carving red gouges through the air before rending the blood demon straight through the middle. Her success only emboldens her as Sarah starts to charge forward, straight into the waiting arms of the greed demon. The two large monsters clash with enormous force, but Sarah doesn't take a backward step as she snarls and snaps at the corpulent demon with her teeth.

[Let's go Tiny! Follow up behind Sarah!]

With his arm partially healed Tiny is ready to go once more, the lightning flickering around his frame again as he readies his fists. My minds spin at a dizzying pace as I try to work out the best plan of attack, feeling out the situation with all of my senses as I charge. Despite being literally split in twain, the blood demon isn't out for the count yet, its strange half fluid half flesh body already in the process of drawing itself back together as it slashes out towards Sarah. We can't have that happening! The omni-elemental construct spins and whirls within my mind, the many layered sphere churning out mana as my mind constructs cooperate to make the thing dance.

A searing jet of blue flame erupts from in front of my mandibles, torching the blood demon and sizzling it even as it tries to regather itself.

[Tiny! Give it heaps!]

Without needing more encouragement, the big ape leaps forward, both arms raised above his head before he brings them down in a shattering impact that rattles the floor, discharging the lightning he built up straight into the weakened demon. If it's still kicking, then it sure isn't going to be doing anything to harm us anytime soon. The envy and grudge demons at the back are growing ever more frustrated in their attempts to gather mana and weave their spells, the suppression of the two brainy beings behind me has been too much for them to overcome so far, but a deep flickering green light within the winged eyeball tingles my danger senses more than a little.

Without hesitation, I *dash* forward, my legs firing and my brains blazing as I spin together a series of condensed force bolts over the course of a second. I run an arc around Sarah who continues to savage and bully the greed demon in front of her, with the big thing holding its ground so far. As I draw closer I infuse my body with Will energy, using the Vestibule to fuel my strength before I place my six legs carefully and time my Skill activations to fire a triple Dash at the last possible second, unleashing my force bolts at the same moment as I Charge into the demon's flank.

Despite being a hefty demon the monster is knocked to the side as I unleash all of the force I can muster and blast the thing straight into the side of the tunnel, leaving Sarah with nothing in front of her for a brief moment. The enraged bear soon fixates on the pride demon who had stepped forward to assist its now stunned ally and I swear the swagger in its step falters for a brief moment as he stares down the Asura.

The unending roar of malevolence continues to shatter all of our ears, or send every hair along my body shaking as if I were standing in the epicentre of an earthquake in my case.

[Tiny, deal with the fat one! Crinis! I need you to help me with the envy demon!]

The pulsing green energy is growing stronger within that eye every moment and once charged that beam is going to do serious damage if we let it. With Sarah pulling aside the only obstacle still remaining between us I rush forward to engage the backline, my mandibles wide open and a Doom Chomp primed and ready to go. Before I can reach my target, the grudge demon leaps in front of me.

The demon is small and surrounded by a strange gaseous cloud, its body hidden behind the ever shifting vapour. Unwilling to allow it to slow my charge I rush straight through it, slamming my mandibles shut after infusing them with wind mana.

An inrush of air compresses around the demon, compacting the gas before my jaws slam shut.

What the heck?! It's as if I didn't bite anything at all! I may have well have bitten steam! Directly in front of my face, the demon reforms in an instant and I feel a powerful sluggishness overcome my limbs. I think this darn thing just cursed me somehow! Dammit! I feel so weak!

Unable to advance as quickly as I want, I watch as the envy demon continues to build its energy until the eye is gleaming bright. Desperate to avoid getting blasted in the face with a laser of death I spin together a host of force bolts, launching them at the side of the eyeball just as it leaned forward to unleash the beam.

Struck at the last second the eye swings to the side, scorching my side with immense heat before it's directed into the wall of the tunnel. A few moments later, Sarah arrives on the scene, having already dealt with the pride demon she crashes down on the flying eye like a collapsing house, putting a rapid end to the fight. I mean, the grudge demon is still here, but I have no idea how to kill it and I'm not sure how well it'll be able to fight on its own. The next thing we have to do is work out how to calm Sarah down...

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 857: More huntin'

[I am really sorry about that.]

[Hey, don't worry about it. You've apologised already, I'm fine, you're fine, we're all fine.]

[I mean. Sure, but I still feel bad. Is there anything I can do?]

[No, seriously, it's already healing. There's no issue here.]

Calming down the rampaging Asura bear turned out to be easier than I thought. She might be an unstoppable killing machine when she gets going, but she's still limited to the strength of her tier. Between Tiny, Crinis and myself, we manage to slow her down enough that she eventually came back to herself. I mean, I did get bitten in the process, but it's not too bad. My legs grow back fast and I'm pretty nimble on five anyway. It was the deep grooves she managed to cut into my carapace that I found more frightening. That's just with her jaws, imagine if she got a full swing with her claws?! Scary...

Once we managed to subdue the bear and she calmed down, it was time to harvest our gains, consume the Biomass and decide what to do with the grudge demon.

[They are an interesting type of demon,] Al remarked. [They aren't exactly impossible to destroy, but it is extremely difficult and involves spending far more effort than is usually considered worthwhile.]

[When I bit it I felt like I'd chomped nothing at all, then I got hit with a curse that made me feel super weak!]

[Yes, that's right. The grudge demon is quite weak, but if you 'destroy' it, then you will be hit with a sapping curse that drains your strength for a time.]

[The ultimate sacrifice play...]

[Well we may as well send this creature on its way.]

So saying, Al enveloped the little demon in a pillar of flame before detonating it and dispersing the grudge.

[What the heck?!]

[It will take some time for it to bring itself back from that. Of course, this means that I will suffer its curse for longer, but it does not affect my mental abilities so I shall be fine.]

They may be weak, but somehow I find the grudge demon quite scary. So persistent!

[What happens when a grudge demon evolves?]

[Due to their low offensive power, it is supremely difficult for grudge demons to accrue experience. Despite being so hard to kill, examples who have managed to reach tier seven are vanishingly rare. Should they succeed though, the resulting demon is immensely powerful.]

[Yeesh. I hope I never meet one.]

Once we clear up the battle site we gather once more to plan our next move.

[This was only one of the hunting parties sent out from Orpule and tangling with them was no joke. That proves two things, that we were right to be cautious and that we were right to hunt them down. If the Colony has to deal with these dudes themselves then we are talking about a lot of dead ants.]

[And these were only tier six. I can't imagine what the tier seven demons are like,] Sarah says.

[They're messed up, big time,] I say, not looking at Al. [So I think our best course of action is to keep hunting through these tunnels to see if we can find any other groups and then check back in with Vibrant. We know three groups came out in this direction so I'd like to find at least one more before we leave, but we can't be sure that they are even in these tunnels to start with.]

[You think they might have gone elsewhere?]

[Who knows?] I shrug with my antennae. [It's possible that they entered the tunnels but at another point we don't know about.]

[How many of these groups left Orpule so far?]

[Ten according to the general Emilia. They've scattered all over the place.]

[It's unlikely that we're going to get them all.]

[No chance. But we should make every effort to find as many as we can. We have two days before we need to regroup with the Colony so we need to move quickly.]

[Are you able to do that, you're missing a leg remember? Sorry about that, again.]

[It'll grow back in a few hours, I've mutated specifically for that purpose.]

[You mutated to grow your legs back faster? How often does this happen?]

[More often than I'd like...]

I turn to Brilliant who managed to keep her head down and not run off for once during the fight.

"You did a fantastic job helping us track these guys down. Now I need you to do it again, about ten times."

"Ten?! You really think you're going to be able to catch them all?"

"Nope, but I'm going to try."

"Fair enough," the little ant looks back and forth. "So, which way are we going to go?"

She makes a good point, we pursued this group quite a long way.

"Let's head back to where we entered the tunnels, I'm guessing that if more than one group came down here then they would have split up and gone in different directions, otherwise we would have found them together."

"Makes sense."

I let the others know the plan and we head back toward the entrance. There's still more monsters and ghosts on the way which we make sure to put down and feed as much experience and Biomass into the hatchling as we safely can. She's tier four now, but I'll be a lot happier when she reaches tier five. Bringing her down here was always a risk, but it's served a few purposes. Namely, accelerating her growth, and making sure that I was able to oversee her education.

Champion monsters, and champion ants in particular, are a little weird. The way they inspire followers and loyalty is a good thing, Vibrant and her squad have been an amazing asset to the Colony, but there's also a risk. If a Champion was raised within the nest? With all the rest of the hatchlings? What sort of influence would she have on them? How effectively would she have absorbed the lessons of the tenders who may be inspired to follow *her* directions instead of their own?

Since I'm one of the few who seems resistant to the strange charisma that's exuded by the Champions, I'm in the best position to educate them. I'm not just trying to get Brilliant to agree with everything that I think, but I'm trying to create the space that she needs in order to develop into the ant that *she* wants to be. When I eventually let her loose on the Colony she'll at least have a solid conceptual understanding of who she is and what she's passionate about.

I also get the opportunity to make sure that she's not obsessed with something that'll get all of us killed.

[All right. This is where we entered.]

The path branches from here in three different directions, meaning we have two possible avenues of investigation.

"Do you sense anything, Brilliant?"

She hesitates.

"Nothing right now. The trail may have gone cold given how long ago they moved through here."

So we just have to guess. Ah well.

[This way. Let's see what we can see.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 858: The Very Best

The Colony was like a boulder rolling down a hill. The moment the wave ended they had exploded outwards, and their momentum had only grown as time had passed. The more they expanded, the more nests they created, the easier it was for them to continue the process. More Queens allowed more eggs to be laid, which grew the workforce which meant more nests could be constructed. Only months ago the Colony which had been confined to a single nest now boasted six satellite nests with four new main nests under construction. Kilometre after kilometre of tunnel was now the claimed territory of the ants, along with numerous expanses which they harvested vociferously, using every resource on hand to sate the unending hunger of the brood.

This relentless growth made it inevitable that they would eventually encroach on the interests of another power, but Coolant hoped that day was still far off. The destruction left behind by Garralosh meant that the first stratum and surface were clear of any major influence for a great distance around their main nest. The frontier kingdoms no longer existed and thus all of that empty Dungeon had become ripe for conquest. Likewise, the lands to the south were abandoned wilds, deemed too bothersome to settle by the established empires of the surface. Already the Colony had cleared swathes of land, establishing farms, roads and prepared sites for villages and nests.

The second stratum was more crowded, since the Colony knew that to their east the Empire of Stone simmered, still smarting from their earlier defeat. It made no sense to expand in this direction, that would only shorten the time needed for the golgari to threaten their interests. The third stratum was likely to be even more contested. Perhaps not one neighbour would object to the growth of the Colony so close to their doorstep, but two, or more. The golgari almost certainly maintained a presence on this stratum, rich with resources and hunting grounds as it was, but who else might they run into?

This was a question that the strategists and thinkers of the Colony obsessed over daily.

Coolant had been amongst the first to consider that she and her siblings knew precious little about the factions and kingdoms of the world, potential allies and enemies all of them. This was essential knowledge that could guide their actions to the best outcomes possible. Who could they afford to offend? Who did they need to avoid? It was for this reason that the mages began to spearhead an effort

to question and learn from as many of the people who came under their 'rule' as possible. The refugees of Renewal and the people of Rylleh were all untapped sources of intelligence that could add the detail and colour that was so lacking in their picture of this world. Today the council member had come to the intelligence gathering station the Colony had established in the underground city where willing volunteers were interviewed and their information collated.

"How goes the day's proceedings, Accountant?"

The rather idiosyncratic ant looked up at Coolant through her ridiculous and oversized glasses.

"Very well! The merchants have proven to be a wealth of information once we understood what they wanted."

"They wanted to be paid?"

"How did you know?"

"They always want to be paid."

"I... suppose that's true, isn't it?"

"So, what did we end up having to give them?"

"Nothing. The faithful barricaded their homes and stores until they volunteered to talk to us."

Coolant slapped her forehead with a front leg. The humans could be very enthusiastic when it came to helping the Colony, sometimes more than was necessary.

"Make sure we give the merchants something for their time. They only recently calmed down and we don't need them getting riled up again."

The longer the Colony was in charge of Rylleh, the more they had learned running roughshod over everyone all the time wasn't always the best decision. Sure, if they chose, they could dedicate the resources to locking down any whisper of dissent in the city, but why bother? They had much more important things to do! Better that the systems they put in place and oversight they had installed keep things running smoothly. This way the ant presence within the city itself could be kept to a minimum.

"So, what have we learned?"

Accountant pushed her glasses up with one leg, a habit that caused a flash of irritation to run through the elder mage. Why the heck did she need glasses anyway!? A useless non-monster fixation! In truth, the glasses *did* in fact serve a purpose. Accountant had them made in order to provide magnification since she spent such an inordinate amount of time perusing human documents in her role. The glasses themselves were a work of art, hundreds of individual lenses aligned perfectly to her compound eyes to provide the necessary focus to read the tiny writing. The best part? She didn't have to use any mutations or evolutionary energy to achieve the effect!

"Our understanding of the trade routes and goods exchanged with the Kaarmodo to the north has grown extensively. The sand lizards are a fascinating society with a relationship that borders on symbiotic with their attendants -"

"But are they likely to fight us?"

"Oh yes, absolutely. They are very territorial according to the people we've spoken to. Obviously, we don't have much by way of verifiable history here, but from what we've been told the Dungeon society of the Kaarmodo is amongst the oldest on Pangera."

"Interesting. What of the Brathian?"

"Ah, the water people. Yes. Apparently, there is a small population of them within the lake next to the former kingdom of Liria, though their main strongholds are far from here. Their presence in the third stratum is weak, for fairly obvious reasons, though we have learned that they covet territory in the fourth."

"Any ideas on why?"

"Nothing definite."

"What about these so called 'old kingdoms'."

"They are far from us right now, much further north, beyond the lands claimed by the Kaarmodo. I'm sure that we will run into them eventually, but so far we haven't interacted with them in any meaningful capacity."

"Have the people here had much to do with them?"

Accountant hesitated.

"It would appear not. It is... difficult, as I understand, for people who live on the frontier to visit the old kingdoms."

"What about to our west?"

"From what I understand there is some conflict to be had in that direction that remains unresolved."

"Between who?"

"The Kaarmodo and the Mother Tree."

"The Bruan'chii?"

"Indeed."

Coolant fell silent and thought for a moment. There likely wasn't much they could do to interfere in that mess at this time, but in a few months, when the Colony had extended their reach into the third stratum and begun to extract resources from it? The tree had reached out to assist the Colony in their time of need and she would make a powerful ally.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 859: Assault on Orpule

I have seen many things, dear readers, been to many wild wonderful and dangerous places, but even I felt a moment of trepidation as we passed between the legs of a giant carved statue of an ant and the hard stone closed around us. My two guards and I had now left the world of the sun behind us and

delved within the nest of the Colony. I have to admit that this is the first time in my long life that I've willingly plunged within a nest of monsters, though my apprehension was somewhat mollified by the smiling guide at my side and the children running before me.

"Was that statue another depiction of the... great one?" I asked my guide, Emilia, mainly to distract from my feelings of discomfort.

The young woman chuckled a little before replying.

"Although there are many, MANY depictions of the Great One, that statue is an exception."

"Oh really?"

"Yes. That was a memorial placed in memory of Grant, one of the first twenty ants of the Colony to be raised by the Great One, and who sacrificed her life against Garralosh, helping to bring about that monster's defeat."

"Sounds like quite a story."

"Yes. I was a young girl then, but I can still remember the sounds of battle from the shelter where the children were kept. When we finally learned that it was over I almost couldn't believe it would be possible, that this beast who had destroyed kingdoms was defeated by these ants."

We fell into silence as we continued to walk, the path sloping downward at a steady pace before it turned to the left and began to spiral. We'd gone down perhaps a hundred metres before the tunnel opened into a wonderfully pleasant welcoming chamber, with human attendants, comfortable chairs, thick woven rugs on the floor and core enchanted lighting along the ceiling.

"This seems... oddly luxurious," I murmured.

"The Colony is quite spartan when it comes to their own accommodations, they usually don't have rooms of their own but sleep in designated chambers with hundreds of others. When it comes to their guests however, they are extremely generous. Watch."

So saying she stepped to one of the human attendants, dressed in much the same way as my guide and entered into a brief, whispered conversation. When Emilia returned to me the other woman had left the room, but returned a few moments later holding a tray laden with a teapot, cups and delightful little cakes. Such a sight warmed my heart dear readers, you can imagine how much I had missed my tea! And let me tell you that the ceramic work on the cups and pot were just spectacular. Ornate little flourishes abounded and when I leaned close I could see the flowers painted on the side sported small ants foraging amongst the petals.

We were invited to sit in the comfortable chairs and enjoy our snacks, which I did! I was halfway through the delicious cake when a realisation struck me. I turned to Emilia to see her watching me with a wide grin on her face.

"All of it was made by the ants," she confirmed for me.

"Even the tea?"

"Especially the tea."

Victor looked out at the transformed city of Roklu with satisfaction. Even now the plate bristled with ants at work, carvers and soldiers doing the heavy lifting and putting the finishing touches on the new defensive works. Small forts in the shape of anthills were now dotted throughout the city, giving the ants a fallback position and safe firing platform. The pillar above the city now sported similar protected hollows formed by bonding stone to the harder material of the pillar itself. Any approach to the city from the air would be subject to a bombardment of spells and acid that would put even the most powerful tier six minds to the test.

Although they lacked their human allies and the potent buffs that they provided it was hoped that these home ground advantages would be enough for them to utilise the sheer weight of numbers to the fullest extent, holding off any demonic assault whilst their own offensive reaped the rewards in Orpule.

Tens of thousands of members of the Colony remained within the city, dug into position and ready to fight at a moment's notice. When the enemy came, they would be made to understand the folly of challenging the Colony!

"How goes the preparations?" Advant asked, crawling up into the central compound where the general had made herself at home.

"Just about done. The last few days have been hectic, but I think we're ready."

"There's been plenty of work to go around," the soldier agreed, "not that I was worried we wouldn't get it done."

"No, everyone knows how much is riding on this. With the Eldest personally involved, everyone is more than prepared to give their all."

"Are you going to be alright here? Will the contingencies be enough to handle a tier seven if it appears?"

Victor shrugged her antennae.

"You cannot engage in conflict that is totally without risk. We have done everything we can to minimise it, but an element of chance will always persist. With the information we have to hand we have made the best decisions we could. It should be enough."

"Well I wish you all the best. If all goes well, I'll see you when the column returns with word of our victory."

"Yes, shouldn't it be leaving right about now?"

"The departure has begun. I just thought I'd check in with you before I went on my way."

"Why thank you sister, that warms my heart."

"You're very welcome."

The two enjoyed a moment of silence as they looked out over the vast emptiness that surrounded the city.

"All right. I'll be on my way."

"Tell the Eldest that we have things looked after on this end. Make sure they do their job properly."

"I will."

So saying the large soldier moved swiftly, dashing away and into the city to reach the edge of the plate. Before long she had reached the outside and began the long, arduous climb down the pillar along with a vast horde of her siblings. From a distance it almost appeared as if the pillar were alive, covered as it was in a writhing carpet of enormous ant monsters. When they reached the floor they spread out into one enormous column hundreds of metres wide that trailed through the Plains of Leng. Every ant stepped in perfect unison, the combined sound ringing throughout the stratum like a fearsome bell, like a giant knocking on the world's door.

Even the ever present demon larvae, rattled by the vibrations that shivered through the solid stone beneath them, moved far afield from the mighty column, revealing wide swathes of the floor to light for the first time in centuries. The ants were on the march.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 860: Assault On Orpule pt 2

It was a tired and bedraggled group that I led out of the tunnels after a few days of hunting. Trying to track down the groups of demons that had escaped from the city proved to be a massive pain in the business district, much as I expected it to. Nevertheless, when we finally made our way to the plains outside of Orpule around which Vibrant and her gang were still running laps, we returned triumphant! Seven out of ten groups successfully annihilated! It was rough going, especially toward the end when everyone (other than me) was tired, but we persevered! The destruction of these groups will surely cause some pain for the city which will soon become part of the Colony's territory!

Gweheheheh.

Brilliant was instrumental in bringing about this outcome, her ability to tap into the residual memory of the Dungeon itself was the only way we could track the wayward demons. As a side benefit, we've gotten close to pushing the hatchling to tier five in what must surely be the most rapid ascent of any ant in the history of the Colony! Another ten levels and she'll have it! Once the battle for the city is done, getting her to evolve is going to be my highest priority! Once she reaches that stage she'll be decently strong and I won't have to worry about her evaporating in a puff of smoke when some demon looks at her the wrong way.

"Hey-hey, Senior!" Vibrant greets us enthusiastically when she finally loops around the city and back to our side. "Nice to see you again! How'd things go? Good I hope! I'm sure they were good! Hello Crin-Crin! Are you ready for more tag? I sure am!"

The machine gun of pheromones into my face is as unpleasant as ever and it's almost a relief to encourage the eldritch horror riding on my back to go have some fun with her friend whilst the rest of us take stock for a moment.

"How many were you able to destroy, Eldest?" the general Emilia approaches, ready to record our latest results.

"We managed to track down and annihilate the sixth and seventh groups who deployed south. It wasn't easy, especially since the trail had gotten so cold, but we managed it in the nick of time."

"Another three groups were sent out since you left, which means there are six still out there."

Dang it.

"Well, that means the demons remaining in the city are even fewer I suppose. Keep our claws crossed that the defence will manage to hold back at Roklu. Do you suspect any tier sevens left the city?"

"We can't confirm it, but we believe that it's likely. Some of the groups had fluctuating mana readings which is almost always a sign that concealment is taking place."

"There's no way they sent out more than one right?!"

"We don't think so. The mages in our group expect that it was a decoy effort to make it harder for us to work out which disc carried the tier seven."

"Sneaky..."

[Anthony... can I go sleep yet?]

[Ah! Sarah, don't sneak up on me like that!]

[I'm bigger than you, how on earth can I possibly sneak? That's not important. Sleep is important. Where are we resting?]

[Ah, it's over that way.]

"I'll be back later, I think the group is in dire need of a nap."

It hasn't all been running laps for Vibrant and her crew. She has all castes as members in her posse and the carvers have been busy laying the groundwork for the coming invasion. Two kilometres from the base of the pillar that supports Orpule the staging grounds have begun to take shape, including a convenient rest area that Sarah, Tiny, Invidia, Brilliant and AI can pile into for some well-deserved snooze time. After days without rest, constantly roaming through the dangerous, lava-filled tunnels, I can't really blame them for being low on energy. With my twenty bodyguards and the huge numbers of ants teeming throughout this area of the stratum, I've generally been fine. Vibrant's group never left my range throughout our time on the prowl, evidence of the increased potency of my reformed Vestibule.

If I actually took mutations to increase the range... it might get pretty crazy. As it is, every time I improve the organ, the range is increased as a by-product, enough that I'm content with it.

Speaking of mutating, I should get some more of that done while I have the chance. I've managed to put away enough Biomass to pay for another few upgrades and the fight tomorrow promises to be a tough one.

I look up at the city of Orpule. Bigger than Roklu and not by a little bit, the demon city is made up of several layers rather than just the one. I don't know how they've done it, but several of the giant plates have extended out of the pillar, allowing for multiple levels of buildings. Other than the primary level, the others are still much smaller, clearly in the process of expanding to reach their full size. I really do have to find out how they've done it, induce the pillar to grow more levels. We could do with more space in Roklu, since that's likely to be the primary staging ground for the Colony on this stratum.

With the others settled down to rest, I make myself comfortable and prepare to mutate. Before I can get started, I feel something tickling through Vestibule, a drip of Will that quickly turns into a flood. The unified determination of the invasion force wells up inside me, a powerful rise in emotion that almost drives me to my feet and sends me charging at the base of the pillar on my own. I restrain myself with some effort. Tens of thousands of ants all with a singular, unified purpose are enough to have a strong effect on me, even if I guard against it. I'll need to be careful over the next few days.

I crawl to a higher vantage point and look out, hoping to see the arriving force. It takes a little while, my eyes still aren't amazing at a long distance such as this, but eventually they become more than a blur on the horizon. A huge column of ants marches forward, indomitable and unyielding. Before they are anywhere near me I can already feel the vibrations of their steps through the ground. With this many members of the Colony within range, the Vestibule once more floods my body with energy as the whispered Will of my siblings pulses in my veins.

We aren't holding much back for this assault. Now that we've gained a foothold on this level, it's imperative that we hold it. The opportunities and experience we can harvest from this stratum are the key to unlocking more tier six ants. We haven't even begun to explore what rare resources we may be able to tap. Rather than take a backwards step, we've decided to use this conflict with Brixin to expand our footprint instead. Aggressively seize more land that we can then consolidate. Once we've secured our gains, it won't end there. The Colony is forever growing, with an inexhaustible demand for Biomass and cores. We will push and push until something decides to push back.

That's when the real fun starts.