

CHRYSALIS

Chapter 10 The study of the beas

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"Alberton! Alberton! Answer your door you deaf idiot!"

Two young Legionaries stood to one side, faces white with worry as they watched the Legion commander smash his massive fist repeatedly into a sturdy, iron framed door so hard that dust fell from the cold stone ceiling into their hair.

These two soldiers were the first see the monster and also had by far the best look at it, so Titus had taken them immediately to the medicus for treatment and from there to the Legion Keep of Liria. Right now they were several floors below ground level and the air was thick with dust and moisture.

To tell the truth, Titus hadn't been knocking for long but it hadn't taken much for the huge man to run out of patience.

"Open this door Alberton or I'll burn your stupid books to warm my backside!" Titus roared.

The door was yanked open immediately to reveal a dishevelled man in a brown robe sporting a hedge like beard that appeared to stab forward from his face like a wall of spears.

"You wouldn't dare Titus you illiterate ape! There's a thousand years of Legion history in here!" the beard shouted back at the commander.

Titus merely grunted. "Good, your awake" he said as he pushed the much skinnier Alberton out of his way and advanced into the chamber.

"I'm always awake" protested the scholar as he absentmindedly scratched at his robes, "what time is it?".

Titus simply shook his head and gestured for the two young soldiers to enter the room after him, which they did with some trepidation.

The room was a mess, every surface dusty and heaped with piles of parchment, book and scrolls of all descriptions. Several tables and a corner desk occupied the center of the room whilst around the walls were huge bookcases that stretched from the floor to the ceiling. Every shelf of every bookcase was heaped, stacked full of enormous leather bound volumes each labelled with intricate script on the spine.

Casting a quick glance around the room Titus stuck his head back into the corridor just long enough to bellow "cleaning!" and as Alberton began to protest that there was really no need for cleaning and they always disturbed his concentration anyway he simply ignored him and started speaking.

"Legionary trainee Mirryn, legionary trainee Donnelan, this is the Legionem Abyssi Loremaster of the Liria legion, Alberton. We are here, Alberton, for you to consult the records and identify a beastie the two trainees saw in the Dungeon today".

Alberton peered at the two trainees doubtfully. "Haven't expeditions been banned for a few days now? What could they possibly see on guard duty at the Dungeon entrance that they couldn't identify? Have we stopped teaching legionaries what a thorn lizard looks like?"

"If we have, that would be your responsibility as Loremaster, Alberton" Titus sighed "Alberton we need you to identify an ant for us".

The Loremaster froze.

"You mean ... Formicidae?"

"Yes".

Albertons' eyes drifted aimlessly around the room as he absorbed this information. After a moment he seemed to focus again and brought his attention back to the people present.

Without a word he turned and moved to a wooden ladder propped against the wall in a corner of the room. With some difficulty he moved it to one to the shelves propped it open and somewhat nervously climbed it. On the seventh shelf he reached for one of the volumes and withdrew it before climbing back down the ladder with some difficulty.

Thump!

The massive volume crashed into the table, spraying dust clouds into the air. The trainees could clearly see the word 'Formicidae' in stitched in gold filigree on the cover of the volume.

As Alberton retrieved the book, Mirryn turned to her commander hesitantly, "commander, I know we don't usually see any ant monsters under Liria but why is it so serious that we've seen one here?"

Donnelan also turned to listen to the answer. Titus cleared his throat. "A single ant is weak, pathetically weak, but you will almost never face a single ant. They will swarm in the hundreds, thousands even hundreds of thousands. They are far more cooperative than almost any other monster type, they are fearless, feel no pain and are ravenous. An ant colony can sweep clean vast sections of Dungeon, growing in strength, and if they are spawned in the second strata or higher they can climb up to the surface in search of more food. An ant colony expanding onto the surface is a massive disaster, it has only happened twice and whole kingdoms were burned to the ground before they were destroyed."

"In those cases" wheezed the Loremaster, turning to the two young legionaries, "the people were unable to react fast enough to the threat as the ants are excellent at creating their own tunnels, they didn't climb out of the dungeon entrance but burst into houses, basements and through castle prisons. They could be digging through the dirt around us right now".

Alberton chuckled drily as the trainees eyed the walls with suspicion. "Now describe this creature for me and we'll see if we can know our enemy".

As the two young soldiers began to describe the creature they had seen, Alberton began flicking through pages on the vast volume in front of him, muttering to himself. The trainees could see each page was covered in neat script and detailed drawings of different monstrous ant species, the recorded wisdom of generations of Legion soldiers.

"Large eyes you say? Very unusual, at least we can rule out the dorylus species, thank the legion" Alberton mumbled.

Donnelan turned to Titus with an eyebrow raised. "dorylus ants are almost completely blind" he explained, "but a dorylus queen can lay over a million eggs a month, and their colonies can grow to fifty million individuals. Also, they are nomadic, swarming endlessly and devouring everything in their path. Think of millions of monsters crawling across the ceiling, bursting out of the

walls and scrambling on top of each other to kill you, what does it matter that they can't see?"

"Spraying acid to attract claw centipedes?" Alberton frowned as he continued to flick pages, "that is ... rare".

"Do you have anything Loremaster?" Titus asked.

"the colouring of the monster and the acid spraying are very distinctive features. We can be fairly sure this monster was some species of formica, definitely a hatchling based on its size. However, there are a few odd features, the creature appears to have mutated its eyes, which is extremely unusual for an ant, also the very unusual show of intelligence to lure other monsters into the fight in order to secure its escape".

Titus nodded, "I agree with you, a regular ant hatchling has a cunning stat of three or four, this ants' is clearly is much higher. What else have you learned?"

"We may have been extremely lucky here commander".

"In what way?"

"You said it yourself, you will almost never see one ant operating on its own. We also know that ants will almost never spawn in the first strata, so how can we explain a lone hatchling being found so close to the surface? I posit that a nest raid has taken place lower in the Dungeon, and a fairly new ant colony was too weak to repel it. As a result, some of the young were brought out of the nest and carried towards the surface where somehow this lone worker was able to hatch".

"So we've possibly been warned of the threat far earlier than we might have otherwise been" Titus mused.

"Correct. It's possible the queen spawned as little as a two months ago. The thing that puzzles me the most is how did this lone hatchling ant worker, possibly the weakest individual monster in the entire Dungeon, survive for any length of time? Based on the information provided, we can deduce that this ant has mutated its eyes at least once, possibly twice. How did it secure biomass? Why does it display a level of cunning far in excess what we would expect? These are very puzzling elements commander".

"I agree" Titus said, "but being able to move against the colony itself is of far greater concern to me than one lone worker ant. We will need to organise a deeper expedition to find and eliminate this threat. The timing is terrible since we anticipate a wave soon".

Alberton winced, "that seems like more than we can take on ourselves, commander".

"I agree" Titus said, "the legion will push into the dungeon immediately while you and I go to have to have a chat with your aunt".

Alberton sighed bitterly at his commanders words and as a team of cleaning staff filed into the room and immediately began shuffling his papers around to sweep he could only sigh again, looking extremely forlorn.