

Marcus and the Amazons

Geoffrey Philp

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Published by Mabrak Books

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First electronic edition 2011

Philp, Geoffrey, 1958—

Marcus and the Amazons / Geoffrey Philp.

p. cm.

Summary: After traveling through the forest, Marcus returns to his home and discovers that Amazons have enslaved his colony and imprisoned Princess Amy, his bride-to-be. With the help of his friends from the forest, Marcus must save Princess Amy and rally his colony to stand against the Amazons. But during his stay in the forest, Marcus has also renounced violence. Will Marcus succeed?

ISBN: 978-1-4524-1099-9

[1. Philp, Geoffrey, 1958--. 2. Ants--Juvenile literature. 3. Civil rights movement--Juvenile literature. 4. Friends and relationships--Juvenile literature. 5. Caribbean--Juvenile literature.] I. Title.

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For Kamau Brathwaite



The Abduction

Perched on a blade of grass, Princess Amy and her friend Jennifer looked up at the star-filled sky and whispered their wishes to the moon. A firefly hovered over their heads and blinked away the darkness that surrounded them.

“I wish Marcus were here,” said Amy wistfully, as she looked across the field that smelled of jasmine and gardenias.

“I wish I could fly like that firefly,” said Jennifer, admiring the lazy loops of the firefly in the summer air.

“Not me,” said Amy. She shook her head. “I’m afraid of heights. But I do like its light.”

The firefly landed on a nearby fern and continued blinking. The fern’s tips were wet with moonlight.

“But you’re already a light,” Jennifer teased.

“What do you mean?” asked Amy. She came closer to Jennifer and stretched her arms, slender as blades of bluegrass, over her head.

“For Marcus, silly,” said Jennifer. She patted Amy on her arm. “Has he told you when he’s coming back from the forest?”

“In about three months,” Amy sighed. She looked up at the stars again.

“I still don’t know why he had to go into the forest now.”

“Jeremiah, his teacher—”

Jennifer interrupted Amy. “Jeremiah was his teacher?”

“Yes. Before he died, Jeremiah told Marcus to go into the forest to find ways to help our brothers and sisters.”

“But why now? And especially when there are so many rumors about the Amazons coming our way.”



“Marcus says if I became the queen of our colony, I would always need someone to tell me the truth. He wants to be that someone. That’s why he had to go into the forest.”

“But there are so many outlaws in the forest,” said Jennifer. “Isn’t he afraid of them?”

“Marcus said we shouldn’t be afraid of the outlaws.”

“Why not?”

“Because they’re just trying to find a different way from everyone else. Marcus’s father taught him never to be afraid of anyone. Formica or Amazon.”

“Well, there’s *someone* who he should be afraid of,” Jennifer laughed. She smacked her arms together.

“Who?” asked Amy, her eyes widening.

“Me,” said Jennifer, and she laughed. “He will have to answer to me if he doesn’t come back soon to help you pick out your wedding dress. Have you started looking?”

“No, I’ve been busy with the preparations for the summer festivals. I completely forgot,” Amy admitted.

“Well, you better hurry. It’s the biggest day of your life,” said Jennifer. “Those spiders are always late when you ask them to make anything and the aphids are always stingy with their honeydew.”

“I didn’t know you were so prejudiced! But, I’ll begin tomorrow,” Amy reassured her. “I promise you.”

Just then, an army of Amazons, led by Captain Bull O’Grady, burst through the thorny brush. One of the soldiers knocked Jennifer out of the way and grabbed Amy.

“I’ve got her!” the soldier screamed. He dragged Amy toward the captain, who rubbed his antennae together.

“Help!” cried Amy. She tried to hold on to the blade of grass, but it was no use. The soldier was too strong and the grass was too slippery. She fell to the ground.

Captain O’Grady, lean and as cruel as his wasp bodyguard, pulled out his bullhorn.

“You are all prisoners of war,” he bellowed into the bullhorn. The firefly lifted off the edge of the fern and disappeared into the night.

Jennifer ran toward Amy, but some other soldiers cut her off. Their eyes looked as if they were on fire.

“Look out, Jenny!” shouted Amy. A soldier pinned Jennifer, but at the sound of Amy’s voice, she got up quickly and dodged the other soldiers.



“Run, Jenny, run,” screamed Amy. She waved her arms frantically in the air.

“No!” cried Jennifer. “You are my friend. I won’t leave you.”

“Do it for me,” pleaded Amy. The Amazons pulled at Amy’s arms. “Get word to Marcus. Tell him what has happened.”

The soldiers, wielding spears, surrounded Jennifer. They closed in on her like wasps around a wounded enemy.

“Do it for me,” Amy cried. “Marcus is the only hope for our colony”

“I will,” said Jennifer. One of the soldiers tried again to grab Jennifer, but she was too quick. She moved in the opposite direction and darted under the dark side of the grass.

As she ran through the field, she could still hear Amy’s voice ringing in her ears.

“Tell Marcus that I love him!”

In the Forest

By the time Jennifer got back to the village, the Amazons had already taken over the main roads. They had posted sentries at every crossroad and entrance, so she had to take the back roads to get to her home.

Once inside, Jennifer foraged for some food, which she put in a knapsack. She grabbed a sweater, and a shawl that she could use to hide her face and cover her head. Then she went over to Marcus's home, where she met his brother Clarence, whose steely eyes fixed on her as she approached.

"Clarence, I'm so glad to see you," said Jennifer. She uncovered her face so that Clarence could see her eyes. "They've taken Amy and I need to find Marcus."

"I know. They've also taken our little brother, Ashton. But why do you want to find Marcus? What good can he do?"

"Amy said I should find him," Jennifer explained. "That's all that matters."

"Marcus left us to go off into the forest and you still want me to help?"

"He's your brother, Clarence. We all have to do what we have to do."

"And I *don't* have to help you find Marcus," he growled and went back to cutting the dandelion stalk into thin slivers.

"Are you going to make me beg? You know I can find the trail myself. It's just easier if you tell me where it is."

"Okay," said Clarence and he dropped the stalk. "He took the eastern road and then entered the forest where there weren't any other trails."

"How do you know?"

"I went with him as far as I could, and then, I came back home. I had work to do."

“Thanks, Clarence,” said Jennifer. “You take care of yourself.”



“If you’d like, I can come with you,” Clarence mumbled apologetically.

“No, I travel alone,” said Jennifer.

Jennifer covered her face again with shawl and headed east through the fungi farms to avoid the Amazon guards. She then followed the river's edge through a

yellow field of dandelions and woodsorrel until the trail led her to a cluster of Australian pines that were so tall they seemed to touch the sky. She had reached the dreaded forest. There had been so many stories about the forest, and they never had happy endings.

Entering the forest, Jennifer was frightened immediately. It was as dark as some of the deepest tunnels in the colony. The air was cold and musty. It took Jennifer a week before she found Marcus's trail and by then her food had run out. She had to learn the ways of the forest—what food she could eat and what food to stay away from.

Another week passed before she finally found Marcus. When Jennifer saw Marcus, she could barely recognize him. He was wearing a brown tunic that only outlaws wore. What was even worse, he was sitting on a rock near the roots of a banyan, talking and laughing with an old, grey wasp, a spindly, black spider, and a pear shaped aphid. *Living in the forest must have driven him mad*, thought Jennifer.

"Marcus, Marcus," called Jennifer. "I've been searching all over the forest for you."

Marcus rose quickly to his feet and so did his friends. Jennifer stopped. She held her breath in anticipation as they came closer.

"Don't be afraid, Jennifer," Marcus assured her. "These are my friends. We're all here learning from each other."

"¿Que esta pasando?" asked the aphid. He moved beside Marcus to protect him from the intruder. Marcus whispered to him, and then, turned to Jennifer.

"This is Walter," said Marcus. He embraced the aphid.

"Es un placer, señorita," said the aphid. He bowed his head like a knight of the Spanish court.

"This is Nancy," said Marcus, presenting the spider.

“Respect,” said the spider and she curtsied to Jennifer. Her dress billowed out, with deep red pleats showing over black creases.

Marcus nodded toward the wasp. “And this is Herood.”

Jennifer was afraid. She had never been this close to a wasp. She had always been told that they were mean, vicious, and to be avoided at all costs.



“Enchanté, mademoiselle,” said the wasp and he did a flourish. His arms were scarred like those of an old warrior, yet he seemed very peaceful.

“It’s nice to meet you,” said Jennifer to the three. She turned to Marcus. “You need to come with me now. We need your help.”

“Why? What happened?” asked Marcus.

“The Amazons have invaded the village and they’ve taken Amy.”

“They’ve done what?”

Marcus tightened the rope around his tunic and readied himself for more of the bad news.

“And they’ve also taken Ashton.”

Marcus picked up his walking stick that Jeremiah had bequeathed to him. Then he quickly gathered his belongings into a small bag. Nancy helped him find a spare shirt and stuffed it into the side pocket of the bag.

“Marcus, is there any way we can help you?” asked Nancy.

“Stay here until I send word,” Marcus implored. “I will see you soon, my friends.” He shouldered his bag and pointed with his walking stick. “Let’s go, Jennifer.”

Herood, Nancy, and Walter waved goodbye as Jennifer and Marcus headed west toward the village. Jennifer waited until they were far away from Marcus’s friends before she spoke.

“I never thought I’d see you dressed like an outlaw. The son of a hero, a decorated soldier, hanging out with spiders, aphids, and wasps!”

“Like I said, we’re learning from each other.”

“Learning what?”

“That we don’t have to hate each other. That we can help each other.”

“But what would others in the village think?”

“I’m just trying to live by what I know is true,” said Marcus confidently. “So if the others in the village want to think that I and my friends are outlaws, then I’ll just have to live with that.”

“Really?” Jennifer scoffed. “You mean you trust your friends that much?”

“With my life,” said Marcus. “With my life.”

Home Again

It was late in the afternoon when Jennifer and Marcus entered the village. As they walked through the streets, Jennifer gasped at the changes that had taken place. The fungi farms, the main food supply for the colony, were overrun with weeds and garbage was piling up along the pathways. New signs were popping up everywhere: AMAZONS ONLY.

Yet Marcus seemed unmoved by the changes. He guided Jennifer back to his home. There they saw Clarence working, making neat piles of leaves near the front of the yard.

“Clarence!” shouted Marcus, and he ran over to meet his brother.

At first, Clarence did not recognize Marcus. But when Jennifer removed her shawl, he realized that it was Marcus and ran to greet him.

“Marcus, you look so different,” said Clarence. “I almost mistook you for an outlaw.”

“You can’t always believe your eyes,” said Marcus. “Living in the forest teaches you that.”

“It sure does,” said Jennifer. “I’ll leave you two to get re-acquainted. I have some foraging to do, and I have to find out where they’re keeping Amy.”

“Or find out if she’s dead,” said Clarence.

“Don’t say that!” Jennifer cried. “Never say that.”

“I’m just saying, don’t get your hopes up.”

“Goodbye, Clarence,” said Jennifer in disgust. She turned to Marcus. “As soon as I find out anything, I will let you know.”

“Thanks, Jennifer,” said Marcus. “And you be careful.”

“I survived the forest, didn’t I?” said Jennifer. She pulled the shawl over her face, looked right and left, and beat a path toward the capital of the colony.

Clarence picked up a dead leaf, held it up to the dying sun, then threw it on a pile of leaves. The leaves rustled under the weight.

“I guess Jennifer told you what happened to Amy,” said Clarence, as he picked up another leaf.

“Yes,” said Marcus, and he loosened his tunic. “She also told me about Ashton.” He searched for somewhere to put down his bag and his walking stick.

“And I suppose you are here to rescue them?” Clarence sneered.

“I will do my best to free them,” said Marcus.

“Papa used to talk like that. It’s what got him killed.”

“Papa’s dead?” The bag dropped from under Marcus’s arm. He walked over to a nearby log and sat down. He placed the walking stick near his left leg.

“How did it happen?” Marcus asked.

“They came in the night. Then suddenly there was rumor of a Formica revolt. But most of us didn’t believe it.”

Marcus stretched out his legs. It had been a long walk through the forest. Dark mud, thick as jelly, still stuck to his legs.

“After Jennifer left, there was a bloody battle. We heard that our queen and most of the royal family were dead. The airwaves were flooded with all kinds of rumors and we became fearful. We would have done anything to be secure again. So Papa gathered some of the older soldiers and they went to fight in the capital. He never came back.”

“What do you mean, he never came back? Where is Papa buried?”

“They paraded his dead body through the streets and then took him outside the walls of the colony. No one knows where he and the other rebels—”

“You mean freedom fighters.”

“Call them what you want to call them. They’re all dead somewhere, thousands of them, in unmarked graves beyond the walls of the colony.”





Marcus bowed his head. His father had told him about the Amazons' cruelty, but they had never done anything like this before.

"The next morning, we were told we had a new queen. And because we didn't want to die, we accepted the news and went back to work," said Clarence. "But with so many dead from the uprising, the Amazons needed palace workers. That's when they came and took Ashton."

“He’s just a grub! Is he alive?”

“Yes, he’s living in the palace. I tried to save him when they came, but they were stronger than me. I could only get him a job to care of the Amazon queen and her royal family.”

“Doing what?”

“Ashton prepares the food, feeds them, and cleans up after them,” said Clarence.

“They’re that lazy?” asked Marcus. “Can’t they do that for themselves?”

“The Amazons say they are the warrior tribe. Work like that is beneath them.”

“Is that why we now have “Amazon Only” places in the colony? Why we have to enter through the backs of buildings?”

Marcus opened his bag and searched for a flask of honeydew that his friend Walter had given him. He found it at the bottom of the bag. He offered some to Clarence.

“No thanks,” said Clarence. “Sipping honeydew is for royalty and outlaws.”

Marcus ignored him. “So how come they left you?” asked Marcus. He took a sip of the honeydew. It was cool and sweet.

“They knew I was a law-abiding citizen,” said Clarence. “They knew I wasn’t going to make any trouble.”

“So do you know what they did with Amy?”

“No. I told you, I’m a worker. I don’t worry about things like that. I work and I work and I work. I have worked from the day I was born and I will work until the day I die. And when that happens, they can put me in an unmarked grave, just like Papa.”

“I still can’t believe that you didn’t give our father a proper burial. It’s just not right.” Marcus placed the honeydew gently in his bag.

“They said he was a traitor and that was all he deserved,” said Clarence.

“Did you at least try to find out where he was buried,” said Marcus.

“Why bother, Marcus? We’re just Formicas. We’re born, we work, and we die. Each of us is one in a million. It’s just not worth it.”

“Not worth it!” said Marcus. He rose to his feet. “We are Formicas. Our ancestors built pyramids and leveled hills.”

“Marcus, I know the speech,” said Clarence. “I heard it a million times from Papa.”

“But did you believe it?” asked Marcus. He stepped toward Clarence.

“Whether I believed it or not doesn’t matter,” said Clarence, as he backed away from Marcus. “He’s dead isn’t he?”

“He’s only dead if we forget about him and what he stood for,” said Marcus.

“Then, he’s dead to me,” said Clarence. “Dead is dead. At least I’m alive and I’ve got work to do.”

Clarence looked around the yard at the piles of leaves. He was pleased with the work he had done for the day. Tomorrow he would wake up to a new day and new piles.

“Is this living, Clarence? Bowing to the Amazons every day? Living in their shadow as if we were nobodys? That’s not living. That’s surviving.”

“Marcus, you can call it anything that you want,” Clarence grumbled. He turned his back to Marcus. “I have a roof over my head and food on my table. That’s all I need or want. I’m alive.”

“That’s not being alive. I know Papa didn’t teach us to be like that.”

“If you loved Papa so much, you should have stayed. Papa had big plans for you. But you decided to leave Ashton and me and go live in the forest with your outlaw friends.”

“I had to go,” said Marcus. “Papa understood that.”

“We all have to do what we have to do,” said Clarence.

“I agree with you, Clarence,” said Marcus. He pulled Clarence to his shoulder, but Clarence moved away. He had never seen Marcus or anyone behave like this

before. Clarence was embarrassed. He figured the embrace must be something Marcus had learned from living in the forest.

“I’ll get your room ready,” said Clarence, and he lowered his eyes. “Tomorrow is Monday and we have a big week ahead of us.”

“I’ll be there soon,” said Marcus. “I’m just going to sit out here and think a while. I need a plan to rescue Amy.”

“Suit yourself,” said Clarence, and he went inside their home.

Marcus watched his brother go. Maybe he was only imagining it, but Clarence’s shoulders seemed a little more stooped, a little more bent than when he last saw him. Or maybe Clarence was just tired. From the time they were small, Clarence had always taken care of him and Ashton. He had always been such a good older brother.

The sun lowered over the hills and the night crept in with the sound of crickets chirping under the dried leaves and wet pine needles. Marcus stretched out his legs and gazed at a swarm of fireflies that flew past the moon.

Marcus thought about Amy. Was she safe? What was happening to her? Wherever she was, did she see the beautiful moon that was rising over their village?

The Betrayal

Clarence waited until he was sure Marcus was fast asleep before he snuck out and went to the palace. He looked up at the walls with the flags and banners and shook his head. Wasp bodyguards watched from on high.

Clarence had never liked the palace, even when his own queen was on the throne. But now that Marcus had returned from the forest, everything had changed. It was too late to save Marcus, but Ashton still stood a chance. He had promised his father that he would take care of Ashton, and he was going to keep that promise by any means necessary.

Entering the palace through a secret passageway in the rear, Clarence was led by the guards into the Royal Sitting Room. They waited behind a heavy screen of ivy for a summons.

High on a platform with narrow steps, Queen Victoria settled back on her throne. Wrapped in her royal garb, she was as plump as a butternut squash. A heavy green curtain of vines hung over the back of the throne, where Captain Bull O'Grady stood in waiting.

The Queen signaled to the guards and they guards parted the curtain. Clarence crawled on his belly up to the edge of the dais. When Captain O'Grady saw Clarence, he emerged from the shadows.

"What do you want, vermin?" asked Captain O'Grady. He pointed his spear at Clarence.

Clarence tried to rise to his feet, but the palace guards put their feet on the back of his neck so he couldn't move.

“Vermin, you do not look at the Queen!” Captain O’ Grady sneered. He motioned to the guards to press down harder on Clarence’s neck.

Clarence slumped down even lower on the cold palace floor. He hid his face in the edge of the carpet. Dusty mold covered his body.

“Now, now,” said the Queen. The guards backed away from Clarence. “We must not be so hard on Agent 800. He has been a very useful ally in our conquest of the Formicas. Without his valuable information, we would not have been able to find out who the rebels were and where they were hiding, and finally defeat them. Isn’t that true, Agent 800?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Clarence.

“It’s ‘Yes, Your Majesty’!” screamed Captain O’Grady. “And don’t you forget that, vermin.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” said Clarence.

“Excellent,” said the Queen. “Agent 800, what brings you to the palace at night?”

“I have important news, Your Majesty,” said Clarence.

“It must have been important. You’ve broken all the rules of security to come here,” said the Queen.

“It better be,” said Captain O’Grady. He leaned his spear against the wall and pulled out his baton.

“It is *very* important,” said Clarence. He looked up at the hem of the Queen’s robe.

“Well, what is it Agent 800? I don’t have all night,” said the Queen impatiently.

“Before I tell you the news, you have to promise me something,” said Clarence.

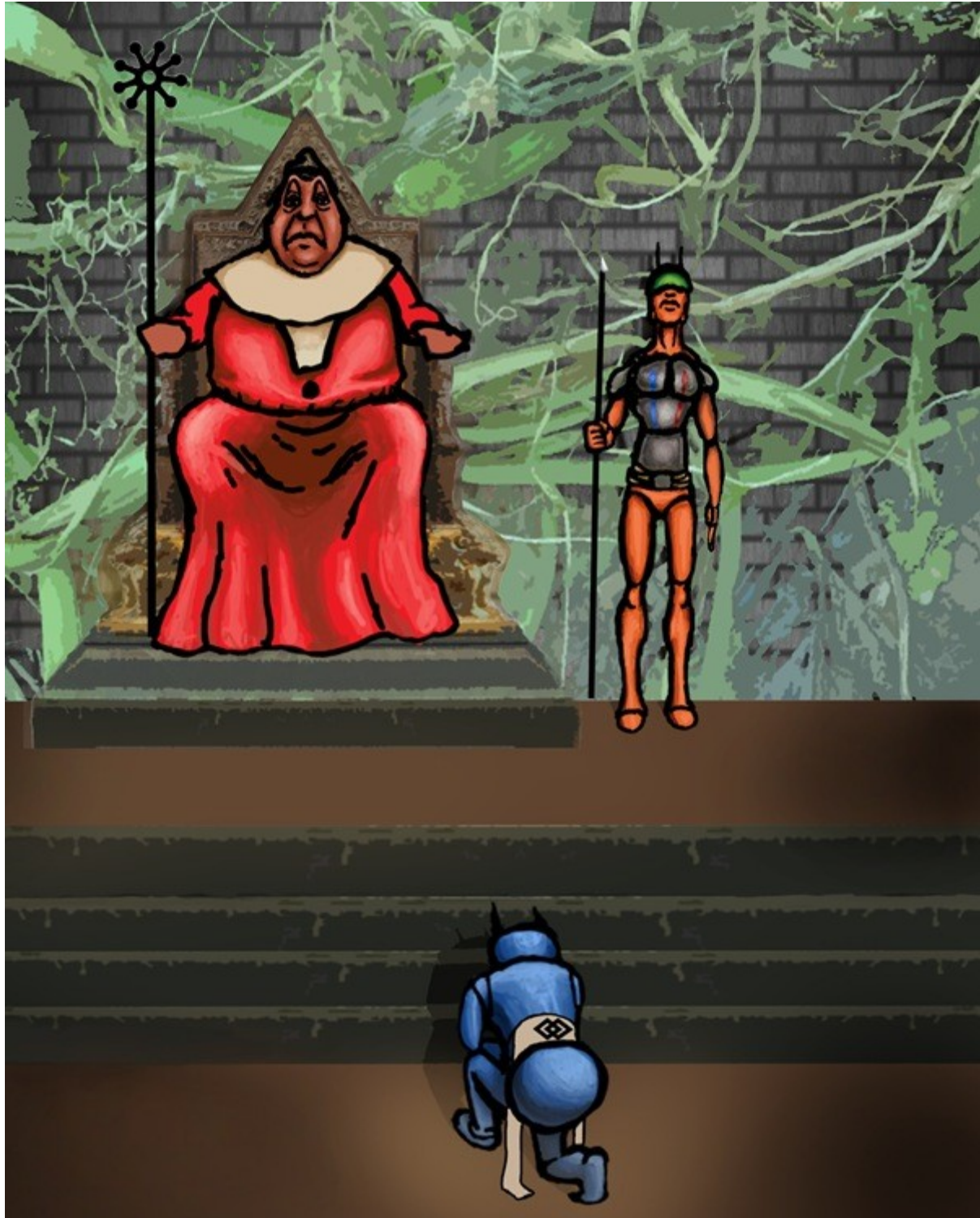
Captain O’Grady moved down one step. He held his baton high, as if he were going to hit Clarence.

“The queen does not bargain with vermin,” said Captain O’Grady “You will tell us or we will beat it out of you.”

“Then you will have to kill me and then you’ll never know,” said Clarence.

Rushing down the steps of the platform, Captain O’Grady waved his baton over Clarence's head. The Queen tapped her scepter on the floor and the captain froze.





“Now, now, Captain O’Grady,” said the Queen. “Agent 800 has always given us excellent information about the rebels. I suppose we could listen to him. He is our friend. Aren’t you Agent 800?”

“Yes, ma’— I mean, yes, Your Majesty,” said Clarence. He cleared his throat.

“So what do you want in exchange for your information?” asked the Queen.

“I want you to promise me that for as long as the Amazons rule, my little brother Ashton will live here in the palace,” said Clarence. Then he added, “And even when he grows older, he will not be drafted into the army. I want him to have a good life here.”

Queen Victoria sat back on her throne and thought about the deal. She leaned forward, extended her scepter, and touched Captain O’Grady on his side. He walked back up to the throne. The Queen whispered something to him. Captain O’Grady nodded.

“This must be very important,” said the Queen. “I will trust you and grant your wish. Captain O’Grady will make sure that it happens.”

The captain lowered his head and looked at the floor. He put his baton back in its sheath.

“So what is your valuable information, Agent 800?” demanded the Queen.

“My brother Marcus is back in town. He is staying at our home.”

“And why should this be of any concern to us?”

“My brother Marcus has never been like the rest of us. He always listened to my father’s stories about the glory days of the past and the grand legends about the Formica dynasty.”

“Aaaah,” said the Queen. “A daydreamer.”

“And now he had returned from the forest,” said Clarence.

“What?” The Queen gasped. “He was living in the forest? A daydreamer and an outlaw? He is dangerous.”

“Yes, yes, Your Majesty,” said Clarence. “And he’s even more different from when he left.”

“How so?”

“He seems more determined in everything that he does,” said Clarence.

“Even if he is an outlaw and a daydreamer, why should I fear one Formica?”

“Because you’ve put his bride-to-be high up in the Tower,” said Clarence.

“Princess Amy?” asked the Queen. “Another daydreamer. Isn’t she the one who spends all her days and nights looking out the bars of her cell?”

“Yes,” said Clarence. “She is the only one left from the old Formica dynasty. I think you’re holding her until your official coronation next week. And then, I suppose, she will be of no use to you.”

The Queen smiled to herself. Clarence was smart. Too smart.

“Dangerous rebels,” said the Queen. “Yes, this is important information. Agent 800, once again, you have proven yourself to be a valuable ally to our tribe.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Clarence nodded. He began edging into to the curtain, careful not to turn his back to the Queen.

“Not so fast, Agent 800,” said the Queen.

“Yes, Your Majesty?” asked Clarence. He stopped in his tracks.

“First, you were not dismissed,” said the Queen. “And I have my own questions.”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“I’ve often wondered why you would betray your own tribe.”

“My brother Ashton is the only one who matters to me,” said Clarence. “I am also a law-abiding Formica. Now that the Amazons rule, you are our queen. You care for us and protect us. We cannot live without you.”

“Well spoken,” said the Queen. She applauded. “But now you will make a promise to me.”

“Yes,” said Clarence, fearing the worst.

“You will stay by your brother’s side through thick and thin. You will report his every move to me through the usual channels.”

“The fireflies?”

“Yes,” said the Queen. “I want to know about everything that happens. The fireflies will relay everything to Captain O’Grady. He will inform me about everything that is happening in my kingdom.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” said Clarence. “I will tell you everything that I know.”

“I don’t want you to risk coming back here under any circumstances. The stakes are too high.”

“I understand, Your Majesty,” said Clarence. “I will obey your every word.”

“You had better,” the Queen demanded. “Your brother Ashton’s life depends on it.”

Meeting the Elder

The next morning, Marcus awakened refreshed. It was good to be home. He had enjoyed his time in the forest among the others who wanted to live in peace with each other and the land. But it was only on this small patch of the earth under his feet that his heart felt at rest.

Marcus washed his face in the river and feasted on a mango that had fallen from a tree. The pulp was moist and juicy. After he had finished eating, he watched the beams of light on the leaves of the wild tamarind that looped over fences into the backyards of his neighbors.

A gentle breeze waved the ferns. Marcus thought about Amy. Was she still alive? How would he free her? Lost in his thoughts, Marcus did not hear Clarence's footsteps behind him.

"You're up early," said Clarence. "What are you doing?"

"I was thinking about Amy," Marcus replied. "I was wondering if she was still alive."

"I think she is," said Clarence. "Remember what Papa told us that the Amazons did the last time."

"They killed the last members of our royal family after the coronation of their queen."

"Yes," said Clarence. "You see you weren't the only one who listened to Papa's stories."

"When is the coronation of the Amazon queen?"

"This Sunday," said Clarence. "So if you're thinking of freeing Amy, you'd better act fast. You don't have much time."

Just as Clarence spoke the words, the blast of a siren went off. Suddenly, the streets were filled with Formicas, aphids, and spiders. The sun beat down on their backs with a burning fury.

Marcus watched in fascination. "What was that?" he asked.

"Since the Amazons took over, they put up sirens. One short blast means GET TO WORK. Two short blasts mean STOP!

"Is there anything else I should know?"

"One long blast means DEATH—FALL ON YOUR KNEES OR DIE. That's what happened when Papa and all the rebels, I mean, freedom fighters, got killed."

"Has anyone been killed since then?"

"After Papa and the freedom fighters were killed, we were all afraid," said Clarence. "A few brave ones stood up during the sirens. But then, the wasps came swarming out of nowhere and killed them immediately. The word spread like wildfire. Since then, no one risked standing up whenever the sirens went off."

"So that's how they began to control us," said Marcus. "Kill a few and scare the rest with laws."

"I better get going," said Clarence, trying to change the subject. "I have to cut down some petunias for the coronation."

"I'll see you tonight," said Marcus.

Clarence did not answer him. He rushed out of the yard as if there were a fire in the fungi farms. Marcus shook his head in disbelief and went inside the house. If he was going to free Amy, he needed a plan and he would need help. But who would help?

He began remembering his father's stories about the last Amazon-Formica war. The Formicas had won that previous war, but at the cost of many lives. The Formica colony had almost been destroyed. But then the Amazons went on to capture another colony. And even though the Amazons were always outnumbered, they found new ways to outsmart and enslave their enemies.

As much as he hated to admit it, using the sirens to spread fear among the Formicas was a smart idea. As long as the Formicas believed they would die if they disobeyed, then the Amazons would rule. Forever.

Not on my watch, thought Marcus. He went to his father's room and changed from his tunic into his father's work clothes. They didn't fit him very well because his father had always been a bit chubby. *Just look at yourself now, Little Moses*, he thought. "Little Moses" is what Marcus's father used to call him, and the name had stuck, so much so that many Formicas forgot his real name, Marcus Junior.

Marcus slipped his father's work clothes over his tunic, pulled up the sleeves, and snuck out the back of the house into the fields. He blended in with the workers. No one noticed. Marcus worked side by side with the other Formicas and watched how the Amazons whipped and mistreated his brothers. Yet, he held his anger in check. *Not now*, he thought. But soon. Real soon.

Two blasts of the siren went off and the Formicas went into the shade of the palms. Marcus went over to a palm and began to chew on the pollen he found between the roots.

An older Formica came over to the shade and also began chewing on the pollen. He looked over at Marcus, but didn't say anything. Marcus looked at him and didn't say anything either. Finally, the elder moved beside Marcus.

"You're new here aren't you?" asked the elder.

"Why do you say that?" replied Marcus. He took off his father's work clothes.

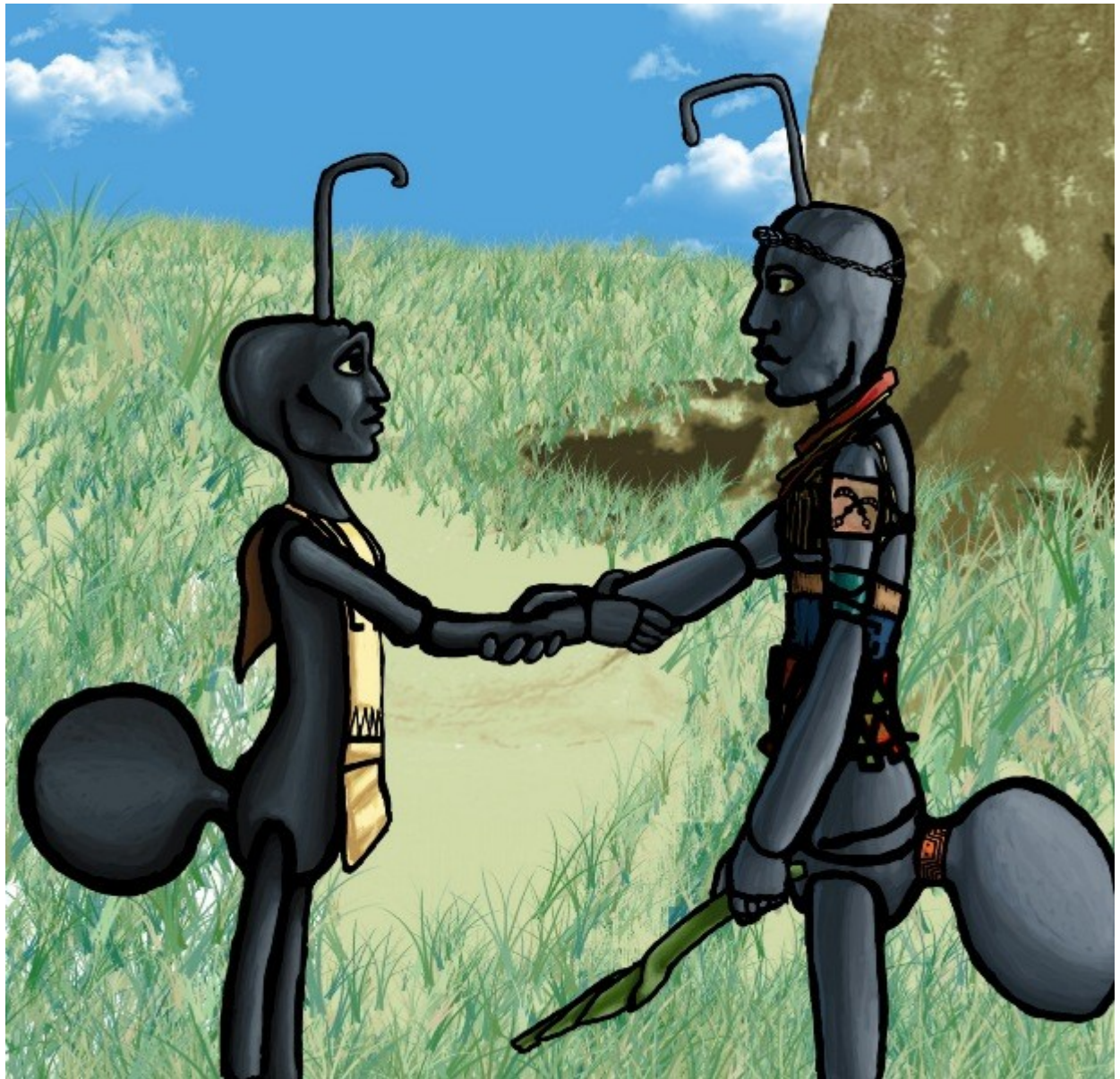
"Don't worry," said the elder and he smiled. "I'm not here to hurt you. I could spot you a mile away. You're the only one who knew to come over here and chew the pollen. I've been doing that for some time now. Alone. This tells me you know about the old ways and the old stories. My name is Deuce." He stuck out his arm.

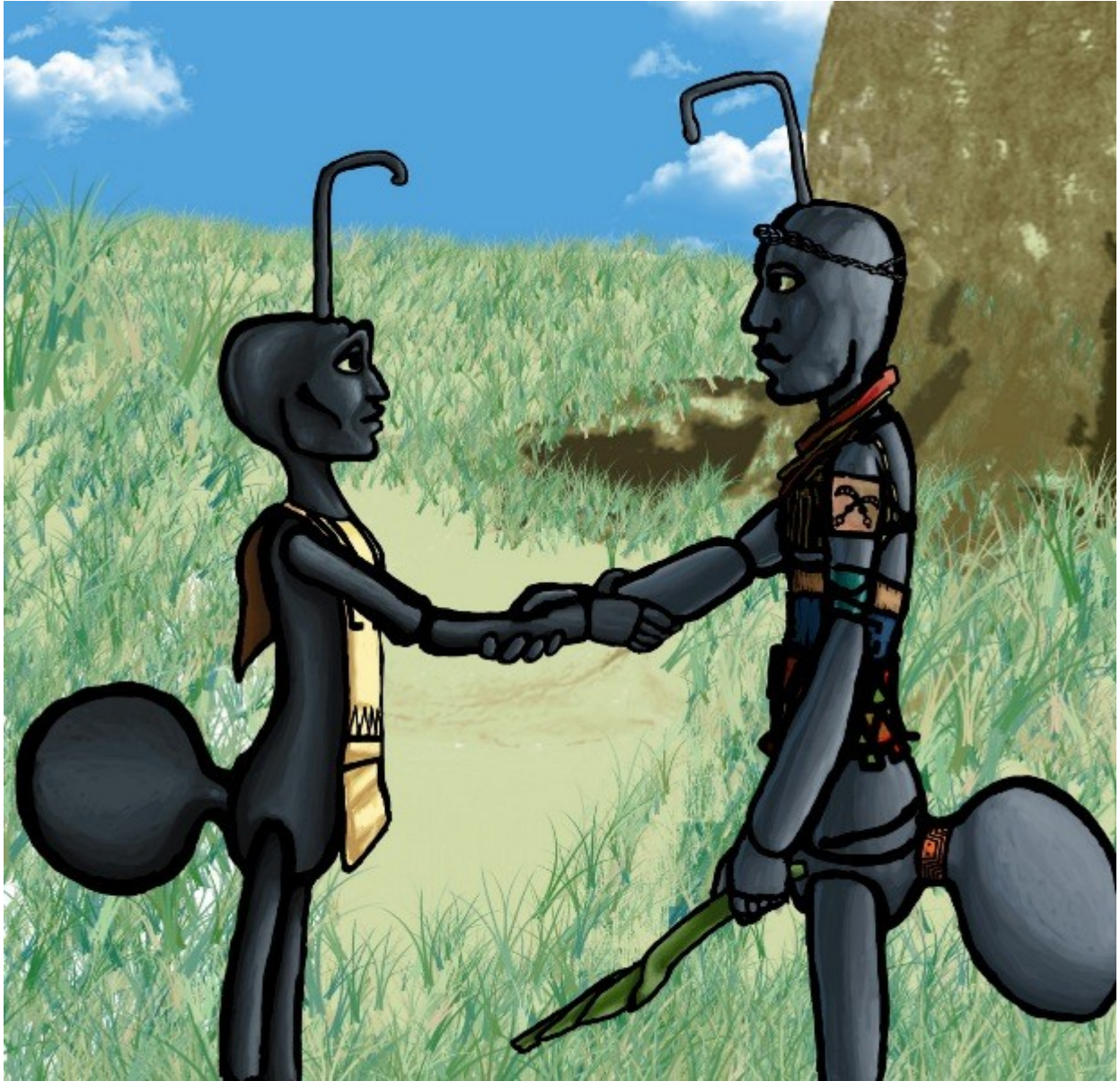
"My name is Marcus Junior."

They crossed their arms and continued chewing on the pollen. Marcus watched Deuce while they ate together and noticed the gray patches around his face.

“Aren't you “Little Moses”? Marcus Senior's boy?”

“Yes,” said Marcus.





“Your father was a fine soldier,” Deuce nodded. “A fine soldier. Too bad what happened to him.”

“And to so many others,” said Marcus. “But it’s good he never lived to see us like this.”

Deuce picked up another piece of pollen, turned it over, and offered it to Marcus. Without hesitating, Marcus took the gift from Deuce.

“So, Marcus, what’s the plan?”

Marcus was startled. *Was the elder a mind reader? How did he know?*

“Don’t look at me so surprised,” Deuce laughed. “One look at you and I knew you must have a plan. Someone like you can’t look at all of this suffering and not have a plan.”

“I haven’t thought it through yet,” said Marcus.

“Well, you better think it through quickly. The coronation is on Sunday, and once the new queen is crowned, then you know us Formicas, we will follow the law, no matter what.”

“I’ve been thinking and thinking about the old stories,” said Marcus.

“Which ones?” asked Deuce. “I always liked the old stories.”

“I’m thinking of the story where Prince Malachi is in the cave of the dragon and he can’t escape until he learns the name of the dragon.”

“Holdfast,” said Deuce excitedly. “I always liked that story. Prince Malachi thought he was doing the right thing until he learned the name of the dragon.”

“My father and my teacher, Jeremiah, liked that story too.”

“Jeremiah was your teacher? You come from a great lineage.”

“But I don’t think my lineage or the stories can help us now. The Amazons have changed. They now use sirens instead of dragons to control us. They’ve taught us to hate our cousins, the wasps, and the spiders. And for what? It’s just not right.”

Marcus swallowed the juice from the pollen. It was almost as sweet as the pollen he had eaten in the forest.

“We can’t bring down the Amazons with the ways of our fathers,” said Marcus. “We have to combine the old ways with something new.”

“I hate to say it, but the sirens work,” said Deuce. “For a long time, we’ve been organizing in silence, waiting for someone to lead us. But everyone is so afraid. No one will lead us.”

“I will lead the Formicas,” said Marcus.

“Are you sure?” asked Deuce. “They might kill you.”

“Anything is better than living like this,” said Marcus.

For the rest of the week, Marcus worked side by side with Deuce. Then, secretly at night, Marcus taught the freedom fighters the ways of the forest.

“Living in the forest, I learned that I should always live up to what I know is right,” said Marcus. “I also learned that we are one. So if I hurt another, I hurt myself. And that’s why we’re not starting another war against the Amazons.”

At first Deuce had resisted, but then he gave Marcus the benefit of the doubt and recruited Formicas.

Word spread through the colony that Marcus—or “Little Moses,” as he was now being called again—was planning a revolt against the Amazons. The Formicas, tired of the whips and the sirens, began rallying behind Marcus.

“Have you figured out what you’re going to do?” asked Deuce.

“On Friday, we’re going to lead a march into the capital,” said Marcus. “We’re going to make our demands known to the Amazons.”

“Are you crazy? Do you actually think that is going to work? We’ve got to fight, Marcus. Fight!”

“We’ve tried that before,” said Marcus. “All the wars we have fought have never resulted in peace. If we fight the Amazons and blood is spilled, there will simply be fighting again and again and again. We will have to win this time by peaceful means.”

“Do you think it will work?” asked Deuce.

“Love never fails,” said Marcus. “Tell our brothers and sisters that we will march to free the aphids, spiders, wasps, and fireflies. We will free all the prisoners.”

“*All* the prisoners, Marcus?”

“We will set the captives free,” said Marcus.

The Secret

On the Thursday evening after Marcus and Deuce had finished training the marchers, Jennifer met them near the fungi farms. Marcus told her about their plans, but Jennifer said nothing until Deuce left them. As Deuce walked away, Jennifer took the shawl away from her face.

“I didn’t want to say anything until he left,” said Jennifer.

“Why?” asked Marcus. “You can trust Deuce. I do.”

“You’re too trusting, Marcus. There are rumors about a traitor in the movement. Someone close to you.”

“That’s to be expected,” said Marcus. “Change is never easy, and all revolutions like this have traitors.”

He picked up a blade of junegrass and chewed on it. Dew ran down the side of the stem.

“Not everyone is convinced that we’re doing the right thing,” said Marcus. “And when your enemy uses fear, then it’s hard for others to find courage to do the right thing.”

“I suppose you’re right,” said Jennifer. She shrugged. Then, her eyes brightened. “I’ve found out where they’re keeping Amy. She is in the Tower. They’re waiting for the coronation before they kill her. We need to do something now.”

Marcus thought for a moment. Was this the right time to call on Walter, Herood, and Nancy? But he couldn’t go. He needed to be with the marchers.

“I need you to do something you may not like,” said Marcus. He looked into Jennifer’s eyes.

“Marcus, I’ll do anything you ask,” said Jennifer. She looked back into Marcus’s eyes.

“I want you to go back into the forest and tell Walter, Herood, and Nancy that I need their help.”

“Are you sure they will come with me?”

“Just tell them, ‘Marcus sent me,’ and they will come.”

“I will, Marcus, I will,” Jennifer promised. She covered her face once more and walked with Marcus until they were near his home. Then she left Marcus and headed back into the forest.

As soon as Marcus got home, he went down by the river to wash his face. The wild petunias were in bloom and Marcus lifted his head to catch a whiff of their perfume. He inhaled deeply and looked up at the moon, still radiant in the sky.



Marcus was troubled by the news from Jennifer about Princess Amy being held in the Tower. But he was even more troubled by the rumors of a traitor in the movement. Jennifer had said it was someone close to him. Who was the traitor? Deuce? Clarence? Was it Jennifer herself?

Marcus walked back to the house. As he stood in the silence of the yard with his thoughts swirling, Clarence came out of the house. When he saw Marcus, Clarence shook his head and came over to Marcus's side.

"I know you're planning something," said Clarence. "I can see it in your eyes. It's the same look that you've had since we were grubs."

"You know me well, big brother," said Marcus. "We're planning a strike tomorrow."

"What?" asked Clarence. "Are you trying to get yourself killed, like Papa did?"

"No, this is a peaceful march," said Marcus. "We're close to a million."

"And who's the leader?"

"I am," said Marcus confidently. "But I need you to keep this a secret."

Clarence began pacing around Marcus. Then, he walked away angrily. Once he was out of Marcus's sight, he ran down to the river. Clarence waited for a few minutes before putting his arms up in the air, as if he were surrendering. Fireflies buzzed around his head and then zoomed away.

Clarence walked back to the front of the house and leaned against the door.

"This is all for Amy, isn't it? You would risk the lives of a million Formicas to save your bride-to-be, wouldn't you?"

"I would never do that," said Marcus. "This movement is bigger than me or Amy. It's for generations of Formicas to come. If we don't stand up now, we'll never be free."

"If we listen to you, we'll be free and dead," said Clarence.

"I'm sorry you feel that way," said Marcus. "I was hoping you would join us."

Marcus walked away from Clarence. He was confused. Marcus had been almost sure that Clarence would join them. After a few minutes, Clarence chased after Marcus and tapped him on the shoulder.

"That doesn't mean I won't march with you," said Clarence. "And I will keep your secret. You can trust me on that."

Marcus was surprised. For a minute, he had even thought that the rumors were true, that Clarence might be the traitor. But maybe that's all they were: rumors.

“I mean, what would Papa think if I abandoned my little brother to the Amazons? He would want me to march with you, so, I’m marching with you.”

“Papa would be very proud of you,” said Marcus.

“I’m not too sure,” said Clarence. “I’m not too sure.”

The Queen Strikes Back

Queen Victoria shifted on her throne, while two Formica servants, one on either side, fanned her face with fallen leaves. She had been waiting for Captain O'Grady, but her patience was wearing thin. He was late. She leaned forward, shifted her weight again, and tapped her foot against the edge of the platform.

"Where is Captain O'Grady?" she snapped at the two palace Formicas. Not knowing what to do, they fanned her even more fiercely.

"Get out!" she screamed. "You are all worthless!"

The servants scurried behind the curtain and then peeked out, awaiting the Queen's next command. In the meantime, she decided to amuse herself.

"Bring the little worm in here," she ordered. "I want to see why his brother would sacrifice his life for him."

Two scrawny Formicas who worked in the kitchen dragged Ashton into the chamber. Ashton had not eaten in days. When they let go of his arms, Ashton fell on the floor. He was exhausted.

"Not much to see," said Queen Victoria. "You! What's your name, worm?"

Ashton was so hungry, he could barely hold his head up. One of the Formicas poked him in his side and stepped back.

"Speak up, worm! What's your name?"

"Ash, Ashton, ma'am."

"I see good manners do not run in your family. It's Your Majesty! I'll ask again, worm. What's your name?"

"Ashton Formica, Your Majesty."

"Good. You're a quick learner, like your brother."





Ashton perked up. He looked around the room, his eyes searching every corner of the chamber.

“Marcus is here?”

“No, silly worm,” said the Queen. “Your brother Clarence.”

“Clarence is here? Tell him I want to go home. Tell him I miss Papa.”

“*This* is now your home, silly worm,” said the Queen. “And you better get used to it. You’re going to be here for a long time.”

When Queen Victoria said “for a very long time,” Ashton began to cry. He was crying so hard that the two Formicas turned their heads away.

“Take him away! Now! Take him out of my sight!” the Queen demanded. “Whimpering little worm. He is useless. Useless.”

The two Formicas grabbed Ashton by the arms and picked him up from off the floor. As they dragged him out of the chamber, his crying became so loud that his voice echoed through the palace.

“Useless,” said the Queen again, in disgust. “Absolutely useless.”

When the two palace Formicas saw Captain O’Grady coming down the hallway, they were relieved. He rushed past them and went straight into the parlor.

“My lady,” he said and bowed. “I’ve just learned that the Formicas are planning a strike tomorrow. Shall I mobilize the troops?”

The Queen eased back in her throne and tugged at the back of her robe. She looked up at the ceiling and across the palace. Captain O’Grady could tell that she was thinking, but he wanted to do something. Anything.

“We shall do nothing,” said the Queen confidently. She settled back into the throne and extended her legs under her robes.

“What, Your Majesty?” Captain O’Grady swallowed hard. He could not believe his ears. “Surely you jest, Your Highness?”

“No, you heard me correctly, Captain O’Grady. We shall do nothing.”

“We are going to let the Formicas march on the capital and do nothing?”

“Yes, Captain, we shall give them the illusion of freedom. Then, they will love us even more when we take their freedom away. We hold the reins of power. They will

have to learn that if they want to live, they will have to see the world through our eyes. For what can they do when they get here? Play music, drink honeydew, and give a few speeches?"

"Never underestimate a small band of Formicas," said Captain O'Grady. He scratched at a wound he had received from Marcus's father in the war.

"But they are harmless," the Queen sneered. She waved her arms and pointed at a small carafe of honeydew. A servant filled her cup to the brim, and then ran back behind the curtain. The Queen sipped the honeydew, savoring the taste.

"They are led by a daydreamer who wants to free his bride-to-be. His own brother has betrayed him. The very thing that he desires the most will be his downfall. Let him march."

"Yes, Your Majesty," said Captain O'Grady. He was disappointed. "I shall disband the troops immediately."

"I didn't say to do that, did I?" asked the Queen. She laughed to herself. Then she gulped down the rest of the honeydew.

"No, Your Majesty, you did not." Captain O'Grady was confused. The Queen was allowing the Formicas to march, but he shouldn't disband the troops?

"Wait until they reach the capital. Then, we shall let loose the fury of war on these puny Formicas," said the Queen. "Then they shall see the full force of Amazon rage."

"And we kill the daydreamer once and for all?"

"Do not touch him!"

Captain O'Grady was again confused. Queen Victoria let him continue in his bewilderment for a few minutes and then tapped her scepter on the floor. The Formica servants ran back into the room and began fanning her.

"We don't want him to become martyr before the coronation. That would disrupt everything," said the Queen. "I suspect that is what he wants. But we shall deny him that pleasure until after I am crowned."

“And his traitorous brother?”

“He can be abused for daring to bargain with us. The audacity to think that a mere Formica could make demands to the Queen of the Amazons. As if they could ever be our equals!”

“I agree, Your Majesty. He must be punished for his crimes.”

“With him, you may do as you please.”

“With pleasure, Your Majesty,” Captain O’Grady growled. He unsheathed his baton. “That will be a pleasure.”

Freedom March

Friday morning, the sirens blared out into the streets, but no one went to work. The workers who were in the village stayed inside for their safety. An eerie calm, like the silence before a hurricane, settled over the colony.

At the southern edge of the town, Marcus had gathered the Formicas. They marched with him through the countryside and into the capital. It was an impressive sight: a million Formicas dressed up in their Sunday best, marching down the main street. And Marcus, holding Jeremiah's walking stick, was leading them.

Many who were too afraid to march watched from their windows. Some of the elders held up the young, so that they could see history happening before their eyes.

As the Formicas marched north, they passed more and more buildings and hotels with the signs AMAZONS ONLY. Once again, Marcus felt anger rising in his chest. But he knew he had to remain unruffled. He had to be an example for the movement.

The hot dusty road stretched before them and the sun beat down on their heads as they marched. Their legs buckled under the long trek, but Marcus knew it was worth it. Jeremiah, his teacher, had always said, "Freedom never comes without sacrifice."

They had already freed the spiders and the last stop was the aphid factory, where honeydew for the coronation was being prepared. Marcus walked up to the gates of the factory, where Captain O'Grady met him.

"Where do you think you're going, vermin?" screamed Captain O'Grady.

“My name is Marcus. Please call me by the rightful name my father gave me,”
said Marcus respectfully.





Captain O’Grady laughed. He turned to his troops, who were ready to fight.

“Troops, did you hear this? This vermin wants to be called by his ‘rightful name.’ Have you ever heard such a thing?”

“Noooooooooooooooooooo,” yelled the troops. They all started laughing at Marcus and jeering.

“Vermin, I will give you one last chance to clear the streets.”

“Or else what?” asked Marcus.

“Or else I will set my troops on you,” Captain O’Grady warned. He growled and advanced toward Marcus, as if he were going to explode at any moment.

“We are prepared for that,” said Marcus. He turned to the crowd. The sunlight beamed down on his face. “Remember, Formicas, what we discussed in church last night. What we have trained for. We will not retaliate.”

“This is an illegal strike,” screamed Captain O’Grady into his bullhorn, over Marcus’s voice. “This is your last chance. Go back to work now or you will suffer the consequences of your disobedience.”

Marcus held his arms over his head and again addressed the crowd.

“Peace, my brothers. We haven’t come this far to be stopped,” said Marcus. He turned to Captain O’Grady. “Captain, open the gates and let us in.”

“No way, vermin. You will obey *me*! The aphids belong to the Amazons. They are the spoils of war! Why don’t you stick with your own kind?”

“As long as one aphid or one spider is in captivity, none of us, Formica or Amazon, is free,” said Marcus. “For this, I am ready to die.”

“Are your brothers ready to die for *you*?” asked Captain O’Grady. He spat in Marcus’s face. “How dare you challenge me, vermin? How did you come to be a leader? Don’t you know that only Amazons are leaders?”

Captain O’Grady put his bullhorn back on his waistband and pulled out his baton.

“Troops, let’s get to work.”

Captain O’Grady opened the gates. A horde of wasps and Amazons streamed out of the factory. They had been waiting since dawn for this moment. Their anger carried them past Marcus and out into the crowd, where they began to beat the Formicas.

Captain O’Grady started with Clarence. He beat Clarence until he couldn’t walk. Then, the captain went over to Deuce and beat him too. His troops waded

through the sea of marchers and struck young and old. They beat them mercilessly, but they did not touch Marcus.

Marcus walked through the crowd, but the soldiers would not beat him. No matter how much Marcus tried to get their attention, the soldiers stayed away from him. They beat and beat and beat his brothers, right in front of his eyes, but they never touched him.

The siren for the break rang through the colony. The Amazons stopped beating the Formicas, who scrambled to the shade. Captain O'Grady wiped his baton on his uniform and pulled out his bullhorn.

"That's right, that's right," he bellowed. "Run, run, run like the vermin you are. You know who's in control here."

A soldier brought a length of chain and walked over to the captain. Captain O'Grady spun Marcus around and placed the chain around his neck.

Jeremiah's walking stick fell from under Marcus's arm.

"And you, vermin, are under arrest."

The Amazon troops rushed in and grabbed Marcus. Captain O'Grady stepped over the bodies of wounded Formicas and stood over Deuce and Clarence.

"Formicas, I have news for you. Go home and tend to your wounds. We will not retaliate, because this "Little Moses," or whatever he calls himself, has misled you. He is not a true leader. He has been doing this for himself. He only wants to free his bride-to-be who is locked away in the Tower."

Deuce looked up at Marcus, who was shaking his head in disbelief. The streets suddenly seemed narrower and Marcus felt as if he couldn't breathe.

"Say it isn't true," Deuce sobbed. His eyes were filled with tears. "Say it isn't true, Marcus."

"My bride-to-be is in the Tower," said Marcus. "But--"

But before Marcus could explain that Amy was the last princess of the Formica dynasty, that if she died, then, even if the Amazon's left, their colony would be left

without a queen, and they would die. Captain O'Grady drowned out Marcus's voice again.

"Now I will call you by your rightful name," said Captain O'Grady over the bullhorn. "Marcus Formica, in the name of Her Majesty, Queen Victoria, I hereby sentence you to death for the crimes you have committed against the Queen and our state."

As the Amazon troops surrounded Marcus, Captain O'Grady stopped them. He walked over to Clarence, and again addressed the crowd with his bullhorn.

"And you all have this Formica to thank. Clarence Formica. He has been on our side all this time. So, not only have you been betrayed by Marcus, but *he* has been betrayed by his own brother."

Deuce glared at Clarence and then at Marcus. Clarence hid his face in shame. Captain O'Grady strolled over to Marcus and gave him the bullhorn.

"Is there anything you want to say to your followers before we take you away?"

Marcus held the bullhorn. He was trembling. Everything that had seemed so clear in his mind was now shaken. Clarence, his own brother, had betrayed him. It felt as if a million wasps were stinging him in his heart.

"My brothers," said Marcus. "Go—"

The crowd began booing and throwing rocks at him, anything they could find. They were hurt and angry. They had believed in Marcus.

"Go home and think about what I said to you in church yesterday. Think about all the things that I learned in the forest."

"Liar!" an elder shrieked. He threw a rock, which hit Marcus over his left eye. Marcus held his head and fell to the ground.

"He's done," Captain O'Grady snickered. "Take him away, troops."

When the soldiers grabbed the chain, the crowd cheered. The Amazons picked up Marcus and dragged him through the middle of the crowd.

As Marcus passed Deuce, he whispered, "This is a bigger than all of us. Remember everything I told you. If you still believe, wait for my word."

"I will try," said Deuce. He crept over to the spot where Marcus had been arrested and picked up Jeremiah's walking stick.

"I will try, my brother."

Jailed!

The darkened cell of the jail was musty with the smell of rotting straw. There was barely any light, except for a single beam of moonlight that streamed through a narrow space of the bars. Marcus sat on the straw with his head bowed, the moonlight bathing the top of his head.

Since they had been put in the cell, neither Marcus nor Clarence had spoken to each other. The cell was silent except for the occasional groan from Clarence.

“Aaaaah,” Clarence turned on his side. He was still in pain from the beating.

“Are you all right, Clarence?” Marcus asked. He moved to help Clarence. For when everything was over, whether they won or lost, Clarence would always be his brother.

“No. I’m still hurt from the beating,” said Clarence. “But what would you know about that?”

“Clarence, I never meant for you to get hurt like this,” said Marcus. He stroked Clarence’s shoulder.

“Get away from me,” said Clarence. He turned his shoulders away from Marcus. “I told you not to do this. And now look what happened. But from the time we were grubs, you always wanted to do things fast.”

“What are you talking about?”

Marcus unwrapped the piece of cloth from over his left eye where he had been hit with a rock. The bleeding had stopped, but his eye was still swollen.

“I guess you’ve forgotten,” said Clarence. “You never sat still. You were always going for the quickest way. It’s like when we were little and Papa told us to race against each other on that L-shaped track.”

“I won,” said Marcus.



“You cheated,” said Clarence. “You cut across the L while I ran the full length of the track.”

Clarence raised himself up from the straw to where he could see Marcus’s face and sat with his back against the wall. They faced each other like when they were

young grubs, but Marcus still bowed his head to Clarence. Although Clarence had betrayed Marcus, Clarence was still his older brother. He would always be.

“You always wanted to win. No matter how much I said to you, ‘Slow down, Marcus,’ or ‘Marcus, you will get hurt,’ you always wanted to go fast.”

“I took the most efficient way. Papa only said, ‘Whoever gets to the end of the L wins.’ I got to the end first, so I won.”

“Call it anything you want, Mr. Speed Racer. You went too fast then, and you are going too fast now. That’s why we’re in jail and all of our brothers are now wounded.”

“Did you think the Amazons were going to give up that easily? You remember all the stories that Papa told us. You were in the church when I said that. This is a struggle that will take weeks, months, years for them to see that we deserve justice. Until then, they are going to fight back.”

“You aren’t bleeding! But I forgot, you’re ‘Little Moses,’” said Clarence sarcastically.

“Don’t you see that this is all to make me look bad? Now I know they’re afraid of me.”

“Oh, I see,” said Clarence. “You’ve got them right where you want them. You are going to die, Marcus. I told you, we must obey the law.”

“We must not obey unjust laws,” said Marcus. “If we do, we are as bad as the ones who created them.”

“And what is an unjust law?”

“A law that puts down someone for who they are,” Marcus explained.

“Oh, yeah? What if I steal something and they put me in jail. Isn’t that putting me down?”

“Stealing is something you’ve done. It’s not who you are. There’s a difference.”

“You’re a daydreamer, Marcus,” said Clarence. He rolled over on the straw and turned his back to Marcus.

Marcus crawled over to the wall of the cell. He was trying to find a warm space so that his joints wouldn't ache in the morning. He had finally found a spot when the guard came to the door of the cell.

"Visitor!" the guard roared. "Five minutes. Five minutes only!"

Marcus rose to his feet when he was that it was Jennifer. She had brought him honeydew and some pieces of strawberry.

"Jennifer, it's so good to see you. Are you okay?"

"Am I okay? Marcus, you're in prison. I'm the one who should be worried about you," said Jennifer. "Anyway, I've got some food for you"

Jennifer gave Marcus the honeydew and a few pieces of a strawberry to Marcus. The cell was so dark she could barely see him.

Marcus took the pieces of the strawberry from her, and went over to where Clarence was lying down. He offered some to Clarence, but he refused. Marcus left the pieces beside Clarence's head and went back to the cell door.

"Have you heard anything about Amy?" asked Marcus.

"No, they're still holding her in darkest cell at the top of the Tower. I'm scared for her," Amy confided. "You know that she's afraid of heights."

"I know," said Marcus. "But Amy is a tough Formica."

"That's why you love her, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Marcus. He blushed and then motioned to her. "Come closer, Jennifer."

Jennifer came as close as she could to the cell door. When she saw the wound over Marcus's eye, she almost cried.

"Marcus, your eye!"

"I'm fine," he insisted. "Are Walter, Herood, and Nancy here?"

"They're in town," Jennifer replied. "They're staying with Deuce."

"That's good," said Marcus. "They should have met a long time ago. But I guess now is as good a time as any."

“It always is,” Jennifer agreed. “Do you want me to tell them anything?”

“Tell Deuce I’ve been thinking about the old stories and how Prince Malachi freed his brothers. Tell Deuce I said, ‘Holdfast’ and he will know what to do.”

“Holdfast?”

Marcus said it loud enough for Clarence to hear. Jennifer was confused. *Maybe the wound had rattled Marcus’s brain*, she thought.

“Are you sure about this, Marcus?”

Marcus nodded even though it hurt his head.

“Holdfast.”

The Escape

High up in the Tower in a place where Princess Amy never thought she would be, strange noises bubbled up into the cell. It took every ounce of courage for her to look out the bars down to the center of the capital. Driven by their Amazon overlords, Formicas were destroying a fungi farm and making a platform for Queen Victoria's coronation.

Every day that the Amazons were in charge, they destroyed the land. Amazons couldn't see the land the way she saw it. To her, the land was something beautiful that had kept the Formicas alive for ages. Amy knew if the Amazons destroyed the land, the Formicas would die. This was why the Amazons were determined to get rid of her.

Amy also knew what would happen next. Once the official coronation took place, she would no longer be necessary. The Amazon dynasty would begin again and the Queen's family would rule over the Formicas until a new leader came to lead the resistance.

"There has to be a better way," Marcus had once said. *But where was he?* thought Amy. There were rumors in the prison that Marcus was dead, crushed when he tried to lead a revolt against Captain O'Grady. At least, that's what she heard the other prisoners saying when she listened against the walls of her cell. Some said Marcus was blind. Others that he was killed in prison. And still others that he had escaped and was planning something grand at the coronation. The guards didn't know, and Amy didn't know what to believe.

But there *was* one thing that Amy knew for sure. She had thought about it for a long time—for if there was anything good about being alone in a jail, it gave her time to think about her brothers and sisters. About Marcus.

One day Formicas would be free.

Amy stepped away from the bars and leaned against the wall. Her cell was so quiet. Although Amy had come to appreciate silence, she still longed for the laughter of her friends and the pleasure of their company.

“Who goes there?” barked the guard.

“Jennifer Formica, a friend of the prisoner.”

Amy rose to her feet and looked out the cell door. She could barely make out what was happening.

Amy hadn’t seen Jennifer in months. *What was she doing there? Was she bringing news about Marcus? Was Jennifer going to tell her that Marcus was dead?* The questions tumbled in her mind like a will o’ wisp caught in the wind.

“She has no friends,” the guard insisted. He moved menacingly toward Jennifer.

“I am her friend and I have brought her some fruit,” Jennifer said sweetly.

“The Queen says she has no friends. If the Queen says it is so, it is so,” said the guard. “Do you dare to question the Queen?”

“I’m not questioning the Queen,” said Amy. “I’m saying that I am Princess Amy’s friend.”

The guard scratched his head. This was too much for him. He didn’t want to be a guard. All he wanted to do was to be at home with his family, sipping honeydew and enjoying the games.

“And why should I let you see her? What’s in it for me?” asked the guard. He pulled out his sword.

Jennifer took a bowl of honeydew that Herood had given her and held it in the air. He rubbed his antennae in anticipation.

“I will give this to you,” said Jennifer, “if you give me a chance to see my friend.”

“How do I know that it’s any good?”

“Come closer,” beckoned Jennifer. “Let me show you how sweet it is.”

The guard put down his sword and grabbed the honeydew from Jennifer. While he was busy sipping the honeydew and not paying attention, Jennifer slipped past him and went to Amy’s cell.



“Amy, we’ve come to get you,” whispered Jennifer.

“Jennifer, what are you doing here?” asked Amy. “Is Marcus okay?”

“You’ll see. Put this on.”

Jennifer slipped one of her old dresses between the bars of the cell. She turned her face while Amy took off her prisoner’s uniform and changed into the dress. After Amy had finished dressing, she went back to the cell door.

The guard had almost finished with the honeydew. When he sensed what was happening, he ran for his sword.

“Now, Nancy!”

Nancy, the spider, rushed in and tied up the guard with her web. Then Walter, the aphid, came up behind Nancy and went over to the guard. He gently removed the keys from the guard’s waist.

Herood, the wasp, came out from the shadows and walked over to his friends.

“You must come with me, Queen Amy,” Herood insisted. “*Mon ami*, Marcus said that we should personally take care of you.”

“I’m not a queen yet,” Amy corrected him. “Queen Victoria is still on the throne.”

“She won’t be for a long,” said Herood. “But that does not matter. For I can tell you that you are already the queen of Marcus’s heart.”

“Is he all right? I heard rumors that he was dead.”

“He is very much alive and wanting to see you,” said Herood. “But we must take you away from this place of death.”

“Lead me away,” Amy replied. “I’ll be happy to be in the sunlight again and to be with my friends.

“Then, my lady,” said Herood and he extended his arm, “we are ready to go.”

The Coronation

The circle of the capital was strung with garlands of petunias and purple milkweed that released their petals into the summer air. With the buzz of wasps overhead, the colony waited for the royal carriage to appear at the northern end of the main street and then down to the entrance of the palace.

No expense had been spared for the coronation. For the extra honeydew, some of the aphids had been worked to near death to make up for lost time, and the spiders had worked overtime to make Queen Victoria's hundred-foot robe that was carried by fifty Formica servants on either side. The Queen never looked more regal.

To mark her ascension to the throne, the Queen had issued several proclamations and lauded new titles on her entourage. Of special mention was Captain O'Grady, who was promoted to general and given the title Protector of the Empire and Imperial Wizard of Amazonia, the new name of the capital.

General O'Grady strutted down the main street to inspect the grand platform that had been built for the Queen and the smaller platform where Marcus was going to be executed.

The cry of a bugle pierced the air, signaling the start of the event. Slowly the Formicas began to assemble in the capital and the Queen's procession began.

The Queen's divan made a slow circle around the capital and then up to the platform. Carried aloft by twenty Formica workers, the Queen waved to her subjects, who had been instructed to lay down ferns and palms ahead of her procession.

General O'Grady, pacing in front of the platform, waited for the Queen to be seated. He pulled out his bullhorn to silence the crowd that had been gathered against their will.

"Vermin, count yourselves lucky to be here today to witness the coronation of our most regal empress, Queen Victoria Regina, the Mistress of Heaven and Earth. She is the great mother of Amazonia, who gives life and death and to whom the sun and the moon bow every day."

Queen Victoria blushed. At General O'Grady's signal, seven Formica servants brought the crown and placed it on an altar beside a microphone at which the Queen was going to give her first speech. A hush came over the crowd. Once the crown was placed on her head, the Amazons would have secured their dynasty and all Formicas would become slaves to the Amazons.

"But before we crown our beloved Queen, I have a special treat for you. Bring forth the prisoner!"

A cart filled with straw and a makeshift jail trundled down the main street. The guards threw rotten fruit at the cart and made mocking sounds as it passed in front of them. When the rumor spread through the crowd that Marcus was going to be executed, some of the Formicas began to cry.

"They are going to kill Marcus," they wailed. "They are going to kill the dreamer and the dream."

The cart stopped in front of the platform. The guards opened the door to the jail. They grabbed the prisoner, whose face was covered with a hood, and led him up to the platform. The crowd moaned.

"Before we execute this rebel, I will allow you to see his face for the last time. This is what we do to Formicas who do not obey the law. This is what happens to outlaws who refuse to follow our instructions. Remember, Formicas, we are the law. You owe us your lives, your every breath, and if you do not follow the rule of law, you will die."

General O'Grady ripped the hood off the prisoner's head. The crowd gasped. It was Clarence. He had been gagged.

"What happened to my prisoner?" screamed General O'Grady. He unsheathed his baton and walked menacingly over to his guards.

"Where is he?"

General O'Grady stared angrily at Clarence and then pounced on one of the guards.

"Why didn't you warn me?"

"We're new," stuttered one of the guards. "We came this morning and the other guards had left already."

"I will kill those responsible. Find him and bring him back to me. Dead or alive."

The Amazon army fanned out in all directions and left only the palace guards to protect the Queen and the royal party. The guards began muttering among themselves.

Then, a few in the crowd began to laugh. The laughter spread through the crowd until it seemed as if a tremor shook the capital. General O'Grady surveyed the crowd that was now reeling with laughter.

"What's so funny? I demand that you tell me!"

"Looking for me?" asked Marcus as he swung onto the platform.

"Arrest that outlaw," screamed General O'Grady. The palace guards rushed toward Marcus. But Nancy, who had held the rope for Marcus, swooped down behind him and covered them with netting.

General O'Grady pulled the gag off Clarence and looked into his eyes.

"What's happening, vermin?" asked General O'Grady.

"Marcus escaped last night. I told him everything."

General O'Grady lifted his baton to hit Clarence, but Herood, who held Jennifer by her waist, flew down on the platform. They stood between Clarence and General

O'Grady. When General O'Grady saw Herood, he swallowed hard. He didn't know what to do.

"Call out the wasps!" General O'Grady screamed into his bullhorn. "Get them here now!"

Herood looked up at the sky and laughed heartily. Then, he turned to Marcus.

"Don't worry, my friends," said Herood. He rolled up his sleeves to show his battle scars. "If you are looking for my brothers to attack, they won't. I told them that if they tried, they would have to deal with me first."

Marcus took the bullhorn from General O'Grady.

"Brothers and sisters, for too long we have lived under Amazon rule. Today, I tell you, we are free!"

The Queen whispered to one of her servants and he snuck away without being noticed.

"And now, my brothers and sisters," Marcus continued, "I present to you, our rightful queen, Princess Amy."

The crowd cheered. From the eastern side of the capital, Princess Amy, escorted by Walter, walked into the capital. She was beautiful.

The crowd parted respectfully and Marcus waited until she was on the platform. He bowed before her. Princess Amy walked over to Marcus and told him to rise.

Queen Victoria signaled to her servant who had escaped to the Tower. In the distance, the long siren of death wailed. Clarence, the stage party, and the crowd fell to the ground while Princess Amy, Jennifer, Marcus, and their forest friends remained unmoved. The long blast went out again and again and again. They remained standing.

"I see that my brothers have taken my advice," said Herood. He flared his wings. "They have not shown up."

Marcus held up the bullhorn and pointed it over the crowd.

“See, my brothers and sisters, we are still standing. We are not dead. Those were the lies that the Amazon told you so they could control you. They convinced that you could not live without them. But you can see with your own eyes, I am still alive. Princess Amy is still alive. We are all still alive.”

Out of the crowd, Deuce stood up. He was holding Jeremiah’s walking stick. He walked up to the platform and gave the walking stick to Marcus.

Marcus helped him up to the platform and they stood together. Slowly, others began to rise. Then, some more. Then, more and more and more, until every Formica in the capital was standing and cheering.

“Kill the Amazons!” they screamed. “Kill the oppressors!”



Princess Amy walked over to the microphone. She looked out over the crowd, at her brother and sisters. She knew why they wanted to kill the Amazons.

“My brothers and sisters, we will not kill them.” She paused. “My reign will not begin with bloodshed. The Queen and her party are forevermore banished from our colony. We will escort them to the edge of the town and we will banish them forever.”

Then, Amy turned to Queen Victoria and General O'Grady and lowered her voice.

"You had better move quickly. My goodwill is only for a short time. And I am not sure that I can, or will, hold back the crowd forever. Go and never come back," she said sternly.

The Queen, General O'Grady, and the royal party hustled off the platform. Herood escorted them to the jail on the cart. He instructed the driver to take them as far away from the colony as possible. Then, Herood came back to the platform and stood beside Clarence.

"What about me?" asked Clarence. His voice was shaking. "Am I to be banished also?"

"You are our brother," Princess Amy chided him. "You thought you were doing the right thing. But now that you have learned your lesson, do you have the courage to change?"

"Yes, I do," Clarence blurted. "I am a law-abiding Formica and you are my queen. I will serve you for the rest of my life. For I, too, remember the story of Holdfast." He winked at Marcus.

Marcus went over to Clarence and hugged him. For the first time in Marcus's memory, Clarence hugged him back. Suddenly, the crowd parted, and through the middle, Ashton, their long-lost brother, approached the stage. Marcus and Clarence rushed down to greet their little brother.

"Do I get to go home now?" asked Ashton.

"Yes," said Clarence and he rubbed Ashton's head. "You will go home."

Then Marcus climbed back onto the platform. He walked up to the altar and held the crown aloft. Princess Amy bowed her head and gently placed a necklace with the Formica symbol of linked hearts around her neck. Amy blushed. Then, Marcus placed the crown on her head. The royal lineage was sealed. She was now Queen Amy. The crowd clapped and cheered.

Queen Amy looked out at the crowd with love. They could feel her love and they chanted, "Long live Queen Amy. Long live Queen Amy!"

"Thank you, my brothers and sisters," said Queen Amy. "We have to mend the trust that has been broken among us, and to rid ourselves of the fear that has ruled our lives. We also have to heal the bonds between aphids and spiders and our cousins, the wasps. And we can do it. We will learn to live as one, for we are free. We are free. Let the celebrations begin!"

The End

Acknowledgments

First, I'd like to give thanks to my wife, Nadia, and my family whose support helped to make this book a reality. Without their love, none of this would have been possible.

I won't name everyone who assisted with the editing, but I'd like to single out Kyra Hicks, author of *Martha Ann's Quilt for Queen Victoria*, for the many insights she provided to sharpen the focus of the story. I'd also like to thank Patrick—whom I love like one of my own children. It was a pleasure to work with him and to watch him grow in so many ways.

Finally, I'd like to thank Andrew, our production manager, for helping me to meet the deadline. His amazing knowledge of C++ and Adobe gave the book an added dimension. He has grown up into a fine young man. You make me proud, son.

Marcus represents the best qualities that I try to live by and I hope he will inspire you to do the same.

If you liked *Marcus and the Amazons*, please leave a comment at the site where you bought it. And share your enthusiasm with a friend. Or two!

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