

CHRYSALIS

Chapter 18 The world below

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Spreading out before my very (small) eyes is an impossible vista. A huge underground world of incredible size, the entire floor covered in strange, magical plant life.

Bizarre looking trees and giant mushrooms loom below me, casting deep shadows over a forest floor covered in grasses and plants similar to the strange crystal flower I saw in the shaft. The entire scene is suffused with the blue light I've seen in the tunnels before, the plants themselves have the creeping veins of light twisting through their forms.

As I watch the entire scene pulses, just like I'd seen in the tunnel walls.

This is insane.

...

Gandalf? What is going here?!

How can an under-ground space of this scale exist? I can't even see the other side?! The roof looks like its 60 meters high! I didn't expect to see this flourishing eco system?

This place must be absolutely crawling with monsters!

The thought grips my little ant heart. Somewhere in this massive cavern my colony exists, or perhaps they are even further away than this and the scout passed through this area on its way higher up!

At any rate, I somehow have to explore this space.

I can't help but feel depressed. The vista in front of me is exotic and exciting but I can't appreciate it whilst I'm in a position of not knowing the first thing about it! In such a massive open space, what size could the monsters have

grown to? How much Biomass could they pile up in a flourishing area like this?

I have no idea!

Gah!

Firm your resolve Anthony! You are going to make it! You will conquer this space and reunite with your colony!

However!

First I will retreat to higher up and get some levels.

Don't look at me like that, this is clearly the sensible choice! I need to raise my level and gain more mutations before I'm prepared to explore this space. I will conquer the known before I attack the unknown!

Back up we go!

I retreat up the shaft and regroup back in my nest.

I'm feeling pressured by time now. If my suspicions are correct then the 'main' tunnel up here is connected to the cavern I was in earlier, which is now fully occupied by soldiers. They could come down in this direction at any time, so I have to stay safe, assuming that they will.

Once they do come down, I won't have access to the easier XP and Biomass I can gather from there and will be forced into the open space below without any further preparation. Taking all this into consideration....

I have to move fast. It has become necessary to throw some of my earlier caution to the wind and make bold moves. Without XP and Biomass I won't survive if I push deeper into this place and I can't take my time acquiring said XP and Biomass as I'd like to. Time for this ant to go into battle.

My mind made up I zip back out to the main tunnel and immediately stealth up to the ceiling, antennae waving in the air as I cast my eyes about to spot prey. If I want to maximise my Biomass gains then I should be sure to target the

creatures I haven't been able to consume yet, ensuring I get the bonus point from Gandalf, which means I would need to try and hunt one of the mollusc creatures (ugh), the tail rat and if possible one of the croca-beasts.

I have no idea how the hell I would hunt one of those giant crocodiles, they are so much more frightening than everything else around here.

Looking about I notice one of the slug creatures is sliding along on the wall to my left. I don't have two days to sit around starving myself as I obsessively study the creature, I'm going to have to move quickly!

Entering shark mode, I sneak up behind the hideous snail creature, making sure to avoid standing in its slime trail. I keep a constant eye on my surroundings as I do, not wanting get caught out by anything as I'm hunting.

Up close the creature is even less appealing, probably twice my body length they are very sizeable, a long slimy body topped with brightly coloured spines that seem to grow organically from the creatures back. I absolutely won't touch those!

Two stalks poke out from the front of the monster's head, either eyes or antennae on the end, I'm not sure, they could be a vulnerable point to attack later. As I draw closer to still to the creature I'm able to notice something else, the body constantly releases a thick covering of mucus, presumably to help grease the path of the creature to increase its speed but I suspect also for another reason.

Backing away from the slug slightly I nip behind a rock and then quickly give it a surprise blast of acid!

Aaaaaaand nothing happens.

The monster continues to slide along the wall, seemingly totally oblivious to my sneak attack. I thought as much. That thick layer of mucus is protecting the creature from my acid and will do exactly the same thing if I try to bite it with my jaws, I'd probably just get stuck!

Damn slug.

Of all the defensive measures you could employ, you had to use a slime barrier?! Could you make this anymore disgusting for me?

If that's the way you want to play, fine then. I will show you the power of a human mind!

...

Actually this is a trick that even ants on Earth are able to do. As the slug continues to slide its way along the wall I quickly scout around for some dirt. Grabbing a mandible full I sneak up behind the slug and place the chunk of soil on its side before immediately backing off, looking for a reaction.

Nothing. It isn't clear the slug can even feel what I'm doing.

Gweheheheh.

Moving quickly I repeat the process four more times, piling up dirt on and around the same place towards the rear of the slug on its side. The dirt quickly grows claggy and thick, covered in the oozing slime, soaking in it. Once the soil has become a sticky ball of yuck I grab chunks of it with my mandibles and peel it away from the body of the slug, then replace it with fresh dirt.

Repeating the process for ten minutes I manage to soak away the defensive slime layer covering this one area while the slug continues to show no reaction.

Let's see what happens this time.

I retreat from the slug once more and find a sheltered spot before turning to present the b-zone and firing acid once again.

As soon as the acid impacts the slugs' delicate spongy flesh the creatures shudders with surprise. Felt it that time did you, Slug? How about another shot!?

Pow!

Nailed it again! The slug is visibly in pain now as its body writhes from the burning. Actual steam is rising from the sticky flesh of the monster as the acid continues to eat away.

Yyyyyyyuck.

Rearing back with its front half the slug lifts its head from the wall with a sticky plop and turns its head towards the source of the damage. Detached from the wall I can see the creatures 'foot', the undulant muscle that snails and slugs use to move, writhing and wriggling in the air. The long stalks, far longer than what you would expect to see on a slug, wave wildly in the air, seeking the foe.

In that moment my danger senses start tingling and a thought flashes through my mind at light speed: how does one of these slow slug monsters get food up here? There aren't any plants, so how do they hunt monsters?

No sooner does the thought occur to me than I dart out of cover and scramble away from the slug as fast my little legs will carry me!

Turning back I can see the slug withdrawing in on itself, almost compressing its raised front half, before out of the slime a mouth opens wide, revealing a hideous maw of fangs. Bursting forward like a spring, the slug blasts out a

massive spray of thick mucus, covering the rock wall behind me in a noxious goo that immediately starts bubbling and eating away at the stone.

Whoa! Sticky acid! By the looks of it that acid is much stronger than mine too!

Without pausing again I continue my retreat, moving up to the ceiling and getting lost amidst the rocks before I turn back to check on the slug. The monster is clearly enraged now, its eyes sweeping the rocks as it reorients itself and moves in my direction, its surprisingly vicious looking maw gnawing at the air.