

The Chronicles of Henry Roach-Dairier

To Build a Tunnel



Deborah K. Frontiera

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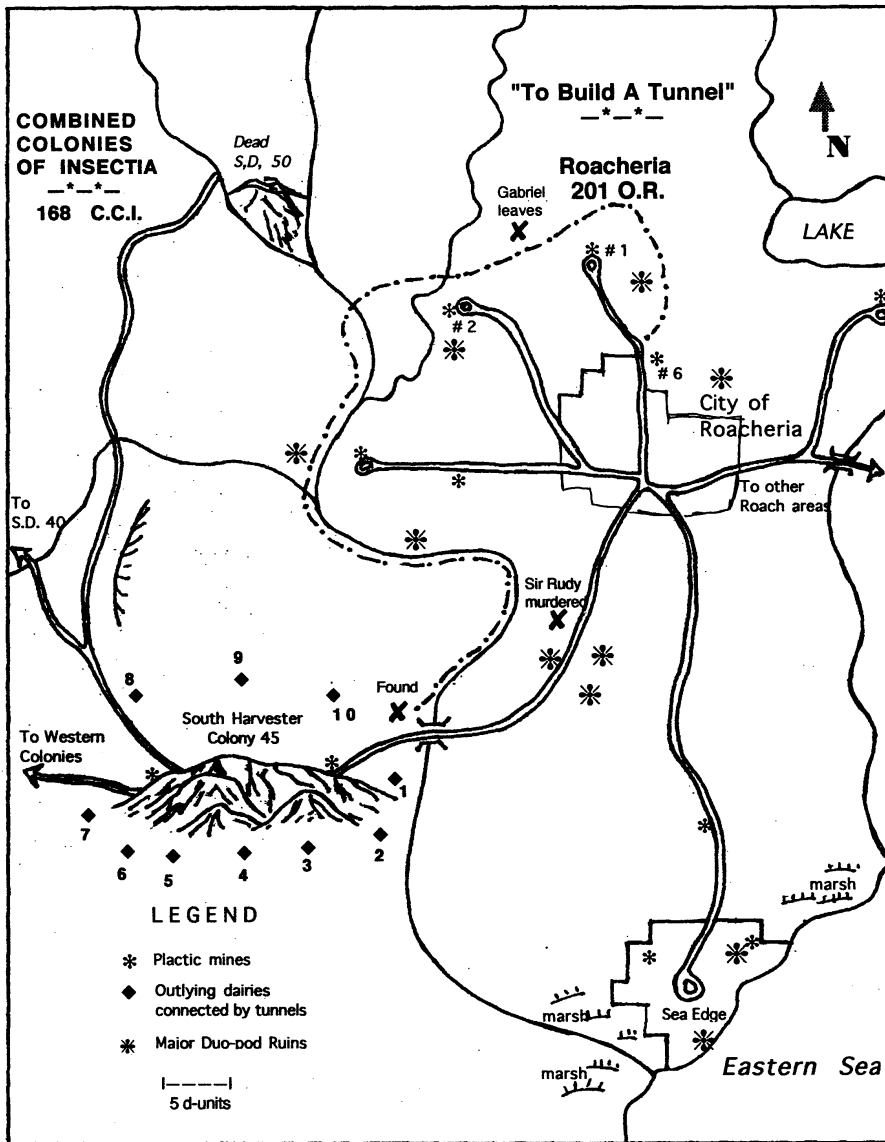
Dedication: To Linda and Diane, my first fans, and to Dorothy, all of whom believed in me from the start.

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Introduction

The Beginning: as revealed to Daeira Dairier in dreams and meditation

In the beginning, Essence roamed the skies looking for the right place to start a world. She saw that our planet already had cycles of day and night, water and air. It had a set path around its sun so its cycles could be numbered, but it had no life.

“I will see what can live and grow here,” she said, and joined herself with it. The Creative Life Force of Essence endowed the waters with miniscule plants and creatures and the cycle of life began.

Essence cherished this new life, but was tired from her journey across the cosmos, so she entered the earth and went to sleep.

Eons later, when she awoke, the planet was filled with life forms. The water and land and air teemed with a great variety of plants and creatures. Some were tiny and frail, others huge and fierce. There was great variety even in their coverings—smooth, hard, scaly, furry. The large, scaly ones dominated at that time.

Essence watched her world. The sun fed the plants, which fed the moving creatures, who then were eaten by larger ones, and on and on. They grew, propagated, and returned to feed the earth when their time was over. Some creatures failed and disappeared, but new ones evolved to take their place.

And ants were there.

Essence, satisfied with the balance and cycles, cradled her world, and went to sleep again.

The pain of many shocks woke Essence. Chunks of matter hurled through the cosmos and struck the planet, killing millions of life forms and knocking the planet in its cosmic path. The dust from their impact screened the sun’s light, denying life-giving energy to plants. Essence watched in dismay as thousands of species disappeared from her cherished world. In her grief, she shook. Hills tumbled. Mountains sent forth liquid fire from within.

But even in grief, Essence’s Creative Life Force found its way again. An infinite variety of flowering plants came to be. A few species of the scaly creatures and the small ones with fur and feathers survived.

And ants were still there.

Essence watched for many eons as the fur creatures increased in size and began to dominate. “What would happen,” Essence said, “if I interfered and gave one life form an advantage? If I gave a tad of my intelligence to a creature, could it create something original, as I have?”

Essence looked closely at each species and finally chose one that seemed different from others. This species was not entirely covered with fur, stood on only two appendages, and had a well-developed nervous system. She infused them with more intelligence and waited to see what would happen.

Season cycles passed. Generations of Duo Pods came and went. Essence saw that they made tools, built things, and developed the planet. Their machines grew ever more complex. Satisfied, Essence took a nap.

Essence awoke with a fever. The planet's surface was a shambles. The air and the water were fouled. All the Duo Pods, all of the feathered creatures, and most of the furry ones were dead forever.

"What has happened to my world?" Essence cried.

Grief for her failed experiment and illness consumed Essence. The earth shook. Storms raged. Her tears covered many lands. Then slowly, the earth healed itself. Although it would take many more eons for all of the Duo Pod creations to return to the earth, the world looked new and fresh once more. Essence found that one substance the Duo Pods had made would not break itself down and feed the earth. They had indeed created something original. Her experiment had not been a total failure.

She looked around hopefully and found that ants, roaches and other insects were not only still there, but had grown greatly in size and changed in other ways.

"Ah, my faithful ants," she said. "You have been with me from the earliest days and have always been civilized. Perhaps the intelligence I gave the Duo Pods was not enough. I will try again. I will give you not only the gift of knowledge, but my compassion as well. And this time, I will not sleep, but will watch over my world. I will be available to my creatures, speaking to their minds when they seek me. When each one's time on earth is done, the part of me that is in them will return to me in unity forever. Eat then, my ants, of the lasting creation of the Duo Pods—plastic—and receive my gifts. Cherish my world and seek to understand its mysteries."

And so we are.

While Essence was speaking, a group of roaches approached. They took the gift of intelligence, but ran away before the second, more important gift of compassion and inner essence was given. Thus they received no more of Essence than had the extinct Duo Pods.

Bemused, Essence observed the roaches as they ran from her. "I must watch and see what comes of this development."

The Cast of To Build a Tunnel

THE ANTS

Henry: the unofficial leader of the three ants sent to Roacheria

Adeline: Promised in mating to Henry

Howard: oldest of the three ants enslaved by Rex Roach

Herbert: third of the enslaved ants, good friend to Henry

Deanna: Adeline's sister

Master Andrea: Henry's mentor

Alyssa: Council Chief of South Harvester 45

Ferdinand: commander of South Harvester 45's fire ant guards

Henrietta: Henry and Adeline's first-hatched daughter

THE ROACHES

Sir Rudy: member of the South East Roach Control Board (S.E.R.C.B.) who begins negotiations with the ants

Rex: Sir Rudy's son and heir

Sir Royal: Sir Rudy's brother

Rolinda and Regina: sisters of Rex

Gabriel: roach tunnel engineer who has a legal mate and two daughters

Griffin: Gabriel's brother

Rufus: interpreter who has a legal mate and a son, Randall

Sir Rolo: member of the S.E.R.C.B. convicted of the murder of Sir Rudy

Rachel: legal mate of Sir Rolo

Ganton: commander of Sir Rudy's (and then Rex's) security warriors

Sir Rodger: a rival of Sir Rex on the S.E.R.C.B.

Reginald: legal mate of Sir Rodger's youngest daughter

Sir Ronald: S.E.R.C.B. member and owner of the #2 Plastic Mine to whom Rex "rented"

Gabriel

Forward:

Henry Roach-Dairier

When I wrote about my grandfather, I had all my information directly from the original source, Antony Dairier. Not long after it was circulated throughout The Combined Colonies of Insectia, I received a package from my great-uncle, Andrew, who was my grandmother's youngest brother.

A brief note came with the package:

"Dear Henry, I never knew my sister well, since she was thirteen season cycles older than I, and had been living and working in New South Dairy 50 for several season cycles before I emerged as an adult. I feel much closer to her now through your account. You honored her and Master Antony in the highest way. So I feel it is fitting that you should have these. Perhaps one day you will find it right to personalize this segment of antstory as well."

The package contained the journals of Uncle Andrew's parents, Henry and Adeline. I was pleased to accept them, since I am named for both my great-grandfather and my grandmother. The journals contained Henry's and Adeline's accounts of the season cycle Henry and two other ants spent building tunnels in Roacherian plastic mines under conditions that can only be described as slavery.

At the start of every term at the training facility in the City Of Roacheria where I teach Ant language and culture, I make it a habit to trace my family background, and how I, as a roach, came to be part of both the ant and roach worlds, and why I work so hard to help understanding between us continue to grow, after over two hundred season cycles of distrust. I tell the young roaches how my father came to be adopted by Antony and Henrietta after the last violent conflict.

Another term began right after I received the journals from Uncle Andrew. It took me by surprise when a new trainee named Ruth remained after the others had left, and asked to speak to me privately. In spite of the fact that many more females in Roacheria now receive formal training, she was one of only three females in the group. A few of the males had made snide remarks about them, until I stated my rules regarding insults and personal questions, and told them to leave if they couldn't follow those rules.

"Trainer Henry," she began, "my family lives in a very old domicile. Recently, my younger brothers had a fight and knocked down part of a wall. We found this between the partitions. My father said I should take this training unit and try to find out to whom it should be given. From what you said, you are one of them."

I looked at the words on the outside:

"To the descendants of Henry, Herbert, and Howard, three tunnel engineers from South Harvester 45, only after Sir Rex Roach is dead, or no longer in control of the South East Roach Control Board, that they may know the truth."

It was also an account of the incident with my great-grandfather, but as experienced by a roach mine tunnel digger, Gabriel. The coincidence of receiving the two versions within such a short time span unnerved me. As I read Gabriel's journal, I was shocked by the depth of deception used by the roaches in convincing the ants to work for them. I wondered if the affair would have ended as peacefully as it did if South Harvester 45 had known the truth at the time.

Ants keep journals for their descendants to remember and learn. Roaches do so out of a sense of self-importance and hide them carefully, lest the contents be used to condemn them for illegal activities. Gabriel's journal was obviously not written for those reasons. I wondered if Rex Roach, the villain of it all, had kept a journal. I went to the Archives of the Condemned to see about it. Rex *had* kept a journal, found only after his condemnation, when officials were sent to confiscate all his possessions. Since I am a descendant of one of Rex's victims, I was given access to it. It was there, in Rex's journal, that I found the seeds of deceit, greed, betrayal, and treachery which sometimes still trouble the relationship between The Combined Colonies of Insectia and Organized Roacheria.

After other research into the times in which they lived and much meditation on all the accounts, I give you *To Build A Tunnel* as true to the way they lived it as possible. Perhaps by presenting all the viewpoints of this unfortunate time, I can further nurture the seeds of healing.

1.

Young Rex Roach hurried toward the entrance of the Number 1 Plastic Mine. It was owned by his father, Sir Rudy, an influential member of The South East Roach Control Board, the governing body of Organized Roacheria. Several mine workers frantically attempted to clear debris from the tunnel's entrance.

Roacherian plastic mining was a half scientific, half luck affair. Plastic would be found on the surface and scavenged. When it was gone, digging would begin. The hole would be enlarged and deepened until the pit resembled a huge, bowl-shaped scar in the planet's surface, sometimes 2000 f-units in diameter. The depth varied greatly from one location to another. Tunnels would be dug into the slopes as needed. This particular mine had begun on the side of a slope, so its pit was comparatively small and its tunnel system much more extensive.

A confused noise of wailing and questions came from several female roaches, wandering about, searching for their mates and sons, to see if they had gotten out before the tunnel caved in.

Rex approached the workers. "Where is Gabriel? Did he get out?"

"Yes, Sir, he's over there resting," replied the overseer.

Rex moved toward where the mine tunnel digger reclined on the ground, front pods on his head, moaning. Parts of his back were caked with mud but Rex could see no obvious injury, which relieved him. Gabriel was not a great tunnel digger, but he was the best available in the area.

"What in maggot muck happened, Gabriel?"

Gabriel looked up and shook his front pods in anger. “Exactly what I told you would happen without enough support timbers! The whole thing fell in. Twenty, maybe thirty workers are dead because you wouldn’t authorize more timbers!”

“Pah, on workers. I can get fifty more tomorrow and they’ll be glad of the chance. How long will it take to get back on schedule with production? Every day is less credit.”

“Do lives mean so little to you, Rex? Where will you get your workers when the shortage means nymphs will suffer from Plastic Deprivation? You won’t have your luxurious life when they reach adulthood so mentally impaired that they can’t dig in your mine.”

Rex glared at him, eyes afire. He rose to his fullest height so that his seven f-unit body—for he was one of the larger variety of roaches—towered over the smaller, more slender Gabriel. It struck him as ironic that the plastic which made him rich was left behind by soft-bodied Duo Pods who, many thousands of season cycles ago, had stepped on and crushed ancient roaches. Now, he and his kind, evolved in size and intelligence, dominated and did the stepping.

He suppressed the urge to punish Gabriel. “I realize you are upset by your own narrow escape, so I will overlook your rudeness to me for the moment. Get up and come with me. My father wishes a full report immediately.”

Gabriel rose, winced slightly, and reached back to rub the support joint of his back-left leg. He followed Rex up the path to the structures which housed the mine’s administrative work chambers.

Sir Rudy stopped pacing as Rex and Gabriel entered. “How bad is it, Gabriel?”

Gabriel humbled himself before his powerful employer, stooping and sweeping his front pods outward in a submissive greeting. “At least sixty f-units collapsed. Between twenty and thirty workers are dead. If I’m given twice as many timbers, I can probably repair that section in two time frames, but the rest of the tunnel is just as bad. Unless I rebuild the whole thing, we’re sure to have an even worse cave-in.”

Sir Rudy groaned and crawled onto the softly padded bench behind his slanted work surface, dangled his middle and back legs in a resting position and tapped his front pod on the polished wooden writing surface.

“Why does it seem so impossible for you, or any roach tunnel digger for that matter, to build a tunnel that won’t fall in without half a forest to support it? Do you think timbers are free? Five season cycles ago, I was inside South Dairy Colony 50, negotiating a plastic trade deal with those ants. There wasn’t a timber in the place.”

“With all due respect, Sir, if you want an ant tunnel, hire an ant, and get some of that miraculous tunnel liquid of theirs while you’re at it.” Gabriel’s voice rang with sarcasm, but he didn’t care.

Sir Rudy stared at him and softened his voice. “All right, Gabriel. You do the best you can with what we have. Go home. Get yourself cleaned up and tell that mate of yours you’re all right. Take a few days off and have a physician check that obviously hurting back appendage. Send the bill here. We’ll discuss this further when we’re all in a better mood.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Gabriel said. He turned and limped toward the portal.

Sir Rudy turned to his first-hatched son after Gabriel closed the portal. “Learn one thing thoroughly, Rex. Look far ahead when you plan. Next time frame is not as important as next season cycle, or five season cycles from now. Learn to weather temporary set backs and bide your time patiently. I listened to Gabriel, ignored his disrespectful remark, offered to pay a medical bill, and sent him off happier. Now he thinks I’m great, and he’ll settle for half the timbers he really wanted. Sometimes loyalty costs a little, but it’s worth it later.”

Rex tapped his back pod on the floor and sat silently, his abdomen protruding from the open back of the chair as he leaned against its wooden side.

Sir Rudy looked at him curiously. "What's in that scheming mind of yours?"

"I was thinking that he's right. We should hire some ants."

Sir Rudy broke into gales of laughter. "What maggot crawled inside your head and ate your brain?"

"No, Father, I'm serious. Hear me out."

"I'm listening," replied Sir Rudy, stifling his laughter at his son's serious tone.

"Remember when The Board was trying to negotiate with South Dairy 50 two season cycles ago for some tunnel liquid?"

"Yes, we offered three season cycles' plastic supply for the formula and the training to use it. Then before the deal was complete, **poof**, no more South Dairy 50. We lost our negotiators and a good interpreter."

"Why not try again with South Harvester 45?"

"South Dairy 50 needed us. That surface has no more plastic. I never understood what those ants lived on. Why do you think we head the banished in that direction? We know they'll be dead in a time frame. South Harvester 45 has its own mine."

"We just need the right incentive."

Sir Rudy shifted and twitched his antennae. "Such as?"

"Some phenomenal amount of credit."

"It wouldn't work. Ants don't work for their own gain. They work for 'the good of the colony,' or some such nonsense."

Rex persisted. "Every creature has a price. You taught me that. Who cares if they share it with their whole colony? We might imply, not promise, but imply, that plastic prices would drop if we had better tunnels. The whole southern region of The Combined Colonies purchases a little more plastic from us each season cycle. I think their population is growing and their production isn't keeping up."

Rex rose from his chair and looked directly into his father's face. "Once you and I get that formula, we could charge the other mine owners whatever we wanted and increase our financial empire a hundred times."

Sir Rudy stared at his son. "Well, I'll be... I haven't raised a fool after all."

"Take it to The Board, Father. It'll look more official on S.E.R.C.B. parchment, though The Board will know it's a private deal."

Sir Rudy nodded. "I'll make inquiries about a good interpreter this afternoon. Now, a chore for you. Get an exact list of the dead workers. Go to each family and try to be pleasant, even if you have to clench your mandibles. Give our condolences along with the rest of this time frame's pay and our standard death benefit. It's a meager amount, but they'll thank you. If they have any reasonably intelligent adults in the place, offer them the job."

Rex rose to leave. He detested going to the worker's domiciles. He never went to that part of the city unless he wanted a female without the responsibility of a mating contract and the bother of raising nymphs. His father didn't know half of what was in his cold, calculating mind, or just how devious he could be.