

Dungeon Crawl Classics #4.5

My Friend the Formian

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Remember the good old days, when adventures were underground, NPCs were there to be killed, and the finale of every dungeon was the dragon on the 20th level? Those days are back. Dungeon Crawl Classics adventures don't waste your time with long-winded speeches, weird campaign settings, or NPCs who aren't meant to be killed. Each adventure is 100% good, solid dungeon crawl, with the monsters you know, the traps you remember, and the secret doors you know are there somewhere.

My Friend the Formian is a short adventure designed for 4 characters of 5th level. The party should include at least two strong fighter types. I wrote this as an interlude on a night when our regular 5th player couldn't make it to the game. The whole adventure can be played in a little over an hour. It's really a one-trick pony with an interesting gimmick that adds a twist to interaction with formians. That said, it's a fun one-trick pony that changes the way the characters approach the situation (and forces them to fight *out* of a dungeon rather than *in*, for a change).

Adventure Summary

The characters have been employed to shut down a formian hive that has recently put a stop to the local town's mining operations. Among other things, the formians have kidnapped several townspeople and are forcing them to work. An old, crippled mage in the town has managed to capture one of the formian workers via *charm monster*, and has uncovered an interesting side effect of their physiology: if he communicates with the creature via *R.'s telepathic bond*, he can tap into the hive mind messages that constantly run through the formian's thoughts. (As one of my players put it, "It's like listening to ant radio!")

Thanks to the mage's discovery, the town has learned an unsettling fact: the formians have opened a direct portal to their home plane in their rapidly-growing hive, and plan to bring many more formians through.

A direct assault on the hive would be doomed to failure, since they have literally endless waves of reinforcements waiting on the other side of the portal. But the mage has a plan. The characters are to travel with the charmed formian back to the hive.

The mage will make sure his friend the formian knows the characters are also friends. As long as possible, the group is to maintain a ruse of being new slaves captured by the worker. They are to find the portal, close it (hopefully before attracting reinforcements), and then clear out the hive and rescue the slaves. To facilitate communication, the mage gives the characters a pair of magic tiaras which, when worn, link the wearers via *R.'s telepathic bond*. One such tiara is to be worn by the formian, and the other by a character.

Getting the Players Involved

This adventure can be set in any town with a mining operation, or any other sort of digging: city expansion, archaeological excavations, or early construction on the king's new castle.

The easiest way to hook the characters is the old classic: payment. In my campaign, the old mage offered them each a few low-level potions, and told them he'd craft a more powerful magic item to their specifications as long as they supplied any rare material needs. Payment via gold or gems is of course an acceptable substitute. He needs the magic tiara back, by the way.

Another hook are the slaves. Good characters should be motivated to free them. Make one slave the mage's nubile young daughter and every red-blooded adventurer ought to be motivated to free her.

Background Story

Really, do you need it? It's a one hour adventure that's meant to be a drop-in dungeon. Make up something on the fly and go with it.

The Formian Hive Mind

The formian hive mind is a funny thing, it turns out. It really is like "ant radio." Anyone opening telepathic communication with the formian is overwhelmed at first as they hear literally thousands of disparate thoughts floating around in there. These are primarily other workers "gossiping" in their own way. Each worker is mentally connected to his boss (usually a soldier) and has a vague connection to his boss's boss.

(usually a myrmarch). An extremely faint awareness of the queen is buried in there somewhere, but except in rare circumstances she never communicates directly with the workers.

After a few minutes, the listening character can filter out the hive mind and tap into the thoughts of the formian he's directly connected to. The mage's formian friend, whose name is something like Qrtzz tjk'nk'nkgh'tssssssag (pronounced "Bob"), isn't very smart (Int 5, lower than usual). He communicates with the characters in simple concepts, not sentences, but he can still convey most of the information they'll want to know:

- Where is the portal? Where are the slaves? (Answered with mental urges of the right directions to go.)
- What does the hive look like? (He can't answer this in a useful manner, having never seen a map, though he can get across that it's symmetrical and that he can guide them through it.)
- How many formians are there in hive? (He can answer precisely, at least since he was last there. If the characters know about the formian social structure, he can answer questions about how many formians of each rank are there.)

And so on. Remember that *every creature in the hive mind is aware of every other creature*, though it's often by way of the social hierarchy. Soldiers eavesdrop on workers all the time, but they rarely sound the alarm unless they get an alarm signal from the worker. Thus, as long as the characters don't alarm their formian friend, or start making him send thoughts to the hive mind that are really scary (like asking him, "Do you mind if we slaughter your friends?"), the hive will basically ignore their conversations. If they stop being friends with the formian, however, it could all change fast.

Player Beginning

Start the adventure by reading or paraphrasing the following to your players:

Once again the mantle of the hero has been placed on your shoulders. The old mage has led you down the winding tunnels to an enormous pile of loose dirt. Beside it is a 5 foot wide tunnel carved roughly from the raw earth. The mage tells you that the formian hive is down this tunnel somewhere. He gives you the magic tiara that allows you to communicate with your formian friend, then bids you adieu.

The Formian Hive

The map shows the layout of the formian hive. All walls are simply hard-packed dirt (hardness 0). Anyone can cause a cave-in with enough effort (100 hp damage to any wall). The hive is symmetrical (it's the formian way), except for the unfinished southern sections.

The symbols on the map indicate the locations of the hive's residents: workers (W), soldiers (S), the taskmaster (T), and the enslaved human commoners (C). Most of the map locations don't need specific descriptions, so simply go with the location of creatures as indicated. The rooms labeled 1-5 have special circumstances that are described below. The rough edges of the southwest and southeast corners of the map are unfinished tunnels.

This adventure really isn't long enough to have much in the way of wandering monsters, but if you want to include them, there are always 1d4 worker formians out and about. Often they are carting dirt from the southern edges of the hive down the long tunnel to the dirt pile.

Area 1 - Formian Guards

Read or paraphrase the following:

The tunnel goes for several hundred feet until it terminates in a 25-by-25 room of hard-packed dirt. Two larger, more menacing formians stand in the middle of the room, on guard. You hear them speaking with your friend the formian through ant radio as he explains who these soft-skins are. He says you are captured slaves. They pause for a moment, then wave him on. As you walk past, you are keenly aware of the sharp stingers and powerful claws of the creatures. Over the ant radio, you hear the beginning of a dialogue between the guards and their boss, as the guards inform him that your friend the formian has brought more slaves.

Unless the characters are really dumb about it, let them pass as slaves. Presumably, they've sheathed their weapons and acquired some shovels or picks. If they really didn't try to look like slaves at all, the adventure ought to end right here. Give them some hard-to-beat Bluff checks and sic some formians on 'em!

The soldiers aren't in charge and don't know what the deal is with the slaves, so they start "talking" (via the hive mind) with the taskmaster in area 5 about them. It will take a few rounds for taskmaster to sort out why there are more slaves coming. He certainly didn't

arrange for them... and it's his domination ability that keeps the rest around.

The players now have 5 rounds before the taskmaster decides something is wrong and sends the hive after them. They can sense the growing apprehension on the ant radio as he concludes that there are interlopers. Until then, the characters have a "hall pass" to wander the hive, as long as they look like slaves, stick with their formian friend, and don't do anything alarming. Their friend can lead them right toward the portal as needed. However, still make the characters painfully aware that they're in the lion's den. Perhaps the workers at the second checkpoint inspect them carefully to see if they're suitable for labor...

Area 2 - Food Supplies

This room is piled high with food supplies, most of it quite repulsive to your palette. It looks like it has all been chewed up and regurgitated, then rolled into compact little balls for storage. There must be two tons of reconstituted vegetable matter and meat in here, along with four workers. Two workers are tending to the food, while two others appear to sleep.

This is indeed the food supply. Taking from the food supply without permission is a no-no, which the characters' formian friend can tell them. The two sleeping formians are off duty; this is where they come to rest.

If the characters are being expeditious, they will probably bypass this room on their way to area 5.

Area 3 - Slave Labor

This irregularly shaped 20-by-20 room looks like it's still being built. The whole southeastern corner is only half-carved from the dirt walls. Three human slaves dig steadily with shovels while two worker formians shape and finish the walls that are already carved.

These are three of the four human slaves (human Com1, AC 10, hp 2). The slaves show no sign of it if they see the characters, nor any desire for freedom. They are dominated. The fourth slave is in area 5.

The corresponding area in the southwest corner of the map is similar - the tunnel to the west is only half-complete, and the workers are busy digging away.

Area 4 - Inner Guardpost

By the time the characters reach here, the hive will probably be on alert anyway. Either way, no one's supposed to be coming in here, so they're going to get trouble. Read or paraphrase the following:

You've entered a 10-by-15 north-south room with a formian soldier in the opposite corner. He immediately begins a hostile interrogation of your formian friend over the ant radio.

The formian friend is caught in a bind. He has two sets of friends, human and formian, and doesn't want them to fight. He'll argue with the soldier that these are his friends and they shouldn't be harmed. That alone is enough to set off the hive mind. Now it hits the fan!

As of round 5, or one round after the characters enter this room, the hive mind goes into high alert. The soldier here charges into combat. The soldier in the next guard room joins the fight, as does the taskmaster from area 5. Additionally, the rest of the hive starts moving toward the characters.

If the characters have good tactics, they'll be able to bottleneck the passages to fight opponents one at a



time. If they do this and then focus on forcing their way through to area 5, they should be OK. If not, they'll be overrun by formians and probably perish.

But the real problem is getting to the portal in area 5. As long as the taskmaster is alive, he will send for reinforcements. Since the hive is in high alert, the characters will hear his commands over ant radio in a much more vocal fashion than before. In fact, whoever wears the magic tiara will hear him ordering the hive around. With a standard action, that character can concentrate to determine the location of every formian in the hive! As a free action, he can catch pieces of conversations and determine the hive's general attitude ("charge and kill the intruders!").

Reinforcements: Reinforcements arrive through the portal in area 5. Each round there is a 25% chance that another soldier comes through. This continues as long as the taskmaster is alive.

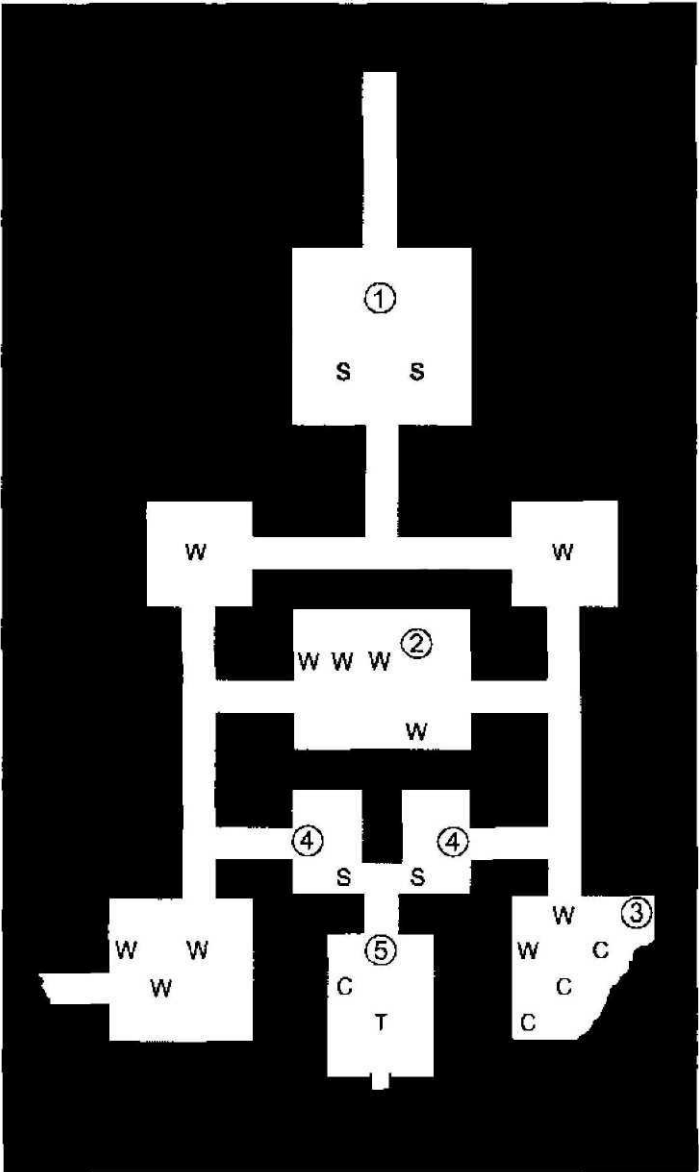
Once the taskmaster is dead, this branch of the hive mind is effectively cut off from the rest of the hive mind. Mentally, these formians are still connected, but the chain of command is broken, and that chain matters a lot in formian society. The formians now have no commander, so they aren't sure what to do. This doesn't affect combat (they still fight to the death), but it means no more reinforcements for at least 15 minutes (until the hive mind can allocate a myrmarch or taskmaster to re-establish command), which should be more than enough time to destroy the portal.

Area 5 - The Portal

Read or paraphrase the following, altering it if there are still enemies in the room:

You've gallantly fought your way through to the final chamber of the formian hive. This long 15-by-20 room is rough-hewn dirt, like the rest of the hive. But in the center of the far wall is a solid iron doorframe. Through the doorless frame, you see an impossible scene: an endless vista of massive mechanical gears slowly turning in place, with millions - perhaps even billions - of swarming formians as far as the eye can see. This hive clearly has a lot of reinforcements. You better take down the portal fast!

If the taskmaster is dead, no formians will be coming through for at least 15 minutes. But don't let the players know that; they're facing an endless swarm and need to do something fast!



The players probably won't think of this, but the hive mind knows the portal's command word. It would take a Gather Information check (DC 25) or Bluff check (DC 30) by the character with the tiara to persuade the hive mind to give such important information to a lowly worker with no real need to know. But if the characters find it, they can simply say the word to close the portal. Of course, they still need to destroy it, because another formian can re-open it with the same command word. But closing it's a good way to stop the apparent immediate threat.

The portal is a physical doorway that can be destroyed more easily than a solid door. It is iron: hardness 10, hp 30, break DC 26. If subjected to spells or magic, it saves at +10 (created by the queen, a 17th level caster).

Once the portal is destroyed, the image flickers a few times, then flashes off. The characters are left looking through a broken iron doorway into yet another wall of dirt. Once they escort the slaves out of the hive, they'll collect the reward and be on their way.

Appendix: Creature Statistics

Refer to the MM for full stats and details on special abilities.

Formian Worker

CR 1/2; Small outsider (lawful, extraplanar); HD 1d8+1; hp 5; Init +2; Spd. 40 ft.; AC 17, touch 13, flat-footed 15; Base Atk +1; Grp -2; Atk +3 melee (1d4+1, bite); Full Atk +3 melee (1d4+1, bite); Space/Reach 5 ft./5 ft.; SQ Cure *serious wounds*, hive mind, immunity to poison, petrification, and cold, *make whole*, resistance to electricity 10, fire 10, and sonic 10; AL LN; SV Fort +3, Ref +4, Will +2; Str 13, Dex 14, Con 13, Int 6, Wis 10, Cha 9.

Skills and Feats: Climb +10, Craft (any one) +5, Hide +6, Listen +4, Search +2, Spot +4; Skill Focus (Craft).

Formian Soldier

CR 3; Medium outsider (lawful, extraplanar); HD 4d8+8; hp 26; Init +3; Spd. 40 ft.; AC 18, touch 13, flat-footed 15; Base Atk +4; Grp +7; Atk +7 melee (2d4+3 plus poison, sting); Full Atk +7 melee (2d4+3 plus poison, sting), +5 melee x2 (1d6+1, 2 claws), and +5 melee (1d4+1, bite); Space/Reach 5 ft./5 ft.; SA Poison (Injury, Fort DC 14, initial

and secondary 1d6 Str); SQ Hive mind, immunity to poison, petrification, and cold, resistance to electricity 10, fire 10, and sonic 10, SR 18; AL LN; SV Fort +6, Ref +7, Will +5; Str 17, Dex 16, Con 14, Int 10, Wis 12, Cha 11.

Skills and Feats: Climb +10, Hide +10, Jump +14, Listen +8, Move Silently +10, Search +7, Spot +8, Survival +1, Tumble +12; Dodge, Multiattack.

Formian Taskmaster

CR 7; Medium outsider (lawful, extraplanar); HD 6d8+12; hp 39; Init +7; Spd. 40 ft.; AC 19, touch 13, flat-footed 16; Base Atk +6; Grp +10; Atk +10 melee (2d4+4 plus poison, sting); Full Atk +10 melee (2d4+4 plus poison, sting), +8 melee x2 (1d6+2, 2 claws); Space/Reach 5 ft./5 ft.; SA Dominate monster, dominated creature, poison (Injury, Fort DC 15, initial and secondary 1d6 Str); SQ Hive mind, immunity to poison, petrification, and cold, resistance to electricity 10, fire 10, and sonic 10, SR 21, telepathy 100 ft.; AL LN; SV Fort +7, Ref +8, Will +8; Str 18, Dex 16, Con 14, Int 11, Wis 16, Cha 19.

Skills and Feats: Climb +13, Diplomacy +6, Hide +12, Intimidate +13, Listen +12, Move Silently +12, Search +9, Sense Motive +12, Spot +12, Survival +3; Dodge, Improved Initiative, Multiattack.