



This is a photo from the internet of a current-day fire ant. The characters in this novel have evolved and are larger, walking on the back four legs and using the front legs as “arms” and “hands”. The evolved creatures are 3-4.5 feet from mandible to stinger and legs hold them perhaps 3 feet “high”. Other ant varieties and roaches in the novel are larger than fire ants in proportion to current species.

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Chronicles of Henry Roach-Dairier:

One Fire Ant's Life

By Deborah K. Frontiera

Henry Roach-Dairier II: A Note to My Readers on the Origin of This Segment of Antstory

I thought that once I completed *The Inception of the Combined Colonies*, I would stop writing Antstory and Roachstory. I would be able to write contemporary articles for Roacherian news outlets and help raise my son. I was wrong.

Unity was three timeframes past his first hatching anniversary, and Raissa just laid another egg, when I received a letter from Flora, the archivist at Fire Colony 2:

Dearest Henry,

I know you are busy, but I have recently received something I feel would be of great interest to you. I would take it to you, but even in these days of peace, I don't think a fire ant would be welcomed in Roacheria. If possible, please come and visit so that I can give you a carton containing several journals by one fire ant, Alexander. You would be aware of him from your grandfather's work on *New South Dairy Colony 50*. He was Captain Alexander during that conflict and then Commander at New South Dairy 50.

The gift to me came not from a descendant of Alexander's brother or sister, but from the descendants of his two best friends, Fred and Ferina. The relationship is much too complex to put into this letter, but it's a remarkable story.

Please let me know when you could arrange a trip here.

Sincerely,

Flora—Antstorical Archivist, Fire Colony 2

She is correct about not visiting Roacheria. Roaches still dread fire ants. While other ants and roaches travel between the colonies and Roacheria, fire ants respect roach fear and never venture across the border. I entered our parlor and handed the letter to Raissa.

She read it and said, "I knew you'd be called upon to write more, but what would make one fire ant so important?"

"What I know about fire ants is limited to friends at Fire 2, my research for *The Inception of the Combined Colonies*, and what my grandfather wrote. I've always wondered about Alexander. A lot seemed left out of my grandfather's account of New South Dairy 50."

Our family helper entered. "Excuse me, but Unity is squealing for you, Raissa."

My mind raced as my mate left to tend to our son. Fire ants did not intermate with other varieties as other ants did. Why? Every adult fire ant, male and female, spent their first two season cycles after job exploration in mandatory guard service. There was no mention of Alexander having a

mate in my grandfather's writing. Why, when reproducing was so important to them as protectors of the colonies? And there was what Alexander told Master Antony: "The best ant to hold anyone's Probationary Behavior Contract is someone who has been through it." What did he mean by that?

Raissa returned with Unity, who jumped out of her pods and ran to me. "He wants to see his daddy," she said.

As I cuddled our son, I told Raissa my thinking, along with my reservations about leaving her and Unity when she had laid another egg.

"I have our family helper and my mother. We'll miss you, but you need to go," my precious mate said. "Write back to her that you'll be there in five days. But, please, don't stay too long."

There was no trail from Roacheria to Fire Colony 2 and going to New South 50 first added unnecessary distance. I knew that from the bridge near Meadow Commonwealth, I needed to head slightly east of north. I had left red ribbons on trees on previous trips to mark the way.

Flora greeted me fondly. "I was so happy to receive your message. There's someone else here, anxious to meet you." A female fire ant stepped forward and held out her pods. "This is Deena—yes, a fire ant named Deena—the fourth generation with that name—descendants of Alexander's friends, Fred and Farina."

"Pleased to meet you," I said.

"And I, you. When the first Deena received this carton," she pointed to a container on the table, "she thought it was much too personal for anyone but family. Alexander wrote it so she could understand why she had a nontraditional name. Each generation of the family read it and passed it on to the next generation. After reading it during my second season cycle of adulthood, I, too, set it aside. Then I read *The Inception of the Combined Colonies*. In a dream, Essence told me it was time for everyone to understand fire ants."

Flora handed us mugs of tea and we sat down on floor cushions.

Deena continued, "We fire ants, while always ants, are 'set apart' from other varieties because of our lethal sting. That gift from Essence is both blessing and burden. With no choice, we hatch into our role as the protectors of all ants. It's hard to explain, but once you read these, you'll understand."

This statement deepened my confusion and interest.

"The journals may seem confusing. I've numbered them chronologically, but there is one more at the end that adds details to all the others. Alexander felt compelled near the end of his life to add more, especially to his early season cycles of adulthood." She opened the journal labeled "1" and pointed to a foot note at the start. "This indicates the place with more information in the last one. If you simply follow the numbers in order and keep flipping to the end volume, you will get a much clearer picture than if you read all the journals before going to the end notes."

After her demonstration of two more, each time pointing to the footnote and then to its companion in the final journal, I could see the organization of it.

"I will treat these with the utmost care and see that you get them back safely when I am finished," I said.

Deena took a sip of her tea. "Thank you, but return them to Flora here at the archives. Take your time. Flora tells me you've a young one and another egg soon to hatch."

I nodded.

"Then you'll want to leave for your home first thing in the morning. Please write to me about your progress."

She said farewell and left. Flora and I chatted, and then I picked up the carton and headed for the guest quarters near the archives. I had to force myself to stop reading and go to sleep. A few timeframes later I wrote to Deena, "I finished reading all of it. Alexander was truly remarkable—so much I never imagined! Now I will go back and study each volume and the end notes to have a better idea of how to present this to our world. Thank you for trusting me. I will send you draft as I go along."

Four season cycles have passed (Unity and his sister Charity often would not let their father work) since that meeting, and I now present *One Fire Ant's Life* to ants and roaches.

Since all other volumes of *The Chronicles of Henry Roach-Dairier* contain "In the Beginning", I will include it here keeping the tradition along with map included in *The Inception*. It does not show every colony Alexander visited, but the main places where he lived and served.

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.

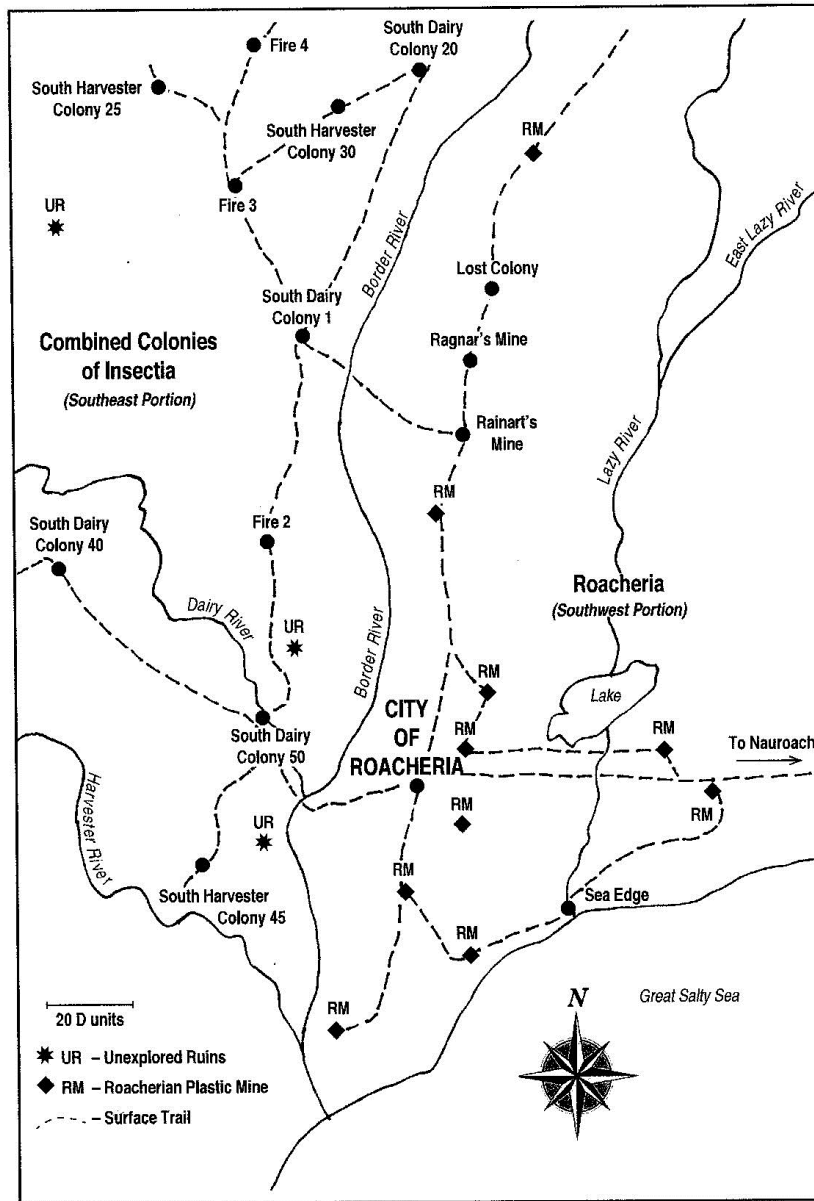
"Ah, my faithful ants," she said. "You have been with me from the earliest days and have always been civilized. Perhaps the intelligence I gave the Duo Pods was not enough. I will try again. I will give you not only the gift of knowledge, but my compassion as well. And this time, I will not sleep, but 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 INCEPTION OF THE COMBINED COLONIES



Chapter 1

When ants emerge from pupation, they don't have active memories of larvahood, but they have a sense of security from their parents and nursery workers. They can speak and understand words they heard before emerging as adults, but they are ignorant, naïve, and prone to misunderstanding many things. Alexander was no different when he fumbled with the latch and opened the portal of his pupation chamber.

His mother, Farrah, embraced him. "Welcome, my precious youngest son! I've longed for this day. I'm your mother. Your father, Frode, has been on guard duty the last nine days. He will be home tomorrow."

Alexander knew her but stumbled for words. "Where's my . . . where's my . . ." What he was trying to say was "mate", but he didn't yet know that word or what it meant. "Where is she?" he finally asked.

"Oh, you mean Deena?"

"Yes, that's it. Where is Deena?"

"Ah, so sweet that you remember her. She is like a twin sister to you. I don't know if she has emerged yet. She and her father, Donavon, live right next to us."

What followed, along with a mug of tea and a snack of roasted grassfrond seeds, helped Alexander understand that Deena's mother had died in an accident a few days before Deena hatched. Donavon, distraught with the loss of his mate, accepted Farrah's suggestion that she and Frode care for both larvae, instead of Deena going to a nursery. Farrah and Frode, having chosen Mated Perpetual Service, shared their job. One was on active duty for ten days, followed by four days at home before the other took up active duty for ten days. One of them was always at home with their young ones. A small number of fire ant families chose this option. Fire ants who held regular jobs in every colony were always "on reserve" in case of major hostilities with roaches.

"It's such a coincidence that you and Deena hatched on the very same day, and went into pupation on the same day," Farrah continued as Alexander munched another seed. "Donavon would bring Deena over every morning, then pick her up at the end of his workday. The two of you were so cute when you would curl up together for a nap after each feeding. We'll wait a couple of h-units so I can tell you more about the rest of our family, then we will go and see if Deena has emerged, or if we must wait a day or two for her to wake from her pupate sleep."

Snack over, Farrah led her son to a large floor cushion. She opened an album and began to show him images of his grandparents. "We named you after my father," she explained. "This is your sister,

Ferella. She is fourteen season cycles older than you are, has a mate, and you are already an uncle. You will meet her, your brother-in-law, your niece, and nephew on Seventhday. You also have a brother, Frode, named after your father, but you won't meet him until next season cycle. He is away from our colony for his time of service to all ants. He helps protect another colony from roaches who attack all the colonies along the border to steal grasshoppers. I'll read you his latest letter in a little while." She went through the rest of the images, then rose, got the letter, and read it.

"Can we go and see Deena now?"

"Alright, but don't be disappointed if she is not awake yet. And if she is, we won't stay long. She and her father must bond and talk as we have."

Farrah walked to a portal opening into the tunnel outside their domicile. Less than twenty steps brought them to another portal. Farrah tapped on it. It opened, and Alexander recognized Donavon—after all, he had seen him every workday for all seven years of his larvahood.

"Well, who have we here—must be Alexander!" Donavon embraced the newly emerged male. "When did he emerge?" he asked Farrah.

"About two h-units ago."

"Amazing! Deena emerged two h-units ago, too."

Alexander looked behind him and saw the one he sought. The two of them rushed into each other's embrace, wrapping their front and middle legs around each other, filled with emotion they both felt but couldn't have described if they tried.

Alexander felt a firm tap on the back of his thorax. He turned to see Donavon who said, "A male and female, even those raised together like you two were—but not actually related—do not hold each other like that."

Alexander and Deena backed away from each other. Deena's mandibles gaped open.

"Oh," Alexander said, "I'm sorry."

His mother's voice was gentle. "There are many things the two of you don't know. So, you must listen to Donavon and me, and to your father when he comes home tomorrow, and do what we say, Alexander."

The awkward moment passed. Donavon gestured to a pair of floor cushions. Their parlor looked a lot like Alexander's. Farrah led Alexander to a cushion and lowered herself onto the soft padding next to him. Donavon and Deena sat beside each other on another cushion. After a few moments of general conversation, again emphasizing the coincidence of the two young ones hatching, entering pupation, then emerging at almost the same time, Farrah rose and said, "We have a lot more to discuss at home, Alexander, and Donavon and Deena need time to themselves. Donavon, would you like to join us on Seventhday to celebrate?"

"Thank you, but we are going to my sister's so Deena can bond with the rest of my family."

"Of course, another time then."

Farrah took Alexander's front pod in hers and led him toward the portal. Back in their own parlor, she led Alexander to the bench opposite her at their eating surface. Alexander sat, abdomen on the bench, middle and back appendages on the floor in front of him, front pods resting on the table.

"We all have deep feelings for those in our families and others we care about," she explained. "The very deepest feelings of affection we call charity, but there are different kinds of charity, too. What I feel for you, my son, is different from the way I cherish your father. When you meet your sister, you'll feel a bond with her, which is yet another kind of charity. It's hard to explain, but I'll try. A male and female who cherish each other would do anything to please the one they cherish, even give up their life if necessary. That is the depth of feeling I have for your father. It develops over time, before a pair decides they are ready to make a life-long promise and become mates. Your father and I spent several timeframes getting to know each other before we felt that depth of emotion. When we joined each other in mating after a ceremony with our families and friends, our act of physical mating created your sister, your brother, and you."

She stopped for a moment to let Alexander absorb that. "We fire ants are special. We have the duty and responsibility to protect all other ants. It is not a choice, but an obligation. When you are older, have finished all your training, have spent two season cycles in service (as your sister did before she mated, and your brother is doing now) then you will likely find a female fire ant you cherish and join with her. It will be your duty to protect ants like Donavon and Deena, cherish them as fellow ants, even like a sister and brother, but not as mates, ever."

"Why?"

Farrah sighed. "You will learn that soon enough. Be patient and trust me. None of us understand everything on our first day of adulthood."

Alexander had a million questions, but he sensed he should not ask them. His mother rose from the table. "Let's prepare our dinner. Let me show you where our eating utensils are, and you can set them on the table while I warm up some of the grasshopper and root stew that I made last evening."

During the night, Alexander awoke in complete confusion. He cried out. His mother came into his sleep chamber immediately, wrapped her front and middle legs around him, stroked his head, sweeping her front pods up to the very tips of his antennae, and rubbed his thorax until he calmed down. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. I saw things, even though it was dark, and my eyes were closed."

"What things?"

"Brightness that hurt my eyes, everything above me blue like the bowls we ate out of."

Farrah touched her son's face and looked into his eyes as she sat on the edge of his sleep cushion. "You had a dream. We all have dreams. It sounds like you dreamed of the surface. Strange, though, when you have never been there. But don't worry. It was all in your brain, not real. We'll go to the surface when your father is home. You'll see it's all right." She stayed near him as he reclined again, to be sure he went back to sleep peacefully.

Frodi arrived home the following morning, entering their domicile as Alexander and his mother finished breakfast. Before he could say anything, Farrah said, "Look who woke up!"

Frodi bounded across the chamber and pulled Alexander into a warm embrace before Alexander could rise from the bench. His father's embrace was different from his mother's, but just as caring. Frodi looked at him. "What a fine young male you are—so much like your namesake." Alexander smiled.

His father turned and embraced his mother. Alexander saw the emotion between them and knew that was the way he wanted to be with Deena. Then he remembered that Deena was supposed to be like a sister.

"What's for breakfast?" Frodi asked. Farrah put a plate, piled high with grain cakes smothered in honey, before him. "Ah, so much better than the guard dining room. Not that theirs don't taste good, but yours are better."

"You do a very good job cooking yourself," Farrah replied. Then she filled her mate in on everything from the previous day ending with, "Alexander had a dream that scared him last night. I think he saw the surface in the dream, though I don't know how someone can dream something they've never seen. Anyway, after the Heart of the Colony today, we should go to the surface."

Half an h-unit later, they headed out of the portal. Frodi explained where they were going. "The Heart of the Colony is, as it says, at the center, both up and down." He gestured the shape of a colony and the inner-most part through all levels. "We all live, and eventually the part of Essence that She gives all of us returns to her, in peace and unity forever. Our bodies become food for the earth. For us fire ants, that might be on the surface in battle protecting others. Our tradition is that those guards are covered where they fell and honored with a memorial marker. Any ant who dies in the colony is covered in the Heart of the Colony, also with a memorial marker, where it's easy for friends and family to come and meditate to remember them. We will take you to where your grandparents are covered."

The place seemed huge to Alexander, a large open area with earthen pillars every so often—to support the ceiling above his parents explained. Rows and rows of straight paths crossed the area. His parents led him down one row with strange markings on a sign at the end.

"This is where your grandparents, my mother and father, feed the earth. See these symbols? That's your grandfather's name, your namesake, the season cycle he hatched," she pointed to various symbols, "when he left this world to join Essence, and this says, 'cherished father of four', your aunts and uncle and me."

"Look, there's Deena and her father," Alexander said, pointing a few rows away.

"Yes, but we won't go and speak to them right now," Frodi said. "That is where Deena's mother feeds the earth. Donavon is probably explaining that to Deena, and I think it's still hard for him to talk about. You'll understand more as you mature, but when we see them next, don't bring that up. It's very personal, and it would be rude to ask him about it. We show compassion toward him, or anyone, by not asking personal questions. He'll tell you if he wants to."

Alexander nodded and then followed his parents to another area where Frodi pointed out where his parents' covering places were. They left by a different tunnel from the place they had entered. A slanted tunnel took them up several levels until they came to the main tunnel out of the colony. Alexander could see a huge bright spot ahead, but Frodi stopped before they got there. "It's important to leave the colony slowly, letting your eyes be ready for the brightness of daylight."

"That's like my dream!"

Farrah took Alexander's pod in hers. "Now you'll know the place you dreamed of, and that there is no need to be afraid when you dream."

A guard stood at the entrance. Frodi greeted him, introduced Alexander, and wrote symbols on a page. "This says who we are and why we are going out today," Frodi explained. "For safety reasons, we keep track of everyone on the surface. Only those who work there and those of us who guard go out regularly. In a dairying colony like this one, most ants go out at least once a season cycle for Summer Solstice. Many ants in other colonies live their whole lives underground."

Then Alexander let out a long sigh. His parents told him what he was seeing—the sky, clouds, grass, trees, blossoms with their bright colors in the field of green, a herd of grasshoppers in the distance with ant workers and guards watching them. "Donavon is a dairying ant. He is usually out there taking care of the hoppers," Farrah said. "But today, of course, he's telling Deena about colony life, like we are telling you."

The three of them walked around, parents explaining to their young adult everything they saw. Alexander, thirsty for knowledge, soaked up all they said.

The dining surface was crowded on Seventhday. Frodi, Farrah, Alexander, his sister Ferella and her mate and their two larvae—a female of six season cycles and a male of three, both named for their parents.

"It's about the right timing for another egg, isn't it, Ferella?" Farrah said with a grin.

"Please, Mother, don't wish that on me just yet. These two are all we can handle right now. You had it lucky, and easy, with the three of us spaced so far apart. I know there is no controlling that, but I hope Essence does not send us another until Ferella pupates."

Frodi laughed and then said. "Easy until you emerged from pupation, Young Frodi went into pupation, and Alexander hatched all in the same quarter time frame!"

"And I thanked Essence for each of you, especially considering my age when Alexander arrived." Since she was seated next to Alexander on the bench, she gave him a side hug.

Alexander wondered about his mother's last statement but said nothing. Everyone smiled and laughed, talked about work, and other joyful topics. Alexander's mind turned to Deena, and he wished she was with them. Even though he didn't remember, and everything seemed new, he realized the great

importance of family bonds and understood what his mother had said about the different ways to cherish others.

A few moments after Ferella and her family went home, there was a knock on the portal.

"Who, at this hour?" Frodi said, rising from his floor cushion.

It was Donavon.

"Come in, come in," Frodi welcomed him.

"No, just a moment of your time. I hate to ask yet another favor of you, but it's egg time for the hopper herd, and I'm really needed. Could Deena stay with you tomorrow?"

"Of course! I'll be taking Alexander to register him at Training Center # 5. Shall I register Deena, too?"

"Oh, perfect. Thank you so much. See you in the morning."

Frodi smiled as he closed the portal. Alexander beamed. He would see Deena tomorrow!

Chapter 2

The following morning, Donavon brought Deena to Alexander's home, as he had throughout her larvahood. Alexander opened the portal, remembered that he was not supposed to be "too close", and held out his front pods in greeting. A few moments later, he, his father, and Deena left again to register at the training center.

"Where does that tunnel go?" Alexander asked, pointing to a small, dark tunnel.

Frodi looked where his son pointed. "Oh, that, it's an old unused tunnel. I've never been down it. We go this way to reach Training Center # 5, where you and Deena will spend First through Fifthday for the next six season cycles of your lives." He continued leading them down the larger tunnel, well-lit with grassfrond seed oil lamps mounted every hundred f-units on the curving walls. A colony worker made his way toward them checking each lamp, refueling some of them. Frodi greeted and thanked him.

They reached a larger tunnel with many more ants and turned to the right. Another few moments later, they reached the training center. Frodi led them to the administration area, where he approached the clerk and said he had two new trainees to enroll. He filled out two sets of forms, explaining to the clerk the friendship between him and Deena's father.

"You are in luck," the clerk said. "This is the last day for new enrollees this timeframe. Tomorrow, you would have had to keep them both at home until next timeframe." She checked a list and told them there were two spots left in one beginning group. "Training groups are limited to fourteen. I'll take you to that chamber now."

The three of them followed her down an inner tunnel lined with portals. She stopped at one, tapped on it, and entered. "Trainer Darren, here are Deena and Alexander, and now your group is full." Then she turned to the two young adults, "See the symbols next to the portal? Take a good look so you remember where to come tomorrow."

"I will be outside the entrance waiting for you at the end of the day," Frodi said, patting the backs of their thoraxes.

Alexander's antennae shook, but he tried to show confidence by straightening up as much as he could. He noticed Deena's left-middle pod ticked rapidly on the floor.

"Welcome, Deena and Alexander," the trainer said, drawing both gently into the chamber. "Deena, you may sit here on this bench right next to Anne. She started a few days ago and will help you when you need it, as will I. Alexander, you'll be over there," he pointed across the training chamber to the last open space, "and Al will do the same for you."

Alexander greeted his bench mate and looked around. All the males were on one side across a wide aisle down the center, the females on the side by the portal. There seemed to be more females than males, but he didn't know how to count. Trainer Darren explained, "Now that the group is full, we will begin learning in earnest. I'll still read to you and discuss topics, but you will have home practice, too. Please, each of you, tell Alexander and Deena your names."

The day flew by and almost before they knew it, Trainer Darren announced that the day was over. Each trainee received a satchel. "These have your home practice in them. Tonight, you'll write your names and have one of your parents read a story in the book enclosed." He led them out, pointing to the symbols next to the portal again, before taking them to the front entrance where Alexander spotted his father among others. Deena's middle pod was ticking again, so Alexander took her pod in his and they walked to Frodi.

He embraced them and stood between them, as they went back the way they had come that morning. "Dad, look, there's another darker tunnel. Could it be the same one close to home?"

Frodi stopped. "Very observant, Alexander! It's possible. We aren't in a hurry; let's find out. We can always come back here if it leads the wrong way."

"There's no light," Deena protested.

"That's all right," Frodi said. "Take my pod and use your antenna to smell your way along."

The tunnel was barely wide enough for the three to proceed side-by-side. Alexander swept his front pod along the tunnel wall, noticing its smooth texture. Then there was a narrow gap and a different texture. "What's this?" he asked.

His father stopped and felt all around, sweeping his antenna side to side. "Oh, this is an emergency chamber. When there is extremely heavy rain on the surface, sometimes tunnels flood. Emergency signals sound letting colony members know to get out of the tunnels. There are chambers like this every quarter d-unit. You'll learn more about that from your trainer."

The tunnel led to the place near their domicile that Alexander had seen earlier. "Well, look at that," Frodi said. "We won't have to leave as early tomorrow. What a great shortcut! Tell me all about your day."

Over mugs of honeydew, Alexander and Deena described how they had all introduced themselves. Then they learned the first six of many reading symbols and the sounds they represented in spoken language. They listened as Trainer Darren wrote one name after another on a large slate, saying the names slowly to accent each sound as he wrote symbols. They said the symbol name whenever he wrote any symbol that he had shown them earlier.

"My name had four of those symbols—well, two of two of them!" Alexander said. "And Deena had two—two of one and one of another."

Deena said that after that, the trainer read a story to them and asked questions. Then it was lunch time, and after that, they learned how to count. "There are eight females and six males in our group. After that, we went to a large chamber with another group where we exercised. I got really tired."

"Me, too, but Trainer Darren said in a few days, we won't be tired. We meditated to Essence, and then he gave us our satchels and we came out to you."

"Well, let's get out that home practice, and see if we can finish before your father arrives, Deena." While Alexander and Deena sat at the dining surface facing each other trying to write their names, Deena stretched her back pod under the table curling it around Alexander's. He smiled.

Young adult ants learn rapidly. Within a quarter timeframe, Alexander and Deena knew all their symbols and could read simple sentences. Writing took more effort and practice. They knew their number symbols and began to solve simple problems. Trainer Darren still read them segments of Antstory and science, using images to help them understand those concepts.

On Firstday of their second quarter timeframe, he explained how each colony kept itself safe, beyond what fire ants could do. He taught them about rain and severe storms, and how they affected colony life. "Some of you may have noticed portals about every quarter d-unit that are not shops or domiciles."

Alexander raised a pod, then blurted out, "Yes, there is one on the little tunnel we take here and back home every day."

Trainer Darren acknowledged his response but told Alexander to remember not to interrupt. "Inside every emergency chamber there are shelves with cushions, a lantern and striker to light it, sealed jugs of water, and food supplies that do not spoil. Next to the door on the right side, sits a bucket with a brush on the top like this," he moved toward the portal of the training chamber where he had placed such a bucket to demonstrate. "Your front pod is strong enough to pry the top off. It's full of a mixture of wax with a little thickened honey to make it stick. Dip the brush in the bucket and apply it to the crack around the portal. It seals out any water that might be running down the tunnel. Every chamber is built large enough to provide ample air, so never worry about that. I want each of you to try

using the brush, so when you need to, you know what to do. Let's start with you," he said, pointing to the closest female.

Deena was second and handled the brush awkwardly but got her portion done. Alexander happened to be last and had watched everyone else, so he finished the last section across the base of the portal with confidence. When they had returned to their seats, the trainer continued. "It's important for every member of the colony to perform this with ease. While it is rare that we need to enter an emergency chamber—only once in my life so far—the colony holds drills twice a season cycle: in early spring when it begins to rain more, and at the start of summer when the severe storm season begins. Severe storms last h-units and h-units, up to two days. Ants caught on the surface during one of these may lose their lives. Fortunately, our bodies always give us warning—a strong tingling in our antennae—about an h-unit before one of these severe storms strikes. We never know exactly when colony safety drills will be. When you hear shrill bursts of whistling through the tunnels, do not panic. There will be a drill one day soon. Do what I taught you today. When the drill is over, we hear long, sustained whistles telling us it is safe to come out. Then you peel the seal off the portal like this." He walked back to the portal, slid his pod under the left-bottom corner and peeled the sealant off in one long strip.

Everybody nodded.

Two days later, on their way home, Alexander and Deena heard the short blast whistles. Deena cried out in fear. "Deena, don't panic. Remember what Trainer Darren said. Look, we are right by the emergency chamber." He took her pod, pushed open the portal and led her inside. Deena went in two steps and collapsed in a heap, shaking.

Alexander, knowing his duty, felt to the right of the door, pried open the bucket and applied the seal. He let his antennae find the shelves on the opposite wall and felt around for the lantern and supplies that were supposed to be there.

The shelves were empty.

"Alexander, where are you?"

The empty shelves had Alexander on the verge of panic, but he was a fire ant. He had to protect her.

He sat next to Deena, put his front pods around her and began to stroke her head and antennae as his mother had done when he had that dream. "Deena, calm down. We'll be fine. It's just a drill."

After a few moments, Deena relaxed, but she continued to shake. He put his middle appendages around her to stroke the back of her thorax. She responded, putting her front and middle appendages around him, stroking him in return. It felt marvelous; he relaxed, too.

Part of him remembered that he should not stay so close. He began to pull away, but Deena said, "No, please don't let go of me. It feels so good. Please, don't stop."

Alexander began to breathe faster, almost like when they exercised. He could feel Deena's thorax touching his, and she was breathing faster, too. She turned so that the back of her thorax touched the front of his. Alexander couldn't have explained what happened next if he had tried to. His mind let go and his body took over. From what he could tell, the same thing was happening to Deena.

A few moments later, Alexander felt the most marvelous tingling sensation all over his body—so intense was the joy of it that there were no words to describe it. He and Deena felt as if they were one body, not two, and he hoped the joy he felt would last forever.

Long, sustained whistles sounded through the colony tunnels.

Alexander and Deena rolled into sitting positions. "Thank you, Alexander. I'm not afraid anymore."

"I'm not afraid either."

"You were afraid?"

"Yes, because the shelves are empty. I'll tell my mom about it, so this chamber is supplied when it really needs to be. We better go home now."

He rose, pulled off the sealant strip, and opened the portal. The two headed for Alexander's domicile, still filled with absolute joy.

His mother let out a sigh of relief when they entered. "Did the training center hold all of you for the drill?"

"No, we were on the way home. But there's an emergency chamber in that dark tunnel, so we went in. I did what Trainer Darren taught us."

"Well, good for you!"

"I was really scared, but Alexander comforted me," Deena said.

"I stroked her the way you did for me when I had that dream. I was scared, too, though. There were no supplies."

"You did exactly what you should have. When you do what you need to, thought frightened, you are being brave." Farrah gave her son an affectionate embrace. "You'll be an excellent guard someday. I'll send a message to those who maintain the emergency chambers. Oh, I almost forgot! I borrowed an image maker. Come sit on the main floor cushion like brother and sister, so I can make an image."

Deena and Alexander were delighted to have permission to sit next to each other. "May we put our middle legs around each other?" Alexander asked. Farrah nodded. So, with their abdomens settled in the soft cushion, back legs on the floor in front of them, middle legs around each other, and front pods clasped in friendship across their thoraxes, Farrah opened the image maker's lens to capture the only image of them together.

The following day on their way home, Alexander and Deena hesitated as they walked by the emergency chamber. "Let's go in again and stroke each other," they said in chorus.

However, while stroking each other with great affection felt good, there was no intense pleasure.

"It's not like yesterday," Deena said, disappointment in her voice.

"Maybe we felt it more yesterday because we were both scared," Alexander suggested. "Maybe Essence gave us that feeling for comfort."

"That must be it."

They went home, and neither mentioned it again—until the end of the timeframe.

Chapter 3

During the third quarter timeframe, Trainer Darren described what the rest of their training season cycles would entail: the first three season cycles covered their "basics"; then there would be three season cycles of advanced training in the mornings with "job exploration" in the afternoons, in which they would cycle through several work areas under the direction of experienced adults. "This will help you find the work you want to be trained to do for the rest of your life—from 'general worker' to specializations like medical, tunnel engineering, colony leadership, larva care, training young people, transporting goods to other colonies, an almost endless list. Our fire ants also know they will spend the two season cycles serving as guards."

He paused and smiled at the five fire ants in his group. "Only after that may fire ants have a mate. But they have other options, too. Would any of you like to tell your friends about these?"

One of the other fire ants said his aunt had made a Vow of Perpetual Service. "She will always remain single, giving up family life and maybe someday be a colony commander."

"Thank you! A very small percentage of guards feel called by Essence to make that vow. Alexander, would you mind telling us about your parents?"

"My parents are in Mated Perpetual Service. They are both guards, but they share one job." He described how their work schedules were different from most ants in the colony.

"We have perhaps half a dozen such families of guards here," the trainer said, concluding that day's colony culture lesson.

On the fourth Fifthday of their training, Trainer Darren opened with a more serious voice than they had heard before. "Our two main lessons today are the most important of your lives. We will diverge from our usual beginning with reading to hear an important segment of Antstory."

The whole group looked at each other eagerly because the way Trainer Darren related the past made them feel like they were there. "You've already heard of how South Dairy Colony 1 and South Harvester Colony 45 were freed from slavery under the roaches by fire ants when The Combined Colonies of Insectia formed. What I am going to tell you today is equally important, especially to fire ants."

Alexander and his fellow fire ants, the smallest of ant varieties, sat up straighter.

"In the generation that followed, our leaders encouraged young adults ready for mating to combine with other varieties of ants. Fire ant leaders believed that the young from those mixes would be larger, even better guards. Concerning size, they were correct. In the twenty-fifth season cycle CCI, when some of the dairier/fire ant guards in South Dairy 1 were active on patrol, Roacheria attacked the colony. Hundreds of roach warriors swarmed across Boarder River." Trainer Darren stretched as tall as he could and drew out "swaaarmed", adding threatening gestures.

"The patrols fought bravely but were overwhelmed. They stung over and over, but the roaches did not die! Survivors whistled the distress call for reserves, who soon poured out of the colony; more and more fire ants had to join the battle. Many guards of that new generation perished that day. The roaches were driven back only because of superior numbers of older guards." He paused a moment in silence. Several trainees put a front pod on their mandibles.

"Afterward, medical personnel discovered the reason for this disaster—the dairier/fire ant mix guards, while they had greater size and a stinger, had NOT inherited venom glands! The word went out to all colonies that any mixed-variety guards should be tested to see if they had venom or not. Not one had venom glands! The better, hoped-for generation had lost the fire ant advantage!" A gasp went through the group; a fire ant's venomous sting was what kept the roaches at bay!

Trainer Darren explained further that fire ant commanders from each colony met to decide a course of action. They emphasized that this was not the fault of the parents involved. "Nobody knew! No one can be held accountable for something they did not know they should avoid. But the leaders decided now that it was known, no fire ant from then on should have any mate but another fire ant!" Trainer Darren stopped for a moment to let this sink in.

Alexander squirmed, thinking of Deena and his deep feelings for her, remembering what his mother told him the very first day. He looked at Deena. She was staring at him.

"I must now ask you five fire ants to stand, for we are grateful for the sacrifice all your antcestors have made for the rest of us, and the sacrifice you will make." Alexander stood along with the other four of his variety.

"Cross your front pods against your thoraxes like this," Trainer Darren said as he demonstrated, "and repeat after me: I . . . then your name . . . solemnly vow, that as a fire ant, when I am ready to choose a mate, I will choose only another fire ant."

Alexander could barely get the words out, but he meant it. It was a good thing they were told to sit down, because his legs felt like mush. It took every bit of resolve he had not to burst into tears.

He barely paid attention to the end of the lesson, which explained that the young guards back then who were in service but had no venom completed their service in support positions, rather than on patrol. Those young guards would no longer be considered fire ants and could mate whomever they cherished. Unmated adults, who now were aware of the problem, all made the same vow that Alexander and his fellow guard trainees had just made.

Lunch followed. He and Deena had always sat next to each other, often with their middle legs entwined under the table. Now, he sat across from her, legs to himself. The sadness with which they

looked at each other was the opposite of the intense joy they had felt until that morning. Neither could speak, and, in misery, munched only a few morsels.

Trainer Darren approached and sat beside Alexander with a friendly pod on the back of his thorax. "Alexander and Deena, I've seen in your eyes how you feel about each other. I can see your pain now. I'm so sorry for what you are going through. But time will heal this hurt. You are both very young. You will each find appropriate mates you will cherish. If either of you ever want to talk about this, don't hesitate to stay after training any day." He reached a front pod across the table and patted Deena's front pod.

If the realization of the morning sent Deena and Alexander into despair, what followed turned their world upside down and inside out. With diagrams and description, Trainer Darren explained how male and female bodies joined in mating to reproduce. He emphasized that for ants, this was a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence. All eggs a female laid, even season cycles later, were from that one joining. Once a male had given his gift to a female, he had nothing left for any other. The first egg arrived two timeframes later, on average, and hatched another two timeframes after that. Beyond the first, a couple never knew when or how many more eggs would come. Somewhere between age forty and fifty, a female would lay an egg that had no life, signaling that the fertile stage of her life was over.

"My mate and I have agreed I may tell you some of this intensely personal and amazing experience. We both spent time getting to know other males and females before we spent exclusive time with each other. We were **absolutely** sure we cherished each other and were ready to make a promise to mate before doing so. Then, according to custom, we remained promised for several timeframes before our ceremony, celebrating with our friends and families and then living together. The pleasurable tingling sensation during joining is so intense, it is beyond words. The word given it, the ecstasy, doesn't, in my opinion, describe it either."

Alexander stiffened. He took a quick side glance at Deena. Her mandibles gaped open, and her middle pods ticked against the floor uncontrollably. Fear flooded Alexander. That was what he and Deena had experienced that day in the emergency shelter! In a timeframe and a half, Deena would lay their first egg! *Oh, Essence*, he thought, *what do we do now? What will happen to me for breaking the vow I just made? How will I protect Deena?*

Alexander mouthed the words, "Don't say anything right now." She nodded.

They managed to hide their anxiety during the physical training period. Alexander ran faster and harder than he ever had, his mind working as hard as his body for some way to handle what lay ahead. He tried not to look in Deena's direction. During silent meditation before the training day's end, he begged Essence for guidance.

When they left the training center, they walked rapidly into the shortcut tunnel, and did not speak until they were far enough away that no one would hear. Deena collapsed in a heap, weeping. Alexander lowered himself beside her, wrapping his legs around her. "Deena, calm down. Tears won't help. We **have** to tell our parents and ask for help! At least we know why it didn't work the next day." He laughed a little.

"It's NOT funny!"

"I know, but I had to try something to calm you down."

"But . . . your vow . . . you'll be in so much trouble!"

"We didn't know. That has to count for something. Like Trainer Darren said about parents way back then, that they couldn't be held accountable for what nobody knew." He tried to sound confident, but dread inside him gripped him like a vice.

Deena stopped shaking. "Please, not today. We have some time. Let's wait a few days to think. We might be able to solve this problem ourselves."

"All right, but only a few days. It's going to come out when you lay an egg, and I think the longer we wait, the worse it will be."

"Please, if you really cherish me, you'll let me say when to tell them."

Alexander was torn. His heart wanted to do as she said, but his head said, as it had while he ran during physical training and during meditation, that they must tell. "Take some deep breaths and calm down, or my father will know something is wrong."

All the deep breaths in the world could not have disguised the looks in Alexander and Deena's eyes. The moment they entered Alexander's home, Frodi took each of them by their pods and led them to opposite sides of the dining surface where mugs of hot herb tea waited for them. When they had drunk about half their tea in silence, Frodi asked, "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Talk about what?" Alexander replied.

"The vow you made today."

"How do you know about that?"

"The looks in your eyes, for one, and the fact that for generations, young adult fire ants make their vow to mate only another fire ant on the last Fifthday of their first timeframe of training."

Deena shook her head. Alexander looked at the floor and said, "Not now."

"Are you hungry?"

Alexander and Deena nodded. Frodi set a basket of roasted seeds between them. He sat next to Alexander, placing a pod on the back of his thorax, and reached across to put his front pod over Deena's.

"I knew this would be a terrible day for both of you. Growing up together like you did. It's never easy to sacrifice what you feel for someone because of a responsibility in which you had no choice. Alexander, you know your mother and I have been trying to prepare you for this. And, Deena, I know your father has, too. But that doesn't change the pain both of you feel now. I was about a season cycle

older than you are when I had deep feelings for a harvester female, and I was aware that we could never progress beyond friendship. This was long before I met Ferrah. I asked if I could change base groups in training, so I didn't have to see her every day. I wept for several days. But I made it through, and so will you."

Alexander knew his father's words were meant to comfort, but Frodi had no idea what was causing the anxiety he and Deena felt. He finished his tea and stared at the floor again.

"Do you have any home study today?"

"No," the two said in unison.

"Let's get your minds off it then. Come over to the biggest floor cushion and I'll read something." Frodi rose, went to a shelf, and chose a book. Deena and Alexander sat on either side of him. "This is a volume of poems written by a dairier like your dad, Deena, about the beauty of the surface."

Between the effects of the herbal tea and Frodi's calm voice as he read, both young ants relaxed. Alexander formed a picture in his mind from the description of a field with grazing grasshoppers, the sound of their munching, the gentle breeze cooling all creatures, while in the distance a giant butterfly lit upon a flowering wood plant to sip the blossoms' nectar. Before long, Deena's father arrived, and she left.

Alexander remained quiet all evening and slunk off to his sleep chamber.

"I will listen any time," Frodi said.

"I know; I just don't want to talk about it today."

Chapter 4

Persistent knocking at Alexander's sleep chamber portal yanked him from a dreary sleep. "Come on, son. You've slept half the morning away."

He dragged himself off his sleep cushion and to the kitchen. He was hungry but didn't feel like eating. His father insisted. "You need some energy. We are going to the surface today—to the top of the mound." Alexander groaned but obeyed.

His father signed them out, greeting the entrance guard cheerfully. This would be the third time Alexander had been on the surface, but they had not been to the mound top before. They walked a quarter of the way around the base of the mound before his father stopped at notched steps, and a slanted path curving around and around the mound.

Frodi pointed to one and then the other. "Straight up? Or on the slant? Choose the one you think you can handle."

Alexander didn't want to do either, but he chose straight up—maybe the extreme demand would dull the aching in his heart. His father said, "You set the pace."

Alexander started the climb. Such a long way! Why had he chosen straight up? He paused often but was determined not to embarrass himself by turning onto the slanted path each time they crossed it. On the fourth crossing, Frodi said, "I used to be able to go straight up with ease. Not so much now—getting older. I'm going to switch to the twisting path. Wait for me at the top."

Alexander nodded and continued up the steps. But he waited for his father to catch up at the next crossing. Those rests helped him make it. No one else was there at the time. The sun blazed nearly straight down from a clear blue sky over an amazing view. He turned slowly around until he faced east, and then his father arrived and told him what he was looking at.

"See that ribbon of shining blue? It's over ten d-units away. That's Border River with Roacheria beyond. That distance is why they don't bother our colony nearly as often as South Dairy 1—which is less than half a d-unit from the stream." Frodi pointed along the trail in the direction of South Dairy 1. "Those are carriers taking baskets of goods we trade with them and other colonies. Often, they use the inter-colonial tunnel, but this time of the season cycle, they like to travel the surface trail. It's about half a day's journey."

Frodi pointed at the meadow between the mound and the border stream. "Can you see any movement in the grass?"

Alexander looked and looked but shook his antennae.

"That's how good we are at guarding. There are over 100 guards on patrol out there—perfectly hidden. They're about every hundred f-units along the stream, then staggered over the rest of the meadow. You can't smell them either. You'll learn to do that when you start your two-season-cycle service. But your antennae can detect roaches a quarter d-unit away, depending on the wind."

They turned again and Frodi pointed at the grasshopper heard. Alexander could see those guards. The dairiers tended, the hoppers and the guards kept a look out for predators. They also admired the tall grassfronds growing in huge fields and smaller plots of other edible plants. The wood plants near a pond were filled with aphids, tended by other ant workers.

Frodi sat down, opened his satchel, and laid out the picnic he had packed. Alexander ate heartily. For the entire morning since they came to the surface, he had managed not to think about Deena.

During Seventhday meditation, Alexander tried to listen to the spiritual director, but all he could think about was seeing Deena again on Firstday so they could talk on their way to the training center

and again on the way home. Alexander knew he must convince her to tell their parents what had happened the day of the safety drill.

He was surprised to see Deena smiling when she arrived. He grabbed his satchel and gave his father a quick embrace.

"I've got an idea!" Deena said the moment they entered the shortcut tunnel. "My aunt asked if I would like to live with her for a while so you and I could 'get over each other.' My dad seemed in favor of it. I said I'd think about it, but what I think is that I should. Because I could confide in her and ask if she would say our egg is hers when it comes. Two of my cousins are pupating, and she doesn't have a larva right now. My oldest cousin won't figure it out, at least I don't think so. Who would know? You wouldn't get in trouble!"

"Would she do that?"

"I think so. Please, don't say anything to your parents. You might not ever have to tell them. I'll tell my dad that I do want to stay with Aunt Darleen, but I'll say that I want to spend a few more days at home. Then I'll be able to tell you what she says."

Alexander wanted to ask what might happen if her aunt said no, but Deena was so relaxed and happy that he kept quiet.

Training days went well because they were both less anxious. On Fifthday, Deena gave Alexander a long, drawn-out embrace before they left the shortcut tunnel. Alexander meditated to Essence asking for her plan to work. He stroked her head and said, "Take care of yourself. See you Firstday morning."

Deena went to her home; her father had decided she could be alone until he came home. And Alexander went to his. Farrah was at home now—she had come off duty on Secondday, so both parents would be home for four days. On the outside, he was cheerful, but inside his emotions roiled. If Deena's aunt agreed to take their egg, it would be a relief, but it would also mean that he would never have any part of his offspring's life. And he would probably never see Deena again. Plus, he hated the thought of living a lie. But what if Deena's aunt didn't agree? Well, then maybe Deena would understand that they needed to tell their parents. Facing whatever trouble he might be in seemed easier than never seeing Deena, never being part of his own young one's life.

Deena was not smiling Firstday morning. They walked in silence until they were into the shortcut tunnel. "What happened?" Alexander asked.

Deena let out a long sigh but did not burst into tears. "My aunt can't take our egg because she laid her dead egg six timeframes ago. My uncle knows that, so turning up with another egg now ... "

Alexander remained silent. That was one scenario he had not thought of. He waited for her to continue.

"She said she was really sorry, that she would have helped that way if she could. She promised not to tell my dad but said several times that we have to tell our parents. It was like, 'I won't tell because I promised to keep our conversation private before you told me, but you two MUST.' So ... "

She reached out to hold Alexander. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

He returned her affection, trying to pretend everything would be fine. "I think today you should go home ahead of me. I want to ask Trainer Darren some questions after training is over. But I won't tell him what happened. I promise."

"How do you think he could help?"

"I don't know. I want to ask if there is ever any exception to my vow for ants like us. I'll tell you what he says tomorrow."

The day seemed agonizingly long. Alexander had mentioned at lunch break that he would like to speak privately with his trainer, so he stayed in his seat while everyone else left.

When Trainer Darren returned to the chamber, Alexander fumbled his words. "Is there ... I mean ... Would there ever be any circumstances in which a fire ant could mate with another variety?"

Trainer Darren replied, "I had a feeling that might be on your mind, so I looked it up. Let's sit down in a more comfortable place." They went to the back of the chamber where there were two floor cushions next to a bookshelf. Alexander had a hard time keeping his antennae from twitching.

"If a fire ant and someone of another variety wish to mate, they must wait all through basic training, job exploration, and the fire ant's two season cycles of service. They must both make a sincere effort to meet and spend a good deal of time with others—eight each to be exact. They must spend a couple of timeframes with each of those eight and may not make a promise with each other at any point during the entire time. They can't spend time with each other, either. Once both have tried at least eight times to cherish someone else, they can apply to their colony's Fire Ant Council for permission to mate. From what I read, it is a rare occurrence."

[Every colony had a Colony Council to administer all colony affairs. But each also had a Fire Ant Council that focused on fire ant issues. Henry R.D. II]

Alexander's head drooped. He sighed. "We don't have ... I mean eight season cycles is a long time, and eight other ants."

"Not very encouraging, I know, but it is possible. I'm sorry I'm not more help."

"Well, at least we know. Thank you anyway." Depressing as it was, Alexander felt that at least many season cycles from now—by which point Deena might have laid two or three other eggs—he could apply to be part of the life of his offspring. He dragged his pods on the walk home.

After explaining the process to Deena the next morning, she remained silent.

"We really have to tell our parents," Alexander said. "Maybe the Fire Ant Council will be kind enough to let me visit our young ones while we wait out the season cycles."

"My father will be so angry. But, yes, we have to tell them. But we still have another time frame. Maybe if I stay with Aunt Darleen, he'll be more open. After a couple of quarter timeframes, I can say I would really like to have a last chance to be with you. Then we could tell our parents at the same time."

"Three Seventhdays from now, my parents will be home together. I think I could talk them into having you and your dad over for dinner that day. If we tell them at the same time, your dad probably wouldn't get mad in front of my parents."

"Or your parents either, when you say you broke that vow."

"It absolutely has to be that day, though. Any more time after that, you might lay your egg, because an egg can come early. Remember?"

"Maybe I should just go off somewhere on the surface when the time gets close. It would be so unfair for you to be punished. We didn't know!"

"Deena, you could put yourself and our future our young one in a lot of danger that way. What would you do with the egg? NO, you can't even think of doing that!"

But they were almost at the training center by that time. No more discussion.

On their way home, Alexander made Deena promise NOT to try to "get lost" on the surface.

Chapter 5

Alexander kept his worries under control until the day for their dinner with Deena and Donavon. During dinner would be the best time, but what to say? All the possibilities he thought of were ridiculous:

"Oh, guess what, Mom and Dad, Deena is going to lay an egg soon."

"Remember that day when we came home all happy after the safety drill? Well . . . Oops . . ."

"Mom and Dad, you are going to be grandparents again . . ."

Donavon arrived at three h-units as planned, but Deena was not with him. "She's coming directly from my sister's," he said. Frodi, Farrah, and Donavon chatted about usual things while Alexander tried to keep his pods from tapping the floor and his antennae from twitching. Moments dragged by.

At half after three, a tap came on the portal; Alexander rushed to open it. But it was Deena's aunt. "Is Deena here?" she asked. "She said she wanted to get some blossoms to bring today—there is one market stall near our domicile that has blossoms, even on Seventhday. But she left at 1:00, so I thought she meant to come back to our place before heading here. Then she didn't return!"

All adult mandibles opened in shock. Frodi took charge. "Alexander, you stay here with your mother. Frodi and Darleen, go and check that market stall. Surely, she wouldn't, but I'll check the main entrance to see if she went to the surface."

[The account that follows was not in Alexander's journal, but in a statement his father made to the Justice Council. A copy of it was folded into Alexander's journal. Henry R.D. II]

Frodi ran at top speed to the main colony entrance and asked the guard on duty if a young female had gone alone to the surface.

"Let me check the roster . . . Yes, here, Deena—purpose: picking fresh blossoms, time fifteen moments after one in the afternoon. I remember. She mentioned her father, Donavon. I know him well, so I thought nothing of it. Strange though . . . nothing yet for return!"

"Do you remember which way she went?"

The guard pointed to a rise a quarter d-unit from the entrance. "I did tell her not to go beyond that rise and she said she wouldn't."

"Please send someone to follow me. Deena and my son are very close. I think something may be terribly amiss."

"I'll ring the call bell."

Frodi ran to the top of the rise but saw nothing. He lowered his antennae and picked up Deena's scent. Her path wandered here and there, with blossomless stems showing the way as well. Over the next rise, his antennae detected a mantis. Anguish clenched him.

Perhaps a thousand f-units farther at the base of a hollow, he saw what was left of Deena, blossoms scattered near one front pod.

"Ahhhhhhhhhh! Oh, Essence!"

A moment later, another guard joined Frodi, also gasping in shock. While mantises were common, and always watched for, one had never come that close to a colony mound.

The two fire ants approached cautiously. "You check her out; I'll make a large circle," the guard said.

Frodi nodded. It was when he reached her that he saw that her abdomen was half eaten. What remained confirmed Frodi's suspicion. He dropped to the ground and wept. The other guard, having completed his circle, joined him. "You knew her?"

"She and her father live next to us. Her mother died in an accident—she worked with aphids and a branch broke under her and an aphid's weight, killing both in the fall. Her father was so distraught.

Deena hatched three days later. We cared for her along with our son. Oh, Essence, how will I tell them?"

"I'm so sorry. The mantis went off to the north. I followed the female's scent trail about two-hundred f-units farther, then she turned straight back to this place, so she was returning to the colony when it happened." He examined the ground next to Deena's remains. "Look! The mantis was female and left this much of her as food for its clutch of eggs when they hatch!"

Frodi rose onto his pods, his emotions churning. "I've got to go home. I forgot my satchel in my rush. Have you got parchment and ink in yours?"

"Of course. Here." He reached inside his equipment satchel and handed the items to Frodi, who wrote their down names and domicile locations.

"Have someone bring body wrappings. This is an occasion when family must not to see." In ant culture, bodies were generally covered unwrapped in The Heart of the Colony, but a death like Deena's was an exception to that custom.

The guard nodded and reassured Frodi he would take charge of the scene and keep the incident private until further notice.

The longer Frodi was gone, the more Alexander fidgeted, and the more he felt something had gone terribly wrong. Farrah kept telling him to relax, that everything would be fine, but he could see that she was worried, too. When Frodi entered, he went straight to Alexander and looked him in the eyes.

"Son, you wanted us to have dinner together today so you could tell us something important. Now is the time to say it."

"Where's Deena?" Alexander shouted.

"She's not coming. What were you going to tell us?"

"Where's Deena?"

Frodi's voice was gentle but firm. "I will get to that. You, first. Now." Farrah gave her mate a questioning look, but he lifted a pod signaling her to wait.

"I ... I wanted to tell you when we found out ... but Deena asked me not to ... She was scared of what her father would think ... but ... well ... "

Frodi put a front leg around Alexander. "Go on, Son."

The portal was still open; Donavon and Darleen slipped in with questioning eyes.

"We ... that day of the safety drill ... we were both scared and, honest ... we didn't know what we were doing ... we didn't know ... but we mated."

There. It was out.

"Now where is she?" Alexander shouted, pushing his father's pod away.

Frodi wrapped both front legs around his son. "She went picking blossoms, and on her way back, a mantis attacked."

"NO, NO, NO!" Alexander pushed away his from his father, screaming in agony.

Donavon began to shout, his voice harsh, angry, and accusatory. "How can you not know that! He had to know! It's all your fault, you guards, with your aggressive instincts! You never supervised them enough. All of you! It's your fault. I want justice!"

Alexander lost control. He retreated to a corner of the parlor, crying, screaming his sorrow, repeating over and over that they hadn't known. He curled his abdomen under himself, stabbing his stinger at one of his back pods. Both parents ran toward him, but he was quicker, ramming his stinger into his back-left pod.

His father, pinned him down calling out, "Farrah, call for medical help, then help me hold him down."

Donavon kept yelling accusations. Darleen tried in vain to calm her brother down. The noise carried into the tunnel. Other neighbors arrived asking how to help. Then the odor of burning roast came from the heat box—everyone had forgotten about the roast grasshopper. Confusion reigned.

Alexander no longer cared about anything. He went limp on the floor, waiting for a death that didn't come. His father continued to hold him. A medical attendant entered.

"Over here!" Alexander heard his father say. "He tried to sting himself."

The medical attendant jabbed Alexander between neck joints. The room swirled around him and went black.

When Alexander awakened, his father's eyes met his. He tried to move but couldn't. He twisted his head to see he was completely wrapped in white cloth bands. "Why didn't I die?"

Frodi stroked his son's head and antennae. "We are all immune to our own venom. The medical attendant gave you an injection to calm you down. You are in the medical center, and the bands of cloth are to keep you from trying to end your own life again. Oh, Son, I wish you had told us sooner. You don't seem to realize how much we cherish you and Deena. We know what happened was not your fault."

"But Donavon said ... and he's right. It is my fault."

"No, it's not your fault," Frodi repeated. "Deena's father was upset. I didn't realize he had returned. That wasn't how I wanted him to hear it. He went berserk, just like you did. Forget what he said. We cherish you, so much."

"Deena didn't want me to be in trouble, you know, because of my vow not to mate anyone but a fire ant. She promised me she wouldn't go to the surface by herself. Now she's gone, and I'm still in trouble ..."

"Don't worry about that right now. We'll help you through this."

Then Alexander heard his mother's voice. "He's awake?"

"Yes," Frodi replied.

Farrah embraced Alexander and stroked him in the same way she had his first night of adulthood. But all the stroking in the world would not undo what happened.

"Is everything all right at home?" Frodi asked his mate.

"Yes, for the moment. Donavon stomped out the door saying he was going to the Justice Council immediately, Seventhday or not. Darleen looked at him, looked at me, kept saying she was sorry for the way he yelled at us, then went after him, to try to stop him, I think. Our neighbor on the other side helped me clean up the kitchen, air out the place. Said ask if we need anything else. Then I went to explain to our commander. He said to take as much time off as we need, and how sorry he was about what happened. He also said that the guard who was with you when you found Deena had come to see him. It will be in the colony bulletin that a young female was killed by a mantis, but no names. I really need some tea."

Alexander watched as an attendant handed his mother a mug and how they held each other close. He saw his mother crying, and it only made him want to die even more. It WAS his fault. He had failed to protect Deena. He had caused his parents' pain. He had made Donavon so angry. He should have told his parents at the beginning, but he chose not to. Guilt washed over him.

Chapter 6

Throughout the night, Alexander pretended to sleep, listening to what went on around him. He heard one medical attendant comment to another what a sad situation it was. In the silence in the early morning, he tried to think of a way to convince someone to unbind him. If he could accomplish that, he would run, taking tunnels upward, until he reached the surface. Then he would run far and fast, banishing himself, hoping to find another hungry mantis, or jump into a spider's lair to end his misery.

His chance came at breakfast. "I'm going to loosen your right-front pod so you can eat," the attendant said.

"Why do I have to be restrained anyway?"

"I was told you are a danger to yourself. You can ask your physician about unbinding you when she arrives."

"Please, can't you just . . . "

The attendant shook his head as he loosened the front pod, and placed a bowl of cooked, mashed grassfrond seeds with honey drizzled over the top where Alexander could reach it and fitted a spoon over the tip of his pod. When he finished the bowl, he said in a calm way, "I'm feeling much better now. Please, won't you unbind my other front pod?"

"I suppose," the attendant said. "Would you like another cushion to prop yourself up?"

"Yes, thank you."

"I'll be right back."

The moment the attendant left, Alexander pulled more of the binding toward him and chewed through the material with his outer mandibles. He curled and twisted and chewed until he was free, hopped off the raised sleep cushion and bounded out the portal. Without even looking, he ran down the interior tunnel, took a turn to the right, and found himself face to face with two medical attendants.

The two tackled him, held him down and called for the aid of others. Another prick in the neck. The last thing he heard before he blacked out again was his attendant saying, "I trusted you and you let me down!"

It was lunchtime when Alexander woke up to find himself restrained more securely than before. When he was offered some broth to drink, he said he wasn't hungry. His mother asked, "Oh, my precious son, what were you thinking trying to run?"

Alexander remained silent.

His mother stroked him gently. "Your father has been with a member of the Justice Council this morning explaining what happened. Donavon has accused us of negligence in supervising you and Deena. It's a serious accusation. Our commander has assigned us a legal counselor, and she'll be coming here to talk with you, too. Please, cooperate."

Alexander nodded. Finally, he said, "I'm really tired," and closed his eyes, pretending to sleep again. Not long after, he heard his father's voice.

"Farrah, this is Anita, our counselor."

Anita's voice was pleasant. "I see your son is asleep?"

"Yes." That was Farrah's voice.

"The Justice Council meeting today was short, and I think it went well. You'll receive a copy of the transcript later. Frodi, you were wonderfully calm describing what you saw on the surface. I know that wasn't easy. The guard with you supported everything you said, and it was a very good point that he found Deena was on her way back toward the colony. Otherwise, Master Danielle, Head of the Justice Council, might have leaned toward Donavon's view that Deena was trying to run away to protect Alexander. Donavon said the two of you must have known and pressured Deena to run."

"What?" Farrah exclaimed.

"I'm sorry, but that was the theory he proposed in his testimony. Please, don't be so alarmed. Having Master Danielle hear our case is to our advantage. She has more experience than anyone else and, though of dairying ant variety, she knows Fire Ant Regulations well. She is also aware of the ignorance of adults as young as Deena and Alexander. She agreed to hear testimony from Alexander's Basic Trainer and, better yet, from the Colony Nursery Supervisor, who will support you in the way you took care of Deena and Alexander. Best of all was Master Danielle's statement that she would contact Master Adriana, whom I've never heard of before and wouldn't have known to contact, to come and evaluate Alexander's state of mind and emotions."

Farrah spoke again, "Frodi, Alexander tried to run this morning."

"Oh, Essence! How did he do that?"

"He convinced the medical attendant to free both front pods and then chewed through all the bindings. He got about fifty f-units down the tunnel, but he ran right into his and another attendant. That's why he's bound even more tightly. He wouldn't tell me why, but I am sure his plan was to try to reach the surface to run into the wild."

Alexander stiffened. Could his mother sense his thoughts?

"Could that be used against him?" Frodi asked.

"Yes," Anita answered, "but it will also show how unstable his thinking and emotions are. And that instability is a reason for compassion, not punishment. Why don't you two take a break? Frodi, you can fill in your mate on what else occurred this morning. The medical dining room is on this level—take a left at the first tunnel crossing. I'll wait for Alexander to wake up."

Alexander waited a moment or two after he heard his parents leave the chamber and then decided he might as well face whatever was coming. He opened his eyes but said nothing.

"Hello, Alexander. I'm Anita. I'll be speaking for you and your parents to support their innocence, and yours, too. Will you talk with me?"

Alexander said, "I don't need someone to support me because I'm guilty. Of all of it. It's all my fault. You can tell the Justice Council that I accept being extinguished. Thanks anyway."

Anita looked into Alexander's eyes for a moment and then said, "Why do you think you should be extinguished for this tragedy?"

"Because I failed everybody. I didn't protect Deena, and now she's dead. Her father is right; it's my fault. I went against everything I'm supposed to do as a Fire Ant Guard."

"I see. But you are not yet a guard, you are barely two timeframes into basics. It may disappoint you to know, but no one in any colony has been extinguished in several generations, and no one as young as you has ever been extinguished in any colony. An adult as young as you are would, at most, be placed under a Probationary Behavior Contract to help you learn to make better decisions."

"Then they should banish me to the wilds."

"Why do you want to die?"

"I don't have anything to live for."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, but I will support your defense anyway—it's my job. I'm going to leave now." She stroked Alexander's head once and walked out.

Alexander's parents returned half an h-unit later. He didn't want to talk, so they sat with him in silence, but did convince him to eat some supper, which they fed him because he could not be trusted with even one pod free. Later in the evening, they received a message that the special physician, Master Adriana, would arrive the following afternoon from Fire Colony 2 to evaluate Alexander, and the Justice Council would meet to hear all the testimony on Fourthday morning, after which Master Danielle would announce her decision.

Throughout the night and into the following day, one or the other of Alexander's parents stayed with him. He didn't want to talk about anything, but they talked to him and stroked his head and antennae, reassuring him that he was not at fault. He ignored their words and pretended to be asleep. When he was offered food or drink, he only sipped or took a few nibbles and said he was not hungry. He was feigning sleep again when he heard a strange voice.

"You must be Farrah? And this is Alexander?"

"Yes."

"I am Master Adriana."

"Thank you SO much for coming to help us. How much do you know about what happened?"

"Only what Master Danielle wrote in her message, but that's all right. I prefer to find out from your son."

"He's asleep, but you may wake him."

Alexander felt a presence close to his face. "No, he's not asleep. Leave me alone with him for a while." How could she know he was awake?

Alexander heard his mother's pods ticking against the floor, followed by the portal closing behind her.

"Hello, Alexander," he heard. "I know you aren't sleeping, because your antennae twitched the tiniest bit, so open your eyes and let's get to know each other. I am a special type of physician. I help ants who have been through trauma, like you have in losing Deena, to heal their deepest feelings, and find a new path for their lives."

She stopped. Silence settled.

Alexander decided maybe she could convince the Justice Council to condemn him. He opened his eyes to see a kind face.

"That's better. My name is Master Adriana. Do you know what the term 'master' means?"

"It means you are really good at what you do."

She nodded. "Master Danielle asked me to have a long talk with you and advise her as to how you may be feeling about everything that has happened to you. I was told you tried to end your own life. Is that true?"

If Alexander could have looked at the floor, he would have. "Yes. Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Would you please sting me, or have someone else extinguish me? It's all my fault."

"I would never sting any creature—unless it was a roach threatening me or someone near me. I don't have the authority to order someone else to extinguish you. My job is to figure out what's going on in here," she tapped his head, "and advise the Justice Council what would be the best course of action in your case."

"But you could tell them to extinguish me, right?"

"I will tell them everything you relate to me and my expert opinion of the situation. That I can promise, but you must understand that my job is to help you, especially since you seem so determined to end your life. So, why don't we start at the beginning. Will you do that?"

Alexander looked into her eyes as she looked at him. Maybe if he let it all out, she would see why he was guilty and agree that he should be extinguished or at least banished. He nodded.

She smiled. "Is it all right with you if I write down notes about what you say? I want to be sure I say exactly what you tell me."

Alexander nodded. She took a pile of parchment and an ink pot from her satchel, pulled a stool close to his raised sleep cushion, and smiled again.

"I cherish Deena, I really do! I'm not too young to know what that means."

"Tell me about her."

Alexander began with the day he emerged. Sometimes she interrupted him to ask a question, or to tell him to slow down because she couldn't write as fast as he spoke. Whenever he said, "I know now that I should have . . ." she would stop him and say, "We all know our mistakes after we make them, but what were you feeling right in that moment?"

When he told her about the day he and Deena mated, she asked for every detail, and especially the following day when they tried to repeat the event—something he had not told his parents. He appreciated it when she said, "I believe you, Alexander. Thank you for trusting me with very personal and intimate details."

The conversation went on for a long time, with offers of water and honeydew along the way. Alexander accepted. Finally, she asked, "Now, please tell me why you feel you should be extinguished. It sounds to me as if you tried to do your best all along, or at least what you thought was best in the moment."

"Because everything is so messed up! I should have prevented Deena's death. I didn't protect her. I broke my vow and mated a non-fire ant. She's gone and it's my fault. I have nothing left to live for!"

Master Adriana touched Alexander's face and looked directly into his eyes again. "You have been honest and open with me. I will let the Justice Council know what you have told me, but remember, the decision about what becomes of you is not mine to make. But I sincerely hope that I will be able to have many more deep conversations like this with you that will help you want to live again. I need to leave now and prepare my report."

The following day dragged on, and all Alexander could do was lie there and wait. No one was with him—both parents and even his sister were at the inquiry—but the medical attendant assigned to him checked frequently.

He did not know how to interpret his parents' faces when they arrived. They were not smiling, they but didn't seem sad either.

Frodi embraced him first. "The Justice Council declared your mother and me innocent of Donavon's accusations. Of course, we see things now that we should have done, but we did nothing wrong. More important, you, too, are innocent!"

"But," Alexander started.

"No, you heard me correctly. Innocent. It was very evident that you and Deena did not know what you were doing when you mated. Your vow was not spoken until half a timeframe later, and you can't break a vow you haven't made yet. You did everything you could to protect Deena. She made that choice to go to the surface alone—even though you told her not to."

Alexander looked at them wide-eyed. "Then you can take these restraints off me?"

Frodi moved aside so Farrah could stand where he had been. Her antennae drooped as she stroked him. "No, we can't do that. You **did** try to end your life, and you **did** try to run away. You are in terrible emotional pain, and you need more help than your father and I can provide. At the request of Master Danielle, I've signed a contract placing you in the custody of Master Adriana. It's not a Probationary Behavior Contract because you are innocent, but it is still a contract. Master Adriana would work with you here if she could, but she has young adults in her care at Fire 2. You'll be in her care there until you are no longer a danger to yourself, until you have gotten through your grief and are ready to begin training again, and until you have adjusted, having found a new purpose in life."

A confused mix of anger, frustration, dread, insecurity, despair, rejection, and bitterness flooded Alexander. He couldn't scream. Neither could he cry. "You're sending me away? You're sending me away!"

"Not because we want to," both parents said—almost in chorus. "It is what the Justice Council decided."

But Alexander wasn't listening anymore. He squirmed and shifted until he turned the back of his thorax to them. Still, he heard their words.

Frodi stroked his son's head. "We will both visit you, every timeframe, but not at the same time. I will come first on my days off, and then half a timeframe later, your mother will visit."

"I know you are angry with me right now." Was his mother's voice shaking? "But I cherish you, my precious youngest son. I know you don't understand right now, but you will later."

If Alexander could have pulled away from their embrace, he would have. It was a relief of sorts when he heard their pods tapping on their way out. With what little movement he had, he pounded his front pods against the cushion.

Another set of pods tapped across the floor. Master Adriana walked around the medical center cushion to face him. "Hello, Alexander."

It took almost all his energy to squirm and turn his body away from her.

"I know you are angry, and you probably feel I betrayed your trust. But remember that I told you the decision about your future was not mine to make. Like it or not, you are now in my custody. I would treat you here if I could, but I do have others who need me in Fire Colony 2."

She moved around the cushion to face him again. He tried to turn, but she put out her pods to hold his head toward her—gently but firmly. "I could keep changing sides, but you will look at me. There are two ways I can transport you: I can give you injection after injection to keep you asleep, or you can promise me you won't yell or scream along the way—which would be more embarrassing for you than for me. You don't have a choice about being restrained—I'll be swaddling you like a larva. Which will it be?"

Alexander wanted to get away from her penetrating look, but he couldn't move so he closed his eyes. "Leave me alone!"

"You didn't answer my question." The calmness in her voice was infuriating!

He waited a full moment before snarling, "I won't yell; I'll behave." Then he pleaded, "Please, no more injections."

Chapter 7

Alexander was awake when they arrived at Fire 2's transport center, and he paid attention to every tunnel turn. He would behave himself until the first chance to escape. Master Adriana placed him on a raised sleep cushion, like the one he had been on before. There was another fire ant there.

"Alexander, this is Fernando. I'm mentoring his medical studies; he will be with you day and night." Across Fernando's thorax was a fabric sash attached to a dark blue, rectangular badge on which was the emblem of the Combined Colonies of Insectia.

"Hello, Alexander," Fernando said. "It will take time to unwrap you, so shall I set you on the sanitation container first?" The very end of his abdomen was the only area Master Adriana had left unwrapped. He remembered stops at rest alcoves along the tunnel when Master Adriana had lifted him from the basket they rode in and placed him over a sanitation container. He shook his head.

Master Adriana's voice dropped to a whisper. Alexander had to strain to catch parts of what she said to Fernando. "... secure portal ... be ready ... anger ...," but she looked directly into Alexander's eyes and said, "Alexander, I have to leave you until this evening. Thank you for a good journey. May I count on you to cooperate when you are unwrapped?"

Alexander nodded.

Fernando talked as he unwrapped Alexander. "I noticed you looking at my thorax badge. Yes, I have made a Vow of Perpetual Service. Essence called me in my second season cycle of service. At that time, I thought I would remain always on patrol. It didn't work out that way. My unit had a serious encounter with roach warriors. It wasn't my first engagement, but there were so many! I lost over half the unit I led and came away with a 'souvenir'." He lifted his left-middle leg, so Alexander could see that the lower half of his appendage had been replaced by one carved from wood. "I was a wreck! I blamed myself for the deaths of my fellow guards and didn't think I had anything left to offer in service. My commander sent me here to be counseled by Master Adriana. I discovered a new purpose for my service that doesn't require six legs. Now, I'm almost through with my medical studies, after which I'll begin learning to help others heal within, as I was helped."

By that time, Alexander's entire abdomen was free. He turned over and over so Fernando could unbind his legs from their folded positions against his thorax. *I bet he wouldn't be able to catch me if I ran out the portal*, he thought.

"All this binding material will be sterilized and reused," Fernando went on. "That's why I'm going slowly with this. I know very little about you. Would you care to share?"

Alexander felt like yelling, "NO!" but he had to keep calm and cooperate so he could escape. "They said I'm innocent, but I know it's my fault she died."

Fernando had almost finished unwrapping him. "She?"

"My Deena. But I don't want to talk about it."

"That's all right. I know it's difficult to accept the death of someone close to us from seeing my fellow guards die in front of me. But that's much different from what happened to you."

"Master Adriana didn't tell you?"

"There hasn't been time. There, you can sit up now; hop off the cushion if you like."

Alexander twisted all around, taking in the details of the chamber. The portal to the tunnel was closed. Above its latch was a dial with holes. The chamber in his colony's medical center didn't have that. An oval eating surface with a stool on each side sat by one wall with several cupboards. The curving earthen walls looked softer than any he had seen before. Another sleep cushion lay on the floor next to the other wall—for Fernando he assumed—along with an individual writing surface and stool, both rounded on the corners. On the innermost wall was a sanitation area—stand with a water spigot and wash basin, a tub, and set into the wall, the bench with its hole for body waste. A curtain hanging on a rod above could be drawn around that area for privacy.

"What's in all the cupboards?" he asked.

"Hop off and take a look."

Inside the first were wooden bowls, spoons, and mugs. Another had shelves with books, parchment, an ink pot, and a box or two with games. His parents had a similar cupboard in their parlor. The third held extra coverlets, pillows, and medical supplies. The last one had a small heating surface and, on a shelf above, boxes of tea and snacks. He could not see any cutting tools.

Fernando answered a tap on the portal. "Ah, lunch is here," he said, opening it only enough to accept a box from the delivery ant. The portal closed. *Oh, well*, Alexander thought. *I need to eat if I want the energy to get out.*

Alexander decided to gain Fernando's trust by being helpful. He took two bowls and spoons from the cupboard and put them on the eating surface. "Thank you. Tea?" Fernando asked.

"Yes, thank you."

Fernando took a kettle from the highest shelf above the heating surface, filled it with water from the spigot in the sanitation area and set it to heat. He ladled stew from the pot into the bowls. Alexander ate two bowls full and drank his tea. Then he rose, casually walked to the portal, and turned the latch. It didn't budge.

"It doesn't open like a regular portal," Fernando commented.

"How do you get out?"

"I poke in a code."

"So what's the code?"

Fernando smiled at him and then said, "Nice try Alexander, but I won't tell you."

Alexander sighed and paced around the chamber. He would have to watch whenever Fernando opened it.

"Shall I read aloud from one of the books here?" Fernando asked.

"Alright."

So passed the afternoon.

When supper arrived, Alexander noticed that there were four holes to be punched for the portal to open, and when Master Adriana arrived an h-unit later, he was able to note the position of the last one. Patience would get him out.

"Well, my young friend, have you settled in?" Master Adriana asked.

Alexander nodded.

"Were lunch and dinner filling and tasty?"

He nodded again. Then he felt he ought to say something—get her trust, too. "Fernando read a great story after lunch."

She smiled. "I'm glad to hear that. I haven't seen my mate or our youngest daughter in a quarter time frame, so I'm going home for the night. Will you be all right?"

Alexander tipped his antennae.

"Do you need anything, Fernando?"

"No, we'll be fine."

Apparently, the portal locked itself because Fernando didn't do anything to the dial when Master Adriana left.

"Do you know how to play 'Adding Cards'?"

"Yes, we have a set, and my dad taught me as soon as I'd learned all my numerals. Is that in a box with the books?"

Fernando handed it to him. "Would you mind playing yourself while I study for my next exam?"

Alexander took the box, sat down at the eating surface, placed a three-by-three array of numbered cards face up, and proceeded to pick up cards in groups that totaled ten. He lost the game with himself halfway through the pile of cards, mixed them up, and began again.

"When you get tired, just get out a coverlet and pillow, prepare for bed as you would at home. I'll turn down the lamp and keep studying if that's all right."

"Sure."

It took three more days of meal deliveries and Master Adriana's visits to memorize the four-number sequence. Alexander waited until night to attempt an escape. Finally, Fernando turned out the lamp to curl up in his sleep sack, which was farther from the portal than Alexander's. Once Fernando was silent, Alexander slipped over to the portal, felt around for the dial, found the top hole, then around to each of the numbers he had memorized. The portal did not yield. He tried again. Nothing! He tried the next numbers over with the same gaps. Still nothing!

Fernando's voice came through the darkness. "We change the sequence every other day, Alexander."

Alexander pounded his front pods against the portal. Then he ran aimlessly around the dark chamber, slamming himself into the walls—which he discovered were covered with padding. He tried to strike his head against the edge of the eating surface—also padded. Why hadn't he noticed that before? He screamed in agony and frustration.

Fernando lit the lamp.

Alexander saw the sack of binding material which had not yet been picked up. Desperate not to be bound again, he tore into it, shredding every last bit of the strips into tiny bits with his mandibles. Then he remembered the medical supplies in the cupboard and before Fernando could intervene, dumped the injectors on the floor and stomped them.

Slumping into the mess he had made, he moaned, "No more bindings! No more injections! Sting me! Sting me, sting me ..., " until he was exhausted.

Fernando pushed a button on the portal Alexander had not noticed before. Then, with perfect calmness, he set about fixing some tea. "I would never sting you, Alexander. Your life is much too precious to throw away like that. Master Adriana will be here in a few moments." He handed Alexander a mug of tea, which he immediately threw against the portal. The tea splattered, but the mug did not break. Fernando lowered himself to the floor behind Alexander and surrounded him with his front and remaining good middle pod (his wooden appendage removed for the night). Alexander could feel the stump on the side of his thorax. He could have pushed himself free, but what good would it do? He moaned and let his tears flow.

The portal opened, Master Adriana entered, and pushed it shut behind her. Alexander watched her look around the chamber. "Fernando, please pick up the broken injectors but leave the rest for now." She took Fernando's place behind Alexander, wrapping all her appendages around him. A few moments of silence, then that irritatingly calm voice of hers. "Did letting out your anger help?"

He said nothing.

"I have been expecting this. You are not the first troubled young adult who needed a chamber like this. Such an outburst is an important step in recovery. Are you ready to help me clean it up?"

Alexander obeyed. Together they scooped all the bits of binding back into the sack. "Now, instead of binding, it can become stuffing for a sleep sack. Would you like to talk sitting on the floor, or on your sleep cushion?"

"I don't want to talk. I want to die."

"Well, I'm not going to let you take your own life." She turned to Fernando. "Would you hand me the envelope I brought in yesterday? It's time he knew exactly what was said in the Inquiry."

Alexander lay on his sleeping cushion and turned his face away from her. She stayed where she was and read him the entire transcript.

[I have no doubt that when Master Adriana read, it was with the voice inflections she had heard that day and used herself, which it's not possible to share. I've included everything except when Donavon was asked if he wished to question any of the witnesses, which he declined to do. The transcript was tucked between the pages of the first of Alexander's journals. Henry R.-D. II]

Official Transcript of the Inquiry into the Death of Deena Dairier

THOSE PRESENT:

Master Danielle—head of Justice Council

Farrah and Frodi—parents of Alexander

Donavon—father of Deena

Darleen—sister of Donavon

Ferella—sister of Alexander

Darren—basic trainer at Training Center #5

Master Ada—Colony Nursery Supervisor

Anita—counsel to Farrah, Frodi, and Alexander

Master Adriana—physician/emotional healer

Official Scribe—to record the proceedings [no name listed]

[NOTE: as is traditional in all ant colonies, inquiries involving young adults—defined as those who have not yet completed basic training and job exploration—participants were seated on benches around an oval table with the Justice Council member at one end, those accusing on one side and those defending on the other. Inquiries for adults took place in another chamber large enough for colony members to attend. Henry R.-D. II]

Master Danielle: We are here to determine any fault concerning the tragic death of Deena Dairier by mantis attack. Donavon has accused Frodi and Ferrah of negligence in the supervision of Deena and Alexander during larvahood and when they emerged as young adults, going to and coming home from training, which led to their mating. He alleges that they had to have known what Alexander and Deena did, and that Alexander forced himself on Deena, which led her to go to the surface alone with the intention of running away to protect Alexander, and that the suggestion that she do this came from

Frodi and Farrah, making them and Alexander directly responsible for her death. Donavon, is that an accurate summary of your accusations?

Donavon: Yes.

Master Danielle: Trainer Darren, let's start with you since I know you have trainees wondering why you and two of their friends are not there. Tell me a summary of what you observed concerning behavior before and after the day of the safety drill, between then and the day of the traditional antstory lesson, when Alexander made the Fire Ant Mating Regulation Vow, that afternoon's body function lesson, and after that.

Darren: Alexander and Deena were typical young adults, nervous on their first day. Both bright and quick to learn. I could see in their eyes how much they cared about each other. I probably kept a closer eye on them than the others because of that. They aren't the first such pair I've had. Deena was nervous during the safety drill. Alexander was overconfident—but he was also the last to practice sealing our classroom portal. That day ended as usual. They smiled at each other more after that, but I didn't think much about it. I caught a look of shock pass in their eyes when Alexander stood to make his Fire Ant Vow. He hesitated, I believe because he knew fully what this meant for the two of them, but he said the words clearly and slumped onto his bench. They sat across from each other at lunch from then on, and with other trainees. During the body function lesson, I noted that their mandibles opened in shock. At the time, I thought that look was because of the charity they had for each other that they could never completely share. Looking back, I believe that was when they realized what they had done. The following quarter timeframe, Alexander asked to speak with me after training ended. He wanted to know if there were any exceptions to the fire ant mating rules. I explained what I knew. He said, 'Eight season cycles . . . we don't have . . . I mean that's a long time.' After that, their studies slowed, both were distracted, but they made strides toward forming new friendships."

Master Danielle: With your many season cycles of experience, do you believe Alexander could have forced himself on Deena or that they knew what they were doing?

Darren: No, absolutely not. The look in their eyes during the body function lesson—they had no idea until that moment what they'd done. May I ask a question?

Master Danielle: Of course.

Darren: With the confidentiality of this inquiry, what may I tell my other trainees?

Master Danielle: You may tell them that Deena was killed by a mantis and that you were here to make a statement. You may say that you do not know the outcome of the inquiry and that Alexander is deep in grief for his sister/friend, but that's all.

Darren: Thank you. If there is any other way I might help, don't hesitate to ask.

Master Danielle: Darren, you are excused now to attend to your trainees. The guard who was with Frodi when they found Deena could not be here today. I will read the statement he made earlier:

"When I arrived on the scene, Frodi went to the body while I circled the area, checking scent markers for the young female and for the mantis. I detected the young female's scent in a direction outward from the colony for about another 200 f-units beyond where she was

attacked. I could see along the way from the colony to the body, where she had plucked blossoms, stopped, and turned back. She was clearly returning to the colony when attacked. The mantis's scent went off to the north. Upon returning to the scene, I noted the mantis was female because there was a clutch of its eggs slightly under the body. That's why there was so much of her body to return—she was to be food for the mantis' hatchlings. I'm sorry to be so graphic, but that was the evidence."

This guard is not related to any of the ants here in this room. I have no reason to believe that he had any bias in his statement. Darleen, I understand that your niece confided in you. Is this true?

Darleen: Yes. Donavon, don't get all upset again. When she asked me to keep a secret, I thought it was just something female related, so I agreed. I about fell over when she said she and Alexander had accidentally mated. She said over and over, 'We didn't know.' And that it would be so wrong for Alexander to be punished. She emphasized how much they cherished each other—young as they were—and accepted the invitation I had made the previous Seventhday to stay with me as a way of helping her move on from Alexander. She asked me if when she laid an egg, I would say it was mine and no one would know. Unfortunately, I laid my dead egg half a season cycle ago, and my family knows that, so keeping her egg was not an option. Donavon, I'm sorry, but if I could have helped her that way, I would have. I also told her she had to tell her father, and that I would support her. Again, Donavon, please, don't get all upset. Deena kept saying you would be angry—which, indeed, you have been.

[There is nothing in the record, but from Darleen's repeated pleading, it is apparent that Donavon must have been agitated during his sister's statement. Henry R.-D. II]

Master Danielle: Is it possible that they did know what they were doing, consensual or otherwise?

Darleen: I don't believe so, because when she calmed down, she said the two of them tried to repeat the experience the following day. I had to clench my mandibles to keep from laughing. She tried to smile over their ignorance but ended up crying again.

Master Danielle: Thank you, Darleen. Master Ada, as head supervisor of all colony nurseries, would you please tell us the current procedures concerning male and female larvae in nursery coops.

Master Ada: Most of our larvae coops can hold up to six. Males and females are almost always together. We group them by age. Several fire ant larvae are in homes since we have other couples like Frodi and Farrah sharing jobs. But the fire ants we do have are always mixed in with others, because they must learn to socialize. Larvae have distinct personalities and squeal their preferences of who they want to be with. Some like each other and others don't, just like adults. We help them get along with everyone by placing those who don't like each other together for only short periods. They always find someone they like the most to curl up with for naps. Those combinations may be with either sex. Long range studies have shown, with rare exceptions, they all turn out fine.

Master Danielle: To your knowledge, have any of those male/female pairs ever developed such deep feelings that as adults they became a mated couple?

Master Ada: Oh, yes! Not all the time, but it's not rare. In the last decade, I've been invited to three mating celebrations by couples who told me their parents said they were in the same nursery and were

so cute when they curled up together. Almost everyone in nursery work for over twenty season cycles has at least one such story.

Master Danielle: Thank you for coming today and for keeping this confidential. Farrah and Frodi, you may make your statements now.

Frodi: I will speak for both of us. Thank you for having the nursery supervisor here today. In grief, we had begun to doubt ourselves. We supervised Alexander and Deena to the best of our ability. I escorted them to training for the first quarter time frame. They, as I remembered I did myself, stated that they knew the way and didn't need me there anymore. We both made sure they sat across the table from each other at our home, or that one of us was between them if they were on the largest cushion in our parlor ... They were never alone ... I'm sorry my voice keeps wavering ...

Master Danielle: Perhaps Farrah could continue.

Farrah: I was home the day of the safety drill. When I heard the signals, so close after the end of the training day, I assumed all trainees had been held at the center, so I was not concerned when they didn't arrive at home right away. When they arrived, Alexander said that Deena had been frightened, and the emergency chamber they entered was unsupplied. He said he had stroked her to calm her down like I had stroked him on his first night as an adult after a frightening dream—you know, how we all stroke our young ones' heads and antennae in parental comfort. ... It never occurred to me ...

Frodi: I was home the day of the lessons ... I had a feeling it would be a difficult day and had tea ready. Neither of them wanted to talk—now I understand why. I didn't want to push, so I read some poetry to them. I thought their anxiety was only because Alexander had made the vow. We had all tried, Donavon, too, to let them know they could only be friends, brother and sister ...”

Master Danielle: For the record, does anyone here remember being escorted to training by a parent beyond the first quarter timeframe? [The scribe noted soft laughter.] I didn't think so. I remember telling my parents I wanted to walk by myself on the third day. We all need a break, and I know Master Adriana's statements will take some time. Farrah and Frodi and your group, you will find lunch provided in the small chamber to the right of this chamber's portal. Donavon and your group, your lunch will be in the chamber on the left. Master Adriana, in order to remain neutral, would you mind going to the guard dining chamber? The portal guard will escort you. I will be in my work chamber. We will resume in one h-unit.

POST BREAK

Master Danielle: Now that we are all back, we will hear what Master Adriana has to say as we seek to find the best action for everyone involved. It was a difficult morning, and it probably won't get better, so I ordered a large container of tea and mugs for all. Help yourself. Master Adriana, please tell us the current state of Alexander's mind.

Master Adriana: I'd like to start by saying that what I heard this morning and what Alexander related to me are compatible. His details varied enough from those Deena told her aunt that this wasn't something they made up to excuse each other. Alexander's emotional state is fragile, and I'm afraid he might break down completely. He is filled with remorse and self-blame. He told me with great personal detail—most of which I will not share—because he believes I have the authority to have him condemned. I explained

my role more than once emphasizing that I can't condemn him. His message to you, Master Danielle, is this: "Would you please sting me, because it's all my fault?" When I asked him why, he said, "Because everything is so messed up! I should have prevented Deena's death. I didn't protect her. I broke my vow and mated a non-fire ant. She's gone, and it's my fault. I have nothing left to live for!" He feels Donavon is right to blame him. I concluded from this that Donavon's statements the day Deena died had a great effect on him. I did not bring up Donavon's charge that Alexander forced himself on Deena, so I would have his version of everything. At several points, he said, "I know now what I should have done." At those times, I reminded him I wanted to know what he was feeling in each moment, not what he realized later. His eyes all through our interview revealed he was not holding anything back or trying to make me believe what was not true.

Master Danielle: Please give me one or two examples.

Master Adriana: When he told me about his and Deena's attempt to repeat their mating experience, he said, "We stood there in the tunnel, right by the emergency chamber, and at the same time said, 'Let's go stroke each other again.'" When nothing happened, they wondered why. Alexander suggested maybe it was because they were both scared and, "Essence sent us that good feeling so we wouldn't be afraid anymore." This type of logic, while it may leave us astonished, is the way many young adults think when they don't know! That statement convinced me beyond any doubt that they had no idea what they had done. Another example is their idea of having Darleen keep Deena's egg. There was no thought of subsequent eggs, or the fact that fire ant larvae have different features than other varieties; it would be evident that Darleen and her mate were not the parents. The news from Trainer Darren concerning eight season cycles sent them into a panic because, of course, they had a few quarter timeframes before others would know. I could go on, but I think you see the pattern of immature thought and decision making. And why would we expect them, at their ages, to think differently? Their fear, especially Deena's—Alexander wanted to take responsibility from the start—propelled their series of foolish decisions leading to tragedy. Alexander did his best to discourage Deena from going to the surface on her own. In my expert opinion, both are innocent of any wrongdoing. They were driven by ancient instinct. However, Alexander's current state of mind and his attempts to end his own life also show that he should not simply return home or to training as though nothing happened. He will probably try again to end his own life.

Master Danielle: Donavon, do you have any questions you would like to ask Master Adriana? [The record stated he shook his antennae. Henry R.-D. II] I have heard all I need to know to make my decision in this case. Frodi and Farrah's actions are those that any reasonable adult would take, and in accordance with formal nursery care. They are innocent of the accusations against them. Alexander and Deena's accidental mating took place half a timeframe before he made his vow as a fire ant. Even under Fire Ant Codes, one can't break a vow one has not yet made. He is innocent of the charge of breaking those codes. As to the accusation that Alexander forced himself on Deena, there is no evidence whatsoever that this was the case. I declare Alexander innocent of any wrongdoing. However, I do plan to meditate more on what might be done by all parents in all the colonies to prevent any similar tragedy in the future. There is nothing upon which to base a Probationary Behavior Contract, so Master Adriana, what should we do for Alexander to prevent him from trying to end his own life and to become emotionally stable?

Master Adriana: I recently read about a young adult fire ant in another colony who tried to end her own life after failing an exam that she apparently considered lifechanging. A physician in my line of specialty placed her under a Medical Emotional Healing Contract. It worked like a Probationary Behavior Contract, but without any record in the Justice Council System. The contract ended when the physician determined the female was emotionally healthy—that she had completed all the goals set out for her and had found a new path for her life. I would like your permission to use such a contract with Alexander.

Donavon: Please, may I say something?

Master Danielle: Go ahead.

Donavon: I've sat here all day and said almost nothing. Where is the justice for my daughter? Alexander will eventually, I'm sure, recover from all this and who will remember Deena? In this contract thing, I beg you, make one goal that when he begins to spend time with other females, which I'm sure he will—they will want to spend time with him because he has many good qualities—but he should have to tell them the very first time he is alone with one that he is infertile and why. He should have to explain what happened to my daughter! I will consider that justice. One other thing: I do not want to see any of you at Deena's covering tomorrow! Please respect that. Frodi and Ferrah, I don't want anything to do with either of you. If I change my mind, I will contact you! Do not contact me.

Master Danielle: Will you put such a goal in this contract, Master Adriana?

Master Adriana: Yes, I will list that as a goal.

NOTED BY SCRIBE: Donavon rose and left the Justice Council Chamber. His sister followed, urging him to come back and sit back down.

Master Danielle: I authorize Master Adriana to write up this type of contract. Since it seems doubtful that Alexander would sign such a document voluntarily, a parent must sign it for him. The three of you may remain here—there's plenty of parchment and ink in that wall cupboard. I trust you to work it out. Master Adriana, you'll hold the original just as you would a Probationary Behavior Contract. Be sure I get a copy and make a copy for the parent who signs. Send me quarterly reports as you would for a PBC. I want to be kept appraised of this situation. Frodi and Farrah should receive quarterly reports as well. I wish you all a good day in the Peace of Essence. I remind all of you that words spoken here are confidential. This Inquiry is now concluded.

NOTED BY SCRIBE: Master Danielle rose and left the chamber, as did all the others except the three indicated. **END OF OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT.**

When she finished reading, Master Adriana looked directly into Alexander's eyes. "Are you ready to stop punishing yourself?"

Chapter 8

Alexander didn't know how to answer Master Adriana's question. If he said no, she would probably bind him again. If he said yes, he would be lying because he still wanted to escape, so he remained quiet.

"You haven't answered my question." Her persistence was as irritating as her calm voice.

Finally, he said, "I don't know."

"In that case, I assure you I will not use any more injections or binding, but the portal must remain secure. Shall we both try to get some sleep?" The double click of the portal locking told Alexander she left.

He poked at his breakfast the following morning, still trying to think of a new escape plan. He should probably go along with whatever was asked of him for a while.

"Have you ever played Blue-Green?" Fernando asked.

"No. My dad was going to teach me, but, well ... we didn't get to it."

"Would you like to learn?"

"I guess so."

Fernando put the breakfast basket outside the portal, positioning himself so Alexander could not see the dial. Then he got out the game board and pieces and explained the rules. The square board had rows of black dots on a white background. Each player had twenty-four flat disks in either blue or green. Alexander chose blue.

"You arrange your markers any way you like in the first three rows of dots," Fernando said. "We will start with the beginning level—you move one marker one dot in any direction toward mine, then I move. The idea is to get one of your markers close enough to mine, so that on your next turn, you can push mine off the dot, capturing my token—unless I see yours and move mine out of the way. Whichever of us has the last marker on the board is the winner. If it happens that we each have one left, we could chase each other's markers forever, so we both win."

"Do I have to move the same marker all the time?"

"No, any marker, any direction, even backwards, any time. You are trying to capture mine as well as escape mine. I'll explain some strategies along the way. Don't worry about winning or losing the first few rounds."

Alexander arranged his markers in neat even rows, an empty dot between each, in the middle of his side of the board. Fernando arranged his in clusters of three, with some clusters closer to the edge and others in the middle. It took about ten turns before any markers were close enough for a capture. While Alexander concentrated on one or two markers, Fernando captured his from the sides. Alexander managed only five captures before Fernando had wiped all Alexander's off the board.

"It's not as easy as it looks," Alexander said.

"Actually, that's not too bad for your first try. Did you notice how I arranged mine in threes? That's so my markers protect each other. You might get one, but I've got two more to capture yours."

In the second game, the play lasted longer, and Alexander captured eight of Fernando's markers. Five rounds later, the game lasted twenty moments, but Alexander lost all his markers while only capturing four of Fernando's.

"You move yours so fast! I can't look everywhere at once," Alexander complained.

"We'll stop for today. This is a fire ant battle strategy game. You imagine your markers are fire ants and mine are roaches. I imagine mine are fire ants and yours are roaches. We both try to protect our own and destroy the opponent. You'll improve with practice. In the field of patrol, you'll be a better guard because you'll know the strategies to protect your fellow guards while striking out at roaches. There are more difficult levels of the game, like Two-by-Two, where we take two moves at a time. The highest level is Total Engagement. In that, there are no turns, just constant movement by both players until there is a winner. It took me three season cycles to play at that level."

"I don't remember ever seeing this game when I was in training."

"Most trainees don't begin to play until halfway through their first season cycle."

Master Adriana arrived mid-afternoon. "Let's discuss what set you off last night."

Alexander stared at the table.

"It began with trying to manipulate the portal lock, right?"

"Yes," Alexander answered, not raising his head.

"Well thought out, waiting until you thought Fernando was asleep. The plan was to run to the surface?"

Alexander nodded.

"How far did you get when you tried that at the medical center in your home colony?"

"You know."

"Not from your point of view."

"I didn't get very far. But I didn't plan it like last night."

"Suppose you had opened the portal? Didn't you think there might be medical attendants or guards in the tunnel?"

"There would be fewer at night, and I can run pretty fast. I paid attention to most of the tunnels when we got here."

"Hummmm. So, the anger came from frustration and failure?"

"I guess."

"Your frustration is what's called a 'sparking event.' Over the next several timeframes, I will try to help you identify other sparkers, so you can learn how to feel them coming on and handle them in a more appropriate way. Our emotions can bring about good or ill. The negative feelings can be channeled so they don't hurt others, but it takes time. We all need to rid ourselves of anger. Shredding the bindings was a good way to release your anger, but breaking the injectors was not."

"Is that why everything in here is padded or made out of wood?"

"Yes. Alexander, I need to ask you something serious and I need as honest an answer as you gave me last night. Will you please look right at me?"

Get her trust, he reminded himself and looked her in the eyes.

"Do I need to have a dial lock installed on the cupboard with the heat surface?"

Why hadn't he thought of that? He could have dumped the shredded bindings on it and burned himself up. But how to answer her? She was already ahead of him, so he would have to think of something else. Besides, he liked having hot tea, not just the relaxing type but the other flavors, and sometimes their food was too cool on arrival, and Fernando warmed it up.

"No, you don't need to lock it."

"Make that a promise, please. Say, 'I promise I will not use the heat source to try to hurt myself or anyone else.' If I hear those words from your mouth, I will believe it, and I won't have to lock that cupboard."

Alexander sighed and repeated it.

Alexander's routine remained the same for the next several days: breakfast, several games of Blue-Green with Fernando, lunch, play a game by himself or look at images in the books available while Fernando studied his medical assignments, talk with Master Adriana (during which Fernando had an h-unit off), supper, listen to Fernando read to him, sleep. While paging through an Antstory book, he found images of two dairier/fire ant mix families. *Like Deena and me*, he thought, and suddenly burst into tears.

Fernando rushed over to see what was wrong. "Oh," he said as soon as he saw the images. "Let me fix some tea." He comforted Alexander while the water heated. "It's a good thing Master Adriana will be here soon. You just found another sparker." While Alexander drank his tea, Fernando read that section of the text. The two families—one with fire ant male, dairier female, and their son, the other with a dairier male and fire ant female and a daughter—were included in the Antstory text because the young male and female as well as their fire ant parents had died in the battle of 25 CCI.

Alexander, while he was no longer weeping, was still upset when Master Adriana arrived. Fernando explained.

Master Adriana wrapped her appendages around Alexander as she spoke. "I understand why this upset you. Do you want to talk about it?"

"At least they got to be together, they knew their young ones. Ours ... mine ... will never be ... "

Master Adriana stroked his head and antennae. "It's another thing to grieve, another sparker. Let's see if you can tell me one happy memory you had with Deena. Fond memories are good things to hold inside. They help relieve the pain of grief."

"The day my mother borrowed an image maker and captured an image of Deena and me. I wrapped my middle pod around her, and she put hers around me. We were so happy all the time—that half a timeframe between."

"Do you remember what day your mother captured that image?"

Alexander thought for a moment. "It was ... it was ... the day we mated," and broke down again.

Once he was calm, Master Adriana said, "Some good news—your father is coming for a visit, arriving Sixthday by noon."

Alexander counted the h-units. Maybe he could talk his father into taking him to the surface, or maybe he would be allowed to go home, in which case he would ask to take the surface trail rather than the intercolonial tunnel. Either instance would be a chance to escape into the wild. He continued to build trust with Master Adriana, talked more, and managed to keep control of himself.

Frodi arrived early, finding his son and Fernando in the middle of a game of Blue-Green. "Ah, I see you have someone to teach you, Alexander." He gave his son an affectionate embrace. "I intended to start teaching you. I can play a lot with you for the next day and a half. How are you doing?"

"I never win, but it takes Fernando longer to defeat me."

Frodi chuckled. "That's how we all learn."

Fernando said, "I'll go and arrange for an extra lunch," and left the chamber.

Alexander jumped at the chance. "Dad, let's go to the surface first, just you and me."

Frodi gave him a questioning look. "Are you ready for that?"

"Oh, yes, I've been doing well the last couple of days."

Frodi hesitated but went to the portal. He looked at the dial. "Alexander, what's the code?"

"Ah ... ah ... 4421." Which, of course, didn't work. "I guess they forgot to tell me the latest change. But you can ask Fernando, and we can go after lunch."

Frodi faced his son and looked him in the eye. "You aren't ready, are you?"

Alexander stared at the floor.

Fernando arrived with lunch. Frodi didn't mention what had happened, nor did he ask for the code. When Fernando left again, Alexander admitted, "You were right, Dad, I'm not allowed out yet. I'm sorry."

Frodi rubbed the back of his thorax. "No more about it. Shall we play Bure-Green? What level are you playing?"

"One-by-One."

Alexander came close to winning once because his father played at a slower pace. When Master Adriana arrived, they talked about how Alexander was doing. His father did not mention his attempt to get out. Master Adriana shared the strategies Alexander was beginning to use (deep breaths and picturing other good things in his mind) to combat his sparkers. She showed Frodi where to find things in the cupboards and where the call button was located. "Alexander, I'm showing your father this in case you have a nightmare tonight."

She turned to leave. "You will have this evening to yourselves so Fernando may have a night off. He'll be back after breakfast. Dinner will arrive at six h-units. I'll have another session with both of you tomorrow afternoon before you head home, Frodi."

When Fernando returned the next morning, Alexander asked, "Dad, why don't you and Fernando play a round of Blue-Green so I can watch and learn more?"

"I haven't played much since Alexander's brother was learning his basics, but I'm up for it if you are, Fernando."

"Let's up the level to Two-by-Two. Shall we clear breakfast first?"

Alexander, eager to watch, took charge, removing the bowls and mugs, and then wiping off the table. When the game began, he noticed that his father set out his tokens in twos, scattered around his half of the board, Fernando's in threes. Each made two moves per turn, with Frodi keeping his twos together. The pace of the game was much faster, and Alexander had difficulty following the action. They discussed the game after Frodi won. Alexander asked them to play again. That time, Fernando won.

"You know," Fernando said, "we really should show him a round of Total Engagement. Are you up for that?"

"Yes, but we should explain it first."

Frodi began. "Alexander, you know this is a battle strategy game with one big difference: on the game board, you see all the markers at once. In reality, you are one token, the others are your fellow guards, and you see it on the level," he bent down to put his eyes at the edge of the table, "like this."

Alexander bent down. From that viewpoint, he could see only a few of the tokens, those immediately ahead or to each side.

Fernando continued, "On patrol, tall grass in the meadows and wood plants in clusters make visibility even worse. That works to our advantage, because fire ants hide in the grass, and we can mask our scent, while we can smell roaches in the distance. But it's more difficult to see what is behind us. That's why we watch out for opponents on the sides and protect those ahead of us. Being good at the Total Engagement level always helps us perform better on patrol because we learn to think and respond automatically."

Frodi added, "Let me put it this way. One-by-One is like what I'm doing when I watch for predators around the grasshopper herds. Two-by-Two is like the spring season when hopper nymphs are hatching, and predators know it. Total Engagement is what happens when roaches sneak across the border stream and try to steal grasshoppers."

"Do other ant varieties play this game?" Alexander asked.

Frodi responded, "Not Blue-Green, but there is a variation called 'Hopper Guard' that many ants learn. They use the same game board, but with twenty green markers—the grasshoppers; five yellow markers—dairying ants; and two red markers—predators. It takes three players: one moves the hoppers at random, one moves the ant markers to herd the hoppers and protect them, and one moves both predator markers. Like Total Engagement, all markers moving at the same time. If there are only two players, the hopper markers remain in one place."

The board was set up. Frodi and Fernando stood with their middle and back legs on the floor, leaning over the board, ready for action. "Alexander, you must give us the 'go' to begin."

Their moves were so swift that Alexander could barely follow what either was doing. It was over in five moments with Fernando winning by a wide margin. Frodi laughed and then said, "You can certainly tell it's been a long time since I've played this level!"

"Well, it's been a long time for me, too, and three season cycles since I've been on patrol. Let's go again."

Alexander watched in fascination. They played three more rounds. Each game took longer to play, but Fernando won every time. Then he left Alexander and his father alone to visit. Alexander heard about what his mother, sister, and others were doing back in South Dairy 20.

Chapter 9

The next several days went well. Alexander began to make progress in his discussions with Master Adriana; he had fewer nightmares and daily breakdowns almost stopped. He achieved a win/win playing One-by-One Blue-Green with Fernando. The idea of escaping into the wild faded from his thoughts. He even looked forward to his mother's upcoming visit.

Alexander sensed that something was wrong when Fernando began to prepare tea a few moments before Master Adriana's daily visit. She entered with a somber look, sat next to Alexander, not across from him, and put her front pod on the back of his thorax. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"At the moment, all your family members are safe, but your parents will not be able to visit for a while, and I don't know how long it will be."

She explained that less than two season cycles previously, the Combined Colonies of Insectia and Roacheria had avoided war over one SERCB member's attempt to enslave three ant tunnel engineers who had agreed to teach roaches how to build safer tunnels in plastic mines. [*To Build a Tunnel*, by my grandfather and namesake. Henry R.-D. II] Since then, one SERCB member visited South Harvester Colony 45 every timeframe so that issues between roaches and ants could be resolved without violence.

South Harvester 45 and South Dairy 1 had the best fire ant defense because those two colonies were close to Border River; they were used to skirmishes over the theft of grasshoppers. But what happened in early summer was not a skirmish over hoppers; it was an invasion of over 1000 roach warriors upon South Dairy Colony 20—Alexander's home colony. Worse was the fact that the SERCB member had completed a visit at South Harvester 45 only ONE day before, wanting to increase trade in plastic and grasshopper meat. The number of warriors involved made it evident that the invasion's purpose was to push Roacherian surface west of Border River making South Dairy 20 as vulnerable as the other two colonies. Ants had not felt this much anger toward Roacheria since the Inception of the Combined Colonies.

Alexander's mind saw the Blue-Green board from the level edge and his father's description of visibility, Total Engagement as a reality, one token on the board ... the fact that his father had played so poorly ... His pods shook in fear. The tea spilled. Master Adriana put her front legs around him. Fernando wiped up the spilled tea.

"I won't honey coat this. The mass of roach warriors rushed at our guards overwhelming them, and many were killed. But the roaches stopped two d-units from your colony and set up a defensive barrier—a sort of fortress nonwarriors carried in pieces and assembled behind the warriors. They set fire to the meadows and forest for 200 f-units all around it, so there is no cover for our guards, and are making their fortress stronger. South Dairy 20's commander thinks they will try to make it permanent to claim the surface. Your colony does not have enough fire ants to push the whole horde back where they belong, so they have set up a defensive line with everyone they have. Both sides are now sitting there, waiting for the other to move. Guards from Fire Colonies 3 and 4 are sending hundreds to help, and supplies, too. South Dairy Colony 1 will send as many as they can, but they feel they must also be ready for an attack there. This colony will be sending guards tomorrow. At the time of the invasion, your

parents were on regular duty with the grasshopper herd. They moved all hoppers and aphids to safety on the east side of the colony where dairying ants ward off predators without guard help. This is the letter your father sent:

“My most cherished son,

“I do not know how long it will be before your mother and I see you again. But I do not want you to worry. Please continue to focus on getting better. I lift you up to Essence every day in my meditations. Every fire ant in our colony has been called away from their regular jobs to defend the colony. Your mother and your sister are both working in support—bringing meals to those of us on the defense line. Your brother-in-law is somewhere in the middle of the line, also on night duty. Your brother has returned from his assignment in South Dairy 1 to help with our defense. He is at the far end of the line on day duty. I am on the line for twelve h-units every night plus the time it takes for the other shift to come to the line so we can retreat to rest. All I have done for the last few nights is stay at the ready for battle, grab a bite of food when I can, wait for my relief guard, fall into exhausted sleep to wake, eat my only hot meal of the day, and return to my position in the line. I may not be able to write to you. Your mother sends her charity, too. Food preparation goes on day and night. She is lucky to get even six h-units of rest a day; she barely has time to wave to me before I go out each evening.

“Please help us by taking good care of yourself.

“Your cherishing father, Frodi”

Master Adriana's comfort did nothing for Alexander. All he could think of was the reality of the game. He had never seen images of a battle, so his mind invented the worst possible scenarios. When he looked at Fernando's middle leg, he pictured pieces of his father lying in the meadow. His emotions fell apart as they never had before. Eventually, he grew tired and felt Master Adriana lift him onto his sleep cushion. She said something to Fernando, but Alexander couldn't hear it.

Self-imposed guilt returned, and he somehow decided—despite logical thought—that he was responsible for the fact that his entire family was in danger. The following morning, he pushed his breakfast around, took only two bites and said he wasn't hungry. He declined to play any games with Fernando, choosing a book, but stared at the same page all morning. He accepted some tea, but said, “I just don't feel like eating,” when lunch arrived. While staring at the same page all afternoon and realizing that there was no way he could escape to the surface, he decided that the one thing he could do was refuse to eat. It would probably take several days, but a body could only go so long without food before death came.

Master Adriana accepted his silence. She did all the talking and reassured him that she understood his worry. He nodded and stared at the floor. Both Fernando and Master Adriana related personal experiences about how they had handled anxiety. He nodded and stared at the floor. At supper he pushed his food around to make it look as if he had eaten but swallowed not one bite—not that his insides were comfortable. He had never felt so hungry.

By the next morning, his insides hurt. He drank his tea, tore his breakfast bread into tiny pieces, dropped a few on the floor with an “oops”, then scooped up enough dirt while picking the pieces up to dirty his entire plate. “Oh, well,” he said, “I was full anyway.”

Fernando looked at him long and hard, and said, “Shall I read to you?” After a story, Alexander claimed to be tired and curled up on his sleep cushion. He pretended to be asleep when Master Adriana arrived, but he could hear her and Fernando whispering.

“If you don’t eat by the time I arrive tomorrow, Alexander, I shall have to force-feed you. That’s not a pleasant experience, so I hope you’ll choose to eat something. I know you are not sleeping.” More whispering, and then Master Adriana left.

Fernando coaxed Alexander to eat supper. “My young friend, believe me, it’s not pleasant to be force fed. I will have to hold you down while Master Adriana tilts your head back and inserts a tube between your mandibles and slides it through your neck. Then she will dribble in a liquid meal. I’ve had to assist once with another patient. That one chose to eat after one treatment.”

Alexander pushed away from the table and lay on his sleep cushion, waiting for sleep to come, but dreading it because sleep brought on nightmares of his father dying in battle. He refused to rise in the morning, despite Fernando’s urging.

By late afternoon when Master Adriana entered with the proper equipment, Alexander had sunk so far into the mud of despair that he didn’t fight them. Fernando held him steadily without force.

“Notice how I coat the tube with oil,” Alexander heard Master Adriana say. “It helps prevent sores from forming in the mouth and neck, for a while anyway.” He lay limp and let her tilt his head back. It hurt worse than he thought it would, but not nearly as much as the aching of his entire insides screaming for nutrition. When it was over, he lay staring at the ceiling, ignoring those he now considered his tormentors.

Day and night came and went in a fog, blessedly empty of dreams, a blackness where he could forget everything. He was aware of Fernando lifting him, placing him in the tub, replacing the woven coverings on his sleep cushion, washing, and drying him, and returning him to a clean sleep cushion. He no longer cared that the tube hurt more with each feeding. Why wouldn’t they just let him die?

Why did Master Adriana keep talking to him every day, rereading his father’s second short letter? Why did she repeat—endlessly—that nothing that had happened was his fault? He knew it was all his fault. He attempted to say, “Leave me alone!” But his mouth was so dry and hurt so much that the words fizzled in a rasp.

That was when Fernando’s whisper was audible. “I don’t understand it, Master Adriana. With all the feedings, he’s still losing body mass.”

“He’s lost the will to live. I’ve talked to every expert I know, and everything they’ve suggested has failed. Something drastic is needed. Until I think of it, hold the present course.”

Master Adriana's voice had never held the sharpness it had the next time he heard her. "Alexander, I know you can hear me. I still believe you cherished Deena, but this state of nothing you have entered is a very poor way of showing it! Every ant I've ever known who lost someone they cherished has tried, even in grief, to LIVE for that ant, honoring their memory through their own lives. What would Deena think of this lump you've become? Have you ever even thought about what she wanted you to do with your life? What you are doing is selfish!"

Alexander's eyes opened in fury. How dare she say that! He would have yelled, but he couldn't get anything out. He glared at her. She glared back, turned, and left the chamber.

Later, he heard the portal open. Then a voice—his father's!

"Oh, Essence! Alexander, what are you doing to yourself? My precious son" Pods surrounded him, stroked him, "Please, stay in this world with me, with your mother. I couldn't bear to lose you! Deena was like a daughter to us. I can't lose my son, too. Let me place a few drops of water in your mouth, just a few drops."

Alexander opened his eyes. Tears dripped down his father's face. He had seen his mother cry, but his ever-steady rock of a father? Weeping over him? He parted his outer mandibles and accepted the drops of water from the tip of his father's front pod. "Ah, that's the way, Son, a little more now."

Frodi began a series of stories, and all the while he talked, he dripped more water, then honeydew into his son's mouth. "I want to tell you about how your mother and I met, because I don't think you realize how much you mean to us. I stayed in guard service after my two season cycles because I was hoping to meet a female I could cherish for life. I had met and spent time with several, but none of them felt right. I was already thirty and concerned I would never find someone; many friends already had two and three larvae. I finally meditated to Essence asking that if she intended to call me to Perpetual Service, to do so soon, so I could stop searching, and if she didn't plan to call me, to lead me to the female she intended for me."

He stroked Alexander tenderly and coaxed him to accept more honeydew. "It was less than a quarter timeframe later when I, literally, ran into your mother. She was carrying a basket full of new bowls and plates to the guard dining room, and we ended up tangled in each other at the intersection of two tunnels. I don't know how, but not a single dish broke. We introduced ourselves, and I apologized. I helped her up, and we picked up the dishes and reloaded the basket. I helped her carry it, and she said, 'I am off duty at six h-units this evening. Will you join me at the Leisure Center?'"

As Frodi went on, Alexander accepted liquid nourishment, basking in Frodi's comfort. The liquid stung his mouth and gullet as it went down but soothed the aching in his body.

"That evening, I felt she was my answer from Essence, but I was almost afraid to keep seeing her—so many times before, my hopes had been crushed. But the feeling I had for your mother was different, deeper, than I'd ever experienced. It was barely a timeframe later that your mother said to me, 'Frodi, you should know that I am already thirty-four. Essence has answered my meditation to meet the right male. I don't want to waste any more time. Will you make a promise with me?' I said yes and we mated a timeframe later."

Alexander had no idea his mother was older than his father, or that they were long past the average age of most mating couples when they met. His brain was too fogged to decipher his parents' present ages.

"When your sister hatched, oh, how happy we were! Then seven season cycles went by before your brother came along. A daughter and a son, we said to each other, everything one could dream of. Your mother was past forty by that time, so we figured a dead egg would come soon. I'll never forget the day Donavon and Deena arrived at the domicile next to ours—newly mated and, to us, so young. The day that Deena came over, crooning over her first egg, we were thrilled for her. Then your mother said she felt ill, so Deena left. Actually, she didn't want Deena to witness the arrival of a dead egg. But, NO, there lay your egg, full of life! Your mother was forty-nine! Almost a record!"

Alexander could add it this time—forty-nine plus fourteen—his mother was sixty-three! No wonder his father had written that she was working in support duty, not on patrol. His father wasn't as young as Alexander thought, either.

"What a precious surprise you were. Then that chaotic quarter time frame came. On Firstday, your sister emerged as an adult. We were barely getting her adjusted when, on Secondday, Donavon arrived, overcome by sorrow because his mate had been killed. Your bother was so close to pupation, and you about to hatch, we didn't dare leave our domicile, so we could not attend Deena's covering ceremony on Fourthday. Then Fifthday morning, not even an h-unit after you hatched, Donavon knocked at the portal, holding Little Deena, so drenched in grief that he couldn't think what to do! As I fed you your first meal, Donavon watched and remembered his training, fed his new daughter, and your sister got her first lesson in larva care. She was a huge help as Donavon continued to depend on us. Now do you understand why you and Deena are so precious? We lost her; you lost her. We are all grieving. We couldn't bear to lose you, too."

Frodi stopped dripping liquid nourishment into Alexander's mouth and pulled him into a close embrace. Alexander began to weep, but he was still so dehydrated that no tears came. He managed to rasp, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Throughout the rest of that day, and every two h-units all night, Frodi continued to feed his son. Both slept on and off as well. In the morning, Master Adriana arrived. She smiled at Alexander and said, "I'm relieved to see you've decided to eat again," but mentioned nothing about her harsh words the previous day. She handed him a mug of liquid nourishment. "Don't drink it too fast. Sip and swallow slowly. Drink another mug every two h-units—more often if you want to."

Once he had finished the mug, she asked, "Do you mind if I look down your throat? I noted that sores had formed even though I was careful every time I had to insert that tube."

Alexander lay back, hanging his head over the edge of the cushion—the position for every force-feeding—and opened his outer and inner mandibles. "A lot of sores, but no infection. That's a good sign." She helped him back into a sitting position on his sleeping cushion. "Alexander, you are going to have to stay on liquids until the sores are completely healed. Have you needed to eliminate yet?"

"No."

"When you do need to, ask for your father or Fernando to help you. You don't realize it, but you are very weak. Your legs will not support you." She rubbed the back of his thorax, thanked Frodi for his help, and said she would return in the afternoon. After Alexander's first trip to the sanitation area, he insisted on walking back to his sleep cushion; his legs buckled underneath him.

Alexander and his father spent the day visiting, with Frodi relating more intimate details of events with his mother. At one point, Alexander asked, "Is Mom all right with you telling me this really personal stuff?"

"After nearly thirty season cycles together, we can almost read each other's thoughts. I'm sure she's fine with what I've told you."

Alexander asked to sit at the table with them at lunch as he drank yet another mug of liquid nourishment. He asked, "Will you tell me about what's going on with the war?"

"Only if you promise not to withdraw from everyone again," his father answered.

"I won't," Alexander promised.

"The first day was the worst, of course. The attack was so sudden, and we were completely unprepared. I was with the hoppers when the alarm whistles sounded. We sprang into action, moving the herds. We only had one drill several season cycles ago, so it was all confusion, until one of the field captains shouted one step at a time to organize and prod the more reluctant hoppers all the way around the mound, staying with the dairying team until another captain arrived. Even though we were under sustained attack, it was a relief to know what was going on. By the time I was assigned a place along the defense line, the roaches had stopped advancing."

"How ... how many died?"

Frodi was evasive. "Three of every four guards out on day patrol. Now we just stay at the ready night and day. Alexander, I can't stay here with you much longer. Our commander and all the captains are planning an offensive to drive the roaches back to their side of Border River. I am needed, and I'm torn apart because you need me, too."

"How much longer can you stay?"

"I should go by late tonight—I'll take a night basket and sleep on the journey. Alexander, I need to ask you something very important."

"What?"

"Look right at me and promise me, out loud, that you will not try to end your own life again. I can't be focused during battle if I'm worrying about you. I need your help if I am to be effective in my duty and stay alive to see you again. Will you promise me that?"

Alexander hesitated but made a firm decision; then he looked right at his father's face. "I'm sorry I hurt you and Mom so much. I won't try to escape. I promise I won't try to end my own life again. I mean it."

Frodi hugged him. "Thank you! Let's enjoy the rest of the day before I leave. Shall we play a game or read?"

"Read," Alexander responded.

Chapter 10

Shortly after his father left, the colonies received news that the assault against the roach fortress near South Dairy Colony 20 had been successful. Many fire ants died, but roach casualties were much higher, and they had been pushed back across Border River. No member of Alexander's family was on the list of casualties.

Alexander's decision to live did not make all his emotional or physical problems go away in an instant. It was a quarter time frame before the sores from the feeding tube healed so that he could eat soft foods, and another quarter timeframe before he could use his mandibles and swallow. But that night, Alexander had the most frightening dream of his life. His shriek nearly sent Fernando through the ceiling of the chamber.

"Alexander, it's all right. It was just another dream," he reassured the young male numerous times before he was calm. "Let me put some tea on. Do you want to talk about it? Shall I send for Master Adriana?"

With a lot of deep breathing and half the tea, Alexander was able to say, "Let Master Adriana sleep for a change. Yes, I want to talk about it. I saw it happen ... I mean I saw the day Deena died. It was ... I don't even know ... strange ... I watched her pick the blossoms. I could hear what she said—meditating to Essence—but not all of it. Some words were garbled. Then I saw her stop, twitch her antenna, turn, and begin to hurry back ... and then the mantis ... but how could I dream that? How could I see that when I was never there?" His pods shook.

Fernando put a pod over Alexander's shaking ones as he sat across from him. "I'm not sure, but you have heard the testimony of the guard who was with your father, and you have heard me read a lot more about working on the surface. I think I should send for Master Adriana because I haven't yet learned about helping someone figure out a dream like that."

When Master Adriana arrived, Alexander told her the dream. "Do you still remember what she said in meditation?"

Alexander nodded. "She looked up into the sky and said over and over, 'Essence, please, help us tell my father. Please, let him not be angry. Don't let them punish Alexander. It would be so unfair. We didn't know. Please, no punishment for him. There must be a way.' She was crying, too, wandering here and there, picking the blossoms. I watched her walk down into that low area and she repeated everything to Essence. Then she walked farther, crying, and picked one more blossom. Suddenly, she stopped, antennae twitching, turned to go back, a lot faster. At the bottom of the low area, she cried out to Essence again, but this time it was all garbled."

"Could you see her face when she stopped?"

"No, she was looking away from me."

"It sounds like she sensed the mantis. This is important—did you seem to be on the ground in your dream? What direction were you looking when you saw this?"

Alexander closed his eyes to think. "This sounds really weird, but I was looking down on her from above. But I wasn't up in a wood plant. How could I do that? Even if I did hear the report a bunch of times?"

"Have you been meditating with Deena in mind lately, as I taught you, remembering happy times?"

"Yes, and I've even been asking Essence to guide me."

Master Adriana rubbed her outer mandibles. "From above. Can you guess how high? How big did Deena seem to look below you?"

"I don't know. Like this," Alexander said, putting one front pod less than an f-unit off the floor.

"This was more than a dream. You know that Essence doesn't interfere and prevent tragedies, but She helps us through them. It's rare, but Essence sometimes answers with visions. Essence has sent you a vision of what She saw that day as a message to you. What do you think that message is?"

Alexander put his front pods over his face. "It's what Deena said ... that she didn't want me to be punished. And I wasn't punished ... well, except what I did to myself. But Deena didn't want that. Like you said when you made me so angry that day ... What would Deena think about what I was doing to myself? Deena wasn't trying to run off to protect me. She was coming back so we could tell our parents like we planned."

"Um hum, go on."

"You were right. I was punishing myself. I just wanted to die, but Deena didn't want that. Essence wanted me to know that, too, to guide me. But what about the part she said that was all jumbled?"

It was Master Adriana's turn to think. "There are two possibilities. One, Deena was repeating what she had already said. Two, Essence knows you aren't ready to hear whatever it was; perhaps She will reveal that later. I need to tell you something else. The night before I received Master Danielle's message to come and evaluate you, I saw you in a dream—but I didn't know it was you at that moment. Essence told me, 'He needs you to help him find his way.' That's why I left right after I got the message, and why I wouldn't give up on you. Do you think you can go back to sleep now?"

Alexander nodded.

Several times each day, Fernando worked Alexander's leg muscles. He would lie on the back of his thorax and push one pod after another against Fernando's pods—twenty pushes with each leg. By the fifth day, he didn't need to be carried to the sanitation area but only supported. By day ten, he was able to walk around the chamber on his own.

Then, Master Adriana said, "Fernando, I want you to begin walking the tunnels with Alexander." And to Alexander, "Since your promise to your father that you won't try to run, you can begin to be outside this chamber. Don't try to go too far the first time, because you must walk back. Try to walk several f-units farther each day."

In another quarter time frame, he was able to walk unassisted several hundred f-units through the medical center tunnels. They had just returned from such a walk when Master Adriana arrived to say, "I received a letter from your parents yesterday after I left."

She handed it to him. While he had begun to remember some of the reading instructions from his first two timeframes of training, he could only comprehend some of it. "Would you please read it?"

"Of course:

'My cherished Alexander, I'm sorry it has taken me so long to write. We're all still on high alert and patrolling constantly along Border River. All our family are safe. Your brother, brother-in-law, and I were in the thick of things, but we all came through it without injury. Not so for many we knew. Here's a little about the battle. Since the roaches had set fire to our meadows to remove our cover, and continued to hide behind their barricades, our commander and the captains decided to use fire against them. A special group slipped across the dark meadow on a cloudy night and set fire to the barricades. Forced into the open, the rest of us could attack the roaches on level ground with our numbers almost equal to theirs. We lost many guards, but we killed far more of them. Less than thirty roaches managed to escape across Border River. Another advantage we had was being able to stay awake by snacking on concentrated, dried honeydew right before the battle. What pleasure we had throwing roach bodies across the water to remind them what we can do! It took more than a day to honor all the guards we lost, and the entire colony mourned. I think I slept the better part of two days after that. Our family had a celebration dinner together a few days later. The guards from other colonies will be staying for a few more timeframes to be sure Roacheria doesn't try to mount another attack. Some of them will be staying in homes, including ours, since the guard dorms are way over capacity. Because of their presence, our commander told your mother and me that we may make a trip to see you next quarter timeframe. Your cherishing father, Frodi.'

Master Adriana handed the letter back to Alexander. He held it against his thorax and began to cry. Once calm, he asked, "Why did I cry? That was the best news!"

She rubbed the back of his thorax. "There are many kinds of tears: those for sorrow, those in sympathy, and those for joy."

"Do you have a copy of the contract my mother signed?"

"Of course."

"When my mother is here, would you bring it to me? I know I still need a lot of help. I want her to see me cross out her name and write mine."

Master Adriana smiled. "With great pleasure! Fernando, I think it's time to gather everything in this chamber and move it to the regular medical center chamber next to this. Alexander, you are still weak but help as much as you can. Start right after breakfast tomorrow."

Frodi and Farrah found Alexander in the midst of a game of Blue-Green with Fernando when they arrived. For Alexander, seeing the game in its box had been another "sparker." Master Adriana had explained that the best way to get over that type of sparker was to confront it. First, she had set the box on the table. Alexander had shaken in fear, but he made himself stare at it. The next time, she laid out the game board and markers. He fought through his reaction. It was another breakthrough when he was able to play again.

Alexander jumped to his pods shouting, "Mom! Dad!" and rushed into their out-stretched pods. He let his happy tears flow, and so did they.

"You look a lot better than the last time I saw you," his father said.

Alexander took a deep breath and nodded. "I am better—not all well, but better." He reached out for his mother again. "I hurt you in my anger. I'm really sorry."

She held his face tenderly in her two front pods. "I appreciate hearing you say that. It's behind us now."

Master Adriana arrived not long after, contract parchment in pod as Alexander had requested. Fernando excused himself while the others sat around the table. Master Adriana put the parchment and an ink pot in front of Alexander, who said, "Mom, I have been ready to sign this for a while now, but I wanted you to be able to see me do this." He dipped the tip of his pod in the ink and drew a line through his mother's signature and wrote his name. Alexander looked with satisfaction at it and then asked, "Why is the ink smeared here and here?" pointing to places where the words were blurred.

Farrah, seated next to Alexander, responded with a side hug, and whispered, "I was crying when I signed it."

"Oh."

Master Adriana lightened the mood. "While we are all here, I'd like to discuss Alexander's upcoming training options. The Guard Academy does not start new groups every time frame, as demand presents itself. They only begin first season cycle groups at the beginning of a season cycle, so Alexander must wait for the new season cycle—two timeframes from now. Alexander, you are way behind in your first season cycle of training. If you had tutoring, do you think you could get through that much information in two timeframes?"

Alexander looked around, waiting for someone to tell him what he should do. He was met with silence. "I don't know. I'm scared about going back because other trainees might start asking about me. It's hard enough to talk to you about my feelings. I don't want to have to tell others about what happened. I'm not ready for second season cycle studies."

"You could start over again with first season cycle work," Master Adriana said. "The other trainees will be new, too, and probably as unsure as you are. You don't have to tell anyone anything you don't want to. There will be no personal questions; they will be as polite as you've been taught to be."

Frodi asked his son, "How much do you remember from your first two timeframes?"

"Not much—writing my name, picking out a few words to read. I remember numbers pretty well."

"Another thing for you to consider, Alexander, is how physically fit you are. I know you are increasing your walking in the tunnels, but the physical training at the Guard Academy is tougher than what you experienced in that short time in your home colony training center," Master Adriana put in.

Alexander let out a long sigh. "So, I'm even further behind."

"What do you think you should do?"

Surprised that she wanted his opinion, Alexander hesitated. "Maybe ... what if I did something in between? If I really work hard with Alfredo from now until the new season cycle to build up strength, I think I could do it physically. And I think I should start over with first season cycle training. Sometimes I get pretty bored, but I can't read most of the books here. You mentioned having a tutor. Would that be possible?"

Master Adriana and his parents smiled.

"How about this?" Master Adriana asked. "I'll see about getting a tutor for an h-unit every day. You would know some reading and number work ahead of the others, so you could focus on getting to know your fellow trainees, and you would feel more comfortable. You should do two workouts per day, an h-unit each with short rests when you need them. Fernando is well trained in that area. I think you should also have some chores daily—you'd be helping around the domicile if you were back home, right?"

Frodi and Farrah nodded.

She continued, "The guard dining room can always use more help, and it's close by. Talking and working with a few ants every day might help you feel more comfortable around others. It's not hard to learn to grind seeds for bread and wash pots, bowls, mugs, and plates. I've had other patients do that and it worked well."

"I think I would like that."

Master Adriana rubbed the back of his thorax. "I want you to begin making more decisions as we come to them. Right now, though, I want you to enjoy your parents' visit. I'm not going to come again until the day they leave."

The two days that followed were the happiest Alexander had experienced since he and Deena found out what they had done.

The first few days of Alexander's new routine exhausted him, but he preserved and began to thrive. Get up at six h-units; work out in the guard gym for an h-unit—walking, then running up and down the built-in slope, lifting a loaded basket, and finally trying to lug the basket up the slope; breakfast in the guard dining room; relax until his tutor arrived; practice reading and numbers for an h-unit; head for the guard dining area to grind grain—which was like another workout; lunch, then help wash all the dirty eating utensils; relax an h-unit; second work out of the day; play a game or two of Blue-Green (he could almost win at two-by-two); daily progress discussion with Master Adriana; supper and relax until the lantern was turned out at nine h-units. Sometimes he fell asleep long before the lantern went out.

He broke down weeping for no reason one day in the guard kitchen, but the worker in charge handled it with ease, calming Alexander down and saying, "You aren't the first one of Master Adriana's patients we've had. We understand." Master Adriana told him that he would probably have many days like that. No one in the kitchen ever asked why. Gradually, he learned to recognize the signs before he began to feel what Master Adriana called "an episode" coming on. Then, he could excuse himself to a quiet area to regain composure.

It seemed like no time at all had passed when the day came to enroll in the Guard Academy. Master Adriana came to get him, and they walked together from the guard medical center to the Academy. "I'm acting in place of your parents today for enrollment," she said. "For the first quarter timeframe, Fernando will accompany you in the morning and meet you just outside the portal to escort you back to your chamber. That's not because I don't trust you. After that, you'll take yourself to and from training. You'll do any home study on your own and still help in the guard kitchen for supper. You should be there by five h-units. Fernando will return to stay with you in the evening—and if you are wondering why, it's because evenings and nights are the most difficult times to be alone."

"He'll probably enjoy the days off after all this time with me," Alexander responded.

"He will be anything but off duty. He needs to begin the clinical aspect of his medical training."

"Oh."

They reached the Guard Academy and Alexander opened the portal for Master Adriana. "Thank you. First, we have an appointment with Master Aluf, head of the Academy. He likes to meet every new trainee." She must have noticed his antennae trembling, because she said, "Don't worry; he is one of the most compassionate ants I know. Then, we'll meet your basics trainer."

Alexander nodded. It sounded like the day that his father had taken him and Deena to enroll, except they had not met the head of that training center. "Does he know ... I mean, well, ... what happened to me?"

"Yes, but he knows everything about every trainee here. And, if you are worried about it, no one else will know, not even your trainer, unless you choose to tell them. Master Aluf keeps everything confidential. Go ahead and tap on the portal. He's expecting us."

Alexander had barely tapped when the portal opened and he heard, "Come in, come in. You must be Alexander! Welcome." Master Aluf extended his front pods in greeting. His smile immediately put Alexander at ease. He gestured for them to sit on cushioned stools opposite his work surface.

"Master Adiana, why don't you fill out the forms while Alexander and I chat? So, Alexander, I understand from Master Adriana's letter to me that you chose to begin your training over again."

"Yes, I ... I've forgotten so much, and even though I've had a tutor for a couple of timeframes, we decided I should start over. I'm ... I'm really afraid I will break down sometimes. What will my fellow trainees think?"

Master Aluf reached across his work surface to touch Alexander's pods. "None of our trainers or trainees will make anything of it, especially in the group you'll be in. We only have one first season cycle group—all of whom are the young of our staff or who, like you, are Master Adriana's patients. By the time you reach your second season cycle and are with trainees from all over the colonies, you'll be ready for it. Do you want to ask me anything else?"

"Um, um ... I know I'll be asked to introduce myself and I don't want to talk about what happened. What should I say?"

Master Adriana had finished the forms and rubbed Alexander's thorax. "Keep it simple," she said. "Tell them your name and your home colony. You might say that you lost someone you were very close to, but that you aren't ready to talk about it. You'll know when you are ready to say more."

"Well put, Master Adriana. I would have said the same. Alexander, I am always here to listen if you have anything you need to talk about. I arrive early and stay late, which is easy since my living quarters are right through there." He pointed to a portal behind him. "When anyone taps on my work chamber portal, it resonates through strips of conductive wood to my home."

He looked over the form and then added Alexander's name to a list. "You'll be in trainer Amanda's group. It's chamber number T 1-8, right down the tunnel where you came in. She's expecting you."

The meeting with Trainer Amanda was similar. Alexander said very little about himself. The chamber had the same basic setup as the one in his home colony. His trainer said that there were only nine in the group—six were the young of staff, and Alexander, and two more of Master Adriana's patients. "It will be an intimate group with plenty of help for everyone. One thing that is different about the Fire Ant Academy is that we must allow enough time for trainees who travel back to their home colonies for Last Day. They have Sixth and Seventhday to journey home, spend Last Day with their families, and two days to travel back here. So, our term begins on Thirdday, rather than Firstday, of the first quarter timeframe each season cycle. Trainees who remain here have their own Last Day service with the staff and their families. We are like a colony within a colony."

"You'll follow your regular routine until then," Master Adriana said. "You and Fernando may go to the main guard meditation chamber for Last Day services. My family and I would be happy to have you join us afterward."

Alexander's first day of training went better than he thought it would. Everyone was so friendly. Fred and Farina, the other two who saw Master Adriana, asked him to join them during the midday meal break.

"My older brother and I live in the academy dorm," Fred said. "Our parents both died in the war over South Dairy 20. I don't remember them at all because I was still pupating. My brother was already here as a trainee, so when it came time, he went home to Fire Colony 4 to greet me when I emerged and brought me back here—only half a timeframe ago. It's been harder for him than for me, I think."

Ferina was equally open. "My dad is Master Aluf. I did know my mother, but for only a timeframe after I emerged. She had some chronic disease—I don't remember the name of it—but she was really sick. A medical attendant came every day so my dad could keep up his duties. But he took half a time frame off when I emerged. It was a precious time for the three of us. Then I was home with the medical attendant and Mom for another half timeframe before Mom went to Essence. Master Adriana has been so much help to my dad and me."

Alexander wondered how either of them could be so calm. He had been such a wreck. Fred, who had lost both parents, was coping—or certainly seemed to be. Ferina, too, with the loss of her mother. How could Master Aluf have been so kind to him the day he enrolled, while he was grieving for his mate? If they could get through it, Alexander knew he could.

"I ... um ... my sister/friend that I lost ... well ... I'm not ready to talk about her yet," Alexander said.

Fred and Ferina answered almost in unison, "That's all right."

Alexander did tell them about the first time he had gone to the surface with his father. When they returned to their training chamber after lunch, he had two friends.

The next few days went well. But on Fourthday of the following quarter time frame, Trainer Amanda began a lesson that sounded much too familiar to Alexander. She began by stating that the lesson was one of the most important they would hear and that all of them would be making a special vow at the end of it. An avalanche rolled over Alexander. He had figured he would hear it again, but not so soon. This was more than a sparker; it was an emotional volcano reliving the trauma he had experienced. His first attempt to quell the growing anxiety was deep breathing.

That didn't work.

He put his front pods on his middle legs to stop them from tapping.

That didn't work either.

Trainer Amanda was halfway through that antstory lesson when he knew he had to get away. He rose from his bench. "Excuse me, Trainer Amanda, I've got to leave to compose myself." He ran down the tunnel and entered Master Aluf's work chamber, shaking, and collapsed on the floor. The clerk knocked on the inner chamber portal. Master Aluf entered, saw what was happening, and said to his clerk, "Send for Master Adriana. Tell her Alexander needs her immediately and bring us some tea."

Alexander blubbered, "I'm sorry ... I ... I had to get away ... that lesson ... it was when Deena and I realized ... falling apart ... didn't want to make a spectacle of myself ... You said I could come any time ..."

"You did the right thing," Master Aluf said as he sat behind Alexander, encircling him with his front and middle appendages, stroking him gently. In a few moments, Alexander was able to sip the tea. By the time Master Adriana arrived, he had stopped crying and shaking.

Master Adriana reassured him. "I'm sorry this happened. I knew you would probably need support for this, but I forgot that lesson had been moved up in the progression of the end of the first timeframe of training. This is my fault. Master Aluf, would you excuse Alexander for the rest of the day?"

"Of course. I'll let Trainer Amanda know. Alexander, do you think you'll be able to return tomorrow?"

Alexander nodded.

Alexander arrived a little early the following morning and told Trainer Amanda he wanted to speak to the group. He and Master Adriana had discussed what he might try to say and what he could leave out.

Once all the trainees had arrived, Trainer Amanda said, "We are glad Alexander is back today. He has something he would like to tell us."

Alexander came to the front, took a deep breath, and said, "First, I'm sorry I ran out yesterday. I had vivid memories of that antstory lesson from last season cycle. I told you I lost someone close to me. Well ... my sister-friend Deena and I grew up together. Our parents lived right next to each other. Deena's mother died in an accident on the surface three days before she hatched. Her father was all upset and grieving, so my parents took care of Deena and me together—oh, it also happened that we hatched on the same day. My parents are in mated perpetual service, so one is always at home. Deena and I had our whole larvahood together. We entered pupation on the same day and emerged as adults on the same day. We felt very close. I had this deep feeling that I wanted her to be my mate, and she

felt the same. When I had to make that vow not to mate anyone but a fire ant, I barely got the words out. Then not even two timeframes later, Deena went to the surface by herself and met with a mantis. I fell apart—stung myself. No, it doesn't work. Anyway, I ended up here with Master Adriana. It took me many timeframes to be able to start training again. So, when I heard those familiar words ... well ... I had to leave."

Telling that much of his story lifted some of the burden. The reaction from Trainer Amanda and his fellow trainees was so supportive that Alexander shed tears of relief and joy.

Chapter 11

Alexander had originally started training during Third Timeframe, but his new start was at the beginning of First Timeframe, which gave him time to adjust before the first anniversary of the day he and Deena mated. In a lengthy session with Master Adriana, he decided he would attend training that day.

"You are, for all intents and purposes, a widower," Master Adriana told him. "You did have a mate whom you cherished. After your mandatory two season cycles of service, you will be able to say that publicly, not mentioning that Deena was not a fire ant unless you want to. But for now, it would be awkward to call yourself a widower because of your age."

"Will I ever get over the pain?"

"No one ever gets **over** what you've experienced. You will, however, get **through** it and take your life in a new direction. Deena will always be a part of you, but the pain will diminish in time."

"I think I'll focus on remembering the joy we felt for half a timeframe before we knew."

Master Adriana smiled. "Good choice, but right now you'd better scoot or you'll be late to dining room duties."

Another positive event happened before Alexander had to face the anniversary of Deena's death. His brother came for a visit. Frodi Jr., like other guards at the time, was asked to accept an emergency extension of his service following the war at South Dairy 20. Now he had been released from his obligation.

Fernando showed Alexander how to get to the transportation center that Fifthday afternoon and waited with him until Frodi Jr. arrived. Alexander thought he would feel awkward because he had never actually met his brother. However, when he came into the transportation center from the inter-colonial tunnel, it felt natural to run forward and embrace him.

"You look a lot like Dad," Alexander said.

"And you look like Mom," Frodi replied, "but when I look at you from this side," walking around Alexander, "you look more like Dad."

"Alexander, will you be able to get back to your chamber on your own? I've got to get to the clinic," Fernando said.

"Yes, don't worry. Did you have a pleasant journey, Frodi?"

"It was long and tiring, but good. I slept in a basket between home and South Dairy 1, but I walked the whole way today."

Along the way to Alexander's medical center chamber, Frodi said, "Mom and Dad send their greetings. They'll be here together ... ahhh ... in Fifth Timeframe."

"You don't have to be vague. I can handle hearing 'the day Deena died,' I still have trouble sometimes in the evenings but I'm better than I was."

"That's good to hear. I have some good news, too! Francine and I have made our Promise to Mate."

"Congratulations!" Alexander said. Frodi Jr. had written to him about Francine, telling how they had met during service. She was from Fire Colony 4, but they were planning to have their ceremony at South Dairy 20 and live there.

"Our ceremony will be in the middle of Sixth Time Frame. Do you think you'll be able to come?"

They had arrived at Alexander's chamber by that time. He avoided answering the question and began to fix some tea before finally saying, "I am happy for you, but I don't think I can handle being at your ceremony. I wouldn't want to spoil your day by having an episode."

"Dad said that might be the case. So ... tell me about training here."

"I'm doing well, keeping up academically. I'm really good at gymnastics, and I like it. When we play defensive games, I'm always able to dodge, turn, twist, and flip away from my opponent, and, so far, I always pin them down."

"That will come in handy on patrol. You still wear corks on your stingers in games like that, right?"

"Of course."

"Which reminds me," Frodi went on, "funny story about the battle. Will it bother you if I talk about that?"

Alexander shook his head while he refilled their mugs and got out snacks.

"My unit was about two hundred f-units away from Francine's on one side and about the same distance from Dad's on the other. Confession here—I was so scared when we started to run toward the roaches that, well ... I spontaneously relieved myself. My unit leader was close by and shouted, 'Not to worry, Frodi, the whole meadow will smell like a latrine by the time we're done!' And he was right."

The brothers laughed and talked about everything. They had a relaxing dinner together in the guard dining hall where Alexander introduced Frodi Jr. to those he worked with. He was only sorry that the visit was too short. Frodi needed to catch a ride in the last night basket so he could be home by noon the following day. He and his Promised One had so much to do to prepare—arranging for a meditation chamber, being assigned a domicile, meeting with their mentors ... Frodi planned to train with the supervisor at South Dairy 20's pottery workshop, and Francine had been accepted in the medical center's biology laboratory as a research assistant.

"We are going to the surface for our session today," Master Adriana said. "There is a place I want to show you. If you agree, it will be the place we go when your parents arrive."

They had talked before about where to have a memorial ceremony for the first anniversary of Deena's death. He needed that symbolic act of letting go. "Guards who die in battle are covered where they fall, and even though Deena was not a fire ant, she lost her battle with the mantis. Our memorial should be somewhere on the surface," he said.

Master Adriana agreed.

Once they reached the public area near the main entrance, Master Adriana pointed and said, "Do you see that grove of wood plants over there? I saw it last Seventhday. There's a sheltered area in the center. I don't think anyone goes there."

They walked several moments before reaching the place. Alexander pushed aside a low-hanging branch and entered the circle of wood plants. "It's really pretty here. Yes, this is the right place. I know I can't put a memorial marker here, but I'll know the spot. Will I be able to come here to meditate other times?"

"Of course."

"In her last letter, Mom said she found something I could cover."

Alexander was somber, almost peaceful—much better than he thought he might be—when his parents arrived the following Sixthday evening. After fond greetings, Farrah handed Alexander a piece of parchment. "I found this crumpled parchment behind the smaller floor cushion in the parlor. I'm sorry I read it first, but I knew it was what you needed for our ceremony tomorrow."

In a beginner's awkward script, Deena had written, "Deena cherish Alexander," over and over.

Alexander held it to his thorax and wept. Finally, he said, "I remember that day, it was our fourth day of training, and we were practicing our names. I asked her to tell me what she was writing because I could see it was more than her name, and I didn't know how to write anything else. She smiled at me and kept writing. I tried to grab it, but she crumpled it and tossed it away before I could, and it ended up behind that cushion. We laughed so loud Dad came from the kitchen to see what we were doing, and

then Donavon arrived, so Deena gathered her things and went home with him, and I forgot all about it—until now.”

Both parents embraced him again. “Is it right for tomorrow?” his father asked.

“It’s perfect. It’s a little piece of her. And I finally know what she was writing.”

Alexander held the parchment to his thorax all night, wishing he could keep it forever. He even thought of crumpling a piece of blank parchment and covering that instead. But by morning, he knew that he had to let go of it. That was the whole point of covering ceremonies. He, like all ants, needed to walk through one of life’s many portals, close it behind him, and move forward. “Remember with fondness and move on,” was a mantra Master Adriana repeated often.

Frodi, Farrah, and Alexander attended Seventhday Meditation with other guards in the Medical Center’s Meditation Chamber, after which they headed for the main colony entrance. Master Adriana was waiting for them. “I signed all of us out.”

Once on the surface, Alexander held the parchment to his thorax again, this time imagining it was Deena’s body he carried. All of them were silent, as they would be in a procession to the Heart of the Colony. Alexander handed the parchment to his father once they reached the grove of wood plants. He lowered himself and began to scoop a hollow in the soft earth. It didn’t have to be very big for a piece of parchment, but still, each scoop of dirt he put to the side felt like a thousand weight units, the heaviness of his grief.

When the hollow was complete, he stood. His father handed him the parchment. He stroked it gently, laid it in the hollow, stroked it again, and spoke. “I miss you. I always will. Thank you for coming into my dream last night and smiling at me. You’ll always be here,” he tapped his thorax, “and I will try to live every day for you, to honor your memory.”

Frodi spoke next. “You were like a daughter to us. I miss you, too. I know you tried to save yourself, and I know you are at peace in Essence.”

Farrah took her turn. “I will never forget the day your father came to us, begging for our help. It was an honor to be a ‘second’ mother to you, a precious part of my life.”

Finally Master Adriana said, “I never knew you in life, but I know you from what everyone else has said, especially Alexander. May Essence guide us all going forward.”

Alexander stooped again and pushed the soft earth he had piled on the side into the hollow, smoothed the top, and patted it down. He rose again and the three of them chanted:

“Song of Our Loss”

No longer with us, you are now within us.

Not here to touch, see, or hear,

But in our minds, ever near.

In time to come, we will join you again,

In the peace of Essence.

If this had been in the Heart of a Colony, friends and family would have been there to express their condolences. The entire group would have returned to the family's home for a meal. Instead, the four of them returned to Master Adriana's home where her mate had dinner waiting for them.

Chapter 12

Toward the end of Sixth Timeframe, Alexander noticed a change in his friend Fred's behavior. The first sign was during gymnastics. The two of them were matched against each other in a battle game. Alexander got the better of his friend quickly. In previous matches like that, they had both laughed when Alexander won. Not this time. Fred got up in a huff and stomped away.

When Alexander asked him later if he was all right, he snapped, "I'm fine!"

The next day, Fred answered an Antstory question correctly after Alexander had missed it. Fred smirked at him in a way that Alexander felt said, "Got you!"

But no one could ignore Fred's actions the following day. Alexander noticed that Fred's middle pods kept ticking, and by day's end, his antennae twitched. Trainer Amanda approached him, but he kept saying he was fine. At dismissal, they proceeded down the tunnel as usual until Fred, last to leave the chamber, burst through the portal and down the tunnel, pushing everyone aside as he ran. "Fred, wait!" Alexander called after him.

Fred tore down the tunnel. Alexander picked up his pace and followed, calling out to his usually calm friend. By the time Alexander reached the dining area, Fred was screaming in anger and upsetting benches.

"Fred! What's wrong? Calm down!" Alexander shouted.

The noise attracted others. "Quick, somebody get Master Aluf, and tell him to send for Master Adriana. Stay back here by the portal. Let him be until they come." Alexander blocked the portal with his own body, keeping Fred inside the dining area and others away from him.

Fred over-turned several tables and benches before he stopped and dropped to the floor, weeping. Alexander approached him. "Fred, is it all right if I embrace you?"

Fred answered with a moan. In the same way that Alfredo had embraced Alexander after he had torn up his medical center chamber, he lowered himself behind Fred and wrapped his front and middle appendages around him.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Fred mumbled between sobs.

"Did I do something to anger you?"

"No, it's not you."

Alexander remained silent. Master Aluf entered and looked at Alexander with questioning eyes. Alexander told him how Fred had been the last few days and ended with, "Then he fell apart today."

Master Aluf, calm as usual, nodded. "You are a good friend, Alexander. Would you mind staying until Master Adriana arrives? I'll stay, too, right after I send for his brother and tell the other trainees to go home or back to their dormitory chambers."

It was almost an h-unit before Master Adriana arrived. "I'm sorry for the delay. It's been one of those days." Then she addressed Fred, "Let me help you up. Let's go to a quiet place and talk. Can you do that?"

Fred nodded.

Alexander let go of his friend and stepped back. Master Adriana helped Fred up and led him away. When she reached the portal, she turned to Alexander. "Please consider my usual appointment with you cancelled. I'll see you next quarter timeframe."

Master Aluf asked Alexander, "Would you mind staying a bit longer to help me straighten up this place before dinner time?"

"I'll be glad to."

As Alexander and Master Aluf put the tables and benches right side up, Master Aluf complimented Alexander on his quick action. "Am I right that your own experiences helped you recognize what was happening with Fred?"

Alexander nodded.

"What I'm about to tell you is confidential. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"I've been watching Fred. He was doing too well handling the deaths of his parents. If he had broken down sooner, it would have been better. I'm glad he has a good friend like you. That's all I can say."

They finished resetting the rest of the benches in silence. Alexander ran back to the medical center dining area so he wouldn't be late for his evening chores.

The following morning, Fred addressed their training group apologizing for his outburst and found the same support from everyone that Alexander had experienced. Later, he told Alexander, "I don't know what I would have done without you."

"You would have done the same for me. It's what friends do."

The rest of that first season cycle of training went so fast Alexander could hardly believe it was over. Trainer Amanda met with each member of their group privately before the end of the term.

"I've been more than pleased with your progress this season cycle, Alexander. It's good to be able to say that you now have two reasons for remaining at the Fire Ant Academy. One, of course, because you are still with Master Adriana, but second, because your academic performance earns you a place as a representative of your colony."

"Thank you," he replied. "There were days I wasn't so sure."

On their final day of training before Last Day holidays, Trainer Amanda announced to the whole group, "I'm happy to tell you that I'll remain your trainer for your second season cycle of basics. It happens that we have no staff members with recently emerged young adults and, thank Essence, Master Adriana has no new first season cycle patients." Fred, Farina, and Alexander led the group in laughter.

Amanda continued, "We will, however, have new trainees arriving from other colonies. They have won their places here through academic and physical excellence in their home colonies, but they are leaving their friends and families and will likely feel as nervous as all of you did when you started. I will assign some of you to be initial partner and friend to one of them to help them adjust and make other friends. I'm sure you'll also be glad to know you've gained the privilege of going to the Academy's Leisure Time Center on Fifthday evenings. Enjoy your holidays; you are dismissed."

Alexander's parents came for Last Day, which they celebrated with trainees at the academy who, for one reason or another, had not gone to their home colonies. When the meditation service ended, Frodi and Farrah made a point to ask Fred and his brother to join their table during the feast.

"Alexander tells us in his letters he feels like you are another brother," Frodi told Fred. "Thank you for being such a great friend to him."

"He's helped me a lot, too," Fred replied.

During the social time and games that followed, Frodi spent as much time with Fred as he did with Alexander, who knew Fred needed such attention, and it gave him time to get to know Fred's brother.

A timeframe later with the new season cycle off to a good start, Master Adriana confronted Alexander. "Why haven't you been going to the Leisure Center?"

"Just because I can go, doesn't mean I have to."

"No, you don't have to go, but you didn't answer my question."

"I ... I just don't feel ready to be around that many other ants."

"You've enlarged your circle of friends; you've been wonderful—so I've been told—to the young male in your group from Fire Colony 4. What's really going on here, Alexander?"

For the first time in many timeframes, Alexander's middle pod ticked the floor against his will. Master Adriana gave him one of her penetrating looks.

"I ... I ... I just don't feel ready!"

"I think you mean you're worried that a female will ask to spend time alone with you and you don't want to explain."

He stared at her.

"I'm right, aren't I?"

Alexander looked at the floor and nodded.

"Going to the Leisure Center doesn't mean you must spend time alone with any female. Go! Sit in a group. Play a few games. Join a Blue-Green tournament. Have some fun!"

"But what if a female asks me?"

"Keep it simple—as you did at the beginning of training last season cycle. Then excuse yourself and return to a larger group. We'll talk more about this because you will have to face this, and sooner is better. The longer you put it off, the harder it will be."

The first two times Alexander went to the Fifthday Evening Social, he sat with members of his training group. The third time, the male he had been partnered with, who made friends easily, introduced him to a trainee in another group who liked to play Blue-Green.

"What level do you play?" Alexander asked.

"Two by two," was the answer.

They set up a board and Alexander won in less than three moments. That led to another trainee wanting to play, and another, all of them losing to Alexander. Before anyone knew it, an unofficial tournament was underway, with everyone laughing and cheering for Alexander.

The Fifthday after that, an upper-level trainee approached Alexander and said, "I hear you're pretty good at Blue-Green. Ever play Total Engagement?"

"A few times," Alexander replied. "I'm still learning that level."

"Then it will be a good game." He sat opposite Alexander and set up the board. An audience gathered around them.

Alexander held his own for five moments before he lost. "Wheew!" Alexander said. "I have much to learn at this level."

His opponent held out both front pods. "You did well actually. I've been grand winner the last two tournaments. I'll look forward to seeing you at the next tournament—and you'd better sign up for the Total Engagement level. You would discourage too many Two-by-Two players."

Alexander decided he needed to practice a whole lot more with Fernando, who was still spending his evenings with Alexander. On subsequent Fifthdays, Alexander tried other games and made additional friends. In his first Blue-Green tournament, he made it through three rounds before losing. He even, at Master Adriana's insistence, attended a dance session. She said he needed to learn various cultural dances and that dancing with several females to learn did not require him to explain anything.

Avoiding one-on-one meetings with a female lasted until Eleventh Timeframe. Then Ferina asked to spend time alone with him. The excuse of having to work longer in the guard dining room would not work. "I really like you as a friend," she said, "and I want to know you better. Are you not allowed or something?"

Her question gave him a new reason to delay the inevitable. "Something like that," he replied.

Master Adriana gave him another of her penetrating looks when he arrived at his next regular session. "You've put off your first one-on-one time with a female long enough, Alexander. Ferina was in tears when she asked why I wouldn't give you permission to spend time with her. I calmed her down and said you didn't need my permission but that I could not tell her why; only you could explain that. We've practiced numerous times. She'll be here in a few moments, and I have tea ready for both of you. Since I have pushed you into this next step, the least I can do is facilitate the conversation. I don't like this requirement either, but we both know you must."

"But ... but ..."

"No more excuses. This first time will be the most difficult."

Alexander went over in his mind the various approaches he had practiced since the beginning of the season cycle. Everything flew out of his head when Ferina arrived.

She looked confused and broke the silence. "Why won't you spend time with me, Alexaner? We are already friends; it's very hurtful."

"I ... do want to spend time with you, Ferina. I would never hurt you. What I must tell you is supposed to prevent hurt ... to keep females from getting too attached without knowing what I can't do ... but it seems I've hurt you anyway, because I've heard you say more than once how much you want a family someday."

"You aren't making any sense," Ferina said, taking a glug from the mug of tea Master Adriana handed her.

"Well, you might not want to spend time with me because ... because ..." he looked at Master Adriana to help, but she gave him an out-with-it look.

"Because I'm not fertile."

Ferina's outer mandibles opened wide.

Master Adriana nudged Alexander again. "Tell her why. I can't do it for you."

Ferina's eyes, full of confusion, finally made Alexander say, "I've told you about Deena as my sister-friend, but she was more than that. She was my mate, accidentally, and we didn't know what we were doing when we mated. I have nothing left for any other female. I'm sorry. It's just so hard for me to talk about. I feel like I'm living it all again and it was hard enough the first time. So hard I tried to end my own life—more than once." Having gotten started, he let it all pour out.

When he finally finished, Ferina said, "So, that booklet my dad read to me when I first emerged, that ... that was about you?"

"Yes."

"I'm so sorry, Alexander. I'm feeling very confused right now. Please, give me time to sort this out. I'll let you know when I'd like to see you again—I mean just the two of us."

"And if you don't, I'll understand."

Master Adriana joined the conversation and said, "Ferina, you can talk to your father about this if you need to. He knows, but it must remain between you, your dad, Alexander, and me. This is Alexander's story to tell, when necessary, not yours to pass on. Do you understand?" When Ferina nodded, Master Adriana continued, "You can head on home now. Alexander and I will keep talking for a while."

The following morning, Ferina handed Alexander a note:

"Dear Alexander,

"I do want to spend time alone with you. My dad reminded me that spending time with someone doesn't always lead to a Promise, and none of us can know if we cherish someone until we spend a lot of time with them. I told him I was concerned that since he lost Mom, and I'm the only young one he'll ever have, if you and I did come to cherish each other, he would never have any descendants. He said no mated couple is guaranteed young ones, and I need to live my own life and not worry about him having grandsons or granddaughters. I'd like to have a picnic on the surface with you on Sixthday. Will you come?

"Your friend,

"Ferina"

Chapter 13

Alexander stood outside the Guard Academy main entrance—almost noon—to wait for Ferina, as per her instructions when he accepted her invitation. She came out carrying a basket and a folded ground mat, which he took from her pods. They headed to the main entrance. Once signed out of the colony, Farina said, “I was thinking that grove of wood plants would make a lovely picnic spot.”

Alexander nodded and followed with hesitant steps. Ferina couldn't possibly know what that grove meant to him. “Let's put the mat over there,” he suggested, pointing across the grove from where he had covered Deena's paper.

After sampling the snacks Ferina had brought, Alexander asked, “Have you ever been here before?”

“Just to check it out. Why?”

“I've been here several times—once with Master Adriana, again with my parents last spring, and on my own to meditate.”

“Really?” Farina said and smiled at him.

Alexander felt comfortable confiding in her now. He explained the memorial ceremony they had, including why they had not put any marker there ending with, “When you pointed to this grove, I wasn't sure what I would feel when I got here, but it's all right, peaceful, actually.”

“I didn't realize, or I would have chosen a different place. We're not ... uh ... sitting where you covered the parchment are we?”

Alexander smiled at her. “No, that's why I pointed to this spot. Our place is over there. But enough of me. I would like to know more about you. These fried grassfrond seeds are so crunchy, different from any I've ever had. Did you make them?”

“Yes. About a week after I emerged from pupation, my mother wasn't feeling as sick as usual. She taught me her way of frying seeds rather than roasting them. That was a special day for me, and one of the few days she felt that well. After Mom joined Essence, I didn't want to cook them this way anymore, but Master Adriana told me that doing so might help bring me peace. She was right, as usual. So, now I make them often for Dad and me.”

Alexander looked up into the leafy tops of the wood plants. “‘Right as usual’—yes, Master Adriana is that, for sure.” He changed the subject. “Isn't it lovely the way the sun comes through the leaves. Look at the patterns of light and shadow on the ground. I can't help but feel good in this place.”

They talked about the things they enjoyed, books they had read because they wanted to, not because they were assigned, and things they didn't like. Before they knew it, lengthening shadows told them it was late afternoon, so they packed up the basket, folded the ground mat and headed back.

That day was the first of many caring experiences the two of them shared. They picnicked several Sixthdays—going to the grove and other places, too; they played games on Fifthday evenings with others but often sat in a quiet alcove. On dance nights, they danced together and with others. A

few times, they sat with Fred and a female he was seeing, but those evenings felt awkward for Alexander. Though he didn't know why, he sensed that Fred felt awkward, too.

Time frames flew by and before Alexander knew it, the second season cycle of basics ended. He spent Last Day with fellow trainees—without his parents, who were with his brother, sister, and their families. Fred's brother had completed all his training and was prepared to leave for his two-season-cycle service on Firstday. Master Adriana arranged for Alexander to become Fred's dormitory chamber mate. He said a fond goodbye to Fernando, whom he no longer needed, and they agreed to keep in touch. He was able to decrease his appointments with Master Adriana to twice a timeframe. Third season cycle basics were more challenging, but Alexander continued to perform at the top of his group. He excelled in defensive gymnastics, and the trainer often asked him to help others who were struggling.

During Ninth Timeframe, Alexander noticed a look of longing in Fred's eyes when Alexander returned to their chamber after spending time with Ferina. Once Alexander asked, "Why didn't you spend time with Anna tonight?"

"We just, somehow, didn't seem to have that spark."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Don't worry about it. I'll go tomorrow to play some games, maybe meet someone new."

Another two timeframes flew by.

Oh, Essence, there was that penetrating look in Master Adriana's eye—again. What goal had he neglected now? He plopped into the floor cushion in her work chamber and accepted the tea she handed him. Tea—another sign she would confront him with something he didn't want to discuss.

"Are your feelings for Ferina deepening?"

"Sure, I guess. We always have fun together. We can talk about anything."

"You guess?"

There it was. He cared for Ferina; he was comfortable with her; he felt safe, but he didn't want to say any of those things because he knew that was not what Master Adriana wanted to hear. He answered her question with one of his own. "Has she been talking to you about us?"

"You know I wouldn't tell you if she did. You didn't answer my question."

There went his middle pod, tick, tick, tick, on the floor. Again—that penetrating look in her eyes.

"Could it be that by spending time with her, you can turn down other invitations, not having to explain yourself to someone else?"

He stared at the floor, as he always did when she confronted him, glugged the rest of his tea, and clamped his outer mandibles together.

"I thought so. But if your feelings for her have not grown deeper in all the timeframes you've spent with her, are you being fair to her to continue? How many females has Fred spent time with since you started seeing Ferina? Assuming you still hope Essence will call you to a Vow of Perpetual Service, have you forgotten that you must spend time with at least eight females before the committee would even consider your proposal? Have you reached the point where you need to let Ferina go, so she can spend time with other males? I don't want your answers today. We will discuss all this again in half a timeframe."

Alexander didn't go back to his dorm chamber. Instead, he went to a meditation chamber near it. An h-unit later, he had decided what he needed to do, even if he didn't want to do it.

"Would it be all right if we went to the surface to watch the night sky instead of going to the Leisure Center?" he asked Ferina.

"I guess so. Are you alright? Your antennae are twitching," she replied.

He let out a long breath. "Yes, and no. Let's just go somewhere quiet and uninterrupted."

He led her about halfway up the outside of the mound, facing east so they could watch the moon rise, grateful to Essence that it was a clear night.

"Ferina, I've been doing a lot of thinking, and I must confess that ... my feelings for you are not what they should be. My friendship for you has grown deeper, but it's not like ... I don't want to hurt you ... it's more like I feel for my sister, not anything like I felt for Deena. I'm sorry. It's not fair to you to keep seeing each other exclusively."

It was too dark to see her expression, but he heard her sigh. "Hearing you say that is a relief. I'm sorry, too, but I've also been thinking, and I really do want to be a mother. I've known for a couple of timeframes, but I was afraid to tell you because I didn't want you to go back to that dark place you were in before."

They laughed and cried at the same time. Then they embraced each other. Ferina broke the silence, "I really do cherish you, Alexander, and it's going to be hard to move on. For a while, I thought I could accept not being a mother if I could be number one in your thorax. But I don't think there's room in there," she tapped his thorax, "for anyone but Deena, and I can't be number two in addition to not being a mother."

"I understand. I'm glad you have been my first, because you accepted me totally. I will always cherish you for that. Will you still be my sister/friend?"

"Of course, but give me time to myself for a while."

"Do you want me to walk you home?"

"Sure."

They were quiet on the way back and Alexander realized there was someone else he needed to see before training on Firstday.

Fred was reading when Alexander entered their sleep chamber. "You're back early!"

Alexander flopped onto his sleeping cushion. "Ferina and I decided we should stop spending time together."

"What?"

Alexander detected a mix of joy with the confusion in Fred's voice. He replied, "It was mutual. I realized she feels more like a sister than someone to cherish for life. Besides, I've noticed how you look whenever I head out to be with her. It occurred to me that you have cared deeply for her the whole time, and you were too polite to say anything. Go for it, Fred. I think she cares for you, too, but she doesn't know it yet."

The confusion on Fred's face increased. "I know we're all friends, but what have I got that you don't have? You're top of the group, best in gymnastics, winner in Blue-Green Total Engagement when I can't even get halfway through a two-by-two tournament, not to mention that you are better looking."

Alexander paused and then said, "You can make her a mother." Then he told his brother-friend why.

Early Sixthday morning, Alexander rang the special bell on Master Aluf's portal. "Alexander, what can I do for you?"

Alexander told him about his and Ferina's decision the previous evening and then said, "I think it will help her move on if we don't have to see each other every day in training. Could you change me to a different group?"

"I wondered why she had such a sad expression last evening, but she went straight to her sleep chamber and closed the portal. Yes, I can arrange for you to change groups. I admire your initiative in asking. Let me check the list of groups for a good fit."

Alexander waited while Master Aluf opened a compartment and lifted a stack of parchments onto his work surface. After flipping through them, he said, "There's a special group for those exploring the possibility of a Vow of Perpetual Service. It's a small group, meets for an h-unit longer than everyone else for sessions of deep meditation to learn to be more open to the voice of Essence. That group also has a different schedule for job exploration. There is no obligation for anyone to make a vow—the usual procedures apply. Trainees there may have already been called, are hoping to be called, or are simply exploring the possibility. Interested?"

"I think I would like that."

"I'll send Trainer Fortuna a message that you'll report Firstday morning. Arrive half an h-unit early and introduce yourself, chamber T-2 C."

"You can tell Ferina I was here today and why."

Both rose and extended their front pods to each other.

By the end of that day, Alexander had sent Master Adriana a message that he would like to see her before their next regular session, and wrote his parents a letter, to be shared with his brother and sister.

Chapter 14

Tunnel 2 in the Academy ran parallel to the tunnel he had taken to his former group. The portal of Chamber C was opened. The moment he entered, he heard, "You must be Alexander. I'm Trainer Fortuna. Welcome."

"I think I should tell you a little about myself that Master Aluf didn't, and which is not in my progress records," Alexander said after sitting where she indicated.

"Whatever you want to share is fine. As you see, I've made a Vow." She pointed to the badge across her thorax and then to the extensive scars on her abdomen. "While escorting a group of scientists through the western mountains ten season cycles ago, I was caught in an avalanche. I was lucky to live, but it was difficult to give up guard duty and find another way to serve Essence. After two season cycles of recovery at the medical center here and guidance from Master Adriana, I found a new purpose—guiding other young adults in how to discern a call from Essence. I also tend to night problems with trainees in the dormitories. You can come to me any time. Like Master Aluf, my living quarters are right here." She pointed to a portal behind her.

Alexander relaxed. He remembered seeing her behind Master Aluf, directing trainees the day Fred fell apart. "I'm one of Master Adriana's patients, too," he said, providing the short version about what happened to him.

"Thank you for your courage in sharing that. I hope I can help you determine the right path for your life. You are the eighth ant in the group—three females, and you are the fifth male. You'll sit here, making a group of three, with the other two males close by. The three females sit there." She pointed to sets of benches and work surfaces. The male groups were on one side of Trainer Fortuna's work surface and the female triangle on the other. At the other end of the chamber were floor cushions near a collection of books and another set of cushions in a circle for group meditation.

The other trainees began to arrive, and Alexander recognized some of them from the Leisure Center and Blue-Green tournaments. The daily schedule was different with physical training first thing in the morning rather than at the end of the day. He discovered this group was about half a timeframe ahead, but Trainer Fortuna said she would help him catch up in the evenings or on Sixthday.

The academy's spiritual director arrived at the end of the day for her h-unit of instruction. She began with a reading from one of the many books of wisdom recorded by the most well-known spiritual directors. They discussed what it meant and then meditated silently. She reviewed the meditation breathing sequence for Alexander's sake since it was different from the anxiety-relief breathing Master Adriana had taught him. He felt more peaceful than he had in a long time.

Fourthday, when he met with Master Adriana, he was eager, for once, to relate his experiences. "You reached an important tunnel crossing in your life and made sound decisions through meditation. I'm very proud of you!"

"I hope it's all right if I skip socializing for a while. I need to stay away from anywhere Ferina might be."

"I agree. But promise you won't become a recluse."

Alexander caught up with the rest of his group after a few evenings with his new trainer. He found he missed socializing and only skipped one evening. When he arrived the next Fifthday, he saw a few of his new group of training mates close to the entrance. Across the large chamber, he noticed Fred and Ferina sitting in one of the many one-on-one alcoves. He joined his new base group.

When the music began, Francine, whom he had trounced in the last Blue-Green tournament, approached. She had a satchel over the back of her thorax, unusual for socializing. She tugged his pod and said, "Let's dance." When the music ended, she tugged his pod again, this time toward an empty alcove. "I want to ask you something in private."

"Have you had any ale this evening?" Alexander asked.

"Only one, so I've got one more coming." Two mugs of ale per evening for those still in training was a strictly enforced regulation.

"I'll get one for each of us." Her invitation to sit alone with him set him on edge, so he was grateful for the long line at the ale stand. He lifted up a silent thought to Essence, *"Please, help me handle this. Let her not reject me outright."*

He handed Francine her mug of ale and sat opposite her in the alcove. *Might as well get to it*, he thought. "Francine, before you ask whatever it is, there is something I need to tell you. It's very personal, so please, don't ever mention it to anyone else."

She gave him a curious look. "All right; what is it?"

"I'm one of Master Adriana's patients."

"So? That doesn't matter. What I wanted to ask you is: will you teach me to play Blue-Green as well as you do?"

"Of course, but there's more I have to say. May I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure." She fidgeted.

Alexander put one front pod firmly on his ticking middle pod and took a glug of ale. "When you first emerged from pupation, did your parents read you a biology booklet about mating?"

"Of course; they told me everyone had to hear it before starting training."

"Well, I'm required to tell you, or any female who wants to be with me, on the first occasion ... " He took a long, deep breath before continuing, "I'm the male your parents read about. I'm not fertile because Deena and I mated accidentally."

"Deena? Not a fire ant? Are you serious?"

"Yes, very serious, and when she died, I tried several times to end my own life. I hope you'll be open enough want to get to know me."

"I saw you all those timeframes with ... and she knew?"

"Yes. We were already good friends from our training group. Still, it was hard for me to tell her. It isn't easy now with you. I hope you will still want to spend a few evenings with me anyway."

He took several glugs of ale. She sat in silence drinking hers.

Finally, she said, "That's a lot to take in the first time alone—certainly puts a fire cloak over developing feelings." She paused, during which time Alexander glugged the rest of his ale. Then she said, "Since you were honest, I will be, too. I know, without any doubt, that I want a family someday. But I still want to improve my Blue-Green game, so here's what I suggest: we spend time together, knowing we will only be friends, until I can at least come to a win-win with you in Blue-Green. Then we part as friends."

"Thank you. When shall we start?"

"Now," Francine said, pulling a Blue-Green board and markers from her satchel. She unfolded the board and set it up.

Alexander laughed before saying, "You came prepared. Let's start with two-by-two. I'll go slowly and stop to show you some strategies I use. I won't go for a win right away."

Alexander spent two timeframes of Fifthday evenings in the same alcove teaching Francine to play Blue-Green before she, to his surprise, beat him in Total Engagement. When they finished laughing, Francine said, "See you at the tournament, my friend!"

Alexander realized he had only a quarter timeframe until the following Sixthday's tournament to develop a new offensive strategy and defensive moves to counter the offensive techniques that he had taught Francine. He hurried through his advanced problem solving and reading each evening and then laid out his own Blue-Green set in the sleep chamber he shared with Fred. He would move the pieces into a position like the layout right before Francine won. Looking from every angle, he moved pieces in isolation in various ways to see where he could have done things differently. He played against himself, stopping from time to time to try a variety of moves and playing the game to various conclusions in a two-by-two set up. The last night before the tournament, he shouted, "I've got it!" Fred shook his head and turned out the lamp.

Sixthday morning, Alexander helped change the table and bench setup from breakfast positions to tournament needs—scattered smaller tables with a single bench on opposite sides, with tables and benches around each for those watching. He saw Francine enter with several other contestants and walked over to greet her. They wished each other luck and checked the brackets to see who faced whom for the Total Engagement rounds—always played last. She had a different initial opponent than he did.

Names in the forward brackets changed throughout the tournament as several contestants, including Alexander and Francine, advanced while others were eliminated, until the two faced each other for "Grand Winner." Alexander rubbed the tips of his front pods together, and she smirked at him. The word had gotten around that Alexander had been teaching Francine. The entire crowd of young adults gathered around to watch with those at the back standing on tables for a better view.

The two played equally well until the last moment when Alexander swung two markers into action that he had left at one side until that moment, which Francine had forgotten about, and captured her last two markers. Those watching cheered. Francine stared at him. "You never showed me that move!"

With a perfectly calm voice, Alexander said, "After our last game, I realized I wouldn't always be able to win with the same set of strategies, so I developed some new moves."

Francine smiled and held up his pod higher than hers, accepting defeat. A plaque with Alexander's name on it and that day's date would be added to the Winner Wall by the time they all returned from Last Day Holidays.

Alexander knew to come right to the point with Master Adriana. "I've received my schedule for job exploration for this season cycle. Nursery work is second on the list. I'm not sure how I feel about it or how I might react. Any suggestions?"

She handed him the usual mug of tea. "Why do you think you might react badly?"

"Isn't it obvious? It will remind me what I will never have."

She nodded in acknowledgement. "What's first on the list?"

He shifted on his cushion. "What has that got to do with it?"

"Sometimes the first assignment is a prerequisite to the second. So, what's first?"

Even after four season cycles, it still irritated Alexander when she answered his questions with another question. "Messenger."

"That will work. When you are delivering messages with your job exploration mentor, you are sure to have at least one nursery on the route. Make a note of the location and drop by on your own time. Talk with the supervisor there; introduce yourself and say when you are scheduled to explore nursery work. Even if you are assigned to a different nursery, you'll see how you feel. If an episode starts, quickly excuse yourself after saying thank you, and we will talk about it in our following session."

He sipped his tea. "Why didn't I think of that?"

"Because as much as you have progressed, you are still naïve. As always, meditate asking for Essence's help. Also, think of every larva you handle as yours in unity with all. If Essence does call you, remember that you will pledge to be a brother, sister, parent and young one to every colony member. In times of peace, guards under a Perpetual Vow are often called upon to help in nurseries at night, or when one of their regular staff is out. How are you doing with advanced training?"

"I felt overwhelmed the first day, but so did everyone else. It's challenging to work with a partner or team on problem solving; Trainer Fortuna keeps reminding me to let others do some of the work. I guess I tend to take over. I'm working on that. There's so much more reading that I haven't been socializing.

She nodded. "It will ease up in another half a timeframe."

He followed her advice and when he did begin working afternoons in the nursery, he had no problems. He considered the larvae he cared for like younger brothers, sisters, nieces, and nephews.

Alexander finally made it to the Leisure Center at the beginning of Second Timeframe. It was nearly closing time when he finished his assignment, and Fred had already gone to sleep, but he wanted to get out. The center was nearly empty. He got a mug of honeydew instead of ale and sat down by himself at a small eating surface.

A female he had seen often but never spoken to before asked if she could sit down. He nodded.

"I've watched you for ages," she said, "and you are almost never alone. Looks like I finally have a chance to spend some time with you."

The last thing Alexander wanted to do that evening was to explain himself, but he didn't want to refuse her. "It's late and I'm tired. I only came to relax for a while, so, if you don't mind, not tonight. Maybe next Fifthday?"

"Great! I'll reserve alcove 2 for us. Shall we say at seven?"

He nodded and watched her walk over to a table by the drink booth to write in a reservation for an alcove. She waved at him and left. He finished his honeydew and headed for his dormitory chamber, but thought he saw her watching him.

At breakfast the next morning, she approached while Alexander helped serve the food. Once he had begun living at the Academy, he had stopped working in the guard dining room and begun the same chore schedule at the Academy. She smiled as he filled her bowl with cooked mashed grassfrond seeds. "Honey on it?" he asked.

"Oh, how 'sweet' of you to ask." Snicker. "I'm looking forward to our time together."

He smiled.

After Seventhday meditation service, she waved and smiled at him. Firstday morning, she appeared just as he was about to enter Tunnel 2. The area was crowded with other trainees, but she reached out to touch his front pod saying, "I'm in third season cycle basics, but next season cycle I can walk down this tunnel with you." Short encounters continued every day. Alexander didn't know whether he should feel flattered, excited, or anxious.

Fifthday evening arrived. Alexander saw her in the alcove the moment he entered the Center. She had already gotten mugs of ale for them, and his mug was next to hers. Should he tell her what he had to right away or talk for a few moments first? He also noticed that Fred and Ferina were in alcove 1. He waved to Trainer Fortuna, a chaperone that night.

Her chatter began the moment he sat down—opposite her—pulling the mug across the surface.

"Why didn't you sit beside me? You can't imagine how I've waited for a chance to get to know you. I've watched you so often—ever since I could start coming here. But you were always with another female, so I thought maybe you had made a Promise with her, but then you were gone for a while, and now she's with someone else. And then before I got the chance, you were with someone else again—the one you taught to play Blue-Green. What a tournament that was! I know I'm a season cycle behind you, but that shouldn't matter. I'm so glad I finally got this chance!"

Oh, Essence, help me through this, Alexander thought. *Use what you said to Francine.*

[In all the entries concerning this female, Alexander never mentioned her name, referring to her as "#4". H. R.-D. II]

Alexander touched her out-stretched front pod gently. "There is something I am required to tell every female who wants to spend time alone with me. It's very personal and difficult for me."

Confusion showed in her eyes.

He continued, "May I ask you a question?"

"Sure ... why?"

"When you first emerged from pupation, did your parents read you a pamphlet about how adult bodies work and about mating?"

Confusion echoed in her voice and increased as she responded, "Yes ... what's that got to do with anything?"

"Well, I'm the male described to you in that pamphlet. I'm the male who accidentally mated and went out of my mind in grief for a long time. I'm still one of Master Adriana's patients." Something prompted him to remind her of the ant code never to relate anyone else's personal information. "Please, remember my story is not yours to repeat to anyone."

"You're joking!" Her eyes flashed anger.

"No, it's not a joke, least of all to me. I'm required to tell females, so they know my limitations before becoming involved."

With an angry hiss, "And the two I saw you with? They KNEW that? And kept seeing you anyway!"

Antennae twitching, "Yes, both gave me a chance and are wonderful friends. I hope you'll give me a chance, too."

She thumped the surface and yelled, "All this time! I waited and waited! And now this? All the time I wasted hoping for you! GONE!" She threw the rest of her mug of ale in his face, bolted from the alcove, and ran from the chamber.

Eyes in the center turned to alcove 2. Mandibles opened in surprise when she left. Now front pods covered open mandibles. Alexander shrank; his pods shaking, his antennae twitching. Before he could fall apart, he gathered what dignity remained and, as calmly as he could, left the Leisure Center.

Fifty f-units down a darkened tunnel that led to the main training areas, he slumped to the floor in a mix of hurt and fury. A moment later, he felt friendly pods surround him. Fred and Ferina had followed him out. A few moments later, he was able to explain what happened.

"How cruel! How rude!" Ferina said.

"Totally uncalled for, that ale in your face. Where was her compassion? She owes you a huge apology! Do you want us to report her?" Fred asked.

"No, let it go," Alexander responded. "I'd have to say it all publicly to report her. It's not worth it."

"You're a better ant than I am, then," Fred replied. "Come on, let's go back to our chamber. I'll fix some tea. I'll see you tomorrow, Ferina."

She patted Alexander's thorax and left.

The following morning, Alexander received a message from Master Aluf: "Please come to my work chamber at 10 h-units. Don't worry, you are not the one in trouble."

When he entered, #4 sat looking at the floor, along with Master Aluf—calm as usual—and Trainer Fortuna.

Master Aluf said, "Alexander, please sit down. I've talked with those here about what happened last evening. I also want you to know that Ferina told me about it but said you did not want to report it. Trainer Fortuna could not let it go unreported with so many trainees there as witnesses." He glared at #4. "You know what you must do now."

She barely raised her eyes. "I'm sorry for my behavior. You didn't deserve that. I ... I ... had convinced myself of certain fantasies about you over the last several timeframes and ... well ... I reacted in the worst way possible to what you told me. I know I can't take back the hurt to you, but I am really sorry. Please, forgive me."

Alexander looked directly at her and said, "I appreciate and accept your apology. I am very hurt, but I forgive you." Then turning to Master Aluf, "Please, it's not necessary for any further reprimand. I'm not up to any public announcements. I'd rather just put it behind me."

Master Aluf rose and put a pod on the back of Alexander's thorax. "She will be under a short Probationary Behavior Contract, totally private, and supervised by Trainer Fortuna. Other trainees will figure out that she is under a contract, but no one, except those of us in this chamber, will know the subject of the conversation, and she knows the consequences if any of this gets out. If you are counting, she counts, even though it was only one brief meeting."

Alexander was counting. Fire ant codes stated that for each of the minimum of eight females he needed to spend time with, there must be at least three encounters of an h-unit each for it to be considered a relationship. So far, there had been Deena, Ferina, and Francine. Now he knew #4 could remain one on his list, and he was halfway through the ordeal of needing to spend time alone with females, hoping that each would agree to at least three encounters. He left Master Aluf's work chamber and went to the academy meditation center to ask Essence, once again, to help him through this part of his life and to call him to a Vow of Perpetual Service.

Chapter 15

Alexander vented his pent-up anger over the "female situation" with Master Adriana. He yelled, stomped, and pounded his pods against the floor. "Making me tell them is so unfair! I'm cut down from the start! I know how wasps feel when their home has been disturbed."

"I'm going to write to Master Danielle, but don't expect a quick change. Donavon still refuses to talk to her about modifications, won't speak to any counselor, and refuses contact with your parents. He's stuck where he was at the start. Your reference to wasps is a good one. We are not far removed from them biologically, you know."

"Should I write to Donavon telling him I'm sorry?"

"He might not read it, but it will do you good. I will include it with my quarterly report."

Both were quiet for a few moments.

"That night, I felt such rage. It's a good thing Fred and Ferina came. Fred and I talked for a long time. I was calm the next morning, but I'm worried about controlling my anger in the future."

"If you are with me, or in a place away from others, you can do what you did today. Pounding a cushion and shouting into it will soften the noise near others. Going to the surface and throwing clods of dirt is quite satisfying, or running rings around the mound, or up it. Mainly, you want to stay far enough from others not to hurt them. Hurting yourself is not worth it, as you know. When you were first here and ripped up all the cloth bands, that was good, but you can't count on being near a pile of stuff ready to go to the reuse center. If you are close to the gym, hard exercise helps. If you are near any of the guard dining areas, they always need more grain ground, so pushing on the pole to turn the grinding wheel is a good outlet. Most importantly, don't let anger build up inside you, or you may become like those wasps, but with consequences you won't want."

"Thanks. At least training is going well. May I stay away from the Leisure Center for a while?"

"Yes, let others forget what they witnessed. But uphold your dignity; don't stay away for too long. I'll see you again in half a timeframe."

It was Fourth Timeframe in Alexander's fifth season cycle of training when he gained enough confidence to return to the Leisure Center. He let out a long breath as he entered and looked around. His eyes settled on a female sitting alone, recognized misery in her face, and sauntered over.

"Hello, I'm Alexander. May I join you?"

"Sure. Why not?" she answered with no enthusiasm.

"What's your name?"

"Alice."

Alexander sat down on the stool opposite Alice.

"Will you dance with me?"

"I can't."

Alexander turned his head to a questioning angle. "Not to be rude, but why not?"

"I'm recovering from an injury. I'm missing a back leg."

"I'm sorry to hear that, and I don't mean to be forward, but let me help you. You could balance against me. We have plenty of legs between us."

Alice looked at him skeptically but stooped to stand on five legs. Alexander came close to her, lifted her slightly, and said, "Join your front and middle legs with mine for balance. We'll give it a try."

They moved awkwardly along the edge of the dancers, as the musicians played a slow tune. Alice almost smiled.

"I've had injuries, too," Alexander said, "just not the kind you can see. I'll tell you about them after this dance."

Alice looked at him and said, "I'm still in basic training—season cycle three; I'm from South Dairy Colony 40—a long way from here. I was with my mother on the surface one Sixthday. We were watching some carrier trainees hauling huge boulders up the side of the mound. One slipped from their grasp and thundered down the slope. My mother tried to pull me out of the way, but it rolled right over my back leg—crushing it. The surgeons said I would have a better chance here. The Master Surgeon of the guards is trying to figure out a way to attach some type of artificial limb, but I don't have enough of a stump. Another special type of physician—she's pretty nice—is trying to help me adjust. I'll never do guard duty, that's for sure. I didn't want to come to the Leisure Center, but she told me I needed to be around others. Thanks for joining me."

The music ended, and Alexander helped her return to the table. "I'll get some refreshments. What would you like?"

"I'm not supposed to have ale with the medication I take, so honeydew. I'm so far behind in my studies. It's so overwhelming. I ... I don't know what to do."

Alexander left and returned with their beverages, setting hers in front of her. "The counselor you are working with wouldn't be Master Adriana, would it?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"I've been a patient of hers since I got here less than three timeframes into adulthood. Master Adriana can be irritating when she insists that I do things I don't want to, but she's always right. I've come through grief and a lot of lousy experiences, but I have hope for my future. When I finish telling you about it, I hope you'll still want to spend time with me."

Then he told her the required highlights. He also told her why he had come over to her, and perhaps there was something he could do to help.

When he finished, Alice said, "Suddenly my problems seem insignificant. Yes, I'd be glad to spend time with you and be your friend. I could really use help with my studies. It seems all the tutors are busy. My trainer said not to worry because I'm only here temporarily, but still ..."

After Alexander explained his schedule, they agreed to meet First, Third, and Fifthdays after supper in her medical center chamber. Later, they met at the academy research center. Their friendship lasted half a season cycle until Alice was ready to return to her home colony wearing the best artificial leg available at that time—carved wood with one bend at the main support joint but no flexibility. It was attached with straps to the back of her thorax since there was so little of her natural leg left, but it did

help her stand more upright and hobble around. Alice wrote to Alexander regularly many season cycles after that, always thankful for his friendship.

Fauna was the next female to ask Alexander to spend time with her. She listened to Alexander's story and expressed sympathy but said she knew she wanted a family, so there was not much to keep meeting about.

"Will you at least spend two more evenings with me? I'm in the training group for those hoping to make a Vow of Perpetual Service. But I still must try to form relationships with females, and I need to have at least three meetings of an h-unit each to count you as one of them. I know I'm begging, but would you do me that favor?"

Fauna took a series of sips from her mug of ale, looked up, then down, then around, and finally said, "Yes, I'll do that. You certainly have some challenges in your life that I'll never have to worry about."

The following two Fifthdays, Alexander and Fauna sat in an alcove, danced, and shared mugs of ale while they told each other where they were from and complained about the weather on the surface now that their physical training groups met there, rain, wind, or shine.

"What do you think it will be like when you are on patrol? Always sunny and warm? Never cold at night?" Alexander said, mocking their physical trainer's voice.

Fauna laughed. "You sound just like him! I figure I will serve my obligation in my home colony, becoming a unit leader, since I trained here. I hope I'll be promised to someone by the end of it." They played several rounds of a factual recall game and called it good.

Alexander socialized with his vow group through the end of that season cycle. Arlene, who had told them that she had been called during her first season cycle of adulthood, spent her required three evenings with one after another of the males in the group. Arnie and Fermin had also heard their calls and were glad to take turns spending time with the three females. Anna had not heard her call, but always said she was sure she would hear it soon. Acacio was merely curious and not worried one way or the other. Alexander could see in Freda and Farley's eyes after they had spent a few timeframes together that the only vow they would be making would be to each other. They were a safe group of friends.

After Last Day break, Alexander meditated more and more, begging Essence to call him. Master Adriana reminded him to be patient. "She calls in her time, not ours. A Vow of Perpetual Service is not your only option," became her mantra.

She, #7, came up to Alexander as he was dancing with Anna and trying to get up the nerve to ask her to sit with him in an alcove. "Mind it I step in?" #7 asked.

Anna backed away. "I'll see you later, Alexander."

When the music ended, she pulled Alexander toward an empty alcove. Alexander prepared for the inevitable. "I'll get some ale," she said.

"I've already had two, so honeydew please," he replied.

"All right. Some fried fungus strips to go with it?"

"Sure."

Alexander did his breathing exercises and was ready when #7 returned. He had almost memorized his "speech", but she spoke first, saying where she was from and what she enjoyed doing. "I've gotten to know a lot of males since I qualified for the academy, but you fascinate me with your many talents."

Why does this remind me of that other night? Alexander thought.

"I hope I don't disappoint you, but you may think differently in a few moments. I have my limitations," he said and then told her his story in the shortest form possible.

Her eyes opened wide in shock. "I wish this was ale," she said in a low tone, glugging the honeydew. "I've seen you with several others you must have had to tell, and I was here that night back last season cycle, so I don't plan to make a scene. I've always wondered what was behind that ale in your face. Now that I know, I don't want to waste my time, so why don't we pretend for a few moments. Then we'll walk out of here, as if we were going to the surface or something and go our separate ways. No offense intended."

"Non taken," Alexander said, even though the rejection stung him to his core. He told her about his hope to make a Vow and asked if, out of friendship, she could "pretend" with him for two more evenings.

"No. I'm sorry, but no," was her reply.

Alexander looked up, around, and down, thinking of running to the surface and climbing straight up the mound at top speed. They stared at each other and munched through the fried fungus strips. With nothing else to do, they both stared at the floor for several moments before she said, "Well, let's walk out together."

Alexander nodded and they left the alcove. She turned toward the female dormitory, and he bolted for an up-tunnel. He had never climbed the mound so fast, stomping, grinding his mandibles together. His anger was gone when he reached the top, gasping for air. Then he went to see Master Aluf.

After explaining the situation, he said, "She didn't embarrass me in front of others or do anything to report about, but could I please call her #7? I think we were only in the alcove half an h-unit, and I did ask her politely if she would spend two other evenings with me, but she refused."

Master Aluf shook his head in amazement and then said, "Yes, under the circumstances, you may count this as your seventh relationship. I'm sorry this has been so hard on you, Alexander."

"Wheew! Seven down and one to go. Thank you," Alexander said. Then he laughed so he wouldn't cry.

"You are very strong, Alexander. I am sure good things will come to you. Will you be all right?"

Alexander nodded. "I think I'll go to the meditation chamber." As he turned to leave, Master Aluf embraced him in a fatherly way.

Chapter 16

Four timeframes into his sixth and final season cycle of training, Alexander changed his daily request to Essence. Remembering what his father had told him about when he met Alexander's mother, he asked Essence, "If you plan to call me, could it be soon? And if you aren't going to call me, will you tell me somehow? Then I can plan to be a single guard beyond my obligation. Maybe you will lead me to a widow to be my life companion. Or I will be a guard all my life without a vow. I will accept whatever you want for me; I only need a hint."

A timeframe later, Arlene approached Alexander as they were dismissed from training. "Could I have a moment of your time? I have a favor to ask."

Alexander nodded. They let the others pass them by. "Will you, please, be my number eight? My older sister's mating ceremony is this Sixthday, and my mother reminded me that I promised her I would invite a male friend. I've been putting it off. It's so hard to convince males, since I've already been called, to spend the required amount of time with me. We've done many group things together, so I was thinking maybe you wouldn't mind."

Alexander smiled. If this worked out, she would be his number eight as well. "Sure. I've never been to a mating ceremony. We should get together before that, though. Then once afterward would make three."

"How about tomorrow in the research center after training? It's usually quiet in there."

"That sounds fine," Alexander said.

The next day, Arlene led him to a sitting area in the research center at the end of some shelves of books trainees rarely looked for. He gestured for her to sit and said, "I have a certain limitation that I am required to tell any female interested in me on the first time together. I hope it doesn't put you off

from having me go with you to your sister's mating celebration. But maybe, since you have already been called and weren't planning to have a family anyway, it won't matter." He decided to go into more detail, as he had with Ferina.

When he finished, Arlene put her front pods over his and said, "Oh, Alexander, what a terrible tragedy! Dear Essence, what you've been through. I have often wondered since my mother sat me down and read that pamphlet before I started training, if that story was real. I wouldn't dream of not spending our required three evenings together—or even more. I must have sounded absurd when I complained about getting males to spend time with me. Please, forgive my rudeness. Wait ... was that why that one ... ?"

Alexander, finally able to laugh about that night, nodded his head, and threw his front pods in the air. "Was the entire academy at the Leisure Center that night?"

Arlene laughed, too. "Probably, and everybody still wonders what made her do that. You certainly behaved better than she did! I think she got off too easily with a two-timeframe contract—she did tell most of us in the female dorm about that. To her credit, she was tight-mandibled about you, and we encouraged her to open up. I know you won't pass that on. You might not have noticed, but none of the males would have anything to do with her afterward. I overheard someone refer to her as 'the mantis,' which was rude and mumbled behind her thorax, of course. Did you know she left the academy—went back to her home colony?"

"No, I didn't know. It wasn't me who reported her. I just wanted to put it behind me. It may sound strange, but I'm sorry to hear she was badly treated. That was as unfair as the way she treated me. Enough of all that. Tell me what to expect on Sixthday."

After Arlene told him what time to arrive at her family's domicile, they talked about many other things until the chime sounded through the tunnels, calling them to the dining area for the evening meal.

Fourthday, at his usual session with Master Adriana, she asked him, "Do you think you'll have any issues during the ceremony and celebration?"

"I thought about that. I'm not sure why I feel so peaceful about it, but something tells me I'll be all right."

[Detailed descriptions of the ant mating ceremony and celebration may be found at the end of *To Build a Tunnel*, and in Chapter 14 of *New South Dairy Colony 50*. H R.-D. II]

Alexander arrived at 11 h-units in the morning as Arlene had instructed. He could hear joyful voices and laughter within as he raised his pod and tapped the portal. Arlene opened it and welcomed him. She introduced him to her parents and her sister, Felicia—the queen of the day. To his surprise, Arlene's parents asked him if he would like to help carry Felicia's basket with the family.

"I'd be honored," he said. Arlene and her mother finished tying some blossoms together by their stems into a chain which they draped over Felicia. Alexander talked to her father for a few minutes about himself, his home colony, and his hope that Essence would call him.

"Your parents must be proud!" Arlene's father said. Then in a softer voice close to Alexander's head, "I'm so proud of Arlene, but her mother is still getting used to the idea of her calling."

Before they knew it, it was time to leave for the meditation chamber. Felicia climbed into a basket lined with the softest fabric. Alexander offered to hold the portal open before he joined Arlene and her parents as they lifted the basket and proceeded down the tunnel. Friends and extended family joined in a procession behind the basket. Two cross-tunnels later, they joined the drone's family carrying his basket and the two processions merged into one.

Alexander let one tear slip, thinking about the fact that he and Deena never made a promise, never spoke a vow, or had a ceremony. A deep breath took care of it; he reminded himself that widows and widowers had a similar ceremony to become life companions. Perhaps ... whatever Essence intended for him. He took in the joy and simplicity of the ceremony and joined in the responses of those gathered in pledging to support the newly mated pair.

Felicia and her mate held open the portals to the adjoining celebration chamber. Piles of food in serving bowls lay on tables on one side of the chamber. Jugs of ale and mugs stood on another. A perfectly oval honey cake, symbolizing hoped-for eggs, sat on a smaller table ready to be shared. Arlene led him to the family area at the front while friends chose other dining surfaces around the chamber. Alexander, his parents' cooking long forgotten, had not tasted such tender roasted grasshopper in all his time at the academy. He sipped his ale slowly to make it last—still under the "only two mugs" training limit. He noticed Arlene doing the same. Everyone laughed and cheered when the couple completed the spiral mating dance.

When the tempo of the music slowed, the mated pair broke from each other, Felicia pulling her father into the dance and her mate pulling his mother in. Then Felicia's father pulled in his mate. Other family members were drawn in gradually with each pause in the music. Arlene drew Alexander in when she let go of an uncle. Soon everyone was part of the dance, the joy, and the laughter.

It was barely a whisper inside his head, "*Alexander.*"

He turned to Arlene, "What did you say?"

"I didn't say anything," she replied.

Then it was unmistakable, soft, and gentle. "*Alexander, now that you will accept anything, I call you to me. You were not meant for mated life. Make a vow to me.*"

"*Yes, yes, I will,*" Alexander answered silently.

Not wanting to disturb the dance or the others, but bursting with excitement, he guided Arlene to the side. "She called to me! Just now as we danced. Essence called me to a vow! But let's keep this to ourselves. This is your sister's day."

"I'm SO happy for you!" She held him at legs' length away and then pulled him in to a friendly embrace.

The dancing, drinking, and eating went on into the evening. When it finally tapered off, Alexander joined with both families when the mated pair climbed into one basket, filled on one end with containers of extra food. A new procession formed carrying the mated pair to their new domicile. The laughter and singing echoed down the tunnel. The parents set down the basket inside, backed up, and closed the portal, whistling and joking.

"Come back with me to our home, just for a little while," Arlene said, "and tell my parents about your call. Then next Fifthday, we'll sit in an alcove all evening and celebrate."

Alexander waited in excitement for Fred to return to their dorm chamber. Fred was grinning. He and Ferina had made their Promise that evening, even though they would have to wait through the last few timeframes of training and their two-season-cycle service before having their ceremony. They laughed, hugged, and thumped the back of each other's thoraxes.

"You will stand as my First Friend, won't you?" Fred asked.

"If I possibly can, but I will be under a Vow; doing so will depend on what's happening wherever I'm serving."

If the voice during the dance had not been enough, later that night, Alexander had the vision of Deena's last day again, but this time, he heard her last meditation, which had been garbled before. "Please, Essence," Deena had said, "if whatever I sense out there gets me today, or if they won't let Alexander and me be together with our young one, call Alexander to that other vow. Please, call him." This time, Essence cut off the vision before the mantis attacked.

Alexander woke up with a start but was not afraid. The vision, while still inducing sadness, confirmed that his call was what Deena had wanted, too. He also understood why Essence had not let him hear those final words before. Master Adriana had been right—that Essence might reveal that garbled speech at a later time. He didn't want to wake Fred, but he could hardly wait to tell someone, especially Master Adriana.

Seventhday morning, Alexander rose early and went to Master Adriana's work chamber. He knew she wouldn't be there, but he went to the appointment signup board. There was a spot open for Firstday afternoon, so he wrote his name in it. It was before the end of the training day, but he was certain, under the circumstances, that his job exploration mentor would let him leave. It was his last quarter timeframe at that location anyway. Then he erased his name from his regular appointment on Fourthday.

Joy bubbled into everything he did that Seventhday, which included writing a long letter to his parents. His training mates were thrilled for him on Firstday. He entered the Reuse Center right after lunch and asked his mentor, "Would it be all right if I leave at three h-units to see my counselor? Essence has called me to a Vow. I want to tell her about it."

His mentor shouted out to the other workers, "Praise Essence! Alexander has been called to a Vow!" Then to Alexander, "Of course you may leave early. Start sorting that pile over there. Give me a yell as you leave."

Master Adriana greeted his smiling face with, "I figured something happened at the mating ceremony, and I'm relieved from your expression that it was good. Come, sit down. Tea?"

Alexander exclaimed, "No tea needed today! Essence called me! And there's so much more."

She embraced him in joy. "Tell me everything."

He began with, "I understand why Essence waited to call me. Before this timeframe, I wasn't ready to hear her call because I hadn't really accepted my other options. I wanted the call for the wrong reason. I was begging Essence for what I wanted, not asking what She wanted from me." He described the peace he had felt when he changed his meditation.

When he finished with every possible detail and his understanding of having the vision of Deena's last day again, she said, "Your interpretation of the vision and understanding of why you couldn't hear that before, show great insight. You have finally reached the point where, very soon, I will be able to say your healing contract is complete. What satisfaction I feel! Do you want help preparing your proposal to the Academy Vow Committee?"

"No, thank you. I need to do that myself. Really? I've completed all my goals?"

"There is one more goal—making a visit home. You should face your feelings with specific places and ants. Who and what do you think those are?"

Alexander put a front pod across his mandible. Silence settled.

"Once I make my vow at the end of training, assuming the committee accepts my proposal, I will go directly into service, and I won't have any leave for two season cycles, so I want to spend time with my family. I should thank my first trainer for supporting me, and that nursery supervisor who defended my parents when she didn't know them or me. Probably the Head of the Justice Council, too. I wish I could talk to Donavon—do you think he would see me? And I want to go to the Heart of the Colony. Would I be able to go to where it happened? There's a part of me that wants to see the place I've experienced in visions. But when would I be able to take that much time away from training?"

"You thought of some that I didn't; well done. When you see the head of the Justice Council, you'll be able to find out the latest on Donavon—expect the worst, hope for better. You'll go before the Vow Committee just before the end of Sixth Timeframe. I have no doubt you'll be accepted. I can help you arrange to take a couple of days off from training before the Summer Solstice Break, so you'll have plenty of time. We will have another meeting to work out the schedule for the others you should see. Trainer Fortuna and Master Aluf will both understand how important the trip is."

"We need to begin our day with discussion," Trainer Fortuna said, "so let's make ourselves comfortable in our meditation area."

Once the group of eight settled themselves, Trainer Fortuna continued, "A quick reminder—discussions like this during which many of you will reveal personal thoughts—remain within these chamber walls."

Everyone agreed.

"Now that four of you have heard a clear call from Essence, I want you to know what to expect with the Vow Committee. It won't hurt the rest of you to hear this, because we are all called by Essence—some to celibate perpetual service, most to the life of the mated, some to mated perpetual service, and some to simply remaining single."

Acacio raised a pod to speak. "Thank you for saying that because I'm as undecided as ever. I've spent time with way more than eight females and no deep feelings ever grew, yet I haven't heard that clear call, either. Knowing that whatever I do is all right gives me more peace than I have felt for a while."

"You're welcome," Trainer Fortuna replied. "Anyone else?"

Albert and Fermin shared how they had changed during their years with the "Vow" group and that the meditation had helped them listen to Essence's voice.

"I think the hardest part for me was finding males willing to spend time with me when they knew I had already heard a call," Arlene said, "until I met someone who's difficulties are far worse than mine. So, I've grown a lot, too."

Alexander smiled at her and then admitted, "I have grown so much these season cycles, enough that I'm comfortable saying this to all of you. You know that pamphlet your parents read to you during your first few days as an adult?" They all nodded. "I'm that male. I'm a season cycle older than all of you because I had to start training all over once I was emotionally ready. The hardest thing for me was the requirement to tell all females who asked me to spend time with them that I am not fertile and why."

Arlene smiled at him. The others had various expressions of surprise but remained silent. Alexander continued. "It's good to feel comfortable admitting that. But the main thing I want to share is that it wasn't until I stopped begging Essence to call me and accepted the fact that I had alternatives that She called. While some of the rejections hurt, I gained friends, and I understand that someone's feelings aren't always what they seem. I try harder not to make assumptions about others, and I try to think before I say something that may be hurtful."

Farley lifted a pod. "Thank you, Trainer Fortuna, for the reassurance that mated life is also a call. Neither of us thought we would end up promised to each other when we joined this group." He reached out for Freda's pod and their laughter broke the tension in the group.

As a result of the laughter, Anna asked, "Alexander, I think you were trying to get up the nerve to ask me to spend time with you that one night our dance was interrupted. If you were, I want you to know I would have been glad to spend time with you."

Alexander nodded his appreciation.

Anna continued, "But I feel the strength now to continue to wait and see what Essence wants from me."

Trainer Fortuna wrapped up the discussion. "Thank you all for your honest sharing. Those of you who are going before the committee, open yourselves to their questions, and you will be fine. No one from this academy is on the committee to whom you will make your proposals. It consists of two members from the Intercolonial Fire Ant Council and one member of the Justice Council. You are asking all colonies to be your 'mate.' I have questionnaires for each of you to fill out. Return them by next Firstday, and I'll put them with my recommendations. Master Aluf will add his recommendation, so they will know a lot about each of you in advance. In all the season cycles I've guided trainees in their discernment, this is the largest number of those called to a Vow in one season cycle. It's been an honor guiding you, and I look forward to our final term after Summer Solstice."

[Every colony had a Colony Council to manage colony affairs and a Fire Ant Council to handle their special issues. The Intercolonial Council, housed in Central Harvester Colony 12, had a representative from each colony for affairs affecting all colonies. However, Fire Colony 2's Fire Ant Council was also the Intercolonial Fire Ant Council. Its members, one from each fire ant colony, worked other jobs in their own colonies in addition to their council meetings. Each season cycle, names were drawn by lot to hear the proposals of guards wishing to make a Vow of Perpetual Service in colonies with proposals to be heard. Each colony also had a Fire Ant Commander, but the Head Commander of all the colonies lived in Central Harvester 12. H. R.-D. II]

Chapter 17

The Proposal Committee met in the evening, on 5th day of Seventh Timeframe, close to Summer Solstice on the 14th. Alexander, Arlene, Albert, and Farmin sat in the antechamber of the meeting area. A clerk directed them to draw a number from a bowl for their order of appearance. Alexander drew number 1. A few moments later, the clerk said, "They are ready for you."

The others smiled, attempting to squash their own nervousness. Alexander rose with confidence and then tripped as he entered the chamber.

"I'm sorry," he said to the two females and one male facing him.

"Don't worry," the female sitting in the center said. "We've all had similar moments. You are Alexander, correct?"

"Yes."

Each of the committee members rearranged sheets of parchment and brought one to the top, which Alexander assumed was about him.

"I've come to you today to say, that having been called by Essence, I offer myself to you, as representatives of this and all the colonies, my service for life. I wrote more than needed in my proposal,

but I felt it was important for you to know everything about me. There is only one thing I want to add. My wonderful sister/friend, with whom I spent many timeframes, told me when we decided to stop spending time together, that she could have accepted not being a mother if she could have been number one in here," he tapped his thorax, "but she felt there was no room in me for anyone but Deena, whom I lost. My friend was right, but I learned something important about myself from each female I spent time with. While I don't have 'room' to cherish only one female, there is room for an entire colony. Please accept me as I am."

The three committee members looked at each other and nodded to the female in the center. Her voice was as gentle as Essence whispering in his head during the dance.

"Alexander, we are pleased to accept your proposal. What you wrote to us is one of the most inspiring accounts of overcoming difficulties I have ever read. Have you thought about what type of mentorship you would like to pursue after your first two season cycles?"

Alexander's middle pod clicked on the floor. He stiffened that leg to regain control of his nerves and said, "No, I'm sorry, should I have? I assumed I would continue to be a guard. I will accept whatever my future commander asks of me."

The male on the left spoke, "That's all right. Relax, Alexander, no one here is going to bite you."

Alexander finally smiled as the others laughed. The male continued, "There are many who, like you, have no preference. When you return from your visit home, your trainer will give you a packet. It's a survey in which you will describe, briefly, your various job exploration experiences—what you liked, what you didn't, what you feel your strengths and weaknesses are. You will have a timeframe to complete and return it to her. Your responses, along with the reports we have already received, will help us determine your best form of life-time service."

The three rose and extended their front pods. He touched each, thanked them, and left the chamber. Once the portal closed behind him, he jumped and flipped for joy. His friends embraced him. Then the clerk came and indicated to Arlene, who had drawn the number 2, that it was her turn. When all had been accepted, the clerk invited them back into the meeting chamber where four more cushions had been added. The clerk handed everyone a mug of ale. Formality disappeared while the committee and the candidates enjoyed each other's company.

Alexander dashed through the tunnels to Fire 2's transportation center. His problem-solving examination, which he took in the evening before other trainees, had run long, and he nearly missed the last basket.

"Ho, there," she called to the carrier beneath the basket, "I'm a guard-in-training headed home for Summer Solstice. Mind if I hop on?"

The carrier's face remained facing forward, but Alexander heard, "A guard? Glad to help you."

"Thank you!" Alexander said as he climbed up the back of the basket. The two introduced themselves when the carrier made his first rest stop. Alexander fell asleep after that, barely noticing when the carrier reached the midpoint and exchanged baskets with another before heading back to Fire 2.

By half past six in the morning, Alexander had arrived in South Dairy 1. He picked up a breakfast bag and headed across that large chamber toward a tunnel with "South Dairy Colony 20" written above it. He munched slices of grassfrond seed bread and dried fruits as he walked at a normal pace. He made sure to pass three d-unit markers after he finished eating before launching into the travel exercise routine: one d-unit at regular pace, one at double pace, one at quadruple pace, another at double pace, another at normal pace, double pace, repeated for two h-units. He stopped at the half-way marker where the tunnel had a way station with water and sanitary facilities. From that point, he had two more h-units of exercise pace or three more h-units all at normal pace to reach his home colony. He decided on the exercise pace to save an h-unit.

Master Adriana and he had worked out a schedule that would allow him to see Master Danielle during her lunch break. He knew from job exploration as a messenger that all colonies were laid out in roughly the same pattern. Transportation centers were always on the second level (the first being ground level); from there, one could easily find any other location. Tunnels up and down were labeled accordingly, and on each level, tunnels going north and south had number names, while tunnels going east and west had letters.

Master Danielle was waiting for him when he arrived.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," she said, gesturing for him to recline near a low surface with lunch for two. "Master Adriana's quarterly reports always gave me the basics of how you were doing but never included personal details. So, I feel like I know you, but not really."

"First, I want to say thank you for your decision to turn me over to Master Adriana. I detested it at the time, and told her so, but later, I realized how important your decision was."

As they ate lunch, Alexander told her the more important details of his journey, from wanting to end his own life until his call from Essence. "I wish we had more time, but I do have an afternoon meeting, and I'm sure I'm not the only ant you want to see," she said at the end of an h-unit, wishing him a fond farewell.

He reached the colony's central nursery about ten moments later, where he had been told he would find Master Ada. Master Ada did not keep an appointment book because she never knew when an emergency in one of the colony's many nurseries would take up an entire day. Fortunately, she was in her work chamber. A clerk motioned for him to go on in.

"Master Ada," he began, "my name is Alexander. You may not remember, but a little over six season cycles ago, you spoke in defense of my parents regarding the way they raised me and my accidental mate, Deena. This is my first trip home since then and I wanted to say thank you."

Her look of astonishment turned into a broad smile as she extended both front pods. "What a pleasure! I could never forget that day. I've lifted you up to Essence many times. Since I was not on the list for updates, I've always wondered what became of you. Please, have a seat. I've got about twenty

moments before I meet with the male who will be taking over my position next timeframe when I retire.”

Alexander told her the highlights of his journey to emotional health and the fact that he would be making his Vow of Perpetual Service before that season cycle ended. She gave him a motherly embrace, saying she would continue to lift him up to Essence.

Trainer Darren wrapped his middle pods around Alexander. “I saw your mother the last time I was in the market, and she told me your good news and that you would try to drop by. It’s wonderful to see you! We have about half an h-unit before my current group returns from physical training.”

After Alexander related the main events of the last six season cycles and thanked Trainer Darren for supporting him, Darren asked, “Would you feel comfortable sharing your call from Essence with my group? I have quite a few fire ants, and the others would benefit from a first-pod experience.”

“Talking about my call is easy; it’s the rest I’m still not comfortable with relating unless I have to, or it’s to a small group of friends.”

“I understand that, and we won’t have much time anyway.”

It was almost four h-units when Alexander left the training facility and headed home. “I have tea and snacks ready for you. A long day?” his father said embracing his son.

Alexander nodded. “Yes, but good, and my day isn’t over yet. Master Danielle mentioned that this evening would be my only chance to go to the Heart of the Colony when Donavon isn’t there. I couldn’t believe she had to restrict him.”

Frodi handed his son a mug of tea and they sat on the largest floor cushion. “It reached the point where we could never go because he was always there. The Justice Council had to remind him that the Heart is for everyone, and he could not restrict us. Would you like me to join you?”

“Yes, you and mother, since you know exactly where Deena is covered.”

They talked for quite a while before Frodi said, “Your mother will be here soon. Shall we start supper?”

It had been several timeframes since Frodi and Farrah had visited Alexander. After he was fairly well, their visits were less necessary. He looked forward to his mother’s embrace. “I gather you’ve had a good day so far?” she asked. He nodded and gestured to the dining surface.

“Before I forget in the busy few days you have, I need to measure something,” Farrah said. She went into their sleep chamber and returned with a packet. “The colony provides the fabric, but I have the honor of sewing your service emblem, and I need to mark the length of the strap.” She took a long strip of deep blue fabric from the packet. Using clip-holders, she put one end of the strap to the top-left of the rectangle with the insignia of the Combined Colonies.

"Face me," she directed Alexander, "and hold this at the center of your thorax." Then, she wrapped the strap diagonally across the back of his thorax and around to the lower right corner of the rectangle. "It needs to be snug enough not to slip, but not too tight. How does that feel?"

"Comfortable."

"Great!" She put a fabric clip to mark the place and removed the strap from his thorax. "Now we can eat."

"Let's leave the cleanup for later," Frodi said when they finished eating.

Frodi led the way to the Heart of the Colony and to Deena's marker. Alexander lowered himself to the ground, gently sweeping his front pods over the place where Deena fed the earth. "I still miss you," he began. "I thought a hundred times on my journey about what I would say. Now I realize that it doesn't matter what I say or where I say it. I can meditate to you anytime, anywhere. It is special here, but this long since you were covered, your body has probably disintegrated, and your essence was never here. I feel you within me, everywhere. It's odd that it took being here to realize that. I'm all right now, so you can be with Essence and not worry about me. I like it when you come into my dreams, but I don't need it now—like I did before. I will know your presence in everyone I serve, wherever I am sent. I will always cherish you through others."

Frodi and Farrah each spoke briefly in meditation to Deena. On the way home, Farrah said, "We are off until Firstday. Tomorrow morning, we can rest and do whatever you like. Family dinner will be at your brother's domicile in the evening. With their third larva hatching so soon after the second, it's hard for them to get out, even for Summer Solstice. So, we agreed we would all go there and celebrate ahead of time. I'm bringing the roast grasshopper, and your sister is making the rest. It feels strange sometimes that she isn't carrying a larva around. The youngest entered pupation, you know, and your oldest nephew won't emerge until next season cycle."

Alexander linked front pods with one parent on each side.

Farrah said she was too tired to go to the surface on Sixthday, so Frodi and Alexander proceeded to the main entrance on a two-fold mission.

"Are you sure about this?" Frodi asked. "I haven't been there since that day—couldn't make myself go, and I'm not sure I remember the way."

"Yes, I've seen it twice in dream-visions. Essence will lead us. I'll be fine."

Both let out long sighs when they reached the place where Deena had died. "I'll stay up here on the edge and keep my antennae up. You go ahead," Frodi said.

The perspective was much different standing on the ground. No wind flowed into the hollow—no wonder Deena had not detected the mantis sooner. He could barely sense his father. He felt Deena's presence more keenly than ever before. He stood silent for a few moments and then rejoined his father.

"I'm glad I came. After so much anguish, I feel at peace," he told his father. "I can finally close that portal behind me and venture down a new tunnel."

The second part of their mission took them to the opposite side of the mound toward Boarder River. Seedling wood plants grew above the meadow grass where the roaches had burned over the surface six season cycles before. Only a few charred ruins remained where the roach "fort" had stood. Workers from the colony kept the meadow grass clipped shorter all over the battlefield so the markers of fallen fire ants could be found easily. Alexander and his father stopped for a few moments of silence to honor them.

"Did Fred's brother have any idea where their parents were?"

"They were not supposed to be that close to each other, but Fred's brother was told things shifted rapidly. They ended up right in the center. Let me get out the image maker he loaned to me so I can take the image when we find their markers."

They wandered about for several moments before Alexander said, "Here's one—their father. The other should be within fifteen f-units of this."

By walking slowly in a circle around where Alexander stood, Frodi found the second. "This is a true kindness to Fred. I'm glad you have each other."

Alexander nodded as he made the images of the markers. "Maybe someday they will be able to visit, but if not, they'll always have the images."

At dinner that evening with his parents, brother and sister, and their mates, amid joy of a family together and the noise of three whining larvae, Alexander told his brother and sister, "I know it's many season cycles off, but when the time comes to read and discuss that pamphlet, it's all right if you tell my nieces and nephews that it's about their uncle and the aunt they will never know."

Seventhday marked Summer Solstice. After services in the colony's many meditation chambers, over half the colony, including Alexander and his parents, went to the surface for the feast. Workers had been preparing since dawn. Several whole grasshoppers roasted over pits of hot coals in a huge flat area in front of and to the sides of the main colony entrance. Plank tables with benches on each side surrounded each pit. The family added large bowls of cooked root vegetables to the other dishes on one of the plank tables. They roamed about the area greeting friends and neighbors. Fire Colony 2 had sent notices to the public bulletins of the home colony of each guard who would be making a Vow of Perpetual Service. So, with each introduction, Alexander was congratulated, not only on his call, but on his outstanding performance at the Guard Academy. He felt humbled, uplifted, but embarrassed because he didn't remember anyone.

Late in the afternoon, he felt a tap on the back of his thorax. He turned. "Hello, Alexander! We never formally met. I'm Darleen, Deena's aunt."

"Oh," was all Alexander could manage in his surprise.

"You look wonderful. I was thrilled to read the announcement. I'm glad Donavon decided not to attend today. Not that he has any control over what I do, but he would be upset if he saw me talking to you—so foolish of him. He rejects any suggestion to get help. I am ashamed of my brother's actions that tragic day. I have lifted you up to Essence daily ever since, and I'm SO happy to see how well you have recovered. May I embrace you?"

Alexander opened his pods to her caring hug. "Thank you," he said. "This means a lot to me."

She let go of him. "I suppose you have to leave soon."

"Yes, I've got to head back to South Dairy 1, so I get there in time to catch a night basket back to Fire 2."

"My thoughts will always be with you," she said.

Chapter 18

The following Fourthday, Alexander entered Master Adriana's work chamber at his usual time. It took quite a while to relate all that had happened on his visit home.

She placed his Healing Contract before him and wrote "Successfully completed" and her signature and the date on it. "If this were a Probationary Contract, we would tear it in half and consume it. What would you like to do with it?"

"I'd like to keep it. But I'd also like to consume something for the symbolism." He carefully tore off the blank edges. "Shall we consume this?"

They each picked up an edge piece and ate it. "By consuming this, it is over and done but forever a part of us," she said.

Alexander repeated the same words and then said, "How do I ever thank you for all you have done for me?"

"Someday, you may encounter an ant who needs help. Take action, like you did that day with Fred, and when you offered Alice your friendship. If that ant's problem is more than you can give, make sure you refer them to a qualified doctor or counselor."

"May I ask you something?"

"You may ask, but I might not answer."

"Has my contract been the longest, time wise, that you've had, and was I your toughest case?"

She tapped one front pod on her writing surface. "I never divulge the length of time any ant spends with me or whether one was more difficult than another. I will tell you this. You came very close to willing yourself to die. I sent that emergency message to your home colony commander telling him he must release your father for a few days. I knew if I didn't make you angry and then have him here for you, I would lose you in another day or two. It was a drastic move, but I was desperate to keep you alive."

Alexander reached out to embrace her. "I'm glad you did."

"Watching you grow to this point and hearing you say that makes it worth it."

Once Alexander completed the lengthy set of questions regarding his job exploration experiences, the rest of his final term of training went by so fast he barely had time to breathe. A few days before the Completion Ceremony, Trainer Fortuna handed each of them an envelope with their service assignments. Alexander tapped his writing surface and stared at it. A chuckle went around the chamber; they all were staring at their envelopes. They would be patrol guards like everyone else for their first two season cycles. Freda and Farley would go to South Dairy 20, and Acacio and Anna to South Harvester 45. They were glad to be headed for the same colony.

Arlene opened hers and exclaimed, "Yes! Leadership Training! And in South Harvester 45, my first choice!"

Fermin and Albert pounded their back pods on the floor—they had been assigned to mentors for field physician training. Both would spend the first two season cycles in South Dairy 1 and then head for mentorships in colonies to be assigned later.

Everyone looked at Alexander. He opened his and stared. "Leadership Training! South Dairy 1 with Commander Alonzo as my mentor? This must be a mistake. I'm not qualified for Leadership Training."

"No mistake, Alexander," Fortuna said. "Your humility in thinking you are not qualified is one of the most important characteristics of a good leader. Your responses in the survey also pointed to leadership. Master Aluf and I were in total agreement recommending you."

Alexander stared at her.

"Think of all the times you took initiative: your reason for requesting to change base groups, help given to several trainees, offering to assist with physical training, willingness to accept anything ... I could name more."

The first thing out of Fred's mouth when Alexander returned to their dormitory chamber was, "Well, what did you get?"

"I was surprised, but I'll be in Leadership Training."

"I'm not surprised at all. Ferina and I will both be going to South Dairy 1, so we'll get to be together, and with you. We already decided I'll volunteer for night patrol."

Promised couples were always on different schedules during their obligatory service. One, it protected them from being in battle at the same time. Two, it reduced the temptation to fulfill their mating promise before they were permitted to. One would always be asleep while the other was on duty, and when they were both awake and not on duty, there were plenty of other ants to chaperone.

Guest quarters at Fire 2 were overcrowded for the Academy Completion Ceremony. Alexander's parents, brother, and sister shared quarters with Farmin's family. It was a large chamber, but the sleep cushions were practically wall to wall. The families were too happy to care.

Seated with the other trainees, facing their families, Alexander had never seen the exercise area so crowded. Each trainee rose when Master Aluf called their name and stated in which colony they would serve. In season cycles past, about half from the academy went to South Harvester 45 and half to South Dairy 1 because those colonies had the greatest number of roach incursions. Since the attack on South Dairy 20, the academy sent roughly one third to the three most affected colonies. A few would return to their home colonies for service.

The Vow Ceremony came last. Alexander kept repeating the words in his mind, not wanting to be embarrassed by forgetting, even though he knew the colony commander would prompt him. When his name was called, he rose. "I promise myself to you, representatives of this and all the colonies, in Perpetual Service. I will perform whatever duties are assigned to me to the best of my ability, day or night, through every season cycle, in peace or conflict, sacrificing my life to protect others if necessary. When my body or my mind fail me in old age, preventing any type of service, I trust in you to take care of me until my essence leaves this world."

All those in attendance responded, "We accept your Vow of Perpetual Service and pledge to support you."

While the audience pounded their pods on the floor in support, Alexander's mother came forward with his emblem. The deep blue of the fabric contrasted with the Insignia of the Combined Colonies of Insectia, a line of ants, one of each variety, pods joined with each other, against a white background, applied on it. With quick movements, she looped the strap around the back of his thorax and stitched the end to the lower corner of the emblem—the perfect fit she had measured. She put her front pods on the sides of his face and whispered, "There is something special inside for you to see later," and returned to her place with his family.

The procedure was the same for Arlene, Albert, and Farmin.

The feast in the over-crowded dining chamber went on for a few h-units before younger trainees headed for the transportation center to travel to their home colonies. Extra chambers were then available to relieve overcrowding. Alexander and his family retired to his dorm chamber, and the

temporarily empty one next to it, for Seventhday and Last Day, before he would march off with the group headed for South Dairy 1. His family would ride home in a carrier's basket at the end of the Last Day Feast.

Fred finished filling his satchel as Alexander and his family arrived. He embraced all of them and said, "I'm headed to my brother's domicile. See you Firstday morning, Alexander." Fred's brother had returned from his service when Alexander and Fred were in their fifth season cycle of training and was now mated.

"Now is a good time for you to look inside your emblem," Farrah said.

Alexander slid the tip of one front pod inside his emblem. He pulled out a piece of fabric upon which was an embroidered copy of the image of him and Deena, attached to a firmer piece of fabric. He stared in amazement. "How ... how did you?"

His father answered. "It was up to us to choose the best thing to place in the pocket that would remind you of your reason for living. But if we put the parchment copy in there, it would be ruined the first time you were on patrol in the rain. Our commander told us about an artist who stitched copies of any image. He was happy to do us the favor. Here's the original parchment copy to keep somewhere else."

"Thank you," Alexander said and put the parchment copy in the front of his volume of *Meditations to Essence*. "Mom, you may not remember, but you made this image of Deena and me right after we got back from training the day of the safely drill—the day we mated."

Farrah put a front pod to her mandibles. "That's right. No wonder your eyes sparkled!"

Their joy continued during the next two days, tempered toward the end of Last Day's feast because Farrah, Frodi, Ferella, and Frodi Jr. would be leaving, and the family would not be together again for two season cycles.

It was barely six h-units in the morning when Alexander stumbled into the academy dining chamber for the last time, gobbled a quick breakfast, and picked up a sack of lunch and snacks for the journey, which he stuffed into one of his satchels. Other new guards did the same and then headed for the transportation center. Just over 200 of them separated into groups of around seventy. Those headed for South Harvester 45 went to that intercolonial tunnel's entrance behind a captain wearing an orange sash. Those headed for South Dairy 1 and South Dairy 20 would travel in the same tunnel. The captain escorting Alexander's group, also in an orange sash, shouted, "We will travel at a slightly quicker pace than the group to South Dairy 20. They will spend the night in South Dairy 1's transportation center before they continue their longer journey. Step to the sides of the tunnel for any oncoming carriers. You may walk with friends but maintain the pace I set. We will stop for a morning snack, lunch, and afternoon snack."

Fred and Ferina joined Alexander. "Guess You won't have to worry about chaperones on this journey," Alexander quipped. Fred laughed, and Ferina gave him a grin.

The pace set by the captain was quicker than normal but not an exercise routine. Everyone welcomed the breaks. It was nearly supper time when they arrived at South Dairy 1. The captain guided them into the guard exercise area and said, "Do you see the numbers posted along the walls? Find your name and unit number on the lists at the tables and then proceed to your unit area. You'll eat a sack supper while you listen to your unit leaders. Thank you for keeping a good pace on a tiring journey."

"Look," said Fred, "you and I are both in unit 3, and Ferina is in unit 2."

Once settled in their areas munching roasted seeds, dried grasshopper meat, and flasks of honeydew, their Unit Leader, with a green sash like the other ULs, called each name on his list and said, "I am Unit Leader Fenton. You will address me as Unit Leader Fenton when a captain or our commander is around, but you can shorten it to UL if we are on our own. I know you are tired, and I won't keep you long. Today was a taste of the exhaustion you'll know for the next two timeframes of offensive training, but you'll live through it. Is anyone here promised to someone?"

Fred raised his pod. "I'm promised to Ferina; she's in unit 2."

"Thank you. Even-numbered units are on days, odd numbers on nights. No problem there. Anyone else?"

Alexander looked around. Two pods near the back went up and the female said, "We are promised. I offer to change units."

"Thank you," said UL Fenton, "please step to the center with me and wait. Others who need to change units will join us."

Alexander watched as other ants stepped to the center of the area. Those needing to change units left with different ULs. His unit gained another male.

"As soon as you've finished eating, I'll take you to the male and female dorms so you can settle in and get some rest. Since we are on night duty, you are encouraged to sleep as much as possible tomorrow. We will do all our training at night, so your bodies become adjusted to being awake then. During your off time, remain quiet in the dorm, or go to other areas of the guard center. You'll see signs in the tunnels showing you where the Leisure Time Center, reading areas, meditation, and dining chambers are. Because of varied schedules, there is almost always food in the dining area."

The twelve members of Unit 3 rose and followed their UL. When they reached Male Dorm 1, Alexander noted that sleep cushions were arranged in clusters around the huge chamber. He didn't count, but there must have been at least sixty sleep cushions. Each sleep cushion had a small cupboard next to it for personal items, and its top served as a writing surface. He could see signs for multiple sanitation areas. Fenton turned to Alexander and said, "Please drop your satchels on this sleep cushion next to mine and come with me. Commander Alonzo wishes to have a quick meeting."

Alexander acknowledged him and followed, noticing that Female Dorm 1 was across the tunnel. On the left side of each dorm was a portal with a captain's name on it. They passed two more male and female dorms on the way to the commander's quarters, and a sign on the tunnel wall said, "Dorms 7-12,

Quiet at all times," with an arrow pointing onward. A branching tunnel directly across from the commander's quarters directed guards to the other areas of the Guard Center.

Commander Alonzo's portal stood open. Alexander followed his UL in. "Please, sit down, both of you," the commander said, extending his front pods in greeting. He wore a Vow Emblem, and Alexander wondered, though he would never ask, what might be inside it.

"Welcome, Alexander. I've been looking forward to your arrival. Unit Leader Fenton, I see you are anxious, please relax. I'm not trying to 'test' you in assigning my mentee to your unit. I chose you because you are an excellent Unit Leader. I'm not out there on patrol much anymore, so Alexander will learn a lot from your example and experience."

"Thank you, Commander Alonzo," Fenton responded.

"Alexander, you should be aware that your unit leader volunteered to continue being a guard for an additional season cycle." He smiled at Fenton and continued, "Fenton has a mating promise with a female a season cycle younger than he is, so he figured he might as well stay on patrol while he waits for her to finish her obligation. She's in Unit 8, right?"

Fenton nodded.

"So, you've got this season cycle to get Alexander ready to take your place as UL."

Alexander's eyes widened.

"Don't look so surprised, Alexander; many guards are Unit Leaders their second season cycle. Fenton, you may leave now. Alexander, I have a few more things to tell you."

Alexander leaned forward as Fenton left.

"This first few days, I want you to observe how Unit Leader Fenton interacts with the guards in your unit. Make mental notes about his leadership style. You and I will have a standing appointment every Seventhday evening at six. I also want you to know that I received packets like yours from two other colonies. Yours stood out because of Master Adriana's and Master Aluf's recommendations. Any ant making it through training at the Guard Academy has an advantage. I've never personally met Master Adriana, but over the season cycles, I've sent her several of my guards in need of her expertise, and then, they end up serving somewhere else. I decided I'd like to have one back, metaphorically speaking. Do you have any questions?"

"Did my packet say why I was with Master Adriana?"

"No, whatever that was no longer matters. She certified you were of sound mind and body, and she considered you an excellent candidate for Leadership Training."

"Do you want to know?"

"Not right now. If I ever think I need to know, I'll ask. Any other concerns?"

"I'm nervous, and I hope I will meet your expectations."

Commander Alonzo rose from his seat and put a pod on the back of Alexander's thorax. "You and everyone else entering service. I'm sure you will meet my expectations. Head on back to your dorm now and try to get some rest."

Chapter 19

The large time piece on the dorm wall indicated 10 h-units when Alexander woke up. His UL lay still on the sleep cushion next to him. A note on his writing surface read: "Do NOT wake me! Look at the schedules posted near the dorm portal and act accordingly."

About half the sleep cushions were empty; the others held sleeping guards. He walked over to the portal. **New Guard Schedule for Units 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9: Nights, Firstday through Sixthday for first two timeframes:**

6 evening: be in the dining hall and find your unit area

7 evening: multi-unit session inside exercise area

8 evening: surface exercise

10 evening: surface drill practice

12 midnight: meal break dining chamber

1 morning: multi-unit session inside exercise area

3 morning: inside exercise drill practice

5 morning: breakfast and off duty—socialization permitted but sleep strongly suggested

Seventhday: off duty; one requirement: attend any meditation service

The day duty schedule was a simple "flip" of evening/morning/midnight/noon. He groaned and tried to go back to sleep. At 11 h-units he gave in to his hunger and went to the dining area where he saw Fred and some others from his unit. After filling up, they decided to explore the guard complex, except for Fred who wanted to watch for Ferina when her unit arrived for lunch. Once they had located the various areas, Alexander went back to the meditation chamber and then tried to sleep again but couldn't.

After supper with his group, all new night units proceeded to the inside exercise area where they listened to a captain's lecture on standard regulations and expectations. Alexander thought there would be fewer rules once he left the Guard Academy. He was wrong. Most requirements were common sense, but with the repeated statement, "We guards set an example of the highest level of ant beliefs. More is expected of you than any other ant variety."

Two solid h-units of endurance exercise followed—running straight up and down the outside of the mound. Alexander thought he was in good physical condition, but after twenty times up and down, his legs felt like mush. Fred struggled even more. Alexander pulled him along. Unit Leader Fenton approached. "Slow your pace. For the next 200 steps, go half as fast as a normal walking pace; then return to normal. You can do it. Just keep putting one pod in front of the other." Alexander watched him encourage several others. They all collapsed at the base of the mound when finally instructed to stop.

UL Fenton handed out flasks of water and snacks of concentrated dried honey dew, which they were told would keep them awake until morning. While eating, they listened to a captain review several defensive strategies. "All this you should know from your previous training. Now, you'll learn techniques for offense, beginning with the front-approach-role-right sting." He gestured to a life-size model of a roach warrior. All their adult lives, guards had heard that roach warriors were at least three times as large as fire ants but seeing the model induced gasps.

"Yes, they are that big. Avoiding the mandibles, you run forward, roll right, swing your abdomen left and sting. Your stinger will penetrate any part of an exoskeleton, so even if you only hit a pod, that roach will die. Another captain is inside the model to simulate movement. The dodging moves you perfected in basics and during job exploration, now become offense. UL Fenton, would you demonstrate this basic sting?"

Sixty new guards, fascinated by the mechanical roach, sat in a large circle around the model and UL Fenton. It was made of several layers of stiff parchment glued together. Inside, a captain operated a series of levers attached to thin strips of wood and braided hemp and pulley systems. Padding protected the operator from stings. UL Fenton stayed outside the range of the menacing mandibles, then in a flash, ran forward, rolled to one side, back onto his pods, swung his abdomen left and stung the "roach's" side.

Each of them attempted the same, with varying degrees of success. Some were pinned down by a mechanical leg; a few were caught in the mandibles; and others made the roll but missed on the sting. Again and again, they lined up to try. By the time the session ended, half of them could deliver the sting without being "killed." All were more than glad to return to the dining area for their midnight meal.

A discussion of why they failed and how to correct their mistakes followed and then more practice on the technique in the inside exercise area. This time there were several "mechanical roaches" with ULs inside. More of them were successful and everyone improved. When a captain in the area announced it was five h-units in the morning and they were excused to the dining area, many cheered.

The next few days were the same—hard runs up and down the mound, intense practice on their first offensive technique and lengthy talks about handling oneself while on patrol or in an altercation with roaches. Everyone looked forward to Seventhday, and when it came, most slept for long periods. Alexander slept until three and, after eating, attended a meditation service at four. He ate again at half after five and headed for his appointment with his mentor.

Commander Alonzo's portal was open. "I see you made it through the first quarter timeframe. Please, make yourself comfortable and tell me what you learned."

"Well, I certainly found out what my parents, my brother and sister, and all my trainers meant when they told me I wouldn't have time to write letters, and that if I thought I was in good physical condition, I would learn I wasn't."

Commander Alonzo smiled and handed Alexander a mug of ale. "One mug—you've earned it! What else?"

Alexander took a glug from the mug before saying, "Unit Leader Fenton focused on learning our names the first day, looking us in the eye and repeating our names at the beginning and end of whatever he was saying. It seemed strange at first, but on the second day, he knew everybody. I tried that during meals with my fellow guards, and it really worked."

He went on to describe how Fenton encouraged them when they thought they couldn't take another step up the mound, how he showed them what to do by doing it. "I saw other ULs let their guards rest more often in those runs up the mound while UL Fenton always made us keep moving, even if slowly. By yesterday, my whole unit made it through while others still had to rest once or twice."

"Good observations! About half the ULs conduct workouts with slowdowns but not stops, and those always turn out to be the best units. I've been telling my other ULs for season cycles to try it—some do, some don't."

He picked up a loosely bound stack of parchment and handed it to Alexander. "This will be an ongoing assignment. Read through a Roach Incident Report, think about it for a day, then write a paragraph of response stating what you think the UL, captain, or other leader did right, and what could have been improved upon. There are no 'correct' answers, but when you are out there in charge of a unit, you'll remember those incidents, and in the split moment you must decide, you're likely to do the right thing. Try to do two per quarter timeframe. We will discuss them each time we meet."

Each quarter timeframe, they learned another attack strategy: front-approach-roll-left-abdomen-right sting, back-approach run up the thorax and sting, one guard distracts face-on while the other runs up the back, and more.

Alexander learned that "on patrol" didn't mean roaming a meadow. They were placed in different configurations varying f-units apart, crouched low, remaining unseen waiting, alert. ULs did the moving around, checking on them and delivering their night meal—usually cold sliced grasshopper, a hunk of grassfrond seed bread, and dried fruit. They always had flasks of water and honeydew snacks in their satchels. They learned how to turn off their scent organs so they would not be detected by roach antennae as they hid.

By the second timeframe, they were required to run a course through a field of mechanical roaches. It took a lot of practice runs simply to make it through without being “killed.” By the final days of their patrol training, they were scored on their actions when they completed the course: ten points for making it through and five points for each delivered sting. Alexander scored in the top five of all the new guards.

He managed to write one letter home, asking his parents to pass it around, and kept up the goal of responses to two Roach Incident Reports when meeting with his mentor. He became accustomed to being awake all night, without needing concentrated dried honeydew, and slept each day until 2:30 in the afternoon. He and most others had time to socialize and take care of personal things before reporting for supper. During their last half timeframe before actual patrol, they were paired with a guard from the current patrol units.

Alexander craved action and was disappointed when there were no roach incursions. His experienced partner informed him, “Boring is good! I hope for five more nights of boring, because then I will be released from service and go home to my Promised One—we weren’t assigned to the same colony. Being apart has been way more difficult than I thought it would be. ‘Boring’ means you get to live a long life.”

The first incursion of roaches—another attempt to steal grasshoppers—happened a timeframe into Unit 3’s patrol duties—around two h-units after midnight with a clear moon-lit sky. Alexander followed instructions to wait in hiding until the signal to attack came, even though his antennae had detected roach scent several moments before. A roach warrior passed within five f-units of his position, and its scent was so strong he could barely tolerate it.

He was sorely tempted to strike but held his position. The whistle to attack came a moment later. Alexander ran a back approach and stung. The roach let out something between a groan and a scream and dropped beneath him. Despite all his training, he shook as he looked around trying to decide what to do next, surprised at the power he had to kill.

Several roach bodies lay around with fellow guards standing over them. One surviving roach ran past Alexander so fast trying to escape that he had no time to react.

The ‘incident’ was over in less than ten moments!

“Let that one go!” UL Fenton shouted. “He’ll tell others of this disaster for them, and we won’t have any problems for a while.” He directed unit members to collect the dead roaches, which they would carry to the river’s edge and heave across—further warning.

“Fly larvae haven’t feasted for a while!” UL Fenton shouted. They collected nineteen dead roaches. Alexander’s unit and the one next to theirs were the only ones involved. Not a single ant had been injured.

Alexander shared his feelings with Fred later. "I felt a strange sense of power, amazing and humbling at the same time. What about you?"

Fred shook his antennae. "I'm sorry, but I froze in place. By the time I got the courage to act, it was over."

Alexander encouraged him. "Well, you'll be ready the next time." But inside, he decided he would try to be positioned near his friend, just in case.

"Just in case" came two timeframes later. Alexander and Fred were hidden thirty f-units apart when a large horde of roaches came pounding toward them. The attack whistle came, and both sprang forward. Alexander dodged right, rolled to sting but missed. He whirled about, dodged again, and delivered a fatal sting. He jumped on top of the roach to look around. Fred, pinned down beneath a roach's middle pods, struggled.

Alexander jumped off the roach. While screaming, "NOOOOOOO," he realized he could reach Fred faster if he flipped. The thought of Ferina experiencing the grief of losing her Promised One brought back his anguish over Deena's death. He couldn't let that happen to Ferina.

Three successive head-over-abdomen flips took him over the antennae of the roach and down, stinger first, hitting with such force that he stuck!

The roach was dead before he could groan. Fred was silent. Two other guards, having heard Alexander's scream, rushed to their aid. They pulled Alexander up and lifted the dead roach off Fred. A few surviving roaches fled toward the river, defeated.

"What was **that** move?" said the first, while the other attended Fred.

"Desperation," Alexander replied. "Is Fred still alive?"

"Yes, thanks to you," the guard checking Fred over said. "He's passed out—just as well. That roach bit off the last segment of his left-front leg, and he's got a minor crack in his abdomen, but nothing fatal. Here comes the field physician now."

UL Fenton arrived as well. When assured Fred would be fine, he said, "We need to haul dead roaches." As Alexander followed, he added, "We will talk more later, but that yell of yours and whatever it was you did got the rest of them running for their lives! I want to know all about it, so will Commander Alonzo."

An h-unit later, Alexander and Fenton entered the commander's work chamber. "I heard you pulled off quite a move, Alexander."

Fenton began. "That's correct, Commander. There were maybe fifty roaches this time and he sent them running with the most fantastic move I've ever seen."

"Do tell, Alexander."

"Well, I saw that my friend Fred was pinned down and realized I could reach him faster if I flipped instead of running." He described the rest.

Commander Alonzo rubbed his outer mandibles with one front pod. "Ingenious! Do you think you could do it again? Without getting stuck? And demonstrate it for others?"

"I don't know. ... I wasn't exactly planning it or paying attention to what I did; I was just desperate to save Fred. ... I can try. ... But I don't know how to describe the movements. I've always been good at gymnastics, but I'm not sure about training others."

"Don't worry. I'll have my main gymnastics trainer work with you! She'll be able to describe it and train others—once you can demonstrate to her what you did. I'm getting personal here; I know you and Fred trained together at the Guard Academy, but why are the two of you particularly close?"

Alexander let out a long breath. "It's a long story."

Fenton put in, "Maybe I should leave?"

"No," Alexander replied, "I don't mind telling you." Half an h-unit later, having explained his past to them, his UL and commander sat in stunned silence.

"Thank you, Alexander," Commander Alonzo finally said. "I know that was not easy, and I now understand why you were so highly recommended for leadership training. What you did a few h-units ago is what leadership is all about—fast thinking in desperate situations and dedication to saving others."

He handed them both a mug of ale before continuing. "You probably won't like all the attention this will bring you, but I'll get you through that, and neither of us will repeat your story. What you did will help save many guards! But now, I know you two are hungry and tired. Go, eat, and sleep. After you visit Fred in the medical center, come back and we will make more plans. You are both off for the next two nights. Fenton, I'll probably have Alexander change to days for a while to work on this new offensive move, but you'll get him back. Roaches will be way too scared to raid again soon, so it won't matter if you are short-podded."

Ferina was with Fred when Alexander arrived. His left-front pod was swathed in bandages and the end of his abdomen was plastered. Ferina jumped up and embraced Alexander. "I'll never be able to thank you enough!" Tears slid down her face when she finally let go of him.

Alexander lightened the mood. "Just have lots of young ones and name them all after me." When their laughter subsided, Alexander continued, "How are you, Fred?"

"Thanks to you, I'll be all right. My physician says the fracture in my abdomen should heal quickly, and I have no internal injuries. They will fit the end of my pod with a metal point so I can use it almost as well as before. I'm not sure how I'll finish my service, but it won't be on patrol. It's a relief because I was terrified every moment of every night. I'm a failure as a guard!"

"You are not a failure," came a voice from the medical center corridor, followed by Commander Alonzo's entrance. "I wasn't standing out there listening; I just happened to overhear the last thing you said."

He held out both pods to Fred and then to Ferina. "Fred, we hatch into this life—no choice—but that doesn't mean we all have what it takes out there on patrol. You did the best you could under the circumstances. You did not act in a cowardly manner, nor are you a failure. What are your plans after service?"

"I hope to enter a mentorship with Master Adriana to be a physician specializing in emotional healing. My physician assured me that my injuries will not interfere with that."

"Good. You'll be a better counselor because of your experiences. I'll have one of our physicians work with you on some of the text training during your recovery. One of our counselors will help you work through the trauma. You'll work in support services once you've recovered."

He rubbed Fred's head in a friendly manner and then turned to Ferina. "A pleasure meeting you, Ferina," and added with a smile, "You make sure that portal stays open whenever you are here."

Ferina smiled back. "Of course," she said.

"I've got other injured guards to visit, so I'll be on my way."

Alexander left a few moments later, having seen another example of leadership demonstrated by his commander. He, too, should visit others in his unit who had been injured.

Chapter 20

It took Alexander a few days with South Dairy 1's head of gymnastics to accomplish his Flip Sting with a stationary target and land on his pods. On the fourth day, the gymnastics trainer arrived with an improved target. Thick layers of heavy paper stuffed with thistledown had been molded into the shape of a roach. A ten-f-unit rope was attached to one end.

"The roach who attacked your friend was stationary. We need to figure out how to hit a moving target."

Alexander groaned.

"Aim for where the 'roach' is going, not where it is. I'll keep it in a straight line."

With that, the trainer began to drag the target across the grassy surface. "And don't land on me!"

Alexander penetrated the slowly moving target on the fifth try. "Now faster," the trainer said.

By the second evening of that, he could “sting” the target as fast as the trainer could pull it in a straight line. “All right, now I need to have someone else pull the target so I can carefully observe and write down your movements.”

They progressed through several more stages: moving target with zigzags, faster erratic movements, anything the trainer could think of to make it more difficult and more like the unpredictable movements of roaches in battle. With each stage of increased difficulty, Alexander had to adjust, remember the emotion he had experienced when he saved Fred, and adapt to a new situation.

Guards passing by on their way to patrol began to shout, “When do we get to learn Alexander’s Flip Sting?”

“Soon,” the trainer would shout back.

“What? Are they naming this move after me?” Alexander asked.

“Of course, you developed it!”

Alexander hung his head. “I don’t want the attention. Can’t you just call it a Flip Sting without my name?”

“I will certainly put that in all my written descriptions, but I can’t control what guards say to each other. They’ve been calling it that ever since you hit the stationary target. I thought you knew.”

“All that’s been on my mind is patrol, eat, and sleep, and work with you.”

On the fourth Seventhdawn after that fateful night, when Alexander told his commander, once again, “I’m sorry but I haven’t gotten any situation reports done. I’m so far behind.”

“Don’t concern yourself with those right now. Starting to train others on your Flip Sting is much more important. What’s your latest accomplishment?”

Alexander took a gulp of the mug of warm honeydew handed to him. “I can now sting three moving targets one after another.”

“Wonderful! Tomorrow evening you’ll start training the rest of your unit. Then we’ll proceed to other night units, the rest of the gymnastics training staff, other colonies’ gymnastics trainers ...” Commander Alonzo’s voice trailed off.

Alexander’s mind flipped. “Is that all I’m going to be doing now? Training others to do this? Doing it doesn’t mean I know how to teach it!”

Alexander’s face must have shown his churning emotions because Commander Alonzo corrected himself. “I’m sorry; don’t be alarmed. No, you won’t personally do the training. Once you and my head gymnastics trainer have got your unit doing it, and you’ve trained the main gymnastic trainers from the other close colonies, my trainer will take over. You, and the rest of the night patrols, need to be out

there ready to USE it. But you DO know how to train. You've shown my best gymnastics trainer everything you know about doing your Flip Sting. And I bet you trained many to play Blue-Green back at the academy. I appreciate your humility, but you have far more abilities than you give yourself credit for. Now go have some fun for the rest of the evening."

Alexander's unit caught on quickly and were soon prepared to use the Flip Sting on any roach incursion. The rest of the night units could perform the move three timeframes after that. Then, the day patrols detected an increase in movement in the tall meadow grass across Border River. Such movement often indicated another roach incursion was imminent. And, for once, the guards hoped they would come. Indeed, they bated the roaches by having the dairying crew graze the grasshopper heard closer to the river.

Guards close to the river were instructed to remain hidden in silence, allow the roaches to pass by them, and attack from behind when the signal came. When guards hit the invading roaches from two directions using the Flip Sting, they stung three times as many roaches in less than half the time! Guards let one or two escape to spread the news. Not a single guard was injured.

Two timeframes before the end of Alexander's first season cycle, UL Fenton approached him at supper on his day off. "Please, come with me. There is something I need to show you."

Alexander wondered why, but he followed Fenton to the surface.

"Sometimes, older guards, and even older dairying ants, think they can still protect themselves and others. We give them their dignity by doing what we call shadowing. It's like hiding on patrol, but you must move behind or beside them at a distance close enough to jump in to protect if needed but not be detected by the one being shadowed. I keep about five body lengths away. Now, with your Flip Sting, it's three flips away, which is about ten body lengths, making it much easier not to be detected. It's easy to keep that distance in tall grass or wood plants, but not so easy on open ground. But on open ground, you can see danger farther away. Does this make sense?"

"Yes, but how do you know who needs it and when they are out on the surface by themselves?"

The two were now close to the grasshopper herd.

"Once someone is trained in being a shadow, we add them to the network. We each sign up to be available about two days a timeframe—always on our days off. We stay near the entrance of the colony where the entrance guard can see us, but unnoticed by others. It's voluntary, but important. Someone out on day patrol might notice an older retired captain or commander whose reflexes aren't what they should be. That ant is placed on the 'watch list'. When those who need a shadow sign out at any colony entrance, the guard gives that day's shadow a signal. The shadow follows them at a discrete distance. Even guards who are no longer active help in their colonies as shadows. Our commander knows his limitations. He checks on us, but he never goes to the surface unattended, so he's not on the

list, but others are. I need you to learn this now, because you'll be the UL for the unit's second season cycle, and you'll have to show the others, even those who will be finished with their obligation."

They approached the UL near the grasshopper herd. UL Fenton waved and then said, "I'm training Alexander shadow skills today. We'll practice on the hoppers and then target you. Call out if you detect either of us."

The UL nodded.

Following UL Fenton's example, Alexander dropped into the grass, scent organs off, and followed the movements of one hopper on the edge of the herd. It bounded away from Alexander.

"What did I do?"

"A small swish of the grass. Hoppers are very sensitive—which is why shadowing one is good practice. Let's try again."

After four attempts, Alexander managed to follow a hopper for five moments before being detected. "My dad was going to take me beetle hunting once, but then Deena died. I'm thinking this shadowing is like beetle hunting."

"I never thought of it, but, yes, it's a lot like that," UL Fenton responded. "Let's see if we can slip up on that UL."

Three times, the UL pointed exactly where Alexander was. "Keep practicing," he said. "You did well for your first day. I can usually detect someone in two moments. Oh, that's another way we know which older guards and captains need a shadow—it's too easy to pass the shadow test."

UL Fenton popped up from ten f-units away, not having been detected. "When you can go ten moments without detection twice and pop up like I just did, on different active guards on different days, you've passed your shadow test. Let me know, and you'll be added to the list of active shadows. Let your target know when you practice. Then that guard can keep track of the time to make it official."

Half a timeframe later, Alexander popped up on one of the captains after twelve moments, and on a UL after fifteen moments, passing his shadow test. As UL later, his unit caught on quickly when he took them one at a time as Fenton had taken him.

Alexander's second year of service was uneventful compared to the first. The roaches stayed on their side of the river many timeframes after the Flip Sting battle. While part of him was disappointed, he now valued "boring." He was still behind writing reactions to the incident reports. Commander Alonzo kept telling him not to worry.

The day came when all those who had arrived with him were released from their obligation. Fred and Ferina gathered their things to leave on Secondday, with their mating planned for the coming Sixthday. "You will be with us in time for our ceremony, right?"

"I hope so, but you know I can't promise. I have not completed my mentorship. You do have someone else, just in case, don't you?"

"Yes," Ferina replied, "But we really want you with us."

Alexander embraced them as they left the guard area. Then he headed for the inside exercise area to meet his new unit members, fresh from their colonies. He was ready to guide them through their training for night patrol.

Late Fourthday afternoon, as he was about to leave for the guard dining room for duty, he received a message. Commander Alonzo wished to see him.

Before Alexander could ask what Commander Alonzo wanted, the commander said, "Aren't you supposed to be First Friend at your friends' mating ceremony in two days?"

Alexander nodded, "But I haven't completed my mentorship, so I didn't think ..."

His mentor shook his head. "I keep telling you not to worry. I've got you for life." He laughed before continuing. "Nobody finishes leadership training in two season cycles! The shortest is two and a half, the longest five. TAKE YOUR LEAVE. Get a night basket to Fire 1 tonight! Drink some sleeping tea before you go, and eat some concentrated dried honeydew in the morning, since you'll need to be awake days."

Alexander's mandibles opened in disbelief.

His commander continued. "After the mating ceremony, hop another night basket, through here and on to your home colony. Be back here next Fourthday. And before you object, don't worry about your new guards! They'll be in good pods. At his request on your behalf, I called Fenton up from reserve for the quarter timeframe. He's in the dining chamber now with your new guards. Now scurry out of here."

Alexander managed to say, "Thank you, Commander," on his way out. He entered the dining chamber to have a hot meal before leaving and joined his former UL and new guards.

"You are supposed to be on your way," Fenton said.

"I will be. The last basket doesn't leave for an h-unit." Then he said to his new guards, "I want you to know that UL Fenton taught me everything I know about guiding you through the first two timeframes. UL Fenton, why did you offer to take my place?"

"My mate and I discussed it and decided that after all you did for your friends, they needed you more than these new guards did. And you'll only be gone seven days."

It was early in the morning when Alexander arrived at Fire 2. He munched the concentrated dried honeydew and headed for Fred's brother's domicile, since Fred was staying there until his ceremony. When the portal opened to his tap, Fred exclaimed, "Alexander! You made it! I was beginning to worry." He pulled Alexander into the domicile.

Over breakfast, he explained that his brother and sister-in-law would both be heading to work soon. "Ferina and I must make some quick arrangements to have basic furnishings delivered to our domicile, so I'm glad you're here to help; we won't have to wait for carriers."

Alexander sipped his hot breakfast tea. "I thought you were all set for staff housing at the academy."

"That's what we thought, but when we got here Thirdday morning, we learned that Ferina's mentorship at the academy fell through. The colony Job and Mentorship Manager arranged another mentor for her, but it's at a different training center. The manager also helped us find a domicile near that training center, which was great, considering we need to be IN it tomorrow evening. You know how when someone leaves a domicile, they leave the basics behind?"

"Yes."

"Well, this is a newly-excavated domicile—only the cold storage unit and the cooking box were in it when we went to see it. We've been all over the market area picking things out. Everything is all set aside for us; we just have to get it from the market to our domicile."

"Shall we go now?"

"The markets don't open until 10 h-units."

"In that case, I've got a few people I'd like to visit at the academy. Shall I meet you back her at 10?"

"Sure. Ferina's going to be thrilled that you're here."

Alexander carried his breakfast plate and mug to the wash basin and left, spending the next two h-units visiting with Trainer Amanda, Trainer Fortuna, and the Guard Academy gymnastics trainer. Alexander tried to see Master Adriana, but her schedule was full. He left a message that he would see her at the mating ceremony.

Ferina threw her front pods around Alexander when he returned. For the next three h-units they carried everything from the market area to their domicile and spent the rest of the day and part of the evening—with help from Fred's brother and his mate, and the couple who would be their neighbors—to arrange their furnishings. In the middle of it all, a female cousin of Ferina's, whom she had chosen to be her First Friend, arrived with a supply of nonperishable foods, soon put into compartments in the kitchen.

[All ant domiciles are basically the same: living area with two individual and one larger sitting cushion, and two low surfaces to set things on; kitchen with an eating surface and four to six stools, cooking and cold storage units, cookware, sets of bowls, eating utensils, mugs, and plates for six; three sleeping chambers with cushions; smaller future pupation chambers off each sleep chamber; and a sanitation area. Cupboards for storage and shelves for books and small decorative items are carved into the walls. If on the rare occasion, a family grows to need more than three pupation chambers at the same time, they utilize an unused pupation chamber in another family member's or neighbor's domicile. Henry R.D. II]

At the first mating celebration Alexander had attended, he had been a guest. This time, he was an active participant. Part of that role included helping to prepare the new couple's domicile—which should have been done much sooner than it had been. He was also expected to help carry Fred's basket,

and later, the one basket for Fred and Ferina, hold open the portals as family and friends entered the meditation chamber. He would also assist Fred with his presentation of his symbolic gift, help distribute the seeds of caring during that part of the ceremony, assist at the banquet, and make sure all family and friends were pulled into the first of the dances.

Alexander rubbed the back of Fred's thorax and abdomen with grassfrond seed oil the next morning until he glistened in the lantern light. "That scar from the abdominal crack hardly shows any more. I'm still sorry I indirectly caused that."

"Well, I'm glad you did, or I wouldn't be here."

Shortly after, Fred's brother arrived with the basket. It was time for the procession to the Guard Academy meditation chamber. Ferina's family had a much shorter distance since her father lived in an academy domicile. The two processions joined at the main entrance to the academy. Everything went smoothly. Large plates and bowls of prepared food brought by friends and family lay on the serving line in the dining chamber. Fred's brother, in charge of the ale, had provided plenty.

Alexander paid closer attention to Fred and Ferina's recitation of their promise and handed Fred his symbolic gift at the proper time. The ceremony he and Deena never had entered his thoughts, but with fondness, not regret. His smile was genuine when he helped those assembled leave the meditation chamber and proceed behind Fred and Ferina to the academy dining chamber for the banquet.

Near the end of the banquet, Alexander rose to speak. "I only have one thing to say to my brother and sister friends on this occasion. May you have twice both your pods in young ones!"

Everyone roared in laughter, though few knew the symbolic meaning of his statement. Alexander glugged his ale and sat down. Someone refilled his ale mug almost immediately. He sipped slowly this time.

Fred and Ferina's mating dance was flawless, and when the music slowed, Alexander was the first ant Ferina drew in—even before her father. "Did you have to make it TWICE BOTH our pods? I certainly hope Essence doesn't load me down with THAT many young ones."

Alexander swung her around in the dance and said, "My mentor is always telling me not to be so serious. 'Twice both your pods' is more fun than 'a whole lot.' Besides, Essence never gives us more than we can handle, of anything."

When the music slowed again and they let go of each other, Alexander drew Master Adriana into the dance. "I think this might be the only chance we have to catch up with each other." He proceeded to give her a brief synopsis of his first two season cycles of service.

"I knew you would do well! I had a letter from Fernando recently. He said to give you his greetings if I got the chance. He is now a physician and emotional counselor in North Dairy 72. Northern colonies, while they may not have to worry about roaches, still have plenty of tragedy and trauma to deal with."

The dancing went on. Alexander returned to his place at the table several times for sips of ale. A helper approached to refill it, but he waved him away. "No, thank you. Two mugs are enough for me." He returned to the dance area, choosing someone he did not know and introducing himself. A couple of

dances, more sips of ale, more dances, more sips ... It certainly seemed to be strong ale; he laughed longer and louder, feeling a bit light-headed. Fred's brother and Master Aluf smiled at him each time he set down his mug to dance with someone else.

After the sharing of the oval-shaped mating cake, it was time to package left-over food for the couple's mating holiday. Alexander nearly tripped. Master Aluf, helping with that task, caught him. "A little dizzy, are we? A bit too much ale?"

"I haven't finished my second mug."

Fred's brother grinned.

By the time Fred and Ferina climbed into their basket, Alexander gripped the table, so he didn't wobble. "Stand between us," Master Aluf and Fred's brother said.

Upon reaching Fred and Ferina's domicile, Alexander had to lean on the tunnel wall to keep from falling. Fred's brother and Master Aluf burst into laughter. Alexander managed to make a final joke as he closed the portal, but his words slurred. "Have fun now—remember, twice both your pods!"

Master Aluf caught him before he slumped to the tunnel floor. "We should tell him."

"Tell me what?"

"Well," Fred's brother hesitated. "We played a joke on you, adding a little more ale to your mug every time you left the table."

Alexander shook his head. "So how much ale have I really had?"

"Oh, at least five mugs," Master Aluf admitted.

"Maybe six. Come on. We'll help you get to the transportation center."

"But my satchel ..."

"I've got it," said Master Aluf. "We would never let anything serious happen to you."

Chapter 21

Alexander did not wake up until the carrier in whose basket he had ridden shook him. He climbed out of the basket and asked, "Can you point out a basket going to South Dairy 20?"

"This note was right—you really were out of it. You are IN South Dairy 20."

"Note?"

The carrier shook his antennae, chuckled, and then said, "Here."

The note in Master Aluf's script stated:

"Dear Carriers:

Alexander, by a trick of mine, had way too much ale at his friends' mating ceremony. He may not wake up when he gets to South Dairy 1 where he serves. He is on leave, so please see that he gets into a basket headed to South Dairy 20 where he has family."

Alexander would have laughed, but his body hurt too much. "Someone picked me up, put me in another basket, and I never woke up?"

The grinning carrier nodded.

"Thank you." Alexander laughed, too.

"We appreciate what you and all the other guards do, especially those of you who make a Vow." He pointed to Alexander's insignia. "It's nice to know you get to have a good time on occasion."

Alexander joined front pods with the carrier. Then he turned to go to his family's domicile. Late Thirdday evening, he was back in South Dairy 20's transportation center after a wonderful visit with his family. He decided to make the four-h-unit journey a workout instead of taking a basket. He munched a piece of concentrated dried honeydew so he could stay awake through the night as he began his run/walk. He reported in and slept into the day ready to take over training his new unit of guards on schedule.

Once his new guards were ready for patrol, Alexander poured every extra moment into his responses to the remaining incident reports, determined to finish by the beginning of Sixth Timeframe. But on the 28th of Fourth Timeframe, Commander Alonzo said to him, "You have a new temporary assignment. This Thirdday, your unit will accompany an archeologist on an expedition to a location about four h-units northwest of here—some unexplored duo pod ruins. You won't have to worry about roaches, but you'll need to be on the watch for predators—mantis, ladybeetles, spider lairs, wasps. You won't be going on patrol tonight—too busy getting ready. This archeologist will arrive tomorrow. We will meet with her at four h-units. And, please, stop worrying about the incident reports. Finish them while you are on this assignment, and we'll discuss them when you get back."

A million concerns entered Alexander's mind. He only voiced the first one. "I'll be in charge by myself?"

"Yes, in charge of the group's safety. Master Diandra is head of the expedition. And before you express your doubts, you are well-qualified to take on this assignment. Here's a list of tasks for the next few days. Go get started."

Alexander took the parchment from his commander's pods:

- Meet with your unit this evening so they know the assignment. Poll unit members for any job exploration experience in these areas: group cooking, wild insect hunting, trail scouting. Also ask who has what games and books to share with all going.
- Choose four guards for night watch.
- Assign two for general maintenance chores, a cook and assistant cook, two as day watch guards from a high point, and two for water carrying and whatever else might come up. These jobs may be rotated among your unit members.
- Visit the guard kitchen and ask for recipes and equipment for basic camp-away cooking for a group of sixteen and ask for provisions for half a timeframe. Fresh supplies will be delivered when carriers arrive with written messages and supplies and take everyone's return messages.
- Visit the campout department for portable dome shelters—one large for cooking, dining, and leisure; two medium-size for male and female dorms. Ask for instructions on building field latrines.
- Arrange to meet with the campout department supervisor to train you and your guards on how to assemble and disassemble the domes.
- Make a list of questions for tomorrow's meeting.

Alexander's unit stared at him when he finished speaking. Then the questions started: Four timeframes away? What about my promised one—can she visit? How are we supposed to ...

"Calm down," Alexander said. "This is new for me, too. An advantage is that for the next four timeframes, none of us have to worry about roaches." That resulted in laughter. "Let's examine one thing at a time on my list. I've had a lot of guard kitchen experience, but not in cooking. Who did cooking in job exploration?"

Two pods went up. "Good, I'll help when I can. You two decide which of you will be head cook. Who would like night duty?"

Four pods quickly went up and the rest of the assignments followed. Everyone said they would prefer to stay with the same job for the entire assignment. Among them, they had three Blue/Green sets and four other games but only fifteen books. Three had music experience—two with reed pipes and one with rhythm implements. Alexander wrote down all their questions as well as his own. Finally, he delegated one guard to visit the research center and ask for twelve to fifteen more books with a variety of topics. He sent the two cooks to visit the kitchen and arrange for the needed items. He told the others to meet him at the campout department the next morning.

The following afternoon, Alexander walked into Commander Alonzo's quarters. A female dairying ant rose from the padded bench and greeted him. "You must be Unit Leader Alexander. I've heard many good things about you; happy to meet you." She extended both front pods. "I'm Master Diandra."

"Alexander, at your service," he said, extending his front pods.

They chatted lightly for a few moments, during which Alexander sensed that Master Diandra would be kind, caring, and easy to work with. "Master Diandra, I know absolutely nothing about archeology, but I'll do my best on this assignment."

Commander Alonzo asked, "What have you to report?"

Alexander told them about the assignments he had made. Master Diandra asked, "Would it be possible for one of the water carriers be assigned to me? I may need help at times."

Alexander nodded. "Both those guards are very bright; they'll learn quickly." Then he added, "We'll train in dome construction tomorrow morning, using the whole day if we need it. I have some questions."

"Start at the top," Commander Alonzo said.

"Two of my guards, one male and one female, are promised to others. Both want to know if their promised ones would be able to visit."

Master Diandra said, "I don't see why not," but looked to Commander Alonzo, who took a few moments to explain the extra regulations fire ants followed during their obligatory service. He tapped a front pod on his work surface and then said, "Jot down their names, promised one's names and units. Their promised ones may travel with the carriers at the end of the first, second and third timeframes, visit for that afternoon and evening and return the following day, again with the carriers. Make sure they stay within the confines of the camp—no wandering off alone. You'll have male and female sleeping dorms, so that shouldn't be a problem, but remind them of the consequences of sneaking out. Alexander, sleep lightly and keep an eye on the males, and Master Diandra, please do the same with the females."

[Among other ant varieties, a male and female promised to each other could choose to mate at any time, although the vast majority waited until after a formal ceremony with family and friends. Fire ants, of course, had to wait until after their two-season-cycle obligation. Henry R.D. II]

The next several questions were routine and easily answered. Finally, Alexander said, "I've often wondered how you, Commander Alonzo, manage to be everywhere at once, and when you sleep."

"That's a subject I have not broached as your mentor. I do a 'split sleep' schedule. With supper, eat a half ration of dried, concentrated honeydew. Move through your tasks and check on everyone until one h-unit after midnight. Then drink sleeping tea—half a mug—and sleep until five h-units. A bit more concentrated honeydew and back to work until an h-unit after lunch, another half mug of sleeping tea and four more h-units of sleep. After seven days, you'll be accustomed to that schedule and won't need the honeydew or sleeping tea." He rose and went to a cupboard, from which he took a small device attached to a band of cloth. "This is a silent wake-up tool. Wind it here," he pointed, "tie it around a middle leg. In four h-units, it will begin to vibrate and wake you up without disturbing anyone else."

At the end of the session, Master Diandra said she would join Alexander and his unit to help them learn to erect the domed structures.

"Let's get these cartons onto the surface," the equipment ant said. "The long, narrow cartons contain thirty-f-unit grassfrond poles. It takes a lot of them to make three domes. Two of you on those cartons, one on the rest."

Alexander saw concern in his unit members' eyes: would they have to carry these all the way to the site? It was a relief to all when they reached the surface, and the equipment ant said, "Carriers will be transporting these to your site. For the bunking domes, two poles are tied together like this," he demonstrated. "Now, we pound these two-f-unit tubes into the ground."

They followed his directions and pounded eight tubes into a circle fourteen f-units in diameter.

"One end of the pole into this tube, and the other on the opposite side." When all were in place, they had the upright framework of the dome complete. "One of you must climb up and bind the poles at the top."

"I know how to do that," Master Diandra said, ascending the arch of one pole.

Alexander said. "I'll do the next one."

"Next come poles tied in concentric circles around the inside of the arched ones. We leave an opening here," he remarked, indicating where the entrance to the dome would be.

Once that was accomplished, he demonstrated how to tie rolls of woven reed mats around the outside, starting at the bottom. The next round overlapped the first, so rain would run down the outside. Ties on the inside to the concentric circles would anchor them in ordinary wind. A final roll was tied inside at the top of the opening so it could be rolled down and tied along the sides. "You'll want to leave the opening flaps up in good weather. The cartons the long poles were in come apart to become tables; the legs are here in this carton. You'll use the smaller cartons for storage units in the sleeping domes or the large dome. Stack them on top of each other any way you choose. Other cartons can be turned over to use as benches."

Once one sleeping dome was completed, the equipment ant showed them how to tie sleep sacks to the concentric poles inside, keeping them off the ground. "When you get your carton/shelves in place, be sure not to store your personal things, food, etc., directly on the ground—unless you want everything soggy after it rains."

Constructing the second sleeping dome took half the time the first one had, but the main dome in which they would cook, eat, and spend free time was twice as large and much trickier to put up because more than one pole was used in each arch. It was well past their usual lunch time before it was complete. Then, they heard, "Now you must reverse the process and get everything back into the cartons."

Master Diandra attempted to lighten the mood. "But once these are up at the site, we don't have to do anything to them for four timeframes. We'll break for lunch before disassembling."

Alexander set the example after they ate, climbed to the top of the largest dome, and began untying the knots that held the top roll of woven mats. With teamwork, everything was down and in the cartons by four h-units after noon.

"Half a day to set up at the beginning and less than that to pack up. You are one of the fastest groups I've taught," the equipment ant stated.

Master Diandra joined Alexander's unit for supper that evening and asked them to stay for a meeting. "I promise, I won't keep you long."

Alexander suppressed a sigh; no others could be heard, but he knew how they felt.

"You deserve to know WHY we are making this expedition. There are two reasons: one, we know there are ruins there, and where there are ruins, there are artifacts that help me and others learn more about the extinct Duo Pods; two, where there are ruins, there are usually plastic deposits. A geologist, Master Hannah, and her assistant, Arnold will be joining us tomorrow. They will be digging test holes for plastic deposits. If they find one of sufficient size, that may become a site for a new colony. If not enough to support a colony, it will be a temporary mining site for shipment out. We have some colonies where plastic mines are almost depleted; new sources are essential. We do not want to become dependent on trading with Roacheria. Get a good night's rest, and eat a big breakfast. We will meet on the surface at seven h-units."

Alexander was ready to drop onto his sleep cushion when a messenger entered whispering his name. "I'm UL Alexander." The messenger handed him a note from the kitchen that he should come and bring two others to collect their field kitchen and supplies.

"Tell them I'm on my way."

Two of his guards had not yet fallen asleep, so he asked them to help. Both let out long breaths but followed.

They each crawled beneath a large basket and began the trip to the surface. Upon reaching the colony entrance, Alexander asked the portal guard if they expected rain overnight.

"Not rain, but heavy dew. There's an alcove where you can leave the baskets and pick them up in the morning. Let me help you."

A crew of carriers was ready when Alexander and his unit arrived. Pairs of carriers crawled beneath the long containers, one on each end, lifted them, and began to move off. Master Diandra and her fellow scientists picked up smaller cartons, but when Alexander began to lift a basket, she said, "Alexander, I need you to move back and forth down the line checking on everyone. Let me know when we need to stop and rest. Our scout at the head of the line will not carry anything either."

Every fifteen moments, Alexander walked to the front, then to the back and to his place again, looking into everyone's eyes for unspoken signs of exhaustion. On the third pass, he called for a rest, during which he reminded them about normal and half-normal pacing, suggesting that they slow their pace. After doing that, they continued two full h-units before needing another rest. The slower but steady pace without constant rest stops kept them on track to arrive at their site by noon. All were glad to put down their burdens and pull lunch and water containers from their satchels.

The site was near a stream through a meadow with forest about 300 f-units from each side of the stream. Alexander could see piles of rubble jutting up from the meadow grass, and the remains of taller structures. Master Diandra plopped down beside him.

"The large dome should be about twenty f-units from the stream, right about there." She pointed. "Twenty f-units upstream from it will be our water gathering place. Fifty f-units downstream and at least fifty f-units away from the stream, dig the latrines. The section of stream between where we take out clean water, but upstream from the latrines will be for washing ourselves and cooling off on hot days."

Alexander nodded. "Where would you like the sleeping domes?"

"I was thinking the male sleeping dome would be twenty f-units from the large dome, and the female sleeping dome slightly downstream and a fair distance from the male dome."

"I want my night guards to get some sleep, so we will be fewer constructing the camp. Do your geologists know how to assemble domes?"

"Yes, they've been with me before."

Alexander led his night guards to a spot where the shade from some bushy wood plants would increase through the afternoon and handed them mugs of sleeping tea. He got a piece of dried concentrated honeydew from his satchel and munched it so he would have energy to last until an h-unit after midnight. Then he helped with the domes, which went up more quickly this time.

It took a few days to adjust to camp life, but everything smoothed out. Everyone respected the quiet zone around the sleeping domes. Night guards got used to sitting up in one of two tall wood plants or moving quietly in arcs 200 f-units from the camp on either side. Whenever someone grumbled about the lack of variety in meals, the head cook asked, "Would you like to trade jobs?"

Alexander took one of the day guards into the forest and taught her to hunt. Once she achieved the first success—one of the smallest beetle varieties—they had fresh meat about twice a quarter timeframe. Alexander remembered what his father had said about wild meat; it should be cooked slowly at a low temperature so it would be tender. Their cook got better at his job. Master Diandra staked off an area to excavate and taught her guard-assistant how to slosh water through the soil she put in a metal pot that had small holes in the bottom. Then she would check through the remaining pebbles for fragments of duo-pod-made objects. The geologists began the first test hole for plastic.

Their first batch of messages and supplies arrived. Alexander handed his two promised guards bound stacks. "I wonder who these could be from," and everyone laughed. Everyone had at least one message, but Alexander noticed that two of them, Allan and Felix, looked disappointed. Allan was closer, so Alexander asked if he was all right.

"Yes, I was just hoping she would write me."

"Someone you were seeing?"

Allan nodded. "The problem is, Felix was seeing her too. But it doesn't look like he got a letter either."

"I assume neither of you had the expectation of exclusivity?"

"No, but I care deeply about her, and I was hoping she might grow closer to me. I am sending her a long letter."

"Well, if you need someone to listen, I'm available." Alexander gave Allan a pat on the thorax and turned to read his own messages.

That evening, those with musical training got out their reed pipes and peapod shakers and played. Everyone danced and had a good time. Alexander relieved two of his night guards for an h-unit each. By that time, everyone was ready to turn in. He went to the other night guards and said, "Next time we have an evening like this, I'll relieve you in turn."

The end of their first timeframe came quickly. Everyone welcomed the Promised Ones and then pretended not to watch as they curled up with each other inside the large dome. Neither Allen nor Felix had received the letters they hoped for. Alexander overheard Allan ask Felix, "What did she say to you when we left?"

Felix replied, "That's personal! Unless you want to tell me what she said to you."

Allan walked toward the male sleeping dome.

Chapter 22

When the carriers arrived mid-timeframe, both Allan and Felix had their hoped-for letters. Alexander handed Allan's to him first, then two other guards their messages, then Felix's.

Before Felix could open his, Allan pounced on Felix yelling, "You stole her from me!" Alexander handed the rest of the messages to Master Diandra and signaled for help. It took three of them to pull the two wrestling males apart.

Alexander glared at Allan. "What is this about?"

Allan struggled with the two guards holding him. "He took her from me! And he knew how I felt about her!"

"Allan, don't make this worse for yourself. Calm down! Felix, are you hurt?"

"No." He brushed the dirt off himself and moved farther away.

Allan, now realizing he was in serious trouble, slumped to the ground. Others continued to stare.

Alexander stooped to look directly at Allan. "Look at me. Are you going to do anything even more foolish?"

"No." His eyes told Alexander that he meant it.

"Good! Now walk over and sit at the base of that wood plant. STAY there until I come to talk to you. And hand over that letter."

Allan did so and walked over to the wood plant. Alexander read the letter and shook his antennae in disgust. "Felix, open your letter, and when you've read it, hand it to me, please."

Felix did as he was told, his pods shaking in anger. "This isn't my fault!"

"Did this female give you any indication that she was serious about you?"

Felix shook his head. "Not really, but I was hoping, you know?"

"I know. Go rest under the other tall wood plant. I'll be there in a few moments." He asked Master Diandra to finish handing out the messages, asked the closest guard to bring mugs of water to the two angry males, and then paced around for a moment before heading over to Allan.

He handed Allan the letter to Felix and said, "Read it!"

"I already read it. She ended it with me. She chose Felix. I know I shouldn't have pounced on him. I'm in a lot of trouble, right?"

"Read it!" Alexander emphasized.

Allan read the letter. He stared at Alexander. "It's exactly like mine but with his name! She ended it with BOTH of us. What have I done?"

"You didn't think before you acted. I know it hurts. I was rejected several times before Essence called me."

"Must I face the Justice Council? Will I be condemned? I'm really sorry. It's all my fault."

"This offense isn't that drastic. In part, it depends on how Felix feels when I tell him what you just said. This female was extremely rude to both of you—couldn't even write two different letters. Both of you are better off forgetting her. Continue to stay here while I speak with Felix."

Alexander rose and took both letters over to Felix, telling him to read both and relating Allan's regret for his impulsive action.

"Unit Leader Alexander, please don't be too hard on Allan. As I was sitting here, I realized that if you had handed me my letter first, I might have done the same thing. Can't we just forget it? Or just give him a short Probationary Behavior Contract?"

"So that would be your choice? Along with Allan apologizing to you, and the two of you explaining the circumstances to the whole group?"

Felix nodded.

Alexander's problem was that he was not yet authorized to write a Probationary Behavior Contract. In addition, if he involved the Justice Council, he would have to go with Allan and Felix, and one other witness. Four guards out of twelve gone at the same time would put a huge load on all the others. He walked over to Master Diandra and explained.

She tapped a back pod on the ground. "I know nothing about these contracts, but four of you leaving at the same time is not a solution. Since I am in charge, why don't you tell them that if Allan's apology is sincere and he behaves himself the rest of the expedition, perhaps the Justice Council will be lenient. Hold that over his head. If it doesn't work out, I'll take the blame for making the decision."

Alexander motioned for Allan to join him with Felix, sat between them, and explained Master Diandra's immediate course of action. "This is a second chance for you, Allan, so don't mess it up!"

"I won't."

Allan apologized to the entire group at supper that evening, and Felix admitted his own feelings of anger, ready as he had been to lash out, too. Both had more sympathy from their fellow guards, male and female, than they expected.

In his next communication to Commander Alonzo, Alexander wrote the details of the incident with Allan and Felix and the decision Master Diandra had made. Commander Alonzo's reply, half a timeframe later, stated that the action taken was satisfactory, but to report to him upon return with both the guards. The rest of the expedition went smoothly and before they knew it, they were dismantling the domes to return to South Dairy 1. Alexander asked Allan and Felix to walk with him.

"I'm glad that you two have become friends, but we still must report to Commander Alonzo. Come with me while we check in all the dome and kitchen equipment and then we will head for our commander's work chamber."

"Do you think he'll send me to the Justice Council?" Allan asked.

"I can't say, but based on how you have behaved since, my report will be positive, and my recommendation will be for no further consequences."

"Thank you!" Allan replied.

Felix added, "I would like to tell Commander Alonzo to forget it, too, and that I may have done the same."

Alexander left them to check that all members of the party were carrying their burdens easily.

Six h-units later, the three of them entered Commander Alonzo's work chamber. "Relax," he said. "You look like you expect to be stung on the spot."

He listened to each of them, asked probing questions about their reasoning, and how they felt they had changed since. "I agree with Unit Leader Alexander. This does not need to go any further. Allan, consider that you have completed a contract, even though there is no piece of parchment to consume. Be aware that if you have any other problems, you will go straight to the Justice Council."

"Yes, Commander, and thank you!"

"Felix, my advice to you is similar—continue to think before reacting. Preventing a problem is much easier than fixing one. Return to your regular routine. UL Alexander, please stay for a few moments."

As soon as the two guards left, Commander Alonzo drew Alexander's Mentorship Contract out of a file, dipped his front pod in an ink pot and wrote "Most Favorably Completed" on it with the date and his signature. "Most of my mentees keep this with their important documents," he said, handing it to Alexander.

Alexander accepted it with his head and antennae lowered. "It will be strange not to meet with you every Seventhday."

Commander Alonzo extended both front pods. "Congratulations. You've done far better than most. But I'm still your commander, and you can stop by any time you want to discuss something. I also consider you qualified to write and hold a Probationary Behavior Contract in the future. I'll be adding your name to the Justice Council's list of qualified guards. I have some other things for you, too."

Commander Alonzo's two-podded greeting turned into a warm embrace, almost fatherly. Alexander returned his affection.

Alonzo went to a cupboard and removed a rectangular satchel made of stiffened fabric that had several pockets inside it. "You'll receive new Incident Reports from time to time. Read them and think about each whenever you can. They go in this first pocket." He pointed. "This second pocket has a guide to designing effective Probationary Behavior Contracts and several samples. You'll notice that beyond a few standard features, each sample is tailored to the specific circumstances. It will make more sense once you read the guidebook. At some point, and don't worry about doing it soon, come see me and I'll answer any questions you have."

Alexander nodded.

"The other pockets in your Leadership Satchel can be used in any way you like to keep official communications organized, store important documents, whatever. I know you are about to say you still don't feel ready—but I know you are. Never stop learning. Get to know your fellow unit leaders and captains better. Ask about their experiences and share yours. You'll find that you'll learn more from them than you ever did from me. We have leadership meetings about once a timeframe—you'll always receive a message since I can never manage to have them on the same day or time. Now, go have something to eat and get some rest."

"Thank you for all you've taught me," Alexander said, tucking his completed contract in the last pocket as he left.

A timeframe later, Alexander sat in the Leisure Center before his unit would head out on patrol. Across the chamber, he saw Allan and Felix sitting together with two females, smiling, and laughing. Then the females led them into the dancing. A female approached and asked to talk.

"Unit Leader Alexander, why did my letters become so public that no one wants anything to do with me? Those were personal!"

Alexander let the silence settle with a sip of his ale before saying, "You can discuss my actions with Commander Alonzo if you like, but he will say that your letters stopped being 'personal' the moment Allan reacted foolishly and attacked his fellow guard. I took the letters to find out what was going on. I kept them as evidence in case the matter went to the Justice Council. No one else read them, but three scientists and six guards witnessed the incident. The ruckus woke my sleeping night guards. Allan and Felix were required to explain themselves to the group. It was their , and right, to tell others about the contents of your letters. If you had been the least bit original and compassionate in the way you ended things with them, none of this would have happened."

Her voice shook. "But what do I do now? The one I left them for ended it with me. No males will even speak to me. But what do you know anyway with your Vow and all?"

"Look at me," Alexander said gently. "Have you forgotten that anyone who feels called by Essence to make a Vow must have spent significant time with no less than eight members of the opposite sex? I know rejection, embarrassment, and pain. At some of the hardest times, I stayed away from Leisure Centers for a while. I talked with my emotional counselor. You can request one here; there's no shame in it. Others will forget in time. But, please, stay away from Felix and Allan. Prevent the awkwardness that will cause. They've already forgiven you; let it go. Forgive yourself and keep putting one pod in front of the other."

He drained his mug, rubbed the back of her thorax in sympathy and left the table.

In the next season cycle near the end of Third Timeframe, Alexander received a message from his commander. After a cheery greeting, he told Commander Alonzo how well his new guards were doing on patrol and how they had bonded with those who still had another season cycle of service.

Commander Alonzo handed Alexander a letter he had received from the top commander in Central Harvester 12. Master Diandra wanted his services again at the same location as the previous season cycle.

"Six timeframes?" Alexander said after reading it.

"Yes, from 1 Fourth Timeframe to 1 Tenth Timeframe. Ought to be easier this time. The Intercolonial Council feels another expedition is warranted, more for possible plastic than ruins, but we don't get one without the other."

"Do I take the entire double unit?"

"No, I can't spare more than twelve. Those who don't go with you will be absorbed into other units. Sorry, but you can take those you had last season cycle and fill in with new guards. At least she understands not to request you before the end of Third Timeframe."

"Here we go again," Alexander said to his unit when they met together in the dining chamber after dinner. Once he had explained, most of the guards who had been with him the previous time were glad to go again. Two females and a male were now promised in mating and were reassured of visits like those during the previous expedition.

Allan raised a pod. "Alana and I have not made a promise, but we are pretty serious and are exclusive. Could she visit, too?"

Felix echoed the request for the female he was seeing.

"You are going to keep Master Diandra and me busy chaperoning, aren't you?"

Everyone laughed. Guards not attached to anyone said they would chaperone.

Dome setup went smoothly, as well as the first timeframe of the project. Alexander noticed a strong bond beginning to form between two other guards, Frick and Frey. What had begun as friendship during the last expedition had blossomed. He could see in their eyes on music nights that they cherished each other. During the first visit with Promised Ones, they snuggled as closely as those who were promised.

He approached them as they set out for a walk after dinner. "Good evening, Frick, Frey."

They acknowledged his greeting with a what-do-you-want look.

"I'm not trying to intrude, but the two of you seem to have grown quite close lately. You would tell me if one of you needs to return to South Dairy 1 visiting as Promised couples do, right?"

Frick laughed half-heartedly while Frey's middle pod ticked on the ground. Frick responded. "Yes, we are serious, but we have not made a promise. We know the rules."

"Good. Have a nice evening." Alexander walked away, deciding he would keep a closer eye on them.

Halfway through Seventh Timeframe, a scout, not from South Dairy 1, arrived. "I'm looking for Alexander," he gasped between breaths.

Alexnader greeted him.

"I'm sorry, but I've been sent to fetch you and guide you cross-surface as quickly as possible. Your mother is close to leaving this world."

Alexander slumped to the ground. He knew his mother had been fighting degenerating breathing organs for two season cycles. His father had written and was caring for her at home, released from other duties. But he was not expecting this news.

Master Diandra left the report she was writing and sat beside him. "Go, gather your things. Everyone knows what to do; we'll be fine."

He leaned toward her, not inappropriate under the circumstances, and whispered, "Keep a close eye on Frick and Frey."

Lunch had not yet been served; the camp cook quickly prepared snacks and filled water containers. Alexander tossed his meditation book and a few other things into his satchel. The scout explained, "I used our best map and a direction guide to take a straight line off the surface trail between South Dairy 20 and South Dairy 1 to reach your camp. Along the way here, I left scent markers and enough blue ribbons to see my own way back, but I will add more ribbons as we go. You'll probably be alone when you return, and you'll need more markings that I do to find your way."

"Thank you. I never did trail scouting during job exploration—well except for tracking the scent of roaches. I admire all scouts."

"Three season cycles of mentorship—I'd better be able to blaze a trail!"

The two proceeded for several d-units, crossed two streams, and went through a section of dense forest. The scout would attach another blue ribbon to a wood plant or bush between those he had already done, so the way was marked every 100 f-units. Emerging from forest to meadow, the scout said, "Keep your antennae up. I sensed a mantis in this section. I climbed that tall wood plant," he pointed, "but never actually saw it."

If the mantis had been near, it was gone now. The two proceeded without problems. They stopped after an h-unit near a stream and ate dried grasshopper meat, summer berries, and chunks of fresh grassfrond seed bread. A few swigs of water and they were off again.

Three h-units later, they reached the trail between the two dairying colonies. The scout wrapped two more blue ribbons around the tall bush at the place. "There. Even if one blows off, the other two, as tight as I just tied them, should show you where to turn off the trail. Can you see the next ribbon back the way we came?"

Alexander looked. "Yes."

"Good, when you return to your camp, just keep moving from one marker to the next."

They walked the last few d-units to the main entrance of South Dairy 20. It had been four season cycles, but Alexander recognized a low hill to the northeast of the trail—the hill Deena had gone over picking blossoms. He stopped.

"Are you all right? I'm sorry for the news I had to bring you."

Alexander shook himself back into the present. "Yes, I'm fine, just an old memory."

"I'll need to leave you at the main entrance and report back to my coordinator."

"Thank you again."

Alexander signed in, hurried down a few levels, and through the tunnels to his home. The portal seemed much heavier when he pushed it open. His brother and sister pulled him close and told him to go into his parents' sleep chamber. His father embraced him. "We've all had our time together; it's your turn now." He stroked Alexander's thorax. Alexander sat next to the sleeping cushion his parents had shared all their mated life.

Alexander reached out and lifted his mother, pulling her close to his thorax—the way she had pulled him to her when he first emerged as an adult. He stroked her head. "I'm here, Mom."

She looked into his eyes; he sensed her thoughts. "You gave me so much," Alexander said. "I can never thank you enough. I always cherished you, even when I was angry with you." Her eyes sparkled; she knew what he meant.

"Be fine," she rasped. "Proud," her last words.

He held her and stroked her head. Then she was still; her essence had left the physical world. He laid her down and called his father, sister, and brother. Frodi's tears flowed as he took her body to his thorax. Then, they all embraced each other.

"I'll bring the basin of warm water for you, Dad, and then deliver the announcement we wrote," Ferella said. "Frodie J., you and Alexander start warming up supper—I brought some containers from home this morning."

Alexander and his brother left their father in silence; neither of them could speak. Alexander's thoughts overwhelmed him; he had never had enough time with his mother, and there was so much he would never know.

Frodi joined them after washing his mate's body. "We won't have the covering until the day after tomorrow—enough time for those here in the colony to see the announcement and come if they wish to. I ... I don't think I can sleep in there tonight."

Alexander reached out to his father again and said, "Bunk in with me. Is the extra cushion still in the compartment in my old chamber?"

His father nodded.

Ferella returned and they ate. During the evening, Frodi got out the book of images and they sat together on the largest floor cushion, looking at the images and reminiscing through tears. Alexander was again reminded how much he had missed in his own grief, in his season cycles at the Guard Academy, and in his service. He could not think of even one thing to say. Then there was the image of him, his parents, and Ferella the day he made his Vow.

"I've always been sorry I had to miss that," his brother said. "Please tell me about it?"

Relating it: how nervous he had been, how his mother had smiled at him from the crowd, how he had focused on her face, and how pleased he had been as she sewed the insignia around his thorax, and especially how wonderful it was to see what she had put inside the pocket. He drew it out, unsure if his brother had ever seen the image of him and Deena. He also showed them another image he had

received recently of Fred and Ferina and their two larvae—a second had hatched barely a season cycle after the first. They honored me by naming their daughter,” he pointed, “Deena and son, Alexander. I couldn’t believe how quickly they were able to have someone embroider this.”

They went on to other images in the book. The evening passed quickly. The following day, neighbors on either side came to help prepare food for the after-covering meal. Alexander had met both couples on his last visit. It kept all of them busy and helped pass the time.

The following morning, promptly at nine h-units, Frodi drew his mate’s body into his front legs and began the procession to the Heart of the Colony. Alexander, Ferella and Frodi J., their mates, carrying larvae, and Ferella’s young adult daughter followed. Neighbors joined, along with other relatives and friends along the way. Alexander was amazed at the number of ants behind them by the time they reached the oval bowl in the ground Alexander and his brother had prepared the previous afternoon.

Frodi laid his mate gently in the space, rose, and said, “We said everything we had to say, and you know everything in my heart. There is no need for more.” He stepped back, indicating that others gathered around could now speak in turn: first family members and then friends.

At Alexander’s turn, he kept it simple. “When I was at my lowest, you were there for me, even when I didn’t appreciate it. I will keep living for you, too.” That was when he noticed Donavon had joined the back of the group, but when it was his turn to speak, he shook his head. It took over an h-unit for everyone to express their gratitude for Farrah and whatever part she had played in their lives. Again, Alexander realized how much he had never known.

He took comfort in what the colony’s Spiritual Advisor said. “As we grieve because Farrah is no longer with us, we must remember that in Essence, she is closer than ever. Now she can touch all of us through our meditations and dreams. We can no longer touch her, but we will carry on, and in remembering her, ease our grief.”

Frodi, Ferella, Frodi J, and Alexander then pushed the soil over their Farrah.

Each ant present embraced each family member, expressed their sympathy, and then moved quietly on. The family’s neighbors slipped away so they could greet those who came to Frodi’s domicile to share a meal. The family would follow, after the last ant left the covering place.

Donavon waited until all the other ants had left before approaching Frodi, who reached out to a dear friend he had missed so long. “I’m so sorry,” Donavon said. “I let my pride get in the way for too long. Another regret to add to my burden. Can you ever forgive the way I treated you and Farrah?”

Frodi answered by embracing him again. “Please, come and eat with us.”

Through tears, Donavon said, “I will, but first I must have a moment with Alexander.”

Donavon reached out his pods to Alexander, who drew him into a long-wished-for embrace. The two of them withdrew to a nearby bench.

“We’ll be along; go on home,” Alexander said to his farther.

"I ... I committed such cruelty toward you. Such a burden I dumped on your thorax. ... And I didn't have the decency to reply to your letter ... I was so filled with anger and grief ... and then that pride of mine ... Please, forgive me."

The two of them held each other and wept the tears they should have shared long before, their grief for Deena. Once the tears were done, Alexander shared with Donavon parts of his journey through grief and the visions Essence had granted him. Donavon told how his sister had finally pressured him into counseling. Alexander showed Donavon the image of him and Deena and the one of his friends and their larvae.

Donavon looked in awe at the images. "I'm sorry to say that in my anger, I tore you out of my copy of that image. Does your father still have the original? Maybe I can have another copy made from it."

"Ask him when we eat together."

"Your friends truly named their first larva Deena?"

"Yes."

"What an honor! I wonder, though, about a fire ant growing up with a dairying name."

"Maybe it's time to stop selecting names by our variety. After all, we all use the letter 'A' for any ant's name."

[There was an antstorial tradition that dairying ants had names beginning with D, harvester ants with H, fire ants with F, etc., but all varieties had names beginning with A. Henry R.-D. II]

A middle leg around each other's thoraxes, they rose to go to Alexander's home, together for the first time in eleven season cycles.

Chapter 23

Alexander left at dawn the following morning after emotional goodbyes to his family. He found the wood plant with the ribbons. One of them had blown off. He could see the next one and the next and headed across the meadow, keeping his antennae moving constantly for any hint of a mantis or other predator. There was one anxious point when he couldn't see the next ribbon, but a faint scent remained. He decided to keep one antenna up and the other near the ground until he saw another

ribbon. After resting by the stream where he and the scout had stopped before, he arrived at camp an h-unit before noon.

The day guards working around the camp greeted him fondly, and after he said they had covered his mother the day before, expressed their sympathy. He headed to Master Diandra's diggings; she stopped her work to greet and embrace him.

"Are you up for a discussion?" she asked, looking into his eyes.

"Let's walk," he replied.

They ambled from her dig to a point on the stream above their water-drawing place and sat down. "How did things go?" Alexander asked.

"Oh, we were all fine. I see why you wanted me to keep an eye on Frick and Fray. I felt a bit guilty about tuning in to their conversation, but I did overhear something of note. Frick said that he thought you might suspect something and that they should keep a bit more distance from each other for a while. Do you suspect that they have made a promise without telling you?"

"No, I think they are avoiding making a promise so they can honestly say they have not, but I sense the bond between them."

"I see it, too, and I see a mix of emotions in your eyes. Would you like to share?"

Alexander nodded and described the preciousness of holding his mother at the last, and the peace of reconciling with Donavon—which involved relating what had happened eleven season cycles previously.

"It's a horrid thing—losing a Cherished One, promised or mated. I know. No wonder you have wisdom beyond your season cycles. It seems we have both mated our jobs." She went on to relate how her Promised One had died two timeframes before their planned ceremony, buried in rubble after a planet quake along the western sea when they were both in archeology mentorships. "But I don't need to talk about me, except to say that I understand what you felt. I'm glad you have peace in the matter. It's lunchtime. Shall we return to the dome?"

"Yes, thanks for listening."

Alexander and Master Diandra talked about their lives often through the rest of the project, which went smoothly, even though no major plastic deposits had been found and the artifacts were not noteworthy. On one occasion, Master Diandra expressed frustration. "How I wish I could find something, or someone, to decode Duo Pod writings! Whenever I'm not digging, I study and study images we've made of their writing—no clues, anywhere. And I'm not the only archeologist searching."

Alexander twitched his antennae. "I'll lift that up to Essence for you."

Alexander continued to watch Frick and Frey, who were acting more like ants getting to know each other than two who were promised, but Alexander could see the truth in their eyes. It was interesting that others did, too. Guards learning to shadow practiced their techniques on the pair, even though Alexander never asked them to do so. They did the same for other promised pairs during the

visits at the end of each timeframe. The end of Ninth Timeframe arrived; domes were dismantled, everything packed up, and they headed back to South Dairy 1.

At the beginning of Eleventh Timeframe, Alexander noticed Frick and Frey frequently snuck off to the surface together. He brought up the subject with them in private.

"Remember how I asked you to stay within the camp while we were on the expedition?" he asked.

"Yes," they said together.

"I'd like to ask you not to go to the surface unless you have a chaperone."

"We keep telling you we have not made a promise," Frick said.

Alexander left it at that, but had the pair added to the "shadow list" if the entrance guard noted them leaving together.

Night patrols put a stop to a few attempts by roaches to steal grasshoppers during Twelfth and Thirteenth Timeframes, but that was routine. On the night of 26 Thirteenth Timeframe, four nights before the end of the season cycle, everyone who was about to be released from service was hoping for "boring."

Not that season cycle.

The roach attack came an h-unit before midnight, much earlier than they usually appeared, and roach warriors numbered several times the amount in a typical grasshopper raid. Units all up and down Border River pulled together to support those in the thick of the attack. Alexander whistled to his unit to move at top speed slightly north. It was the worst roach incursion in nearly three season cycles.

It wasn't until they were beginning to toss roach bodies across the river that Alexander realized he had not seen Frick or Frey. Field medical personnel were tending to several fallen guards. Had the two been injured, or worse yet, killed? He excused himself from tossing roaches to check among the wounded. No Frick or Frey.

He asked another unit member, "Have you seen Frick and Frey?"

"I haven't seen Frey, but I saw Frick running back to our original position maybe ten moments ago, yelling that he thought he saw some stragglers trying to escape in that direction."

"Thanks."

Alexander found no one, ant or roach, near their original patrol position. An inner feeling pushed him farther south. Still nothing. Then he saw movement near a fallen wood plant. He called out, "Frick, Frey, are you there?"

It was silent half a moment before Frick answered, "Yes, here."

Alexander came up to Frick as he stood before an opening in the upturned roots. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, fine UL. You can go on back. I'll be there in a moment."

"Where's Frey? No one has seen her."

"She's ... fine ... just went to ... you know ..." he gestured into the meadow as if to indicate that Frey had gone to relieve herself.

There was something in Frick's voice beyond the hesitation in his words. Alexander heard a rustling noise within the tangle of roots. "Frey?" he called out.

Silence. Then the rustling noise again. He turned back to the wood plant. "Is Frey in there?"

Frick looked at the ground.

"Stand aside, please," Alexander said.

Frick sighed as he moved.

Alexander drew a tiny portable lantern from his field satchel and activated it. The brightness revealed Frey, at the very back, shaking in fear. "Are you injured?"

"No, I just had to ..." her voice shook, "relieve myself."

"Why didn't you answer when I called?"

"It's embarrassing, you know? If you'd just leave, I'll be right out."

Alexander backed off, lantern still hanging on his front leg, and let her out. She stood awkwardly beside Frick but didn't look at him. Something wasn't right. Alexander put his head and the lantern back in the hole in the roots. There was a scent, but not that of body waste. He went farther in and saw a dry leaves and grass covering something, brushed the top layer off to see ...

AN EGG!

Fury grew in Alexander. Deep breaths would not stop it. He came out, yelling.

"All this time you've deceived me! All the times I asked you if you had made a promise! You just skipped over that and want straight into mating?" He grabbed a hunk of grass in his front pods and yanked it out of the ground, threw it away and yelled again. "ARRRRGGGGG! You deceived me! You endangered yourselves! You endangered the unit with your absence! Worst of all, you endangered the precious life in that egg!"

Frick stared at the ground. Frey burst into tears. Two other unit members ran up, wondering what was happening.

Alexander grabbed another bunch of grass, pulled, and threw it, stomped the ground in rage, yelled several more times. All he had lost with Deena, all he had longed for those first timeframes of adulthood, all he had tried to do to take responsibility for what he and Deena had done in ignorance, and these two had thrown away all caution in their reckless act!

His voice revealed his rage. "Frey, get that precious egg and come with me! Frick, follow behind. We are going straight to Commander Alonzo's work chamber. If he's not there because of the battle, we will wait for him!"

He turned to the other unit members, "Please return to the others and help finish the cleanup. Tell the closest captain that Frick and Frey have broken one of the most important requirements of fire ant code and have an egg to show for it. Relate that I'm taking them in."

The two guards stared at Frick and Frey, then said in chorus, "Yes, UL," and ran back to the battlefield. Frey entered the hole, came out with her egg cradled in her front pods.

Alexander didn't yell this time, but his voice was not soft. "Let's go." Not a word was spoken, but Alexander ripped at the grass all the way back to the colony.

As expected, Commander Alonzo was not there. Frick and Frey's middle pods ticked on the floor. They deserved to be nervous. "Sit down," Alexander said. Let them stew for a while. But he went over to the hot plate at the back of the commander's work chamber and heated water for tea. Then he opened a compartment and found a soft pillow, placed it on the floor in front of Frey and said, "You can place your egg on this for now." When the tea was ready, he handed them each a mug, placed a third mug on the commander's writing surface, and finally filled a mug for himself to ease the furry still raging inside him.

Frey's pods shook, almost spilling her tea. Frick held his in both pods.

Commander Alonzo appeared in the portal. Alexander watched his eyes move about the chamber, first glaring at the two terrified guards, caught in the act of hiding their serious infraction of fire ant code, at the tea Alexander had put out for him, and then into Alexander's eyes.

Alonzo strode to his stool and sat down. "Thank you for the tea," he said to Alexander. Silence settled again as he took a couple of glugs. He tapped one front pod deliberately on the surface, took a couple more glugs of tea and finally spoke, his voice firm. "You two are an **embarrassment** to this colony. Your actions are an **insult** to thousands of fire ant couples all across the colonies, and through antstory, who **waited** until released from their obligatory service to mate. You endangered yourselves, your unit, and this is the worst part, you endangered the life in that precious egg. And **I know how hard** Unit Leader Alexander tried to help you avoid this. I've been commander of this colony for fifteen season cycles, and this has never occurred on my watch. I don't think it ever happened under the previous commander either. It's a rarity in all the colonies. It will be hard for the Justice Council to find a similar case to know what to do with the two of you!"

Frey struggled not to weep again. Frick looked as if he wanted to hold and comfort her but was afraid to move. Alexander had to keep his own middle pods from ticking; he had never seen his mentor so agitated. But another part of him observed and remembered the stern but controlled way Commander Alonzo was handling the situation and filed that in his mind for future reference.

Commander Alonzo gulped down the rest of his tea, let out a long sigh, and began his questions: first to Alexander for his account of finding them, then to Frick and last to Frey, whose halting answers took the longest.

"Frick has told you ... that this was his idea ... but it was mine. I was the one ... who said we should hold off ... on making a promise ... so we could ... honestly say we hadn't. I ... was the one who didn't want us to be in different units ... He insisted on us backing off ... on the expedition ... I wanted to sneak off then ... He reminded me ... that we would need to be less than two timeframes away from release from our obligation." She stopped, unable to go on.

Alexander took the cue and poured more tea in her mug.

"Please, may I comfort her," Frick begged.

Commander Alonzo nodded. Five moments later, Frey continued.

"Frick did come up with the strategy of going to the surface from different entrances, so it ... looked like we weren't together, but I was the one who found our wood plant hiding place and chose a meditation chamber on the opposite side of the colony from guard quarters. We made our vows there and recorded it—Meditation Chamber #15. I'm sorry ... I'm so sorry ... I messed everything up. He insisted on waiting until 3 Twelfth Timeframe, so the egg would come three days after we were released."

Commander Alonzo's pod ticked his writing surface slowly. "It seems you forgot your basic biology—that the first egg can come as much as ten days either way of fifty-six. That's a lot of planning to do something you both knew you shouldn't. Can I trust you not to do anything even more foolish now? Like trying to escape? Do I need to have you confined until the Justice Council meets?"

Frick spoke up quickly. "I promise, I will not try to leave the colony. I vow I will stay wherever you tell me to."

"I won't try to leave either," Frey said—no hesitation this time. "But will I be able to keep my—our—egg?"

Commander Alonzo's voice softened slightly. "There is no record anywhere that I know of a Justice Council removing a young one from a living parent, but I don't want the ruckus an egg in the female dorm will cause. You'll have your egg back after the Justice Council makes its ruling. But I will take charge of it for now—probably take it to the closest nursery. The two of you are confined to your dormitories—not even an antenna outside the portal for a sneak whiff of each other. Your meals will be brought to you. Do you want separate legal counselors, or one for both?"

Frick took Frey's front pod in his. "We got into this together, so one for both of us. We will face whatever happens."

Frey's antennae twitched.

"All right then. Go straight to your dorms. Alexander, please stay for a few moments."

The two left, both weeping. Commander Alonzo called to his aid, instructing her to take the egg to Nursery #4, which was close to the guard complex and open day and night. He jotted a quick note for the director there and handed it to the aid.

"I heard how you tore up meadow grass, and your voice carried almost a quarter d-unit. Shall we both pound off our anger running up and down the mound?"

"Yes."

It was late afternoon Sixthday when Alexander woke up to find a message on his writing surface. He went to the guard dining room to eat and then headed for the work chamber of the Justice Council member listed on the message. The portal was open, so he entered.

"I have a message to see you," he said to the female fire ant sitting behind a work surface.

"Unit Leader Alexander?"

"Yes."

"Please, sit down. I'm Justice Ann. Have you had anything to eat?"

"Yes, I grabbed a snack before coming."

"I've read your statement regarding Frick and Frey. The entire Justice Council is still trying to decide what to do with them. While the others are researching records from all the colonies for a similar case, I've been asked to talk to you about one option: a Probationary Behavior Contract for each of them. I noted your name on our list of those qualified. If we decide to go that route, would you be able to set aside your anger to supervise a contract for one or both?"

Alexander thought for a moment. He had worked off his anger running up the mound with his commander, and they had talked on the way back. "Yes," he said. "I set aside my anger last night. I feel I have something I could teach them because of my own past."

"Thank you. We won't announce our decision until Secondday of the new season cycle, so please consider this conversation confidential. All of us want to wait, meditate, and enjoy Seventhday and Last Day with our families. We will confer again on Firstday and explore all our options. Frick and Frey will not be at that meeting, but their legal counselor will be sitting in, as well as Commander Alonzo. Would you be able to join us? It will be at 3 h-units in the afternoon in the Justice Council conference chamber, just across the tunnel from here." She pointed out the portal.

"I'll have someone wake me by two h-units."

She rose, extended her front pods, and thanked him.

Alexander's unit was still on night patrol, so Sixthday night they were back out along the border, spread thinner without two members. Everyone looked at Alexander hoping for some information but all he said was, "I'm not at liberty to say."

They attended the earliest meditation service Seventhday morning before going to sleep. The following day was Last Day—one of the most important celebrations of the season cycle—but they were not off until Secondary, so again, they attended the earliest special meditation service to rededicate themselves to ant beliefs. Alexander told Frick to come along since he knew Commander Alonzo planned to take Frey with him to a later one. True to his word, Frick didn't even glance toward the portal of her dorm when they passed it.

On the way back, Frick asked to speak with him. "Um ... have you heard anything yet ... about what will happen to Frey and me?"

"Even if I knew, I wouldn't be able to tell you. What did your legal counselor say?"

"That we should be humble, accept responsibility and say thank you for whatever we get. She advised us what to say in our statements. She also said Probationary Contracts were an option. I guess the one case they found, the pair had to stay in service, separated from each other, for twice the amount of time from when they mated to when they would have been released. That would be four timeframes for us—two from our mating date and two more to double it. But if the Justice Council looks at it from the first time you asked us if we made a promise, well, that would be ten timeframes ago. A season cycle and seven more timeframes ... I hope they are merciful."

"Well, that's more than I know," was all Alexander said.

"Um ..." Frick hesitated again. "During the service, I realized I have a lot of atoning to do. Starting with you. Can you possibly forgive me?"

Alexander stopped and looked directly into Frick's eyes. Seeing sincerity there, he said, "Yes, but I'll probably still feel some anger for a while. That's a conversation for another day."

Alexander made it to the Justice Council conference meeting just in time. As he sat listening to the other reports, he remembered the transcript of the meeting long ago during which he had been declared innocent. Guilt or innocence was not an issue today.

The Chief Justice Council member thanked them all for coming and said, "The main issue before us is the length of separation and Probationary Behavior Contracts. The case we found—nearly a hundred season cycles ago—extended the time of mandatory service by double the amount of time they had left when they mated, which ended up being ten timeframes for that pair. They were not permitted to see each other at all, only letters were allowed, but when their egg hatched, it was deemed important for the father of the young one to be involved in his son's care. We, too, feel that it is important. Our problem here is whether to go with two timeframes—doubled to four—or go back as far as the first occurrence of deceit to UL Alexander—which would be ten timeframes, doubled to twenty. The first

seems too short and the second too punitive. Alexander, in the few days since, have you noted any change in attitude that we should consider?"

Alexander reported the conversation with Frick following Last Day Meditation and then said, "I try to avoid entering the female dormitory, so I haven't talked to Frey. I do want to emphasize that both, other than this, have been exemplary guards. After the warning ten timeframes ago, they did comply with everything I asked of them, so I agree that going back to that date is too punitive. What about counting it from the beginning of Eleventh Timeframe when I learned they were sneaking off to the surface together and I placed them on the Shadow List?"

Commander Alonzo raised a pod to speak. "I took Frey with me to Last Day Service. She, too, was repentant, also fearful of the worst, as she should be, but when she asked for my forgiveness, I could see sincerity in her eyes. I agree with Alexander on the date—doubling to six timeframes will be sufficient to make the point."

"Thank you both. It's an acceptable compromise, and the Shadow Listing is firm evidence of a specific date, just as their inscription of their mating vow in the meditation chamber is well documented. One other point: we are considering having Frick return to active patrol, but having Frey serve her extra timeframes in Nursery #4 where her egg currently is. Guards aren't the only ones who work at night, and the director there needs a night duty ant. That way she would be with her egg and present when it hatches. The director is amenable to sharing the responsibility of supervising Frey's contract. Alexander, if that becomes the case, would you be willing to hold Frey's contract as well as Frick's, and to supervise his visits to the young one when it hatches? I know that is asking a lot of you."

"Yes, I accept it. I'm used to not having free time."

Commander Alonzo grinned at him and said, "You've got that right, Alexander."

"Thank you. We will see you all tomorrow in the Justice Council Chamber for the formal announcement at five and a half h-units past noon so Alexander can get a good day's sleep and, you, Commander, can have your rest period, too."

Alexander drew close to his commander as they entered the tunnel. "I know I have all the forms and examples, but this is a very important pair of contracts and I've never written one before. Will you please help me?"

Commander Alonzo nodded. "Let's go to my work chamber right now, before dinner and another night on patrol."

Firstday night, Alexander's unit and all others were spread even more thinly because many guards had completed their service and left for home that morning. New guards coming into service would be in their initial offensive training for two timeframes. Alexander, the other ULs, and captains were grateful to Essence that roaches had not figured out this pattern. Everyone welcomed a boring night and the following day off.

The Justice Council Chamber was crowded the following day. The three justices sat at the front; Alexander and his commander rested their abdomens on a bench to one side with most members of Alexander's unit behind them. Frick and Frey and their legal counselor stood before the justices. They seemed to be trying to keep calm by linking middle pods. The rest of the benches were filled with other guards and colony members who were curious to see the two ants who were in such trouble, and one ant whose job it was to relay the results of the proceedings for the colony bulletin.

The Head Justice addressed them. "Since there is no question of guilt or innocence, this meeting is to announce our decision concerning consequences. Which of you would like to make your final statement first?"

Frick raised a pod, and their counselor handed him the parchment he had prepared. "I only want to say that while our actions started out with good intentions, wishing to show that we could handle our emotions and did not need to be separated during a time of Promise, we managed instead to demonstrate why those rules are necessary. I can't go back and change our actions, so I ask for your mercy. I know I face being separated from Frey for some amount of time, but I hope that I may eventually be with my mate and young one. I am truly sorry for my actions, especially after hearing from my fellow guards in the male dorm that after we left the hollowed-out tree that night, a mantis known for hunting in the wilds south of the colony tore up our hide-away because it was attracted to the lingering scent of our egg. Our plan had been to leave our egg hidden there and retrieve it after being released from service. If we hadn't gotten caught, our egg would have been eaten. Unit Leader Alexander was right when he said that worst of all, we had endangered our young one."

Frey sounded more desperate. "I'm so sorry, so very sorry. It was all my idea, my fault. I know you will separate me from Frick, but, please, don't take my egg away from me."

Frick and Frey fidgeted. The three justices nodded to each other.

"We have decided that you will have your obligatory service extended by six timeframes—twice the amount of time since Unit Leader Alexander cautioned you, yet again, and placed you on the Shadow List should you leave the colony together. You will both be under Probationary Behavior Contracts. From this day until the last day of Sixth Timeframe, you will not be permitted to see or speak directly to each other. Unit Leader Alexander will hold both contracts, but the #4 Nursery Supervisor will coordinate with yours, Frey. You will serve as night caretaker in the nursery and will care for your own young one as well when it hatches. Frick, you will return to your unit, but with several restrictions. Unit Leader Alexander will go over those with you shortly. Frick, you will need to bond with your young one. You will have supervised visits—and Frey must not be with you at those times."

The two let out audible sighs of relief.

"Wait, there's more. Normally, Probationary Contracts are private affairs, but not this time. Each of you will write a letter to be published in the *Fire Ant News* throughout all the colonies—and you will sign your names. You might start with some of what Frick said in his statement. This will serve to set an example for other couples. This is the first time in many season cycles, anywhere in the colonies, of a couple violating the Fire Ant Mating Code. We don't want it happening again with someone who can count the days on a calendar more accurately! Do you accept this?"

"Yes, I accept it. Thank you," Frick said, his head and antennae lowered.

Frey managed to look up long enough to meet the eyes of the justices. "I accept it. Thank you for letting me be with my young one."

"Unit Leader Alexander, you may use the small chamber behind you to go over Frick and Frey's contracts and answer any questions about the restrictions they will have. Once they sign, they may have fifteen moments together before commander Alonzo escorts Frick to the male guard dormitory, and you escort Frey to Nursery #4. This session of the Fire Ant Justice Council has ended."

The justices rose and left through a portal behind them. Those in attendance filed out quietly, but discussion about the decision began as they went down the tunnel. Alexander motioned Frick and Frey to join him in the conference chamber.

He closed the portal, pointed to the stools at the table, and said, "Before I have you read your contracts, I need to explain why I was so furious that night." He removed the embroidered image of him and Deena from the pocket in his insignia and told them about his first few years of adulthood. Their eyes and mandibles opened wide at the revelation. He finished with, "All I could think of when I saw that egg was my own loss. Deena and I didn't know what we were doing, and you two planned it, throwing all caution away. I nearly vomited. But I'm sorry I yelled in anger over something you didn't know. When Master Adriana released me from my healing contract, I told her I didn't know how to thank her. She said that maybe one day, my experiences would enable me to help someone else. Maybe I can help you get through the next six timeframes, so you can be together for the rest of your lives."

"I don't know what to say," Frey said.

Frick only stared at his unit leader.

"Now, let's go over your contracts."

Frick would be restricted to the male dorm, the dining chamber, the guard meditation chamber, and reading area. He could not go outside the guard complex except on patrol. Frey would live in the nursery. After the first timeframe, and with the nursery supervisor's permission, she would be able to go to the closest meditation chamber and reading area when not on duty, but she was not to go farther from the nursery than 300 f-units. Her female friends could visit on the unit's day off but were not permitted to take any written messages back and forth. All letters would go through Alexander, and were the only contact permitted.

"After your egg hatches," Alexander said, "I will escort Frick to have time with your larva. Frey, you will be secured in your nursery sleep chamber during those visits. The nursery supervisor will let you out after we leave. Visits will be at six h-units in the evening."

Frey reached for the inkpot to sign hers. "This is much better than we deserve. Thank you."

Frick nodded and signed his.

Alexander scooped the contracts into his leadership satchel. "I'll leave you now for the fifteen moments granted you. When I come back in, please, be calm about it."

He stood outside the portal, his eye on the time piece on the wall of the Justice Council Chamber. Their low voices, filled with weeping, could be heard through the portal. He moved a few f-

units away. Commander Alonzo arrived a few moments before their time was up. When Alexander opened the portal, the two let go of each other in silence, each following their escorts.

Alexander and Frey arrived at Nursery #4 several moments later. "Hello, Frey. I'm Alana, supervisor of this nursery. Please, come in. Our dinner will arrive in a few moments. Unit Leader Alexander, would you like to join us?"

Alexander had met Alana once before during the arrangements. "Yes, thank you."

Alana showed them the chamber Frey would live in. Its portal was directly behind Alana's work area on one side of the nursery's main area. Since it was evening, all day larvae had been picked up by parents and the few who would be there overnight had not yet arrived. Frey entered her chamber and cried for joy when she saw the incubator sitting next to a sleep cushion with her egg softly nestled in it. A relaxing image of the surface hung on one chamber wall, a cupboard for Frey's things, which had been packed up and delivered by a friend of hers, sat below the image. There was also a writing surface, well stocked with parchment and ink, and a stool.

Frey stroked her egg. "This is more than I expected. Thank you."

During their meal, Alexander said that he would come to check on Frey at least every other evening before going out on patrol. "Don't worry," Alana said, "she'll be fine. I can see that in her eyes, and I've read her service file. You've had quite a bit of nursery experience already, haven't you, Frey?"

"Yes, I did a double unit in a nursery in my home colony during job exploration."

"By Sixth Timeframe, you'll have completed a mentorship. Ah, here comes one of our night charges. I'll stay with you the first few nights until you are comfortable with everything."

Alexander excused himself; it was time for night patrol.

The first quarter timeframe was the most difficult for the pair, but before all of them knew it, the egg hatched. Alexander took Frick to meet his daughter. Frey had placed her larva in one of the coops in the main nursery chamber before they arrived. Alexander checked that her portal was secure before telling Frick he could enter.

"She's so tiny!" he said.

"Yes, we seldom have a chance to see one newly hatched, since they are all about half a timeframe old before coming to a nursery for the first time. You can pick her up."

Frick reached forward tentatively with his front pods, lifted the larvae carefully and held her to his thorax. She began to squeak.

"What's wrong? What did I do wrong?"

"Nothing. She's hungry. There's a bowl of larva formula on the surface right there," he pointed to a stool next to the surface. "You haven't forgotten your job exploration and how to feed a larva, have you?"

"No." Frick rested his abdomen on the stool, switched his daughter to his middle pods, dipped one front pod into the sticky substance and held it to the larva's mouth. She lapped at it eagerly.

"Does she have a name?" Alexander asked.

"Didn't you read it in our letters?"

"I decided to leave your letters alone, unless things didn't go well."

"Oh, thank you. We aren't telling anyone now. Our parents want to have a naming celebration with friends and family ... since we skipped a mating celebration. I will tell you, though, before we leave."

Alexander smiled as he watched Frick finish feeding his daughter and then cuddled her against his thorax, whispering to her. The h-unit was over before Frick was ready to leave, but when Alexander told him the time was up, he put her back in the coop.

While it seemed like an eternity to Frick and Frey, to Alexander, it seemed only a few days before it was the end of Sixth Timeframe. He got up an h-unit earlier from the day's sleep, pulled the two contracts out of his leadership satchel, and woke Frick.

"I figured you two would want to catch a late-afternoon basket home. But we have this to do this first." He tore the contract, handed part to Frick, and said, "This is over now, completed. But we make it forever a part of us and then leave it behind." He began to eat the parchment and indicated to Frick to do the same. "Grab your things and we'll go to the nursery."

Frick broke into the widest smile Alexander had ever seen. He swung his two satchels, which he had packed before falling into his dorm sleep sack, over his thorax, and led the way.

Along the tunnel, Alexander said, "Please do me one last favor by waiting in the tunnel one more time so I can consume Frey's contract with her."

"Sure."

Alexander smiled at the nursery supervisor as he moved behind her work surface to tap on Frey's chamber portal. "Frey, come on out."

She appeared, holding her daughter. Her smile disappeared when she didn't see Frick.

"Don't worry, he's there," Alexander said. "I asked him to wait while we formally end your contract."

"I'll hold her while you do that," Alana offered.

Alexander tore Frey's contract in half and repeated the words he had said to Frick. Frey gobbled her half quickly.

"Come on in, Frick," Alexander called.

The two rushed into each other's pods, tears of joy streaming down their faces and over their mandibles.

Alana handed their daughter back to them. "I'm glad to see this day, but I'm going to miss you, Frey."

Frick spoke. "Our daughter's name is Alexandra, for you, Unit Leader Alexander."

"I'm honored," he replied. "May I ask what your plans are?"

Frick responded, "We'll be staying with Frey's parents for a short time until we are assigned our own domicile. I'll be on reserve, of course, but I plan to stay in the general workforce. Frey has a job waiting for her in one of our colony's nurseries."

"Have you got all the larva formula packed for your journey?" Alana asked.

"Yes," Frey answered. "And my things. Thank you for everything."

Alexander gestured toward the nursery portal. "Do you need help getting to the transportation center?"

"No, thanks, we'll be fine," Frick said as they left.

Chapter 24

Alexander went on his annual leave about an h-unit after Frick and Frey left and divided his time between his family and Fred and Ferina. He and Fred talked so long that he missed the last overnight basket out of Fire 2, so he had to walk all night. He would get a good day's sleep before patrol duty, though. He tossed his satchel on the floor, ready to drop onto his sleep cushion, when a messenger handed him a note.

"I've been waiting for you. Please come immediately," the messenger said.

Alexander read the note as he plodded along. Master Diandra was back in South Dairy 1, and Commander Alonzo wanted to see him.

She was sitting in Alonzo's work chamber when Alexander walked in. "I thought you said they weren't going to dig in that location anymore," he said, before noticing his commander.

"Hello to you, too," she replied, holding out both front pods.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm just tired." He returned her greeting and apologized to Commander Alonzo.

"I'm not here about the location we've excavated the last two season cycles. I'm headed to Central Harvester 12, on the surface trail, so I need an escort—only you, not your unit. There's a place a few d-units off trail that I want to inspect. In addition, Head Commander Frank wants to meet you."

Alexander's mandibles opened. The Head Commander stood over every guard, unit leader, captain, and commander in all colonies. While he visited each colony on a rotating schedule, Alexander had only seen him once from the highest level of South Dairy 1's largest training gym when he had addressed all the guards. To meet him individually was a rare honor.

Commander Alonzo said, "Relax, Alexander, he's impressed with your service. You will leave tomorrow morning. Would you take this quarter's reports?" He tapped a packet on his work surface with one front pod.

"I'll meet you at breakfast," Master Diandra said.

Commander Alonzo grinned and said, "Now, you can go to sleep."

Central Harvester 12 was several days' journey north of South Dairy 1. How much equipment and food would they need? He visualized maps he had memorized during basics. No doubt Master Diandra had it all planned, but still, he wondered what she had gotten him into.

There she sat, grinning, at a small eating surface along the wall of the guard dining room. He picked up his breakfast and joined her.

"You look better than yesterday," she said.

He grasped her front pods and explained missing the transport basket.

"Well, our equipment is in a medium basket at the main mound entrance. We will take turns carrying it."

"That's a relief. The first half of this season cycle has been anything but usual," he said.

"I heard but do tell the details on the way."

He chewed roasted grassfrond seeds and gulped honeydew before saying, "I have to admit, I was looking forward to routine night patrol."

She smiled. "I never push travel past ten h-units per day, stopping every two h-units to rest. We will camp in the wild sometimes—with sleep sacks tied by ends into high wood plants. Meals will consist mostly of roasted grassfrond seeds, but we will pass plenty of streams for fresh water and stop in the colonies along the way, staying in guest quarters. You should be back here in half a timeframe."

Master Diandra was true to her word except for their last night in the open during an energy storm. She started up a wood plant. "No!" Alexander shouted. "Never climb wood plant in an energy storm." He looked around and spotted a grove of low bushes 300 f-units off the trail, lifted the basket, and headed for it. She followed him. Her apology for the poor decision was muffled by the noise in the sky.

"The low branches will provide some protection, but we should dig a hollow, quickly."

The two dug into the dirt beneath the bushes, Alexander pulling dirt toward himself and then shoving it back to Master Diandra, which she pushed behind her, until they had a space they could scrunch into. They spent the night cramped and soggy, but safe. Most of the morning went to hanging their wet sleep sacks over the bushes, relieved to see that moisture had not gotten into their dwindling food supply. The delay put them half a day behind, so it was dark—a risky but necessary choice—when they reached Central Harvester 12.

Commander Frank held out both front pods to Alexander when he and Master Diandra entered his work chamber. "Welcome, Unit Leader Alexander—and you, too, Master Diandra. Please, make yourselves comfortable. How was the trip, and what's your best guess on those ruins?"

Alexander related the details of their journey. Then Master Diandra took over concerning the ruins they inspected. "As you are aware, I researched reports of that location on my last trip here but found nothing. Upon examination in person, I saw evidence of archeological digs in the past, but it must have been very long ago—thin new soil deposits over the digs. Perhaps before the Combined Colonies?"

"That's possible," Commander Frank replied. "I'll have my aid check the oldest records of guard assignments, but there wouldn't have been guards if it was B.C.C. Write your proposal to the Intercolonial Council for a new dig. Alexander, please stay here. I have a lot I'd like to discuss with you."

Alexander remained as Master Diandra rose to leave. The commander's aid entered with mugs of ale and honey roasted seeds. Head Commander Frank gestured to Alexander to help himself.

"I must explain. First, you would have been named a captain last season cycle except that Commander Alonzo has his full allotment of captains. His greatest need is good unit leaders. I want to thank you for those you've convinced to stay on as mated guards in unit leader positions. Second, your assignments with Master Diandra were ordered by me. Commander Alonzo was not happy about it. He relented when I assured him that I would never let her have you before the beginning of Fourth Timeframe, and never past Tenth Timeframe. Your work training incoming guards has been too important—wonderful leadership and snap decisions, and I mean that sincerely."

"Thank you," Alexander responded.

"But Master Diandra's work, along with the scouts and plastic explorers with her, is also vital. Over the last generation, the Colonies have become more dependent on Roacherian plastic as some mines are depleted. That can't continue! Roaches know they will never be successful in a war with the Combined Colonies, but they are doing their best to control us through plastic supplies, each season cycle demanding more of our goods for the same amount of plastic. Additionally, we can never trust what their interpreters say. We hear only what the SERCB wants us to know. Look at what happened to the three tunnel engineers from South Harvester 45. The fact that some can now read their language as a result helps, but if I could find **one** ant who could speak their language ... "

He stopped and drank from his mug. Alexander recalled reading lengthy reports of the season cycle Roacheria enslaved the three ants.

[That almost-total-war incident was the subject of my grandfather's work in *To Build a Tunnel*. Henry R-D II]

"If we don't explore for new supplies well within our surface area, and establish new colonies, we will find ourselves becoming economic slaves to Roacheria."

Alexander finished his snack. "Is there a way you want me to help?"

"Thanks for asking. Every field location where Master Diandra wants you, go. Learn all you can in various colonies. From now on, your units will be comprised of guards from the closest colony. Talk with the colony commanders. Learn each colony's uniqueness and special safety requirements. They will want to learn from you, too. Master Diandra will take you all over the colonies. Think about what areas appeal to you the most when on field explorations because the day will come when you'll have your choice of commandship of a new colony. Just tell me where you want to be assigned."

Alexander could hardly find words. "I'm humbled by the thought."

"Which is exactly why I wanted to meet you. I need to know how someone as young as you are, has such great wisdom. I asked Master Diandra but all she said was, 'It's not my story to tell.' I know it's personal, and you have every right to say no, but will you tell me?"

Alexander took a deep breath and slowly let it out. "Yes, but it's a long story."

"I'll make time to listen." Commander Fred called to his aid and requested two dinners, even though it was late in the evening.

Alexander drew the two images from the pocket in his insignia and started with, "That pamphlet given to every ant couple for them to read to newly emerged adults is about me."

Two h-units, dinner, and a mug of ale later, he ended with a question. "So, if I may ask, what's inside your insignia?"

Head Commander Fred nodded and pulled out an image of a female guard. "My oldest sister, killed in a roach raid thirty season cycles ago in South Harvester 45. I had just emerged from pupation. Master Adriana ... the Fire Ant Academy ... your first flip sting ... Everything makes sense now, and none of it will go beyond this chamber. I know you are tired. Get a good night's rest in my guest chamber." He

pointed to a portal in the side wall. "Then after breakfast, head back to South Dairy 1. Aside from a good workout each day, ride in baskets through the tunnel system. Thank you for coming."

Over the next several season cycles, Master Diandra requested Alexander on several of her journeys. In the desert far west from South Dairy 1, he learned how to fight giant tarantulas, and to enjoy many food dishes prepared with cacti. Through tunnels in mountain ranges and all the way to the western sea, he encountered wild insect species he had only seen in images during basic training and witnessed spectacular views and areas of duo pod ruins devastated by planet quakes.

He made the longest journey over a summer to the northernmost colony, North Carpenter 5, so that Master Diandra could examine artifacts found in the areas where ants removed red metal from ancient duo pod workings. Amazed by the lengths to which the duo pods had gone to raise that metal to the surface, he wondered why they had left so much of it behind. All the ants had to do was carry the huge chunks through far-better tunnels south through the intercolonial tunnel system for processing in other colonies. The ants' biggest challenge had been to develop pumping systems to keep water out of the areas where they dug out the metal.

But it was another topic he would remember longer. The subject came up when Alexander and North 5's commander passed a guard on level 4 wearing a red sash—indicating to all he could not go above level three because he had been banished underground for violating the terms of his Probationary Contract, something Alexander had wondered about when he read it in his guidebook and now had the chance to ask.

"Why are those who violate their Probationary Contracts often sent here?"

"You traveled here by intercolonial tunnels, correct?" the commander asked.

"Yes."

"Experiencing is the best way to understand. Meet me at the main entrance at 7 h-units. Bring lunch, supper, and two water flasks."

The sun had been up for quite a while when Alexander reached the main entrance at the agreed-upon time. They spent the day wandering in the most amazing forests Alexander had ever seen. They climbed to the top of a precipice from which he saw a body of water so large he could not see across it, like the western sea, only he judged this view more extraordinary. When they scrambled down to the shore, the commander bent down to drink and invited him to do the same. Alexander had never tasted water so cold or refreshing—not salty like the western sea. Never would Alexander see views he considered more beautiful.

On the way back, the commander said, "Whenever an ant is sent here because of a violated contract, which doesn't happen often, commanders before me, and I have followed their example, take offenders on a much shorter version of what you saw today. Then I tell them that I hope they have a good memory, because they will never see it again as long as they live. Imagine knowing what lies above

you but also knowing you can never go there. I let them write all the letters they want warning young adult ants not to end up banished here. We may get hundreds of f-units of frozen sky water over a long winter, during which most colony members go to winter inactivity chambers until the spring sun warms the surface again, but no one anywhere in the colonies has summers like ours. We may work fourteen h-units or more a day in summer, and I understand why many ants don't want to move here, but I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

Alexander had learned in basics that in many northern colonies winter inactivity began right after Last Day. "You said 'most' enter winter inactivity. Who stays awake?"

"My guards and I stay on duty all winter. The few with scientific training use one tiny entrance at the top of the mound to record weather data and frozen sky water depth. We can't be out there for more than ten moments without being in danger of freezing to death. It's the leased-liked part of my duties, but even then, there is incredible beauty. The other guards work at the pump stations in the metal working area. You may have noticed on your colony tour that most living and working areas only go down six levels to stay above the groundwater line."

He continued as they strolled through the forest near the colony entrance. "Every ant in the colony works the pump systems two days per timeframe, but in the winter, the whole process falls to me and my guards. I divide us into three groups for eight-h-unit work sessions and we are at it every day—one long exercise session, after which we have plenty of time to eat, sleep, and have some recreation."

A gentle meadow-covered slope led to the top of a long ridge behind the colony. They loped up it. "Has any ant banished here ever tried to escape?" Alexander asked.

"Twice in the last twenty season cycles. One was caught before he got to the forest and had to wear restraints from then on. The other managed to find a less-watched upward tunnel and ran out onto the surface just before the winter portals were fixed over that entrance. I happened to be nearby. I shouted to continue putting the winter portal in place. It was Thirteenth Timeframe, and he ran out into a blizzard—like one of your severe summer storms, but with frozen sky water, not rain. The following spring, we found his body trapped in melting ice. I made an image which I still show to any ant wondering what will happen to them outside the mound in winter."

"May I have a copy of that image?"

They entered the colony as the sun dipped below the horizon in a blaze of red and gold, having been on the surface for fourteen h-units. Alexander was amazed that it was around nine h-units—he had lost track of time on the journey. Then he remembered those basic science lessons about the tilt of their planet and its resulting lengthened summer days the farther north one went.

"Sure. I'll give you images of some of the places we saw today, too. I've heard you convinced more than one foolish guard to turn his or her mistake into a better life after a contract."

Alexander chuckled. There had been two since Frick and Frey, minor offenses such as too much ale leading to arguments, but he knew there would be more. Fire ants, due to generations of aggressiveness, tended to have more problems as young adults than other varieties.

The spring after that trip to North Carpenter 5, Alexander was not surprised when he got the message to see his commander. "Where am I going this time and for how long?" he asked Commander Alonzo.

His commander gave him a long look. "To South Harvester 45, and, sadly for me, you aren't coming back."

"What?" While Alexander knew when he made his Vow that he could be sent anywhere, anytime. It hadn't mattered because he had never really known any place as "home". South Dairy 20 was where he hatched, but because of the way his life went, he never made that deep "home" connection to it. During his time at the Guard Academy, that was home. He had spent more time at South Dairy 1 than any place of his adulthood, but now he would be leaving.

Commander Alonzo sighed. "Master Diandra has a project north and slightly east of South Harvester 45, very close to Border River. There's bound to be trouble; we haven't used that part of colony surface in many season cycles and roaches wander there a lot. So, I agree that your experiences on patrol here make you the best for the job. The project is supposed to last two season cycles. It's good for you; Commander Ferdinand will declare you a captain on the spot. I always knew you would be assigned elsewhere eventually."

"When do I leave?"

"You don't have to be there until the 14th of this timeframe. You'll be a long way from your family down there, and I understand your father is ailing. Depart as soon as possible and take extra leave time while you can."

Alexander left the following morning and stayed with his family six full days. After his mother died, his father moved in with his sister and worked in Elder Guard Care. Now, others there cared for him. The visit was bittersweet. Alexander was glad to be able to be with Frodi while he could still get around a little; both knew he would not be there when it came time for Frodi's covering. They talked on a deep level about their pride and charity for each other, all they had done, all that they had wished they could have done. Alexander spent his evenings alternating between his brother's and sister's homes, again in deep conversations. But his time with his young adult nieces and nephews (in various season cycles of basics and job exploration) was spent having fun—playing Bue/Green, enjoying a mug of ale, and dancing at a Leisure Time Center. Farewells were fond but tearful.

A day and a half later, he arrived at Fred and Ferina's domicile. Ferina had laid six eggs by the eighth season cycle of their mating. While she had managed to complete her mentorship as a Basics Trainer, when the fourth egg hatched, it was necessary to give up her position, managing a full nursery load in her own home. On previous visits, she had often quipped, "Less than two season cycles between any of them! Look what you wished on me." But then she would laugh.

Fred had completed his mentorship with Master Adriana and was both a physician and emotional healer. He had taken over his mentor's work. He often came home late, and exhausted, to a mate who craved adult conversation. On every visit, Alexander would send them out the portal to spend

precious time together while he cared for their larvae. He wished he could visit and help more often, but he knew Ferina's father helped, too.

The oldest two, Deena and Alexander, were now pupating but there were still four more of various ages, all squeaking for attention when Ferina opened the portal. "You are a welcome surprise! How long can you stay?"

"I'm expected South Harvester 45 by evening on the fourteenth," he replied, explaining why this leave was longer than usual.

When he said goodbye, he told them, "I want you two to know that sometimes, I feel closer to you than to my brother and sister."

"Don't ever stop being part of our family. You know we refer to you as Uncle Alexander," Fred said as they embraced.

Travel from Fire 2 to South Harvester 45 had been a two-part trip in the early days of the Combined Colonies—four h-units to Old South Dairy 50 and another four to South Harvester 45. But the tragic death South Dairy 50 twenty season cycles before had necessitated building a new tunnel, on a more direct line, reducing the time by two h-units, so he was actually closer to his friends than before. Alexander picked up a lunch basket for the journey and headed through the tunnel at workout speed.

[In an early chapter of *New South Dairy Colony 50*, my great-grandfather, Antony Dairier, was told by his father about how they and a few others had survived the accidental release of a poison gas from a chemical Antony's mother, Dorothy, had been studying. She had stated that the powder left behind by ancient Duo Pods was much too dangerous and should be left buried where it had been found by archeologists. The Colony Council had not heeded her warning. Henry R-D II]

Alexander had been in enough colonies to know that basic layouts were similar, and the guard areas were usually on the second level from the surface. South Harvester 45's Transportation Center was on the fourth level, so upon arriving, he headed for the closest up-tunnel. Commander Ferdinand's work chamber was close to the entrance of the guard area. The portal was open, so he put his head in.

"Commander Ferdinand?" he asked in case an aid sat at the commander's work surface while he was somewhere else in the colony.

"Yes?"

"I'm Alexander, sent to your service from South Dairy 1," he replied, handing the commander a letter from Commander Alonzo.

"Come in, come in! I've been eagerly awaiting your arrival, Captain Alexnader." He extended both front pods in greeting. Alexander extended his in return.

"Have a seat; drop that load you're carrying."

Alexander, inwardly pleased with the confirmation that he was now a captain, removed his satchels from around his thorax. His new commander inquired about his trip and other introductory pleasantries and offered him a mug of ale.

Alexander asked, "What are my duties to be until Master Diandra arrives?"

"Ah, yes, the lucky reason I got you. I had a message yesterday that she will be delayed another two timeframes, which gladdens me because I need your help with training here. Do you remember an elderly gymnastics trainer who could no longer do much but could still train guards adequately?"

Alexander thought back to the first few timeframes after he had saved Fred's life and the early groups of gymnastics trainers from the border colonies that he had taught to do the Flip Sting. "Yes, I remember him."

"Well, he was my trainer—and I've often regretted not sending another younger guard with him. He trained the guards here adequately, until he left this world a few season cycles ago, but none of them ever got farther than one Flip Sting at a time. I'm concerned about this project's location so close to Border River, four h-units northeast of here. We haven't used that area in a long time and the roaches have begun to think it's theirs. I want you to work with the twenty-four guards I'm assigning to you. I wish it could be double that, but our guard numbers have been low the last few season cycles—fewer new hatches back a generation. Once you have that group trained, we'll work on every guard here—if there's enough time. I also want you to work individually with my new head gymnastics trainer. She does her best, but it's not good enough. I don't want to embarrass her by having her train alongside your unit members."

"I can do that. May I ask you something?"

"Certainly."

"A fellow guard at the Fire Guard Academy, Arlene, was assigned here with you as her mentor. We kept in touch for a while, but things got busy ... anyway, is she still here?"

"I wish I still had her, brilliant female, but two season cycles ago, she was sent to Central Harvester 16 as an assistant to the commander there, who was quite ill and about to retire. She's commander there now. How well did you know her?"

Alexander smiled and said, "We were each other's 'number eight'."

Commander Ferdinand laughed. "Let me show you around our guard area, which has a bit different layout than most, and to your quarters."

Having his own quarters felt strange, and Alexander was rarely in them except to sleep. He preferred to socialize in the guard dining area and Leisure Center when he did have free time. This was to be "home" for who knew how long, and he wanted to form new friendships. Two timeframes flew, and when Master Diandra arrived, he knew all his guards well, and everyone could do two consecutive Flip Stings with moving targets. Some could do three. The colony's gymnastics trainer had learned all she needed and thanked Alexander for his help.

Alexander, Master Diandra, and Commander Ferdinand had a long meeting to go over safety precautions. Master Diandra declared, "You two are much too worried. I've got these letters, in Roach

and Ant, prepared by the roach interpreter at Central Harvester 12. Even the roach ambassador said we will be perfectly safe."

Alexander and Commander Ferdinand gave each other a look. Official roach warriors never attacked ants; their leaders pretended to be surprised when renegade roaches did. Fire ant guards speculated that those renegades had never had any training except in how to steal grasshoppers and kill ants.

Two days later, they set up camp near Duo Pod ruins. Alexander assigned eight guards to night duty in a tight ring around the camp, and the other sixteen to camp chores and day watch. This area of ruins had tall synthetic stone pillars supporting arches that Master Diandra said were crossings of transport systems, very climbable. Alexander assigned two guards to the top, their job being to scan surrounding meadows. They would use whistled signals for communication. Things went smoothly for several timeframes.

During Eleventh Timeframe, the daytime temperatures were more pleasant than the stifling conditions of the summer. They had gotten through the severe summer storm season without anything major. Alexander had been awake for an h-unit and was helping to prepare breakfast for the group when he heard three sharp, short whistles from the guards on top of the synthetic stone arch. He handed the cooking utensil to the camp cook and ran up the arch.

"Look," one guard pointed, "movement in the meadow grass—a lot of it."

Just then, ranks of roaches rose from the tall grass, steadily approaching the camp.

Alexander exclaimed, "They'll be here in ten moments. Everybody down to camp!"

He whistled the signal for all guards, even those who had just gone to sleep, to circle the camp and be ready for anything. He took a position outside the circle facing the approaching roaches. "Tell your team to stay inside the dining dome," he shouted to Master Diandra.

The roaches moved in rows of twelve. Alexander estimated there were at least 200. Even if every guard delivered three quick Flip Sting deaths, that would only take out seventy-five. They'd be slaughtered if a battle ensued. But the roaches stopped about 100 f-units in front of Alexander. One stepped forward.

Alexander moved forward enough to let them know that he was in charge. Master Diandra crept close to him, letters in pod. "Now's the time to see if those do any good," Alexander said. "One thing for sure, if they wanted to attack us, they would have by now. Get your image maker and start using it!"

He held the letters out and walked forward. The roach leader did the same. Alexander pointed to the letters, "We have every right to be here," he said, even though the roach probably didn't understand. The roach grabbed the letters from him and looked at them, then grunted, tore up the letters, and scattered them to the wind!

Then he pointed at the ants, yelled something in Roach, and pointed to the trail.

"We can leave, but not right away," Alexander said, hoping someone in that mass of warriors understood ant. "We need time to pack up our camp." He gestured to the early morning position of the sun, pantomimed packing while pointing to where the sun would be at noon and walked a few paces toward the trail. Then he came back and stood before the roach.

More words he didn't understand, the threatening pod still pointing to the trail. Alexander shook his head. "We must take our things." He went through the motions of packing again, but this time demonstrated leaving a bit before noon. The roach tapped one middle pod on the ground and pointed to where the sun would be in about an h-unit.

"Not enough time," Alexander stated, pointing to where the sun would be around eleven h-units. Master Diandra slipped up beside him again. "Start packing," Alexander whispered, "I'm trying to get us as much time as I can."

Alexander and the roach settled on two h-units. He continued to stand firm, facing his enemy, while he spoke directions to Master Diandra. "Pack only personal items, your field notes, and artifacts. We leave the domes, the food, and all equipment. Yes, they'll get that, but those things can be replaced. Tell our camp cook to pack only what we can eat while walking. Tell everyone to fill two water flasks. We will be traveling light and fast!"

The next time she came near, he asked, "Did you get images of him tearing your letters?"

"I think so."

"Slip out there and pick up whatever pieces you can, so you have proof when you go back to their ambassador."

"Me? Why not one of the guards?"

"Because they might think the approach of a guard was a hostile act and use it as an excuse to attack. They won't be worried about you. As good as all my guards are, there are too many of them; we would all be slaughtered."

She nodded and picked her way through the grass, retrieving all the scraps she could find without getting any closer to the menacing roaches, who hissed at her the entire time.

A few moments before the sun reached the agreed upon place in the morning sky, Alexander gave his last instructions. "You and the others, carry the heaviest basket you can manage. Tell my night duty guards to carry the rest. Instruct the other guards to walk up the trail back toward the colony, battle ready, in a circle around the rest of you. Walk at a normal pace and try to remain calm. I'll come last, walking backward to keep my eyes on that mob."

Alexander let them go 100 f-units up the trail before retreating and catching up. He called out a pod count pace to direct their speed. When he saw the roaches race into the camp, tearing into their food supplies, he shouted, "RUN!" and counted out a pace three times as fast until he didn't think the scientists could run any farther.

He called a halt near some tall wood plants and directed one guard to climb them and shout if roaches followed. He would send food and drink up. They rested barely half an h-unit and then took the fastest pace everyone could manage. Alexander did not relax until they were inside South Harvester 45's tunnels.

Commander Ferdinand entered Alexander's quarters late in the afternoon, to find him writing. "I want to complete the Roach Incident Report while the details are fresh in my mind. I'm almost finished," Alexander said.

"I'll wait." Commander Ferdinand walked over to a tiny kitchen area and put on a pot for tea.

After scrunching the last detail into the bottom margin of the report form, Alexander handed it to his commander.

"Your tea is ready."

Alexander accepted the mug.

"First, you handled that situation well—nobody panicked, and everyone obeyed your instructions. I've already talked to a few—they were terrified but trusted you. Thanks for completing the report; Master Diandra wants a copy of it to take to Central Harvester 12. I'll have my aid make the necessary number of copies. Master Diandra plans to leave tomorrow morning. Oh, and she asked me to tell you that the images are perfect, and she even got one of that roach leader's face. Whether the roaches do anything to him remains to be seen. You and your guards will have tomorrow off, and I'll send a counselor to speak to the group in the evening."

"What duty for me would be most helpful now?"

"Please, keep training all my guards. I don't think this 'incident' is over. We've become too complacent—I have, at least. The numbers they sent to confront you are a warning. And we are not ready. Suggestions?"

"When new guards arrive at South Dairy 1, they have two timeframes of intensive aggression training." He described the mechanical roaches and asked if the colony had any.

"I'm sure we still have one or two, which we used for many season cycles, but then they didn't seem needed. I'll make sure to have someone find them. What about next time on a project like the one you were on? Besides the obvious—more guards."

Alexander glugged his tea while thinking. "I thought during severe storm season that we should have had an underground shelter. During a few ordinary storms, we went inside the upper level of a strong ruin. It was fine, but not the best. If we could build an underground chamber, large enough for the whole group and all the equipment, it could serve two purposes: a storm shelter and a place that could be defended until reinforcements arrived. Even if roaches broke down an entrance portal, guards

could be on either side—sting, sting, sting any roach foolish enough to enter. The bodies would pile up, blocking the entrance. But I'm not sure what we would do if they dug in from the top."

"Hmmm, maybe some pod grips scattered over the ceiling, then sting, sting, like at the portal. Let me talk to Master Henry, our chief tunnel engineer. He'll know how big a chamber could be dug out without needing supports, or how to leave enough supports while excavating. He'll also know if we need to involve our domicile excavation team. Let me worry about that. Now, get some rest! I need you at your best."

When a Shadow Team returned the next day from seeing what the roaches had done to the camp, they reported that the roaches took everything before setting fire to the domes.

Chapter 25

A timeframe later, Alexander received a packet from Fred in Fire 2. The letter on top of a stack of documents read:

"Dear Alexander,

"I am hoping you will say yes to holding a contract on the male described in the documents here. He has been in confinement—sent from South Harvester 30 where he had been serving his obligation—for nearly half a season cycle because no one would take on his contract. I have had several appointments with him and have enclosed my evaluation. I talked with Master Adriana about him, too. She's the one who suggested you—saying to tell you to remember the day you told her saying thank you was not sufficient. I don't know what she was referring to, but she said you would. So here I am, begging. He's not a bad creature—just selfish in his thought processes. He acknowledges his guilt but isn't remorseful.

"Your brother forever,

"Fred"

Alexander read through the Justice Council documents. Only the memory of what Master Adriana had said made him read through the documents a second time. He went to the closest meditation chamber and read the packet a third time. Then he went to Commander Fernando, handed him only the summary page and said, "I've been asked to supervise the contract for this male, and I think you should be aware of what happened before I commit to it."

Commander Fernando tapped one front pod on his writing surface as he read. "It's easy to understand why others rejected holding the contract. I gather you plan to take on this male?"

"After meditation, yes. The reasons are complicated, and personal."

Commander Fernando shifted on his stool. "Is the contract already prepared, or do you need to write it?"

"Basics are listed, but I will lay out specific goals. I plan to state banishment underground to North Carpenter 5 as the consequence of any violation. I'll have him stay in my quarters to keep a closer eye out—tell others he's an aid to me—that will provide some anonymity for a fresh start."

Commander Fernando smiled. "North 5—yes. Let me know if you need anything."

"Thank you for your support. I'd chat longer, but I need to send my response and get ready for patrol."

A quarter timeframe later, on his day off, Alexander stood near the entrance to the tunnel to Fire 2 waiting for Axel and his escorts. He spotted them as they made the final turn in the tunnel and approached when he saw Axel in restraints.

"I'm Captain Alexander. I think we can remove these now," he told the escorts. "I'll take charge. You must all be hungry. If you'll follow me, we'll go to the guard dining area."

Axel said nothing as the escort guards removed his leg restraints. He followed Alexander, the two escorts behind him. After eating, Alexander announced, "I'll take Axel with me now so he can sign his contract. Will you two be heading straight back or staying overnight?"

"We were told to rest and return tomorrow," one said.

"That guard by the portal will show you to guest quarters."

The escorts nodded and left.

"Axel, come with me, please."

A moment later, they entered Alexander's quarters, and he hung his "In Consult" sign on the outside of the portal as he closed it. "That will be your sleep chamber," Alexander said pointing to the extra sleep chamber in his quarters. "Toss your satchel on the sleep cushion and sit with me at my eating surface. We have a lot to discuss."

He had the contract and ink pot ready when Axel lowered his abdomen onto a stool opposite Alexander's.

"May I speak first?" Axel asked.

"Yes."

"I want to assure you that whatever is in my contract, I will follow it. After almost half a season cycle alone in confinement, no one to talk to, day after day, not even able to choose my reading

material, I know I never want to have to go back to that. I'm grateful to you for taking me on, and I won't mess that up—not for anything. I'll do whatever you want, won't run, or do anything foolish.”

“That’s good—the right attitude to start a new life. Now, I want to hear from you how your crime began.”

“Didn’t you get all that already?” Axel’s antennae twitched.

“Yes, and I read it all, several times. But I want to hear it directly from you. So, begin with how you met the female to whom you did such a grievous wrong. I’m the one ant who can ask personal questions and expect an answer.”

Axel fidgeted. “Well, like I had with other females, I asked her to dance one evening, my day off, at the Leisure Center. She said yes, and we had a good time. We spent all our second season cycle of service together. Neither of us spent time with anyone else. I had very deep feelings for her, and I thought she did, too, have feelings for me, I mean. We spent lots of evenings in an alcove, danced, looked at the stars from the top of the mound some nights, all the usual things. But four timeframes before our release, when I asked her to make a Promise with me, she said she wasn’t ready to make a promise with anyone, but she agreed to spend more time together.”

“So, what went wrong?” Alexander asked, handing Axel a mug of tea.

“I asked her again a timeframe before our release. She said no, she wasn’t ready and maybe never would be. I almost fell out of the alcove in shock! I asked her why. She said she was sorry; it wasn’t me. She said she spent all that time with me thinking her feelings might grow, but they hadn’t. She even said it had been the same with other males before me. She liked me, and had liked others, but it never got deeper. She was thinking maybe Essence planned to call her.”

Axel’s face showed the anguish he must have felt at the rejection. Alexander pointed to the tea. After a few gulps and silence, Axel continued. “I told her I cherished her, begged her to keep seeing me. A little more time, I thought, and she would see we were meant to be together. But she grew more and more distant, made excuses not to spend time with me. I was desperate; so ... I made a plan. She agreed to spend one last ‘goodbye evening’ with me—right after we were released from service but before either of us left for our home colonies. I went to the market, got everything for a nice dinner, found an emergency chamber in a quiet tunnel, set up the whole thing, had blossoms and everything. If we just mated, she’d feel that ecstasy and know she cherished me. We’d have our mating holiday right there.”

Alexander interrupted. “But she never actually said yes?”

“She said yes to the evening with me.”

Alexander gulped his tea to control a growing inner rage.

Axel went on. “So, she ate, complimented me on the food, the blossoms, and all. I took that the wrong way, I guess, and, well, I grabbed her into my pods, and we mated. Only I wasn’t ready for what happened after that. She screamed, pushed me away yelling, ‘How could you? How could you?’ and ran from the chamber. Just like that! I just sat there. I could hear her yelling for other guards. She came back with help; said I’d violated her. I guess I figured she or they would sting me—wished they would, actually. The rest is in what you already read.”

Alexander let out a long sigh. "Thank you for helping me understand your thinking, not that it excuses what you did. You refused help from a legal counselor and didn't make any final statement to the Justice Council. Why?"

Axel shifted on his stool. "It wouldn't have made a difference so what's the point? Ants in trouble never get what **they** want. Then she goes into all that about being declared a widow, that I was 'dead' to her, that I can never mate, never 'hide' behind a Vow, never be allowed to know any of my offspring, live under a contract, never know what colony she is in, and the Justice Council gave her everything **she** wanted. It was fair; I took the life she wanted, so she took away all my dreams. And like I said before, I won't cause you any problems."

"Do you have any contact with your family?"

Axel shook his antennae. "I wrote my parents. They wrote back that I was 'dead' to them, too."

Alexander concluded that Fred's evaluation was correct. He laid out the images of North Carpenter 5 and said, "If you violate this contract with me, banishment here," he pointed to each image, "but underground is what you'll get. Read your contract now and ask any questions."

Axel looked at the one-page document. He would do night patrol, help as he could during Alexander's training sessions, be restricted to quarters when not on duty, could gradually earn back the privilege of socializing, but would not be released from the contract until he expressed true remorse for his actions and had met all other goals—a lengthy list. There was no ending date to look forward to, only "as long as it takes." He reached for the ink pot and signed it. "I have one question. What should I say to the guards I'll be working with? I want to make a new start, but if they know, I don't think I'll have any friends."

Alexander tapped his front pod. "I'll be introducing you to my Unit Leaders and guards as an aid transferred from Fire 2. Tell them you got into serious trouble, that I hold your contract, that you want to make a new start, but you'd rather not discuss what you did."

"Thank you."

"On the practical side, do you have experience fighting roaches, and can you do a Flip Sting?"

"Yes, I can do three consecutive Flip Stings in practice, but no, not against roaches. I guarded grasshopper herds and flip-stung a mantis more than once, though."

"Good enough." Alexander picked up the contract, and said, "Come on. I'll show you around and let you choose some reading material. Come with me to my training sessions—just observe for today. I'll make sure you get a portion of dried, concentrated honeydew so you'll be able to stay awake on night patrol."

By the beginning of Third Timeframe season cycle 186 CCI, Axel had proved his worth as an assistant trainer and had made friends during meals in the guard dining chamber. No one asked any

personal questions once they knew he was under a contract. Alexander's first report to the Justice Council in South Harvester 30 stated Axel was "compliant but not progressing."

During those timeframes, Alexander received letters from Master Diandra. She had received an apology, of sorts, from the roach ambassador over the previous fall's incident. The leader of the "renegade group" had been identified from her images, but as expected, there were no consequences. To smooth over relations, the ambassador had personally paid for their lost equipment in exchange notes the colonies could use for plastic shipments. Master Diandra and the ambassador developed an antstoric Neutral Zone Agreement. Roach and ant scientists would conduct a joint project. Roacheria would provide an interpreter. The new project would result in "better relations" between the Combined Colonies of Insectia and Roacheria.

When Alexander shared her letter with Commander Ferdinand, he said, "It's a good thing you'll have that underground shelter, forty-eight guards and two ULs, because we both know how long this 'agreement' will probably last. Are your guards ready for the worst that could happen?"

"As ready as they can be."

At Alexander's meeting with Master Diandra, he was skeptical. Until she introduced him to Antony Dairier, who could speak Roach. After the meeting, he sent a letter to Head Commander Frank: "Remember what you said about finding 'one ant who could speak Roach?' I've found one, and I will protect him until my last breath."

Note from Henry Roach-Dairier II:

After that point in his life, Alexander made fewer journal entries. While adding huge amounts to the beginning of his life, he blacked out whole sections with notes: "This is Axel's story to tell. He only gave permission for the beginning." Or, "This is Antony's story to tell."

Axel kept his secret. I found records that he completed his contract and learned to live with the life-long restrictions. In searching New South Dairy 50's records, I found a reference to a visit from his daughter. Her mother must have given access to the Justice Council Transcripts after her daughter made a Vow of Perpetual Service. There was also a reference to one occasion Axel left New South Dairy 50, about three season cycles after his daughter's visit. He went to Fire 1 to meet his son. So, some amount of emotional healing and forgiveness took place between him and the female with whom he had been involved.

I also found a letter in Central Harvester 12's Guard Archives:

From: Captain Alexander, South Harvester 45

To: Head Commander Frank, Central Harvester 12

7 Fifth Timeframe, 187 CCI

Dear Commander Frank,

Remember the day we met when you told me to travel to many colonies and see where I would like to be assigned to as commander of a new colony? I visited many areas with beautiful surface that would have been great. But what I ask of you is to be assigned to

New South Dairy Colony 50 if the Intercolonial Council approves Master Antony's request to rebuild the colony. I believe that his mission to have a joint ant/roach colony is achievable. But I know it will not be easy, not something Roacheria will want to see succeed. The project will require my expertise, and Antony needs me more than he will admit. He still talks about roaming the surface as if he could defend himself. There are plenty of powerful roaches who would gladly hire a warrior to slip onto New South Dairy 50 surface area waiting to catch him alone in the meadows. I didn't convince his physician to move his broken, plastered body and grieving mind to his Promised One's side as she fought for her life or convince Commander Ferdinand that I could handle day patrol while ministering to Antony's grief all those difficult nights, caring for him in my quarters, only to lose him to his possible carelessness on the surface. I must continue to be his shadow, even after he has trained others to speak Roach, and when I can't, assign another highly qualified shadow to follow him whenever he steps out from his hoped-for colony. Thank you for this one request.

Yours always in my Vow,

Alexander

After the death of his mate Henrietta, Antony had moved in with his adopted son's family, leaving their living quarters to those who continued Henrietta's work. Alexander tapped on Dr. Rodger Roach's portal to escort Antony to the beehives on the far north edge of New South Dairy 50 surface. That task had been left to Antony because he was **able** to do it, having had to give up many dairying tasks he had once enjoyed.

The two chatted as they walked along.

"How's that youngest grandnymph doing?" Alexander inquired.

"Too smart for his own safety. He hasn't even gone through his third molt and has figured out how to open every latch. He keeps sneaking out of the colony on his own. Oh, well, he gives your guards a challenge."

Alexander laughed. "Oh, that he does. He's outrun the entry guards more than once."

Chat continued through various colony topics.

They were almost at the hives when a mantis pounced from tall grass on the right side. Alexander shoved Antony to his left, and dodged, but before he could turn to do a slide-under sting, the mantis caught his back leg. The pain was excruciating.

Seemingly out of nowhere, two guards rushed in. One pulled Antony to safety while the other flipped up and over the mantis and stung the top of its thorax. It dropped, pinning Alexander beneath it.

The guard with Antony said, "Stay here!" and rushed to aid his fellow guard and commander. They bound what was left of Alexander's back-left leg.

"Commander, please, lie still. You will be fine. Doctor Rodger will fix you right up."

Several things went through Alexander's mind. First, the realization that shadows had been with him and Antony. Second, the irony that after all he had lived through, a mantis got him. He had once said he would defend Antony until his last breath. What a fulfillment this was, and it was two others who saved them. The guard who had stung the mantis picked Alexander up and ran his fastest back to the colony. Alexander lost consciousness along the way.

When he awoke, he was in a medical center chamber, his leg stump tightly bound. Antony's adopted son, Rodger Roach, the colony's physician, stood beside him. "I'm sorry; your patrolling days are over. Time to delegate your authority to others."

"I can manage without one leg. Can't you fix me up a brace like your father's?"

"Yes, but while you were unconscious, I used the internal imager to look at your breathing organs. I'm not going to honey-coat this. Remember that spot at your last exam that I said I'd keep an eye on?"

"Yes."

"In the last three timeframes it's developed rapidly into the end-stage of disintegrating breathing organs. I've never seen a case advance so quickly. I'll put you on an herb regimen, but that will only get you another three to four timeframes. I'm amazed you haven't felt fatigued or dizzy."

Alexander stared at the ceiling before admitting, "I have felt dizzy upon awaking, but I didn't want to ... admit something was wrong." He sighed, "I always thought I would know when it was time to stop, or at least slow down. My parents both knew. My mentor knew. I thought I would ... so, what now?"

"Drink the herb mixture three times every day, start delegating and slow down." He handed Alexander a mug. "Rest more and get your affairs in order. I'm going to keep you here for two days, and then you can return to your quarters. Several are waiting to see you, but I'm going to tell most of them to wait until tomorrow. You can see three ants for fifteen moments each today. Who will it be?"

"Please, let two at a time count as one. First, I want to thank the two guards who shadowed us. Then my two captains, and then your father. He's all right, isn't he?"

"He's fine. He has the same problem you do. Neither of you wants to admit that you're old, and you can't do what you used to."

Alexander smirked.

"I'll send in the shadow guards first—but they still only get fifteen moments."

The two guards entered, heads and antennae lowered in respect. Alexander said, "I want to thank you for saving Master Antony and my sorry abdomen. You did what all shadows hope they will never have to do, and you did it well. Thank you from the depths of my being." He extended both front pods toward them. The two held out theirs in return.

"You are welcome, Commander," they said in unison. Then one added, "I only wish we had jumped out a moment sooner."

"It would have been a tough decision for any ant. I've done my share of shadowing, and thank Essence, I never had to make that choice. That's all for now, so enjoy the rest of your day off."

Captains Fennel and Frau entered as the two guards left, reaching out in greeting, which Alexander returned. "Please close the portal," Alexander said. "First, how long have I had a shadow? And don't think I don't appreciate it."

Captain Frau spoke, "About a season cycle and a half, right after we noticed it was too easy for new guards to pass their shadow test with you."

"I'm glad you noticed. I always thought I would know when it was time to step back. But then, that's the reason for shadows—to protect some of us from our illusions."

"How would you like us to proceed while you recover?" Fennel asked.

"I know you have both told me in the past that being captains was as far as either of you would go, since you both have mates and young ones, but is there a chance one of you might reconsider?"

Both shook their heads.

"Then I'll write to our Head Commander that someone outside this colony must be selected to replace me as soon as possible."

"But, Commander, you'll be fine. It's just a leg. You can still make the tough calls," Frau said.

"Not for much longer. Yes, the leg stump will heal, but my breathing organs will give out in a few timeframes. I don't want that to become common knowledge yet, which is why I asked you to close the portal. Until my replacement arrives, would you both stay on your current day and night duties, as co-commanders? Will your mates be amenable to that?"

Both assured Alexander that, under the circumstances, they would to the best of their abilities. "But I wish this weren't necessary," Frau added. "You have done so much for so many season cycles here. It won't ... be the same ... ever."

"Thank you," Alexander said. "Always keep a balance between hope for a better future and skepticism toward Roacheria. I know I've said that at least a thousand times but never forget it. We've had peace with Roacheria for a long time, but it's always when we become complacent that they attack. I've trained you two since you came here for your two-season-cycle obligation. I can't tell you how pleased I was when both of you mated fellow guards and stayed here. Train all incoming guards like I trained you. Don't let them forget the past."

"We won't," they chorused.

He embraced them and they left.

Antony was the last to come in. They talked a long time—ignoring Dr. Rodger's fifteen moments. In the days that followed, they had many memory-laden conversations. They discussed whose story was whose, and Antony promised to write his—someday. In their last conversation, Alexander said, "If Fred's

daughter Deena doesn't make it here before I leave this world, please give her this carton of my journals. I explained to her in young adulthood why she had her name, and promised I would tell her everything someday."

That was the end of Alexander's journals. Deena arrived the day before Alexander died, spent precious moments with "Uncle" Alexander, and stayed for his covering, sorry that her parents, who were both ill at the time, could not come. She shared his story with her siblings and passed his journals on to her daughter and on, until I was pleased to accept them. Antony Dairier kept his promise to Alexander, telling his life's story to his grandson, my grandfather, *The Chronicles of Henry Roach-Dairier: New South Dairy Colony 50*. Henry R.-D. II