

Chrysalis 861

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 861: Assault on Orpule 3

Fire iron. Magma crystals. Ash shards. Pyrestone. Along with cores of the demons themselves, these make up just a few of the precious resources that make the third stratum such a hotbed of conflict. For as long as the powers of the world have known of the demon layer, they have fought over it. Territory secured here has always been precious, especially in those areas where the mana flows thick, and the treasures are abundant. Due to a number of factors, such as the difficulty of coexistence with the demons and managing the fallout of their endless battles, securing a safe holding is a constant drain on whoever should attempt to do so. The borders between the various powers are thus in a constant state of flux, rich mining grounds changing hands on a weekly basis. Though the rewards are well worth it.

Fire iron. The precious ore can be found within the stone between layers, or indeed in molten pools mixed with lava. Filled to the brim with fire attuned mana, the weapons forged from this material can become so hot that there are reports of them melting the armour of the foes they were used on while there were men inside it. When properly utilised, it's even possible to forge a suit that would allow a being to dive into molten rock and come out unscathed.

Magma crystals are far rarer. An infused form of quartz, these crystals are so dense with concentrated mana that they can spew forth a flow of lava for hours at a time without needing to be recharged. It was the Legionem Abyssii who were the first to learn how to safely carve slivers of from the gems and apply them to the tips of arrows, a trick that might have been better had it never been learned at all.

Ash shards. A grim material that skirts the edges of the forbidden. The power of ash is a breath away from that of disintegration and annihilation. Capable of dissolving a person whole, it is by far the deadliest substance that can be mined in this stratum.

Pyrestone is the one building material that allows a permanent structure to be formed in the land of fire and ash. Without it, putting one brick on top of another and expecting it to be there the next day would be all but impossible. Resistant to heat and seemingly immune to the degrading power of ash, even at the deeper layers where it becomes more potent, Pyrestone is the bedrock of civilised existence within the world of demons.

- Excerpt from 'The third stratum: a primer' by Mallin the educator.

As the vast army of the Colony flowed into the area around Orpule they set to work like a well-oiled machine. Soldiers peeled off the line and started to set up patrols and a perimeter even as the carvers began construction of a vast project. It was fascinating to watch it happen, sitting up on my rock it almost reminded of looking at timelapse videos of ants at work. A flurry of activity, dirt getting moved around with thousands of little bodies rushing here and there. The main difference in this instance, of course, is that every being I see is a fully sentient creature. There's no wasted movement, no back and forth, just a clean execution of a previously agreed on plan that was carefully considered.

In ten minutes, tons of rock has been shifted, clearing the ground for what is to come. The vast field of plains around the pillar that supports the ceiling so far above our heads is effectively surrounded, teams of ants having formed a living wall around the city. Still, the vast concentration of the army remains

here, close to me, feverishly building in a long line that extends from my position all the way to the base of the pillar. Fifty minutes later and by now even the demons should have been able to work out what is happening. The beginnings of a vast rampart are taking shape the likes of which this stratum may have never seen before. Several kilometres long it will reach from the ground all the way up to the lip of the plate on which the demon city sits. A truly ludicrous undertaking, but one that the Colony will attempt to execute even so. Huge trails of soldiers and scouts have formed in all directions, hauling hundreds of tons of stone every minute back to the construction site where mages and carvers broke it down and fused it into the ever-growing ramp.

It was glorious, it was mad, and it was amazing all at once.

This is the power of the Colony when they bring their numbers to bear. This is what forty thousand of us can do when we work together in harmony. In a year there might be a million of us, or even more. What wonders will we be able to accomplish at that time? I can't help but get shivers as I think about it.

But now's not the time for sitting around on my backside daydreaming! Eventually the city is going to start retaliating, firing spells and dropping rocks on us as we build! At that time, I need to be on the frontlines, ready for action, which means I need to be mutating and resting my mind now, to ensure peak performance when the battle is at its peak!

No longer willing to stuff around and watch others work (think of my reputation!) I rush down into the resting chamber in which my group is already slumbering and prepare to mutate. This mainly involves making sure that nobody can see me, and I'll be protected during 'itch time'.

With this job done, it's time to weigh my gains. How many points do I have to work with?

Five hundred and forty-seven. Not bad for a week's work, especially considering the fact I've been sharing the food with a host of tier sixes (and a seven). It's enough for me to take three of my organs... aaaalmost four of them, from +25 to +30.

Which of the lucky body parts will it be?

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 862: Assault on Orpule 4

Ah mutating. The subtle joy of making some selections within your mind and then having your body literally transform into a better and more capable version of itself. Not only is it mega-convenient, it's super addictive. The feeling of constant improvement is just fantastic. So it's with a giddy joy in my heart that I start perusing the menus and looking over my status, trying to decide which of my many organs and body parts needs to be upgraded next. Obviously it's an important decision, we have a big fight coming up, multiple tier seven opponents will be present in the city, so I'll need to be at my combat peak.

But then, what entails the combat peak? My carapace and mandibles are upgraded, that's fantastic, obviously, but what comes next in terms of offensive and defensive priority? Is it my legs? Speed is always good and they harden up a little when I mutate them, which reduces the chances of going without limbs, which has been a recurring issue. No wonder the way ants fight each other on Earth was to pull the legs off. It's a low blow, but it's effective as well. The weakness was the legs all along.

So legs are an option. My regenerative plating is another strong contender. Tier seven demons are going to be able to put some serious hurt on my carapace, I've no doubt, so being able to absorb some of that impact and regrow my diamond covering that much faster would be a boon. But then again, there's the *mental* edge. I could upgrade my brains rather substantially with this Biomass or I could improve the coordination cortex and give each of my brains a small boost that way.

There's always the gravitational mana gland as well, now that I think about it. A big ol' gravity bomb is what got me out of the last fight against a tier seven alive and if I'm being honest, it's going to be my trump card going into this one as well. Having more gravity mana on hand to throw about sure doesn't hurt.

Of course, improving my nervous system would also be a wise investment. I took my antennae all the way to +30 last time around, so it would make a lot of sense to go ahead and improve this now so I can keep up with what my future sense is telling me.

Gah! So many decisions!

All right, I only get three so I might as well spread the love out rather than concentrate it in one place. I'll improve my coordination cortex. That'll give each of my brains a small but noticeable boost and help me on the magical side of things. I'll also improve the gravitational mana gland. Each improvement gives greater capacity, faster regeneration and so on, but lately I've been mutating it to pre-condense the mana for me and that has been a serious help in making the gravity bomb faster to cast. It might only be doing ten percent of the work I need, but it makes a huge difference in the heat of the moment. Finally, I'll improve the inner-carapace plating.

As good as my reflexes are, especially when combined with my future sense, Grokus showed me that I can't always rely on being able to dodge away, even against foes as ponderous as he was. I fully expect to take some hits in this battle and by improving the plating I'm giving myself the best possible chance to survive.

In terms of the individual mutations, it isn't that hard to pick out what I want from the exhaustive lists. As I stated, the condensing effect I've been adding to my gravitational mana gland has been great. It's actually an idea I stole from Tiny believe it or not. He added this effect to both of his lightning mana glands a long time ago and it was only much more recently that I decided to follow suit. The carapace plating has a mix of mutations so far, aimed at improving its ability to absorb forceful blows as well as healing the carapace above. I think I'll look at emphasising the former rather than the latter. The healing effect I get from the plating is good, but that isn't why I purchased the organ, I purchased it to help shore up my defence against solid, concussive blows. Making sure it's working at maximum capacity in that respect is going to be the best choice right now.

In fact, when I next evolve, I might look at reforging the carapace plating along with the carapace. Rather than add the healing effect, I could go all in on bulking up my defence and add an additional organ or element to repair damage to the carapace on the fly. Even those diamond bugs I was offered last time... I'm not especially comfortable with having little parasites inside my carapace, but if they can strengthen and repair it, then it'll be a worthy trade.

Anything to make the diamond shine brighter!

With all of that done my upgrades look like this:

Braced Healing Inner Carapace Plating +25 -> Fortified Healing Inner Carapace Plating +30;

Unyielding Coordination Cortex +25 -> Indomitable Coordination Cortex +30;

Compressing Unending Gravity Magic Gland +25 -> Forceful Unending Gravity Magic Gland +30;

And those three upgrades are going to cost me just FOUR HUNDRED AND TWENTY BIOMASS. Holy moly things are getting expensive at this tier. I seriously need to prioritise mutating my stomach the next time around. I need to squeeze all the Biomass I can out of the prey I get because I need literally thousands of points to get myself to fully upgraded. This is likely the downside of adding too many different body parts and organs... but it'll be fine. As long as I spend enough time I'll eventually get to max. Considering I need to reach level one hundred and sixty to evolve again, there's almost no chance I reach that level cap before I finish my mutations. The sheer volume of experience required is just mind boggling. Although, knocking down a tier seven opponent is worth quite a few levels... hopefully I'll get the chance again tomorrow.

With my selections made it's time to put my head down and confirm my choices. I may as well let my mind get some rest whilst I'm at it. For a battle of this size, I need to be as fresh as I possibly can.

When I feel the itch start to roll over me, I almost welcome it. Then it erupts from inside my brain and I immediately hate it again.

DAMN ITCH! WHY MUST YOU TORMENT ME!?

Chrysalis

Chapter 863: Assault on Orpule 5

The defensive strategy of the Colony is a brutal one. Though they shy away from attrition warfare in principle, they have been known to engage in it when the grim calculus of war is sufficiently in their favour. If you are losing ten soldiers for every ant you kill, then that isn't a fight that will go well for you. However, committing meat to the grinder is often the only avenue that the damned insects will leave open for you. The records are filled with example after example of the superiority of their defensive construction. The generals have a saying: "Leave three ants on a rock for two days and you'll find an impregnable fortress when you get back." The folly of rushing to engage the fortifications of the ants has been proven time and time again.

Their mages are well trained and strong, adaptable and with excellent coordination. The spell barrages that would-be attackers are forced to endure are harrowing. If you manage to neutralise the mages with your own, no easy task, then you still have the literal rain of acid to deal with. Their artillery ants are capable of firing the stuff a kilometre, spraying wide areas with a mist that will strip flesh from bones if given the chance. Suppose you manage to overcome that obstacle, you advance into their fortifications, likely an anthill since that's their favoured configuration, then what?

A bloody grind of a battle where you are forced to assault layer after layer of walls, traps and pitfalls, that's what. The ground will open up behind you to vomit out hundreds of ravenous monsters, rivers of acid will explode out of nowhere, bursting from concealed storage chambers and flowing down the hill, literally taking the feet out from under you. It's a nightmare, but it's not impossible. With sufficient

numbers, grit and clever tactics, you can overcome this hurdle. But what have you won? The answer is nothing. You have conquered the outside of the anthill, which is nothing. All the things they want to defend are INSIDE the hill, which means the true test is yet to come.

Fighting the ants within the tunnels of their own fortress-hills is some of the most brutal fighting I've ever seen in my forty-year career. I've witnessed veteran soldiers come out of those tunnels as shivering wrecks, completely broken from the experience. It's dark, it's cramped, and at any time, from any direction, a veritable horde of terrifying monsters could burst out through the walls. Fighting the ants outside is hard enough, within the narrow confines of their nests? They turn into another beast entirely.

My official recommendation for assaulting ant fortifications is this: don't.

Establish ranged superiority and throw stuff at it until it crumbles into dust, then burn the dust until nothing remains but a puddle of molten rock. It takes a long time, requires a massive concentration of valuable assets, but it's the only way that works.

- *Excerpt from 'Report and Theory on assaulting Ant strongholds' by Robert Stronghand.*

When I snap out of torpor, I find that the rest of my group has already abandoned me, leaving me inside the small resting chamber all on my lonesome. It's fine though, my feelings aren't hurt. I'm tougher than this! Dammit... I need a diamond covering for my heart. I head out of the chamber to find the Colony has been anything but lazy whilst I was... taking a tactical nap. Construction on the ramp has continued at a vicious pace and already the mighty edifice rises high into the burning air of the third stratum.

Seriously, there must be tens of thousands of tons of stone used to make this thing, if not more. It's bonkers. Still, the Colony is doing it! A constant stream of construction materials flows into the site but not as many as before. As I take a look around, I can see that a large concentration of ants has been assembled toward the tip of the ramp and that some form of conflict is taking place there. It's already started?! I need to get moving! Flexing my legs a little I quickly *dash* forward, scanning around me to find the mana signatures of my crew.

[Sarah? Tiny? Crinis? Invidia? Where are you guys?]

At first I can't spot them but as I run up the base of the ramp and head towards the emerging end of the massive thing I quickly recognise them up ahead. They're already at work!

[Guys! Why didn't you wait for me?!]

[Oh! Hi Anthony!] Sarah greets me. [We thought it would be best to let you sleep. You've been up for a long time after all.]

[But don't let the fighting start without me! I need to be here to help out!]

[It's fine. There isn't all that much going on just yet. If things were getting too crazy we would have definitely made sure you were around.]

She's right. When I eventually make it to the end to find all of my pets, Sarah and Al gathered there, I realise that what I was seeing was only the initial salvos of what is sure to become a hectic battle. Right now, the distance between the edge of the plate and the ramp is still hundreds of metres, too far for most monsters to harm each other, except of course, the spell slingers. Already a fiery exchange is

taking place as the demons throw literal fire and a host of ant mages, along with Invidia and AI, fire back whilst protecting the horde of workers continuing to complete the ramp.

From Sarah's point of view not much is happening since she can't do anything to contribute, but there's plenty that I can do!

[Time to put my incredible shielding skills to good use!]

I've been training for this moment! Full of confidence I rush to the front and begin to weave together some defensive barriers, putting all of my mental constructs to the purpose. Thanks to the upgraded coordination cortex, each of my brains has received an additional boost to their individual working capacity, along with their ability to cooperate, giving each construct that extra bit of oomph! Yes! Come to life my shields! Defend the Colony as they work to bring us to the peak!

Except that my shields are shattered almost immediately...

Dammit! I still haven't grinded enough on the defensive magic! My priority has been on force magic over the last week, I haven't had enough time to rank it up that far! From his position hovering just over my right shoulder Invidia continues to pump out enormous barriers with almost contemptuous ease. His silent judgement burns me like a hot needle.

[You've been practicing this for ages! Give me a break!]

His eye looks down on me.

[*Your Skillssss. I do notsss need themsss.*]

OOF.

[I'm still helping anyway!]

So my barriers aren't that great, but I can keep spinning them and throw some ordinance up at the demons firing on us at the same time. Keeping the opponents on the back foot will reduce the heat on our workers and helpfully I'll have enough time to rank up my barrier magic!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 864: Assault on Orpule pt 6

Sarah paced back and forth on the ramp as she strove to keep her bubbling anger from rising up. Though she put a brave face on it, she was still scared. Scared of this battle, scared of what the Colony was attempting to achieve, scared of being so high up on a ramp with no rails and scared of herself. The battle against the golgari back at the nest had taught her a lot about herself, about the kind of person she'd been when she first arrived in the Dungeon and the kind of person she was now.

Most importantly, she'd come to acknowledge that her fear was the source of her anger, not a by-product of it. Her rage was a reaction to how scared and hesitant she had been when she'd arrived in this world as a little cub, newly formed in the first stratum and forced to fight for her survival from the very first minute of her creation. It was strange how those memories remained so fresh, even now, decades later, she could still remember the terror she'd experienced during her first fight. A rat-toad had found her not five minutes after spawning, as she'd still been stumbling about the tunnel trying to

understand how to move with her new legs, shocked and confused about what had happened to her and desperate to understand where she was.

They were ambush predators, the rat-toad, and this one had been holding onto the roof waiting for prey to wander under it, which she had foolishly done. If it hadn't been for her tough hide she might have been done for then and there. As it was, she lost a chunk out of her shoulder before she knew she was under attack, the sudden pain flooding her system with adrenaline as she'd lashed out in a panic. Luck more than anything else had kept her alive through that battle, and the fear that had bloomed in her heart at that time had never left her, even to this day.

And it never would. She was coming to accept that now, after so long. She wasn't like Anthony, who'd somehow embraced his new life with an innocent glee that she could never hope to replicate. She didn't belong here, in this place, in this world, but she was trapped with no way out. So all she could do was learn to control her fear, to experience it without letting it control her. Once she achieved that, once she had it within her grasp, then she would also control the rage.

It was there inside her now, churning away in a constant feedback loop that kept it moving, kept it growing. Rather than shy away, she leaned into it, allowed herself to feel it, to acknowledge it and in that way, slow it down without letting it die. It wasn't time yet. Soon, but not yet.

The air around her boiled with explosions, ice, curses and lightning as the Colony and demons waged a magic battle even as thousands of ants continued to labour on the ramp, extending it now only with earth magic, manipulating the stone with their minds from a distance rather than risk precious carvers stepping into the firing line where they couldn't protect themselves. There was nothing she could do to help at this point, nothing at all, so she paced. Paced and focused inside.

[Come and get it you morons! Eat fireball! Wait... fireballs probably suck against these guys... Eat ice-explosion! Hah!]

A constant stream of chatter came from Anthony who appeared to be having the time of his life running back and forth on the very edge of the ramp, stepping forward every time it grew as much as a centimetre and flinging spells directly into the faces of the demons. He never seemed to run out of energy, probably a mutation or organ, not that she was going to pry, she had other things to focus on.

Every minute that passed the firestorm of magic grew more intense, spiking the fear within Sarah ever higher as she managed its rise. She wasn't even aware of it as she paced back and forth, but a low growl had begun to resonate in her throat, vibrating through the air and growing in volume all the time. As the ramp crept closer and closer to the lip of the plate, her rage grew ever more intense, a red filter fell over her vision as the Asura within began to beat with the thumping rhythm of her anger.

It was a familiar feeling, one she had lived in fear of for so long she almost couldn't remember a time that she didn't, but now she did not shun it, she sought instead to ride it. Her growl rose and rose and she rose with it, riding high on a wave of boiling rage that sought to drive her consciousness away from her body but she allowed it to buffet her without relinquishing control.

The moment the ramp finally drew close enough, she felt herself roar, unleashing her bottled emotions in one air shattering bellow before she *dashed*, rushing toward the edge and leaping off it. It was a bizarre feeling, as if she were a passenger within her own body, but unlike the previous times this had

happened she wasn't banished to a little corner of her own mind, a locked box where she hid herself away, instead it was as if she clung to the back of a bucking bull, except that the bull was also her.

Within a mighty crash, she landed on to the plate right in the face of a mighty horde of demons who immediately turned their ire on her. She was lashed with flame and fangs but the pain only strengthened her further. The Asura bear was engine and rage was the fuel it burned, the more they attacked, the more she swelled with power until her fangs and paws leaked red energy that intimidated all around her. A thud she heard only distantly told her that Tiny had joined her, leaping across the gap with his wings to aid him and landing amongst the demons around her with a devastating blow. With the space he had bought her she leaped forward, claws flashing, jaws snapping and the enemies around her rose to meet her challenge.

She was amongst it then, battling hard against the monsters in front of her, the growl in her throat having grown to a never ending roar and at this point it became too hard to hold on. At last the bull had its way and she was flung off, falling down into the dim corner that she knew so well.

Even as her control slipped, she still felt a momentary surge of triumph. She had held on longer than she ever had before, and with a little luck, this time she might just come back faster as well. If she kept trying, perhaps the day would come when she was finally the one in command of herself.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 865: Assault on Orpule pt 7

Sloan looked out over the seemingly endless open space of the third stratum with trepidation in her heart. Everything that could be done had been done. The city had been rebuilt from the ground up, its defences strengthened, over ten thousand valiant ants were in position to act as the garrison and fend off any assault, an assault that they knew would be coming. She just hoped it would prove to be enough. The Colony was still untested against the demons, one surprise attack was not enough to determine how well they matched up, and without the humans along to boost them there was every chance things would go much worse for her and her siblings in this battle than the last one.

The tier sevens were also a great concern. Despite all of their efforts, the Colony still had far too few tier six members. The power gap only continued to grow the further up the tiers a monster went which meant that this deficiency would be hard to overcome in the short term. If one came to this city, then they would most likely be able to hold. If two came... things might get difficult. Measures were in place and she could only hope that they proved sufficient.

Scouts bristled all over the city, up and down the column as well as a good distance away on the plains, hiding amongst the boundless throng of demon larvae. A relay of mages, able to pass messages between each other at the speed of thought would likely be the way the Colony first received word of the impending attack. Until that moment came, she could do nothing but wait. When time ticked over and the seventh day arrived a soundless disc of pure magic glided out from its hiding place amongst the mountainous outcroppings of rock several kilometres from the city. Then another, and another rose to join it, each of them bristling with demons.

Word raced through the messenger network before a minute had passed and just like that the defenders of Roklu shifted to an active footing, with ants settling into their prepared positions and readying themselves for the battle to come.

Seemingly without effort the demons glided through the air, rising until each of their discs had reached equal height with the plate of the city before they halted, waiting for each of them to be in position. There were five discs in all, each of the hunting parties that the Eldest had failed to find appeared here, an unknown number of tier seven demons among them. Brixin was not content to merely defend her own territory, she sought to control and dominate and that could not be achieved from a purely defensive position. Her aim was the same as the Colony's, to win it all, to take new territory whilst protecting that which she already owned.

One way or another, one of them would get what they wanted.

Once all of the discs were in place, they began to glide forward in unison, approaching the city at an accelerating pace. Thousands of eyes watched them approach. Hidden behind crenelations and concealed within folds of stone on the pillar the ants watched and prepared. The demons clearly knew what was coming, well before they were within range a host of shields and barriers began to form around each of the discs, protection enough to stop a mighty barrage indeed.

But perhaps not enough to stop ten thousand ants hell bent on protecting what is theirs.

"RELEASE!" came the call from the pheromone glands of hundreds of generals all around the city.

In one unified moment, from thousands of individuals, came a deluge of acid and magic that no demon could possibly have foreseen. The plate and pillar blossomed like a flower as the trails of fireballs, ice, lava and every other element homed in on the discs. The demons didn't attempt to dodge, they just accelerated, putting all their effort into shields to protect them. It was never going to be enough.

The Colony's barrage didn't stop, instead it only grew more intense the closer the discs came to the plate. Demons dropped from every disc, on every side of the city, but still they came on. When they finally made contact with the city, it wasn't the graceful and controlled landing they had probably imagined, instead, they crashed, ramming into the stone ramparts around the outside of Roklu like battering rams, the demons of Orpule were thrown from their perches and rolled in the rubble before they leapt to their feet and began the assault.

Sloan was everywhere, rushing through the command centre like a mad thing, listening to every report, communicating with every scout.

"Where are they..." she muttered to herself as the fighting heated up all around the city. "How many did they send?"

The moment the demons set foot on the plate they were assaulted on all sides by coordinated teams of ants who subjected them to a constant run of attacks. The Colony didn't seek to destroy their opponents immediately, wary of biting off more than they could chew, instead they opted to wear their opponents down, and in so doing, force the tier seven demons to reveal themselves.

It was a lone mage, hidden in a fold of stone on the ground who detected it first. At tier five, she'd done all she could to improve her ability to sense and manipulate mana outside of her body, hoping to specialise in defensive magic and protect her sisters, just like the little winged guardian protected the Eldest. Straining with every fibre of her mind she reached out and tried to pierce the veil that the demons maintained even now, warping and twisting the mana that emitted from their cores.

Then, she broke through, for just a fleeting instant, but what she sensed was enough to send a ripple running through every segment of her carapace.

[Tier seven!] she hollered to the general behind her over a mind bridge. [TWO OF THEM!]

The moment Sloan received word she turned to the waiting scout by the entrance of the command hill.

"Two of them on the west side. Deploy countermeasures."

In a flash the scout was gone, her message delivered in a speed that Vibrant would approve of. Moments later, a deep rumbling began to be felt through the feet of every ant in Roklu, as if the plate itself was shaking. The vibrations only grew in intensity as the moments passed, until every member of the Colony, even on the pillar, could feel it. It had taken a huge amount of effort to raise this force to the sixth tier, now they could only hope it would be worth it.

"Please don't mess this up you idiot," Sloan begged of the empty air.

"WE SEEK!"

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 866: Assault on Orpule pt 8

The Immortals thundered through the wide streets of Roklu, a tidal wave of chitin and steel that seemed to rattle the foundations of the world itself as they ran. How many tons massed their combined charge? Who could say, certainly not Leeroy, who ran deliriously at the head of their flying wedge formation.

"This is it my sisters!" she roared, blasting her pheromones wide as they ran. "We run in the darkest hour! We run to bring glory! Immortal no more! WHY DO YOU RUN?!"

"WE SEEK!"

"SEEK NO LONGER! LAY DOWN YOUR SEARCH! WE HAVE BEEN TORMENTED BY A QUESTION AND I TELL YOU THAT THE ANSWER IS HERE AND NOW! THIS IS THE MOMENT! THIS IS OUR TIME!"

Within each and every carapace covered abdomen the hearts of Leeroy and her loyal adherents beat with wild abandon. Before them lay the mightiest foes the Colony had ever faced. Dreadful in their power, fell in their purpose, the demons would slaughter thousands should they be left unchallenged. Each and every one of the Immortals knew that they would pay any price to prevent that from happening.

Although, to tell the truth, they *yearned* to pay that price!

Surely now they would fall! Though this select group had been raised to the sixth tier, they were not as mighty as the Eldest, did not possess their wisdom or strength, so how could they hope to prevail against such dreadful odds? They wouldn't, they couldn't! But with their final breath they would drag their enemies down into the abyss with them, saving their family and freeing themselves.

Despite their weight, the ground was eaten up quickly by their furious charge. The prospect of imminent death spurred them on to run faster than they ever had before, charge more desperately than could have been previously imagined. Soon, the target of their wrath was in sight.

The demons did not appear overly special when compared to the others around them, not much larger, nor much more powerful than the rest of their group, but the evidence provided by their sister was all the Immortals needed to commit themselves wholly to the fight. They would not take a backward step!

"Brace!" Leeroy roared and the ants to her left and right lunged forward until their armour had interlocked with hers.

The motion was repeated down the line and in the lead position Leeroy was overcome by the sensation that their wills had truly become unified. Were she to lift her legs from the ground the unstoppable momentum and strength of her siblings would still carry her forward to glory.

"Remember the inner fire and bring them down with you!"

The group of demons, only six in number, realised their deception had failed the moment the wave of furious insects had appeared. Amongst them, the two most powerful had sneered, despite the forceful charge of the insects they felt no fear. No longer constrained, they allowed their power to swell, blanketing the area with an aura of violence and decay that sent the rest of the ants skittering backwards.

The demons believed this was a sign of fear, whereas in reality the Colony was simply making room for what was about to take place.

Emboldened by the retreat of the weak who had fled at the first sign of their power, the two tier seven demons stepped forward boldly, willing to take the charge of the Immortals head on. A curious decision. When the two sides met the sound of screeching metal and shattering stone sent the hairs on Sloan's antennae dancing all the way back in the command hill.

Like a freight train running off the rails, the Immortals smashed into a wall, paused momentarily, and then punched right through it. The weaker demons were reduced to a fine mist as Leeroy and her sisters perfectly executed their final surge, combining their Dash and Charge Skills in one ecstatic surge. With the force of an explosive harnessed in insect form, they ran straight through their foes before collapsing in a tangled heap on the other side.

"Right yourselves! It's not over yet!"

Amongst the twisted piles of wrecked buildings and tortured armour, Leeroy and her sisters began the desperate fight to break free. Several of them were injured, some limbs had been shattered at the moment of contact of the collapse afterward, but all had to be put aside so that they might finish the fight. For she was not wrong in her assessment, their leader. Though wounded, their two great foes had not fallen in the initial charge, and now the irate demons sought to exact terrible vengeance upon the armoured insects.

Now the battle began in earnest and Leeroy, the most battered of all the cadre, felt her veins blaze with joy as she stood, her helmet twisted across her head, before she once again raced forward to join the fray. Mandibles flashed and snapped as the two mighty demons roared, spitting fire, slicing with blades that split steel and carapace with equal ease.

It was a desperate struggle, with neither side willing to give an inch, but it quickly became apparent that although their opponents numbered but two, the ten Immortals were outmatched. Even though they

shrugged off the overwhelming pressure the demons brought to bear, despite causing significant injury in the initial charge, the ants lacked the speed and power necessary to contend with enemies such as these. The monsters danced amongst the ungainly armoured figures, slashing with wild abandon as they sought to end the fight quickly and complete their task.

But Leeroy and her sisters would not be brought low so easily! The more they were wounded, the more elated they became! As their HP dropped lower and lower, their hearts soared higher and higher! They fought more savagely! Snapped their mandibles more viciously!

Every moment that passed, the Immortals felt the fire in their veins grow ever hotter, for they knew that which their opponents did not! Without conversing, without collaborating in any way, it so turned out that all ten of them had taken the same evolution at tier six. The System had looked into their souls and seen that they were worthy, and so had bestowed upon them a most powerful evolution, with an organ that would see to it that they accomplished their purpose!

Even now as the strength in her limbs was fading, Leeroy could feel it within her now, pulsing with power that only grew as she drew ever nearer to death. Only when she breathed her last would it unleash its full might and pull these foul creatures who sought to bring harm to their family into the afterlife along with them!

As the battle raged on, the demons became increasingly frustrated. These horrendous ants simply refused to die! No matter the injury inflicted they would come back, snapping their mandibles with ferocious energy which seemed impossible to snuff out. The two combatants were incredibly aware of the vast numbers of weaker ants who simply watched them from a safe distance, no doubt ready to leap into the fray the moment these armoured beasts were defeated.

The two demons decided simultaneously that they could drag out this fight no longer, they were weakened and injured as a result of this disaster, they could not afford to let these undying insects exhaust them further. Acting as one they marshalled their remaining strength and unleashed a devastating wave of power, a combination of fire and ash that swallowed everything around them in a fifty metre radius.

When she saw that deadly conflagration ignite between the two demons, Leeroy felt a wave of peace wash through her being the likes of which she had never felt before. With the last of their strength, the Immortals dove *forward* into the expanding sphere of destruction in order to bring themselves as close to their enemies as possible. Though they would die, they would succeed in defeating their enemies and thus live in glory.

"Farewell sisters! Be at peace!" Leeroy flung one last message to her sisters before each of them were consumed.

When the blast was finally cleared every building within its radius had been reduced to a smouldering heap of slag. Drained, but victorious, the two demons surveyed what remained of their foes, little more than mounds of smouldering Biomass and superheated metal. They had no time to celebrate however. Already the surrounding insects were moving to confront them.

Then something strange happened. An upswell of power that they did not recognise began in each of their fallen opponents that grew so quickly they had no time to react before it burst forth in radiant

light. Each of the defeated ants became bathed in golden flames that grew in intensity until none could bear to look at them. There was no heat, only a pure light that could be seen kilometres away, piercing through the ash of the third stratum.

The two demons were bewildered, but unharmed, and when the mysterious fire vanished they despaired, as they found themselves once more staring at the ten massive insects, completely unharmed, though without their armour.

Each of the Immortals froze for a moment out of pure confusion. They had died, they were sure of it... just what had happened?!

As one they threw open their status screens and inspected their new organ, demanding the System display its description.

[Phoenix Fire Organ: Throughout the course of battle this organ will consume the strength of its holder, empowering itself as they draw closer to death. When the host expires, it unleashes the contained energy in a wave of flame that will annihilate -]

Each of the Immortals realised at the same moment that when evolving they had stopped reading at this point and confirmed the selection on the spot. Leeroy hadn't even noticed that there was more text at all!

[- any injuries the host bears, bringing them back from the brink of death to live again.]

The battlefield remained frozen for a long moment as each of the ants tried to process what they had just learned.

"DAMMIT!" Leeroy screamed.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 867: Assault on Orpule pt 9

I watched in surprise as Sarah, of all the monsters on this ramp, sailed through the air and crash landed on the plate, soon followed by Tiny. Luckily the Colony wasn't as distracted by their antics as I was and utilised the distraction to extend the ramp in a rush, crashing it into the side of the plate as the demons poured their fire into the two monsters.

"Get in there!" I roar and Dash straight across, activating my Charge Skill and ramming into the first demon I see.

Behind me comes a literal wave of insects as the massed ranks of my siblings establish a beachhead in Orpule by simply *shoving* themselves bodily into the demons defending the city, pushing back the front ranks through sheer force. Our enemies aren't without their own strengths and the battle quickly escalates as those demons more suited to close combat find themselves with thousands of targets to unleash their craft upon. It's these kinds of situations in which domain magic is at its most potent and I'm not the only one with this idea.

An immediate war for control of the ambient mana erupts as mages on both sides exert their will. Small pockets of control form here and there allowing domains to flicker to life a few moments later. The demons clearly favour fire or strange swirling flecks of darkness that I can only assume is ash, which

makes sense since those are the dominant forms of mana in this stratum. Wherever they touch the ants are seared or worse before they can retreat back to safer areas.

Drawing on the only mana I don't need to fight for control of, I reach deep within and pull out swathes of gravitational mana, swiftly forming it into a domain spell that spreads to crush the surrounding demons down to the ground. At least, I would have liked it if they were smashed into the ground, but despite my best efforts, the gravity domain doesn't have the necessary oomph to overwhelm monsters of this stratum. That's not to say it has no effect however. The moment the added pressure bears down on them, the monsters around me visibly slow down as they exert far more force just to remain standing. Every time they extend a limb to fight it becomes that much harder to hold it in the air.

With the added condensed effect from my most recent mutation the mana is already fairly thick before I even get my minds onto it, which saves time and effort, allowing me to give the mana a quick compression session before I flip it out into the domain, increasing its effect beyond what was possible when I first learned this spell.

The broader battle has become enormously hectic as more and more ants pile into the narrow landing strip that we've secured, forcing their bodies into the fray and ramming into the demons to try and create more space for the ants behind them. It's numbers versus quality right now, each individual ant is not nearly as powerful as the demons they are facing, but with enough bodies and minds packed into the area it won't be possible for us to lose, which is exactly why the defenders of the city are working so hard to deny us any ground.

Fancy tactics don't work so well when the crush is this intense, no matter what either side intended we've been quickly drawn into an arm wrestle. In the thick of things, I take it upon myself to dive into the more powerful of the enemy domains, taking the damage on myself and countering with my own revolving shell of mana. Of course, behind me comes Tiny, Crinis and Invidia. The combined strength of us four tier six monsters, with near perfect cores and evolutions, is more than most tier six demons can stand against, especially when we're backed by thousands of supporters. Mandibles gnashing, minds spinning, I ram forward again and again, bashing my body into the wall of demon flesh in front and demanding that they yield ground to me.

In these cramped quarters, there is of course one monster who is able to reveal her strength perfectly. The constant din of Sarah's roar somehow keeps rising, growing louder and louder until it feels like every part of my body is vibrating with it but then it just keeps going! Even the demons are intimidated by her as her claws rip jagged red gouges out of the air and her jaws glow with terrible, dark light. Fingers crossed she'll be able to come out of it alright this time, though I kind of get the feeling that I might be missing a leg somewhere down the line.

The brutal, face to face attrition continues seemingly without end, but the moment enough space has been established, the Colony gains valuable reinforcements, fresh off the ramp!

"Hey there! It's good to finally be up here! I've been running circles for so long it feels like I might have gotten dizzy! Nice-nice! Who needs help first? Is it you?! Or you?! Or maybe I just help all of you at once! Let's go everybody!"

A blast of rapid-fire pheromones hits everyone in the plate as Vibrant and her crew make their presence known. With enough space to manoeuvre on the plate they can use their speed to their advantage, cycle

charging all over the place and causing headaches for the demons. Vibrant in particular is a menace. No sooner has she crashed into a particular pack of demons like a cannonball, moving so quickly she almost can't be seen, than she's righting herself and picking up speed again, heading for another area of the battlefield! At her mass and strength, each of those charges carries unbelievable force, like a car travelling a hundred kilometres an hour, the impacts are absolutely shattering, but she seems to pick herself up each time in a matter of moments. There must be some mutations or organs at play there! I'll have to check her core again at some point...

Faced with this relentless and unending grind, the demons cannot hold their ground and are constantly forced back. Progress is slow, but for every metre we gain more ants are able to force themselves onto the platform and shove harder, whereas the surface area of the creatures against us just keeps getting larger, giving us more space to push. Pretty soon the fire raining down on the ramp itself has dwindled to nothing and the mages are engaged in a constant back and forth right over our heads.

Things are looking good for the Colony but I can't help but worry. Where's Brixin and the other tier sevens? They have to be around here somewhere, but wherever they are they haven't deigned to reveal themselves yet...

All I can do is push forward until they are forced out into the open...

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 868: Assault on Orpule pt 10

When the tide turns, it turns quickly. Sarah has taken immense damage with her reckless fighting style but all that happens is she goes harder. With literally dozens of healers lined up behind her it doesn't seem as though she's going to have any trouble maintaining her HP either, no matter how much pain the demons try to rain down on her. Unable to stand up in front of her, unable to bring her down, the line eventually cracks as the enraged bear slashes and tears at everything she can reach. She really is a powerful creature, possibly the strongest that I've ever seen from the first stratum barring the big croc herself.

The moment there's a hole in the line, the ants start to pour through it, wrapping around the demons on either side with expert precision. Sarah of course, is rather oblivious to the trouble and simply rushes forwards, trying to catch the opponents who are now fleeing from her. With the battle on the verge of being won by the Colony there's little point holding back anymore and I reach out with my senses, trying to grasp hold of Brixin and her allies the moment they reveal themselves.

Which turns out to be now. From high above a dense sphere of mana forms, crushing in on itself until it glows bright in my minds like a star. Almost as soon as it appears it begins to drop, rocketing down towards the clustered ants on the edge of the plate.

Aha! So they wanted to annihilate us from above as we were cramped and vulnerable. If only we hadn't been able to anticipate such an obvious move!

"SHIELDS UP!" comes the call that rattles the antennae of every ant in the city.

Dozens of mages leap to the task of weaving barriers above whilst they simultaneously reach out to try and snuff the incoming ball of condensed mana. Each of my mind constructs is bent to the task, having dropped the domain the moment it wasn't needed, spinning shields and tearing chunks out of the spell

above us with frenetic energy. I can feel so many minds around me doing the same thing, including Invidia and Al, which leads me to feel confident that we'll be able to deflect this spell no problem.

Except, that doesn't appear to be the case...

Barrier after barrier gets thrown up and mana is stripped from the giant ball of flame at an accelerating pace as it descends toward us but I feel powerful minds still pumping the spell with mana, weaving vast amounts of fire mana every second. But how is that possible?! Are they literally up there riding the damn fireball down towards us? Because that would be metal as all heck.

No, don't think about that now! I can't allow my siblings to be roasted! We need victory here!

I'm already working as hard as I can, and so is everyone else, but I can already tell that we won't be able to dissipate the spell before it reaches us, not even close. Which means the barriers would need to hold, which I'm not sure that they will. If nothing is done, then a lot of my family members are going to get snuffed out right here. I can't allow that!

But what to do? There's little time until we're all bathed in this dark fire, perhaps ten seconds at best. Not enough time to whip together a gravity bomb, not enough time to try and climb up there and attack the demons responsible for the spell directly, perhaps Vibrant could..: no, she would need to run to the pillar, climb up it and then jump off. That's too much, even for her. I could reach out to Al, but the fiery eyeball is already throwing all he has into defence. Which is rather a lot, by the by, he's putting more shields in place than ten of me could..

That doesn't leave many options! My main mind spins as the flames grow larger in my vision. I can sense the demons now, riding down atop the fireball. I can even feel their gravitational fields, weak as they are. With the spell between us, I don't see how I can possibly get to them in time.

[Master!] a voice rings in my mind.

[Wha-? Crinis?]

[Run through!] she urges me and I spin in confusion for a brief moment.

Then I notice what the heck she's talking about. Right behind me my most horrific helper has poured all of her shadow mana into a black void on the ground as is currently trying to pull me towards it with her tentacles. There's a second where I wonder if she's trying to save my life by helping me escape, but I don't think so. Crinis has grown protective of the Colony over our time together, almost as much as me, so I doubt that she'd give up on all of the ants here.

Deciding to trust in my friend, I rush forward and throw myself into the darkness. For a disorienting moment I'm absorbed into a real of perfect shadow before being spat back out again.

Aaaaand I'm falling.

Where the heck did she send me?! What shadow did she use as an exit!? It takes a frantic second for me to get my bearings and when I realise where I am I can't help but unleash an evil chuckle.

Gweheheheh.

Crinis! You genius! With a giant fireball being formed by the tier sevens above it, where would a shadow be cast? Why, above them, of course! Right beneath me are three powerful demons, including Brixin, each of them focused downwards on the dread ball of doom they have created. It must have cost Crinis just about everything she had in her to create a portal of this kind of distance, including almost every drop of mana inside her core. I have an idea what her limits are and moving something like me this far is something I had assumed was far beyond her. Transporting her own shadow limbs about the place using her shadow magic is one thing, a humungous ant is quite another.

I can't let this opportunity go to waste! With only a few seconds left before the spell hits the ground, I need to do everything I can to stop them from reinforcing as soon as possible! But what kind of mischief can I get up to in just a few seconds?

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 869: Assault On Orpule pt 11

All of the power in this world flows from the Dungeon. Cores are its greatest wealth, experience is its greatest power. For this reason one might think that the bulk of the population would dwell within the Dungeon itself, pursuing all that Pangera has to offer to its people, but this is far from the truth. In reality, the majority of the citizens of this world live on the surface, leading much more mundane lives under the sky, farming, fighting the weak monsters found there, trading and travelling. Why is this the case?

Numerous factors come to bear and it can be difficult to determine which are the most impactful. The Dungeon is certainly more dangerous to live in than the surface, of that there can be no question and seeking out even more extreme risks in order to elevate oneself to the peak of humanity is a powerful lure to some, not so much for others. Many are disposed against violence in the first place, content to create instead. Without such individuals, society could not push itself forward.

There are other considerations also. For over a thousand years the Dungeon has been plumbed by the surface empires and the citizenry have been encouraged to explore its depths, but for many, life within the Dungeon is simply too alien, too strange, for most who are born on the surface. No sky, no space, the constant risk of attack and the ever present threat of a wave, these factors combine to put a great deal of stress on any individual who lives within the Dungeon.

But perhaps often overlooked is the issue of mana saturation. It isn't known why some individuals are more receptive to mana than others, but it is a recognised phenomenon. Some people are simply better suited to absorbing this form of energy than others, which means they have an enormous advantage when it comes to securing a life for themselves below the ground.

An entirely different case are those who are born in the Dungeon. With their own set of advantages and disadvantages that will be discussed in a further lecture.

- *Excerpt from "Introduction to adaptation and societal groupings: above and below." A lecture series from Magnifico the Wise.*

Falling down hundreds of metres with a group of tier seven demons and their giant dark-tinted fireball of doom wasn't exactly part of my plan for the day, but here we are and I need to make the best of it,

and fast! Without enough time to think, I react instinctively and implement my first impulse, which is to reach the demons in any way that I can!

Gravity mana floods my mandibles and I reach out towards the three demons, taking hold of each of them with an almighty YOINK!

The strain on my mana is evident. Even if these three aren't exactly packing heat in the mass department, they aren't slouches, but for whatever reason, likely the fact their attention is so heavily focused elsewhere, they seem unable to resist the energy taking hold of them and reversing the direction of their fall.

The three mighty tier seven demons suddenly stop falling, pause for a moment, and then reverse direction, lifting through the air towards me. Considering the shock of it, they react with incredible decisiveness, turning to lash out at whoever had dared to attach this foreign mana to them. Before I can so much as introduce myself I'm lashed by a series of spells that burn and damage my carapace. Thankfully the powerful demons didn't have much time to put a lot of juice into this effort or I might have been obliterated on the spot. Instead I merely endure a solid roasting before I cut the connection between us and defend myself, allowing them to begin falling again, except this time they are above me, and way too far from their explosive magic to keep assisting it.

As I freefall through the air I can already feel the spell diminishing in size as the Colony rips into it without the demons able to compensate for the loss. Now I have another issue, namely that I'm currently above this veritable bomb as it falls and I'll be caught completely in the blast if I don't do something!

Dammit! I knew I'd regret not getting wings at some point and here it is! Seriously! Who wouldn't want to be able to fly, Anthony you moron! Alright then... what can I do. Think, think, think, thinkthinkthinkthinkthinkthinkthink!

With precious seconds left before I splatter against the shields of my own allies before then getting roasted alive I do what I can with the resources I have available. Working at the speed of thought my brains whip up all the force mana that I can muster which I immediately spin into a series of condensed bolts. All I can think of is trying to move my position and the only way I can think to do that in mid-air is by using the kinetic energy generated by force magic!

Manipulating the spells outside my body is difficult and takes precious time but I gather the six bolts I've been able to create on my left side and let 'em rip at the same moment. My force magic still isn't that strong, but since I'm free falling without any means to brace myself the magic knocks me to the right as all of the spells slam into my carapace at the same moment. Thrown violently off course, I tumble to the side moments before an enormously dense surge of energy registers on my antennae followed by a blinding flash of light.

KRAKOOOM!

Holy moly! That was lightning magic! Above me I see the enraged and twisted face of Brixin as her spell goes wide due to my last second manoeuvre. Yikes! I'd almost forgotten about them. I was so worried about falling. Speaking of which, I'm still falling! I seriously hope that terminal velocity is not a literal term.

My diversion is enough to send me sailing to the side of the many layered barrier the Colony has erected as well as the impact zone of the doom fire the demons created, but not by a whole lot. I likely won't be able to escape the fallout of the fireball unscathed, but at least I'm not going to be dropping flat into the middle of it. As the ground rushes towards me I once again think that being able to close your eyes isn't such a bad thing sometimes. Brace for impact!

I extend my legs out in the hopes of sacrificing them to absorb some of the impact and spare my insides from the pain that's coming but at the last second a forest of tentacles explodes upwards, extending towards me.

Crinis!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 870: Assault on Orpule pt 12

Thank goodness for amorphous blobs of terror! The tentacles twist through the air beneath me, creating a dense noodle stack that I plunge into like a boulder that fell off a cliff. Everything melds into a blur as I plummet the last fifty metres and then -

BANG!

Oof! In an organ rattling collision I smack into the hard stone of the plate with nothing but the tentacles of Crinis to cushion my fall. Predictably, my legs fold like a house of cards before my carapace is rocked by the impact and my head starts spinning. Yikes. Not a fan of that.

[Thanks Crinis! You're a life saver...]

[I almost didn't make it in time!]

[But you did. That's all that matters.]

I trigger my healing gland and sigh in relief as the cooling fluid rushes throughout my body, mending everything that was damaged in the fall and beginning the process of once again restoring my legs to full usefulness. Luckily they haven't been ripped off this time, merely shattered in several places, so I should be good to go before too much time has passed.

BOOM!

I must have been falling slightly faster than the spell since at this moment a cataclysmic detonation resounds from the side. My antennae scream of danger and I use my mandibles to sweep as much of Crinis behind me as I can whilst my brains throw out the fastest barriers that I can. They're flimsy as heck but the best I can do on such short notice and certainly better than nothing. Thank goodness I already triggered my healing gland.

The heat is immense as the fireball unleashes its remaining payload of doom but there is more at play than pure fire magic. The spell was always miscoloured, flecked with darkness where one would expect fire mana to be bright and I can feel the difference now as the flames seem to eat into my carapace even as it burns me. This must be a combination of ash and fire magic, putting the two most prominent elements of this stratum together into one horrific concentration of death!

How nasty.

My HP drops steadily as the fire rages and I find myself fighting on two fronts, trying to utilise my magic to hold off the worst effects of the spell, eating into the mana and countering with renewed barriers once my old ones are shattered whilst at the same time I fight against Crinis as she tries to wrap her limbs around to protect me.

[Dammit Crinis! You're weak to mana like this, you'll just melt in an instant! Stay put!]

[I can help protect you, let me go!]

[Absolutely not! Just sit still will you?!]

[Never!]

[I'm ordering you!]

In the face of a direct command there's nothing that Crinis can do, though even then I see her limbs shivering as she tries with all her being to force herself to disobey my instruction. My heart clenches in my chest in the face of her devotion and I draw her ever closer to shield her from damage.

[You just saved me, now it's my turn to save you,] I tell her firmly but she does not yield in her attempts.

By the time the detonation has finished, the area around me is a smouldering ruin and I am in a not insignificant amount of pain. Checking my HP bar, that I was too scared to look at prior to this point, I see that after everything I just endured I've been chunked down to just under half of my pool. Considering I had regeneration fluid making its way throughout my body throughout the explosion it's a shocking amount of damage to remain. The carapace on my back has almost entirely been eaten away and what's more, it is very slow to regenerate.

Perhaps a lingering effect of ash mana? I don't know enough about the stuff to say for sure, but I have a sneaking suspicion that my hunch is correct.

I know that I'm alright, but what about the Colony?! Taking in the sights as my eyes gradually lose the glare I can see that my siblings have not escaped unscathed from the blast. Closer to the centre of the gathered ants they were safer, having the full benefit of the shields that were woven overhead, but towards the outer edge of that circle things look much more grim.

Already the healers are picking their way over the wounded, administering desperately needed first aid. Every ant who can be saved, will be saved, of that I have no doubt. But the fires of vengeance have been lit in me now. No chance I let them get away unscathed for this!

My sentiment is also echoed by the Colony who bristle with outrage and determination. The ant tide will not be denied! CANNOT be denied!

My mind constructs spin furiously, bringing yet another mana type to the fore, namely healing magic, to try and get me back on my feet again. Far above our heads, the magic oriented tier seven demons that Brixin reserved to defend her seat of power float, looking down on the remnants of their failed strategy. Doubtless they had hoped to triumph here in one fell swoop, but it wasn't to be!

I'm not sure what their next play will be, but I have the utmost confidence that we shall sweep that aside also.

"Come down here!" I roar using my pheromones and wagging my broken legs at them. "I'll bite your ankles off!"

In the distance I can still hear Sarah's endless bellow. She must still be tearing through Orpule on a rage-drunk rampage, followed by a squad of ants who are going to try their level best to keep her from wrecking the entire place. I feel sorry for any demon that gets in her way at this point, once she gets wound up she is absurdly hard to stop.

Speaking of squads following me around.

"Protectant? You lot still alive?"

A short pause.

"Yes. Please don't jump into shadow portals that we can't follow you through in future," comes a clipped reply from thin air.

Well that's a relief, I was worried that they'd gotten themselves baked in the blast.

"Alright then, it's time to bring these demons down and show them what's what. Can someone go and get Tiny for me? I'm going to need him for this."

...

"Are you talking to us?" Protectant asks, again not revealing herself.

"Of course! Who else is here to smell these pheromones?"

"Right..."

I turn my mind to Crinis and connect with her.

[How's things Crinis? Did you pull through alright?]

She was badly singed on the extremities and I don't doubt she lost a lot of her flesh in the blast, especially before I ordered her to pull back.

[You should have let me protect you,] she mumbles in my mind.

I shake my head.

[No chance. You aren't allowed to die before me, that's an order.]

She falls silent, a helpless pile of unshapen shadow goo on the ground beside me. I feel a little bad about ordering her like that, I hate restricting them, but I feel this one with all of my heart. None of them are allowed to die before me.