

Doris and the Sacred Monument of Nom



Hello? Hellllooo? Do you mind? You're breaking the line. If you could just move your right foot back a bit, that would be marvellous.

Coo-ee! Doris! Over here, love. Poor thing, her antennae aren't what they used to be. Not since the happening. Loses the pheromone trail so easily these days. That's it, follow Susan, she knows what she's doing. Keep left and you'll come to the apple core shortly.

Right, the line is back in place, everything is A-OK.

You're still trying to see where I am, aren't you? I'm down here in the hummus. No, not the dip! Though I do quite like that, I have to say. I meant the leaf mulch, the substrate, you know. The ground? I wouldn't bother trying to spot me, to be honest. I'm pretty tiny and unless you're very young, your eyes won't be up to it. Just know that I am down here and surrounded by fearless soldiers armed with formic acid. Yes, I'd take a step back too.

I'm in charge around here. Well, not entirely in charge, obviously – that would be our dear Queen, long may she reign – but I'm as high up as you can get when you are living at ground level most of the time. I suppose I'd better spell it out, since you clearly still haven't found me – you're looking in entirely the wrong spot, you know. I'm left of the brown leaf, behind the orange one, third twig on the right. Oh, never mind, just listen. I'm an ant, a Southern Wood Ant, to be precise and I'm actually pretty



Illustration by Megan Metcalf

large for an ant so your eyes must really be rubbish. Did that daft badger steal your glasses?

Anyway, we are a super-organised matriarchy; we only produce boys once a year for one specific task and we are legion. There is no part of these woods that doesn't have an ant colony and we can trace our ancestral line back for generations. Once a year on the sacred Flying Ant Day or FAD – bit of a joke that because it's been going on forever – our new queen contenders take flight, closely followed by newly hatched winged males, hoping to create some new hatchlings of their own.

You might have seen the glorious spectacle. It always happens on a lovely hot day, after a few days of rain. Last year, we produced such a vast cloud of flying ants you could see us from space! I reckon that's when they spotted us. And then things weren't so glorious for poor old Doris and her friends.

It'd been a bit droopy-drawers in weather terms for at least a week. You know, kind of cloudy in the morning, on and off rain showers for the rest of the day. I do hate a shower. Some of those big drops are like bouncing bombs when you're my size. Anyway, as I was saying, on the fateful day, it started cloudy, but by the time the burning ball of gas was high in the atmosphere, all the clouds had gone. Well, the rain clouds, that is. Because soon our hatcheries burst forth with new life and our baby queens and excitable boys took to the skies in great clouds of whirring wings.

At times, I couldn't even see out of the nest. It was as dark as the night. And then the thunder started. It was quiet at first and far, far away. But then it rolled closer, getting louder and louder until it was right next to our nest, right where you're standing now. Well, we were horrified. Our poor babies were out there, and they can't fly in the rain. A year of careful nurturing and they were all in peril!

There was nothing we could do for our poor, poor babies, so we battened down the hatches to protect our queen and her remaining eggs and huddled together in the nest, waiting for the incessant drumming to cease. After what seemed an eternity, the thunder eventually rolled away and we ventured out, bracing ourselves to see the hideous spectacle of our offspring's battered bodies littering the floor. But there was nothing! Not a single limb or wing snapped off by the rain drops. We even did a quick recce over to the next colony and again there wasn't a single casualty. It seemed that Flying Ant Day had gone without a hitch after all.

However, as we were on our way back we noticed the UFO along with a lot of detritus. Dee-trite-us. Good word that. All around the Sacred Monument of Nom – come on, you must be able to see that, it's right in front of you and frankly monolithic – all around it were discarded apple cores, banana skins and the peel from those giant oranges your small humans like so much.

And don't get me wrong. Detritus is good for us. We love a good old bit of detritus. In fact, I rallied the troops immediately, laid some pheromone lines to and from the nest and we started recovering all the food for the colony quick sharp. But it wasn't just detritus, no. There were other

things. Giant rustly envelopes with orange dust inside. Cavernous swimming pools coated with – surprisingly delicious – white goo. And the UFO itself. It was under the Sacred Monument of Nom. How they flew it there I don't know – and the shade of green. Almost blinding it was. Stuck out like a sore thumb, lying there, cracked open like a great broken egg. I suppose it was the aliens' feeble attempt at camouflage. We kept our distance at first but then the craft was emitting such sweet, unusual and unknown aromas I quickly volunteered Doris to investigate, along with Susan and the rest of Platoon B. Off they marched, into the gaping maw of the beast, Doris bravely leading the charge.

Just as the last of the platoon had disappeared inside, the thunder started again. Faintly at first, but then louder and louder. We called for Doris to come back out, to retreat to safety, but the thunder grew so loud, she couldn't hear us and we had no choice but to retreat once more into our nest. When the thunder eventually stopped and we ventured out, the UFO had gone.

Doris and her plucky crew disappeared for 40 days and 40 nights. We thought she was gone for good. Then one day, the thunder came and the thunder went and Doris was returned! Her left antenna was a bit lopsided, but she seemed to be mostly OK. And did she have a story to tell! Actually, I'll get her to tell it to you herself. Doris! Coooeeee! Come over here please!

Er, hi. I'm Doris and – erm – I was abducted by aliens. Did they probe me? No, they did not! They actually treated us very well. The initial flight was terrifying, though. As soon as we took off, we were plunged into full blackout. Susan screamed then and Martha accidentally let out a bit of formic, but I don't blame her to be honest. Once the velvet darkness descended the flight became very rocky – you know like mega turbulence. I suppose that was when we left the atmosphere and entered space proper. We were thrown hither and thither, thither and thon – sorry, always wanted to say that, heard Owl say it once and it's been stuck in my head ever since. Where was I? Oh yes. Turbulence. That's when Sally got coated in the goo that was stuck in the corner of the craft, but she managed to eat her way out of it.

Then suddenly, all the lights were on and we were stationary – landed safely on their planet. There was a terrible screaming sound when the ship's doors initially opened and I think they were faulty because they closed shut immediately. That's when my antenna got squished. Then the door opened again, more slowly this time. It was so bright, blindingly bright and the creatures peering in at us had the biggest eyes you had ever seen. Bigger than the daft badger's even with her bottle top glasses on. Huge. Martha let some more formic out then, poor girl.

We were in the craft for many long hours, but the detritus sustained us. Then, without warning, the craft took off once more at great speed. Then, while still airborne and flying at the oddest angle, the doors opened again and we fell down into The Farm.

Yes, The Farm – they treated us like animals and conducted experiments upon us!

Trapped between two vertical glass plates we were, in soil and sand and leaves. Martha said we should stay up top and wait for rescue, but I was worried about woodpeckers – or whatever the alien equivalent might be. I suggested we try to create a nest, if anything just to keep busy. I'm not good at just waiting around. We tried and tried to build, but there weren't any pine needles to be found and there was hardly room to swing an aphid between the two glass walls.

At times we were almost calm, accepting our fate and working away together, singing our construction songs, but then the giant eyes would come, so close to the walls, so very near to our faces. And night fell so fast on their planet. One minute the suns were burning as bright as the hottest summer day and then – poof! – pitch black. At least the eyes were gone then.

And then suddenly one day we were transferred to a new spaceship – spotless it was. And the journey this time was smooth. The lights stayed on, but the walls of the ship were cloudy so we couldn't see out. We huddled together and tried to keep Martha calm. When the door opened, we couldn't believe our eyes – was that the Sacred Monument? Our Sacred Monument? We scurried out and called out for help.

And that's when I heard Doris. I came running immediately, of course, laid the line and got them back into the nest.

And now when the thunder comes, we stay in our nests and follow the strict SNACK protocol – Stay Near Ant Colony. We remain ever vigilant, and we're proud to say that it's been 472 days without any alien abductions.

The End

Story by Ribs Norman

**HAND OF DOOM
PRODUCTIONS**



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