

Chrysalis 961

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Chapter 961: Bug Zapper

Is the Colony evil? The monstrous ant foe poses a conundrum, as far as enemies go. It's very easy to paint such alien creatures as 'other', distinct from the sapient people of Pangera, and therefore remove sympathy. The ants do not speak, in the conventional sense; they don't even make sound. When describing them to someone with no direct experience of them or their society, depicting them as mindless, soulless and evil, is almost trivially easy.

Unspeakable, unthinking killing machines. Tunnelling through the soil to strike where they are least expected. They have no mercy in them, no kindness. All they know is hunger, all they think of is war.

And such a viewpoint will be swallowed hook line and sinker by the average citizen on the street. After all, what do they know of the Colony? Nothing at all. It isn't as if an ant is going to pop up in the street and prove me wrong. Although their diplomatic efforts have spread further than any might reasonably expect, the common person knows not of these things and has never come into contact with a sapient ant monster.

For those of us with more information, with more academic rigour, we cannot state that they are evil. Their motives may be difficult for us to comprehend, and their actions may not always make sense to us, and therefore seem barbaric and unnecessary, but theirs is a rich and layered society that, while unified far more than our own nations, is not a monolith. They have their own disagreements, negotiations, and strange manner of decision making. They have culture, art, craftsmanship and all the other trappings of intelligent civilisation.

Perhaps what they do could be considered evil, but the Colony itself is far too complex an entity for such simple labels.

Well, well, well. The ol' lizards have decided to try and set a trap for little old me. Unfortunately for them, I've never seen a trap I didn't want to stick my head in!

Wait...

Anyway, I'm going for it. I won't be dissuaded! Not that the Colony makes any effort to stop me. When I tell the local generals what I intend to do, they just nod as if that's what they expected all along. In fact, when I sally forth with Crinis, Invidia and Tiny in tow, we find an army of ten thousand ants has already been deployed, waiting in neat ranks for me to leave so they can tag along as I go to confront the wizard lizards.

"Uh, you lot are all heading out to the border?" I ask them, a little surprised to see them.

"Yes, of course. We expected you would go and want to make sure that things don't escalate out of hand."

"You really think the Ka'armodo would try and pull something?"

There's a pause as the general in charge looks at me steadily.

"... yes. We were concerned the... Ka'armodo would start something."

That tone doesn't seem down the line to me...

"You... aren't implying that I'd be the one to start something... are you?"

"Nooooo," the ant drags it out for far too long.

"Fine," I huff. "Be like that."

The way they're acting you'd think that I'm gunning to start a conflict with our new neighbours. I've been so patient with them that it practically hurts! After everything that they've done, don't we deserve the chance to kick their scales in?

The answer is obviously yes! However, it can also be true that the Colony doesn't necessarily need open warfare with an ancient race of powerful mages and their bonded servant race. Let's not be silly, we were lucky to get away with ticking off the gulgari, I don't think we'll get lucky a second time. If we give the Ka'armodo a reason to mobilise their real strength, they would probably smash us. We need more time. Time for more ants to be born and trained in the academies, time for the ants in the third to amass experience and Biomass, evolve to tier six.

With enough time, we will be capable of withstanding any assault. The order of the day is to delay. Which is likely why the Colony are making a show of strength alongside me. The best answer to a belligerent neighbour is a show of strength. Let them know you aren't to be messed with.

So I can understand where the Colony was coming from, even if I was secretly hoping to get something started...

Wait! Don't even admit that to yourself! Dammit!

Ten thousand strong, we march through the blasted wasteland of the third stratum, the larval demons cavorting around our legs as we pass. When we finally reach the border, the lizards have beaten us there and through my connection to the hundreds of scouts pouring all over the area I can tell that the hundred lizards in front of us are only a portion of what they've brought to the dance. Trying to hide from the Colony. Foolish!

When I get there, one of the older lizards is standing at the head of their group, so I politely march over with my squad in tow and reach out to make contact.

[Hey there, chief! Nice day to be out for a stroll. Kind of makes me want to find a hot rock and just snooze. Know what I mean?]

The Ka'armodo eyes me through narrowed eyes.

[Yes. It is a pleasant day. The heat is dry, yet the ash is a constant irritation.]

[Couldn't your servants put up a barrier to keep the ash out?]

[I would not drain the Setsulah for such a frivolous reason. Our bond is a sacred trust.]

[Then enchant something. I can't be the first person to think of this...]

[You are not. Why are we discussing sleeping conditions? I am confused.]

I can tell that the last isn't just directed to me and one of the servants steps forward.

[I believe the insect is mocking you, Master.]

[What?] the centuries old giant lizard turns its glare on me.

[What? Hey! That's an unfair characterisation. I was trying to make conversation about a topic that you would find interesting to build common ground between us. Something we're both interested in. Ants also like warmer climates, keeps us moving, keeps us energised. The brood also need to be kept at a warm temperature. Much like an egg. See? We have a lot in common. Like termites, for example.]

The great lizard continues to stare and I lean in closer.

[You wouldn't happen to know anything about termites running rampant in the fourth stratum now... would you?]

The Ka'armodo continues to glare at me, along with its servants and those of another hundred lizards.

[I wouldn't,] he grates and all of a sudden the air has gotten quite tense.

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Chapter 962: Rubbed the Scales the Wrong Way

The two sides stare each other down, the tension thick in the air. Outside of myself and the elder Ka'armodo, along with his attendants, nobody is listening in on our conversation, but apparently the body language is enough to put everyone on edge. In front of me stand a hundred giant lizards and five times that many Setsulah. If that was all, perhaps it wouldn't be so bad, but I know for a fact that twice that number are lurking in the area, laying low, ready to jump in case things go south.

Behind me stands an army of ten thousand ants, lined up in neat ranks, prepared to attack at a moment's notice. I don't doubt that more are mobilising in the area around us, but the Colony is spread across the stratum at the moment, making it difficult to pull massive numbers together. Given a few more hours, I'm sure we could pull ten times this number together, but we don't have the luxury.

You'd think our odds would be good with these sorts of numbers, but in all honesty, the balance of power is even. The only thing that tilts it in our favour is the presence of myself and the squad. With four powerful, tier six monsters hanging about, we have the advantage, and I think they know it. With the ant army backing us up, they don't have the ability to quickly annihilate us, the amount of shields that will appear the moment they get aggressive is absurd, so when the fight drags out we'll explode into their ranks.

So what we have here is a good ol' Mexican standoff.

The only thing I'm not sure of is whether the lizards want to rumble or not. The Colony doesn't, for the most part, but the lizards? Nobody's sure.

[Are you sure you haven't heard of the termites? Mr Ka'armodo? Causing all sorts of havoc down in the fourth stratum. Thousands of them, hundreds of thousands, hell maybe even millions. They've been attacking the Mother Tree, pushing her to the brink. She might be forced to call on her allies, maybe bring the Folk in. If that happens... who knows what'll go down.]

The giant lizard sets his jaw as he folds his arms across his chest.

They look weird, these older Ka'armodo. Their bodies are slightly elongated, the front raised up to something approximating a human chest with two arms. The rest of them is still the same, an elongated body, possibly eight metres from tip to tail, supported on four thick, sturdy legs tipped with barbed claws.

Each one of these guys is basically a monster in terms of their physical attributes. Combined with their powerful minds, it makes a hell of a combination.

[I have already told you, we don't know anything about these termites of which you speak. The Mother Tree is no friend of ours and her suffering brings me joy. She is nothing but a monster, and monsters should be destroyed, for the safety of all.]

That's a little direct. I'm fairly sure that when he was talking about monsters, he wasn't just referring to the tree.

[That's an interesting world view. I'm sure the Legion would be delighted to help you out. Why don't you call them out? Get them down here so we can all tango together.]

A long, slightly awkward silence drags out.

[You can't call them? That's weird, this is exactly their sort of thing. They'd love to be a part of some monster culling like this. Get their hands on the Mother Tree? They'd love it. Or perhaps, they don't have your back anymore, on account of some... shall we say 'toe over the line' activity. The tree hears things, you know? She's got her vines creeping all over the place.]

The Ka'armodo looks decidedly unimpressed.

[You think we need the help of the Legion to crush you? You overestimate yourself profoundly.]

[Is that so? Then why don't you step up and swing?]

A pause. Two armies, poised on a hair trigger, watch the two us. The lizard hesitates.

[... swing what? My tail?]

[No, I mean... like... throw your hands.]

[... how do I throw them? By the sands, speak some sense you absurd insect!]

[Dammit! I mean, attack! Make the first move! If you think you outmatch us so heavily, then attack us and see what happens. *That's* what I mean.]

[Ah. I see your meaning. These idioms do not hold any meaning for us. I am surprised that they do for you. You don't have hands.]

[That's fair. I should stop using them.]

[Indeed. This causes confusion.]

[Right... so... you want to fight?]

[Oh, no. We will return. For now.]

Before my disbelieving, and frankly, disappointed eyes, the Ka'armodo force, which had been posing so aggressively just moments before, turn tail and begin to retreat. I'm so shocked by the turn of events that I reach out to my opponent almost without thinking.

[Wait! You're just going to *leave*? Why the heck did you come out here in the first place?]

What's the point of mobilising all of these forces just to pose and drag us out of our nests? Isn't that a colossal waste of time?! Damn Lizards!

[Hopefully I will not see you again, insect,] he replies as he walks away, carelessly exposing his back to us, supreme in his confidence we won't launch the first strike.

The ant army behind me watches in silence as our opponents retreat, our scouts no doubt tailing them from the shadows to make sure they return to where they came from. As I watch them leave, the general who I spoke to before we left approaches from behind and I turn to her, exasperated.

"What the heck was that all about? Are they just trying to waste our time?"

The general doesn't seem nearly as irritated as I am, viewing the slowly emptying plains with calm eyes.

"This has convinced me that they are intending to invade us," she replies. "I will need to report this immediately to the council."

"Hang on, what?! They didn't even want to fight..."

"They are probing us. Measuring our reactions, holding themselves back and testing how much they can push. Eventually they will reach a point where they believe they know what we are capable of. At that time, they are likely to attack. We will need to be ready."

"Oh, we'll be ready," I huff.

But I'm nervous. If the lizards are actively looking for a war, that's *another* fight we have to deal with. There are tier eight demons going nuts just beneath us! How are we supposed to fight so many opponents at once?

"I don't have long left up here," I grumble to the general. "Let me know what you need done and I'll get to it."

Too many things are piling up, I think it's high time I took care of business. When I get back down below, I'm going to mutate, upgrade my skills and then tear into some termites. If I can wipe them out and get myself to level one hundred and sixty at the same time then I'll be in a prime position to take care of business.

Don't mess with the Colony!

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Chapter 963: Droppin' Plops

"I'm really not sure about this," Isaac muttered under his breath.

[That makes two of us...] his new partner replied.

"I really didn't think they would go for this as enthusiastically as they did."

[It's how we are. If there's an advantage in it, we're more than happy to explore it. Even if it does prove to be... unconventional.]

Isaac felt the massive ant shift beneath him and tried to adjust his position to roll with the movement. The saddle they'd created wasn't *quite* the right shape, the craft ants having never made anything of this sort before, and it chafed him ever so slightly in an area he would prefer didn't see any chafing.

"I just never imagined that I'd ever be riding on the back of one of you. I mean, I didn't expect that I'd be fighting alongside any monstrous ants, but I got used to that well enough, but to be riding on one? Feels kind of weird. You aren't horses."

[What's a horse?]

"Have you seen a cow?"

[I have, in the farms around Renewal.]

"Right, so think of a cow that's prettier and faster."

[... I do not like this comparison.]

"That's what I mean!"

The once former guard captain heaved a sigh and once again fruitlessly tried to protect his most vulnerable zones from the pommel that rose too sharply between his legs. If it was made of cured leather, that'd be one thing, but that damned armour ant had decided to cover the thing in folded steel. To say he was sweating would be an understatement.

[I believe we are ready for the test. We will count you in starting in one minute's time. Prepare yourself, Isaac, Cavalant.]

"Right then, here we go."

[Make sure you don't fall off this time.]

"You are at least half responsible for that."

[That is somewhat true.]

Isaac grit his teeth and hefted his lance once more. He surveyed the course ahead again, a dizzying trail of loops and whorls that took them between pillars of rock, up the walls, across the roof and back down again. If he just had to hold on, that would be one thing, but the series of targets he was supposed to hit with the lance added another layer altogether.

In truth, it wasn't even a lance, not really, but rather an elongated spear with a slightly heavier head on it. He hadn't bothered to correct the ants about it; after all, what the hell did he know about wielding a lance? On the surface it was a noble's weapon and down below no idiot would be fighting on horseback.

The very idea of mounted combat in the Dungeon seemed absurd. But if you were going to ride on something, an all terrain insect wouldn't be the worst choice.

[Focus this time,] chided Cavalant and Isaac rolled his eyes.

The most difficult aspect of his new class was definitely the new mental link he shared with his nominated partner. [Lancer's Bond] was the name of the skill, and even at rank one it provided significant bonuses. Not only were his thoughts connected to the ant he rode, to the point he didn't need to speak aloud if he didn't want to, but to an extent their senses were shared as well. Combined with a quite respectable combat buff, the Class might prove to be a powerful asset, if they could get their teamwork down.

He did his best to concentrate, his thoughts slowly starting to align with those of Cavalant as she settled beneath him, flexing her six legs as she lowered her centre of gravity. When the countdown finished, she would explode from the starting line and Isaac didn't intend to be left behind this time.

[GO!] came the call from the mage and as predicted, Cavalant launched herself forward, all six legs firing in a rapid series of dashes.

The manoeuvre pushed them from a standstill to almost top speed in a matter of seconds and this time he was sufficiently braced to hold on. Gripping with his legs, Isaac desperately clung to his partner's back, straining to hold his lance steady as they raced between jagged pillars of stone.

[We're going up,] Cavalant warned him.

"How could I forget," he growled.

There was a moment of existential terror as they raced directly for the tunnel wall. The image of himself splattered across the rock flashed into his mind, then, with a mind bending twist of perception, Cavalant placed one leg on the wall, then the next, and suddenly they were rushing *up*.

He had no reins to hold onto, they weren't necessary in this particular rider and mount relationship, but he did have a strap to grip to avoid falling to his death. A handy feature which he now took full advantage of.

"Bloody, plops," he swore as he struggled to keep his balance.

The ant beneath him radiated glee as she raced across the wall, zigging and zagging madly along the trail. For his part, Isaac held fast to his lance and aimed it as best he could, every day of his life spent wielding the spear being channelled into his arm.

Crack. Crack. Crack.

Three targets shattered beneath the point of his spear and then, with one nauseating dash, Cavalant was up the wall and onto the roof.

[Grip!] she reprimanded him and Isaac hurried to tighten his legs, desperate to avoid falling.

"I think I'm going to be sick."

[Don't you dare!]

Crack. Crack. Crack!

Three more targets fell as Isaac unerringly pierced them, his arm burning from the strain but still holding firm. Just when he thought he might slip, they zoomed across to the wall and then back down onto the tunnel floor. Isaac gulped down a few steadying breaths, preventing the loss of lunch that had threatened to get out of hand.

[We did it!]

He couldn't tell if Cavalant was more pleased or surprised at their success. When they returned to the observers, he could tell that they too were impressed and a little shocked by what they'd seen.

Which was odd in and of itself. He hadn't been able to tell the emotions of the ants just by looking at them before. Perhaps this was Cavalant's perspective bleeding across the bond?

[At least now we won't have to do that again,] Cavalant sounded happy at the prospect.

"Is it really that annoying having to cart me around?" Isaac asked.

[Not really, I'd just rather be fighting than running tests.]

"That makes two of us."

He'd never reach the person he longed for if he wasn't advancing. He had to be patient, this was a step in the process.

[That was very impressive,] the mage who'd been watching them commented. [It seems this new Class will have direct combat applications. The generals can see a great deal of potential.]

[Well that's excellent,] Isaac replied with his thoughts. [I'm looking forward to getting back out there and seeing what we can do in a real fight.]

[A real fight?] the mage asked. [Oh no, we have long days of testing ahead of us before the two of you will be risked in real combat. We've only just begun collecting data!]

"Plops," Isaac cursed.

[Plops,] Cavalant swore.

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Chapter 964: Sweet Relief

When the light of the portal fades to nothing and I find myself standing atop the roots of the Mother Tree I practically sag with relief. The pain! It's... not gone! It's mostly gone, faded into the background to the point where I can tolerate it much more easily. And thank goodness for that. I was seriously hitting my limit up there in the third, it was absolute agony. Having that unrelenting pull on the core of my being... no rest? No pauses? Wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. Except Jim, that foul worm can get Called twice for all I care.

Freed from the worst of it, I take a long moment to bask in the open air of the fourth. Wide open spaces, the gigantic tree overhead, the air brimming with life mana, the fourth really is a paradise by Dungeon terms. In the distance I can see the glittering waters of the vast lakes that lie between the mountains

that rise and rise until their peaks are obscured amongst the mist and clouds above. Floating islands the size of cities drift impossibly through the air, raining down water that dissolves into fine rain before it reaches the ground. Just lovely. Filled with impossible monsters of death, but still... good to look at.

One particular type of monster is occupying me right now and that's the termites.

It's time to put an end to it. Initially I wanted more time. I wanted to hold defensively until the Colony had consolidated itself, until our numbers had grown and we'd gained a more permanent foothold in the third stratum. With demon allies, with new resources and with hundreds of thousands of reinforcements, rolling over the termite menace would have been as easy as clacking my mandibles together. Alas, it hasn't worked out that way. Too many enemies loom on the horizon and a protracted fight down here is only weakening us, preventing us from properly dealing with other issues.

Issues like the Ka'armodo getting more aggressive on our borders. Or like tier eight demons causing a ruckus beneath our cities for whatever reason.

The time to mess around with these insect impostors is over! We need to get aggressive, smash their nest and annihilate their queens. Until that inferior, slave Colony has been wiped from the Dungeon, I shall not rest!

To that end, we need to arm ourselves for the final push. That means upgrading my Skills and pushing my mutations to their limits. Once I've mustered all the strength that I can, it'll be time to fight.

Obviously I push my companions to do the same. With all of us approaching the pinnacle of tier six, the amount of power we can bring to bear is nothing to sneeze at. If all goes well, we might earn enough experience through this assault to get us to the precipice of tier seven! Despite the many problems it will cause, the increased dependence on mana to sustain myself, the likelihood of suffering even further from the Call, I'm still excited to evolve. I can remember what it was like for me to go from a hatchling to a mature ant. That sudden leap in strength that allowed me to overcome challenges that had seemed insurmountable before. Ah, how I feasted on centipede tears back in those days. Good times.

Regardless, the time has come! Gimme that menu!

Usually I do the skills first, but this time I'm going to dive into the mutations before anything else. I've been fighting and eating termites for ages, so I have a ton of Biomass to spend. Let's get to it!

First off, I should see what I still have to upgrade from 25 to 30. I mean, basically the entire acid production line back in the business district is in that category, and nothing else. Aside from that, I have to take my sub-brains up from +15 to +30. After that...

Wait, that's it?

That's it! Oh ho! I'm extremely close to completing my perfect +30 across the board form. Magnificent! After that I just need to get my core to where it needs to be and I'll be good to go!

Let me see... to fully max out my mutations, I need...

Six hundred and sixty Biomass, just for the +25 to +30. Then I need another... three hundred and sixty per brain, and I have three of those, so that means another one thousand and eighty. So one thousand seven hundred and forty Biomass in total?

Sweet bearded saviour! That is a hell of a lot of Biomass! Do I even have that much?

No...

But I'm so damn close! I have one thousand five hundred and forty three... So frustrating...

I'll upgrade the brains all the way, and then save up the last little bit I need for the complete acid upgrade. A couple of battles and I'll have all the termites I need to get the food required. Then I can upgrade the commercial empire all in one go.

As far as the brains go, the mutation required is hardly worth thinking about. The sub-brains are fully dedicated mind mana engines of refined excellence! The more mind constructs they can handle, the better!

Punch it in!

Checking the menu, each of them will go from a Mind Mana Focused Sub-Brain +15, to a Mind Mana Mastery Sub-Brain +30.

That sounds impressive! With more mind constructs I can handle even more spells, or cast multiples of the bigger more destructive versions. Heck, I may even be able to run a Gravity Domain almost constantly, until my mana runs out of course. Perhaps even a compressed one! Or I can just chuck the handling of my body and spells to the sub-brains and let the main mind focus on crafting a bomb when the need arises. I'm excited for the possibilities!

Alright then. Time to let it rip!

Confirm that upgrade, Gandalf!

CHARANAZINAP! MY FREAKIN' BRAIN(S)!

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Chapter 965: Upskill the Side hustle

Gawd. Mutating is such an itch in the thorax. Once more, only once more and I'll be done for my current evolution. Though that means I'm drawing ever nearer to the next tier, and who can say how many mutations I'll have to go through in that one? If I reset my carapace, I'll have to go through all of those again, and I have to say they were some of the worst. My entire body, more or less, is covered by the exo-skeleton, and when it changes size or shape, the sensation is truly maddening.

The equivalent for a human would be their skin changing in size or composition over the course of a few minutes.

Horrific. But that's for future Anthony to worry about. Current Anthony isn't going to waste another moment thinking about it, not even in a sub-brain.

I mean, why would I? I've got mad SKILLS to be thinking about. I've been grinding my magic hard, as always. Having multiple brains is a wonderful hack in this regard. No matter how busy I get, I can always have a couple of constructs whipping up a spell and flinging it at a nearby target, or straight up into the air, whenever it's done. This has resulted in some rather delicious gains in key skills.

The final goal is always kept in sight! Gravity Mana Specialisation!

I'm probably not there yet, but when I get through enough ranks of new mana types it'll surely open up.

All right, time to take a look at what I'm working with.

Awww snap. Finally, I've achieved the long sought after upgrade to my biting skill! I've been operating on Doom Chomp, or **Doom Chomp**, as I've come to think of it, for such a long time. Doesn't have the same heft without that special emphasis within my mind.

Ah yes, it feels like yesterday when I first experienced the true joy of having the energy of my body, or stamina, manifest itself as jaws of pure light that slam shut in front of me. A special moment in my history, of that there's no doubt. Then, the fusion of all of my bite skills gave me the ultimate chomp, that eventually became the pinnacle which came to be feared across the Dungeon.

What could the upgrade be?

[Doom Chomp (V) -> Void Chomp (VI) - A devastating chomp that rips into the material of existence itself.]

That's it? I mean, that's awesome, but that's short. I can't freakin' wait to take this for a test run. This is a big ticket item! A rank six skill! We are freaking flying, baby! One skill point down, let's keep the party rolling! Whoo!

Sometimes you just have to punch it with a whoo.

As I browse through the impressive list of skills that I've acquired over the journey, I can see a couple of other nice jumps that I've reached.

Expert Grip is jumping up to Master Grip, which is nice. I need all the help I can get when I'm this heavy...

Dash has reached rank five! I'm super happy about that one. Flash Dash (V). Sounds impressive! If a bit wordy...

Mana Masking can promote up to rank four, another win for the stealth approach.

Mana Sensing is promoting up to rank five. Definitely going to be helpful.

Oho! Mana Craft is punching up to rank six! Nice one! That's going to be a big deal. That skill is literally the lynchpin of all magic in this world, governing the ease and grace with which one can grasp and shape mana. I can't wait to see how it feels!

Force Magic going up to rank four is nice, without being a big deal.

Exo-Skeleton Defence is jumping up a rank! Also a big deal. Dodge is up to Grandmaster, as is Endure. An all-round increase in my defensive manoeuvring, capacity to avoid attacks and absorb impacts. Winning all around!

Acid shot is up to rank five, as is precise shooting. I'm especially happy about the second, as it affects all aiming, which includes spells.

Oh! Charge and Mandible Spear have both hit the third rank and can be fused! I wonder what the new Skill is called?

Spear Charge?

... really? Isn't that just literally combining the key words of the two skills? Such laziness, Gandalf! That's beneath you.

Chomp Combo has reached rank three as well, which is going to be even more devastating with the Void Chomp. Actually... I could hardly sustain a **Doom Chomp** combo... the new Void Chomp... oof. It's going to be rough.

Still, this is an incredible wealth of progress! I'm excited!

Looking over all the skills that have progressed into the higher ranks, I'm satisfied with how far I've come. I know Granin likes to say that any skills lower than rank six are basically pure garbage, but I haven't been alive that long, I can't be expected to push myself ahead that far.

In fact, I can probably thank my life of near ceaseless, desperate combat for my rapid advance up the ranks. So hey, an endless series of life and death struggles is good for *something*, at least.

Punch it with a whoo? Probably not the time.

After looking over all of my skills, I confirm the purchases, knocking a decent total off my skill points, but not really threatening it overmuch. I've racked up a *hell* of a lot of skill points. I really need to see if there's anything new to buy. Probably not right now, though. I have a lot of new abilities to get used to, so I'm going to sit on what I have for the time being.

When I hit confirm, the warm drizzle of new knowledge creeps over my brain. Then it keeps on a creepin', then some more, until my mind is *literally* shivering under the deluge of new information.

I probably shouldn't have done all of this at once! A single rank six skill is packed with a lot of stuff, and I just dropped like four of them on myself!

I wouldn't say the sensation is unpleasant, like the mutation itch. It's more like how a single shiver running down your spine is basically fine, but a thousand at once is a rather intense experience.

I hold still on the spot, vibrating as the intense sensation fills my brain. It eventually fades, and I take a look at my complete status, basking in my own glory.

Name: Anthony

Level: 84 (Rare) (VI)

Might: 205

Toughness: 180

Cunning: 145

Will: 100

HP: 360/360

MP: 768/768

Skills:

General:

Grandmaster Excavation (V) Level 1; Master Grip (IV) Level 1; Expert Stealth (III) Level 18; Tunnel Compass (IV) Level 17; Iron Mind (V) Level 15; Master Stamina (IV) Level 22; Still Meditation (IV) Level 39; Flash Dash (V) Level 1;

Mana:

Advanced Mana Craft (VI) Level 1; Condensed Mana (V) Level 1; Grand Finer External Mana Manipulation (V) Level 1; Mana Hoarder (V) Level 1; Layered Mind Magic Affinity (V) Level 36; Extended Directed Mana Sensing (V) Level 1; Expert Healing Magic Affinity (IV) Level 3; Advanced Omni-Elemental Affinity (VI) Level 25; Advanced Mana Masking (IV) Level 1; Wood Magic Affinity (I) Level 1; Metal Magic Affinity (I) Level 1; Lightning Magic Affinity (I) Level 1; Advanced Force Magic Affinity (IV) Level 1; Advanced Barrier Magic Affinity (III) Level 12;

Pet:

Further Pet Communication (III) Level 20; Core Crafting (IV) Level 18; Pet Growth Speed (I) Level 5;

Defensive:

Divine Exo-Skeleton Defence (VI) Level 1; Grandmaster Dodge (V) Level 1; Grandmaster Endure (V) Level 1; Expert Grace (IV) Level 1; Master Mandible Parry (III) Level 1;

Offensive:

Guided Acid Shot (V) Level 1; Grandmaster Precise Shooting (V) Level 1; Void Chomp (VI) Level 1; Master Chomp Combo (III) Level 1; Spear Charge (III) Level 1;

Mutations:

Senses:

Focal Compound Eyes +30; Future Wave Sight Antennae + 30 (Twilight Filament);

Defence:

Thickened Complete Diamond Carapace +30; Fortified Healing Inner Carapace Plating +30;

Physical:

Fortified Absorption Legs + 25; Mana Drenched Mandibles +30; Hastened Potent Regeneration Gland + 30; Widespread Stinking Pheromone Gland + 30; Expanding Discerning Stomach +30; Coiling Hyper-Twitch Musculature +30; Distributed Instantaneous Sub-Neural Network +30;

Acid:

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

Mental:

Indomitable Coordination Cortex + 30; Crushing Gravity Well Main Brain +30; Mind Mana Mastery Sub-Brain +30; Mind Mana Mastery Sub-Brain +30; Mind Mana Mastery Sub-Brain +30;

Mana:

Forceful Unending Gravity Magic Gland +30; Might Infusing Collective Will Vestibule +30 (Soul Crystal); High Purifying Communal Spirit Nave +30;

Species: Colony Paragon

Skill points: 68

Biomass: 508

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 966: Colony Vs Colony pt 6

Having upgraded myself to peak condition, and with my friends and allies having done the same, it's time to descend below and inflict true despair upon the termite foe!

MUAHAHAHAAA!

With my newfound abilities and near-perfect mutations, the termites won't know what hit them. As we march down the extended root system of the Mother Tree, heading towards the village of Bruan'chii in which the Colony has established its forward headquarters, I get to playing.

My mind constructs are almost always in place. By mutating my sub-brains to specialise in mind mana, they are able to handle the constructs for extended periods without rest, despite running hot from the constant activity. When I'm around the Colony, the regenerative energy I get from the Vestibule is enough to soothe the mental fatigue as it happens, meaning I never have to shut my hive mind down.

It basically is a hive mind at this point. I've got over a dozen mind constructs operating right now, each one capable of independent action. With further mutation and another evolution, that may well push to over thirty, or even fifty! Hive mind indeed.

But with my new improvements, I'm especially eager to put them to work. As we walk I spin up each of the constructs and get them working on mana, different varieties, moulding and shaping, compressing, using the omni-elemental construct to create lava, and gas, and stone. I marvel at the ease of it, the relative freedom I have to direct it and shape it as I want.

Compared to how hard it was when I started, this is a joke! Improving my fundamental mana skills is a big deal at this point. I wonder what rank seven will be like? I need to keep pushing forward, grinding and training as much as possible throughout this conflict, to proceed as fast as I can! I should prioritise my force mana also, as it's the candidate I've chosen to work toward the next tier. I won't shift to another mana type until I've gotten to rank five at least!

Except that all of my most devastating and awesome spells are still elemental, so I'll have to rely heavily on that to do most of my damage.

The village is bursting with activity, as per usual. There's thousands of ants crawling over each other in their rush to complete their tasks, a constant flow coming and going as they return from the front or head out. It doesn't take long to find the general in charge; Victor is in the middle of the action, poring over a three dimensional model of the conflict, directing messengers and generals on the path to victory.

"Victor!" I greet her with a hearty slap on the back. "How's things? War going well?"

The much smaller ant rounds on me with a huff.

"Terrible! What did you think was going to happen when you went up top?"

"What? It can't be that bad... things were pretty much on lock down when I left."

"I suppose it's not that bad, but our position is deteriorating every day. The termites, or the Ka'armodo, I should say, are cunning. They've been pushing us non-stop whilst retaining their numbers as best they can. We haven't had time to rest and our defences are constantly being pressed. There must be millions of termites out there by now. The more time passes, the worse the numbers get for us."

"Any reinforcements coming from above?"

"We've been getting a steady flow, despite the fighting above. There's a hundred thousand troops down here at the moment. Enough to hold the line, but the situation is becoming fraught. If the termites mount an all-out assault on one side of the conflict, then we might not hold."

I take a closer look at the model as the endless buzz of activity that had surrounded the general a moment ago has stilled. In my presence, my siblings are polite enough to wait patiently until I'm done barging in and wasting all their time until they go back to their no doubt urgent business. Very nice of them! Such a supportive family, this really is a first for me.

The model that the generals have created is both large and highly detailed, as is their wont. The roots of the mother tree and the various gardens that she cultivates in the area are sculpted to perfection, along with every tunnel, wall and trap that we've created. Markers indicate sightings and the likely position of termite troops, and things are looking grim. We are basically defending half of a sphere as the enemy builds up beyond our walls. It looks like the tree has stepped in to help. At the very least, she's covering some of her roots herself, freeing Colony resources for other areas. Unless something happens soon, we'll be locked into a very drawn-out defensive war.

"Well, I want this conflict done with," I declare to the shock of all around me. "We've got too many things to deal with right now and we can't have the lizards dragging this out. I'm going to make some moves and try to kill as many termites as I can. Depending on how successful I am, you can take advantage of any gaps that appear and kick them where it hurts."

Victor absorbs this information, slowly tapping on her own carapace with a single antenna as she thinks.

"Aren't you worried that this is what they want?" she asks. "If you go out there, it's almost a guarantee that they are going to collapse on you. They've tried it before. Do you really think you can fight your way out of a million termites?"

"Fight my way out? Why would I want to do something like that? The real question is... will a million termites be enough to take me down?"

"I suppose we're going to find out."

"Yes we are."

All the ants around me stare intently as I make my declaration. I can tell what they're thinking, and to be honest, it's kind of heartwarming. Each and every one of them is thinking that they won't let me die. Not to worry, everyone. I won't be the one turning into Biomass.

By the end of the week, the termite queens will have fallen to my wrath! This is my declaration!

[Crisis, Tiny, Invidia. We'll go and find Sarah, then we'll head to the front. Time to get to it.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 967: Colony Vs Colony pt 7

Full of vim and vigour, we dash off to find Sarah toiling away helping to build walls. The great bear isn't much for digging, lacking the zen-like disposition that ants have towards it, or our powerful mandibles. You'd think hands would be great for shifting dirt, but nope, mandibles is where it's at. The two face-hands are excellent for both cutting into the unyielding rock, and gathering up loose soil into a clump.

[Hey Sarah!]

[Anthony? You're back already?]

[Yep! Ready to throw myself into unspeakable danger in the hopes of bringing a swifter conclusion to the war. You want in?]

The great bear looks at me and blinks a few times slowly.

[You want me to join you on one of your crazy suicide missions.]

[Why not? You make it sound like something a person *wouldn't* want to do.]

[Anthony, a normal person *absolutely* wouldn't want to do that.]

[Bah! Who cares about normal people? I don't see any of them around here. All I see are the greatest and most incredible ant that ever crawled and a gigantic, badass bear of doom. What do you say?]

She thinks about it for a long moment before she slowly nods.

[Okay,] she says, [I'll do it.]

[Wait, really?] I'm shocked. [I thought for sure you'd say no. I was only inviting you to be friendly.]

[You invite people on suicide missions, just to be friendly? Actually, it doesn't matter. I want to help. I want to end this war before it gets out of hand. Then, hopefully, we get some rest and the Colony can have peace.]

It's a great thought but I don't want to tell her that it's highly unlikely to happen. Even after the termites are dealt with, we still have a burgeoning conflict with the Ka'armodo, the worrying demon movements

to stress about and the industriousness of the Colony itself. Even without foes pushing back against us, the Colony will always keep growing outwards until it hits boundaries.

With our expansion in the third underway, it's only a matter of time until we get started on the fourth. As I understand it, free real estate is hard to come by down here.

With Sarah recruited, it's time.

We stride past layers of entrenched defences as we make our way towards the main tunnel connecting the Colony on the path toward the termite mound. I don't intend to pull any tricks, we are going straight into the heart of the enemy formation.

With a little luck, they'll come for us and we can hold out long enough for the Colony to take advantage and punch some deep holes in the encirclement.

Complicated plans aren't for me, I'll drive forward, make as much of a mess as I can, and count on much smarter minds to make something good out of it.

As we keep moving, the silent ant guardians watch us with their unblinking eyes, until we leave the last wall behind. My antennae wave constantly as I take the lead, feeling my way forward, looking for traps. The stink of termite is constant in this section of tunnel, their filthy trails clinging to the rock.

It's dead silent, and dark, but that isn't enough to hide from me.

The ebb and flow of mana has never been more clear to me than it is now. I can see the currents, the tiny shifts and ripples, better than I ever could before. There are literally hundreds of thousands of monsters swarming around these tunnels, and the effect they have on the mana flow is considerable.

More than that, so many chunky insects is like lighting a beacon to my antennae. The faint pulses of gravity that I feel send a tingling sensation running down the twilight filament. I can feel them, and they're close.

[Get ready gang, they're coming for us,] I warn the others.

Tiny's eyes blaze with inner fire as electricity begins to ripple across his fur. From the back of my carapace, Crinis begins to extend her tendrils, manifesting her body in increments. Invidia's eye blazes with green light and the air splits open, revealing his enormous cheshire grin.

In the distance, a light tik-tak sound can be heard echoing off the stone walls. Quickly, the sound builds, until the insistent clacking of claws is all around us.

My brains skip into overdrive, working mana furiously, preparing a variety of delights for the oncoming termite swarm.

The first termite rounds the corner in front us, and promptly has its face blasted in by a searing bolt of lightning. I look at Tiny, irritated, and he grins back, his entire body alight with crackling power.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 968: Colony vs Colony pt 8

What is given to us when a monster dies by our hand? Experience. This is the benediction of the System, this gift allows us to grow, to uplift ourselves. Every monster slain is a single brick in the Path that we tread to achieve our perfect self. Since the Divine Descent, when the System made itself known to us, this has been our manifest destiny.

Yet there are questions. How can we best apply ourselves as we walk together on this road? Is there a way that we may devote ourselves more ardently, pursue our purpose more completely?

The great Church of the Path has devoted itself to these questions for thousands of years, desperate to seek a more complete truth.

When a monster is slain, we gain experience for the deed, we grow from the gift of life that we have taken and lay claim to a portion of the experience within the beast. But what of the rest? The experience gained is but a tiny fraction of that possessed by the fallen foe. How can we allow this Holy Sacrament to be squandered in such a way? It's an unthinkable heresy, akin to scattering the Divine upon the ground like rubbish.

Due to the unceasing labour of the faithful, we have been able to ensure our strides are longer, our steps firmer, as we walk along the Path.

Let none of the harvest go to waste. What the Divine has sowed, we shall reap in full.

Excerpt from the 'Book of the Path'

Where one termite goes, many more are sure to follow and it doesn't take long to prove this maxim correct. After Tiny *egregiously* annihilated the first termite to show itself, another soon rounds the corner, followed by another, then another. The tick-tack clack of claws on stone continues to build as thousands of insectoid enemies converge on our location, their mandibles flexing with hunger for ant flesh.

I can feel them all, the micro-disturbances in the planet's gravitational field are all I need to feel out their locations and general numbers. There's a lot of them, but we didn't come to play around.

[No restrictions today,] I tell my crew, [everyone goes full force from the drop. If a lizard pops its stupid head out, you have my permission to lop it off.]

[Yessssssssssssss!]

[SMASH!]

[As you wish, Master.]

Like an ethereal engine of destruction, my mind constructs begin to churn hard, heating up my brains as a dozen strings of mana rise under my command. The mana flows and force mana falls into the waiting hands of waiting constructs that weave and fold the energy into spears of pure force.

Force mana is effectively the conversion of magic energy into kinetic energy, and I've been using it to punch my opponents about the place. A force bolt is effectively a little ball of condensed kinetic energy, and I've been piffing them all over the place like magical baseballs, but really, I should have been using spears from the start. Why punch someone, when you can stab?

The spears take shape six at a time and I fling them at the encroaching termites the moment they're ready. Just for good measure, I unload a steady stream of acid for good measure.

POW! POW! POW!

Potent acid that cannot compare to the piddling stuff I was born with launches through the air, sizzling harshly as it contacts the enemy. Take that, you damn termites! There's plenty more where that came from!

More and more of our insect enemies are making their way here, I can feel it through the gravitational gland as they swarm faster and faster. I can even feel them tunnelling towards us, hoping to take us by surprise. Fools! Well, I won't be surprised, but I'll still be surrounded. Another problem for near-future Anthony to deal with.

As the initial wave of foes closes on us, it's time for my comrades to launch into action. Literally sparking with joy, Tiny jumps into the fight, his fists flickering in and out of sight as he punches with such speed and force that my eyes can't track it. All I can see are bright flashes of light as his skill executes and produces devastating fists of pure energy that extend well beyond his reach and pulp everything they touch.

I think his boxing must have reached a new rank! Impressive stuff from the big ape!

Even more impressive are the arcing jets of lightning that he sends flying out whenever a clump of termites draws too close. The sizzling, searing bolts of electricity crackle with power and boom like thunder when they land, roasting the target monster and zapping those around it. Combined with his ever more fancy feet, Tiny unleashes a terrifying barrage upon the enemy that prevents them from drawing closer than ten metres.

Despite his impressive display, Tiny can't match up to Crinis when it comes to this type of fight. She's almost specifically designed to shred large numbers of weaker enemies, her innumerable limbs are able to entangle hundreds, if not thousands of enemies at a time. In this fight, she doesn't need to employ any fancy tricks. No shadow games, no wasted mana. Instead, she rises from my carapace, the amorphous blob swelling into its true form, the tri-mouthed terror from which springs an unending tide of tentacles.

Razor sharp barbs flash in the dim light of the tunnel as a thick wall of limbs extends outwards. The tentacles coil and twist around each other until a termite draws a little too close.

SLASH!

Like a whip of pure shadow, a dozen vine-thin limbs lash out and entangle the victim who can do naught but fruitlessly try to bite its way out. Those razor sharp mandibles, designed to shred through ant carapace, are easily able to cut through Crinis' shadow flesh, but it doesn't matter. When one limb is dismembered, it splits into five new ones, further entrapping the creature.

Moments later, the dreaded buzzing sound begins as her barbs begin their deadly work. A few dreadful seconds pass, and the termite is no more. The same scene is repeated a dozen times over every few seconds as more termites fall into her clutches. In truth, they are the lucky ones. Less fortunate are

those who experience the true terror of the Soul Seeker Cilia, the ghostly tentacles phasing directly into their minds.

Driven mad by fear, those termites lash out at those around them, sowing chaos amongst the enemy ranks.

Yet still the termites come, in their hundreds, thousands. They pour from the tunnels in a seemingly endless tide.

Which means Invidia doesn't even have to aim.

Chrysalis

Chapter 969: Colony vs Colony pt 9

Detonation after detonation rings out in the narrow tunnel as Invidia weaves his intricate tapestry of death. With my enhanced mana sight, I can see ever more clearly just how absurdly overpowered his mental gifts are. A hundred individual strands of mana writhe through the air at any given moment, pouring into the spells at a dizzying speed as the grinning demon produces magic at an absurd pace.

This is the power of specialisation! He even has time to be weaving shields in-between explosions whenever he thinks Tiny is going to get bitten. This is the real big-brain play. In fact, this is the mega-brain play.

Large clumps of termites are not spared from his attention. With overwhelming force of will, he drives his mana forward and unleashes enormous concussive blasts that rend the air with fire and smoke. Truly, a demon of the third stratum.

Even so, despite our overwhelming power, the termite foe is able to endure far more than they ought to be able to. With their toughened carapace and hardened bodies, the insectoid enemy have been redesigned since the arrival of the Colony. The Ka'armodo wasted little time adjusting the focus of their shock troops from being specialised anti-tree to enduring soldiers capable of fronting up to the firepower of the Colony.

As I pelt them with spears, as Tiny unleashes his almighty fists, and despite the explosions and the cruel ministrations of Crinis, the termites continue to advance. It takes a lot of effort to put them down, and when one falls, another three climb over its remains to draw ever closer. At this rate, it won't be long until their mandibles are able to reach me, and we can't have that!

Too bad this tunnel is far too narrow for a Gravity Bomb, otherwise I'd wipe them out in the thousands, but this is up close and personal, just the way an insect likes it.

Bring it on, termites! You think you can possibly defeat the Colony in our favourite battleground? You must be blind!

Actually... they pretty much *are* blind, but that's beside the point!

Time to get serious.

I continue the Force Spear barrage, but divert a chunk of mind constructs to other tasks, directing them like a conductor does a symphony. In moments, more mana flows and is woven, followed by the ever impressive Gravity Domain taking shape around me. Pre-compressed, the crushing force exerted by the

purple sphere of doom isn't enough to squash a termite flat, but given how heavy they are, it's more than enough to slow them down. Buying that little extra time is all I need.

Heart burning with the pure fire of passionate youth, my mandibles draw back and lock into place as I brace my legs and zoom forward.

In an instant, I appear before the closest termites, my speed surprising even me! This new dash is quick, like, super quick! The strain on my legs is a serious issue, and the stamina drain is immense, but holy moly, it's fast! But that's only the entrée, now comes time for the main dish! The termites react quickly to my appearance, every inch of their large frames screams of their hatred for ant kind as they snap forward with their wide mandibles.

Not fast enough!

VOID CHOMP!

The moment I activate the skill I feel my stamina plummet into the dirt. Such a precipitous drop! It's not as if it just takes twice as much stamina to use as the doom chomp, this is more like five times! What the hell? I'm not going to be combo-ing this sucker any time soon, that's for sure.

The result, however, is enough to bring tears to my eyes.

The dark mandibles of pure energy manifest as they did before, though darker and more menacing. Beyond that, a sphere of annihilation appears several metres before me, tiny at first, but swelling as my jaws slam shut.

I watch it happen as if it were in slow motion. My jaws close, and extended beyond them are the pitch black mandibles created by the Void Chomp. Twice as long as before, they extend almost five metres in front of my face. The tiny sphere of pure black flickers and grows the closer the mandibles get, drawing in the unfortunate termite in front of me, warping and curving it as it's pulled in.

When the mandibles touch the sphere, it's as if a bomb has gone off, an explosion of dark light that blinds me for a moment. When it's done, the termite in front of me, and those near it, are... gone. All that remains are chunks of Biomass on the ground.

T-... too powerful! Too damn awesome! The Void Chomp is everything I dreamed of! Too bad I can't use it all that much, but with a bite that strong, I'll be able to do some real damage to my enemies with nothing but my jaws! I'm so excited by the possibilities!

I wonder what the next rank of bite is like...

No time to think of that now, Anthony! You've got a battle to win!

Thankfully, my numerous brains are all over it and my body ducks and weaves with preternatural grace, dodging and deflecting no matter how many bites come at me at once. I can't use the Void Chomp recklessly, but with so many members of the Colony nearby, I'll be able to charge my stamina up pretty quickly. I just have to rely on weaker skills until then.

A steady barrage of spells and acid fly forth from me as I liberally apply normal bites to my enemies whenever I can. Just like this, we establish our formation, with me acting as the front line, Tiny standing

behind, unleashing his fists and lightning, then Crinis and Invidia bringing up the rear. Until the termites manage to tunnel around us, we'll hold this position, no matter how many of them come at us.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 970: Colony vs Colony pt 10

Sarah watched as the others threw themselves into battle with wild abandon. Anthony and his pets showed no hesitation in attacking the oncoming wave of termites any way they could. It was a dizzying scene. Explosions rocked the tunnel, tentacles lashed left and right, Tiny's fists flashed so quickly she couldn't see his hands, and Anthony stood in front absorbing all the pressure he could.

The defensive mastery on display from her fellow Earth-born was incredible. Whenever a termite moved to attack, he was simply no longer there, or his body shifted just a few degrees and the enemy's jaws would slide off him.

She didn't know how he did it. How did he fight without fear? She'd made great strides in learning to control herself in battle, but even now she felt hesitant to engage in combat. The rage that lived inside her lurked beneath the surface at all times, waiting for her to slip.

She'd fought against that realisation for a long time. For too long, she'd believed that the violence was the problem, that as long as she didn't have to fight, she would be free.

But that wasn't the case.

She'd buried herself amongst the shapers; layered behind their protection, she'd thought herself completely safe. She'd run from the Dungeon, run from the fighting, but in reality, she'd run from herself, and failed.

Because even there, with nothing to fight, the rage had boiled inside her, deep down where she refused to look.

Sarah rolled her powerful shoulders before she rumbled forward. The hovering form of Invidia made way for her and she continued, gathering momentum as she bowled past Tiny. The giant ape leaned to the side, the tunnel was barely wide enough for the two of them to fit side by side as she accelerated further, her lips pulling back from her dagger-like teeth.

Her paws pounded the dirt as she launched her weight forward, her mouth open now as the fear built inside her heart. She ignored it as she tunnelled her vision on the termite in front of her.

Sensing her coming, Anthony stepped to the side and back, smartly avoiding a termite lunge as if he'd known it was coming.

Then, Sarah was there.

She barrelled straight into the massed ranks of the termites, her jaws snapping and claws reaching out to rend everything in front of her. The insects arrayed against her were scattered by the sheer force of her charge. Her mass and strength were enough to overwhelm a hundred termites, forcing them to fall back before her.

But she didn't stop. She couldn't.

Committed to the fight now, she was a roiling mass of emotion. She was afraid – afraid of being hurt, of hurting others, of losing herself to the rage, of what she might find she'd done when she came back to herself. Underneath it all, the rage bubbled with fierce intent.

She lunged forward again, her jaws latching onto an unfortunate termite and closing with a crunch. With a toss of her head, she threw the Biomass away as a dozen enemies began to close in around her.

The greater the danger, the greater the fear.

The greater the rage.

Her fur began to stand up as the first hints of malicious red light began to burn in her eyes. The slash skill was her bread and butter, and she'd recently raised it to rank six, fighting alongside the Colony.

Jagged rents of pulsing red light carved through the air with every swipe of her claws. Every termite unfortunate enough to receive these blows suffered egregious wounds as its carapace crumpled and the claws bit into the tender flesh beneath.

It took longer than she expected for the first wound to come. She'd gone too deep, carried forward by the rising tide of her rage, and had quickly become surrounded. She'd expected to be buried under the weight of a hundred bites immediately, but between the barrage Anthony put out and the shields that sprang into being around her, she'd gone unharmed for a long time.

When the jaws of a termite finally punched through her tough hide it almost came as a relief. In an instant, her fear rocketed higher, but alongside it, her anger exploded and she bellowed with rage.

The Asura bear. She was a monster fuelled by her emotion, and that engine began to turn over now.

Her eyes ignited with red light, her vision swimming with the colour of blood as her lips pulled back to reveal a ghastly grin.

ROOOOOAAAAAR!

She bellowed with uncontrolled fury as her control began to slip. Desperately, Sarah clung to the rising tide of rage as the fight devolved further around her. Wild slashes of her claws filled the tunnel as Anthony and Tiny stepped forward to drive the termites from her flanks.

Already, it was becoming hard to tell friend from foe. Her body hummed with energy, her eyes grew darker and darker as the hunger, the *need* to find some outlet for the emotion that boiled within continued to grow.

[Cool down, Sarah! You gotta leave something for Tiny to punch, otherwise he's going to sulk.]

The touch of Anthony's mind on hers was like a dash of cold water to the face. She froze for a moment, bewildered by the sudden loss of momentum, and copped a nasty bite to the shoulder.

[Don't cool down that much!] her friend yelped in her mind. [Keep fighting! Just remember, we're in this for the long haul, alright? This isn't going to be done in an hour.]

Sarah forced her body to move and began laying about herself with her claws once more.

[I don't think I can remain lucid for an hour, Anthony,] she confessed. [I was almost gone already.]

[Hey, no stress,] he told her, completely unfazed. [If you fly off the rails, we'll take care of you. There's plenty of termites to kill, have no fear!]

[Is that really alright?] she asked.

[Of course! What do you think, Tiny? Think we can handle it?]

The ape pulled back one hand after a particularly devastating uppercut to flash her a quick thumbs up.

[See? It's fine. Just take it slow. If you feel like you might be losing it, pull back and let Crinis cover you. We've got this.]

After one more devastating swipe, Sarah hesitated for a moment before she began to withdraw. Shields sprung up around her and healing magic flowed into her body, closing over her wounds as Anthony stepped in front to hold off the surging termite wave.

She rested for a minute, her great bear body panting heavily as she fought to calm her emotions. When she felt in control of herself again, she stood and began to wade forward once more.

She realised that this could be a great chance for her. By pushing herself to the limit and then pulling back over and over again, she might find the key to finally controlling her emotions! If she could learn to ride the wave, she might be able to enter her berserk state without losing consciousness completely. If she could do that...

... she would at least have one less thing to fear.