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THE ANT RULES

Like all of the other young ants stuck in school for what seemed a lifetime, Skwiz was only waiting for the day when the learning was over and he could start doing some proper work. Finally that day arrived. At first it was wonderful, or so he imagined it might be as Woffle the teacher was telling the Trainees: “Your job will be a very important one. The colony is growing, so we need to build another nest somewhere else.”

“Why don’t we just make the one we’ve got bigger?” asked Skwiz.

“We could,” started Woffle, “But the Queen wants to move. She’s fed up with getting wet every time it rains and the nest floods.”

“You said our job’s an important one,” said Ridgy, another of the Trainees. “What do we have to do?”

“Find a place to build a new nest?” Ridgy’s brother, Didge, suggested hopefully.

The teacher chuckled. “You’re a bit too young for that. No, your job will be to gather food. Lots will be needed for when we move out.”

“We don’t know about finding food,” Skwiz reminded him. “We’ve never done it before.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Woffle reassured him. “See the Boss-ant, Grunt. He will tell you how.” Then he added as an afterthought: “And Skwiz, you’ll keep your ideas to yourself, if you know what’s good for you.” Everyone knew that Skwiz was smart, always questioning the way things were and coming up with suggestions on how they could be made better. It was also known that Grunt thought he knew everything; and he didn’t like some smarty-ant him telling him what was best.

None of the Trainees were keen to take their orders from Grunt the Grump, as he was called – behind his back, of course – but off they went to look for the Boss-ant. “I saw him outside the nest,” said Didge.

“Yeah,” added Ridgy, “There was a gang there building up the barrier to keep the water out and Grunt was bossing everyone around as usual. He wants everything done yesterday, and even then he’s never satisfied.”

“And he’s wasting everybody’s time,” commented Skwiz. “He hasn’t worked out that sand on its own will just wash away when it rains. The barrier should have stones and sticks to hold the sand together.”

“Do yourself and us a favour,” warned Didge, “Don’t tell Grunt that. We can’t afford to get on the wrong side of him before we even start.”

“Trouble is,” said Ridgy, “He doesn’t have a right side.”

When they found Grunt, Skwiz went up to him and announced: “You need to show us how to gather food.”

“*NEED?*” growled the grumpy Boss-ant. “Who do you think you’re talking to?” Then he recognised Skwiz. “Oh, it’s you. You’re the kid with the stupid ideas. Well, what *YOU* need to do is keep your mouth shut and do what I tell you, nothing more.” Leading the Trainees well

away from the nest, he waved his front legs towards a big area ahead. "The food's out there," he said, "And the scouts are looking for it. What you lot *NEED* to do," he emphasised, scowling at Skwiz, "Is follow the scent put down by the scouts. That will take you to the food, which you will pick up and bring back to the nest. And I don't want to see any loitering," he added with a scowl.

There were quite a few ants already out there and Skwiz had been watching them. "Why are they going round in circles and every which way?" he asked.

"Because," droned Grunt, "That's what ants do – follow the scent..."

"But," Skwiz interrupted, "If they went in a straight line they'd get there and back quicker. I thought that was what you wanted. No loitering you said."

"You are making me cross, kid," snarled the Boss-ant. "Just stop passing stupid comments and do what you're told. And don't forget, I'll be watching you."

Rather hesitantly at first, off went the Trainees. Coming close to the other ants, Didge said: "I can smell something peculiar."

"It'll be the scent the scouts have put down," Ridgy reminded him, "And that's what Grunt told us to follow, so we'd better do it."

And they did, straight to start with, veering to the left, then to the right, scuttling round in a circle and back again before heading once more in the direction they were taking in the first place. "This is crazy," declared Skwiz. "We'll never find food like this. There's none here, anyone can see that." Glancing behind he noticed the Boss-ant was still watching. "I reckon we keep on following the scent until Grunt goes; then we ignore it and look for food ourselves somewhere else."

Unsure about the idea, the Trainees carried on wandering hither and thither, and finally Grunt strutted off out of sight. "Right, guys," said Skwiz. "The scent-trails must eventually lead to somewhere way beyond this clearing; but there aren't any going towards the creek, which means the scouts haven't been there yet. That's where we begin. Split up and start looking."

It wasn't long before one of the six Trainees called out: "I've found a seed."

"And me," said another.

Ridgy expected Skwiz would have been pleased, but he didn't seem to have noticed. For some reason he was standing, staring across the creek. Going over to him Ridgy asked: "What's the problem?"

Skwiz waggled a foot at the area on the far side of the creek. "That's where we should be looking. I bet there's stacks of food over there just for the taking."

"But how do we get over there?" queried Ridgy, "Swim?"

"Won't need to," explained Skwiz, turning to look upstream. "See there – that tree branch has fallen across the creek. It's like a bridge. We can use it to get to the other side – easy. Come on. Let's give it a go," and he started off towards the bridge.

"What about us?" queried one of the Trainees. "We've already got our seeds. Do we take them back to the nest?"

Skwiz thought on it, eventually deciding: "No, just wait here until we return. It's my guess we won't be long."

As he was about so many things, Skwiz was right – the other side of the creek was loaded with seeds of all kinds just laying on the ground within easy reach. Gathering up one each, the Trainees headed back to the bridge. On reaching the far side Didge noticed Skwiz wasn't with them and he asked his brother about it. "I saw him wandering around just staring," said Ridgy. "I expect he'll be here soon, and he might even tell us what he was looking at."

A few minutes later, Skwiz came marching over the bridge holding a seed, and he was intent on explaining what he had discovered; then something made him pause in mid-stride. The Trainees were there huddled in a group and they seemed nervous, standing before them an ant Skwiz didn't recognise. Advancing, he came to a halt before the stranger who demanded to know: "What do you think you're doing?"

"Who's asking?" droned Skwiz warily.

"I'm Musk," replied the ant, "Head Scout. As ordinary workers you have no business going somewhere we scouts haven't been to first."

"Well, maybe you should have," criticised Skwiz. "It's plainly obvious food is running out here. All we did was save you the bother of wandering round in circles for days until you found out there was plenty on the other side of the creek."

"That's not the way it's done," growled Musk. "All ants must follow the rules. I shall have to report this and you can expect to be in big trouble. In the meantime, take the food you have back to the nest and wait there." The Head Scout stood watching as Skwiz led the Trainees off. He was furious and called after them: "Stop doing that! Walking in a straight line is not allowed."

Skwiz's only response was to his group of Trainees, and it was so quiet that Musk wouldn't have heard: "Make out we're all deaf and just keep walking."

Their march back to the nest was a spectacle that everyone stopped to watch. Never had they seen worker ants behaving in such a peculiar way – it wasn't done. And something else was a bit strange. "The gang is still building up the rain barrier," observed Ridgy, "But there's no sign of Grunt."

"And what's that line of Soldier Ants doing standing in front of the nest?" wondered Didge.

Skwiz had seen them too and commented: "I think we might have wrinkled a few feelers, guys. The soldier in the middle is Helm. He's Captain of the Queen's guard. Uh-oh, he's coming over."

Helm marched right up to the Trainees and snarled: "Drop the food and come with us. You have been summoned by the Queen."

"The *QUEEN*?" hissed Skwiz. "Why...?"

"You will be told; *when* it suits Her Majesty," snapped Captain Helm with a glare. "And a warning - in the presence of the Queen, speak only when spoken to." With that, he gave a curt nod to his soldiers who advanced to surround the Trainees and hustled them to the entrance.

They had all been inside before, of course, but never as deep into the nest; and none of the youngsters had seen the Queen. Actually, not many ants had. That privilege was only for Her Majesty's most trusted attendants. After being marched along from tunnel to tunnel they found themselves in a large chamber where their guard halted. "What now?" asked Skwiz softly.

"Be quiet and wait," hissed Helm irritably.

The Trainees did as they were told. All of them had their mouths open as they stared in disbelief at the Queen. She was huge, massive, and was sitting on what they guessed was her throne towards the back of the room. A number of attendants were fussing around her and there was a small group of ants standing before her listening as she talked. One of these eventually came and paused in front of the Trainees. "You have been summoned here to explain your actions," he said, "But first Her Majesty will hear from your accusers." Turning to Helm who was nearby he ordered: "Bring in Grunt and Musk."

Then they waited for one of the soldiers to fetch the Boss-ant and the Head Scout. Tension in the room mounted as the accusers were escorted straight to the Queen where they talked with her; although it was so quiet that no-one else in the room could hear what was said. Finally, the Queen stirred and looked straight at the Trainees. "It is said that you have ignored the ant rules and you should be punished for it." Her words brought smiles to the faces of Grunt and Musk, but these soon faded as Her Majesty added: "But I shall speak with you first, in particular with the one called Skwiz who, I am told, keeps coming up with ideas that are both stupid and un-antlike. I think I should hear these ideas before I pass sentence."

Again, the conversation between the Queen and the Trainees was so quiet that only those closest could hear. Grunt and Musk were certainly too far away, so they had to wait for the Queen's final decision; and it didn't please them. Then they and the Trainees were escorted out by the soldiers.

A large group of ants had gathered outside the nest to learn the fate of the young offenders; but as often happens, some news had already leaked out. Apparently, instead of being punished for their un-antlike behaviour, the Trainees had been put in charge of finding a place for the colony's new nest. Such a thing was unheard of and sent a buzz of disbelief through the crowd. There was something else too which would surprise everyone when it was made public; but at that point it was only being talked about in low voices by Skwiz and Grunt as they walked. Grunt spoke in a low growl: "First you had the nerve to tell the Queen the other side of the creek was where the new nest should be; then you said I should be in charge of building it. I'm confused. We don't like each other. Why did you do that?"

"Our personal feelings have nothing to do with it," replied Skwiz. "I figured you were the best ant for the job. You're bossy, sure; but you always insist on things being done properly, and you get them done quickly." He paused to look up to the sky. "The rains will be here soon and if possible the new nest should be finished before it comes. It's all about Queen and Colony, Grunt. As ants we need to remember that. Musk understands. Look at him, walking in a dead straight line for a change."

The Head Scout was doing just that, faltering occasionally then coming back on a track that led directly to the bridge. Skwiz, the other Trainees and Grunt followed the scent he had laid and were soon on the far side of the creek looking for a place to build the new nest. Musk and his scouts had already made a start on this and passed on their findings. Grunt and the Trainees checked out the various spots to decide which was the best one. "I hate to admit it," said Grunt to Skwiz, "But you were right this time. The ground on this side is much higher than where the old nest is, so it should stay drier when it rains." He began digging around in the soil and eventually said: "Here will be ideal. It's mainly sand with not too many rocks. I'll go and muster the work crew. What about you?"

"I'll come with you," said Skwiz. "I have to report back to the Queen; then there's the move to organise. Everything must be ready as soon as you've finished the new nest."

It took days, but no-one seemed to notice because there was so much to do. Eventually a messenger ant scuttled in with the news: "The nest is finished. Grunt says you should move the eggs first; then bring the Queen."

Within minutes, Didge and four of the Newbies began escorting a line of worker ants carrying eggs, all following Musk's scent-trail straight to the bridge. Meanwhile, Skwiz and Ridgy were arranging for the Queen and her attendants to make the long trek to the new nest. Knowing it would be tiring for her because she didn't get much exercise Skwiz had transport ready – a large leaf that she could sit on while a team of ants pulled it along the ground. As soon as it was reported that all the eggs were in the new nest and the colony was just awaiting the arrival of the Queen, off went Skwiz's party. The journey seemed to be going well, although something was not quite right. Didge should have come back after all the eggs had been moved, but there was no sign of him. It wasn't until the Queen and her helpers were approaching the creek that the reason for this became clear – the bridge had gone!

Didge was on the far side of the creek calling out: "Another branch came down. It caught on the bridge and they both washed away. Musk went upstream looking for another way across."

Just then, the Head Scout came hurrying back to announce: "I've found a spot that might be okay. Follow me on your side and I'll lead you to it."

The procession started off again with Musk trudging along the far bank of the creek at a steady pace so that the Queen's party could keep up. Eventually they all arrived at the place Musk had discovered. "As you can see," he said, "The bend in the creek slows down the water. It's also not as deep and there are rocks under the surface. Maybe you can float across on leaves like the one the Queen's sitting on."

Skwiz took a few moments to ponder, watching the flow of water over the rocks and immediately saw a problem. "There are leaves floating down on the surface and they just go straight over the rocks – they're no good." Pausing to look around he noticed an alternative to

the leaves. “We need another bridge,” he said, scanning the area. “There’s the answer, on the ground under that tree.”

“We can’t drag a branch to the creek,” said Helm. “It would be too heavy, even for us soldiers.”

“I’m not thinking about wood,” Skwiz explained. “Those bits of bark that have fallen off the tree would make an ideal floating bridge. Better hurry,” he urged. “It’s starting to rain, and too much of it will make the creek flow faster. Then we’ll never get across.”

Not knowing himself whether the plan would work, Skwiz had everyone dragging bits of bark to the water’s edge. First one was lowered in with four ants at the back holding on to the next piece as it too was pushed in. More were added, the separate sections held together by ants. Musk waited on the far side with extra helpers, and as soon as the leading piece of bark reached the far bank they held it securely. Skwiz was concerned how the floating bridge swayed around with the flow of water and only hoped it wouldn’t pull apart. There was only one way to find out. “Are you ready to cross, Your Majesty?” he asked. “I don’t think we’ll be able to pull you on the leaf, though. Will you be okay to walk?”

The Queen agreed to try. Climbing off the leaf, she went to the edge of the creek and gingerly placed her front feet on the first part of the bridge. The piece of bark dipped slightly as she put more weight on it, but it held; as did the joined sections when she advanced. Finally, after a very nervous, jerky shuffle she made it to the far side, raising a loud cheer from all of the ants. “Everyone else over now,” Skwiz called out, “And make it quick – the creek’s starting to flow faster.”

No-one needed telling a second time and they began pouring across in a line. Then it was the turn of those holding the back part of the bridge to the bank. As soon as they let go and scuttled to the next piece, the one that they had been securing swung in the current. In a moment it had broken free and washed downstream. So it was with the other sections of the bridge causing a mad scramble by the ants who had been holding them together. Once the last of them made it to shore another cheer went up followed by a hushed silence as they all watched the final piece of bridge floating away. Then their gazes turned back to the empty patch of water where Skwiz’s bark-bridge had been. Clearly there was no going back to the place that had been their home for so long, which was a little sad; but on the plus side they now had a brand new nest that was less likely to flood when it rained. As for food, there was so much within easy reach that the scouts hardly needed to make scent trails to follow. They still would, though, because it was in *The Ant Rules*.

Anyone who had ever doubted the smart-ant kid’s strange ideas would surely have a change of heart now. Thanks to Skwiz, the amazing feat would be talked about for ant-years to come, a story that would be passed down from generation to generation. The Queen would certainly never forget, and she rewarded the ones chiefly responsible for the new nest and keeping everyone safe. Grunt was made President of the Nest, while Skwiz was to be the Queen’s Very Personal Advisor and was granted Freedom of the Colony.

“That doesn’t mean you can ignore *The Ant Rules*,” said Grunt quietly as they left the Royal Chamber.

“I might,” said Skwiz with a grin, “Just to annoy you.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” droned Grunt, and he added, “At least some things haven’t changed, though – it seems we still don’t like each other.”

Quiz gave a chuckle. “Wouldn’t want it any other way, Mister President.”

“Me neither,” said Grunt with a wicked smile. “See you around kid.”

And with that they went their separate ant-ways.