

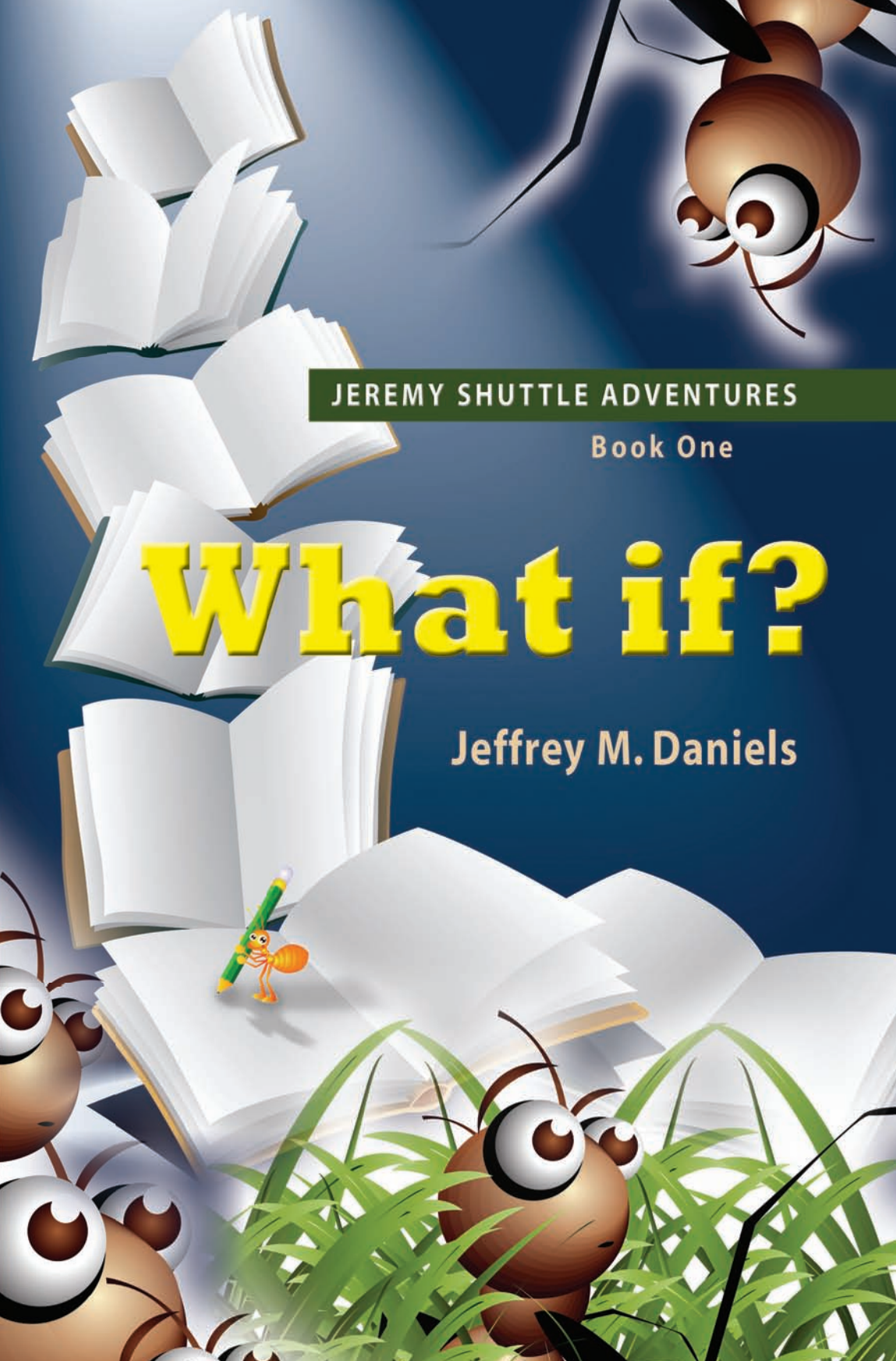
Jeremy Shuttle meets a strange shopkeeper at a new art store and ends up with a new sketchbook. He and his best friend Natalie soon find anything he draws in it becomes real. After a series of amazing adventures, Jeremy decides to use the sketchbook to bring back the Dad he has never seen. Except, Natalie nervously points out, each time before something dangerous has happened. What if that happens again?

What If?

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JEREMY SHUTTLE ADVENTURES

Book One

What if?

Jeffrey M. Daniels

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Read more about the upcoming books in the Jeremy Shuttle series and ask questions of the author at the official website:

jeffreymdaniels.com

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Chapter 13

Home Sweet Home

The walk was surprisingly pleasant. Down below the grass, the ground was cooler than Jeremy would have expected. The aphid had finally accepted his name after having Mitch use it repeatedly as they walked. He sat perched atop Jeremy's back, keeping up a non-stop conversation in his proper British voice that kept Jeremy in a constant state of secret amusement. Both Mitch and the aphid puzzled over his mood but eventually passed it off as another strange characteristic of the unreasonably large ant.

Judging time was difficult for Jeremy, but he guessed they had walked for something like half an hour when they came to a large tree. Jeremy thought this might be the ficus tree on the other side of the school, a little brother of his favorite tree. He marveled at the size of the tree. Large as it was from a human boy's perspective, it was vast beyond measure in his ant form.

Two largish ants, though still smaller than Jeremy, crawled down the trunk of the tree and across the roots as the three travelers approached.

"Hold it," one of the ants called out. "Stop until we can identify you."

Mitch, in the lead the entire time, appeared not to hear the command or perhaps chose to ignore it. He kept advancing on the tree.

"You heard the order," the other ant said, this in a more menacing tone. "Obey it now. We won't ask a third time."

Mitch kept his pace steady, but he finally spoke.

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“Ah, give it a rest will you? How can you be out guarding if you can’t even see two feet in front of you? We’re lucky the queen didn’t go out for a stroll.”

Jeremy thought Mitch’s tone sounded like humor. If so, he wasn’t sure the two guard ants were getting the joke. They strode purposefully forward and they looked powerful and mean.

“Maybe I should just snap you in half and ask questions later,” the first ant said.

“I don’t know if you could snap something so little in half.” The other soldier ant said. “It looks small enough for a single bite.”

“You may be right. It might not be worth the bother.”

“Very funny” Mitch interjected. “You ought to take your act on the road. Preferably very far away on the road.”

The two ants chuckled and stopped, waiting for Mitch to reach them.

“Welcome back, runt.” The first soldier ant said, in a friendly way. “What did you find this time?”

“You might want to show a little more respect for me when you see what I’ve brought home with me.” Mitch said, with a feigned air of dignity.

The soldier ants both chuckled again and turned their attention from Mitch to the grass where Jeremy and the aphid now emerged. The chuckles died in their throats as they beheld the largest ant they had ever seen carrying on its back a beloved aphid. They turned in disbelief to Mitch.

“T-That’s...” one soldier ant stammered.

“W-What?” the other sputtered.

Mitch could contain himself no longer and he burst out into laughter. Jeremy had begun to realize just what a spectacle he and the aphid must represent and he found himself grinning as well in appreciation of the showmanship of Mitch.

“Say hello to Jeremy, ladies” Mitch said.

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Jeremy was stunned for a moment as well. These big bruisers were female? And they're the soldiers? Jeremy concentrated on his ant senses and began to tell the differences between the soldier ants and Mitch. He had relied too much on his human perceptions and only had paid attention to their size and the menace they projected. Now he could tell that they were definitely female. When he realized they were staring at him, Jeremy became embarrassed the same way he did when a regular girl looked at him.

Looking briefly away from Jeremy, the first soldier ant cast a quick sideways glance at Mitch.

"What is a Jeremy?" She asked.

Mitch wiggled his antennae. "That's what he says is his name"

"What's a name?" the other soldier ant asked.

"I think it's how they identify themselves where they come from," Mitch said.

Both soldier ants looked dubiously at Jeremy.

"Is he dangerous?" one asked.

"Are you kidding?" Mitch asked, astonished. "Look at what he's carried back for us!"

"He's awfully big," the other one said, ignoring Mitch's comment.

"Why don't you ask me directly?" Jeremy said, deciding it was time to get involved in the discussion.

The two soldier ants jumped at his voice.

"He's very loud," the first one said.

"And he talks funny" the other one added.

"Yeah, but you get used to it. He's not from around here. He didn't even know about the aphids. They don't have them where he comes from."

The two soldier ants looked amazed at first, then suspicious. Jeremy decided it was too much for him to keep up this deception in an entire colony

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of ants. He decided he was going to have to tell his real story and hope the ants didn't decide to attack him or send him away.

"There's a reason for that" Jeremy began, trying to be quieter, if he could. "It's a very strange story that I haven't told anyone before now." He gestured to Mitch, half apologetically. "I can understand if you get upset, but it's not his fault so don't take it out on him."

The two soldier ants instantly came alert and assumed more aggressive postures. Mitch looked at Jeremy curiously, but without fear. He had come to trust Jeremy and was willing to hear him out. Jeeves hopped down off Jeremy's back and offered a comment in his cultured tones.

"I imagined there would be a story to you, Jeremy," he said solemnly. "You seem strangely ignorant to the ways of [ants] and yet you seem more uncertain than unfriendly."

Jeremy bowed to acknowledge Jeeves' gesture of support. He looked over at the two soldier ants. They were still prepared for battle, but they seemed more inclined to listen to his tale now.

"First off, I'm not really an ant." Jeremy started. "I'm actually a human boy. We use that term for us. I don't know how you see us since we have not come across one during our travels. In my regular form, you would be about the size of..." Jeremy looked around him on the ground and found a small grain of sand. "...about this to your size."

The three ants and aphid stared at him for a few long moments. Then they all broke into huge gales of laughter. Jeremy felt a familiar flush of embarrassment run through him as he realized they did not believe him.

"Buddy," Mitch managed to gasp between laughs "that's a wild one. And that comes from someone who has made up some good ones in the past."

"I'm serious," Jeremy said sternly.

"My boy" Jeeves seemed to be best able to control himself "You are quite creative."

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“Or insane” one of the soldiers said, struggling to get herself under control.

“Listen to me” Jeremy pleaded. “I’m telling you the truth. It’s why I’m such a big ant. I didn’t know how to draw myself to the right size.”

“What’s this “ant” word he keeps using?” the other soldier ant asked. She appeared to be the older of the two ants and she had finally steadied herself, although an occasional wiggle of her antennae showed there was still some remaining mirth.

“He used that earlier. He says that’s what we’re called where he comes from.” Mitch said. “They all have names. He calls himself Jeremy and calls me Mitch and him Jeeves. I’m sure he will have names for you two soon.” He looked at Jeremy, with a faint grin. Having spent more time with him than anyone else, he felt he could read him better. He could tell Jeremy was serious about trying to convince them.

“If what you say is true, and I’m not saying I believe you, how did you come to be like you are now?”

“I got this magic book which made things I drew in it become real. I have always liked ants and wondered what it would be like to talk with you so I drew myself as an ant and here I am.” Jeremy noticed that none of the listeners was laughing anymore. He became worried that they might really be thinking he was crazy.

“You’re not making sense.” Mitch said. “What do you mean by ‘drew’?”

Okay, Jeremy thought, at least he’s trying to understand. He’s giving me the benefit of the doubt.

“Humans don’t talk to each other in the same ways you do. We make sounds with our mouths and we also draw pictures.” Jeremy paused for a moment, deciding in this case that a picture could truly be more powerful than a thousand words. He moved his legs around on the soil, giving silent thanks for the added dexterity of his additional limbs. Within a few moments,

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he stepped away, satisfied and gestured to the others to look. He was gratified to hear several gasps of surprise and “My goodness” from Jeeves.

“This is what we call drawing. What we see with our eyes or our minds, we put down on different surfaces.

“Anyway” he hurried on, “I drew a picture of me as a boy and then drew a picture of me as an ant. The magic book then turned me into an ant. I’m so big because I didn’t know how to draw me to the right size. It’s also why I know so little about ants. It’s because I’m not really one.”

Mitch seemed to be grasping the concepts better than the others are. “And magic?”

“That’s a little more difficult. Um, okay, say you three were standing here on the tree and you wished an aphid joined you so you could bring it back to the city. If an aphid appeared that very moment, even though none was anywhere nearby, that would be like magic. It’s kind of like something that can’t possibly happen, happening.”

Silence fell on the group as they all considered what Jeremy had told them. He fidgeted nervously as he waited for some sort of response from them. For what seemed a long time, there was no reply. Finally, Mitch looked up, shaking his head.

“I’d like to believe you,” he said sadly. “I don’t think you mean any harm to us and you have done us a wonderful favor bringing Jeeves home.” He gestured deferentially to Jeeves, who bowed slightly. Looking directly at Jeremy, he continued. “But it’s just too wild to be real.”

“But that’s the point” Jeremy said desperately. “It IS too wild. Who could make up such a story if it wasn’t true?”

“You obviously didn’t talk to him long enough,” one of the soldier ants said sarcastically, gesturing at Mitch.

Mitch paid her no heed. “Look, Jeremy, do you have anything else you can show us to prove your story?”

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“What about my size? You all said you’ve never seen an ant this big before. Or the words I use.”

“It’s a big world” Mitch replied. “Who knows what cities might exist elsewhere, maybe even a land of giant ants who talk funny. I think it’s more likely you got lost and hurt somehow and have forgotten who you are.”

“No, no” was all Jeremy could mumble. This was going all wrong.

“I know a way you can solve this quickly to everyone’s satisfaction” interrupted Jeeves, his officious voice commanding everyone’s attention.

“Great!” Jeremy exhaled in relief. “Whatever I need to do, just tell me!”

“It seems to me, the answer has been before us the whole time. We just needed someone of keen mind and clarity to review the facts.” Jeeves was clearly enjoying his time in the spotlight, relishing the attention of all present as he displayed his brilliance.

“Yeah, yeah, you’re a genius” Mitch said, impatiently. “Are you going to tell us tonight or do we need the entire city here before you get to the point?”

Jeeves peered at Mitch with displeasure. “Very well, since some of you are in a rush. The answer, so obvious once revealed is simply this: Have Jeremy turn back into this ‘human boy’ and he will have proved his story.”

The three ants and Jeeves turned expectantly toward Jeremy. Jeeves was right; it was an obvious answer. Jeremy felt a chill run throughout his entire body and his antennae shivered in horror.

He had absolutely no idea how to turn back into a boy.

Chapter 14

“I’m too young for that”

“You don’t understand” Jeremy exclaimed as they climbed over the tree roots. “I don’t have any idea how to change back!”

“We got it.” One of the soldier ants said tiredly, not looking back at him. “We got it the first four times you said it, too.”

“But I don’t want to be stuck as an ant forever!” Jeremy’s voice cracked, as panic began to creep in.

The soldier ant in the lead halted abruptly. He had come to use the name Pam for her. So sharp was her stop that Jeeves and Mitch collided. Pam turned to face Jeremy.

“Look, we’re taking you into the city because the queen is going to want to meet whoever brought an aphid to us. He” she shrugged in the general direction of Mitch “is already counting on his extra food and special treatment. Can’t you just act like him?”

“I can’t act like him because I’m not like him!” Jeremy realized he was shouting in his frustration. “I’m a human boy, not an ant! How can I act like an ant when I’m not an ant?”

The other soldier ant, whom he called Kate, grunted. “And here we go again” she said.

Mitch moved up to touch his antennae with Jeremy, trying to show some concern for his distress.

“Whatever you were, you are an “ant” now, Jeremy,” he said firmly, but kindly. “You need to find some way to get comfortable with that fact.”

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“Besides,” Mitch whispered to Jeremy, “the queen will probably take one look at you and invite you into her special chambers” He tapped one of Jeremy’s antennae with his own.

Pam overheard the comment and gave out a snort.

“What foolishness are you spinning now?” she sniffed. “Once she hears him whining, she’ll probably have us run him right out of the city.”

Mitch looked at her disdainfully. “You’ve been a soldier so long; you’ve forgotten anything about being female. I can see why you never made queen.”

“And your vast experience comes from where, exactly?” she laughed. “Oh yes, you must have learned a lot on those long foraging journeys you take...all alone.”

“I learn from everything,” Mitch said in a dignified tone. “I observe everything. Nothing slips past me. My senses are brilliantly honed into a keen sharpness so I can see nuances and shadows where others see nothing. I have seen many things over the years just watching our city and all of us operating within it.”

Kate could no longer resist joining in.

“Oh that’s just too much.” She said with a trace of humor. “Somehow, during all these years, it has gone without notice that you are secretly the most brilliant of us? How could we have missed it?”

“I don’t like to show off” Mitch said modestly. “The rest of you would be uncomfortable around me if you knew the truth.”

Kate laughed. “You must be right. I’m getting uncomfortable around you now. And I thought we were only escorting one insane creature through the city”

“In an insane world, only the sane are considered insane,” Jeremy, mumbled.

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“Well said!” Mitch crowed in triumph. “Do you see ladies? And you called him insane.”

The two soldier ants looked at each other, as if debating the value of continuing the discussion. They both turned and began walking across the roots once more, neither one speaking for the remainder of the journey.

“I hope that means you are back in control,” Mitch whispered to Jeremy, this time ensuring that the two soldiers were far enough ahead not to hear him.

“I’m not sure.” Jeremy answered. “If you mean have I grown ‘comfortable’ being an ant, no, I’m not in control. If you mean, am I going to stop acting like a crazy person, then yeah, I guess so.”

“That’s progress, at least” Mitch chuckled. “Don’t worry; when you meet the queen, you’re going to be happy you’re an ant.”

“I doubt it,” Jeremy said morosely. “I miss my Mom. I miss Natalie. I should have listened to her. She was right again. She’s always right.”

“Who is this Natalie?” Mitch asked.

“She’s my girl...my best friend.” Jeremy replied. He thought of her face earlier today when she had tried warning him and felt a heartache he couldn’t quite define.

“Is she a queen, too?” Mitch asked.

Jeremy looked at his friend. He realized the gap between humans and ants was too vast for him to have a regular conversation. He shrugged.

“We don’t actually work like that. She’s just a girl. We don’t have queens. Well, at least not in America. And before you ask, America is what we call a country. Countries are big places that contain lots of cities. If you believed in humans, I could tell you that your city here is inside my city, which is inside the country of America. In the entire country, there might be tens of millions of cities like yours.”

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Mitch walked silently alongside Jeremy, trying to imagine the concepts of something so vast that it could hold an endless collection of cities as grand as the one they were now entering. Shaking his head, he had to admit that even though he thought of himself as open to new ideas, he could not grasp something so large in scale.

"I don't know whether your tale is true or not, Jeremy," Mitch said with respect. "But if it isn't, you are the most imaginative creature I've ever come across."

Jeremy looked at Mitch closely. He was thankful for his ant senses, for they gave him an ability to read clearly the true emotions of the creatures around him, free of the masks and disguises humans so often used. He saw no ridicule or humor in Mitch. He swallowed down tears.

"In any form," he said thickly. "There is nothing more precious than a good friend."

Mitch looked at him with an awkward grin and bumped into him. "Now that's more like it."

"Not a moment too soon, either" came the cultured voice of Jeeves. He had been so quiet up until now; Jeremy had forgotten he was still riding on his back.

"What's so important about right now?" Jeremy asked.

"Look over there," Jeeves said quietly. "That's the queen's chamber. Get ready to meet her majesty. Do try to be on better behavior."

"Yeah, at least try not to mess up my shot at a reward" Mitch piped in. Jeremy looked at him sharply, but saw he was grinning.

"Okay," he sighed. "I'll try to keep the 'human boy' conversation to a minimum."

"That might be advisable," Jeeves said.

"Yeah, let me do the talking" Mitch added.

"That might not be advisable," Jeeves said dryly.

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Jeremy could not help but chuckle. He might not be happy about his situation, but at least likeable characters surrounded him. Even the bossy soldier ladies had been pretty easy on him. He looked at them now, as they stationed on either side of a chamber that, if he had been a human boy, might have looked like a little knot in a tree.

“Let me see the gallant forager and mysterious stranger who have brought such a wonderful gift to our city.”

Jeremy hesitated, suddenly nervous. The voice from within the chamber had a strange effect on him. It was soft, yet firm. Commanding, yet melodious. He felt dizzy and for the first time since he was standing on the sketchbook did not seem to be able to control his legs. Afraid he might trip, he stopped before the entrance.

Mitch turned back to look at him, puzzled. Instantly, he smiled widely.

“Yeah, the first time meeting the queen can be pretty tough on us males.” He whispered back to Jeremy, suppressing a laugh. “Wait until you get to see her!”

“Um. That’s okay.” Jeremy stammered. “I’m good out here. Give her my regards.”

“Sorry, buddy,” Mitch said, this time unable to prevent a chuckle from slipping out. “No one can refuse to see the queen if she requests it. You should be okay, though, right? Human boys aren’t going to be interested in a queen ant.”

Jeremy shot Mitch a look that just made Mitch chuckle again. He turned back to the chamber and entered, followed by Jeeves and then, reluctantly, by Jeremy.

The inside of the chamber was impressive in its size. Jeremy recalled going to a concert hall with his Mom once; awed by the high ceilings and ornate decorations around the main hall. He got the same impression entering the queen’s chamber. Though the walls appeared to be simple tree

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wood, there were bits and pieces of tree and plant life hung all around the walls. They appeared to be hanging with some kind of glue or paste. He imagined it would look like dirt or debris in his former body, but it had an oddly appealing look to it at this size.

The floor was smooth and cool. Whether there was a substance covering the wood or it had been polished by some means he could not tell, it was as impressive as any fancy marble or wood floor he had ever seen. The floor rose at a small incline towards the back of the chamber, culminating in a rounded "throne" area at the very rear. Around this area, several large ants hovered, not quite as big as the soldiers but larger than Mitch. These ants all had wings and he knew instantly that they were all male. "Breeders" was the term Mitch had used when they first met.

In the center of the breeders, on the polished knob in the back, was a large ant, nearly as large as Jeremy was. She was obviously the queen, he thought. She rested on the throne, looking relaxed but alert. All in the chamber showed her deference, but she seemed to take little notice in it. Not haughty, Jeremy thought appreciatively, more like she doesn't feel the need to abuse it.

He grew a bit uncomfortable as he realized that she was focused on him. As he widened his perceptions beyond the queen, he noticed the Breeders were also watching him carefully. Almost ominously, Jeremy thought. This can't be a good development.

The queen turned to look at Mitch. Despite his bravado, he also seemed in awe of the queen as he stood in front of her. She inclined her head forward slightly and spoke.

"Welcome back, brave forager. You bring us a great gift from your travels today." Her voice sounded like a soft caress to Jeremy, just audible and yet perfectly clear.

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“Thank you, majesty” Mitch said boldly, displaying no sign of the nervousness he must have felt. “In truth, the great gift is as much the workings of my new friend, Jeremy, for it was he alone who carried Jeeves to us from far away”

The queen flicked a quick glance at Jeremy, and then turned to address Jeeves.

“We are glad that you have chosen to reside with us. If there is anything we can do to make your stay more comfortable, you have only to ask.”

“Thank you, your majesty” Jeeves replied formally. “I am glad to be among such industrious and courteous care.” He made his small bow, which brought the shadow of a smile to the queen’s face. “Indeed, your young forager could not have been more pleasant or inviting” he made motion to Mitch.

“I’m not that young” Mitch blurted out, then looked as if he wished he could pull his comment back.

This time the queen did smile. “Surely he only refers to your youthful enthusiasm for your job and means no insult to your experience.” she chided him.

“Of course.” Jeeves added stiffly.

“No, I know that. I mean, yeah, uh, yes, I get it, I mean” Mitch was flustered by the kindness the queen had showed him. He had prepared himself for almost the entire trip leading up to this moment and now he was tripping all over himself in her presence. “That is, thank you, your majesty.”

Jeremy could understand Mitch’s dilemma. He didn’t know if he could have been the first one to talk to the queen either without making a fool of himself. Now, seeing his friend in need, he felt a sudden surge of loyalty and protectiveness break through his own spell.

“It was his idea to bring Jeeves here to your city and without his guidance neither of us would be here.” Jeremy stated in a tone daring

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anyone to laugh at his friend. There were several gasps in the chamber and a couple of the breeders mumbled to each other. Jeremy realized he had breached proper tact in some way.

The queen seemed not to take offense. She glanced back at the breeders, who immediately fell to silence, then turned to address Jeremy.

“You misunderstand me, stranger,” she said. Her voice dripped sweetly through Jeremy’s senses, bringing back his earlier sensation of dizziness. “I meant no rebuke to our gallant forager. He is to be grandly rewarded for his efforts as well as receiving my personal thanks for the great service he has provided our city.”

Mitch beamed, trying unsuccessfully to restrain his grin. He turned to look at Jeremy and “winked” at him with an antenna. The queen pretended not to notice the action and continued to look at Jeremy. He had to use all of his will power not to squirm under her gaze. He didn’t understand what was going on with his body, his thoughts.

“And now we come to you, mysterious one.” The queen continued in her syrupy sweet voice. “What tale must surround you, I wonder. You are larger than any I have ever seen, yet you are as wingless as the smallest male. You have great strength, to have carried, ‘Jeeves’, you called him, here all by yourself. Yet you also have great strength of loyalty, to defend so vigorously your friend when you felt him wronged. I would hear your story”. This last was clearly a command, though her voice stayed sweet throughout.

Jeremy could see Mitch shifting nervously. He saw Jeeves also turn slightly away, as if afraid to witness the next few moments. Jeremy knew that he could not lie to the queen. She had some sort of power over him he could not identify. He must choose his next words carefully, he thought.

“I come from a long distance away” he began. “Everything is larger in my city. I am not even the largest who lives there. I ask many questions and seek answers wherever I can find them. It was on just such an adventure that

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I met and made friends with Mitch...your forager. Then he coaxed Jeeves to join us and we journeyed together to your fine city.”

Mitch made only the tiniest of sounds, an almost imperceptible sigh of relief, but the queen caught the motion.

“I had heard of these strange words you use, names I think you call them.”

She maintained her focus on Jeremy, as she leaned her head forward, antennae reaching toward him. Startled, he pulled back a step. This time, the chamber broke out into audible exclamations. The two soldier ants darted inside in alarm, trying to discern the reason for the uproar.

The queen silenced the room with a quick glance and motioned for the soldiers to leave. They nodded and left, both staring at Jeremy meaningfully.

“There are a lot of customs in his city that are different than ours, majesty,” Mitch said quickly. Another look from the queen cut off whatever else he had to say. She turned to look at Jeremy, with new interest in her eyes.

“I sense there is more to your story than you are willing to share,” she said gently.

“Isn’t that always the case?” Jeremy said, then, realizing how harsh that sounded, added hurriedly, “I have told you my story as well as I can without lying or creating a situation which would be uncomfortable for all of us. I would ask you not to press me any further. If I can assure you of nothing else, please believe me that I mean no harm to you or anyone in your city.”

“I already know that much” the queen said, allowing a smile to touch her face. “Your actions are not those of a villain. Instead, I sense in you a noble spirit. But you seem conflicted. Can you not speak of this, for I would help you as you have helped my city.”

Jeremy was beginning to figure out what he was feeling toward the queen. Although he could barely believe it, he was feeling attracted to her.

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He had never felt attracted to any female before. He was only 12, for crying out loud! A quick vision of Natalie's face came to him, but he dismissed it just as quickly. She's my best friend. It's not right to think about her that way.

The queen had taken the opportunity in his silence to lean her head forward once more. As her antennae touched Jeremy's, he felt a shock go through his entire body. Every part of him felt on fire and he thought for sure he would fall. He looked wildly at the queen and saw that she also looked surprised, although much more in control of her responses.

"Oh my!" she said in the barest of whispers. "What an entirely amazing sensation." She leaned forward again, but Jeremy managed to struggle backward.

"Um, yeah" he sputtered. "It was interesting."

"Interesting" she laughed. "Well, that's certainly not the most flattering description I've ever been given".

"Sorry?"

"Are your customs really that different?" she asked, in a wondering tone. "Have you no mating rituals where you come from?"

"Mating rituals!" Jeremy could not control the shout. "Mating rituals? I'm way too young for that"

The queen laughed again, her voice ringing within the chamber.

"My, one could almost believe so from your reactions" she said warmly. "You can't already be a breeder to your queen, or you would never have been allowed out to wander"

"Uh, look, maybe I've given you the wrong impression. If so, I'm sorry"

"No, I don't think so. There was no mistaking the reaction you had when we touched." The queen said firmly. "I think you would make a marvelous breeder. It is rare to find one with such...non-breeder values"

"Perhaps you would feel better if you called me Natalie?" She asked slyly.

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“W-what?” Jeremy stammered. “Where did you get that name?”

“It’s someone you care for a great deal, is it not?” she replied, advancing on Jeremy again.

“Wait. Just wait. Please? You don’t understand. Trust me when I say we’re not on the same page here.”

Jeremy froze. The queen paused as well, sensing something different.

“That’s it!” Jeremy yelled excitedly. He ran over to Mitch. “I’ve got it!” He looked over to Jeeves. “I’ve got the answer!”

The queen watched the recent developments with a mixture of anger and amusement. She had never been spurned before by any male, but this one was so different she could not measure how she should view his rejection. Whatever she had sensed from him when they touched was beyond her previous field of experience. She had felt impressions and feelings that she could find no description. She resolved to let the scene play out in hopes it would lead her to understanding this strange visitor.

“It’s obvious, don’t you see?” Jeremy was no longer shouting, but the excitement he felt was visible in every action of his body. “Oh my gosh, I can’t believe I was freaking out so much”

Mitch took a nervous glance back at the queen and was emboldened by her encouraging nod. “Okay, slow down. What have you got? What answer are you talking about?”

“To Jeeves’ question.” Jeremy replied. He took a few moments to allow his heart to slow. “I know how to change back to a human boy.”

“A human boy?” the queen asked.

Jeremy turned to her, and she saw that his nervousness was gone. He exuded a confidence and joy that indicated whatever she had sensed troubling him, he believed he had found the answer.

“That’s the ‘more to the story’, your majesty, that you were perceptive enough to see. I can tell you now, if you want, but I must warn you that

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neither of my two new friends here believe me. They think I'm confused, or worse. But I need you to believe me, if no one else."

The queen liked seeing this more confident demeanor. She was also more willing to believe than Jeremy might have thought. She knew the thoughts and feelings she had experienced in their brief touch would lead to an explanation beyond anything she had known before. She approached Jeremy, halting just outside the point where their antennae could touch. She did not want to scare him off now.

"Why do you need me to believe you more than anyone else? Why do you think I will believe you when your closest friends won't?"

Jeremy studied her, using his ant senses to feel her mood. She was curious, not angry. He smiled.

"I think you'll believe me because if you felt as much about me as I did you when we touched, you must know I'm like nothing you've ever come across before."

"And I need you to believe me because you are the only one who can save me."

Jeremy Shuttle meets a strange shopkeeper at a new art store and ends up with a new sketchbook. He and his best friend Natalie soon find anything he draws in it becomes real. After a series of amazing adventures, Jeremy decides to use the sketchbook to bring back the Dad he has never seen. Except, Natalie nervously points out, each time before something dangerous has happened. What if that happens again?

What If?

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