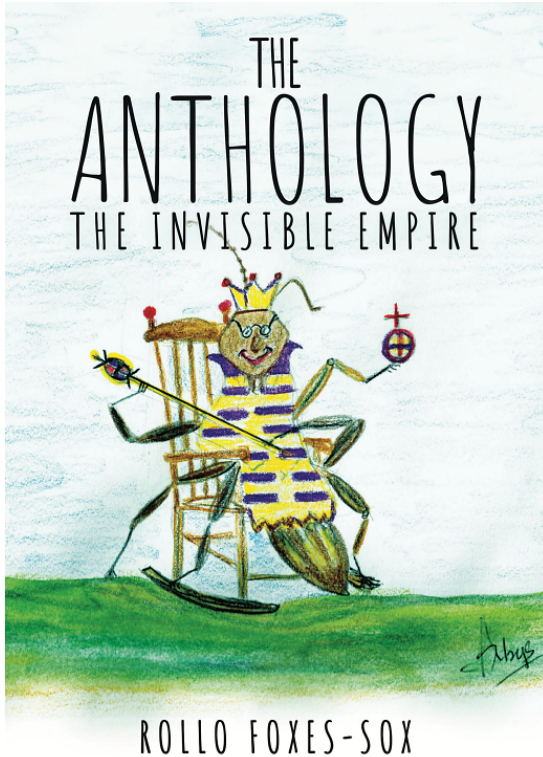




Here we have the adventure of an impaired ant who becomes the leader of her colony and ultimately queen. How this happens and the difficulties she encounters reveals the intricate behavior of this predominant insect species.

The Anthology: The Invisible Empire

By Rollo Foxes-Sox

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THE ANTHOLOGY

THE INVISIBLE EMPIRE



Abys

ROLLO FOXES-SOX

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1

TWILIGHT

Antonia here. I am enjoying a glorious autumn sunset. The colors of purple and gold are magnificent. The sun's waning rays warm my aching joints. The squeaking of the rattan rocker reminds me of that fact. I am alone and yet have seen and endured many things; I have heard and experienced so much more. I was neither the brightest star in the sky nor the most agile of my peerage. Yet, no one knew, including myself, that I was a diamond in the rough outliving my enemies, competitors and friends. Yet, there was a time not so long ago when I struggled to survive and find my way in a world that seemed stacked against me. I was beaten by some, ignored by most and befriended by few. You may wonder how did this come to pass?



2

IN THE BEGINNING

It was a routine day in the Royal Chamber when egg batch #39 arrived; so many identical beige parcels. You would conclude that my birth would be quite unremarkable among so many. Comingled among some 1000 siblings a royal attendant quickly whisked me off, but unfortunately, dropped me along the way. I rolled unceremoniously into a remote corner of the nursery. Nanny nurturing commenced immediately except no one noticed me for several days as I sat in my cold dark corner. The neglect caused my development to be slow and delayed for several weeks. According to the records I received less than half of the average feedings, cleanings and lickings.

I subsequently learned that my fate was actually better than some who were eaten by the nursery staff. The milestones of my larval infancy came slowly, as at a snail's pace. I remained an extra month in the nursery to "catch up." And I never did even during my time as a pupa. But my ears worked. And what I heard was disconcerting. I was considered a disadvantaged, frail, underdeveloped, malformed infant-a runt likely destined for the Disposal Unit(DU). How it happened that one of the attendants took a special interest in me remains a blessed obscurity.

Her name was Antha. She was pleasant, vibrant and vigilant. More than once, she saved my sorry soul by making sure I received the basic staples for life. Off hours she provided supplements whenever possible and available. They were not particularly unusual; rather

her thoughtfulness spoke volumes since she short changed her own rations. And it was her good cheer that early in my life imparted an enduring antimas that helped me accept life as it was, plus hardened me to the difficulties I would face. I did not understand this at that time. Antha never complained about the additional work. The extra effort, however, did cost her a routine promotion. I loved her greatly for her care and thoughtfulness.

She guided the removal of my silky prison cocoon softly naming me, Antonia.



It was a strange feeling to be free but also made me vulnerable to the world around me. I could barely see but felt the cool air and inhaled the earthy odors of the chamber. I was pale as a ghost, and it was hard to determine all my body parts as they were all jumbled together. To no one's surprise I was unable to stand or speak. This was a critical juncture for me because I was soon to learn that an ant

who could not stand, move, climb, swim, fly or worse converse was worthless! I was quarantined.

By this time the rest of my brood had already passed through their youth and had begun entering the workforce. Management recommended disposal for me, but once again Antha intervened. She suggested some extra time be allowed for strengthening through some physical therapy; an approach usually reserved for the injured only. I became an unwarranted nursery tenant. The sessions were a painful time for me trying to coordinate the movement of six scrawny legs. My knees constantly buckled, falls produced a myriad of bruises, and the resulting frustration and depression made progress very slow. It was during a particularly painful fall that I uttered my first squeaky word- yee...ouch! I practiced that word a lot.

I spent the next two months learning basic speech and motor skills. I cannot remember how many times I fell trying to run and later climb, which was simply awful. I landed on my hinie multiple times when I became tangled in the harness and ropes. I stammered and stuttered horribly when I attempted to speak, making me an object of ridicule. But Miss Antha taught me how to read and write sharing many new words along the way. The library was around the corner, and I spent hours there engorging all sorts of stories and information. But it was a struggle, since I often confused words and never seemed to get their pronunciation right. Most importantly, she introduced me to the use of my antennae to detect vibrations, air currents, chemicals, and touch for both short and long-range communication. The skill was a marvel as I felt a strange calling to use them to explore. What I failed to fully appreciate was her kind advice about life, particularly her admonitions. But her examples of patience and fortitude spoke to my heart.

"It is a blessing to have work; always do your job right the first time," she would say and then add that it was very important to be careful since the world was filled with dark forces.

I then fell under the care of an extravagant dolly mop, Miss Antsy Pansy. She spent a lot more time managing her hotsy-totsy, luxuriant bouffant than helping me, and would become quite cantankerous if interrupted with her foofaraw. The result was less attention to my needs, but the upside was more freedom for me to read and investigate my surroundings. While her radiant fluff factor grew flamboyantly, my knowledge of the area significantly improved. Unfortunately, throughout this period of almost 2 months my weight and height remained pathetically less than the third percentile. My slow progress was very frustrating to the termagant. I thought of becoming a truant.

"You are taking much too much of my time Antonia, and you don't have much to show for it," she flippantly commented. "As a matter of fact, you are a pathetic peasant, disgraceful all around." In disgust, mostly to facilitate her self-centered preening activities, the dilatant consulted her boss, and it was decided that I should be assigned a low-level job. My humiliation passed as I was so excited to be asked to do something at long last. I greatly thanked her and with my orders in hand left that dismal place as quickly as possible.

I showed my papers to the security guard at the nursery sector saying, "I am an app...pplic..cant and a poor converr...sant.

"Ah yes, I hear ya," he grinned. "Report to midden on the double."

"Um...mm, mid...dd...den exactly what and where is that?"

"Two milks and three cookies and you will be there lickety-split."

I thought for a while, actually too long. I had become rather proficient at map reading, but cookies and milk really? Where was that on any map?

So, without further ado I headed out from the nursery sector and began looking around.

Because my Antenna Positioning System(APS) was still not fully operational, I aimlessly wandered about for several days. During this time, I ran into Santiago, a local way finder, who successfully led me to my destination commenting, "that's 2 right turns and 3 left turns."

I introduced himself to the operational manager of the area and was shocked to find out that the midden was basically the garbage dump and cemetery, containing items brought in from dust bins and street cleaning.

"Oh m...m...my," I said. "Ex...aa...actly what am I sup..p..posed to do here? The place is a me...me...mess."

From behind a pile of rubbish came the raspy voice of Graves, affectionately known as El Diggar.

"Mess, really! Have you ever seen a neatly organized garbage dump? "This isn't the Library of Congress. Now start sorting. Old or unused foodstuffs go in one pile. Discarded exoskeletons another. Frass is over there and dead bodies to the far right. And missy you might want to consider getting some serious work clothes, like pants and gloves."

Embarrassed, I replied, "uh, th...thank you, sir. I'll ge...ge...get ri...ri...ght on it."

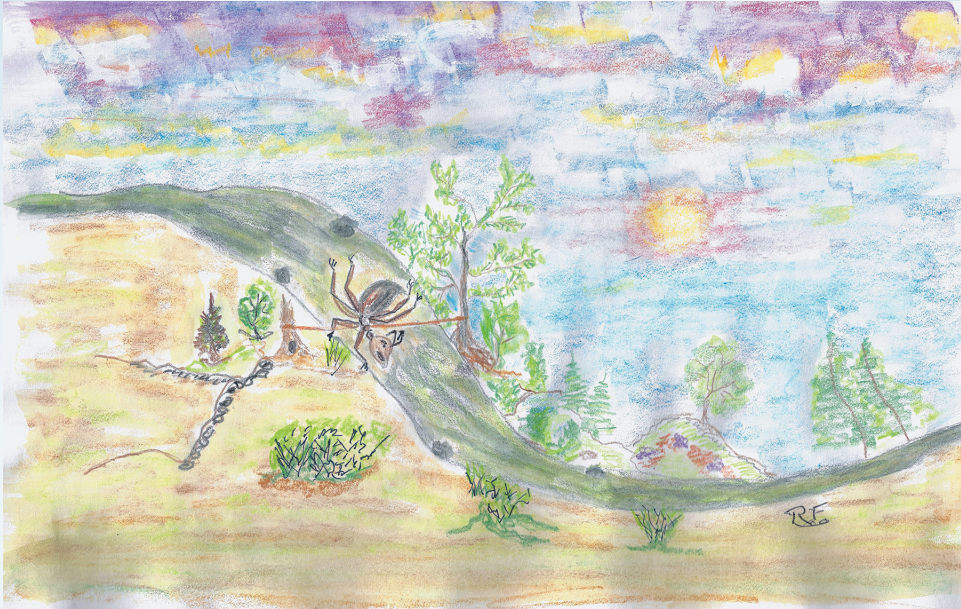
I dove into the work, and Graves, who thought I would not be able to do the job, soon realized after several days that I was quite reliable and industrious, outworking my larger and stronger colleagues.

"You have a penchant for organizing things," he observed. "Your predominant work ethic will allow me to streamline operations, supplant others, and earn a promotion.

Within a week's time I had cleared the backlog of waste piles, which brought accolades from Nightshade, the Super. This did not endear me to my coworkers who began to eye me with suspicion.

"You need to slow down a bit Antonia," commented Ravenswood. "You're making us look bad. You may injure yourself."

At the close of one day as I was preparing to leave the worksite, I tripped and fell, breaking one of my legs. I ascribed it to my lack of coordination, not observing the rope strategically placed across my path.



I spent the next two weeks in sick bay in order for the leg to be treated and heal. During that time, I gave some thought to improving the waste management operation, and because sick bay also had access to the library, I read a number of very helpful articles. I learned that sorting was very important, but the idea of recycling and the newer concept of upcycling might be very beneficial. So, when I was back on my legs, I talked to a colleague about the idea of repurposing the stuff that ended up in the dump. I proposed a mercantile enterprise.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, but if you want to try it, I'll help," offered good-natured Hallow, the Half-Wit, who liked the idea of marketing and selling packages but did not fully understand what I meant.

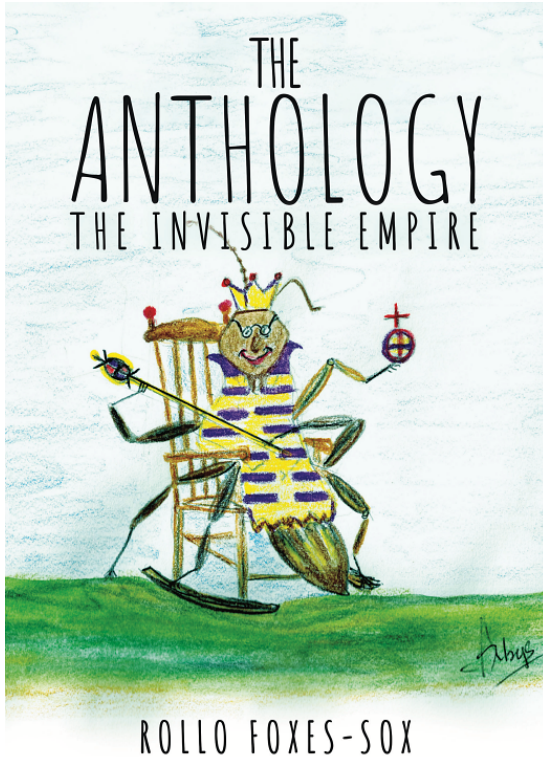
And so, I began collecting virtually everything, that had been discarded and put them in packages. After hours I carted them to upper levels where transporters lived. I asked that they be distributed to any interested buyers.

I soon learned that nobody was interested, and so they were haphazardly strewn around the outside of the hill. The gossip among resistant staff was that this was a cockamamie idea.

"Whose cuckoo idea was this anyway? Garbage is garbage and that's it."

Regrettably the plan became a source of laughter in many gossip circles. Hallow became distraught as he very much wanted to become a successful merchant.

I remained steadfast about my idea. I had read that unused food stuffs, rotting vegetables and decaying bodies all had value in the plant ecosystem as fertilize. As I was considering additional options, a note arrived from the Office of the Headmistress requiring me to report to school.



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