

Beneath the cloak of night, a darker form prowled the earth; as if the gravity of this being seized any photon which strayed within its orbit. A ghostly preternatural shadow gliding beneath the moonless sky. Death in its domain, holding illimitable dominion over all, so terrible were the acicular design of its fangs and the crushing power of its jaws. A perfect killing machine evolved for this sole purpose, through stealth and sudden ambush, or a swift chase on powerful legs; running prey to ground or leaping up to snatch it from the air before rending it limb from limb. The ferocity of the spider was nonpareil and those of the wilderness who dwelt in its midst knew it to be devoid of all mercy or compassion.

Under the cover of darkness, it moved silently towards an unsuspecting victim. An unusual victim, since the spider was a devout carnivore; and a helpless victim, unable to run even as the first jagged hairs on its muscular legs pricked a sensitive peduncle.

By Tax Fries:

The Wulfmarsh Weekend

The Levin Plays

Ragnarok

A
SPIDER
BALLET

Tax Fries

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Poetry used in the story text:
Edgar Allen Poe (1809 - 1849)

ISBN 0 9533333 2 9

www.dancefell.com

Printed and bound by Lulu

ACT I - SPRING

Little Miss Muffet, sat on a truffet,
Eating her curds and wey;
Along came a spider, who sat down beside her,
And frightened Miss Muffet away.

Songs for the Nursery (1805)

1

Sunshine. An affectionate smile from a benevolent guardian nurturing a distant ward, and exacting a tribute from the denizens of the garden befitting a glorious deity. Golden sunflowers, towering and statuesque, reached up into the clear blue sky as if aspiring to kiss the scintillating orb ahead of the more modest and dissembling roses. These demure flowers were content to bathe their striking beauty in the cascade of warmth and light from the fiery god in the sky.

In the firmament surrounding the flowers, a swarm of honeybees danced with frenzied joy on this bright afternoon; driven by the engine of life to an orgiastic display of aerobic skill and prowess. Soaring, spinning, looping and diving with power, grace, agility, and daredevil disregard for gravity or each other as they sought, through open competition, to impress and gain favour among the watching flowers.

The rules of the garden were simple enough, drawn from the imperative to survive and flourish within a complex society. Natural selection bestowed currency on the players with which to partake in the game. A commodity market trading nectar, pollen, and other less tangible qualia to be trafficked through the skies.

From various sites all over the garden, keen eyes tracked the animated cloud that was the swarm on its lazy drift across the sky, eagerly anticipating the trysts it would bring. Breaking away in twos and threes, the honeybees picked their targets, circling overhead before swooping with preci-

sion to bestow their favours on the psychedelic flora.

A familiar enough pattern to those flowers observing the holistic organism from soil beds dispersed around the garden. Some maintained the appearance of being outwardly chaste, though most eagerly awaited their chance to participate in the ritual.

One bee seemed to lag substantially behind and below the swirling ensemble. Lacklustre in appearance, though largely unnoticed among the multitude, until the disconcerted gaze of a delicate pink rose-flower locked onto her, piercing the shield of her anonymity. The honeybee allowed herself to become further detached from the main body of the swarm; hovering hesitantly rather than climbing high in an energetic spiral in prelude to a climactic dive.

She dropped to ground level some distance from the flower, as if unsure of her own intentions. The descent was ungainly and lacking in style. A curious profile; erratic, ugly and without grace; devoid of the characteristic charisma of the honeybees; perhaps even lacking the basic vitality of life. The signs of strain hinted at a struggle just to remain in the air.

The honeybee began to close despite the wary eyes and discouraging frown of the flower. Experience had taught the rose what to expect; unless, of course, the guise of self neglect fell, exposing a ruse; and a wily honeybee shot forward, buzzing with the strength and vigour of her kind. In the course of a didactic spring, the flower had seen it all; and hoped this was just a clandestine charade, however irritating, since that would be infinitely preferable to the flower's conscience than the unspoken alternative. The range fell away, and with it died the prospect of a malingerer's recovery.

A pallid complexion and glazed eyes confirmed the diffident malaise; mercifully rare, though usually fatal for those deigned to rely on the intricate faculty of flight. The

flower turned away; not wishing to be cruel, not wishing to reject absolutely, since nature makes no gains if the traders do not trade; but merely wishing to provoke an appropriate response, should any spark of hope remain. The gauntlet fell, if only the bee could stoop to retrieve it.

Unfortunately, the enervated honeybee was unable to oblige, despite a desperate need for the flower's nectar. Bedevilled by impaired balance and vision, she could barely fly straight, never mind pick out a target, and banked away gently; acknowledging the prescience of the flower and recognising the futility of proceeding. The market ceased to trade below a certain price.

Nearby; witnessing the brief, abortive encounter from the vantage of a tall peduncle; a sunflower called out, attracting the attention of the honeybee and beckoning to her with a self-assured smile. Wary onus shifted from flower to flyer as the honeybee ascended slowly to the lofty height, impeded not just by suspicion but also the physical and mental fatigue brought on by abstinence.

"Why are you acting so strangely?" the sunflower asked her boldly. "You're not like the others."

The question stirred anger in the honeybee, not just because of its obvious condescension but for its intrusion. Of course she was different, any fool could see that she was physically and mentally unfit to fly. But she was also transparent and resented being probed. It was as if the sunflower could see straight through her skin to observe what lay within: a grotesque and ugly creature struggling to escape the sleek aerodynamic frame like a caterpillar inside a silk cocoon. That thought presented her with an unwelcome reflection of herself.

"Why do you ask?" came a terse reply.

"Answer my question and I'll tell you."

"Yes, I'm different," the honeybee confirmed, hovering at an oblique angle to partially shield her eyes from the

interrogation.

“Pity there weren’t more like you,” the sunflower sighed. “The honeybees are all the same.”

“Hedonists,” the honeybee remarked disdainfully, as if distancing herself from the species. “They embrace the wealth and the lifestyle of the garden. In the wilderness, things would be different.”

“I wouldn’t want to live in the wilderness,” the sunflower gasped, shuddering at the thought. “But the honeybee visits are all too brief; they land and are away again without pausing for breath when there are so many things I’d like to talk about; ideas I’d like to discuss and explore; if only they would wait around long enough to listen.”

Annoyance gave way to incredulity, then bemusement. The honeybee might have laughed out loud, choosing instead to stifle the rising mirth at such blatant affectation. She felt a strong desire to empathise with the flower, but a self-mocking voice in her head warned against such feelings.

“You don’t strike me as the lonely type,” the honeybee professed.

“Appearances can be deceptive.”

“You can talk to the other sunflowers around you. They’re a fairly gregarious bunch.”

“I know, but all they do is chat about the bees. It gets really boring after a while. Sometimes I wish I was standing in a nice grassy meadow by myself - with lots of different flyers about, with different tales to tell.”

“The sunflowers are foremost among the garden flowers, they get more attention from the honeybees than any of the others.”

“We get plenty of brief visits for our nectar and pollen, but I’d like something more.”

“So what would you like to talk about?” asked the honeybee, sufficiently intrigued to suppress her natural cynicism.

“You’re not fatally sick, are you?” the sunflower inquired, with admirable compassion.

“No, I’m fine,” she lied.

“You don’t look very well.”

“We can all have an off-day - if we don’t get a good night’s sleep.”

“I knew a honeybee once who had too many off-days,” the perennial sunflower recalled.

“What happened to her?” the honeybee asked, with some noticeable apprehension.

“Disappeared on a flight one day over the wilderness and never came back. Some say she was eaten by a predatory flower.”

“There’s no such thing,” the honeybee ventured uneasily.

“Maybe not in the garden. But who knows what’s lurking out there in the wilderness? Of course, nobody really knows what happened to her. Maybe she flew straight into a web.”

This shot hit its mark beautifully, causing the nonchalant mask of the honeybee to slip as if jolted from behind. She shuddered, an involuntary spasm induced by the thought of being caught in the silken deathtrap so greatly feared by her kind.

“Some say she did it deliberately,” the sunflower added, sounding almost gleeful. “She went mad and decided to end her summer.”

“That’s a lie!” the honeybee remonstrated loudly, deeply discomfited by the proposition. It beggared belief that anyone, no matter how disturbed, would choose to end their summer in such a way.

“That’s what they say,” the sunflower insisted, finding coarse levity in tragedy and seeming to enjoy stoking the neurosis of the honeybee. “Others say it was misadventure. She liked the excitement of playing around with the predators - teasing and taunting them - until one day she got caught up in a web. Honeybees are such dumb flywits you

never can tell what they might do.”

For the honeybee, this embellishment on an old story was just as disturbing as a web suicide. The laughter of the sunflower sounded callous and skittish; an echo of her own internal rumbling that she was trying to escape from. A tacit condemnation of her attempt to communicate on an earnest level with a flower. The inner voice had been right - again. What sort of grand, cosmological meeting of minds had she expected with an entity so markedly different - so far removed in thought and feeling from her own experience? Feeling foolish for the *faux pas*, she banked away; letting gravity repay the energy expended in rising to the bait.

“No, wait, please, don’t go, not yet!” the sunflower pleaded, earnestly trying to forestall the departure with compelling pathos. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it to sound like that. I thought I was cheering you up. I thought that’s what you wanted to hear. There’s something I want to ask you, something I need to know. Please, don’t go! Maybe you can help me ...”

The honeybee slowed her weary retreat and hovered some distance from the sunflower, but still within earshot.

“Come back, closer to me,” the sunflower urged, in a projected whisper. “It’s personal, I don’t want to say it out loud.”

The bee approached cautiously, noticing the sunflower’s furtive glances into the sky beyond her, but carelessly attributing them to a wish for discretion.

“Actually it concerns you. Something you really ought to know,” the sunflower broke off the whisper and looked beyond the honeybee’s shoulder. The gleam of triumph in the florid smile flashed a brief warning to the honeybee who, in her peripheral vision, caught sight of a characteristic delta-shape closing on her flank with reckless speed.

A sense of fatalistic apathy retarded the reflexive instinct to veer away from danger despite the imminent risk of

collision. The assailant closed rapidly and with violent intent, even as the honeybee's wings finally bit into the air and her stomach lurched with the upward acceleration. But such a slow, exaggerated effort telegraphed the move to the other bee who altered course before impact to cross the dogleg and slew into her victim. The jarring collision stunned the honeybee, who immediately lost all faculty for flight and began tumbling earthward in an uncontrolled spin.

The antagonist hovered next to the sunflower, laughing in company with her floral consort and loudly offering advice for all to hear. "This isn't the place for you, my feeble friend, at least not until you learn how to fly. Stick to the roses, or better still the daisies. You won't have so far to fall!"

The condescending jibe jarred the honeybee even more than the collision itself as she tumbled to earth. Gripped by a sudden pathological fury, she fought to recover from the spin. The adrenalin of blind rage surged through her arteries, smothering the pain and compensating for weakness by injecting temporary life into flagging flight muscles. Blessed by the god of vengeance, the honeybee ceased to tumble, levelled off, and drew up in a slow, deliberate climb.

"She's coming back!" cheered the sunflower, as if eager to see a joust. "I don't believe it, she's actually coming back! What are you going to do now? What if she was just play-acting all along? She could be a much better flyer than you think."

"I doubt it," the brash bee groaned. Preoccupation with the flower had taken her mind off pugilism, and now she took to the air in a resolved mood; reluctant but determined to teach the impudent cripple her place. "This will only take a brief moment, then I'll be back."

"Everything takes a brief moment for you," the sunflower observed, with ill-concealed sarcasm.

"Don't be jealous," the brash bee smirked, disarming the sunflower with a smarmy glint in her eye. Such easy going,

quirky self-assurance contrasted sharply with the intensity displayed by the fumbling honeybee, without sense enough to take the convenient way out for everyone and just fly away.

“Why should I be jealous?” the sunflower jibed. “There are plenty of other bees in the swarm.”

“But the others don’t have this,” the bee replied lewdly, extending a long tongue from the proboscis which she used to good effect when licking nectar from the carpels of a flower.

“You flatter yourself?”

“When you’ve got talent, flattery is something you just have to live with,” the bee conceded modestly.

Unbeknown to either clear-headed consort, neither modesty nor common sense were in the mind of the psychotic honeybee as she performed her own hypothetical assessment of a hubristic clash with a zeal far surpassing that of her bullying adversary.

The stricken honeybee recognised her brash opponent from the swarm. A belligerent and frivolous bee, popular with the sunflowers, though not greatly noted for her speed or agility. The honeybee calculated that she lacked the physical and mental substance to be a great flyer.

A hawkish murmur in the honeybee’s disturbed psyche predicted a favourable outcome; and it was this truculent, perhaps atavistic, trait which powered her on to the conflict. Jousting among honeybees was fairly common, and often bruising to both body and ego, though rarely fatal. A honeybee who used her sting risked disembowelling herself when she tried to withdraw the barbed needle, and the ethics of the garden forbade the use of stings on each other to prevent pointless soricide within the swarm.

Ironically it seemed, the deftness and energy denied her for gentler pursuits were available in abundance for a competitive encounter where the goal was simple and her

purpose clearly defined. But then, the same treacherous purpose struck her down. Simple tactics infected by a quest for strategy. Parasitic forces of self-doubt broke out of their enclave, releasing something like adrenalin which exercised not muscle but mind. A corrosive chemical, gnawing away at her certainty and questioning the wisdom of a battle for status; for that conclusion lay at the root of her deduction.

The brash bee knew and the sunflower tacitly understood. But the honeybee didn't want to know - didn't want to confront her *raison d'être*. Slapped in the face by an inescapable fact of life, the honeybee desperately racked her conscience for a more worthwhile cause to fight as she climbed past the gleeful, lusting flower; knowing that without one, the outcome would not alter or dispel the symptomatic disillusionment of her condition; nor prevent her further manipulation by a game she despised but seemed powerless to change.

Win or lose, she would lose. Yet it seemed that she had little choice given not just the immediate circumstances, but the whole framework of her existence. If she didn't compete for the approval of the flower, then nothing in her life would make any sense. The last strands of reality and reason would slip through her grasp. There would be no point to being here, no point in being a honeybee; no point belonging to the garden into which she had been born.

The contradictions tore at her as she continued to climb above the other bee; eyes locked onto the opponent with cold, provocative disdain. For the beautiful, voyeuristic sunflower, now far below, she felt nothing. A disturbingly cold and utterly useless emotion which she also despised; but then, the sunflower was just another flower; an eager spectator, doubtless willing to receive any victor. What disturbed the honeybee most was the thought that, as a victor, she might readily accept the favour.

The sunflower knew nothing of her ambivalence, wanting

no more than to witness the spectacle, and was eagerly tracking the distinctive forms as they rose up into the azure sky. But rather than begin the joust, they just kept on climbing. The flower became increasingly irate at the prospect of seeing nothing as the specks faded into the wide blue yonder. The tactic of ascent employed by the honeybee frustrated the view even from the high vantage of a sunflower peduncle.

The two bees continued to climb; the challenger leading, the other matching her wingbeat stroke for stroke - their aspects face to face and frowning brow to brow. Surprised by the apparent revitalisation of her adversary, and curious to her first move, the brash bee refused to relinquish any height advantage; mercilessly pushing the ascent in an exacting contest of wills that prefaced a physical encounter.

The first blows were, in fact, already being struck. The psychotic honeybee displayed great stamina in this quint-essential game of chicken. She felt light and strong; her lithe frame well suited to the rarefied air and her psychological state conditioned to an alien, isolated, and punishing environment, detached from the main body of the swarm. The other bee was just as strong though, and seemed determined to pursue her opponent despite her rational senses warning of a looming vicissitude.

The honeybee grudgingly admired her tenacity, acknowledging the adroit strategy. For the brash bee to fall away now would be to invite swift retribution from above; and so clearly she had little choice; though it was not the sort of confrontation she had expected when provoking a lazy, low level scrap with a cripple. Soon, the brash bee would begin to tire. Her wings would begin to feel like lead and her brain would become stifled by a lack of oxygen. Then, the honeybee would stoop, strike, and inflict a bruising humiliation on her opponent in front of the sunflowers and any other members of the swarm in the vicinity.

But with supremacy went a sense of responsibility. Her anger had dissipated in the climb and now she no longer wished to conquer or exact revenge, least of all as a strategy to briefly appropriate a sunflower. She just wanted to escape, and rest, and think about the unusual course her spring had taken.

From this new vantage, the honeybee could view the garden that surrounded the white temple of the tall-spirits in a different light. All of the garden: the expanse of the lawn, the mirror-like surface of the pond punctuated only by ripples from the rising fish; the dendritic arms of trees laden with blossom; even the very boundaries of the garden itself, defining the parochialism of its denizens; and the vast expanse of tangled wilderness beyond, bordered on the western horizon by the high snow-covered peaks that held up the sky.

The spectacle was visually cold and fascinating, the perspective beguiling; a glimpse of something tangible, yet nebulous; something beyond the reach of her dimmed senses and limited perception. She looked to her compatriot, expecting to see the revelation reflected there also, but encountered only blank ignorance and confusion - further evidence that she was very different to the others of the swarm. No matter. Nothing seemed to matter up here among the wispy clouds, above and beyond all established order and convention.

To the honeybee, it felt as if the chains of conformity were breaking away and debris from the destructive passions which had propelled her to such heights were falling back to earth, redundant and burned out. She grinned, cheeks aglow, a glimmer of emancipation in her eye.

The other bee moved back slightly, bracing herself for the clash; but the honeybee merely gave a salute before peeling away on the high altitude slipstream; leaving her misapprehending opponent in a state of guarded uncertainty. The

other bee held her station, making no attempt to pursue the fleeing adversary; half expecting her to circle then close again. But the honeybee just kept on going until out of sight. Nonplussed, the bee cautiously swooped back down to the waiting sunflower, realising with amazement just how high they had risen in the heat of the encounter.

“Why did you go all the way up there?” the sunflower demanded to know on her return. “I couldn’t see a thing.”

The bee circled slowly without answering, her eyes scanning the skies overhead; totally perplexed by the motive of her opponent and still expecting a strike from the blue.

“Well? Tell me what happened? She’s not dead, is she?”

“No, she’s not dead,” the bee answered brusquely. “Not yet anyway. One minute she was mad at me and trying to gain height and then she lost her nerve and flew away.”

“Lucky for her!” the sunflower quipped sarcastically, at the expense of this consort.

“She seemed to have a lot of stamina at altitude,” the bee had to admit. “Didn’t seem to tire at all. Maybe she’s high on something.”

“She led you up there, then zipped away!” the sunflower laughed. “You went all the way up there for nothing.”

“It wasn’t for nothing,” the bee remonstrated, landing heavily in the sunflower. “I’ve never been that high before. There’s a great view of the garden and the wilderness.”

“The view?” the cynical sunflower moaned aloud. “How can it be any different to the view from here? All you do is look down on the grass. Honeybees! Crazy flyers, I’ll never understand you.”

“Who’s asking you to?” the brash bee chuckled, taking the nectar she desired.

2

The supercharge was spent, discarded in the wake of a pointless confrontation; and now the feeble mortal could no longer sustain the elevation of a god. The honeybee glided aimlessly in a shallow dive, losing height on an indeterminate course, but without the inclination to alter it. She was fleeing not the other bee, but the madness which had stripped her of everything except a blinding desire to escape; even as a hostage to fortune on a random bearing which, if adhered to, might even carry her beyond the protective confines of the garden itself.

The leisurely vertical component of descent raised up the green continuum of the lawn until its texture took a more distinctive form and the elliptic curve of her shallow dive flattened out at blade top height. The honeybee careered along with neither power nor steerage; nor, for that matter, even the will to determine the destiny of her passage other than to remain airborne; though even that seemed too much to ask.

Her flight muscles were stiffening, her wings becoming inexplicably rigid and non-responsive. A creeping paralysis developed as the debt incurred to confront her peer at altitude was recalled. Without mobility, gliding seemed the only option. If she tried to turn on rigid wings, she would plummet and crash. Even landing in a glide pattern would be difficult. Honeybees were not designed to glide.

Ahead, the homogeneous green forest of cropped grass gave way to bare soil; then to the expanse of glinting water

backed by elevated rocks where one of the tall-spirits - mysterious giants who fashioned the garden and collected the sun-god's honey from the hive - was kneeling and tending to some water lilies. He raised his head briefly to track the passage of the buzzing *Apis* as it flew over the smooth, dark, deadly surface.

The honeybee breathed deeply and borrowed on her dangerously low reserves as she forced power into her wings; pulling up away from the deathtrap and clearing the bleak, bare rocky outcrops at the back of the pond on which, exposed to the afternoon sun, she would soon perish.

Once over the rock garden, she lost altitude again, and found herself at the edge of the garden; a border demarcated by an old fence of wooden boards.

The honeybee glided through a gap in the planks of wood and entered the world beyond where gnarled, twisted old trees with blackened bark reached up as high as the sky. A rough, untamed wilderness of mere and fell; forest, heath, and marshland. Desolate and forbidding to the aesthetic eye of one raised in the garden and yet, like so many wild things, fiercely independent and strangely beautiful; without the influence of straight lines and ordered conventions that were the major features of the garden. Chaotic and lawless; this was a jungle to be feared by any civilised creature.

The honeybee sailed on through the alien environment of jagged brush, misshapen mounds, and coarse grasses; managing to glide a considerable distance on a straight course and avoid collision, perhaps guided by the providence of the sun-god, though the cramp in her chest reminded her that even with providence on board she was still heavier than air. The flight muscles which had faithfully cleared the rocks were now exhausted and seizing up.

The honeybee acceded to the inevitable. Partially blinded, indifferent beyond despair; exiled in spirit and now in body from a tidy universe which she neither understood nor

belonged to. This time she was going down. No longer able to maintain flight, she braced herself for a controlled crash in a muddy clearing of the uneven grassland.

The ground came rushing up despite the shallow angle of descent. Lacking coordination or control as if intoxicated by a debilitating narcotic; unable to airbrake and alight; the honeybee's legs brushed the soil, flipping her onto her back; though this did little to reduce the momentum with which her body continued to sluice through the loose earth, still soft and damp from a recent summer shower. With two degrees of freedom remaining, her body rotated and skated along on planer wings designed for more elegant transit, until finally arrested by a jarring impact. The honeybee had collided with something firm and immovable, though mercifully as pliable as the ambient soil.

"Hey! What the hell? ..." a surprised voice cried out from nowhere, pitching into a very high octave.

The honeybee might have retorted with similar surprise but, dazed and winded by the unsolicited impact with *terra firma*, she lacked the energy for such vocal expression and was content to simply groan and shake her head.

The exotic dialect persisted without concern for her welfare after the crash. "I said, what the hell d'ya think you're playin' at? Just look at all my work! It's bin wiped out! Took me all mornin' and now look at it! There ain't nothin' left, nothin' recognisable."

Startled and slightly irritated by the whining complaints, the prostrate honeybee sat up and casually dusted herself down before turning to address the injured party with a stern glare which immediately melted into an expression of amazement at the sight.

"Ain't you got a tongue in your head?" the plaintiff demanded to know.

"Yes, but I've - I've ..." tongue tied, the honeybee halted in mid-sentence, agape at the appearance of the strange and

exotic looking creature before her.

Slim and cylindrical, with no obvious shoulders or neck, it projected out of a miniature conical tumulus. The creature had skin of a reddy-brown tincture and wore a hat fashioned from grass stalks as if to protect the point of its conical head from the sun. Never having seen anything remotely like it, the honeybee didn't know what to say.

"What's up wit' you now?" the ground-dweller jibed, sounding exasperated with the interloper from the sky; though the honeybee suspected that he was in fact amused by the incredulity he inspired, and becoming more eccentric because of it.

"Sorry," the honeybee muttered cordially, rubbing the back of her head in a futile attempt to relieve the aching pressure that was building there. "Are you stuck in the ground? Maybe I can help pull you out?"

"No, I ain't stuck in the ground and I don't need pullin' out!" the ground-dweller replied testily. "Unless you're a blackbird lookin' for a tasty meal."

"Then what are you doing in the earth like that?"

"This is where I live!"

"In the earth?"

"Sure, I live in the earth. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, I suppose. You said I ruined your work?" the honeybee recalled, looking around at the scattered mud in some confusion as to the exact nature of her crime.

"Ain't you got eyes in your head?" The ground-dweller gestured to the mound of earth which had arrested the honeybee's landing. "Sculpture! I was sculptin' the mud. What else would I be doin' above ground on a hot afternoon like this? Gettin' a suntan? Don't you know an earthworm's got delicate skin?"

"What's an earthworm?" the honeybee mused.

"Yer lookin' at one!" the worm answered sharply.

The honeybee nodded, then viewed the mound of earth

she had unwittingly demolished with a mixture of curiosity and highly dubious scepticism. It had the remnants of a few regular lines which seemed contrived and unusual, but not enough to justify aesthetic labelling.

“It looks like the earth from a tunnel excavation,” the philistine professed, scratching her head. “How can you ruin a heap of soil?”

“Of course it looks like that, coz that’s all it is since you crashed in on the scene. The sun’s shinin’ and we don’t see it too often down here, so why can’t folks enjoy a quiet time without other folks crowdin’ in on their space?”

“I lost control - the ground came up so fast there was nothing I could do,” the honeybee explained. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to disturb anyone.”

The worm paused for breath, taking a moment to study the honeybee with equal curiosity. He sighed deeply, as if placated by the apology. “Aw, that’s okay, forget it. Did you break anythin’? A fall like that can be pretty rough.”

Pricked by the question, the honeybee glowered warily, suddenly embarrassed by the indignity of having crashed and now finding herself amongst ground-dwellers.

“I don’t know,” she admitted vaguely, then felt rather foolish for her honesty.

“They’s your wings, don’t you know how to tell if they’s broke?” the earthworm joked, amused by the defensiveness of the flyer.

“That’s a good question,” the honeybee conceded.

“It is?” The earthworm sounded delighted. “Hey, I just love good questions. All day, I dig holes and ask questions. Not much else to do but ask questions when you’s stuck down there in the dark. It helps concentrate the mind. But the funny thing is, it ain’t no good for answerin’ them.”

He paused for a moment, giving the honeybee a chance to digest this curious fact before resuming his exposition.

“Answers takes somethin’ else - not concentration but

kinda like distraction. Somethin' that pushes and pulls your thoughts around in all sorts of wild, crazy places until you bump into the answer almost by accident. Somethin' like sculpture," he suggested, patting the pile of earth.

"Sculpture?" the bemused honeybee queried.

"Sure, I know it don't look like much now - but it was gonna to be a bust of me. A self portrait." The earthworm stuck his chest out and beamed proudly, displaying a mouthful of gleaming white teeth.

"What's a bust?"

"Let me show you," the earthworm proposed, and immediately set about moulding the clay with an enthusiastic zest which, to the honeybee, seemed almost comical. He hummed as his fingers worked; a musical utterance quite unlike anything the bee had ever heard before.

"What's that you're doing?" the honeybee asked.

"Ah, wait and see ..."

"No, the sound - it's sort of rhythmic."

"Just humming a little ditty; don't you like songs?"

"Songs?"

"Songs - you must know some songs?" It was the earthworm's turn to wear an expression of confusion that quickly broke into a comprehending grin. "You ain't from round here, are you?" he presumed.

"I'm from the garden," the honeybee revealed. The statement was accurate yet somehow didn't ring true. "I was from the garden," she iterated, it sounded better.

"So where you from now?"

"Nowhere."

"You didn't go breakin' no laws, did you?"

"No," the honeybee insisted indignantly.

"It wouldn't make no difference to anyone around here anyways - there's only one law and that's Sisera."

"Sisera?"

"This is his territory. You don't ever want to meet him,

not on the ground. What you come here for?"

"I told you, I crashed," the honeybee answered sharply; though her eyes were fixed intently on the skilled, fast moving fingertips of the worm, fashioning the clay into something vaguely familiar. A depiction of life using non-living material. Iconic image representation was virtually absent from the life of a honeybee, but there was sufficient resemblance in the emerging study to thrill her as the subject materialised before her eyes, and to fire her imagination with the potential of this new medium.

"But what you doin' flyin' over the wilderness?"

"I took a wrong turn," the honeybee quipped wryly.

"There, that's a sculpture," the earthworm announced proudly, removing his hands to reveal a miniature honeybee moulded from the clay. "When I've finished workin' on a piece, I leave it out in the sun to bake hard, then store it underground in one of my galleries."

The honeybee gasped, astounded by the sight. "It looks like a honeybee!"

"It looks like you," the earthworm insisted. "At least it would if I had more time to develop the facial features. Do you know what you look like?"

"Any other honeybee," the honeybee presumed.

"But have you ever seen a reflection of your own face?"

"On the surface of the pond in the garden," she recalled.

"Then you'll know that everyone's face is slightly different. Even the homogeneous honeybees."

"I've always wondered why that is," she mused.

"Coz we're *all* different."

"Not the honeybees. We're all the same, or rather, we all try to be the same. We all do the same job and we're all supposed to have the same relationships with the flowers in the garden, so why do we need different faces?"

"You're a long way from home," the earthworm sighed. "Things are different around here."

"I don't have a home."

"Sure you do - the garden's your home."

"Not any more. I can't go back."

"Why not? What are you runnin' away from?"

The honeybee frowned at the pun, wrapped in a curious colloquialism. "I'm not *running* away from anything. I just can't fly any more."

"But you're a honeybee, ain't you?"

"We don't always fly. You must have seen a grounded bee before?"

"Yeah, but flyers on the ground don't usually last long around these parts," he ventured grimly, then tried to sound more optimistic. "You just need a rest, then you'll get back in the air. Honeybees have gotta fly some time. How else you gonna live and get nectar and pollen from the flowers? They ain't gonna let you crawl up their stalk and have it for free. There's gotta be a trade - somethin' in it for them."

The honeybee was trying not to think about the stark reality of her dire situation. She was reprieved from answering the question for the moment by an unexpected interjection.

"Hang on, Zeb, I'm comin'! Don't worry, I saw ever'thin' just like it happened. This crazy flyer came straight out o' the sky and deliberately crashlanded right on top o' you."

The lazy drawl belonged to a big black slug; moving slowly, though clearly exerting himself in his efforts to reach the scene. The unfortunate stalks of grass groaned as he pushed them aside with his great bulk, leaving a hideous slime trail in his wake. The fastidious honeybee shuddered at the sight.

"Things are fine, Naph," the earthworm assured the new arrival. "She didn't mean nothin', did you, er, hey, what is your name anyway?"

A curious frown spread over the honeybee's face. The simple question seemed to leave her confused for a

moment, as if it had slipped from her memory. "I don't have one," she finally revealed.

"Sure you do," Zeb insisted. "Ever'body's gotta have a name. How else do you talk about folks if they don't have a name?"

The newly arrived slug grinned as if sharing in a joke, and the honeybee detected an esoteric note of levity in the vernacular of the earthworm's deadpan delivery. But then, the worm adopted a sterner countenance and looked closely into the eyes of the honeybee, as if searching for some sign of an affliction.

"You got concussion or amnesia?" he asked, feeling the honeybee's head for signs of bruising.

"What's that?" she replied.

"Concussion is when you get hit on the head, like when you fall out o' the sky. Amnesia is when you forget. Sometimes one leads to the other."

"I didn't hit my head - I landed on my back."

"Other times, folks just forget ever'thin' about themselves for no reason - no obvious reason - their names, their friends, where they's from ..."

"I haven't forgotten anything," the patient insisted meekly. "Honeybees just don't have names. We don't talk about each other - at least not in the way that I think you mean."

"No fun in that," Zeb quipped. "It's good to bust someone's ass when they ain't around."

"You're from the garden, ain't you?" Naph noted. "I can tell by the accent."

"Yes, the garden swarm is a homogeneous entity with a collective identity. We all know what we are expected to do and most of us enjoy getting on with it; at least, enough of us to maintain the garden each summer and sustain the hive through the winter. No need for individual names. It would be the height of pretentiousness to assume one."

"But ever'body's gotta have a name sometime," Naph

insisted, disputing the proposition. "I wouldn't want to live in a place where nobody's got one."

"The honeybees and flowers in the garden must have stopped using names many summers ago," the honeybee presumed. "Their use would be problematic now. If you were to address someone by a name, it would either be interpreted as deferential, marking you as inferior; or patronising, which would be taken as an insult. Far better to remain neutral and not communicate in that way."

"Don't it bother you? Never havin' had a name?" Zeb inquired. "I sure wouldn't like it myself."

"Not really," the honeybee answered guardedly. "We don't miss what we don't know. A lot of other things bother me," she suddenly announced in a rash disclosure, then calmed her tone in the company of strangers. "But there's nothing I can do about them now. I'm out of the garden and I won't be going back."

"Why not?" Naph asked bluntly.

"Because, as I explained to your associate here ..."

"Zeb," the earthworm cut in with a teasing grin. "My name is Zeb - just call me Zeb - short for Zebulun. And this is Naphtali. We're pals, ain't we Naph?"

The slug nodded and grinned too - keeping his end up as the other half of this grotesque double act.

"Are you two fellows male or female?" the honeybee inquired warily.

"Hermaphrodite," Zeb beamed proudly.

"My guess is you don't have friends in the garden either," Naph presumed.

"We have associates. Friendships would distract from the drive to make honey and could even compromise the loyalty of a bee to the hive and the Queen."

"So what are you doing way out here?"

"As I've already explained to Zeb, I can't fly."

"Neither can I, but it never stopped me raidin' the garden

at night for the leaf litter.”

“Well, there’s one thing we can change right away!” Zeb decided. “You’re a honeybee, ain’t you?”

The honeybee nodded warily in response to the rhetorical question.

“In that case we’re gonna call you - Jael.”

“Why Jael?” asked the puzzled honeybee.

“It means ‘to ascend’ - and it sounds more feminine than, say, HB.”

“I think I prefer HB,” the honeybee professed, though in a distant corner of her mind, the laughter roared again, mocking her and the preposterous situation she had fallen into. These blunt, warm-hearted, well-meaning characters were quaintly irritating; almost inviting derogatory ridicule. The honeybee had to suppress the supercilious being that dwelt within her. Ground-dwellers wouldn’t know anything about the sophistication of the garden; its challenges and rewards, ethics and conventions; but being here in their domain, she knew better than to say anything that might offend their simple manners.

“Thank you,” the honeybee muttered tactfully, with all the sincerity she could muster. “Time I moved on. Sorry about your earth, er, sculpture, Zeb.”

“Aw, forget it. It weren’t no good as it was anyways. Somethin’ll come from the unexpected element of chance. Serendipity - that’s how great artworks are made.”

“I hope so.”

The honeybee considered the proposition doubtful - but encouraged by his faith, she was filled with a sense of wary optimism as she trundled off in an ungainly fashion; the coordination in her legs not much better than that of her wings, but sufficient to cope with the demands of walking.

“Hey, honeybee - where you goin?” Naph called out after her.

“I don’t know yet.” The bee paused thoughtfully for a

moment, then grinned and mimicked their strange, cheerful accents. "I'll let you know when I get there."

"Take care, honeybee."

"Thanks."

The honeybee disappeared into the grassy undergrowth, leaving the ground-dwelling pair to exchange ominous glances.

"Sun's beginnin' to fall," Zeb noted. "It'll be dark soon. Think she'll make it through the night?"

"Someone must have seen her come down; there'll be whispers and rumours of a downed honeybee spreadin' through the undergrowth by now. And when Sisera hears, he'll get her for sure."

"A damn shame, she seems fine for a honeybee."

"You think any of the other honeybees'll come look for her?"

Zeb shook his head. "Honeybees don't help each other unless they're defendin' the hive."

"She ain't a happy honeybee if you ask me. See how pale she looked? Her eyes were all swollen and bloodshot like she don't sleep well at nights."

"Well, she ain't gonna get much sleep this night in the undergrowth."

"Maybe we ought to keep an eye on her," Naph proposed cheerily.

Zeb looked at the earth surrounding the mouth of his burrow, then at the flabby bulk of the slug squatting before him. "How do you propose we do that?" he queried. "We're kinda mobily challenged, even compared to a grounded flyer."

Naph conceded the point with a shake of his head, then pointed to the image moulded in clay. "I don't know, but you better not leave that thing lying around here. Never know who might pass by on her trail and see it."

"You kiddin'?" the artist lifted his piece and lovingly

tucked it into his burrow for safekeeping. “I ain’t finished workin’ on it yet. Not every day a honeybee falls out o’ the sky for a sittin’.”

3

Temperatures fell as night advanced in the wake of the retreating sun. The cold air laid siege to those dependent on the warmth and light of day as they waited for the relief of dawn. In the absence of a moon; faint, blue radiation from distant constellations danced vividly around the noctilucent clouds of the mesosphere; a first port of call after centuries of voyaging through the vast, icy wastes of space. These ambassadors from a galactic potentate confirmed exile on the remote blue planet, bowing to deliver their message of chilling isolation before impinging in the soil around the crouching honeybee.

She huddled in the darkness beneath the comparative shelter afforded by a clump of torn grassroots and reflected on her fall from grace. The honeybee was not accustomed to facing the darkness alone; but even in the company of other bees, the nightly gift of catatonic bliss had never been hers to share. Sleep then had been a haunted, troubled, restless affair; an elusive need now further than ever from her grasp. On the ground in the garden would have been bad enough; but out here in this alien environment; with strange, threatening sounds and choking smells; she was filled with a sickening dread.

Every movement or cry in the eerie, earthy jungle of dendritic grasses and decaying vegetation jerked her enervated senses into a state of anxiety from which they would only gradually relax, until the next terrifying shriek or wail. Even though she no longer belonged to the garden, in body

or in spirit, still her thoughts returned again and again to the other bees and the sunflowers; safe and secure in each others thoughts; no doubt dreaming of frolics to come with the warm, sensual kiss of dawn, when the smile of the sun-god would set nature to play once again.

But day was not the only time for play, as the honeybee was discovering in a world apart from the civilised garden. A world of unseen screams and cries which startled and petrified the expatriate. A lawless territory of unknown and unseen agonies and ecstasies; an uncharted wilderness of euphoria and despair.

Heavenly wanderers marked the passage of time, until an opaque belt of cloud moved in from the west. Grey chariots driven by the wind, eclipsing the night sky panorama. The ground, thankfully still warm from the day, swelled the clouds with rising currents; setting up a massive electrostatic potential that finally broke the resistance of the dielectric air.

The deadly beauty of flashing arcs lit up the dense undergrowth in all its grotesque, twisted glory for barely more than a few seconds at a time; in that time parting the flood of darkness and holding its great weight at bay.

Thunder followed from the crashing heavens; an overture to the rain which cowed every mortal creature into attentive silence. Light droplets began to fall, gradually becoming heavier, slating the thick undergrowth in which the trembling honeybee huddled for shelter. The rain dispersed into a fine, freezing mist on impact with the grassy leaves and stalks to compound her misery.

The crashing impacts did, however, block out the blood-curdling sounds of the wilderness. Perhaps all nocturnal activity had ceased under the bombardment. The honeybee considered this a blessing in disguise as involuntary shivers shook the drips from her antennae and wings; preferring the discomfort of this freezing rain to the screeching, jarring cries of the night.

Several hours later, the heavenly tirade relented with unnatural abruptness; leaving only the sounds of damp, groaning earth and settling leaves to trouble the honeybee. The thermal glow from the earth encouraged evaporation; helping the immobile flora to shed some of their saturated burden into the humid air. Beyond this misty backdrop of dripping leaves lay an eerie silence; one born of anticipation disturbing to the anxious bee. With the passing of the storm, she had expected the night creatures of the soil to resume their shrieks and cries; and wondered why they were so silent.

She should have felt grateful for the tranquil peace, except that this peace wasn't at all tranquil, but threatening - deeply threatening. Barring a miracle, her death was now inevitable, perhaps even imminent. This she had known since the moment her wings had failed, and she was seeking to accept the enormity of the verdict and come to terms with her fate. Yet still the manner and choosing of the moment mattered greatly. Confronted by intangible fear, she realised that she was still very much alive; sensing death in its most terrifying form abroad at this instance, stalking her through the darkness; seeing her with omniscient vision and closing in to tear her apart.

The honeybee continued to crouch under the grass roots; helpless, petrified, virtually blinded by the gloom, with nowhere to run even if her weakened frame were swift and energised. There was nothing she could do but wait, with senses hyperalert, for it to seek her out and end her life in a most hideous fashion. Nothing except pray. But to what god could a honeybee pray except the absent sun - far away on the far side of the world? Even in faith, she was alone and disenfranchised; knowing only those demons of logic and contradiction so quick to reject and disprove; sceptical ascetics by nature and philosophy, requiring no more comfort than the necessity for courage. Still, the hypocrite

invited tenders for her soul in her most desperate hour, and received a few implausible bids.

With sight closed in by the darkness, other senses tried to compensate for denuded vision. A very mixed blessing, since they became intolerably keen; as if their purpose were not to aid but merely to torment. The garden was a clean, sterile place; lightly perfumed by roses and apple blossom. By contrast, the undergrowth of the wilderness was organic and earthy; all the more so after rain; with a pungent aroma rising from the damp humus, decaying all around. An unpleasant stimulus to the honeybee's sensitive olfactory system.

A faint whiff of some other noxious cloud was also drifting through the night air. As it faded, the honeybee wondered whether she had imagined it; but soon it returned, wavelike and reinforced, as if the source were getting closer.

Though possessing no conscious memory of such a putrid odour, the honeybee instinctively knew the cause. Where was it emanating from? From what direction and how far away was the source? Was it dead? If so, by what cause? Or was it living and moving? Or being moved by another? If so, on what bearing? Such were the questions inspired by the inimitable sickly-sweet stench of decaying flesh. Auditory and olfactory senses were compelled to search for more information.

Time past, distorted by the strain of circumstances, rewarding the vigilant honeybee with nothing more than dripping silence. A lull of indeterminate length, then another piece to the terrifying puzzle struck a resonant chord in her sensitive ear.

Her heartbeat picked up a pace, echoing through a frenetic beating pulse. Dawn was still several hours away; the hope of celestial intervention a forlorn one; though still she prayed for the sun to rise by way of a natural miracle; willing the fiery light to soar above the horizon and banish death to

the shadowy cracks of the earth for another day. That was all she prayed for; a humble, modest wish for just one more day.

Tortured silence followed as the honeybee waited with baited breath for the next augur, confirming what perhaps she only thought she had heard, what perhaps she had only imagined. Time past, stretched and strained by tension from any linear semblance, and the honeybee could only wait for the damning iteration to confirm her fears.

When it finally recurred, the bearing seemed to have changed. Not significantly, but sufficient to highlight the limitation of her confused senses in this hostile, alien environment. Unless the bearing really had changed, carrying it away to torment another grounded soul.

Her hopes were soon dashed. The crashing sound of movement through the undergrowth, commensurate with great force, resumed its original course towards her. The approach was slow and deliberate, coming for her inexorably, regardless of her attempt at concealment. Why should the darkness and the undergrowth impede the ground dwelling predators of the night?

The sound escalated, the source getting nearer and nearer. In a state of petrified resignation, the honeybee crouched rigidly; antennae flat, heart racing into palpitations, hoping the ground would swallow her up; senses swamped by the crashing onslaught of approaching death, so near now and yet invisible behind the blanket of night.

The grass ahead moved, destroying the last vestige of hope she harboured of seeing the sunrise. A faint quiver transmitted through neighbouring ranks of grass stalks, building to a full blooded sway as the violent engine grappled with the obstacles in its way. The shield parted to reveal a great beast towering over its helpless prey. Two white, glowing eyes on stalks projecting from a massive head peered down at the wretched, cowering honeybee, and a

distinctive voice boomed out.

“Hey, honeybee, you okay? You don’t look so good. Got a bit wet in the storm? I guess they’d be talkin’ ’bout you in the garden if they could see you now.”

The honeybee recognised the familiar, friendly, lazy drawl and nearly fainted with relief.

“Zeb sent me to look for you. We was worried about you,” the slug explained. “He’d have come himself but he’s too slow underground and too exposed above it.”

“How did you manage to find me?” the honeybee asked quietly, still recovering from the shock.

“You leave a trail like an invitation to a party. Most ground dwellers know how to cover their tracks. Too many bad asses about, especially after dark. Lucky I picked up your trail first and wiped it out.”

The honeybee gestured to the long trail of slime leading back into the undergrowth. “What about that? Even I could follow the trail you leave.”

“You ever tasted slug?”

The honeybee shook her head.

“It ain’t nice. In fact, it ain’t even healthy. What are we gonna do with you? Look at you! You’re hungry, you’re shiverin’, you’re soaked through. You don’t know nothin’ about livin’ down here.”

The honeybee wasn’t listening to anything except her own heartbeat. A few more scares like that and she’d be dead from heart failure with nothing left to worry about. “Can we discuss it later?” she ventured wearily. “All I want to do right now is sleep.”

“First rub some humus over your body. Your scent gives you away. You smell like a garden flower.”

The honeybee sniffed the humus. The smell was fairly unpleasant, but not putrid like the foul breath of a carnivore. She took the advice and rubbed it over her body; darkening her golden colour and providing some camouflage for the

daylight hours to come.

“Now you can get some zzzs. If anythin’ does come along, I’ll just spoil its appetite by coverin’ you in slime,” the giant grinned.

On that dubious note of reassurance, the honeybee closed her eyes, then opened them again to see the sunrise. The last tenebrous hour had passed in the instant it had taken her to blink. True to his word, Naph was still standing guard over her.

“Zeb’s here,” he announced.

The honeybee looked around, but the earthworm was nowhere in sight.

“Where is he?” she asked naively, her faculties yet to fully emerge from the twilight of sleep.

“Underneath you.”

The honeybee looked down in astonishment as the ground beneath her feet began to rumble. Movement of the topsoil was her cue to jump aside as something burst up through the earth in spectacular fashion, showering the bystanders with a fountain of fine debris.

The effervescent face beamed from under the hat, making its own modest contribution to the dawn. “Did I get you? I got you, didn’t I? Came up right underneath you,” he boasted. “How’s ’bout that for locatin’ a position. As good as anythin’ you can do in the air.”

“She’s bin through enough without you scarin’ her half to death,” Naph groaned.

“Me scare her? That’s a joke, what you think happened to me when she just fell out o’ the sky and hit me on the head like a bolt from eternity - shattering the exquisite tranquillity of my repose?” Zeb winked at the honeybee as he wrapped his tongue elegantly around the exuberant syllables. “This ain’t the nicely laid out garden; we don’t have landin’ spots for honeybees down here. All we got is earth and roots and worm holes.”

“And flowers?” the honeybee inquired, viewing the endless expanse of shrubs, trees, and coarse-leaved sedge grasses. “Do you have flowers?”

“Some - but they’re kinda hard to see from the ground. How did it go last night? Pretty rough, huh?”

“I survived - thanks to Naph.”

“Lucky he found you.”

“How did you find us?” the honeybee asked Zeb, naturally curious about sensory systems. “How do you navigate underground?”

“I got tunnels all over the place. I can go anywhere, it just takes time, that’s all. And where there ain’t a tunnel, I can dig one. That takes longer.”

“Yes, but how did you know *where* to find us?”

“By sound. The soil is a very good conductor of low frequency sound. The sort o’ thing Naph makes when he slides along and knocks the grasses over; and when I get close enough I can hear your voices.”

The honeybee shifted uneasily. “Does that mean our voices carry through the soil?”

“Yeah, and when I get real close, I can even hear your heartbeat.”

The honeybee was alarmed, realising that this previously unconsidered form of signature might give away her presence to less benevolent creatures under the ground.

“Don’t worry, there’s only worms down there and they don’t eat nothin’ tougher than a dead leaf,” Zeb assured her; pausing to regard the shabby looking bee and considering what to do about her destitute state. “So you made it through the night, huh? What are you gonna do now? You can’t burrow and you don’t eat humus.”

“You don’t eat flowers, do you?” asked Naph.

The coarse proposition invoked a spontaneous outburst of laughter in the honeybee; a hysterical release from the vice-like tension of the night. “No, we don’t eat flowers; just their

nectar and pollen and the honey we make.”

The disclosure seemed to come as something of a relief to the slug. “When did you last eat?” he asked. “You look kinda skinny to me.”

“Ever’body looks skinny to you,” Zeb quipped, pushing his fist into the slug’s gigantic bulk.

“I’m not starving,” the honeybee replied stoically. “I really do appreciate what you are trying to do. Thanks, Naph, for covering my tracks last night and watching over me, but I have to go now, the sun is rising. I’ll be alright. I’ll probably fly back to the garden when my wings dry out.”

The honeybee bowed her head to them in parting and trundled away again into the undergrowth.

Zeb turned to his towering friend. “What do you think?”

“Last night she was lucky. I don’t see it happenin’ again. We tried. If she don’t want our help, there’s nothin’ more we can do.”

“Maybe that’s the best way. At least it’s quick. Better’n a slow, lingerin’ death on the ground,” he suggested doubtfully.

“Quick if Sisera don’t torture her first. You know what the predators are like. They’ll wanna know all about the garden and the swarm and what she’s doin’ in the wilderness territory.”

“It ain’t our problem any more,” Zeb decided, with a deep sigh; his doleful expression a mirror of his friend’s unease.

“It could be a problem for me if Sisera finds out we helped her last night,” Naph pointed out.

“Shit! I thought she’d be flyin’ again by mornin’, or at least headin’ back to the garden on foot.”

“Well she ain’t, so what we gonna do now?”

The earthworm shrugged. “I’ve got no idea. Maybe you oughta think about headin’ for the garden yourself and holdin’ up there for a while. I’ll send word to you when things blow over.”

“No, I’ll just stick around here. If Sisera wants me that badly, he’ll find me wherever I am. I hope my slime sticks in his craw.”

4

The honeybee continued to wander aimlessly through the dark, dense undergrowth in the oft-observed manner of grounded bees, pausing for a few moments in each clearing to soak up the mid-morning sun before trekking back into the shadows created by the forest of gossiping wild grasses that peered down and whispered unintelligible things as she past.

The overnight downpour had dampened the soil, making the going tough at first, with mud clinging to her legs. But the ground was drying rapidly with the morning and becoming easier to traverse. There seemed an almost cathartic element to walking alone in the wilderness, as if the slow mundane activity allowed her to think and to collate the jumbled mass of conflicting information which could explain her decline and fall from grace.

A crushing sense of confusion clouded her brain as she trudged along between the stalks and beneath the leaves of long grass. Why her? What caused this? What went wrong? Was it her fault? When did she take that first errant step on the path from so much promise which had ultimately led here - so far from the normal life of a honeybee? Where did such useless states of mind stem from? What was their purpose? Did they have a purpose in an elite society such as hers? The introspective honeybee began to relax her vigilance; forgetting the need to be alert for the dangers that lurked around every corner in this hostile environment.

No tangible warning came of the silent attack, but her

senses detected something and an abrupt reflex action kicked-in which caused her to leap deftly to one side. A jagged claw flew through the air into space inhabited by flesh just a fraction of a second earlier.

The honeybee spun round to evaluate the threat, hoping to buy time by jumping back and opening the range between herself and the creature behind the formidable looking talon. This was an unnecessary, though perfectly understandable, overreaction in the circumstances. It transpired that the range of the assailant's strike was limited to the reach of a claw.

The honeybee was confronted by another curious creature; this time squatting on four legs with its back resting against a grass stalk. Its body was slightly longer, but slimmer, than her own. Unlike the slug and the earthworm, this strange creature offered no cheery banter or friendly smiles. The foremost pair of legs projected forward like arms and were folded as if the thing were praying. These modified legs each carried a vicious spiked-claw and the honeybee was in no doubt that this was a predator. Its brownish-green colour perfectly matched that of the grass stalks and provided excellent camouflage. But for the sudden movement, the honeybee realised that she would have walked straight past the thing without even knowing it was there. Now her keen eye was programmed to look out for and detect the slight anomalies created by the presence of its kind.

She waited for it to close within striking range again; but the strange creature, with a pair of bulging eyes on a head shaped like an inverted triangle, remained where it was; squatting against the grass stalk, arms curled up piously.

The honeybee decided that she was no longer in any immediate danger and sighed with relief; then forced herself, partly for the sake of erudition, though perhaps also to satisfy the remnants of a redundant bravado, to evaluate the

potential foe. Warily, she moved closer to examine the creature in more detail.

The honeybee was not deceived by the oblique, vacant focus of its hypnotic stare. She could see her own reflection in the shiny green eyes that were watching her intently, while its jaws were twitching in anticipation of imbibing the flesh and blood of live prey. This was an ambush predator. If its first strike missed, then it would wait patiently for the next opportunity. The spiked claws could doubtless inflict a severe wound, even on the armour of a thick exoskeleton, and the jaws a fatal one given the opportunity; though she doubted whether this slightly built predator would be capable of killing a honeybee before sustaining a potentially lethal sting. It was simply not large enough. She wondered whether it had ever seen a honeybee before and understood the risks involved in trying to prey on one.

The shredded body of a recent victim lay nearby; its thin external skeleton cracked open and the soft tissues and juices inside extracted for nutrition. The dead creature was missing its head, presumably chewed-off; but otherwise looked remarkably similar to this living predator; and the honeybee shuddered at the realisation that it had just eaten one of its own kind.

The horrors of cannibalism aside, the predator - prey relationship disgusted and appalled the honeybee; seeming barbarous, cruel, and archaic; though at the same time fascinating to her darker side. A very dangerous game which some species were forced to act-out, giving life an edge on which to cling for survival and concentrate the mind while facing a precipice of extinction. Such challenges no longer existed in the safe, regulated environment of the garden; though the honeybee was certain that they must have done at some time in the past when the garden was part of the wilderness. The origins of the garden perplexed her. The honeybees were theists who worshipped the sun-god; but

she'd always assumed that the garden had evolved gradually, perhaps fashioned by the tall-spirits, rather than through some spontaneous magical act of creation. In religious terms, she was more of a deist.

Few predators ventured into the garden now and those that did posed little threat to the honeybees. The swarm was the sovereign power, and prescribed any activity that might interfere with its imperative to manufacture honey. The honeybees and the sunflowers were beautiful, symbiotic creatures, with no natural enemies in the garden; relying only on the sun and each other for their hedonistic existence. An elite society had developed there which eschewed the consumption of death. An enlightened colony rejecting the tyranny of the predator; a favoured enclave of the sun-god, unblighted by the carnivore, or the curse of the carnivore a compulsion to eat the flesh of others.

Courted by a twinge of nostalgic regret, the honeybee acknowledged the extent of that achievement with an overwhelming sense of pride; realising why the honeybees were the apogee of nature. But her eulogy was rudely interrupted by another surprise. The dumb expression of the strange creature belied an articulate voice.

“Come to me, honeybee!” the thing hissed, extending its claws in welcome. “Lucky, lucky honeybee.”

The honeybee jumped back in surprise from the predator that seemed to want to embrace her, while glancing over her shoulder to check that the way of retreat was clear.

The taunting voice then began speaking as if it had somehow managed to read her supercilious mind; expressing itself in unusually structured sentences:

“Yes, Heaven is thine; but this
Is a world of sweets and sour;
Our flowers are merely - flowers,
And the shadow of thy perfect bliss

Is the sunshine of ours.”

The honeybee was dumbstruck by ambivalence at hearing verse from such a vile and stupid-looking creature. She wasn't sure what to make of it, wondering if it were a form of insult or a prelude to another attack. She approached the orator again, judging the range carefully; not to provoke, but to examine in a different light the thing that could doubtless recite and kill in concatenated breaths.

In the garden, no one spoke in verse. It would be considered the height of pretentiousness. But out here in the wilderness, where life could be snuffed out in an instant, the charge of pretension seemed trivial, and the lines of verse resonated in her mind.

“What does it mean?” she asked.

The head of the antagonist moved suddenly and the eyes came to life, boring into her as a jagged claw was raised in an accusatory gesture. “It means you have fallen from on high; and down here, your flesh will feed our children.”

“Tell me more,” she instructed the poet, in a steely tone measured to incite a response. “What do you know about me?”

The predator took a long moment to study her before answering coldly. “You don't belong here - except as prey.”

“I don't belong anywhere,” the fallen honeybee replied ruefully.

“You are like a stray spark fallen on dry tinder. You must be extinguished before the flames ignite and spread fire through the wilderness.”

“Flames? What flames?”

“The flames that will engulf the fiefdom of Sisera.”

“I've heard that name before,” she recalled.

“Sisera rules this territory - where no honeybee can survive on the ground. He will devour you, as it is foretold.”

“Foretold? By whom?”

“We know what you are thinking, honeybee, and we know why you are here. We see your summer end; not in the garden, but out here, alone in the wilderness - though not quite alone. We see another with you - who is always with you ...”

The honeybee looked over her shoulder, expecting to see someone there.

The predator seemed confused by its own prediction. “... and within you - strange honeybee.”

“No one can predict the future - or read another’s mind,” she protested, though alarmed by the possibility that this seer could possess some form of supernatural power unknown to the swarm.

“Your summer will be shortened for coming here to spy on us - then you’ll reunite with your companion in a fellowship of death.”

“Reunite with whom?” the honeybee asked ominously.

“The one who gave herself to you.”

The honeybee began to suspect that a form of cold-reading was taking place. “Why would I want to spy on you?” she inquired politely, ignoring the vague references to her past.

“The swarm is seeking to colonise - to take our land, to steal our territory; to wipe out the predators and destroy our wilderness. But first you will send out scouts and emissaries to survey the sites for your colonies.”

The honeybee laughed, having never heard anything so ridiculous in her life. “There are no plans to colonise the wilderness. Honeybees have no interest in the wilderness. What use are barren rocks, coarse grasses, and gnarled tree bark to us? Not to mention the dangers. We love the comfort and security of the hive, and the bright colours and sweet smells of the flowers in the garden.”

The head of the creature swung like a pendulum as it deliberated. “Then why are you here?”

“I was caught in a freak storm, blown off-course, and forced down by the rain,” the honeybee lied.

“The rain has passed, the weather is fine now. Why are you are still on the ground?”

“I’ve strained a muscle, I’m waiting for it to heal,” the honeybee revealed, perhaps unwisely. “Why do you think the honeybees are planning to colonise the wilderness?”

“Your ambition to expand and to conquer; your self-proclaimed destiny is well known to all the predators in the wilderness.”

The honeybee detected a note of paranoia which could explain, in part, this creature’s strange demeanour. If this predator were representative of its kind, then there could be countless numbers here believing that they were in some sort of imminent danger from the swarm.

“We have no concept of destiny. How can you know more about the swarm than I do?”

“Sisera - the oldest and wisest of all the predators - chronicles the history of each summer’s swarm and observes the activities of the bees in the garden.”

“Is this the predator you see devour me?” the honeybee inquired, prodded by morbid curiosity.

“The same.”

This chilling prospect shocked the honeybee. If the swarm were to expand into the wilderness, it was difficult to see how conflict with the predators could be avoided.

“How does he observe the bees?” she queried sceptically. “Predators are not tolerated in the garden.”

“Sisera is like a ghost or a shadow; reclusive by day, looming out of the darkness by night. He comes and goes at dusk and dawn, leaving the bodies of his prey for the sun-god to grieve over. He enters the garden at night, and lays under the turf in the daylight hours, where no flyer can spot him from the air.”

The honeybee shuddered at the thought of a clandestine

predator stalking the garden at night. “Why did you kill your own kind?” she countered, gesturing to the desiccated headless corpse.

“He served another purpose – after we mated. His flesh will grow again in the form of his offspring.”

“He was your mate?” the honeybee gasped.

“We have no honey factories or nursery broods as you do in the hive. We raise and nurture our young by ourselves as best we can.”

“How can you know so much about the hive and the swarm?” the perplexed honeybee asked again.

“We value knowledge for our survival. Those who teach in the swarm are despised, are they not?”

“There is no need for teaching or learning in the swarm,” the honeybee admitted uneasily. “The wealth of the garden provides the honeybees with all they need for a hedonistic existence. The Queen lays eggs for all the swarm, which are tended by the hive workers before they become field bees.”

“Then you are barren?”

“Sterile,” the honeybee replied, sensing that the question was tendentious in some way.

“So you can lay unfertilised eggs?”

“Unfertilised eggs hatch into drones. But egg laying is a royal prerogative.”

“What sort of life-cycle do you have without offspring of your own?”

“I’m glad I don’t have that responsibility,” the honeybee confessed.

“I’m sure you would make a good mother - given the chance,” the seeress taunted her.

“I’m sure I wouldn’t,” the honeybee replied, with some certainty.

“Did you ever meet your parents?” she probed.

“My mother is the Queen.”

“And your father? What became of your father?”

“Drones perish soon after the mating flight.”

“So it would seem that you and I are not so different after all? Both our fathers died to give us life.”

“We do not kill after mating. The drones simply lose the power of their wings and fall to earth.”

“Just as you have done.”

“I’m not a drone.”

“Are you sure?”

The honeybee was sufficiently unsure of her true nature and identity for the question to be slightly disconcerting. “I’m sure,” she replied defensively.

“If you were to start laying eggs in the hive, you’d soon be granted an audience with your queen. Being her daughter wouldn’t save you. She’d point out the error of your ways with her barbless sting. Did you know that she came to power by murdering her siblings, and that she maintains her position by destroying any anarchic workers not repressed by her pheromone?”

The honeybee was aware that the hive had its darker side for those involved in dynastic struggles. But most honeybees were unaffected by the politics of succession. “The Queen is charged with reproduction in the hive - she does not usually extend her power beyond that prerogative.”

The honeybee wondered what sort of mother a predator who could kill her mate so casually would make. The seeress noticed the way she was staring at the remains and sought to read her thoughts again.

“You condemn me for absorbing his flesh for my offspring. But what did your father do for you apart from fertilise the egg before his passing?”

“His seed lives on in the Queen, with those of others, to fertilise eggs and produce my sisters and half-sisters,” she insisted, unimpressed by such moral equivalence.

“In the wilderness, death sustains life. If you wish to live out here, others must die to sustain you.”

“I’m not a predator,” the honeybee protested.

“Or a flyer – any more. What else is there to eat and drink on the ground but flesh and blood?”

“Humus?” she suggested, without much relish.

“Humus is for those who scrape in the mud. No honeybee can live that way for long.”

This was a damning reminder to the honeybee of her bleak and uncertain future. She began to back away, cautious in retreat. But then, in a moment’s reflection, the encounter took on a new significance. An inducted spark landed on volatile matter, igniting a conflagration of cynicism at the barbarous claims made by this low life.

The honeybee objected to the philosophy of the predators almost as much as she balked at the idea of being their prey. The psychotic part of the honeybee objected very strongly indeed. She approached the seeress again.

“I want to test this power of foresight you claim to possess,” she proposed. “You say you see me killed by the predator thane known as Sisera?”

The seeress nodded warily.

“But you are not Sisera?” she sought to confirm, so as not to fall victim to a simple twist of logic.

“If I were, you would already be dead, or dying slowly and painfully as I disembowelled you,” she hissed.

This sadistic taunt was just what the honeybee needed to justify her next move.

“What if I give you the chance to eat me now?”

The seeress shifted uneasily at this unexpected proposal. “The fates are not immutable,” she decided on reflection. “If you wish to end it now, you have that choice.”

“I’m glad to hear it. But won’t that make Sisera deeply unhappy? He may want to interrogate me first - to find out what I’m really doing here.”

“Sisera will be content with your remains. Your wings can be offered to him as a tribute. I would offer him your head,

but I want to keep it for myself to chew on.”

“Then let’s give him what he wants. But you’re not going to start with my head. First you’ll have to eat the other end.”

The seeress made no move as she warily examined the unusual prey; her eyes settling on the tip of an abdomen which the bee had brought up into a strike pose. “I suppose you want me to believe that you carry a sting?”

“Do I look like a mimic? You claim to know all about me. You called me a lucky, lucky honeybee. Are you feeling lucky?”

“Honeybees can sting only once.”

“Depends what we sting, and where we sting; but once should be enough through your thin armour.”

The honeybee concentrated on the claws, her sting primed to deliver a deadly strike through their lethal clutch and into the thinly-plated underbelly of the creature the moment they moved. The crisis adrenalin had heightened her reflexes again and her focus was geared to the destruction of the other creature. The honeybee was beyond fear, having crossed the Rubicon on a bridge of maniacal fervour.

“Do you really know what I’m thinking? Or would you like me to show you?”

The honeybee, with sting at the ready, reached out to grip the folded claws of the seeress with her front legs, as if about to dance a duet, before slowly moving inside the deadly embrace.

“Is this how he died?” she taunted the predator.

The seeress flexed her claws slightly; but wisely refrained from extending them; fearing a suicidal but deadly counter-strike from the barbed harpoon of the bee which, once lodged, would remain embedded in the flesh of an opponent and continue pumping the venom from its sac, even after the flyer was torn apart.

The bee closed to embrace the seeress, pressing the point of her sting against the supple flesh whilst feeling the

resistance of the jagged claws on her chest. She was ready to drive forward, determined to make that final lethal thrust, even in death.

“Get back!” the seeress commanded, realising that she couldn’t stop the final lunge, even though her claws could rip open the honeybee’s thorax and her jaws bite into the honeybee’s head at the very same instant. She assessed the situation as stalemate.

But the honeybee wouldn’t back off, or rather she couldn’t. She’d lost control to a fanatical objective. The honeybee displayed the primed point of her sting for the seeress to see and brought it up to the mouth of the predatory creature.

“Eat this!” she commanded, putting the sting into the mouth of the seeress until it pressed against the back of her throat.

“Get away from me!” the seeress shrieked, digging her claws deeper into the chest of the honeybee so that the blood trickled down her thorax.

The honeybee pressed harder, pricking the throat of the seeress so that blood filled her mouth and spilled down her jaw. The honeybee had never drawn blood with her sting before, and until now had no reason to think that she ever would. But down here, any weapon was a double blessing; a tool for survival, a gift from an enlightened god; and a source of power and an instrument of vengeance from a dark god of chaos and destruction.

“Now you know me well - better than you knew your own mate. I’m beginning to like this game,” the janic honeybee confessed cynically, still taunting her unfortunate victim. “Maybe we should colonise the wilderness after all.”

The seeress struggled and gurgled, unable to speak as she choked on her own blood. Her spring-like claws suddenly extended and flung the honeybee away, just out of sting range.

She spat out a mouthful of dark fluid at the honeybee's feet. "You'll never colonise this territory - if more of you come, Sisera will enter the garden and destroy the swarm."

This ominous warning gave the honeybee pause for thought. There were stories, told by the perennial sunflowers of the garden, of an invincible predator from the wilderness who had destroyed previous swarms; but the frenetic, materialistic honeybees had no use for such fanciful mythology from summers long past. It seemed to the honeybee now that these old sagas could have some veracity and value.

The malevolent mask melted away as her psychotic rage subsided and a cooler head prevailed. She confronted her own disturbing behaviour in the face of a perceived provocation and murmured an apology to the incredulous creature. "What you say is impossible," she then stated firmly. "There is no predator powerful enough to challenge the swarm in the garden."

The seeress smiled cynically, as if bemused by her ignorance; and the honeybee recognised the wisdom of tactful, reasonable behaviour; even when dealing with those who enraged her.

The seeress spoke again, wearily, with blood still trickling from her mouth. "Sisera is an ancient creature of the night. The honeybees are children of the sun-god and, with the exception of your queen, have no more wisdom than a single summer. You'll meet him soon enough, and in your final moments you can judge his power for yourself."

The imminent prospect of meeting such a formidable predator on the ground alarmed the honeybee and she staggered away, leaving the bleeding seeress still shaking against the grass stem.

5

The violent confrontation had also left the honeybee deeply shaken. The scratches on her chest were painful, but superficial; soon the bleeding would stop and the flesh would heal. But the tension and the trauma had also torn flesh from her mind and she paid the price with a blinding headache, as if the claws had pierced her skull and sunk into her brain.

She reflected ruefully on her reckless behaviour and recognised the wisdom of an imperative to eschew confrontation, if at all possible, and stay alive until the power of flight returned.

However, the encounter also seemed to have the positive effect of temporarily relieving her depression and firing the dulled synapses in her brain. Perhaps a consequence of adrenalin - or the mental activity of sifting through the proposition that a predator could challenge the swarm in the garden. Such a thing seemed not just unlikely but infeasible, and yet the honeybee was intrigued enough to consider how it could happen. What sort of a predator, under what circumstances, could withstand or evade a mass of strikes from the air?

The honeybee's wings remained in a state of semi-paralysis that rendered them useless for flight. It seemed a cruel twist of fate that she should be cursed by a crippling affliction when ready to fight back from the nadir of apathy and self-neglect. She was intrigued by what she had learned. Could there be plans to colonise the wilderness that she had no

knowledge about? But who would have the time to formulate such plans? A queen who allowed herself to be distracted from laying eggs would be deposed, killed, and replaced by her own court. Some workers maintained the brood chamber, while most foraged in the garden, so an effort to colonise would seriously strain the resources of the swarm; but still, it could be done. There were no hives, of course, but there were plenty of hollow tree trunks. The predators were hostile and legion, but they could be overcome. Yes, she decided, as a new seed of thought began to germinate in her brain; in principle, it could be done.

From the position of the sun, high in the sky, the honeybee could estimate the bearing of each visible landmark. The garden lay far behind her, too far to reach in a single day on foot, and in any case a pointless destination without the ability to fly since she would be no more than a freak; an object of ridicule and contempt, unable to scale the heights of the hive and tormented mercilessly by the flowers she sought sustenance from. But at least she would be relatively safe, even as a worthless beggar on the ground.

Instead, the honeybee chose to trek further west, away from the civilised haven of her birth and deeper into the hostile wilderness. Despite the danger, she did not feel unduly alarmed, but was imbued with a sense of destiny which she did not fully understand.

Whatever love she bore for the gentility of the garden was tainted by contempt for its parochialism and hypocrisy. The seeress was right in one respect. The predators killed to survive as individuals or to provide sustenance for their offspring, but the Queen killed to achieve political power and the royal prerogative to reproduce for the swarm. If she failed in any way, she too would be killed. The honeybee presumed that the Queen must be under great pressure to make her reign a success and to ensure the survival of the swarm - a far greater responsibility than any single worker

honeybee had to bear.

Despite the risks, the honeybee wanted to escape from the moribund strictures placed upon her in the garden; to experience and explore in the time she had left. With this practical aim in mind, it seemed prudent to seek suitable shelter in advance of the coming night. One that shielded her and which, if necessary, she could defend against the terrors of the darkness. There were many hours to pass before then; a substantial time in the life of a honeybee; though these could be the last hours of her summer if she were caught in the open again after the light had faded.

The honeybee was learning to survive and to endure in this inhospitable place and that knowledge was raising her spirit. Her gentile senses were adapting by the hour to this coarse and primitive alien environment; and now detected more danger over the approaching rise, confirmed by the sound of a struggle and another unfamiliar, but powerfully unpleasant, odour which filled the air like a gas cloud.

A sharp, pungent vapour burned the back of her throat when she inhaled and made her sensitive eyes water. Crouching close to the ground, she crept forward and peered down at the source.

A gang of marauding ants, about twenty in number, were attacking a grasshopper. The vapour came from the dark little insects spraying formic acid to debilitate and subdue their victim before starting the grisly procedure of incision and vivisection with their pincer-like mandibles.

The honeybee knew that ant colonies were run on similar lines to the swarm, with large numbers of female workers serving a single queen. There were ants in the garden that harvested leaves and milked honeydew from the aphids. But these wilderness ants were not farmers, they were hunter-gatherers - and predators.

Horried, the honeybee watched in morbid fascination as the diminutive engines of death went about their business

with the same frenetic efficiency as honeybees gathering nectar - until the antennae of one shot up and scanned around for another victim.

The honeybee realised a moment too late and ducked down. She suspected her presence had been detected and looked around for a natural defence, fearful of an encounter with the ants. Though only a fraction of her size they could, in sufficient numbers, overpower and dissect her just like a grasshopper. With no easily defensible position in sight there was only one option left to the honeybee.

She began to run, blindly smashing through the undergrowth and whatever hazards lay unseen or waiting in ambush. The ants would be swifter over the ground, this was their environment; but first they had to circumvent the rise, then pick up her trail. One that would be relatively easy to follow if they chose to pursue.

The honeybee eased up on her pace, trying to conserve her energy while maintaining a vigil against ambush by a third party in the path ahead. With the experience of the seeress still fresh in her mind, the suspicion that she was clear of the ants soon began to dominate her thinking.

The sounds, far away in the distance, were indistinct at first; even their bearing was hard to locate on her sensitive antennae. But gradually, as the intensity of the signals increased, the bearing seemed to swing around until directly behind her and clearly gaining. The sounds became more recognisable, until the whooping voices confirmed that she was the object of the hunt.

The honeybee blundered onwards, trying to buy time while hoping to formulate a strategy for escape from the dire predicament; knowing that her stamina on the ground would be no match for the whelping pack, closing fast and exhilarated by the chase.

Crossing a clearing, the honeybee saw a chance to leave the trail. A clump of earth, about the size of the head of a

tall-spirit, with what looked like the entrance to a burrow excavated in its face, lay nearby, and a fallen tree twig provided a bridge to this redoubt. A place to hide perhaps, or barring that, a position to defend until the ants grew bored or were compelled to retire to their nest by the onset of night. The likelihood of it already being occupied by something even more unpleasant than a gang of marauding ants wasn't worth thinking about in such dire circumstances.

The honeybee ran up the long, narrow incline towards the black, gaping fissure; and immediately realised that the hollow was deeper and wider than she had anticipated; its full extent concealed behind the drooping grass leaves that continued to grow from the upturned grassy mound.

The entrance was too wide to easily defend; the ants would be able to slip past her flanks and attack her rear. She tried to dislodge the twig, which served as a bridge, but the weight of the wood was too great for her to move. She decided against making a stand on the bridge itself, thinking that in a struggle she'd soon lose her balance and plummet to the ground where the ants would set about her.

The best option seemed to be to hide inside this mass of earth and hope they wouldn't find her. A veil of darkness hid the nature and contents of the earthy realm, forbidding attempts to reconnoitre with her eyes; but in facing certain evisceration by the ants, the choice was stark and clear. She entered the gloom and was cloaked in the silent darkness.

At first, the honeybee could not assess the extent of the cavity, her visual acuity taking time to adjust, but she suspected that it might go back a very long way. Barely concealed from the outside world, though penetrating as far as she dared, she turned her back on whatever horrors lurked in the dim shadows and returned to the entrance, using the grass leaves for seclusion. She peered down at the trail below. The voices grew louder until it seemed as if they were right beneath her, but still she couldn't see anything

below the overhang.

Their tone suddenly changed, the excitement died to be replaced by confusion; but then a few moments later the energy returned, as if inspired by a fresh decision. They appeared as she expected, not in a headlong rush but a fast foraging mode; zig-zagging to scout either flank and flush out anything that might be hiding there as they advanced. For some reason, they did not send anyone up the bridge to check out the cavern. The honeybee waited with baited breath until the shouts and calls had died away in the distance before turning to examine the hideaway again.

As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, the excavated nature of the cavern filled her with unease. She stepped further into the domain, touching the sides of the wall in which long parallel grooves had been carved as if by cutting tools. The scale of the earthworks amazed her, though she could not fathom their purpose. Large depressions had been scraped out of the walls - as if to provide storage space.

The honeybee recalled her encounter with the earthworm. Could an earthworm have created this? If so, for what purpose? To store sculptures perhaps? If so, where were they?

Penetrating further into the cavern, her eyes fell upon an even blacker recess. The honeybee took a step forward to inspect it, then halted; her blood turning cold at the hideous odour of decaying flesh as vague imagery loomed out of the shadows.

The bowel of the charnel house was ready to give up its wretched secrets. The honeybee backed away from the putrid remains of a subterranean larder; feeling nauseous and fighting to control a rising panic; as fearful of the unknown as she had been of the ants.

Was this the lair of Sisera? If so, where was he now? Out hunting? The seeress had described him as a creature of the night, so perhaps he was sleeping in the back burrow she

had so nearly blundered into? The honeybee neither knew nor wished to know. She simply wanted to escape into the daylight and breath the fresh clean air. She stumbled out onto the bridge, gasping and choking.

Unfortunately, the escape route was blocked. An ant sat at the far end of the bridge with a nefarious grin spreading over her wily face. A sentry posted to stake out the hiding place.

“She’s here! She’s over here!” the cocky little ant yelled out, as she began to ascend towards the prospective victim. “We knew you were hiding around here somewhere.”

The honeybee backed off slowly, her limited courses of action tumbling about in her mind. There would almost certainly be other ants nearby. One individual might yell out but wouldn’t try to bring down a large prey without assistance.

The chasing group would have detached from the original hunting party, the honeybee calculated, and then split again, with possibly only half remaining in the immediate vicinity to render assistance. Now she faced perhaps no more than half a dozen. The number echoed around inside her head. It gave her a chance, at least a fighting chance. If she struck first, and without warning, before they pinned her legs and wings and set about trying to dismember her, the number would fall to maybe three or four.

The honeybee backed off, returning to the morbid sanctuary of the cavern to prepare an ambush out of sight of the scouting ant. Again, she looked around for some vantage point, and this time was rewarded. Part of the wall in the gloom of a shadow overhung in a precarious fashion near to the entrance.

The honeybee clambered up the side and onto the shelf before the ant entered the forbidding domain. The honeybee’s recent experiences had conditioned her to survive and she was ready to commit acts of brutality that

would have been unthinkable for one of her kind just twenty four hours earlier.

Survival had become a blind obsession, excluding all other high-minded principles or ethics; nothing else seemed to matter now. The competitive spirit of the honeybee had been perverted to playing for this desperate prize. But using a sting was always a risk. If the barbs caught in the victim, the honeybee could only break free by disembowelling herself.

The ant cautiously entered the cavern, realising the danger of being alone and virtually blind in the few vital moments before her vision adjusted to the gloom; though driven by bravado and the reward of kudos among warlike peers, and the assurance that help would be arriving soon. She, too, was playing for a prize.

It was, on paper at least, a mismatched contest. The honeybee was not only bigger and stronger, but presumed she had the wisdom, character, and guile of her superior species. And she was about to spring a trap on the unsuspecting ant.

The honeybee launched herself from the ridge onto her smaller opponent, lethal sting primed to impale the slender thorax and sever the fragile junction of neurons in the chest of the ant. But the honeybee had underestimated her wily opponent. The reflexes of the ant were highly tuned to danger and her whole body shifted sideways at the vital instant of the lunge. The sting grazed her abdomen, but then harmlessly struck the ground.

The ant twisted and turned before biting into the exposed shoulder of the honeybee with a vice-like grip and bringing the tip of her abdomen up to squirt her larger opponent with formic acid.

Locked together by the ant's jaws, the pair tumbled down an incline; caustic fluid burning into the honeybee's skin, excruciating pain shooting through her shoulder. She rolled

over onto the ant, pinning the tough little fighter with her greater weight and pushing up with her legs to wrench her shoulder free, sacrificing a lump of flesh to the ant's jaws.

The ant leaped to her feet and spat out the trophy. Then, without hesitation, she lunged forward again for another bite. The honeybee's head met the head of the oncoming ant in a crunching blow that knocked the smaller insect onto her back and left her momentarily stunned. The honeybee drove her sting into the ant's chest in a swift, dagger-like thrust, shattering the thin, brittle armour of the exoskeleton and piercing the soft tissue and organs within, before successfully extracting the harpoon and stepping back from the ant's sting and jaws.

But this time there was no gutsy counter-attack. The impaled creature was seized by a brief, convulsive spasm; then withered and curled up on the ground to die. The once fierce member of a hunting pack had been reduced to a pitiful, undignified sight.

The injured honeybee breathed deeply, weakened by her ordeal and shocked at the strength of the ant. Still standing near the body of her opponent, she gradually became aware of the presence of others around her. She looked up at the vengeful eyes staring into hers. Four more ants had witnessed the demise of their comrade and were closing in, blocking any escape into the daylight by the perpetrator.

Just one more would be too many now, judged the honeybee. She clutched her bleeding shoulder and continued backing away, resigned to the end while concentrating on the lead ant; marking her should she leap first, determined to fight to the last. The seeress had been wrong in her prophesy - unless Sisera was the name of the ant colony.

So this would be her destiny, she realised with mystic clarity. This is how the summer would end for her. She would fight valiantly until her life was extinguished and her remains carried to the ant nest to sustain their young. No

one in the garden would ever know what became of her, which in a way pleased her. She did not want to be the idle subject of gossip for the edification of perennial sunflowers who could not appreciate the tragedy of having a summer cut short. She would have preferred it to happen in the open, in the sunlight, but it was not to be. Her god, the god of irony, had decided otherwise.

The expected onslaught did not come straight away. The ants seemed to hang back despite their greater number. The honeybee noted their respectful caution with some weary satisfaction. They were wary of a weapon which had so clinically dispatched one of their number, or so she thought.

They exchanged a few disquieted glances, then halted and started to pace backwards in retreat. The honeybee suspected a ruse. Expecting an attack from the rear, she turned to look over her shoulder just as the blow came from behind, devastating as it was unexpected, with far more force than any ant could possibly deliver.

The grounded honeybee felt herself flying again, literally, without the need for wings. She crashed against the wall of the cavern and sank to the floor. Winded, dazed, and only semi-conscious; until the piercing screams of an ant in her death throes pervaded the peaceful sanctuary of the honeybee's netherworld, bringing her round to focus on an infinitely more violent reality.

The thrashing creature which had come between them was going about its grisly task with mechanical precision. An elongated, reddy-brown monstrosity, with countless pairs of pointed legs and a powerful set of pincer-like mandibles that seized and closed around another ant, severing it into two twitching pieces. Evidence of the beast's ferocity lay with the dissected pieces of ant scattered all around, still twitching after death. The last surviving member of the group was cut off from the exit and dashed about frantically until caught between the deadly pincers. The pincers closed and the

abdomen convulsed as the head fell clear of the thorax.

The head of the ant rolled along the ground to where the honeybee lay and the staring eyes looked straight up into hers, as if trying to communicate a final, forlorn message. The honeybee feared a similar fate. She slowly rose to her feet, pressing hard against the back wall of the cavern as she tried to edge away from the loathsome terror with blood dripping from its pincers; moving carefully so as not to incite a strike.

The eyes of the predator were fixed on her just as warily it seemed, as she crept towards the entrance that beckoned; ardently hugging the earthwall while trying not to appear threatening or appetising. The creature followed at a distance, as if curious rather than intent on immediate action; its energy and fury dispelled on the creatures that were its natural prey and now seemingly content to regard with bewilderment the large, passive-looking alien that may have inadvertently stumbled into its domain. The honeybee wondered vaguely whether or not this could be the Sisera she had been warned about; but with the exit within reach, she thought it unwise to dally long enough to ask.

Dazzled by the sunlight at the entrance, the honeybee continued to back away from the following beast; though unable to keep her balance, she stumbled and fell from the bridging twig onto the ground below.

Bruised and stunned, she simply lay where she had landed, eyes closed, waiting for the other ants to return or the ferocious predator with many legs to descend and finish her off. The blood flow had stemmed from her shoulder, and the acid burns, though painful, were superficial; but her brain could take no more and began to shut down as shock carried her into unconsciousness.

Then came a voice in her head, reminding her of the need to survive. A slow, rhythmic chant. Soft at first, then growing in intensity until a booming cacophony. "Ants!

Ants!! Ants!!!”

Regaining consciousness and realising the danger, she got up; though still dazed and far from steady in her stance. She established a rough bearing before staggering off in a westerly direction, divergent from the ant trail.

6

Mid-afternoon. The sun was still high in the sky on this bright day, beating down on the grounded honeybee and gifting her the strength to carry on. Though not yet mystic enough to succumb to a belief in the patronage of a solar deity, the great yellow disc was nonetheless revered by the honeybee. In the iniquitous world of shadows into which she had descended, it had become a muse of purity and strength - an icon in a state of grace. A state to which she aspired, and as such, the orb was a symbol of hope - or perhaps faith.

To the honeybee, killing was a barbarous atavism closely associated with the consumption of flesh. The honeybee had never taken a life before, and had been forced to use her sting in order to survive. This was a consequence of the poverty and lawlessness of the territory, she decided.

The rules of the garden not only forbade killing, except when dealing with an external threat, but also rendered killing unnecessary. But then, the rules of the garden suited the lifestyle of the honeybees, who had no natural enemies in the air and lived on the produce of the flowers. The biggest threat to a honeybee was another bee; but since stings were never deployed, their jousts were rarely more than a bruising encounter and sometimes mere ego-bruising at that. Illness and accidents claimed victims, of course, though instances of honeybees dying prematurely were not very common despite all their reckless antics. But could the predators she had encountered survive on a diet of pollen

and honey? Or were they cursed with a simple choice between flesh and death?

She considered a situation whereby all the honeybees in the garden were suddenly grounded and unable to gain access to the flowers. What would become of them? Most would die off, but some may adapt and find other ways to survive at the expense of their fellow creatures. The ants were, in many ways, similar to the honeybees; highly organised and successful, but without wings or the means to manufacture honey. Could they be descendants of honeybees who had fallen from the sun-god's grace and favour? Cast down, as she had been?

Despite the fraught circumstances of the encounter, and her willingness to engage the ant, the honeybee was left with an aftermath of guilt. Was it right, as an alien, to encroach upon the wilderness and then kill - even for survival's sake? If she had stayed in the garden, her home, the incident would never have taken place. But the crash had not been one of her choosing, or had it? Was it right to ask these questions? To most bees, those who took their good fortune for granted, such questions would have seemed totally worthless.

The honeybee suddenly had cause to appreciate her own good fortune - she was still alive, and that was all that mattered for now in this battle of attrition between the wilderness and her embattled psyche.

Asking questions may have led her into the wilderness, but such mental dallying would not get her out again. However, as she continued to trek towards the far western horizon, the honeybee couldn't help but wonder what lay over that horizon. Some questions - those of an outward, probing, exploratory nature - were, perhaps, permissible.

A strange, mellifluous reply to her inquiries floated out through the stalks and leaves to tease, stroke, and gently draw her onward to its source. A euphony comparable to

that made by the humming earthworm but far more melodious and refined.

The siren-song induced an irresistible pleasure in her ear; arousing the aesthete and making it nearly impossible to simply skirt around the source without investigating its nature, despite the now familiar paradox of the wilderness. In this hell, artistry and brutality coexisted quite happily.

The curious honeybee followed an invisible sound trail; wary and guarded, though at the same time enchanted by the music that grew stronger as she approached. What sort of predator would use such an insidious device to lure its victims to their deaths? Primed by the utmost caution, the honeybee continued to advance; wondering what sort of exotic monstrosity lay just out of sight, waiting to devour its devotees as payment for the haunting rendition.

Then silence fell like a veil. The honeybee stopped and scanned the surrounding flora for a concealed predator. They were not without some subtlety and patience it seemed. She squatted beneath the lengthening shadows, wondering how long she could afford to sit and wait. No longer, she decided, in consultation with the sun, and began moving on; slowly and quietly; listening carefully for the song to resume.

Ahead, the undergrowth gave way to a wide clearing which had to be crossed. Rather than expose herself, the honeybee chose to skirt around the open space, using the surrounding grasses to her advantage in the hope of avoiding detection.

The siren song began again, now close by. Peering through the grass, she spied the green peduncle of a flowering plant; the first she'd seen since the crash. But this flower was unusual in that it lacked any brightly coloured petals. It was green throughout, though it was also deeply, exotically alluring. It opened like the eye of a tall-spirit, with needle-like eyelashes, and a tantalising glimpse of pink tincture

glowed from within. It smiled at her and continued to sing, as if inviting her to climb up the peduncle and take sustenance.

Despite the overture, the honeybee maintained a wary vigil on approach. Flowers were renowned for their duplicity and some were even thought to be carnivorous. Among the flowers in the garden, there was talk of their exotic cousins in the wilderness that actually consumed flyers; though no flyer she knew had ever encountered one and it seemed more likely a myth created to discourage members of the swarm from neglecting the garden flora by straying into the wilderness to investigate pastures new. But if there was such a thing, this would certainly be the place to find it.

The honeybee began to climb; drawn by the dreamy song as much as a need for sustenance. As she drew close to the green flower, she could smell its sweet enchanting perfume, intoxicating in a way she had never previously experienced. There was nothing quite like this in the garden. She felt light-headed as she tried to clamber over the awkward needles which would have been no impediment to a nimble flyer. But something was wrong. There was the sweet scent but no obvious visible source of nectar inside the pink chasm. And then she noticed, tucked away at the back of the mouth-like vestibule, a discarded wing - all that remained of a previous flyer.

In reflex, the honeybee flung herself backwards into free space, caring not where, just as the needles of the trap began to close. They caught her thorax like pincers, but were not sharp or rigid enough to pierce her flesh. These were not fangs but the stiff drapes of a curtain designed to trap a flyer within the flower, which would then be digested by enzymes.

The honeybee wriggled and struggled backwards as the caustic chemicals began to flood the chamber. Where they contacted with her flesh, there was a faint corrosive sizzle as

the tissues dissolved. She screamed and struggled wildly, working her body in retreat until she slipped free.

She felt herself falling to earth and impacted heavily with the ground. Fortunately, the intoxicating fumes she had inhaled anaesthetised the fall.

She lay on the ground, breathing deeply, and reflected on the fact that not being able to fly had just saved her life. Once inside the bars of the curtain needles there would have been no escape. She wondered how many adventurous honeybees disappeared over the wilderness each summer, claimed by such insidious death-traps, and wondered why this information was not widely available to all, so that they could identify and avoid this species. The reason, she quickly realised, was that predator plants were no threat to the swarm; just to the odd bee that strayed too far from the garden. She was reminded, yet again, of the merely statistical significance of her existence to the swarm and the garden.

The honeybee massaged her bruised side and began walking again, limping along and wondering how much more physical and psychological punishment her mortal frame could withstand before it ceased to function completely. Few honeybees survived the wear and tear of an entire summer and these violent experiences would be drastically shortening hers.

However, she knew much more about the wider world than she had at the start of the previous day and valued that knowledge, acquired at great risk. She wanted to preserve and make use of it somehow, but lacked the means as yet. She took a last look at the predator-plant, which was whining unpleasantly now at having been denied a meal, and imprinted its distinctive appearance in her memory before moving off again; still feeling light-headed, but substantially the wiser.

The honeybee managed to traverse some distance without further incident before a sudden, sharp, two-pronged whistle

halted her in her tracks. Conscious of more eyes upon her, surprised by their temerity in this hide and seek jungle and knowing she was being observed, the honeybee left the sanctuary of the undergrowth and boldly stepped out into the open.

In full view, the honeybee continued walking until a stern lilt sang out, “Where do you think you’re going?”

She peered in the direction of the voice. It seemed to come from a hummock of giggling grasses in the centre of the clearing, though none seemed sufficiently intelligent to communicate through speech.

“Over here,” the voice called out again.

The honeybee shifted her gaze slightly higher and moved nearer, intrigued by the dulcet tone, quite unlike any she had heard since leaving the garden. Was it a flower - a real nectar-bearing flower - or another carnivorous monster?

Peering through the stalks surrounding the grassy hummock, she sighted one. A bright and elegant wildflower, with an attractive, windswept bearing. Its wild colours were dilute and restrained when compared with the gaudiness of the garden, yet still striking to her photosensitive eye; perhaps even more so in that they invoked admiration for an alternative, more economic style; reserved and sensual in make up.

The flower looked down and smiled. The honeybee straightened up, blinking to sharpen her eyes; aware of her ruffled, ragged, mud-splattered appearance; but in reflex digging deep to invoke a ridiculous attempt to appear like a carefree traveller.

“You must be going somewhere?” the wildflower suggested. “Unless you are just out for a walk.”

The honeybee stared far ahead into the distance, hoping to see something inspiring to comment upon, but on this occasion was rewarded with none but the same. “I don’t know,” she confessed truthfully, then with a bit more

panache added, "You're right, I'm just walking."

"You don't look very happy," the wildflower noted briskly. "It's such a glorious day, we don't get many like this each summer."

"You're perennial?" the honeybee surmised.

"Of course. But I still can't imagine why anyone would want to feel unhappy on a beautiful day like this."

"Neither can I," the honeybee replied with a sigh, massaging her aching shoulder that felt as if it were on fire. "But maybe we just lack imagination."

"If we're imaginative enough to ask, we must be able to find an answer," the wildflower proposed shrewdly. "It's all a question of defining the problem."

"If only that were true," the honeybee mused. She sat down to rest for a moment, her gaze wandering past the flower into the indeterminate depths of the blue sky. "Some things are difficult to rationalise. Why did you call out to me like that?"

"To get your attention. Honeybees rarely fly by here, never mind walk. I wondered where you were going. You are a honeybee, aren't you? I've seen their silhouettes high in the sky, but I've never been this close to one before."

The honeybee nodded, intrigued by this flower whose keen, measured words were delivered in a soft timbre without visible hint of affectation. "You're not a predator, are you?" she queried.

The wildflower laughed. "No, of course not. Whatever gave you that idea?"

The honeybee's eyes narrowed with suspicion as she recalled the recent encounter with the predator-plant. "There are plants in the wilderness that eat the flyers who land in their flowers."

"That's one way to deal with unwanted suitors," the wildflower chuckled. "But there's nothing like that around here."

“Er, I beg to differ, and I speak from experience,” the honeybee stated sharply. She believed the wildflower was speaking honestly, just not accurately; and in view of her recent experience, she felt she could be excused for being pedantic. “I just had an encounter with one.”

“Maybe it grew quickly from a seed,” the wildflower proposed. “What did it look like? Was it anything like me?”

“No, you’re quite ordinary - in an attractive sort of way. But this was unlike any flowering plant I’ve ever seen before. Its flower wasn’t actually a flower, more like the mouth of a predator.”

“So why did you go in? Silly thing to do,” the wildflower tutted.

“It lured me in with a song,” she confessed.

“Was it anything like this?” The flower began to hum a light melody; not intoxicating, as the strains of the predator-plant had been, but pleasant to listen to.

As the honeybee synthesised the notes in her brain, her penetrating gaze saw through the flower into a euphonious world of enchantment, and her eyes expressed a desire for spiritual beauty. But she was still haunted by the ghosts of distant memories and the vacant stare gave away the nature of her condition - the disease in her mind.

The wildflower realised that something wasn’t quite right with the honeybee and this created a damaging impression. Her physical state did not go unnoticed either and a sense of caution set in, leading to a prickly frown and an abrupt change of tone, adopted to ward off the flyer with impersonal caprice.

“The sun is already in descent. It was nice meeting you, but I’m waiting for someone else. Won’t you be late, wherever it is you’re going?”

It seemed unfortunate to the grounded honeybee that even as a flightless cripple near the end of her summer, she was still clinging to the persona of a honeybee and still being

judged as such. The garden had been left behind, far away. There was nothing left to prove or to achieve, she couldn't fly even if she wanted to, and yet she could no more understand or relate to this wildflower than those in the garden. Relationships between flyers and flowers were governed by universal laws and the etiquette that divided them was not to be flouted. Weary and irritable with herself rather than angry at the flower, the honeybee straightened up and bowed her head politely.

"Maybe we'll meet again some time," she sighed, before departing. "Under happier circumstances. I did like your song very much, thank you." Then, prompted by a honeybee's mischief, she added, "I wonder if that predator-plant knows any more songs?"

The honeybee had covered some distance from the flower when she heard the voice again, this time wistfully volunteering an opinion. "Sometimes I feel sad. When it's cloudy or rainy and I'm alone. But when the sun comes out, I'm always wonderfully happy."

The honeybee paused in her tracks. Was this a trick or was she being given a second chance? The wildflower might just be curious enough to want to know more about her. Perhaps few flyers visited this isolated place and even a mad, grounded bee might be an interesting distraction.

"How can you always be happy?" the honeybee asked doubtfully. "There are many other factors that can sway a mood besides the sun." She adopted a cheerful countenance, but paid a price inside her skull as the pain lanced through her brain. She winced ever so slightly, but maintained eye contact with the wildflower and smiled in an attempt to conceal the discomfort.

The flower smiled too, seeming happier for her show of levity. "Yes, but when the sun comes out, the hoverflies appear and dance in the air. I love to watch their aerial performances."

“Hoverflies?” she queried, looking about - the sky was empty.

“Oh yes, they’re superb flyers, they can do almost anything. Backwards, forwards, sideways, you name it.”

“We used to joust with them,” she recalled, feeling nostalgic for the utopian past; and two other, perhaps conflicting, emotions - relief and disappointment. Relief came with the knowledge that the wildflower was not condemned to live out endless summers in lonely isolation. Such cruel tricks of nature were not uncommon. But she was also dismayed by the idea that, even in an isolated corner of the wilderness, she would have to compete for the attention of a flower with a gang of cocky, brazen flyers.

“There’s one in particular who’s always here. His name is Barak. He’s so fast and agile, the best flyer around. All the other flowers love him, and try to keep him for themselves; but still he comes here every day just to see me ...” the flower blushed coyly, curtailing this stream of revelations to a complete stranger.

The honeybee thought it odd that a wilderness flower would be so shamelessly innocent and naive. Was this a true self or another veil of affectation disguising some devious plan to assault or persecute her. She looked around for signs of danger and decided to trust again - against her better judgment.

Whatever the reason, the magnanimous disclosure of felicity struck a chord in the outcast who had failed to achieve content through any stable conformity with her own kind. She hoped the wildflower would continue speaking; an emotive and irrational desire perhaps, but one that might be rewarded by a slender thread of guidance from this unwitting counsellor, describing the modest aspirations of a humble, but well ordered, life.

“Why does he do that?” the honeybee inquired innocently; not wishing to be provocative, but merely curious.

“Do what?” the wildflower asked, puzzled by the tactless question.

“Why does he keep coming back? With so many other flowers to see, and so widely dispersed in the wilderness, I would have thought he would be too busy to ...” now it was the honeybee who trailed off, confronted by an angry expression.

“This isn’t the garden,” the flower motioned sternly.

“There are a few differences on the ground,” the honeybee conceded, a massive understatement, “but I don’t believe there are any in the skies. I’m sure your hoverfly plays by the same rules that we do.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Flying is the same the world over. Why would any flyer pay special attention to a single flower when you can visit so many from the air?” The honeybee paused for guilty self-reflection before adding, “Unless compelled to for some reason, some disability perhaps.”

The wildflower seemed taken aback by the remark. The honeybee wondered why? What else was she supposed to say in conversation with a flower? Maybe things were drastically different in the wilderness, where the flora were more dispersed and diverse; but even so, censoring her thoughts or attempting to contrive conversation contrary to her true opinion would surely be as much an insult as the affectation of the sunflowers.

She considered trying to make a genuine apology for her obvious lack of tact; an anathema in the garden, but perhaps appropriate here. It seemed ironic that such a violent place might have the most genteel of manners.

“You are from the garden, aren’t you?” the flower probed.

“Yes,” the honeybee confirmed, with a hint of hubris.

“I thought so. The bees from the garden rarely see fit to honour us by descending this far.”

“We rarely have cause to fly over this territory.”

“Why are you covered in mud? Doesn’t it make flying more difficult?”

“I landed in a puddle,” the honeybee lied.

“You’re a long way from home. Why don’t you fly back to where you came from?” the flower taunted her.

The honeybee felt the barb of rejection like a fang puncturing her side. It hurt almost as much. She wondered why it should hurt at all? Why should she care? It came from a flower. A wildflower at that, lost and concealed in the wastes of the wilderness.

She considered making an appropriate retort without deference to polite etiquette. She even thought about trying to pacify and make amends with what limited explanation she could.

Then, in a brief flash of synapses, the belligerence evaporated; just as it had against the brash bee in the garden; and she calmly considered why the flower had taken a verbal swipe at her. What gains were there to achieve - they were alone, weren’t they? No one to witness the exchange; no one in whose eyes the flower’s status might be enhanced using a crippled honeybee as a step-up. Were they alone? The honeybee scanned the clear blue skies for danger. The only activity she could detect was too far away to pose an immediate threat, yet something was making her feel uneasy on this unfamiliar turf.

“I prefer walking, it helps me think,” the honeybee disclosed, breathing deeply before resuming her trek away from the flower; disappointed that the encounter should end on a note of acrimony just as she was beginning to enjoy the conversation.

As she departed, she was struck by an irrational urge to try and explain the cause of her affliction to the flower before it was too late. She did not expect absolution or catharsis, but her story would be her legacy and the fates were whispering that this might be her last opportunity. But then, her keen

senses began warning of an imminent danger again in the presence of a flower.

“Wait, come back!” the wildflower shouted out.

The honeybee was struck by a sense of *deja vu*. Recalling her last conversation with a sunflower; and in light of recent experience, she felt that she should just keep right on walking; especially since the hackles on the back of her neck were beginning to rise for no explicable reason.

“I thought you could fly!” the flower cried out in alarm. “I didn’t realise - I didn’t know - fly, honeybee, you must fly away now!”

As the voice trailed into a stifled sob, the honeybee stopped, turned and looked back. The flower’s pleading agitation sounded natural and sincere, adding to her discomfort. Her stomach turned cold and hollow, knotting with fear as every nerve and sinew in her body began to twist and tighten once again, just as it had through the night. The acute anxiety had returned, warning that the same preternatural spirit which had stalked her through the darkness had now, inexplicably, emerged in the light of day to alarm her senses.

She wanted to run, but knew not where. She wanted to fly, but her mud-caked wings were rigid and useless. She looked back at the wildflower for an answer.

The attention of the flower was no longer fixed on her, but rather diverted to something in the distance. Something which, by virtue of the flower’s height, only the flower could see.

“What is it? What do you see?” asked the honeybee, as the flower strained for a better view. To her rational mind, such behaviour on the part of the flower seemed perversely reassuring; alluding, as it did, to some tangible cause for her fear rather than a false or distorted perception.

“Quickly, climb up here!” the wildflower urged.

The honeybee hesitated, still questioning the nature of the

threat and not entirely convinced that the flower was not some exotic form of predator.

“What are you waiting for? There’s no time to explain, just get up here!” The terse instruction was muffled, as if the flower were concerned that it would carry in the air.

“Why? What is it? I have to know!” the honeybee insisted, holding her ground.

“Sisera!” the wildflower gasped.

The evident panic in the pleading voice suggested that explanations could wait. The honeybee dashed back to the flower. Climbing the stalk was difficult, but the same adrenalin which had served so well in recent moments of peril responded again, compensating for her lack of strength. The honeybee quickly accomplished the climb, to be rewarded by the seclusion afforded by the petals of the flower.

She crouched amongst the soft carpels and sweet perfume that induced nostalgic memories of youth from times before her innocence had been shattered. She breathed slowly and deeply in an attempt to control her anxiety, focussing on the tremors within her body that the flower would be able to feel. But curiosity led her to lean forward and peer out through the petals to confront this source of provocation in her discordant life. A focus, any focus, would be preferable to ignorance.

“Get back,” the wildflower whispered. “You might be seen.”

Too late, the mesmerised honeybee was locked into the shocking terror her rational mind desperately wanted to see; perhaps needed to see if she were ever to understand her relationship with the wilderness.

The dark, primeval terror of all her kind was stalking the undergrowth with chilling grace in broad daylight; slowly extending in pairs, the long, powerful legs that could run any creature to ground. The bulbous red eyes, arrayed in a

rectangular pattern of eight, were mounted at the front of the huge, black skull. The powerful, bloodlusting mandibles; so adept at rending prey; ground together in a curdling sound; while poison dripped from twin daggers, masquerading as fangs. The great beast, ugly and malevolent in appearance, seemed to glide slowly over the uneven terrain like a shadow of death; paying lip-service to the gravity that held it earthbound, belying the swiftness and power of the perfect killing machine.

The honeybee realised now the nature of the being which had been abroad the previous night and had closed on her through the darkness, only to be thwarted by the fieldcraft of the slug. Even the smell was familiar; a sickening stench of death and decay left in the wake of the hellish creature as it past within a leg-span of the flower's stalk.

She tried to shut out the disturbing thought of what might have happened had Naph not covered her tracks, what surely would have happened but for the audacity of the wildflower. The same flower in whose petals her trembling body now nestled and shook unashamedly.

Fear of the spider was innate and pathological; the primary fear of all flyers. She'd encountered spiders before; the smaller, more colourful webbed varieties; and she knew what they could do to anything unfortunate enough to become entangled in their deadly silken traps. But never in her worst nightmares had she encountered such a hulking brute as this behemoth hunting on the ground. The prowling beast did not look up, nor look round after passing; which was fortunate, since the honeybee's shocked expression remained fixed on the trail down which the monstrous apparition had vanished for a considerable time after the danger seemed to have past.

"You're safe now, for the time being," the wildflower assured her.

"How do you know that thing won't come back?" the

honeybee asked anxiously.

“No reason why he should,” reasoned the flower. “If he’d known you were hiding here, you’d be dead by now. I’m surprised to see him patrolling at this time, he disdains the sun-god and usually hides in the earth until dusk.”

“Why did you do that?” the honeybee felt compelled to ask, her gratitude tempered by a sense of embarrassment at her vulnerability. But more than anything else, she felt humble in the presence of a flower capable of such compassion. It seemed inconceivable to her that any sunflower would have stooped to save a crippled honeybee.

The appalled expression of the wildflower said it all. “What else was I supposed to do? What would you have done in my place?”

The honeybee was lost for a reply. Incapable of anything other than the brutal honesty that irked the flower, she prudently decided to refrain from further comment that would reveal her cynical sense of fatalism.

“I don’t know, but thank you anyway,” she mumbled, with a dry sense of etiquette. It seemed a ludicrously inadequate thing to say, but also entirely correct. Then she added, “Most sunflowers would have found the spectacle of a spider eating a honeybee quite edifying.”

“I find that hard to believe,” the wildflower replied.

“The garden would seem as strange to you as the wilderness does to me.”

“In that case, you’re a very lucky honeybee.”

“A predator called me that earlier today,” the honeybee recalled.

“Another predator?” the wildflower queried, in surprise. “He obviously didn’t eat you or you wouldn’t be here.”

“It wasn’t a he, it was a she. A seeress who’d just finished gobbling her mate.”

“You could have been part of the wedding feast.”

“She didn’t find my sting very appetizing,” the honeybee

chuckled.

Thinking about the day, certain fragments began to fall into place; creating an unlikely scenario, yet one that was difficult for the honeybee to refute in her disturbed state. She had faced death repeatedly in the wilderness and had survived each time against the odds. Maybe the flower was not altruistic, but merely an agent of intervention at the behest of an obscure, manipulating will whose nature lay beyond any mortal comprehension; but whose machinations she could discern in terms of their effect on events.

She drew a deep breath and sucked back the tears as the notion of an unseen deity at her shoulder resounded in her head. For an unknown purpose, something, somewhere, clearly wanted her to live a while longer, and had willed it so. But another demon whispered in her ear that it was all down to luck - and her luck would run out all the sooner if she started believing in that sort of delusion.

The wildflower sensed her inner turmoil - the close encounter with the spider had been something of a shock - but couldn't understand why she hadn't simply flown away? Examining the honeybee closely for the first time, the flower noticed congealed blood on her shoulder and blistered skin on her torso.

"You've been wounded in a fight, that's why you can't fly," the wildflower presumed.

The honeybee merely nodded. This plausible explanation would suffice for now.

"The spider might still be patrolling nearby. You'd better stay here for a while," the wildflower suggested, tacitly offering her a chance to rest up.

The honeybee concurred with another grateful nod and closed her eyes for a moment; searching for the appropriate verbal response; acutely aware of her compromising proximity to the flower now that the danger had past; but was swept away from inhibition by the currents of fatigue

seeking to make good the sleep that should have been hers the night before.

She had barely closed her eyes when a sharp voice and the drone of wings overhead intruded into her sleep.

“Who’s she?” the voice inquired brusquely.

“Just a honeybee,” came the somewhat coy and non-committal reply.

“I can see that.”

“I don’t know who she is - she didn’t tell me her name.”

“So what is she doing here? Just fell out of the sky, I suppose?”

“She was walking nearby when ...”

“Walking?”

“Yes, walking. She was lost and grounded. We’d just started talking when Sisera swept passed on a daylight patrol.”

“You concealed her from Sisera?”

“What else was I supposed to do?” the flower protested.

“You obviously haven’t heard?”

“Heard what?”

“A honeybee came down in this territory yesterday and the spider wants her captured or killed. What’ll happen when he finds out you’ve been harbouring a grounded honeybee? Did anyone see you talking to her?”

“I’m not a flyer!” the flower proclaimed, with ill-concealed contempt. “Sisera doesn’t frighten me.”

A clump of nearby grasses giggled at this bravado.

“Keep your voice down! You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I know exactly what I’m saying. It’s a pity some others don’t have the guts to say the same,” the flower insisted defiantly.

“It’s not a question of courage,” the winged voice declared, rising and adding to the seditious broadcast before dropping in mid-sentence and steering away from a heated

debate. "He was born to rule - it's his birthright."

"No creature is born with a right to rule," scorned the wildflower.

"Maybe not - but the spider has the backing of the other predators and the power to enforce his will in this territory."

"I hope I live to see the end of his power."

"None of us will live that long. He's immortal."

"That's just his propaganda, to suppress dissent."

"Why is the honeybee still here?" the winged voice queried, sounding eager to change the subject away from such dangerous talk.

"She's asleep. If she came down yesterday, she must have spent last night in the undergrowth. Can't you see she's covered in mud. The ground is not a good place for a honeybee to spend a night."

"It's the best place for them if you ask me. She's not dead, is she? Might be difficult to move such a large body."

The honeybee wasn't dead, neither was she asleep. Alerted by the down draught from whirring wings, and the inquisitive, penetrating voice of a hoverfly, she maintained a sleeping posture whilst attentively eaves-dropping on the inquiry of which she was the subject.

To hear the wildflower defend her against a flyer who was probably a consort both amused and flattered the honeybee. She wondered if relationships between flyers and flowers here might be different to those in the garden where there was no interreliance, merely interplay. The concern of the hoverfly for the wildflower and the wildflower for her was intriguing.

Prompted by a cue, the honeybee considered this a good time to wake up. She sat up and smiled at the insolent provocateur hovering just above the flower as if suspended on a thin line. Gossamer wings flickered from a slim, streamlined body; blurred by the frequency of their reciprocating motion.

"I'm not dead," the honeybee announced.

"You're obviously not deaf either," the hoverfly observed wryly.

"How long have you been listening to our conversation?" the wildflower asked, far from amused by her lack of discretion.

"Not long, I've only just woken up," she lied.

"You're a long way from home," the hoverfly interjected. "Who are you?"

The honeybee stretched and yawned, ignoring the hoverfly as she scanned the unfamiliar horizon for useful landmarks. It was early evening, the sun would be setting soon.

"Well?" the impatient hoverfly demanded to know.

"I suppose this is Barak?" the honeybee motioned at last, in an off-handed manner.

The hoverfly seemed surprised that this stranger knew his name. An accusatory glance fell on the flower.

"It's getting late, time to move on. I don't want to get caught in the open again with that thing tracking me on the ground."

"How do you know my name?" the impetuous hoverfly persisted.

The honeybee wondered if he were inclined to be pushy all the time or if this were simply a show of bravado to impress the wildflower.

"We were talking about flying. You're supposed to be very good - for a hoverfly. The best around here," the honeybee disclosed.

Barak looked sternly at the flower and asked, "Is that what you think?"

"You know it is," the wildflower answered sharply, slightly irritated by his ego.

Barak smiled; effectively disarmed and stripped of all his bombastic conceit and displaying his pleasure at this praise with an almost juvenile grin, spreading like an infection

across his features.

The honeybee experienced a sudden twinge of embarrassment and guilt at her catalytic presence. This low born pair had a relationship based on genuine affection rather than affectation, in which intimate communication could carry meaning. An obsolete arrangement in the garden, where such indulgence would be tormented mercilessly. In the garden, there was no escape from the probing flattery at which its denizens were highly adept. An amusing, disingenuous tool of rhetoric between jousting minds. To refrain from flattery would invite the charge of being coy. To be visibly affected by flattery – to be gratified or offended – would invoke the mocking disdain of the flatterer. But the honeybee felt no disdain for either the wildflower or the hoverfly. If anything, their flaws endeared them to her, though by the logic of the garden she should have held them in contempt.

“If you will excuse me,” the honeybee politely interjected, “I’ll be on my way. Thank you for your help.”

“Wait!” the hoverfly ordered sharply, then tried to soften his tone. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude, it’s just that, well, most of the honeybees I’ve encountered have been full of their own conceit and arrogance. They seem to expect the same thing from everyone else.”

“Maybe we should be judged for who we are rather than what we are,” the honeybee suggested, spurred more by mischief than pious virtue.

“Suppose we were in the garden now. How would I be judged by you and your friends?”

“Your prejudice reinforces theirs.”

“Maybe we should agree to differ on that,” the hoverfly suggested. “I was curious, I still am very curious, what were you doing on the ground, so far from the garden?”

“Some of us like to take a break from the garden,” the honeybee announced sardonically. “Away from the cut grass

and the sweet smelling air to a place more rugged and demanding on the body and the senses.”

“And risk your life in the process?”

“The package does seem to contain that hidden extra,” the honeybee admitted, with bluff stoicism.

“Are you any good - for a honeybee?” asked the hoverfly, shifting to hover close by - provocatively close, as if by way of a challenge.

“No, not even for a honeybee,” she admitted, with a modest smile.

“Honeybees have a great deal of power in flight,” the hoverfly observed generously. “I remember once seeing one in a vertical climb, shooting straight up into the clouds.”

“I haven’t been up in the clouds for quite a while now. It’s going to take an effort just to climb down to the ground.”

“Where are you going on foot?” the wildflower inquired, evidently concerned for her welfare.

The honeybee hesitated, looking out over the far horizon as if undecided. The peaks that held up the sky seemed as far away as ever. She could never reach them on foot, not in a single summer, and the call of the wild seemed less urgent now. What she needed was the power of flight. With that, she could explore great distances at her leisure. But simply wishing for something didn’t make it happen.

“I should go back to the garden,” she answered at last, with new found clarity. The odds against completing a westerly trek now seemed overwhelming, the reckless strategy suicidal. Not that it had seemed any different previously, but the recent traumatic experiences had rekindled the honeybee’s desire for the competition of life. She still felt mentally below par, but was fighting back against the rigours of the wilderness. She could cope with the hedonistic rough’n’tumble of the garden now, if only she could fly.

“It’s a long way to travel on foot,” the hoverfly pointed

out, quite unnecessarily.

“But it’ll be safe once I get there. And when I can fly again, who knows? Maybe I’ll survey the wilderness at leisure. Do you know what lies to the west, beyond that range?”

“No, it’s deceptively far. No one has flown all that way and come back to tell the tale. The mountains would be much too high for a flyer to clear, even if you had the endurance to reach them. The air is too thin and too cold.”

“There could be a way through - a gap between the peaks. It’s something I’d like to see before the end of summer.”

“You’ll never make it back to the garden on foot,” the flower protested. “If Sisera doesn’t get you, something else will.”

“Is Sisera the name of the ground spider?”

“Yes, this territory is his fiefdom. Beyond it there are other fiefdoms and other spiders eager to claim a downed flyer.”

“That’s a chance I’ll have to take.”

“Sisera is a ruthless killer. Relentless, cold-blooded, and without mercy. He’s hunting for you now, even as we speak,” the wildflower argued passionately, trying to make her see sense. “If you head for the garden on foot, he’ll easily pick up your trail and track you down before the morning.”

“I’m not so easy to kill,” the honeybee retorted, then instantly regretted the foolish remark. “I still have a sting,” she explained phlegmatically.

“Sisera uses bee stings for toothpicks,” the hoverfly mused grimly.

“My name is Deb - short for Deborah,” the wildflower suddenly revealed. “What’s yours?”

“Names seem to be important to you all down here,” the honeybee noted. “We don’t have individual names in the garden – just job titles.”

“How is that possible?” asked the flower. “How do you communicate?”

“We don’t, not in the sense that you mean. Communication is codified to serve the needs of the hive and the garden, not each other as individuals.”

The wildflower looked puzzled. “But without a name, how do you have a sense of identity or self worth? How do you know who you are?”

“Notions of individual identity have ceased to exist, except in cases of extreme notoriety or conspicuous achievement. The use of another’s name implies a diminution of one’s own status among the mass of equal peers.”

“I’ve heard stories about the garden from other flyers, but you’re the first to speak critically about life there,” the wildflower claimed, clearly suspicious of her motive.

“In what way?”

“The garden is supposed to be a wonderful place; a paradise for flyers, with golden honeybees swarming over the beautiful sunflowers. But you make it sound very cold and unfriendly.”

“And highly competitive,” the honeybee stressed. “The game is everything, especially in the air above the sunflowers and the roses. A ruthless, hedonistic battleground of rivals and suitors; all in a wheeling dealing frenzy, trying to make the most of their summer.”

“So what happened to you? Couldn’t handle the pressure?” the hoverfly butted in.

“Barak!” the wildflower remonstrated.

“No, he’s right, in the end I couldn’t live up to the demands and the expectations; or rather, I just didn’t want to,” the honeybee admitted. “The garden is not the place for you if you’re different, or you don’t want to conform. But I’m not knocking the garden for that. For those who can stand the pace and embrace the lifestyle, it’s a great place to live out the summer. But for those who ask questions - and

seek answers - and measure and savour time with breaths of inquiry - the garden is a place of ignorance and stagnation in which nothing seems to change and no one seems to care about anything except collecting nectar, tending the brood chamber, and manufacturing honey.”

“It’ll be getting dark soon,” the wildflower pointed out. “Stay here for tonight, you’ll be much safer with me than on the ground. You’ll stand a better chance by morning. Sisera is a creature of the night - maybe with a daylight start you’ll make it back safely.”

The honeybee waited for the hoverfly to protest at her encroachment on an appropriated flower; not fired by jealousy, such emotion would be far beneath even a low born wilderness flyer - even if his perceived rival could fly - but by awkward bloody mindedness. Instead, the hoverfly simply landed next to the stricken honeybee and eyed her lines with professional interest.

“Plenty of power, if it were working properly; but not much manoeuvrability,” the hoverfly suggested, summarising his appraisal.

“I manage with what I’ve got.”

“You’re not managing very well at the moment,” the hoverfly observed bluntly.

“Can we put a lid on the flying talk till morning,” the flower interceded sharply, fearing a heated argument might develop. “It gets really boring after a while.”

The honeybee conceded with a nod, refraining from a verbal response. She was, in any case, growing more tolerant of the hoverfly’s directness.

“In fact, you look pretty rough all over,” the hoverfly continued regardless, as he noted the bites and the scars. “What happened?”

“I ran into a bunch of ants,” the honeybee explained. “Soldier ants,” she added, for good measure. A slight embellishment, but the temptation to toy with the hoverfly

was difficult to resist.

“On the ground?” the hoverfly gasped.

“Naturally, soldiers can’t fly.”

“You escaped after they did all that?” the wildflower queried, with a measure of scepticism.

“Only one did this. The rest were killed before they could reach me.”

“Killed? How?”

“By something that came out of the ground.”

“What did it look like?” the hoverfly asked, clearly fascinated by the tale.

“A long, brown, muscular creature with many legs and scissor-jaws that’s thankfully more partial to ants than to honeybees,” the honeybee sighed wearily, suggesting ambivalence to further questioning.

“Maybe we should talk about this in the morning,” the wildflower suggested, taking the hint.

“What happened to the ant you were fighting?” the hoverfly continued to probe.

“She ran away,” the honeybee lied, not wishing to admit that she’d taken a life. “Otherwise the thing would have killed her too.”

“Not like an ant to run away. Crazy little bastards will have a go at anything.”

The hoverfly exchanged a telling glance with the flower, which the honeybee noticed, but was unsure how to interpret. Was it simply disbelief? Or a mixture of unease and incredulity at the exploits of this alien bee? Or something more machiavellian? It was inconceivable that they were unaware of the raw brutality around them - oblivious of it until now. She reviewed the role of raconteur and decided to employ more caution before volunteering anything else.

“This thing sounds like a centipede. A ferocious burrowing predator, but not very bright. Did it attack you as well?”

the wildflower asked quickly, as if curious about the violent encounter.

“No, I don’t think it had ever seen a honeybee before and allowed me to slip away unmolested.”

“Sounds like you had another lucky escape.”

“I seem blessed that way at the moment,” the honeybee concurred without conviction, her heavy eyelids closing out the world.

7

Morning departure was delayed by the inevitable flying-talk. The hoverfly insisted on a practical demonstration of the honeybee's inability to become airborne; or failing that, a plausible explanation as to why she was grounded. Since the latter had eluded the honeybee since the crash, she reluctantly agreed to the former; and endured the hoverfly's goading attempts to browbeat her into the air.

"It's easy, just whirl your wings and let them lift you," the hoverfly exhorted, rising several times to demonstrate the simplicity of levitation.

The honeybee shook the dried mud from her airframe and then flapped her wings, but with neither power nor enthusiasm. Not only did she lack the strength to create sufficient impulse for lift, what she did manage was incoherent and very unstable; just as likely to flip her over or drive her legs into the soil as lift her into the air. She seemed to have lost the aerial coordination that was second nature to experienced flyers.

"You do know how to fly, don't you?" the hoverfly queried. "I mean, you have flown before?"

"How do you think I got here? It's a long walk from the hive."

"Then why can't you fly now?" This was a strictly rhetorical question, born out of exasperation. "Hold out your wings," the hoverfly ordered brusquely.

The bemused honeybee duly obliged, though not without some difficulty. The transparent wings shimmered as the

nerve endings tingled under the strain.

“Can’t you hold them still?”

The honeybee breathed deeply and stiffened the muscles in her back from where the wings cantilevered. The wings stopped shaking, but her legs began to tremble in a strange dance that stirred up the mud.

The hoverfly and the wildflower thought it comical and laughed.

“I’m glad you two find it so funny,” the honeybee moaned.

“You really are a sad case for a honeybee,” the wildflower mused.

The hoverfly took his time examining the wings; keen eye scanning the intricate nervure network for anything amiss; a break, a fracture, or an incongruous imperfection which might explain the honeybee’s inability to perform her most natural function.

“Well? What do you see?” asked the honeybee, straining to hold the awkward pose.

“Have patience!” the engrossed technician advised, before delivering his negative assessment. “I don’t think the problem lies with your wings. There doesn’t appear to be anything wrong with them - no visible damage I can detect.”

The honeybee knew her own physiology well enough to expect this.

The hoverfly then pointed to a curious jagged line on the honeybee’s abdomen. “How did you get that old scar?”

“Pricked by a rose thorn after too much nectar,” the honeybee answered glibly.

Hoverfly and wildflower exchanged another characteristic glance; a fleeting communication prompted by the facetious remark. The honeybee suspected that she was being studied in more ways than one.

“If you want the answer, you gotta try lookin’ in some other place!” a fresh voice interjected, giving succour to the

honeybee's suspicions.

Attention turned to a conical mound of earth near the wildflower's stalk. It had been there the previous evening; innocuous and discretely camouflaged; but since then its appearance had altered. The mound itself was now animated, with a strange being sticking his hat-bearing head out of the ground.

"Zeb!" the wildflower cried. "How long have you been there?"

"Long enough to know the problem's not in her wings, it's in her head."

"Have you two met?" the hoverfly inquired warily of the earthworm and the honeybee.

"Sure thing, HB and me are old friends."

The honeybee nodded, thinking it odd that a flyer and a flower should be acquainted with a ground-dweller; but said nothing, recognising the prejudice of her background.

"HB? So you have got a name!" the wildflower noted with a frown. "Why didn't you say?"

"That was Zeb's idea," she explained, slightly embarrassed by the appellation. "I'm still not sure how to use it."

"Other names came to mind - after she landed on my work and demolished it," Zeb recalled. "I didn't think I'd ever see her again, but I figured it out anyway; just in case we ever met another grounded flyer. All it took was some sculptin' and everythin' began to make perfect sense."

"What did?" the honeybee wondered vaguely.

"You don't fly coz you don't wanna fly."

The hoverfly looked at the honeybee, bemused at first, but then his expression hardened with a sense of indignation. "Is that true?"

The honeybee made no immediate reply. An intriguing idea, which had been trapped and floating around in a recess for some time, was suddenly prised free and brought to the fore by Zeb's blunt diagnosis.

“Perhaps, in some strange way,” she conceded.

The impulsive hoverfly reacted with a predictable lack of grace. “In some strange way? What does that mean? Here we are trying to get you back into the air, and now you’re saying you don’t really want to fly at all?”

“Hey, take it easy, it ain’t her fault,” Zeb interjected. “What we gotta do is find out why.”

“Why doesn’t she just tell us?”

Zeb shook his head despairingly. “Okay, smart ass, you know all the answers, with that dumb brain o’ yours vibratin’ faster than your wings. Why don’t you go ahead and ask her?”

“Alright, I will.” The hoverfly faced the honeybee and put the question to her. “Well?”

“Well what?” the honeybee inquired, bemused by the exchanges and feigning an abstruse ignorance.

“Why don’t you want to fly?”

“I do want to fly.”

“But you just said you didn’t.”

“I said maybe - on a subconscious level.”

“You see, dope, it ain’t that simple!” Zeb cut in, before the honeybee could commit further pedantry. “Nothin’s ever that simple. Come over here, HB, and sit down in a comfortable spot. I wanna ask you some questions.”

The honeybee was not keen to play this new game that might drag her from the psychological citadel of her comfort zone. “The sun is up,” she remarked. “I really should be making a start back - the garden is a long way off.”

“C’mon, what have you got to lose?” cajoled the worm.

“My summer,” the honeybee quipped darkly.

“There’ll be plenty of daylight tomorrow, I guarantee it. We saved your ass the other night, now’s your chance to repay. You owe me for half a day’s work, remember? Now come and sit down over here while I finish my honeybee piece.”

The earthworm took the unfinished clay sculpture from his burrow. The honeybee looked to the others for moral support, but all they could offer were perplexed expressions. Reluctantly, she approached the worm hole and sat down on the soft, loose earth surrounding it.

“Now what?” she asked sceptically.

“Close your eyes and try to relax,” advised the worm; peering at the honeybee’s face, barely an arm’s reach away, as if it were a globe to be studied. “Are you sure you’re feelin’ comfortable?”

“Yes,” replied the honeybee, though she was ill at ease.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Mushrooms.”

“Why mushrooms?”

“They squat in the mud with their eyes closed.”

The others chuckled. Zeb also obliged, but only for a brief, courteous moment, before requesting their silence with a finger across his stern lips.

“Where were you born?” he asked, as he began fashioning a face from the clay.

“The hive in the garden.”

“Have you always lived in the garden?”

“Yes, if you don’t count the last three days.”

“Think back as far as you can. What are your earliest memories of the garden?”

“The early part of spring. Emerging from the hive to explore in the sunlight.”

“Are they happy memories?”

“Yes.”

“Would you mind sharin’ ’em with us?”

“Just encounters in the garden.”

“Can you describe them?”

The honeybee breathed deeply and tried to arrange the fleeting images logically in her mind before offering them to the analyst like neatly wrapped packages, not wishing her

vague memories to seem incoherent. “The garden is much the same now as it was then, I think,” she ventured. “Just my perception of it has changed.”

“In what way?”

The closed void of her mind opened painfully, as if clawed back by a jemmy. She recalled vivid images and sensations - the spiritual uplift of each dawn, the pleasure of sunshine on wings in flight, the smell of cut grass and apple blossom, the sound of birdsong and fountain ripples on the pond.

She mumbled discordantly, describing each fragment as best she could, unsure of the legitimate boundary between actual memories and imaginative nostalgia.

“How did you feel back then?” Zeb probed.

“Happy, optimistic, excited. The world was new and full of incredible surprises. I was young and eager to learn. To experience everything the garden had to offer.”

“Did this outlook continue through the spring?”

“No, there came a point when things began to change,” she disclosed. “For the first moon everything was fine. I could soar and dive in spectacular fashion and would spend all day taking nectar and pollinating the ... the flowers.”

Though brief, the pause to drop a prefix seemed self-conscious enough for Zeb to note and wonder about its significance. “Sunflowers?” he suggested.

The honeybee nodded.

“Tell me about the sunflowers.”

“They were the most amazing discovery of spring. Beautiful, striking, statuesque entities whom I worshipped in an obsessive way that honeybees aren’t really supposed to; far beyond objective notions of pleasure or desire; not just as a materialist or an aesthete, but in a deeply spiritual way. One that isn’t recognised by the swarm. Maybe it doesn’t exist anywhere except in me.” The honeybee opened her eyes and smirked at Zeb and his graven image with smug egocentrism. “You did ask. Is this what you want to hear?”

We don't usually talk about such things in the garden."

"Desperate maladies call for desperate remedies," the earthworm sighed.

"How do you analyse me and work on that thing at the same time?" inquired the ever curious honeybee, as if impressed by the earthworm's range of skills.

"Multitasking," shrugged the earthworm. "What happened on the day you crashed in the wilderness?"

"I don't remember much about it, just another day that ended differently."

Zeb suspected that she was holding back. "How did you feel physically on that day?" he asked.

"I had a headache," the honeybee admitted, "and other problems you don't get in the garden. Not if you want to keep flying."

"What things?" Zeb probed.

"Partial paralysis, loss of balance, coordination, and vision."

"When did these symptoms first appear?"

"I don't remember exactly."

"On the day of the crash?"

"No, long before that."

"What do you think could have caused these symptoms?"

"I don't know," the honeybee insisted. "But when they occurred, the world around me seemed to alter mysteriously; losing its worth and meaning; as if I was an alien in a strange environment. Everything except the flowers, whose beauty became more enhanced and vivid, as if my mind were compensating in a singular way for the loss of so much mental coordination."

"How did this breakdown in mental coordination manifest itself - aside from the physical symptoms?"

"I lost the ability to communicate effectively."

"Did you lose the ability to speak?"

"No, but have you ever tried talking to a rock?"

“Sure, when I meet one underground, but you don’t see many flying through the air.”

“I was being facetious,” the honeybee confessed.

“So was I.”

“When your outlook and values shift away from those of your society, or even if you just perceive a significant shift, you begin to view those of your own kind as impermeable to new ideas - a bit like that figure in clay you’re creating.”

“This clay is yieldin’ to my hands - that’s why sculptin’ is such fun. An artist can breath life into clay. The Almighty made the first earthworm out o’ clay,” preached the evangelical worm, before resuming his analysis of the honeybee. “So eventually this lack of physical coordination and the mental conflict caused you to crash?”

The honeybee nodded, wondering whether to recount the final incident at altitude with the rival bee; but decided against it, not wishing to reveal a belligerent aspect to her nature. “Yes,” she confirmed vaguely. “It gradually got worse and I was forced down.”

“Do you ever dream?” Zeb asked, broadening the scope of the analysis.

“Occasionally, doesn’t everyone?” the honeybee answered warily.

“Vividly?”

“Sometimes.”

“What sort of things do you dream about?”

“I can’t remember anything specific.”

“Do you find the experience pleasant or unpleasant?”

“Depends on the dream. Usually quite pleasant, the rocks are more malleable.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“Another form of compensation for reality, like the colour of the sunflowers.”

“What about the unpleasant ones? What are they compensating for?”

"I don't know," she hedged. "Dreams are confusing things. The theme of transition is fairly strong, like memories of spring. Light fading into darkness, a shadow falling across the sun, euphoria to dread, that sort of thing."

"Do you ever have to fight for your life in these dreams?"

The honeybee glanced sternly at the analyst and artist, the dumb hick worm of first impression.

"Those dreams are more common than you think," he assured her, as a means of encouragement.

"Around here that doesn't surprise me. There are plenty of nightmares to be had when you're awake."

"But were your dreams violent before you ended up in the wilderness?"

The honeybee braced herself for an investigation into the darker shadows of her psyche. "Not exactly, well sometimes, maybe," she hedged. "How do you define violence in a dream?"

"Action that threatens physical injury or death," Zeb suggested.

"Suppose the action never leads to injury? As if the fighting itself is merely a game - a portent for an obscure, but far more disturbing, sanction?"

Zeb pondered on this point for a moment. "Fear of a sanction is a form of violence. What is this sanction that you fear the most?"

"If I knew that, I'd be a lot wiser than I am at the moment," the honeybee disclosed, swallowing hard.

"Do you want to rejoin the bees in the garden?"

"The garden is relatively safe for a honeybee, even on the ground. I should go back there until the power of flight returns. But what then? Rejoin the swarm and continue as before as if nothing had happened? That would be a retrograde step, don't you think?"

"What do you think?"

"I feel as if I have a greater affinity with the wilderness

than the garden,” the honeybee professed. “The garden was fun in the early spring, but I can never conform enough to live the life of a real honeybee. So far I’ve just pretended by learning the script and mimicking the others. Things are different out here. A different set of rules for a different sort of game.”

“Any place depends on what you make of it.”

“There’s nothing more to be achieved in the garden. The swarm has reached a pinnacle of conformity and now it’s fixed in a social stasis - a cocoon of moral, cultural, and emotional stagnation. I feel more alive out here facing the monsters that want to kill me than I ever did serving the vacuous sunflowers,” the honeybee declared, giving vent to her frustration and anger for the first time. “I abhor the practice of eating flesh, but I respect the clarity of vision they seem to have in order to survive. Violence is a creative activity for some, and a form of communication for others.”

“Monsters are seductive to those who are not their prey,” Zeb warned. “Most ground-dwellers would like to see the predators banished from our territory.”

“That would take violence of a sort only the predators themselves are capable of inflicting. Would you approve of such violence as a means to an end?”

“That’s the dilemma we currently face,” the earthworm conceded gravely. “Why did you use the term ‘vacuous’ sunflowers?”

“The thin air at high altitude affects their brains.”

“Unlike the honeybees,” the wildflower noted wryly.

Zeb flashed a stern glance of admonishment at the flower.

“Honeybees also spend time near the ground,” the bee ventured, with a hint of self effacing irony.

“Have you suffered any kind of emotional trauma lately?” Zeb delved.

“Honeybees don’t have emotional traumas,” she chortled. “That would be bad for morale and group cohesion.”

“But what would happen to a honeybee who was genuinely ill and unfortunate enough to exhibit trauma symptoms? Would she be driven out?”

“There’s no organised policy of expulsion, unless she became a threat to the brood chamber or the Queen - in which case she would be considered anarchic and killed. But you are expected to work and the whole garden expects you to be at the peak of your game. Anything less and the chattering flowers soon notice and begin to shun you.”

“There, it’s finished,” the earthworm proclaimed in triumph. “What do you think?”

The honeybee viewed the piece with a mixture of curiosity and disdain. It looked lifelike - almost too lifelike for her fragile state of mind. It reminded her more of a bee she had once known than of herself. “It looks great,” she professed. “Can I go now?”

“Don’t be in such a hurry to get yourself killed. Do you drink dandelion nectar?”

“Only when I’m flying.”

“There’s a group of dandelions just over there.” Zeb pointed to cluster a short distance away. “Maybe you could help Barak gather some for Naph and me. We slurp the stuff when we can get it, but we have a problem reachin’ up to them.”

“How do you suggest I get up there?” the honeybee inquired tersely.

“You can still sweet talk a dandelion and climb up a stalk, can’t you? They’re sure to be generous to a honeybee, they don’t see that many and they’re so dumb they’ll believe any story you wanna give ’em about your wings.”

“That’s how the honeybees talk about the flowers in the garden. The flowers make similarly disparaging comments about the bees. I don’t understand what purpose that sort of enmity serves.”

“Tribalism in a symbiotic relationship,” Zeb suggested. “I

didn't mean to disrespect the dandies, but how about that nectar? Be nice and sincere if you like - they're not like the sunflowers."

"I'll try," she conceded, resigning herself to losing another day and setting off with Barak in company to collect the nectar. The hoverfly hovered overhead, prudently keeping an eye out for danger.

"What about Sisera?" the wildflower asked, after they had departed from earshot. "He's still out there somewhere and could come back at any time."

"Concerned for a vacuous honeybee?" Zeb asked wryly.

"I saved her life."

"I know. That's why we've gotta get her in the air before Sisera comes back - for all our sakes. If he catches her on the ground he'll make her talk."

"We'll be alright. Barak can fly and you can go deep underground."

"That's right, I can go underground. What are you gonna do?"

"He won't harm a flower, it's against predator law."

"Sisera is the sovereign power in his fiefdom, and if he wants to change the law to suit himself he can - any time he likes. It's called judicial murder."

"Well, I'm for changing the constitutional set-up around here," the wildflower proclaimed defiantly.

"How?"

"I don't know yet - but there must be some way. Protecting that honeybee is a start. Maybe she can help us when she's flying again."

"Right now, I'd say the chances of her ever flyin' again are less than fifty-fifty."

"But if she did, she could be a powerful ally."

"She's only a honeybee - no match for a ground spider."

"There are thousands more in the swarm. They could easily destroy Sisera from the air."

“So that’s why you did it? For a while you had me thinkin’. But it ain’t that simple. Sisera is nocturnal and the bees can’t fly at night. In a war, Sisera would enter the garden and raid the hive after dark, stealin’ away the sentries then hidin’ up in a burrow to avoid detection by day. He could terrorise the swarm all summer and never once get caught in the open during the day.”

“We could find his hideouts and get that information to the swarm.”

“You’ve got it all figured out, haven’t you? You just don’t know what it’s like to be afraid.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean physically afraid, afraid for your own life. You’re not a prey species, you’ve never bin hunted. If you did, you wouldn’t be takin’ such a big risk. Just because you’re perennial and live through the winters don’t make you immortal.”

“I see the same butchery year after year. Nothing ever changes, we just accept it as Sisera’s law. But if we help the honeybee, then maybe the swarm will help us, all of us.”

“That’s just never gonna happen,” the earthworm insisted, shaking his head grimly. “The swarm won’t leave the garden. We’ll get the honeybee flyin’ again, then wave goodbye to her. After that, we pray the spider never finds out.”

“It’s about time we did something more than just pray!”

“Sshh, what are you trying to do? Get yourself killed?” he gasped. “Don’t take this the wrong way - but you’re just a pretty flower. Spiders don’t eat flowers so maybe you should just count your blessin’s and soak up the sun while you can.”

“Sisera would make a tasty meal of you if he caught you on the surface. He’d suck out your juices till there was nothing left but a skin bag. So why not join the conspiracy? What have you got to lose?”

“The summer’s gonna end for all of us eventually. I suppose I’ve just come to accept that the spider was here

before we arrived and he'll still be here long after we've gone. Maybe he's got a divine right to rule after all."

"And maybe we've got a natural right to kill him before he kills us."

"But it's not your fight. You're not a flyer or a ground dweller."

"It became my fight when those I love began disappearing in the night. Sometimes they're found the next day - what's left of them."

"Sisera has his summer to live, as God intended; just like the rest of us."

"He's had countless summers. He's as old as the trees, they say. But I've been dreaming lately that this summer will be his last. He's heading for extinction. How would you analyse that?"

"Wishful thinkin'," Zeb chuckled, then curiosity got the better of him and he asked, "In your dream, how does this extinction come about?"

"The sun-god sends a honeybee to smite him with her sting."

"He'd have to fall asleep right under her sting for that to happen."

"He swept past here in daylight yesterday - he never usually does that. Why is he so desperate to get his fangs into a grounded honeybee? He must fear her kind greatly."

Zeb briefly pondered this enigma. "I don't know, but God must have some purpose for him, just like the rest of us."

"You don't believe that," the wildflower chided. "If we could clear the predators out of the wilderness, it would become a hedonistic paradise - like the garden."

"Oh, but I do," he insisted. "Don't forget, the honeybee is runnin' away from a so-called paradise."

"Are you telling me that if you could wish Sisera dead this instant, you wouldn't do it?"

"I didn't say that. I wanna get rid of him too. But I'd also

like to know why he was created in the first place and what'll happen after he's gone. Havin' to eat flesh must be a terrible curse."

"He relishes it. He loves to kill. And you're just hiding behind a shield of sophistry because you're too afraid to do anything about it."

"You're damn right I'm afraid! We're all afraid except you! It just ain't natural not to be. But you don't wanna get the swarm involved in the affairs of the wilderness, you don't know where it'll end up. After we get rid of Sisera, someone'll start preachin' about gettin' rid o' the swarm, and there'll be more bloodshed, and it'll never end."

"Too late, it's already begun - and we're both part of it."

"I've still got the luxury of my deep burrow to escape into and I'm not hangin' around topside to watch Armageddon on the surface."

"The honeybee isn't natural either," the wildflower mused, in a faintly mystical tone. "You must have sensed it. She should be dead by now, but she isn't."

"Because you intervened instead o' lettin' nature take its course."

"Not just me; there were close encounters with a seeress, a predator-plant, a patrol of ants and a centipede. She's incredibly lucky to be alive. Maybe there's more to it than luck."

"If she starts thinkin' it's fate, she'll be dead in no time," snorted the worm.

"Or she might start flying again and fulfil whatever destiny the sun-god has mapped-out for her."

"Promise me you won't go fillin' her head with that sort o' heathen delusion?" he pleaded.

"If I'm right, it won't make any difference what she thinks."

"Somethin' terrible must have happened back in the garden that deeply disturbed her, and now she's walkin'

around in a prolonged state o' shock. That's why you think she's weird - but you may be able to help her get over it."

"How?"

"Just by talkin' to her. Find out what's really keepin' her on the ground."

"Does she know what it is?"

"I think so, but I'm not sure that she understands the significance of the subliminal stuff and the way it's screwin' around with her conscious mind. This fear of flyin' is buried deep in her subconscious, literally holdin' her on the ground where she feels safe. When she makes the connection and faces up to it, she should be able to flap those wings and take off."

"Safe? With Sisera around?"

"Maybe there's somethin' she fears more than death itself. It's possible. Somethin' she just can't come to terms with; and until she does she'll never fly again. When your antennae get badly crossed you evaluate things differently; in ways that seem irrational to normal folks. I was hopin' the image of her face sculpted in clay might bring it all back, but it didn't seem to do nothin'. I've done all I can for now, tonight it's your turn."

The wildflower frowned. "She's not easy to engage in conversation. She finds it quite challenging at times."

"That's just a defense. Find a way to break through it. Try gettin' her to talk about the sunflowers. I think they're the key."

"What if she doesn't want to talk about anything?"

Zeb shrugged. "The dandelion nectar may help, but if it don't, there's not much more we can do."

"You're wrong about me, Zeb," the wildflower decided on reflection. "I am afraid - very afraid."

8

The night air remained balmy despite a clear sky, though the stars seemed less cold and distant to the honeybee. She was becoming accustomed to the loud nightly chorus; the cries and groans of the wilderness no longer threatened and jarred her senses. With the help of the flower, and a few drops of dandelion nectar, she was adjusting to this alien environment and learning to accept its bewildering complexities.

A world of incredible diversity, of opposites and extremes. Ugliness and beauty side by side, and not just in the physical manifestation of being, but in the philosophical world of thoughts and ideas. The wilderness was a creative enigma besieged by ignorance and violence; real violence, not a conceptual game of jousting egos, as in the garden. Yet from this fiery cradle had emerged arts and interactions lost, forgotten, or undreamed of in the safe, sterile, regulated confines of the garden.

The honeybee silently pondered the relationship between intellect and environment; violence, terror and the arts. Did one feed off the other? Was the other inspired by the one? Perhaps in a manner not dissimilar to the symbiotic relationship between the sunflowers and the honeybees? Then why not in the garden? Perhaps the conjugates there took the forms of wealth and physical perfection, as intellectual development was judged unsafe to the social order of the swarm.

What of the nature of relationships in the wilderness? Naph and Zeb; Deborah and Barak; and Sisera, her nemesis,

according to the prophesy of the seeress. If only she could fly, she would overcome her repugnance for the spider and try to communicate with him; to understand why he was driven to kill rather than seek alternative forms of sustenance; and why he sought absolute power over the subjects of his fiefdom.

By their sedentary nature, flowers could not be expected to apply themselves to rigorous intellectual disciplines, since they were not driven by the necessary mobile metabolism; and yet the wildflower, in isolation, seemed more capable and attune to the task than any in the garden. Perhaps isolation was the key. The garden flowers were gregarious and in close proximity; judging, conforming, and admiring each other whilst playing frequent host to the flyers, leaving little time to think about the wider world.

The honeybees were partners in this symbiotic society, devoting all their mobile energies to aerial competition with each other; requiring dexterity in flight, rather than thought on the ground. Those who stopped to think soon developed doubts and became unable to maintain the frenetic lifestyle of the bees in the swarm.

Such individuals drifted away; driven out by the pressure and the expectation of their society; but where did they go? The honeybee could answer this question at least. They came here, to the wilderness, where they lived in the company of wildflowers - perhaps to the end of their summer - and then the knowledge and the wisdom they had acquired from the experience died with them. If that knowledge could somehow be preserved and returned to the garden, it could have a dramatic effect on attitudes there.

"Where is Barak?" the honeybee inquired suddenly. The hoverfly had slipped away before sunset, soon after Zeb had retired to his hole for the evening.

"We're alone," the wildflower answered obliquely.

The honeybee had grown used to being alone, if not in

body then certainly in spirit. She was still alone, uncomfortably alone with the flower. Perhaps the loneliest experience of all. "Does he ever sleep with you?" she asked.

"Sometimes." The brief answer lingered in the still night silence.

At first, this terse, qualified admission seemed like a vindication of the honeybee's expressed view that all flyers were philanderers by nature who spent very little time with any one particular flower. However, in this instance, she suspected some degree of contrivance on their part for her sake.

"Everyone talks about the night sky as if it were a heavenly garden," the flower observed wistfully.

"Maybe there is a heavenly garden - waiting for us all," the honeybee suggested, indulging in the poetic reflection that was permissible in the wilderness.

"Do you think you would be happy there?"

"Probably not," the honeybee conceded. "I like the idea of a world that is flawed in some way."

"Then why do you hate the garden so much?"

"The garden has been dumbed down and purged of the need for any form of intellectual radicalism. Everyone has the same *raison d'être*. I never met a single philosopher in the garden. In the wilderness, they seem to crawl out from under every rock."

"The starflowers appear very much alike to me," mused the wildflower. "Do you think they represent some sort of ideal?"

"What ideal is that?" asked the honeybee, keen to understand the thoughts of this flower.

"A pinnacle of evolution - like the sunflowers on earth. But if a species reaches an ideal state, then the individuals can be no more than facsimiles of each other. How do you differentiate between them?"

"The stars or the sunflowers?"

“The sunflowers. Their stature and their shades of gold make them sound more like deities of the sun than flowers rooted in the earth. No wonder the honeybees rarely leave the garden.”

“Why would I want to differentiate between them?” the honeybee queried. “They’re a resource to exploit - a collective asset of the swarm.”

“But there must have been at least one whom you became especially fond of, or thought of as different or special in some way?”

“The garden isn’t like that,” the honeybee tried to explain. “Individual relationships are brief, fleeting, and then quickly forgotten.”

“You mean, you felt nothing at all for the flowers that gave you their nectar?” The incredulity in the voice of the wildflower sounded like an accusation.

“You’re transposing your values onto a completely different culture,” the honeybee suggested tentatively, trying to steer a course between tact and honesty. “Loyalty and affection are simply commodities; like nectar and pollen. In the garden, where there is little danger and food is abundant, we’re raised without the need to secure ourselves with the sort of advantageous cooperative contracts which may be commonplace out here in the wilderness. A large number of transient affairs are needed to gather enough nectar for the hive and efficiently pollinate the flowers.”

The wildflower groaned in dismay. “You think what we value most is no more than utilitarian; but don’t you think that is a transposition of your values onto our lives?”

“Of course,” the honeybee conceded. “But out here, you would condemn me for a lack of feeling, whilst terrible acts of butchery are being committed all around us. In the garden, where there is very little violence, a heavy sanction falls on those who do not conform to the ideal of competition within the rules of the game. That means no displays of

affection unless contrived. Conformity is everything and eccentricity is condemned. If you don't conform to a series of codified rules, you lose the credibility and respect needed to make compacts and have trysts with the flowers, especially the sunflowers."

"But surely you don't all want the same thing in the same way?"

"Unfortunately, it would seem that we do," the honeybee affirmed. "It's the price we pay for a safe, well ordered, and aesthetically beautiful society. No one cares much about individual relationships - the need for one is a sign of weakness, the desire for one is an eccentricity."

"It seems a shame - they don't know what they're missing," the flower sighed. "If I were a sunflower, I'd want to be completely different to the others. I'd certainly act differently."

"In what way?"

"Well, for one thing, I wouldn't be at the beck and call of the honeybees. They have a reputation for being arrogant and conceited."

"They can also be quite charming when it suits their purpose. Most flowers find them hard to resist. That's why they're such a successful species."

"All the same, I'd want to meet other flyers."

"Not much chance of that. The honeybees chase off any interloper who goes near their sunflowers. The air space over the garden is highly restricted."

"Don't the sunflowers protest?"

"No, why should they? They're great spectators of aerial clashes; a battle is just another aerial dance to them. Dissenting voices are simply not a feature of the garden. No one is willing to risk losing their riches by tolerating diverse opinions. After living out here, you would find the garden facile and cruel, at least on an emotional level."

"That's easy for you to say. You're not stuck in one place,

you can come and go as you please. Your idea of cruelty is abstract, whilst ours really does exist and we can't escape from it."

The honeybee was uncomfortable with the charge. The wildflower, if discontent, could rationalise and articulate tangible grievances against the wilderness. What tangible grievances could she have against the garden, with all its wealth and splendour?

"Do you wish you were a sunflower?" she asked quietly.

"Yes," the wildflower replied instantly.

"The sunflowers are not loved, they are simply objects of desire, like the honeybees."

"I can live with that," the wildflower disclosed. "But if I were a sunflower, would you think of me as all the others, even if you knew it was me inside?"

"If you were a sunflower, I'd only know what you were, not who you were."

The wildflower grinned impishly. "Do you know what I'd really like to be? A sunflower with wings. One that can uproot and fly! Then you'd notice me."

The honeybee was taken aback; partly by the surreal notion, but also by the fact that it came from the imagination of a flower. "That's ridiculous," she chided, for want of anything better to say.

"Imagine a world in which streamlined flowers can flap their petals and take to the air." The wildflower paused, lips stretching into a sanguine smile. "You can still have our nectar - but we can fly with you. Do you feel threatened by such thoughts?"

"It's not something I've ever considered," the honeybee answered, falling back on blunt honesty. "In the garden, it would be considered anarchic - a travesty of nature."

"The garden you describe is a travesty of nature. Wouldn't you want to be airborne with a flower?"

"I don't know," the honeybee admitted, uneasy with a

notion that did indeed challenge her perception. Then she chuckled at a bizarre thought of her own. "Is that how you're going to get me back in the air again? Flap your petals and take off into the sky with me riding piggyback?"

"I would if I could, but I've got no wings. What you see is what you get," the flower disclosed sadly.

"We both know that isn't true," the honeybee insisted. "There's a lot to you that no one can see."

"Is this the famous honeybee flattery coming into play?"

"Honeybees only flatter when they're flying. But your thoughts and ideas excite me more than anything I ever experienced in the garden. The facades of the garden are superficial and contrived, but your wild aspect and unpredictable nature are much more appealing."

The wildflower blushed. A self-effacing reaction which surprised the honeybee. Perhaps wildflowers were modest and sincere by nature, in contrast to the facile flowers of the garden. An unfortunate discovery to make so late in the spring.

"Sounds like you don't need to fly," the wildflower mused, with a quiet sigh.

"Sometimes the truth can be flattering."

"You're being charming because it suits your purpose," the wildflower decided on reflection.

"What purpose is that?" the honeybee asked, taken aback by the cynical accusation.

"Gratitude perhaps. You don't owe me anything. But if you insist on being lyrical, describe the sunflowers again. I'd like to hear more about them."

"I've said enough already."

"They fascinate me. I'm just as interested in your world as you are in mine."

"They're just flowers," she shrugged, trying to play down her earlier enthusiasm, but immediately regretting the choice of words.

“Just flowers?”

“Tall flowers.”

“They must be quite something to view from the air. But you’ll get used to us. It’s not so bad down here - once you can stand the smell.”

The honeybee wondered what the flower hoped to gain by being so blunt and provocative. She recognised a strategy of some kind.

“Maybe I’ll never fly again,” she replied. “Maybe that’s the price I’ll have to pay for what I’ve learned being here.”

“An evasive flatterer. I’m not sure whether your stock is rising or falling.”

“I hope it’s rising,” she answered quietly.

“What about the sunflowers?”

“The truth?”

“If it’s not too much to ask.”

“Yes, they are inspirational to behold from the air, maybe even objects of obsession. They’re unique, even by the standards of the garden - a *raison d’être* for any flyer. Fabulous, golden creatures with awesome, breathtaking beauty; reaching high into the clear blue sky where the air is light and rare and plays wonderful tricks on the brain.”

She paused, waiting for the trap to close with the incisive, mocking ribald to which the wildflower was entitled, and which she deserved for such indulgent revelations.

From the flower, a quiet murmur issued forth, expressing not the contempt for which the honeybee was prepared, but rather a soft, melancholy note of resignation that floated up through the night air. “If I felt such passion for anything, I think I’d sprout wings myself. You’ll fly again, one day, when it’ll serve some purpose dear to your heart. Who knows, maybe one day you’ll fly for me.”

A humbling breeze swept through the honeybee, gently raising her spirit as if it were a fallen leaf, then quietly laying it to rest again as if never having been disturbed.

The wildflower began reciting verse as the seeress had done:

“Of what in other worlds shall be - and given
In beauty by our God, to those alone
Who otherwise would fall from life and heaven
Drawn by their heart’s passion, and that tone,
That high tone of the spirit which have striven,
Tho’ not with faith - with godliness - whose throne
With desperate energy ’t hath beaten down;
Wearing its own deep feeling as a crown.”

“That sounds interesting. What does it mean?” asked the honeybee.

“I don’t know, I didn’t compose it.”

“Who did?”

“A flyer from a previous summer.”

“And you can recall it after all this time?”

“Oh yes, and I’ve often wondered what it meant. Now after meeting you, I think perhaps I’m just beginning to understand.”

The soft voice reached into her heart and tugged gently in a way she’d never felt before; uttering words she’d never heard spoken before with any depth of sincerity. They filled her with a sense of warmth and ease and comfort that both elated and perturbed; for she was unaccustomed to dealing with such emotions and sought to stem the tears welling in her eyes.

The honeybee would have wept freely but for the presence of the wildflower; yet without that presence, the tears would have remained frozen shards of ice locked in her soul. She recognised the strategy of the flower, though was nonetheless moved by it, and allowed herself to be drawn into the flower’s maw and outflanked in a subtle, selfless trap. But, as always, the honeybee couldn’t be certain

of the flower's motive.

Maybe this was simply another ghost, twisted by her conditioned perception of the world. The honeybee desperately wanted to be certain, to be right for once. She'd been wrong many times before and each memory haunted her. Perhaps the time had come to confront the ghosts of the past. To accept the absence of certainty in her life, to be wrong once more without the burden of a conscience that was tearing her apart.

The honeybee was exhausted from the long day. The emotional strain of introspective vivisection at the hands of Zeb and the flower had left her drained; though also light-headed and optimistic, as if perhaps there was a purpose about to be unveiled to fill the spiritual vacuum of the garden.

She couldn't sleep, despite or because of hyperexhaustion, and was held conscious by maverick thoughts about events past, but mostly about the flower. If they hadn't met, she would almost certainly be dead by now. That debt would exist forever, whatever the flower might say. If she hadn't crashed, what interest would she have in the knowledge of such a secluded existence? The answer troubled her greatly, for in the flower there existed a bright spark of compassion; the same ideal that separated and dissociated her from her peers in the garden; one which she had failed to recognise and accept in time before fleeing from her homeland. A glowing quality, possessed by the ground-dwellers and the tall-spirits, which she valued as highly as the sunlight.

A desire to complete unfinished business kept her awake. Her sense of guilt and injustice at the world turned to anger again, and she looked to heaven for an invidious god to rail against. But the gods were too high up and too far away to hear the cries of a grounded honeybee, so she turned the rage inward upon herself; conserving her strength as best she could while waiting for the eastern horizon to begin its

spectral transformation and herald the approach of morning.

The hours past slowly, and by way of preparation she put aside much of the corrosive doubt, tacitly encouraged by her ability to do so. A good omen. Instinctively, the honeybee knew when her time had come and left without disturbing the sleeping flower; drawn, or perhaps even summoned, to a personal rendezvous with the early dawn on the eve of summer. Pilgrim or subject she knew not, nor knowing whether to expect absolution, ennoblement, or damnation.

The honeybee climbed onto a sodden clump in the clearing and sat staring at the sky; waiting for the tip of the orange disc, the great engine of life, to clear the horizon and shafts of energising light to reach out and bestow a blessing on her cold, inert frame. She shivered and caught her breath as the first searching ray caressed her cheek like a teasing lover, raising her spirits and priming a sentient consciousness for the coming assay.

She gritted her teeth, closed her eyes, and spread her wings to soak up the salubrious gift; shaking and straining wilfully against the strictures within herself; imbibing all the promise of the morning.

She thought of the wildflower as the blood began pumping through cramped muscles and restricted veins, holding an abstract image in view of the flower in a brilliant, unearthly guise; like a bright, dazzling star on a dark night, speaking with the flower's voice, realising with infinite perception those things that she could never speak of. But as the flower spoke again, and the revitalising blood coursed through dormant tissue, so the suppressed flames of memory reared-up to sear her psyche.

9

Spring in the garden - where a batch of young honeybees were cocksure of themselves after the initial success of their induction into the air. Each passing day had been noticeably longer and sunnier than the last, and the bees were rapidly developing on the wing as they imbibed nectar, pollen, and sunlight; and ceaselessly sought out new challenges to test the rigour of their wings and their senses. But for some, a gnawing sense of disillusionment had already set in; and their spirits were beginning to ebb within the confines of their narrow existence, until the maturing season brought the timely promise of another game.

The assault on their youthful senses began anew when an exotic vein of flora burst into life; no longer passive, but reaching high into the airspace to enthrall the honeybees with the richness of its colour and the wisdom of its perennial experience; reaffirming the singular purpose of those deigned to fly. For the prize of each sunflower, rich beyond imagination, the airborne cavaliers merely had to maintain a glorious tradition and emulate the accomplished aerial feats of their illustrious predecessors in summers past.

Encouraged by the late afternoon auger of a fine conclusion to the day; one group of satiated honeybees, tired of frolicking with the flowers, invoked the freedom of the air, granted them by their designer, to peel away from the convoluting swarm and dance in elegant formation around the progenitor like animated dust snatched on impulse from a cosmic cloud by the gravity of a passing star. Escaping

from the main mass in a spiralling trajectory, the curling asymptote carried the formation further and further from the swarm until completely free of its influence.

This maverick group gave head to its impetuous spirit, sweeping high over the garden; chasing a wasp from the apple blossom, then swooping low to buzz the goldfish rising to gulp air from the surface of the pond. A pair of mating dragonflies hovering in the disputed airspace over the water presented something of a riskier proposition; fierce and bad tempered at the best of times; yet still the boisterous honeybees, savouring their youth, began to mob them; counting coup with one pass after another until the lusty pair peeled away in search of a quieter life, leaving the inflated bees circling in triumph.

The honeybees went about their exuberant antics with an energetic zeal, inspired by much of the same competitive rivalry employed to extract favour from the flowers; though once removed from the divisive influence of the sunflowers an embryonic team spirit began to develop within the group; and though there was no call for a natural leader to emerge, there was tacit acceptance of one who led by example. A daring individual with exceptional skill who could skate across the deadly water surface on her buzzing wing tips. She flew spectacular loops around the wasp as the others looked on in amazement, then directed the dangerous manoeuvres against the dragonflies from a precarious stand-off, within striking range of their powerful mandibles.

The chase had carried them right up to the wilderness border before sobriety prevailed and they eschewed the temptation to continue the pursuit. The wilderness was rightly regarded as a savage, uncivilised environment by the fastidious honeybees; and although they had all made short incursions into it at some time or another in the course of spring, few found anything to compare with the edifying distractions of the garden. But with the departure of the

dragonflies, the honeybees were suddenly at a loss for something worthy of their attention before the close of day.

Decisions were being taken to begin a sweep back towards the hive when the voice of the leading bee called out from below. The other bees looked down to see her hovering near an area of fallow grass beyond the pond rockery, marking the boundary where the wilderness encroached upon the garden.

“Take a look at this,” she shouted.

The group wheeled across the sky in a lazy formation and took up position over their comrade; reluctant to descend *en masse* to the rough ground below.

“What is it?” a bee shouted down to her.

“Some sort of tunnel,” the lead bee replied, describing an old curving section of drainage pipe; abandoned and reclaimed by the long grasses.

The second bee surveyed the curious snake-like object from her greater height. Its exposed end seemed to gape open like the mouth of a giant predator lying in wait for a victim. “We should keep away from it,” the second bee advised. “We’re right on the border - it must lead straight through to the wilderness.”

“No, check it out!” another bee countered. “We ought to know what’s in there.”

“But there’ll be no light to see anything. It may as well be wilderness territory at night,” judged the more cautious bee.

“If it’s a passage to the wilderness, we should investigate it,” the lead bee decided. “Anything could crawl through and raid the garden at night, then hide up out of sight before sunrise. Who’s willing to take a look inside?”

Most of the group hung back in high formation; brave enough to risk their lives in the daylight skies, but not keen to venture into a dark, alien, claustrophobic world of shadow on the ground. Only one of the circling bees dived to hover beside her associate. The same bee who was

counselling caution.

“Do you want to go first?” the lead bee invited her.

The second bee shook her head vehemently. “Just leave it for today, it’s not worth the risk. This tunnel must have been here for many summers without posing any threat to the garden. See how thick the growth is around it. Even the tall-spirits leave it alone.”

“I know, but I’m curious. Aren’t you?”

“Yes, but not today,” the second bee urged. “It’ll be getting dark soon. We should be heading back to the hive. We can come back tomorrow with a full day ahead of us.”

“If we leave it till tomorrow, the opportunity to discover something new today will be lost. There’s more to life than the sunflowers, we’ve got to seize these moments when we can.”

With this advice, the adventurous bee disappeared into the narrow entrance of the tunnel. The darkness and the curvature of the pipe soon hid her from view. Three others descended from the group overhead and the second bee became aware of these as they took up positions hovering on her flanks.

“Someone else should go in too,” one of the new arrivals suggested.

“No, wait until she comes back,” the second bee advised.

“What does she hope to achieve?”

“Her own swarm in the wilderness,” another of the new arrivals remarked sardonically.

Maintaining their station at the tunnel mouth, they were soon rewarded by a voice emanating clearly from the entrance of the cylindrical waveguide.

“Can’t see very much, it’s fairly dark in here,” the echoing voice informed them. “It’s full of strange melodic rhythms, maybe the echoes of my wings. I’m edging forward slowly - ranging off the sound.”

All the listening honeybees were unhappy with the enter-

prise; partly because of the potential risk, but also because of the ambivalent strain of finding themselves in a situation in which instinct conflicted with the endeavour, and for no tangible reason which they could consciously discern, given their youth and lack of worldly experience.

The second bee was so impressed by the brave explorer in the tunnel who was determined to investigate every aspect of the garden, and presumably the bordering wilderness, that she was prepared to follow her in, but was far from enamoured with the idea. The entrance to the pipe disturbed her; even making her hackles stand on end. She still thought of it as the mouth of a giant predator.

The darkness itself should have been sufficient to deter any daytime flyer, being so debilitating to the senses, and she grudgingly admired the courage of any bee who dared venture into such a dismal unknown to explore.

“If you can’t see anything, come back,” the second bee advised, disregarding the enmity of those flanking her who wanted to see the investigation pushed through to a conclusion.

“Keep on going,” urged one with a more cavalier attitude. “She’s in there now, she may as well find out what she can,” the bee explained, with a shrug of her shoulders, before bellowing more encouragement into the gloom. “What can you see?”

“I think there’s a light at the far end,” the hidden voice issued tentatively. “I can just see it, maybe I can fly all the way through!”

The second bee accepted the news with relief; unrepentant for her prudent advice, but gladdened by the outcome and grateful that her assessment of the danger had not been substantiated. Attention would soon be focussed on the triumph of the emerging heroine and her own cautious counsel would soon be forgotten.

The commentary continued, more confident now, certain

that success was assured. "I'm flying into the light!" the tunnel voice confirmed, and suddenly faded as if she were out on the other side.

They waited for her to reappear, but the wait took much longer than expected, and the surveying bee failed to emerge into the air to collect her accolades and console her critics.

Overhead, there were impatient shouts of "What's happening?" and "What's going on down there?"

"She's flown all the way through!" the third bee yelled up to them.

"Oh yeah? Where is she then? We can't see her."

"Find the other end of the tunnel," the second bee advised.

Several high-flying bees crossed over into the wilderness to search for the other end of the tunnel. They returned a few moments later with a discouraging report. "We can't find the pipe. It's buried deep in the long grass."

The little group of bees at the tunnel entrance were perplexed by the situation. Had she been mistaken about the light? At that instant, the voice came from the tunnel again, though not quite the same voice, that much was plainly evident despite the filtering effect of the pipe. A sudden, subtle vacillation. A sea change swift as the descent of a curtain of mist. No longer the brash tone of the adventurer exploring new territory, but the soft, pleading whisper of the vanquished. A pitiful moan of anguished disbelief.

The second bee shouted into the shadowy gape for more information, steadying her own voice, which was unnerved by the encrypted sound of panic. This did not sound at all like the same bee whose cool head had made such an impression earlier in the day.

No direct response came to enlighten the agitated bees. Their missing peer seemed preoccupied with her mysterious predicament; her muted communications transformed from vigour into a state of despair. It sounded as if she were

weeping, punctuating the subdued abreaction with the words, “Oh no, oh no, no, no ...”

Then, suddenly, her state altered again; breaking into a frantic panic, as if driven to cry and shout for help; culminating in a blood-chilling scream. The bees around the tunnel mouth exchanged awkward, helpless glances; then looked skyward to the rest of their group still circling overhead.

“She hasn’t used her sting,” a fourth bee observed. “I can’t detect a sting pheromone.”

The second bee delivered her own assessment of the situation to the small group. “She’s not the type to cry out. I think she’s in serious trouble and for some reason can’t use her sting.”

The third bee concurred, calling to the overhead group again. “Something has happened in the tunnel - it could be a predator.”

The overhead group acknowledged this report and hastily convened to consider a response. The small detachment remained by the tunnel mouth, listening for any further information from their missing comrade. They were impatient for a course of action, but in the unusual circumstances looked to the larger group for leadership through consensus, as they were expected to do in times of crisis. The intent of the overhead group became clear to them before any official instructions filtered down.

A spokesbee swooped to deliver the damning decision. “The interior of the tunnel is considered wilderness territory.”

“You mean we’re leaving her in there?” the second bee asked, aghast at the verdict.

“You know the policy of the hive. The swarm only takes collective action against threats to the garden. That tunnel is not posing a threat to the garden and therefore is not to be disturbed. Maybe she’s being used as bait to draw more of us in. It could be a death trap in there. There’s no way of

knowing without risking more lives,” the spokesbee ruled.

“But we can’t just leave her in there! She’s a honeybee - a member of the swarm!” the second bee protested, horrified by the cold policy calculations performed by others on her behalf.

“The swarm can’t deploy in that dark, narrow tunnel. It’s a job for two or three bees at most,” the spokesbee replied. “Maybe you four would like to try; but we can’t stay and support you, we have to return to the hive; we’re losing the sun-god.”

The spokesbee looked nervously at the once fiery disc, now a subdued shade of blood-red as if in mourning, as it began dipping beneath the horizon.

The second bee was willing to try entering the tunnel and looked round for support from the others, but the uncertainty on their faces more than mirrored her own.

The third bee, who had been urging the explorer to press on into the tunnel, now lifted abruptly and without comment, to rejoin the group high overhead as it began wheeling round on a course for the hive.

“She knew the risks,” the spokesbee pointed out. “She was warned against entering the tunnel - you yourself advised against it. She’s the instigator of her own misfortune. There’s nothing more to be done now except head back.”

The spokesbee dipped away over the short grass before rising in a slow climb, immediately followed by the fourth bee.

Only two bees remained at the mouth of the tunnel now, torn between embryonic notions of loyalty and their instinct for self preservation. The trapped bee cried out again, jolting their sense of urgency.

“They’re right,” a fifth bee concluded. “She should never have gone in alone like that. Now it’s too late, we’ll have to leave her, we’re losing the light.”

“No!” the second bee insisted obstinately.

“What else can we do? The sun has almost gone, it’ll be darker than ever in there now. We’ll be blind.”

“We can range on sound using our antennae.”

“The nocturnal predators have night vision. We’ll be totally outclassed.”

“We don’t know yet that it’s a predator. She might simply be trapped - caught up in something.”

“Then why doesn’t she communicate that information calmly? Why did she scream like that? We can come back tomorrow morning when the sun is low in the east, maybe shining into the tunnel entrance. I’d be willing to take a chance with the sun at my back.”

“Tomorrow will be too late for her,” the second bee decided gravely.

“It’s already too late,” the fifth bee pronounced, with a profound sense of fatalism. “It was too late the moment she followed her ego into the darkness. That’s when her summer ended.”

The youthful second bee shuddered at the thought of a summer ending so soon, barely before it had begun.

“Let’s go! If we lose any more light we’ll never get back,” the fifth bee urged, rising higher in the air in accordance with her own pragmatic instruction.

The cautious bee reluctantly followed, taking up station on her wing as they climbed in search of the larger group, now no more than a smudge against the red sky.

Both bees looked back, hesitating even as they departed; their forlorn trailing gazes hoping for some miracle of divine guidance or intervention before the bonding tether stretched to breaking point, releasing them from their responsibility as witnesses, leaving only the guilt trip home to bear.

The second bee seemed most reluctant to break that bond, and began trailing behind the wing of her companion. The sun was indeed setting and the urge to seek shelter was strong. At night, it was said that giant predators swept the

skies for prey like angels of death. Being caught in the open air at night, without senses to navigate by, was unthinkable. Though for the second bee, not comparable with the horror that followed.

The last pair of honeybees did not retire alone. There followed from the pipe a final scream - a sustained cry; not of agony or abject terror, but of hopeless abandonment and despair; marking the end of a summer in the dark abyss where the sun-god would never smile.

It sang up to the remaining pair; a spiritual bequest ascending to ride home with them on the last few lightbeams of the day; and found its mark in the conscience of one, arresting her departure.

“What are you waiting for?” the exasperated leading bee called back. “We’re barely going to make it as it is.”

The dallying bee made no reply.

“It’ll be the end of your summer too,” she warned, then decided to waste no more time. She sped off to join the rest of the group who were filtering into the hive as the sun dipped below the horizon.

The trailing bee watched her former companions grow smaller in the distance, until she too found herself alone in the darkening sky, making it difficult for her to navigate or even pick out landmarks on the ground.

A dizzy sense of panic began to stir within her at the prospect of being lost in this suffocating darkness. Yet something else, an innate sense of loyalty, transcended the primary instinct of self preservation and held her fast; effectively committing the bee to a further, and even more daunting, course of action; the thought of which stretched her taut nerve and taxed her courage beyond anything previously imagined in a boisterous, but cloistered, lifestyle.

She swooped down to the entrance of the tunnel and called to the other bee, listening for any reply which might indicate the nature of her plight. She was answered by a

quiet, garbled whisper; confirming that a flicker of life still burned in the darkness. Battening down the insubordinate fear which threatened to take control of her wings, the bee eased forward and was swallowed by the gloom.

It seemed a hopeless task, she was completely blinded by the lack of light. Nevertheless, she advanced on trembling wings; slowly and cautiously; guided by the erratic breathing of a peer whose previous daring now seemed reckless and stupid. Spectacular deeds high in the sky were one thing, but this was quite another. What sort of madness, or ambition, had possessed the other bee to push so far into this claustrophobic deathtrap? The anger she felt almost compensated for her fear.

The last intelligible words of the explorer had spoken of the acoustics of the tunnel and a light at the far end. As the second bee moved further into the waveguide, she began to hear the music of the tunnel, generated by the vibrations of her wings echoing off the curved walls. What should have been random noise became eerily symphonic; an overture to her odyssey.

She knew there would still be some red light low on the western horizon and strained to see ahead; hoping to be blessed with a glimmer, or any form of elucidation that might let her know what she was advancing into. Without vision, she could do little more than hover at the frontier of twilight and darkness until her eyes began to adjust and appreciate the few wandering photons available for capture. She waited for a short while before probing further into the forbidding space.

Ranging by the passive sounds of distress frayed her nerves and tormented her imagination, fanning those flames of panic that demanded instant retreat. What desperate calamity could possibly make a honeybee, any honeybee, never mind this brave individual, sob so pitifully? In honesty, she did not want to know. It wasn't too late to turn

around; she'd come this far, further than any other honeybee save the one ahead. It was simply too dark to do anything; too dark to see; and soon it would be too dark to find the hive.

As common sense wrestled with her conscience, the slow momentum of the advance continued without arrest. Her eyes had barely begun to adjust when she saw something glowing ahead - a glimmer of hope, a silvery light at the end of the tunnel - the window the other bee had flown through.

The bee felt her hackles rise. This was no window to the sun-god. How could it be? The world outside would be cloaked by dusk. This was a false light to beguile foolish infidels. An iconic vision began to materialise; an evil apparition from a nightmare faintly illuminated by the eerie glow. A web that seemed to bioluminesce.

Despite her fervid imagination, there was nothing that could have prepared her, even in the censorious gloom, for the looming image of a honeybee suspended in the air, writhing and struggling for her life. The once proud, finely-shaped wings were spread out as if in flight, but unnaturally crumpled and still. The sleek body heaved and convulsed; choking and foaming at the mouth from some undiagnosed affliction; whilst limbs clawed in panic at the ethereal deathtrap. The victim merely aggravated the wiry entanglement with each bucking twist and turn.

The cause of the affliction could be located on the bee's flank - twin bite marks from a pair of fangs. Nearby, a diminutive black spider seemed to defy gravity as it waited patiently for its larger victim to tire before beginning its grisly work; its expression one of gloating at the new arrival. Eight beady red eyes tracked the second honeybee as she hovered near her trapped comrade.

At close proximity, the web became entirely visible, generating its own ethereal light to cast a deadly spell. Soft, shimmering strands carried tantalising waves of silver,

crimson, and verdure in an elemental dance before her enraptured eyes; teasing like sweet cherry blossom in a gentle breeze; beckoning her to fly into the mesh and caress the exotic radiance with her wings; though this attraction was infinitely darker and more forbidding than any gaudy experience of the garden, piercing the deepest recesses of the conscious mind to appease with fascination the repulsion there.

The second bee snatched her eyes away from the spell-binding image. It was only the presence of her trapped compatriot that saved her - by revealing the true function of the hypnotic web.

“Stop struggling!” she ordered the trapped honeybee, forcing herself to ignore the beguiling allure of the coruscating web. Then her tone softened. “Save your strength - struggling won’t help.”

The other bee nodded, calmed by her presence. “I thought you had gone,” she gasped, incredulous and almost joyful to see another honeybee. “Where are the others?”

The new arrival heard but didn’t answer, pretending to concentrate on the spider, which had begun to advance again to claim another victim. The second bee began pumping the permutations through her brain, forcing aside the obstructive mental blocks induced by fear as she searched for a solution to an intractable problem.

There was no obvious survivable solution for them both, she quickly realised, dismayed by her own damning conclusion. Only death for at least one. The web was designed to ensure that. She considered ramming the other bee in the hope of puncturing the web and freeing them both, but she had no idea of the tensile strength of the silk strands or the power of its adhesive. It would be difficult to build up speed in the dark tunnel and she lacked the courage to make such a suicidal charge.

Sufficient lucidity prevailed over the victim to read the

pessimistic prognosis in the mind of her would-be saviour. The situation was clear now to the trapped bee. They were alone. The intended rescuer waited for her to break down again in despair, but curiously she didn't, as if companionship imposed the restraints of etiquette, even in death.

"Get out of here and save yourself, there's nothing more you can do," the victim rasped valiantly.

There was no time for an answer. The spider charged across the web to prevent them conferring and the second bee interposed herself between the victim and the predator, ready to engage with her sting. The spider was surprised at first and halted, backing away from the threat of impalement on the sharp point; then advanced slowly to fight out a patient duel with all the advantages on its side, taking no chances as it cautiously timed a series of probing lunges to snap with its jaws; all the while edging closer to the trapped bee.

Adrenalin fired the desperate bee as she fought to maintain a protective station over her associate, knowing that survival hung on the slender reserves of her strength. Thrusts with her sting were hampered by the proximity of the web and the restricted space of the tunnel prevented manoeuvre.

The slightest error of judgement with regard to the beautiful, deadly gossamer net would spell immediate disaster with first one wing, and then the other, hung-up on the wire. The spider reared and slashed the air with poison-tipped fangs, aiming for the soft, exposed underbelly of the flyer.

Using the extra dimension of flight, the bee passed over her web-bound opponent to attack from behind; targeting a known weak spot - the top of the spider's head, where a bee sting might penetrate the thin skull and pierce the brain without its barbs becoming lodged. A strike there would be instantly fatal to such a small creature.

The spider leapt round, away from the enmeshed victim, to guard against attack from the rear, and was gradually lured away. The bee had discovered an effective tactic, but for how long could she sustain it? She was tiring fast in hover mode and needed to incapacitate the spider quickly.

She began lunging in earnest at the spider's head, in doing so exposing her abdomen; but each time penetrating further into the spider's guard; reaching closer to the target, all the while praying for the decisive hit needed to eliminate the foe; leaving her free to concentrate on the equally daunting problem of extricating the entangled bee.

The spider recognised the significance of the ploy and countered by slashing again and again at the airborne opponent, knowing that a single strike by either of them would be decisive.

A sharp tip found its mark, halting the contest. Not the straight point of a rapier, but that of a curved tapering scimitar. The fang had bested the sting in the race to puncture flesh. In that instant, the bee was struck down, not by the force or venom of the blow but by despair. The entangled bee, whom she had sought to protect, was now doomed. The barbed fang had caught like a fishhook and the enraged bee tore away, feeling blood from the wound spilling out onto her flank.

An impulse cried "Do it! Do it now!" but the bee resisted the urge to ram the spider in a last suicidal bid for revenge. The tenacious instinct for self preservation was still very strong despite the wound. The spider though, was uncertain of her intention, and prudently raced for cover in the shadows until the venom could take effect, giving a moment's respite to the bees.

The failed rescuer expected to see cruel pain and condemnation in the expression that she had to face now; but the trapped bee strained to smile, as if to grant absolution for the failure.

“You didn’t have to come back,” she gasped, choked by the strands of silken wire which had enveloped her throat. “Leave here while you still can.”

The second bee hesitated. The paralysing effects of the poison were beginning to take effect, stiffening joints and muscles, but she still couldn’t bring herself to desert the victim. Soon it would be too late. If she collapsed in the tunnel and paralysis set in; she, too, would be at the mercy of the spider.

“Go on, go now! You’ve done all you can!” the trapped bee exhorted gallantly.

The second bee heeded the pragmatic advice and began to move away, but then halted.

“I can’t do this,” she suddenly professed, baulking at the insidious dilemma. “I can’t leave you here, I won’t leave you here, not like this.”

“There’s nothing more you can do,” the other bee rasped, eyelids closing as she faded, unable to breath on the crucifying web.

“Not like this,” the second bee iterated desperately, returning to the side of her stricken companion and pressing against a body that was growing cold as its life drained away. “The summer isn’t over yet for either of us,” she whispered. “Soon the sun will be rising over the garden again. The flowers will awake to greet the dawn; their colours bright and vivid, their perfume sweeter than ever; just waiting for you to swoop over them, to feel their warm glow and the soft touch of their petals beneath your wings. But first we must leave here together. You must come with me, back to the garden, do you understand?”

The eyelids flickered, and the lips of the dying bee moved almost silently in a weak enunciation. “I’m ready - take me with you.”

The second bee nodded, feeling a numbness in her brain as she began the long slow retreat from the moribund scene;

backing away to let the gloom swallow the crucified bee; interring the mortal remains in this sepulchre forever. In retreat, she braced herself for the scream that would reverberate along the tunnel to assail the defiler and reclaim the soul she was carrying from the depths of the underworld. But there was only the quiet hum of her own wings.

The second bee flew on blindly to escape the terrible resonance that would scythe through her head, confirming that the butchery had begun. Psychedelic terror, prompted by the toxins in her blood, drove her against the smooth walls concealed by the darkest of shadows in a series of jarring collisions before she spilled out into the dubious welcome of a moonlit night.

She hovered for a moment over the tunnel mouth as best she could, drifting without control, wondering why there had been no final screams or cries, merely a surreal silence. Or had there? In her panic, she could have blocked them out. No, she decided with some relief, the other bee had left her body before the end.

The surviving bee allowed herself to be carried away from the tunnel on failing wings. Weak and disorientated, she landed heavily on a flat, gently sloping rock by the pond and crawled to the water's edge; there licking its surface to soothe her cracked mouth and ease the dehydration caused by exertion and fear. The moon rose as night developed, casting an eerie light over the still, silent garden. Too tired to move, she looked into the water, and saw not the reflection of her own face but that of the other bee.

The blood in her wound had clotted, stemming the flow; though the torn muscle used to flex her abdomen ached mercilessly. A more serious threat came from the poison which had spread throughout her system, and was now causing violent convulsions and vomiting.

She became feverish and delirious and in her sleep returned to the tunnel to stand by her still living companion.

This time she charged into the trapped bee before the spider could reach them. Miraculously, the web gave way and they both dropped to the curving floor. They quickly wrestled free of the sticky strands and the rescuer, able to maintain flight, covered the retreat of the other bee whose wings were still wrapped in the web strands. The spider followed to the edge of the tunnel, its angry eyes glowing in the dark as it stalked them; but it was held at bay by the hovering bee whose sting remained poised like a divine sword to guard the pair until they were clear. The spider remained in the tunnel, unwilling to venture out where the second bee had freedom to manoeuvre, climb, and strafe with her sting. They rested for the night undisturbed, preening each other to remove the vile adhesive from the web. By morning, they were both flying again and set course for the hive; deliriously happy to be safe, alive and going home. But on return, they were greeted with hostility and suspicion by the swarm, which gathered round them in a great wave. The survivors didn't understand at first, then they realised they were different now. Marked by fate, changed by the experience. They weren't supposed to come back; they were anarchic - a threat to the natural order of things. The swarm closed in ...

The honeybee woke with a scream. Fortunately, the dose of poison she had received had been insufficient to kill. It was dawn and light from the early morning sun was banishing the last legions of night from the garden.

Unfortunately, she found herself in the water. She tried to rationalise the situation and realised that she must have wandered down the rock face in her sleep. The edge of the pond was close by, but as she struggled she could make no headway against the surface tension which seemed to hold her fast.

Nearby, the fish were rising; pulling objects from the surface down into their watery domain. The bee closed her eyes and stopped struggling as she waited for them to bite

off her legs and wings before sucking her limbless body down into the abyss to sleep in an unknown grave.

A shadow fell over the water and she felt something solid beneath her abdomen that gave purchase to her legs rather than pull her down. She opened her eyes to see the dark silhouette of a crouching tall-spirit blocking out the rising sun. Beneath her, a tree twig was rising as if on a stiff breeze and she was lifted from the pond water and placed on the rock face. The tall-spirit rose up and left.

Lying exposed on the rock beneath the rising sun, the honeybee dried out, then instinctively crawled into a crevice and lay there all day and the following night. She slept fitfully; this time enveloped by a peaceful, healing oblivion. The following day, she felt strong enough to fly back and rejoin the swarm.

The cautionary dream was forgotten, but not the compassionate intervention of the tall-spirit, as she slipped quietly back amongst the other bees, as if returning from a routine patrol. A few eyed her suspiciously, though no one commented or inquired into what had happened. That surprised her, though in a sense she was grateful for it. The harrowing memories were receding into the murky depths of the past and she had no wish to resurrect them. Their place was not with the living. And what was her place now? Something was different about her which she didn't yet understand. Something within her had changed, and with it her outward personality.

Vague suspicions began developing into paranoia. Doubts began to plague her about everything and everyone, not least herself, and this manifested itself in increasingly nonconformist behaviour. The shock that followed was subtle in form, but devastating in effect. She found it increasingly difficult to function in the complex society of the swarm. The accepted norms of etiquette, wit, and acumen needed to serve in the highly-organised machine began to desert her.

For a while, she wanted only to be alone with her thoughts; dangerously questioning the society to which she belonged and on which she was so acutely dependent, as if possessed by an urge to bring about its, and her own, destruction. Her erratic flying and introspective moods were manifestly evident to her peers. Not that she was greatly concerned, she didn't even want to be a honeybee any more. She wanted to be something else, in a place far removed from the garden; something less flawed and restricted in outlook; with greater compassion and a more enlightened view of existence; something that wouldn't leave her own kind to die.

But even though she wanted no part of a society which had so casually left the tunnel bee to her fate, what other society could she join? What else could she be except a honeybee? She retained no empathy for either the bees or the flowers, avoiding both as much as possible, until she realised that she needed something more than just the nectar from the flowers; some mystic quality perceived in them and denied her, which perhaps they didn't have to give. But by then, the flowers she had eschewed for so long were turning away from her.

10

The wildflower awoke with the dawn, petals opening to greet the azure sky, only to be struck by the realisation that the honeybee had gone. Concerned for her welfare, and keenly aware of her vulnerability when alone on the ground in a hostile, alien environment; the flower searched about, hoping to catch sight of the wayward cripple who indulged in amusing flattery. But this search was in vain. It occurred to the flower, with a sad twinge of regret, that she may not come back. Recalling their last conversation; wondering if perhaps the strident, devious, prodding and probing had driven her away; the wildflower felt sad at the idea of never seeing her again. She couldn't fly, it was true, and she was more than a little bit mad; but she was quite appealing, in an eccentric sort of way.

The fiery disc cleared the horizon, passing through the spectrum of orange to yellow to brilliant white, blinding the wildflower with the tears of morning.

The wildflower fixed on to its revitalising heart, feeling its probing rays clearing out the cobwebs of the night and burning off the dewy sense of loss. The faint hum of approaching wings barely registered - an unfamiliar signature; too low in pitch to be Barak, doubtless an early flyer in search of sustenance.

Would they notice and pause to solicit nectar or simply pass overhead, oblivious to the wildflower's secluded existence or in search of other things. The latter course of action would not greatly perturb the wildflower at this particular

time. The unannounced departure of the honeybee was a gnawing source of irritation; a hollow sense of loss, almost like a mild state of chilling grief that persisted even beneath the warming stimulant of the sun's radiation. The wildflower had grown accustomed to the presence of the honeybee and the mood for playing host to other flyers had yet to return.

The vibrant hum grew stronger with approach, and with it the wildflower became more disaffected. Being unable to see the source, the reason for which soon became apparent, caused further irritation. The flyer was coming directly out of the sun.

The wildflower waited until the variation in pitch had ceased, indicating that the target was stationary. All that could be discerned was a dark silhouette hovering against the blinding backdrop. Having to squint through watery eyes simply added to an irascible demeanour.

"What do you want?" The wildflower asked, in a curt tone designed to discourage any attempt at flirting.

"A flower," the stranger remarked casually.

"There are plenty just over that hummock."

"Have you seen them?" the stranger queried.

"Of course not!" the wildflower retorted sharply.

"Then how do you know they are there?"

"I'm reliably informed."

"By a flyer?"

"Is that any of your business?"

"No, I suppose not," the stranger conceded. "Maybe I should go, you don't seem very happy today."

"Please do," the wildflower urged.

"But tell me first, is it me, or have I just come at a bad time?"

"Both," the wildflower replied, blinking irritably.

The flyer moved a fraction and the flower waited to catch sight of the stranger as she departed, but then she halted and moved back into the sun again.

“Can you tell me what’s wrong? I’d be happy to listen.”

“I’m waiting for someone else,” the flower chided, angered by the persistence. “There’s no reason for you to stay.”

“You’re probably right. No reason at all, except the one that brought me here.”

“Come back tomorrow, you may find me more receptive then. By the way, I don’t like staring into the sun.”

“I was marked by an encounter with a spider.”

The wildflower drew breath. “I’m sorry, are you badly scarred?”

“No, the wounds have healed quite well.”

“Then why do you hide yourself?”

“Habit, I suppose. There are other scars that take longer to heal.”

“I don’t understand?”

“Why would a wilderness flower hide a grounded honeybee from a predator?”

“Who are you? What do you want?” the flower demanded to know, perceiving blackmail from a perfidious flyer who knew too much. There was something incongruous, and yet familiar, about the voice. The flower studied the silhouette. Too big to be a hoverfly, more likely a bee - another honeybee?

“Please don’t be angry,” the honeybee urged. “It’s such a beautiful morning - we’re given so few to appreciate. I can’t imagine why anyone would want to be angry on a morning like this.”

With slow deliberation she descended into the flower; the down draught of her wings fanning the welcoming petals.

“Neither can I,” the wildflower whispered in her ear. “But maybe we just lack imagination.”

11

Mid-morning. The hoverfly flew leisurely at shrub top height, on course to rejoin the wildflower. He expected to find the honeybee still there, perhaps for some time to come. Without flight, she was entirely dependent on the good nature of the flower and charitable motives that baffled the hoverfly. Many things about the flower were simply beyond his comprehension. Benevolence seemed admirable so long as the wildflower realised that the honeybee would be back amongst her sunflowers the moment her wings regained their rhythm. Rivalry among the flyers was boisterous and competitive; but jealousy was anathema to them. The hoverfly was extremely fond of the wildflower, more so than any other, but with so many to visit there simply wasn't time to be over attentive to any single one. In places where perfect competition existed, such as the garden; the arrangement worked equally well for the flowers, courted by a large number of flyers.

The hoverfly thought the wildflower as attractive and congenial as any other in the wilderness, but also knew the flower was unfortunately placed in a secluded position, reducing the number of flyers that might otherwise drop by. Hence the wildflower's fondness for the attention of the honeybee. But even if the honeybee could fly, the hoverfly would not perceive her as a threat unless she actually sought to deny him access to the flower - as happened in the garden, where the honeybees laid exclusive claim to all the sunflowers.

Unlike the honeybee, the hoverfly knew his place and purpose well, and that which he didn't understand didn't bother him a great deal. On the whole, he found the idea of a honeybee who was afraid to fly amusing; though it was also annoying to think of all the opportunities that she was denying herself. In the hoverfly's mind, if he were a honeybee, he'd be in the garden every day; frolicking with the sunflowers and oblivious to the supposed shortcomings of the garden utopia, whatever they may be.

Closing on the familiar position, the hoverfly put into a shallow approach dive. As he drew nearer, it became clear that another flyer was flirting round the flower; circling and performing modest aerobatics. The shape and colour were those of a honeybee. It seemed unlikely that another bee should concern herself with the wildflower so soon. Maybe a friend of HB's from the garden. Drawing closer, the hoverfly recognised the distinctive markings and made a cheeky landing on the obliging back of the honeybee for a fleeting second before taking off again.

"You've done it, you're flying again!" the hoverfly cheered aloud.

"Obviously!" the acerbic flower groaned.

"I knew you could do it," the hoverfly enthused. "The ground's no place for a flyer. How do you feel?"

"Fine," a somewhat reserved honeybee replied.

"Fit enough to prove a point?"

The honeybee grinned. She was still physically well below par, but mentally she was buzzing with some of the old competitive garden spirit and so answered the challenge with a challenge of her own. "Let's see what you've got."

The hoverfly bowed his head slightly then shot up into the air in a near vertical climb. The honeybee followed, weakened by her ordeal and in any case heavier than the hoverfly, she could not match the rate of ascent at low altitude; so the fleeting hoverfly channelled his energy into a helix, allowing

the other flyer to keep up.

The wildflower watched from the ground, tracking the diminishing specs until they were finally lost in the azure sky. They reappeared a short time later, hurtling towards the ground with wings swept back. Now the honeybee was gaining on her lighter adversary and was seen to overhaul the hoverfly before they disappeared beneath the horizon of the observer. Acoustic shadow deprived the wildflower of the reassuring hum of their wings and with breath on hold, the wildflower began to fear a mishap had resulted from their enthusiasm. Seconds past, stretched by tension and anticipation, and the flower began to curse their foolish high spirits while peering over the tops of the grasses, wondering if they had buried themselves in the ground.

“What do you see up there?” a high pitched voice called out from *terra firma*. Zeb had poked his head out of a hole and latched on to the pensive fix of the flower on the horizon.

“The honeybee is flying again,” the flower informed him excitedly. “She’s up there now with Barak.”

“That’s great news, I knew you’d find a way!”

“Yes, but I think they’ve decided to celebrate by killing themselves.”

It seemed an interminable wait before the hoverfly reappeared over a hummock; silent at first in the distance before closing rapidly on a curving arc with such speed that the humming signature of his wings seemed to lag seconds behind. Then they spotted the honeybee coming in from a different angle, just as low but even faster, on a course to intercept. The flower watched the exhilarating sight with baited breath. A collision at such speed would be disastrous, yet the honeybee seemed determined to buzz the hoverfly on passing. She crossed the dogleg and an impact seemed inevitable - until the highly manoeuvrable hoverfly viffed to one side and the hurtling bee passed harmlessly through the

vacated airspace.

The hoverfly slowed, laughing as he caught his breath, and flew over to the watching flower. The honeybee pulled round in a wide, lazy turn and came to rest on the ground nearby.

“That’s a neat trick,” the honeybee noted. “How about teaching it to me?”

“It’s simple, you just angle down and twist.”

“Simple if you’re a hoverfly,” the bee opined sardonically.

“We’re not all so supple.”

“I think honeybees can do it too, if they try.”

“Alright, let’s see you do it again,” the honeybee urged.

12

Sunset on the fourth day. Zeb had retired to his burrow and Barak had departed for another flower, leaving them alone together again. Learning from the hoverfly, the unfit honeybee had overexerted herself on her first day back in the air and though she had acquired some new flying skills, she was now stiff with strain and fatigue.

“You’re very quiet tonight,” the wildflower noted.

“I’m tired.”

“How do you feel?”

“I just told you,” the honeybee snapped, but then immediately realised that she had no cause, certainly no right, to be irritable with the flower. “Sorry, being able to fly again is great, but I don’t feel very much like talking about it. All I want to do is go to sleep.”

“You’ll be fine tomorrow.”

The honeybee closed her eyes and thought out loud in spite of her professed weariness. “What’s the plan now?”

“Plan?” the wildflower queried.

“I feel as if I’m part of something without seeing the whole picture.”

“Doesn’t everyone get those feelings from time to time?”

“Do they?”

“Well I do. And you obviously do. We can’t be the only ones.”

“It’s not the sort of thing we usually discuss in the garden.”

“So you keep saying. Does anyone ever discuss anything

in the garden that doesn't involve flying and making honey?"

"Flying and making honey are very important to us - they sustain our life cycle," she explained, sounding like a honeybee fresh from the hive.

"But there are other things to life."

"You mean like intrigue and conspiracy?"

"Those are ugly words."

"You've been very kind to me. You, Naph, Zeb, and Barak. Rescue, hospitality, analysis - it all adds up to quite a substantial bill."

The wildflower was deathly silent for a few moments, as if quietly seething at the lack of grace on the part of the guest; but then gave an unexpected answer. "We want you to help us challenge Sisera's right to rule this territory."

The eyes of the weary honeybee opened wide and she smiled inwardly at this confirmation that her assessment had been correct and not simply imagined.

"How?" she posed. "Only the predators possess the power to depose him, and I get the impression that they're steadfastly loyal to his ideology - and they'll back his leadership because they fear an invasion by the swarm."

"We don't just want him deposed, we want him dead."

"You want me to help you kill Sisera?"

"Yes," the flower confirmed.

The wheels of the honeybee's brain began to whirr with imponderables. "Honeybees are not offensive killers," she replied curtly, as if affronted by the suggestion.

"Neither are flowers - unless they're predators. But you have killed before, haven't you?"

"I killed an ant once in self-defence," she confessed, unburdening herself of the crime. "A ground spider like Sisera would make short work of any honeybee who got within range of his fangs."

"But a strike force from the swarm could do it," the wildflower speculated.

“Only if Sisera entered the garden. The swarm is a defensive entity, charged with protecting the hive and the garden. Why should it deploy in the wilderness? It never has in the past.”

“Sisera is a monster who must be destroyed.”

“What right have I got to judge good and evil out here?”

“This is my homeland,” the wildflower reminded her. “You said Sisera would not be allowed entry into the garden, but you tolerate his evil in the wilderness.”

“It’s a moot point. I can’t kill Sisera by myself, and the swarm won’t attack anything outside the garden. I’ll never forget what you did for me, but you ask the impossible. Did you know honeybees have barbed stings? We can only harpoon a large creature like Sisera once, then we pull away and die. A great many bees would have to sacrifice their stings in an operation against a ground spider.”

“I didn’t know that,” the wildflower admitted, with some embarrassment. “Can’t you strafe him? That’s what Barak would do if he had a sting.”

“I don’t know,” the honeybee murmured, mulling over the possibility of such an attack. “We don’t practice strafing much, it’s a tactic used for conquest; and it would take dozens of strafes to mortally wound a big spider.”

“When are you returning to the garden?” the flower asked abruptly.

“Tomorrow.”

The honeybee expected to be pressed further into rousing the swarm under the banner of the wildflower, but the devious flower took on a more a subtle tack and made a generous offer. “You can stay here as long as you like. You’re no longer in any great danger now that you can fly again, so long as you keep your wits about you. They say you should never let the spider’s eyes lock onto yours. Sisera is most dangerous for the fear his presence induces in his victims. He uses that fear to subdue before he strikes.”

“I’ll remember that; but I’m more concerned about Barak than Sisera. Doesn’t he think my remaining here might displace him in some way?”

The wildflower laughed warmly at the notion. “No one will ever displace Barak in any way, nor you. I love you both for different reasons.”

The honeybee was not used to genuine affection and inwardly blushed. “Would you really want to be a sunflower in the garden?” she asked. “I think you’d lose more than you would gain.”

“It might be fun for a day or two,” the wildflower mused.

The honeybee paused, wondering how much the wildflower really knew about her. How much she volunteered, even when lying silent and still. The pause grew into a protracted silence, descending like a curtain between them, and she assumed the flower had gone to sleep. The next question came quite unexpectedly and caught her off guard.

“What really happened in the garden to bring you out here?”

The honeybee blinked and peered through the darkness at the wildflower, wondering where to begin, and whether she even wanted to. Yes, she wanted to; but knew better than to try and communicate on such a level with a flower. “Does it matter now? The past has gone.”

“It matters to me,” the wildflower insisted. “You said you were marked by an encounter with a spider. You still have the scar on your side.”

The honeybee closed her eyes and drew an emotive breath. “Nothing happened in the garden,” she revealed. “As Zeb might say, you’re looking in the wrong place.”

“Where should I be looking?”

“A tunnel that’s too dark for anyone to see into.”

“Would you enter that place again - for me?”

The honeybee shuddered involuntarily, her body racked by a chill. There was a prophetic quality in the requests of

the flower that disturbed her. The prediction that she would fly again had come true soon after. Now the proposal was a return to the tunnel - the tomb of her half-sister - and the domain of the web spider.

A distraction caught her eye, something moving high overhead. A roaming starflower, perhaps? But starflowers didn't move, except with the passage of the night sky garden. And the parallax of this motion suggested that it was much closer to earth. She sat up and focussed on the anomaly, searching her brain for a rational explanation.

"Fireflies," the wildflower explained. "They fly by night and create their own light."

"Night flyers!" the honeybee gasped, squinting at the lights, trying to guess their height and speed. "I'm going to join them, I want to get a closer look."

"No, wait," the flower warned. "There's no moon tonight. Once up there, you won't be able to find your way back to me in the dark."

The impulsive honeybee mulled over the advice for a few seconds and was about to disregard it; but then reason took over, and she settled down again. The idea of spending another night on the ground, with Sisera on the prowl, did not appeal to her. But then the fireflies altered course and circled overhead, as if they were studying her as she was studying them. One descended to hover nearby, casting its light over the flower.

The honeybee could not resist this opportunity and rose up to hover next to the strange creature. It didn't look like an alien species of fly, more like a luminescent honeybee. As she drifted nearer, she could pick out the features on the face, and went pale with recognition at the ghost as the music of the tunnel began to play in her ear to mesmerise her.

The wildflower broke the spell with a harsh whisper, fired from the ground. "No! Not here! Go away! Go away now!"

The ghostly firefly seemed to heed the request and instantly vanished into the night. The disquieted honeybee sank back into the flower.

“She was lighting us up like a beacon,” the wildflower explained. “Sisera could be patrolling nearby.”

“I’m sorry, it was stupid of me,” the honeybee admitted, rubbing her eyes in disbelief at the illusion of having just seen a familiar face.

“Strange looking firefly,” the wildflower added. “I’ve never seen one like that before - or that colour.”

The honeybee closed her eyes and waited for the sleep of the saved to abduct her on a smooth flight to tranquil oblivion. Perhaps this anticipation proved her undoing; though more likely a natural, post-traumatic apprehension was working its way to the surface of her weary consciousness, carrying with it all the “what if?” permutations from the last few days that her analytical mind could conjure; and which were now exploding like flares to disturb the inner dusk of her slumber.

She tossed and turned, troubled by thought, drifting in and out of twilight as if it were a stormy sea and she a lost porpoise lacking sufficient ballast to achieve sanctuary in the deep. Her restless shifting interrupted the sleep of her benevolent host, who prayed silently for her mental equilibrium to return with the power of flight.

Before dawn, fear punctured the shallow enclave she had scraped in the nether world of dreams. Her bleary eyes opened on the familiar, reassuring world of the flower; yet different in some less tangible way. She felt cold, apprehensive, and trapped; her dread mounting as if it might explode into panic. A petal moved in the still air. An unnaturally driven movement on which she became fixated; feeling the fearful tremors in the weakened muscles of her legs as she tried to rise. All she could do was watch and wait and pray for the petal to remain still; each moment of

stillness a minutia of reassurance that it would not move again; that it was just a breeze, or an earth tremor, or an illusion.

But then it moved again and parted; pushed aside by a hideous, black, misshapen thing with dripping fangs, breath reeking of decaying flesh, and eight bulging red eyes; terrifying to behold at a distance, overpowering in such close proximity.

The honeybee tried to take off but her wings were heavy as lead. Her scream was drowned out by an earth shattering roar as a huge ground spider lunged forward; and with heavy, meat-grinding jaws, seized and crushed the soft, writhing body of the prey.

13

Sunrise. On the still morning air, the wildflower could hear the low drone of a flyer hovering in the distance, probably flirting with another flower on this fine morning. The wildflower fixed onto the sound, and with keen eyes picked out the speckling reflection of translucent wings; oblique solar sails batting the impinging light. The early sun rays were also searching for suitors amongst the flora, and the wildflower stretched and spread petals out in a fan to absorb the rejuvenating photons and attract any passing flyers.

The honeybee was gone, presumably leaving before the dawn to seek other flowers that might assist with the finer points of her recovery. The wildflower wondered when she would return - if ever. Honeybees were known to be capricious and the allure of the garden would likely be enough to occlude the traumatic memories of the last few days.

However, mid-morning brought the return of the wayward spirit, energised by the sun and appearing fresh and vital despite the restless night.

"You're looking very alert for someone who didn't sleep all that well," the wildflower observed, greeting her with a smile.

"Sorry about last night, I hope I didn't wake you."

"Was it a nightmare?"

"You don't miss much, do you?"

"A cry in the dark is hard to miss."

"A spider dream," the honeybee disclosed calmly.

“That’s hardly surprising after all that’s happened. You’ll probably have a few more like it before the end of the summer. Maybe it’s a good thing - confronting your fears through dreams.”

The honeybee nodded, displaying a new form of robustness in her outlook. “I think they’ve gone,” she affirmed. “I feel fine.”

The tacit communication spoke volumes which the flower imbibed with relief, and also unexpected sadness at the inevitable consequence of the honeybee’s recovery.

“What are you going to do now?”

“There’s only one sensible thing to do, what I should have been doing all this time.”

“There’s still the wilderness,” the flower motioned boldly; bravely suppressing the melancholy at the thought of losing the honeybee, but hoping it would pass fleetingly enough once she had gone.

The honeybee looked to the west, and the peaks that held up the sky. She was still drawn to them, but less powerfully now, as if a spell had been broken. First, there were other things to do. “It’ll have to wait,” she decided, with a sigh.

“Indefinitely, I suppose?”

“It’s not like you to be so cynical.”

“So now you’re just another honeybee; slave to the sunflowers; trapped in a web of conformity.”

“Don’t say that,” she pleaded. The jibe hurt, but not as much as the unwitting image it conjured in her mind.

“When are you going?”

“Before sunset.”

“Would you do something else for me?”

“If I can.”

“Would you ... If we ...” the wildflower hesitated, reconsidering the request. “Don’t wait till sunset, just go now.”

The flower turned away to the sounds of distant activity in

the air as if the honeybee were no longer there. Silence simply widened a gulf previously bridged by the needs of danger. Now that the crisis had past, the emotional bond was breaking and the bridge was about to collapse as they parted.

The honeybee thanked the flower once again. It seemed like an appropriate gesture. Words of sincerity sounded to her honeybee ear like no more than useless platitudes tripping uneasily from her honeybee tongue as she tried to say goodbye; embarrassed at what she had been, self-conscious in the presence of a flower who'd witnessed her at nadir.

She wasn't the same honeybee they had helped; that being no longer existed. But still, the emotive memories of their time together, and the intimate moments they had shared troubled her.

"I'll be back soon," she promised, knowing that she probably wouldn't, and uncomfortable with the knowledge that the wildflower also knew.

"See you then - if I'm still here," the flower responded glibly.

"What does that mean?" asked the honeybee, momentarily concerned.

"We never take anything for granted in the wilderness," the wildflower replied, eyes glazed and shiny. "That's the way of things around here."

The honeybee had never been moved by a weeping flower before. For once, the emotional display seemed almost genuine rather than contrived. She bowed her head slightly and banked away, wondering if it were possible to make the wildflower understand; wondering why she should care whether the flower understood or not, and most of all wondering why she thought the flower would be in the slightest bit interested.

Such irritating thoughts were jettisoned like unwanted

ballast as she climbed and set course for the garden and the sunflowers. The rarefied air speeded her journey and cleansed her mind so that when the great golden petals came into sight, all thoughts of the wildflower had drained away and the transformation was complete. Memories of the aerial bouts, the festival of competition, the pleasure of the prizes, came flooding back. At last free to follow her *raison d'être*, she was determined to make up for lost time; to bury all sensitivity and doubt; to play the game with a vengeance.

14

Beneath the cloak of night, a darker form prowled the earth; as if the gravity of this being seized any photon which strayed within its orbit. A ghostly preternatural shadow gliding beneath the moonless sky. Death its domain, holding illimitable dominion over all, so terrible were the acicular design of its fangs and the crushing power of its jaws. A perfect killing machine evolved for this sole purpose, through stealth and sudden ambush, or a swift chase on powerful legs; running prey to ground or leaping up to snatch it from the air before rending it limb from limb. The ferocity of the spider was nonpareil, and those of the wilderness who dwelt in its midst knew it to be devoid of all mercy or compassion.

Under the cover of darkness, it moved silently towards an unsuspecting victim. An unusual victim, since the spider was a devout carnivore; and a helpless victim, unable to run even as the first jagged hairs on its muscular legs pricked a sensitive peduncle.

Disturbed from sleep, the wildflower realised what was happening and panicked; twisting and turning in an effort to throw the eight legged perpetrator of the assault; but the beast tightened its grip and continued clawing its way up the smooth, slender stem; each assertive stroke defying the will of the victim whose desperate struggles to resist the annexation were all in vain.

The spider continued to ascend until pressing against the underside of the petals, and then began swaying violently on

the inverted pendulum, as if trying to break the vascular stalk which supplied life to the flower.

The victim screamed in mortal terror; enough for the spider to abruptly cease the torment, for now. He wasn't ready to snap the stalk just yet, he wanted this wildflower alive for interrogation.

The spider roughly thrust his massive head through the decorative fringe into the face of the wildflower. His glare was cold, hideous and indifferent. All eight eyes, like red spotlights, boring focussed beams into the captive. Windows into a black soul where wretched prisoners might expect little mercy, even after such a swift conquest. Afraid, yet still defiant, the flower glowered back at the vile intruder.

The spider made no move in response; but merely continued squatting like an ugly, malignant growth within the flower; his attention fixed unnervingly on the host-victim as if his presence might, with familiarity, be overlooked, then reaffirmed to sap the will of the frightened hostage.

"What do you want?" asked the wildflower, with a voice cracked by the strain of fear.

The question failed to solicit a response. Sisera maintained his pose with no communication other than the tacit bearing of his menace, fraying the flower's nerve and wearing down any resistance.

Fearful of the spider's wrath, the wildflower observed an extended spell of silence; but the crushing burden of captivity, bearing down on a defiant and impetuous will, drove the flower to speak out again.

"What is it you want? There's nothing for you here. Just nectar and pollen. You don't drink nectar, you don't eat pollen. What do you want from me? Are you just going to sit there and gloat?"

Behind the bravado was a terrified wildflower, knowing perfectly well why the spider had come, though not yet aware of his full knowledge or intention - whether he meant

to harm or merely to intimidate - but knowing his power and his taste for mutilation and death. Being a flower would count for nothing in his psychopathic mind. The wildflower realised now the wisdom of Zeb and the hoverfly, and was afflicted by the corrosion of fear.

The monstrous visage remained unchanged and the flower wondered if the spider were capable of expression. The foul smelling behemoth continued to regard the unwilling host with the same chilling aspect which must have confronted thousands of other victims in their final moments before he snuffed out their lives.

The flower suddenly felt a chilling solidarity with those flyers and ground-dwellers; a brief psychic link with the dead, whose ghostly skulls seem to float around the spider's aura like captive souls crying out for release: including the flyers the wildflower had once known and loved who had fallen prey to this thing, under whose tyranny they all existed without exception.

But not all flowers; not the sunflowers of the garden, protected by the honeybees, the wildflower realised, with sadness and pride; as if a bond existed with those distant, haughty siblings of whom so much had been said.

The wildflower breathed deeply and cursed the beast; irrationally hoping that provocation would force his hand to whatever action he intended and end the ordeal of waiting.

"Damnation awaits you for your crimes - a dark pit in the earth. If I were a flyer, if I had a sting, if I were a ..." the flower fell silent to stem the revelation.

"A honeybee?" the spider suggested; a cold, callous smile breaking across his hideous features.

With eyes closed, the flower drifted to escape; thoughts floating up amongst the stars, seeking out the garden of the night; but the words of the omniscient inquisitor followed to drag the wildflower back down to earth to be pummelled by the inevitable questions.

“What did you discuss on those nights together beneath the starry sky? Was she enchanted by your sweet perfume and the soft sound of your voice? Honeybees rarely sleep with their flowers; you must have found that experience quite exhilarating. Is that why you helped her?”

“Helped who?” the wildflower asked calmly; wilful and uncooperative.

The spider shifted aspect, moving ever so slightly, then moving back; his gaze wandering, searching for damning clues of a former presence.

“There’s no need for dissembling, we know she was here. Such indiscretions do not go unnoticed for long among the chattering classes.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the wildflower answered nervously, conscious of being lulled by the urbane tone of the interrogator.

Sisera shook his massive head, slowly and deliberately, as if gravely disappointed. “You know the law. All grounded flyers are mine. The law is very clear on this issue, and it is important that we all obey the law.”

“Important to you, you mean. The law is there to serve your interests.”

“... important to us all - and you have broken our law.”

“But I didn’t ...”

The spider pressed a hairy digit across the lips of the flower to discourage further comment. “No need to perjure yourself. Just tell me where she is and perhaps we can overlook your foolishness.”

The flower was confronted by a myriad of cold, glaring eyes; while digging deep to find the courage of defiance.

“Why do you hold me in such contempt?” queried the spider, feigning bewilderment. “We are not natural enemies. We feed on those who would feed on you. But for the work of the predators, the plant life around here would be devoured by herbivores within a few summers and there

would be no more flowers.”

“The flyers are not herbivores. They take nothing more than our nectar.”

“I’m not talking about the virtuoso hoverflies who dance solo on your petals,” the spider insisted. “But the honeybees are different. They have developed an advanced society and have become a powerful superorganism based on homogeneity, conformity, social cooperation, and sustenance from the sun. Out here, life depends on a foodchain with us at the top and you at the bottom. Can’t you see how dangerous a threat their quasi-utopian ideas pose to the delicate balance of our mixed ecology?”

“You don’t just kill to survive. You do it because you enjoy it!” the wildflower cried.

“We enjoy the hunt, and since the cull is necessary, I see no problem with that.”

“Tis an evil thing.”

The spider simply laughed at the charge. “Come now, what is evil? Simply an abstract term for those notions that we find personally disagreeable. I am a solitary being and have no need, no craving, for the love and approval you demand from your flyers and your ground-dwelling friends. I need only the nourishing sustenance of blood, and a little excitement from the hunt and the kill. Does that make me evil?”

The flower nodded slowly to reaffirm this belief. “Taking a life is evil.”

The menacing eyes of the spider lit up and shifted closer to the flower’s face. The wildflower was intimidated by their power and looked away in disgust.

“Then taking my life would also be evil; though you would kill me if you were able to, would you not?”

A flash of venom in the wildflower’s eyes answered affirmatively.

The spider roared with laughter. “We thought as much

when we realised you were the one harbouring the honeybee. Why? I wondered. Why take the risk for such a vain, facile, irritating, egocentric, pain-in-the-butt type of flyer? Unless the honeybee could be put to some use. You've got courage and guile, we admire those qualities in any creature. Well, here I am. Where is she? This brave honeybee of yours who can rid the world of evil with her sting?"

"I didn't do it for ideology or ambition. I'd do the same for any grounded flyer, and I'd do it again," the wildflower answered quietly, no longer trembling but coldly defiant. "My pleasure comes from saving life not taking it."

The spider suddenly reared up high over the captive. Fangs drooping like daggers, poised to unleash the wrath of hell; hot, stinking breath, like putrid jets of steam billowing from demonic jaws, striking the delicately shaded eyelids of the flower.

"Where is she?"

"You're too late. She's gone."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

The spider relaxed his threatening posture and lowered his voice; smiling compassionately to encourage a cooperative response.

"Tell me where she is and we might be able to overlook your foolishness. After all, it wasn't really your fault, we understand that. All flowers have irrational moods and silly ideas from time to time. It's in their nature. The honeybees have always been notorious for seducing their victims with their persuasive charm. That's why they're so dangerous to our social order. Why else would we prey on them so vociferously when they stray from the garden?"

The wildflower regarded such sophistry with utter contempt. However, since the honeybee was now safe, it seemed sensible to accept whatever terms the spider was willing to offer.

“She’s back in the garden where she belongs,” the flower divulged, boldly cautious with the announcement as if party to a vicarious triumph.

“When did she go?” the spider demanded to know, surprised by the candid admission and the spirited tone.

“Earlier today - you just missed her.”

“That isn’t possible!” the spider growled, “I’ve been sweeping this area all day and would have picked up her trail.”

“She’s flying again,” the wildflower taunted gleefully, fresh courage inspired by the recent memory and the gift of a single shot with which to wound the nightmonster.

“Flying? How? Grounded bees don’t fly again. Not after four nights. Four nights here in my fiefdom. Four nights in which you hid her and worked your sorcery!” The spider’s head began to swell with rage. “You have a lot to answer for, rebellious flower!”

The spider lashed out viciously with a punitive fang, tearing the flower’s even complexion of carapels; leaving an ugly gash, discoloured by dripping toxin. The flower cried out in pain and terror; a piercing scream lost in the dark wastes of the wilderness at night.

“When will she return?”

“She won’t,” the wildflower cried out pitifully.

The spider lashed out again.

The wildflower screamed again, then sobbed, “She isn’t coming back!”

“Not coming back?” the spider gasped mockingly. “You expect us to believe that? After all those nights you spent together? After you saved her life?”

The wildflower shook helplessly, speechless in denial. The spider raised his fangs, threatening further mutilation.

“No! Please, don’t!” the flower cried out, weeping freely. “I don’t know, she didn’t say. She’s a honeybee! She won’t be back, there’s no reason for her to come back ... she’s a

honeybee ... a honeybee ...”

The fangs dropped slowly; the monstrous head appearing to be propitiated by the abreaction. “In that case, you may have wasted your time, rebellious flower. What did the honeybee ever do for you?”

The wildflower had no answer; at least none to share with the spider.

“And now we’ll just have to make an example of you - to encourage the others. You are fortunate in one respect though - we don’t believe you. But that honeybee had better show up soon, for your sake.”

The wildflower continued weeping softly, trying to contain the searing pain and stem the flow of tears; realising, as was the brutal way of the wilderness, that the price for a life would be a life.

ACT II - SUMMER

... bees and spiders make works of art ...

Gines de Sepulveda *Democrates Alter* (1544)

1

In a good year, spring and summer might encompass one hundred and eighty days. In temperate latitudes, autumn also has its finer moments, but for most of the denizens of the garden these will simply constitute borrowed time. Set against such a span, each day counts crucially towards the final tally of experience and achievement, and accounts for the frenetic existence of the swarm. Even the perennial plants have a bleak and lonely time in the winter and so their flowers eagerly participate in the festivities while they can.

The honeybee rejoined the swarm as the balmy spring days gave way to the heat of a glorious summer. Her return, like her absence, went largely unnoticed. Looking like a honeybee, and now acting like a honeybee, she blended into the complex anonymity of the fold as if never having been away; and before long her feats in the air were a source of intrigue and speculation among the garden flowers.

None of the other flyers recalled the honeybee's previous maladroit behaviour; or if they did, they were tactful enough not to say anything. Tact was not a common feature of the gossiping garden flowers though, and so the honeybee presumed that to them, one of her kind looked very much like another.

The memories were no longer painful, but rather a source of bemusement. She had reached emotional maturity with the passing of spring and had come to understand why her kind cared so little for the opinion of the flowers who craved their attention and yet despised them and were

jealous of their wings.

She soon developed a love affair with her new found life and freedom; augmenting a passion bordering on euphoria as she ceaselessly served the hive and the garden whilst exploring the limits of her aerial skills. With each passing day of summer, the honeybee gathered strength as she gathered nectar and pollen. Not just physical strength, but the mental vitality needed to sever the emotional constraints anchoring her to the ground, and even to acquire the luxury of a pseudo-identity within the homogeneous society. Experience had marked her with a sense of balance and armed her with a fierce, burning determination to succeed. She developed and perfected the exotic flying techniques of the hoverfly; and armed with this repertoire, there were few among the other bees to rival her in the air.

The wildflower was soon forgotten; or rather, all thoughts of the wilderness were shelved in a sanitised place, where they might conveniently decay to extinction. At first, she regretted making the promise to return, having no reason or desire to honour it, then realised that regret was a fault in itself. Thereafter, she merely forgot the wildflower existed; only to be reminded from time to time by the whisper of a soft breeze or the bright glow of an early evening star.

However, states of mind are far from constant, and in odd moments of caprice she would recall the wildflower; and in brief moments of reflection she would desire to communicate again, and perhaps fleetingly revisit the intimate rapport they had once shared when thrown together in a desperate time of danger and confusion.

The emotive undertone of such desire still irked her, though merely as a poorly understood intellectual puzzle. That concession seemed permissible now that she was no longer a cripple, though most of the other bees would consider such thinking risible. Zeb might make sense of it, she supposed; though Zeb's skill would be better employed

on weightier matters of whole societies rather than focussed on the trivial eccentricities of one individual.

The honeybee had refined, in her mind, those discordant ambitions which had so mercilessly tormented her mal-adjusted youth, and she had integrated them into a plan. But as the days passed, she began to sense a cyclical nature to her existence; as if the straight path of time was actually a curved trajectory, drawing her round in a wide circle to revisit events of the past.

The wilderness was not completely forgotten, how could it be? Whenever she climbed high above the sunflowers she could see it stretching beyond the horizon, all the way to the snow-capped peaks that held up the sky. She still wondered whether it was possible to fly over them, or through them, to see what lay beyond.

The call of the wild never ceased, and occasionally broke through the utopian spell of the garden to stoke a new form of passion with its soulful harmony. Finally, the honeybee knew the time had come to return. Not as a lone and wretched outcast, but as the leader of a wide-ranging survey. And for that she needed the support and cooperation of the swarm.

The honeybee presented her plan to a committee of the royal court, who were counsellors of the Queen, in a chamber of the hive. The royal court formed a governing body, subject to royal assent; not that they had much governing to do since the laws rarely ever changed. But if members of the swarm were to be recruited for a new enterprise, then the appropriate permissions first had to be sought, lest she be seen as anarchic.

“There’s nothing of value out there,” a sceptical leader of the committee insisted at the hearing, after the honeybee had outlined her plan.

The honeybee responded with a question of her own. “How do you know that?”

“It’s well known that the wilderness is hostile, even dangerous; and by the standards of the garden almost completely barren. We have all we need right here. Doesn’t it strike you as avaricious to be so malcontent?”

“I’m not avaricious - just curious,” the honeybee confessed, with a mildly comic understatement that caused ripples of mirth to spread through the packed chamber.

“Is that why you propose this policy? A personal desire to satisfy your curiosity?”

“To see what’s out there!” she declared passionately. “We may have possession of the garden, the richest plot in all creation. But there are other forms of wealth, knowledge, and experience, that cannot be appreciated by staying with the hive and pandering to the sunflowers.”

The honeybee had brought a small number of like-minded peers to the meeting who had already formed a provisional survey group and one of these now addressed the committee.

“I’m curious too,” she admitted. “Many of us are. I’ve always wondered what lay to the west, beyond the wilderness and the peaks that hold up the sky.”

“Do you think there is anyone here who hasn’t thought that way at some time or other?” the acerbic committee leader conjectured wearily. “But we don’t even know how far the wilderness extends.”

“This could be a chance to find out. It can’t extend forever.”

“The peaks you mention are far enough to pose a daunting challenge. To cross such a distance and return may take an entire summer. Who’d want to make that sacrifice? The garden is such a beautiful place; do you have the courage to give it all up on what could be a tragic fool’s errand?”

“The wilderness is a vast territory. We don’t know that it’s barren everywhere,” the survey supporter continued to

argue. "There could be places lush with flowers. There may even be other gardens and other swarms ..."

The honeybee who had crashed in the wilderness was enjoying these proceedings. She listened carefully to the arguments and was thrilled to see a group of bees devote their energies to an exchange of rhetoric. There was more to life than just flying and flowers.

It seemed now that there was scope for fanciful conjecture in the garden after all, and many other bees were of an imaginative persuasion. There were others very much like herself; secretly wishing to explore beyond the confines but afraid of the enmity they might provoke. They hankered for spiritual as well as material forms of sustenance and were inclined to such dangerous adventures as surveying the wilderness for posterity.

The honeybee could sense the truth emanating from them, despite the doubts and denials programmed by an ultra conservative society in which the majority were materialists; obsessed with order, safety, and security; content to live off the riches they had inherited without questioning where it had come from, or contributing anything more than their statistically insignificant unit-labour to the sum of progress which had elevated the species so far above all others. The honeybee had long ago grown disdainful of this majority, despite their hard work each day in collectively maintaining the hive and the garden.

The honeybee thought she recognised her true enemy. Not the individual bees or the flowers of the garden, or the obstructive counsellors that faced her across this chamber; and certainly not the predators of the wilderness; but the invisible strictures of the society into which she was born. A society which she held in hubristic contempt, for it stood in the way of her compulsive nature and her ambition to break free of the constraints that denied her knowledge and understanding. But now, her society no longer seemed immutable,

as it had in her youth. It was a hermetic entity, thriving on ignorance and parochialism, but vulnerable from within. It could be changed through advances in knowledge. Parasitic eggs could be laid to hatch and devour its visceral organs; and all but the most ardent conformists were susceptible to influence and persuasion as fashions changed.

“I wouldn’t give up my summer in the garden for anything,” she revealed, answering for the other bee. “Nor would I ask that sacrifice of anyone else. This is a very modest proposal. But we can pave the way for exploration by future generations by surveying the outlying wilderness now - as far as we can.”

“Even one-day surveys are a very risky proposition,” another counsellor proposed. “So many things can go wrong on extended flights. Muscle cramp, freak weather, losing daylight. Heaven help any bee who has to set down out there. The swarm can’t render assistance outside of the garden. She’d be as good as dead from the predators if she had to spend a night on the ground.”

“Heaven won’t help - but the ground-dwellers might,” the honeybee ventured.

Those well acquainted with her were familiar with the unlikely details of her survival, but the esteemed committee members, those she sought to convince, knew only the rumours. They regarded her with some scepticism, thinking she could be a charlatan. She paused, waiting for the inevitable question.

“Ground-dwellers helped you, eh? I’m surprised they didn’t eat you,” a droll, conservative, hardline counsellor remarked, instigating raucous laughter amongst her peers on the committee.

“Some very nearly did,” the honeybee replied. “But most ground-dwellers are not predators. They feed on decaying humus.”

“That’s just as disgusting!” the counsellor judged, wrink-

ling her nose.

“I’m sure they’d all eat honey if they could.”

“Is it as wild out there as they say?” a moderate committee member asked.

The honeybee smiled wryly as she recalled the seeress. There was a character she’d like to meet again - if only to hear more verse. It seemed ironic, but to have that predator beside her now, alive and taunting the committee, would have been a great boon.

“Yes, but it’s also very beautiful, and with determination and a bit of luck a honeybee can survive many nights in the wild. Keep your wits about you, smear your scent, cover your tracks, fight if you have to. Befriend the flowers - they’ll give you shelter ...”

This suggestion was greeted with another uproar of laughter that drowned out her testimony.

When things had settled down, the gruff hardliner asked, “What flower would help a grounded honeybee?”

“There are some in the wilderness who would,” she disclosed, recalling the wildflower; though she didn’t want to waste valuable time in front of the committee discussing a personal relationship. “It’s very important to find shelter at night. Sunrise, clear weather, and a few hours rest should allow you to fly again. I’ll brief those who undertake flights on what they may encounter, and what to do should the worse happen, so that we can minimise our losses on the ground.”

“But you accept that there will be losses?”

“We can expect to lose some to predators before the end of the summer,” she sighed. “That’s always going to be the price of exploration - it seems tragic because we have come to regard safety in the garden as such a paramount issue.”

“The obsession with safety is a political concession to the flowers. Those who are obsessed with safety can live out their summer in the garden,” the moderate counsellor

motioned with some contempt, revealing her sympathy for the plan.

“Forgive my cynical nature,” the articulate hardliner countered with an acerbic tongue. “But surely we can expect you to play down the worst aspects of the wilderness to avoid discouraging any volunteers for your enterprise?”

“On the contrary, we want to discourage anyone who may not be up to the physical demands of extended flight,” she insisted resolutely. “Or anyone who can’t identify a predator flower and resist its charms.”

“Predator-flower?” the committee leader gasped. “Do they really exist?”

“Oh yes, but they’re not hard to spot. They have a very distinctive appearance, quite unlike any garden flower. The danger comes from their hypnotic song that intoxicates like sweet nectar.”

“Song? What is that?”

“Melodic sound,” the honeybee explained, realising that she probably knew more about the arts and the predators of the wilderness than any bee alive and currently serving in the swarm. There ought to be a screening system for the survey applicants, she decided, to identify those with specialised skills and knowledge.

The hardliner resumed her questioning. “Aside from the personal dangers to those individuals who are foolish enough ... I mean, brave enough, to embark on such ventures; it would also mean diverting huge resources from the garden. Even a sector subtended by a modest arc will cover a massive area if the radius is extended to a half-day flight. Maintenance of the hive and the garden will suffer as a result.”

The honeybee and her supporters had prudently discussed many of the opposing arguments beforehand. The responses were now axiomatic, though not necessarily palatable to the conservative committee.

“There is an easy way to maintain the garden with fewer bees,” she responded casually.

“How?” The questioner’s wary eyes narrowed in anticipation, as if knowing what was to come.

“Discontinue the exclusion policy,” the honeybee suggested boldly.

“You would have us allow wilderness flyers into the garden?” queried the hardliner, with exaggerated incredulity. “Have you gone mad?”

The honeybee was willing to admit to that possibility - but only privately.

“Do you honestly think anyone will agree to that?” the moderate counsellor asked.

“Why shouldn’t they?” she replied, appealing to those with open minds. “There are other flyers who can service the flowers just as well as we can. Some better, I dare say,” she joked modestly. Not all present were amused - some feared the mythical prowess of the alien flyers. “At least they would make up any shortfall in numbers. Maybe we can enforce a system of internal segregation; sunflowers for honeybees only.”

“You know that would be impossible to police,” the hardliner declared scornfully. “Once inside the garden, they would eventually acquire the same rights as honeybees.”

“How carefully have you thought this through?” the moderate counsellor interjected. “If we allow disparate groups of flyers into the garden, friction will develop between different factions that could lead to internecine violence. The policy of exclusion is for a purpose - to maintain peace and tranquillity in the garden.”

“The wilderness flyers are not organised into cooperative groups as we are,” the honeybee ventured. “They fly alone or in pairs. Some will get injured in aerial duels, but we tolerate fights between ourselves - it’s an accepted, some might say a celebrated, part of our culture.”

“They’ll organise soon enough if we let them in,” the hardliner stated bluntly. “And they won’t feel bound by the laws of the garden either. They’ll bring their own laws; archaic and brutal; and those with weapons will use them against us and each other.”

“Then we should aim to eliminate all forms of violence in the garden rather than condone or excuse it among ourselves,” the honeybee argued, conscious of the fact that she didn’t have all the answers. She just wanted the resources for a survey and wasn’t really concerned about the long-term social effects of a flood of aliens on garden society.

“Even if what you say is correct, to drop the exclusion policy will require a majority decision from the royal court and royal assent. How are you ever going to achieve that?” asked the moderate counsellor.

“I could enlist the support of the garden flowers,” the honeybee suggested. “They could turn out to be quite militant and persuasive if they organised themselves and withdrew their nectar until given a greater say in the running of the garden.”

“Why would garden flowers want to meet flyers from the wilderness?”

“There is a perception that all honeybees are arrogant and conceited. Someone is spreading a rumour that wilderness flyers are polite, considerate and well-mannered.”

“I wonder who that could be?” the leader of the committee remarked wryly. “They’re running a big risk of being branded anarchic.”

“Whoever it is has got the flowers talking.”

“They’ve got nothing else to do except sit there and look pretty. If the flowers wanted polite, well-mannered flyers, we would have evolved that way. They like us just the way we are, and I don’t believe the wilderness flyers are any different.”

“Maybe they are just like us - but the flowers don’t know that. The only way they’ll believe it is to discover it for themselves.”

“Suppose this survey is carried out. What do you propose to do with the, er, knowledge you acquire at such great expense?” another counsellor inquired. “We have no oral tradition, we’re too busy flying and making honey to pass on stories, and those of us who survive the winter will be dead by next spring.”

“We could educate the perennials,” the hardliner suggested, tongue-in-cheek. “They could be our repository through each winter and brief the neophytes in the spring - if they can find any who are interested enough to stop buzzing for a while and listen to what they have to say.”

The assembly laughed at the notion of fit young honeybees taking time-off from flying to attend lectures given by flowers.

“It would be an fascinating experiment to conduct - a game of sunflower whispers,” the hardliner joked, generating yet more derogatory mirth.

The honeybee found such ignorance irritating but said nothing. This was the divisive nature of garden society - the flowers and the bees that flirted so casually in the sunlight held each other in contempt. Tribalism, chauvinism, and the wealth of the garden maintained and encouraged polarised camps. The influence of the wilderness might dispel some of the prejudice. The dispersed and thoughtful wildflowers were far more likely to pose an intellectual challenge for the honeybees; whilst the sunflowers would encounter a disparate range of characters amongst the wilderness flyers, not just the brash bees.

“We could use the perennial flowers, but their perception of the world is so different to ours that the information would be severely corrupted on retrieval,” the honeybee concurred. “Besides, word of mouth is inefficient and

archaic. We should construct a permanent physical record with the wax we use to make honeycombs in the hive.”

The counsellors exchanged glances of amusement and surprise at the novel idea.

“How do you propose to do that?” the hardliner asked sternly.

“There is a way of recording images in clay that I observed in the wilderness.”

Murmurs of intrigue spread across the committee.

“It really is amazing to see,” enthused the honeybee. “Art and craft techniques are highly developed out there. We can use representations in wax to construct a concentric model of the wilderness that surrounds the garden. We’ll have to employ sculptors from the wilderness to work here - ground dwellers, not flyers,” she emphasised, to minimise dissent for the time being. “But that’s not a problem, I know exactly where to find them.”

“Why would they work for us?” the moderate asked.

“Honey - we have an abundance of it.”

“I still don’t think you’ve considered all the possible consequences of such action,” a dubious committee leader maintained. “Producing a survey record of the wilderness would certainly be a remarkable feat, but what future use could be made of it? It might even encourage and empower future swarms to embark on a campaign of colonisation.”

“Who’d want to colonise the wilderness? Most honeybees would rather stay here,” a sceptical counsellor declared bluntly.

“Most, but not all,” the committee leader noted. “We seem to have some pioneering spirits among us. If this survey goes ahead, then after we’ve covered all the territory within a half-day’s flight, pressures will arise to begin creating staging colonies and push out even further. Is that what you’re hoping to achieve?”

The honeybee nodded. “There must have been a time in

the past when the garden was part of the wilderness, and it may be reclaimed again some time in the future. So why shouldn't we try to establish colonies and civilise other parts of the wilderness?"

"There are other creatures out there who may not want to be civilised. What gives us the right to displace them from their territory or force our culture upon them?"

"A predator – a seeress in the wilderness – said it was our destiny. But we don't have to force our culture on anyone. Maybe we can learn as much from them as they can from us. The garden is a colony in a hostile world, and we are already colonists within it. The garden maintains its beautiful, safe sterility through order and conformity, but this has led to a condition of cultural stagnation."

"The garden is the will of the sun-god," the hardliner stated sharply.

"And the work of the tall-spirits," the honeybee countered. "Maybe it's time we learned how to create our own garden."

This remark brought angry murmurings from the more conservative elements of the committee.

"Create our own garden? Such talk is blasphemy," the hardliner protested.

"The time has come to disestablish ourselves from the primitive tenets of theology," preached the honeybee. "We need to experience the diversity of the wilderness and learn from it; take those things that we can use - the arts and the philosophy - whilst continuing to reject the curse of the predator."

Faced with a general air of disapproval, she was encouraged by a few grins and the odd sparkling eye that seemed to come alive at the thought of exploring new territory. The conversion would take time, but enough would be proselytised eventually to make it happen.

"You would need royal assent for the creation of virgin

queens,” the bemused committee leader remarked. “And volunteers among the drones to accompany them to new nest sites.”

“I’m sure there are plenty of drones willing and able to fulfil that role,” the honeybee smirked. “It’s the chance they’ve all been waiting for.”

“It was interesting to hear of your experiences in the wilderness,” the hardliner motioned, recognising the grave threat this radical posed to the status quo, and the need to discredit her. “We know that you took time off – to find yourself ...”

There were chuckles and murmurs at this wry wit.

“... meanwhile, other hard working bees had to continue maintaining the garden and the hive and defending our borders in your absence. What I’d like to know is – what treaties and alliances did you form out there?”

Uproar of accusation and counter-accusation gripped the ensemble. The honeybee waited for the noise to settle, but was denied the opportunity of an immediate reply by the orator who pressed home the charge.

“You speak of modest change and injections of diversity, but what is it you really want and for whom do you really speak? An outside agency, perhaps, eager for the collapse of order in the garden and the dissolution of the swarm?”

The honeybee was guilty more of vain ambition than treachery, but the accusation was damaging and had to be answered. “There are no organisations in the wilderness to form alliances with. Merely small groups of individuals struggling to survive.”

“There are the legions of predators on the ground who could invade the garden and destroy the swarm if they chose to cooperate and organise themselves. They stay out of the garden for now, but if we interlope in the wilderness, they may retaliate by attacking the hive at night.”

The honeybee recalled the prediction of the seeress, and

the stories of the mythical predator which could destroy the entire swarm, but dismissed the idea as fanciful. "Maybe we should learn to fly at night to protect the hive at all times," she proposed boldly.

"Can you fly at night?" the hardliner challenged her.

"When there's moonlight to see by."

"And when there isn't?"

"I'm as blind as you are - but there must be a way to create light."

"Create light? More blasphemy! Only the sun-god creates light."

"The tall-spirits make their own light inside their temple."

"The sun-god blesses the temple of the tall-spirits with nightly visitations."

"Who makes the stars shine?" the honeybee asked mischievously. "When the sun-god falls from the sky we see shadows creeping across the moon, but the stars are always bright and constant, even when the sun-god is visiting the far side of the earth."

"The stars are sun-gods too," a learned counsellor proposed. "Shining over their own worlds far away."

"The sun-god shines over our world - that is all we need concern ourselves with today," the committee leader ruled sternly, not wishing the meeting to degenerate into a dangerous theological debate.

"*Of what in other worlds shall be or given ...*" the honeybee recited.

"Excuse me?" the committee leader queried.

"Nothing," the honeybee replied, slowly and dismissively shaking her head. "In the wilderness there are flyers who make their own light and glow in the dark - fireflies. If we could enlist their help, have them fly in consort with us, we could fly short distances from the hive at night and attack targets on the ground. No predator would dare come near the hive - by day or night."

“Have you tried enlisting the help of these fireflies?” the hardliner inquired sceptically.

The honeybee recalled the ghostly spectre she had witnessed on her last night with the wildflower and wondered whether such communication would be possible. The spectre had seemed ethereal and other-worldly. What language did it speak, if any?

“No, not yet,” she conceded. “I’ve only ever seen them once - at night in the wilderness. But I’m willing to try and make contact through the survey.”

“You predicted an encroachment of the wilderness upon the garden,” the moderate counsellor reminded her. “Is this something we need worry about soon?”

“I meant through an act of nature, not an invasion or a conspiracy,” the honeybee stated, not wanting the survey to seem like a provocative act that would stir up the predators.

“Sometimes one can be confused with the other. If you simply wanted knowledge of obscure cultures you would not have returned here, but would rather have devoted yourself to the wilderness. If we are to believe that you are not a mad eccentric; or worse still, a traitor; then we must know more about your motives.”

The honeybee paused before answering to examine the stern faces of her inquisition.

“I want to know more before the end of the summer. I want to know where I came from and what I’m doing here. We should have a greater purpose in life than simply flying and making honey. By the way, those involved in the survey will need to adopt individual names for identification and allocation of assignments. And we’ll want to screen all applicants for specialised skills and knowledge.”

This announcement precipitated another uproar to amuse the honeybee and her supporters.

2

The impediments and practical objections to the scheme prevented it from receiving official sanction immediately, though the persistent honeybee knew that its time would come. This was just the first stage in a battle of lobbying, manipulation, and the manufacturing of consent for her cause. The vast majority of honeybees in the swarm had no strong feelings about a survey, one way or another; but opponents and proponents alike had the common task of claiming to speak for the majority, with full moral authority, whilst accusing the other side of being harmful or sinful in some way.

Undaunted; a small, but dedicated, group of survey bees worked on the details of preliminary planning. Long range patrols extending far over the western horizon would be a distraction from the primary role of the swarm and yet, incredible though it seemed in view of the inherent dangers and ethical misgivings of such a venture, their publicised intentions generated much interest in the garden.

Despite the risk to life, limb, and reputation, volunteers came forward in large numbers. The subtle art of courting opinion intrigued the honeybee. However, as one of the counsellors had pointed out, all the effort would be pointless without a medium for preserving and retrieving the valuable information, gathered like nectar on the wing.

The honeybee set out to commission a sculptor. Involvement in the great adventure would be his reward, but he would also be paid from the rich resources of the garden.

She didn't know exactly where Zeb would be, but knew another who might.

Recognising the ground below, the honeybee peeled away from her straight course, navigating by landmark and faithful memories until the familiar figure came into sight. In a cheerful mood and wishing to surprise the wildflower, she approached slowly, gliding silently on final approach.

The petals were drooping and drab, and much of the floral colour had faded, but the honeybee was so wrapped up within her egocentric self that she barely noticed the change. Her only concern was the pleasure her visit would inevitably bring the wildflower.

The honeybee announced herself with a flourish, looping round in a tight turn before slowing to hover nearby. Expecting applause, she received none, and was confused, and slightly crestfallen, at the lack of any reaction from her audience.

The wildflower seemed to have prematurely withered with age, no longer as fresh and vital as she remembered. An obnoxious and incongruous odour hung in the air. Hovering close by, the honeybee began to feel uncomfortably ill at ease for no explicable reason, as if the old anxieties of spring were threatening to return.

"Why are you closed-up like this in the daylight?" asked the honeybee.

The wildflower moved slightly in response, but the once appealing features remained well hidden behind lacklustre petals, despite a strong sun high in the sky.

"What do you want?" a gravelly voice rasped from a concealed mouth.

"To see you again, of course," the hovering honeybee insisted, momentarily forgetting the real reason and feeling a twinge of guilt at the lapse of time which had so swiftly fled by. She drifted closer to the weathered looking figure to affirm her presence now. "Don't you remember me?"

“No, go away! I don’t want to see anyone today!” the wildflower rasped.

The honeybee continued to hover nearby, nonplussed and uncertain of how to react. The wildflower continued to sense her presence without looking up.

“Get away from me! Didn’t you hear? I don’t want you near me!”

The honeybee drew back a short way, stunned by the outburst, and examined the state of the flower in the light of this behaviour. “I don’t understand - what’s happened to you?”

“Just go! Leave me alone.”

“You were never like this before. You were always so happy and cheerful, especially when the sun was out. Why won’t you look at me?”

“Please - just go away,” the wildflower pleaded, in a low tone.

“I should never have stayed away so long, but I need to get a message to Zeb,” the honeybee stated, falling back on blunt honesty.

The flower declined to answer.

“I need to set up a meeting with him,” the honeybee persisted.

“I don’t know anyone called Zeb,” the wildflower insisted wearily. “Go back to the garden where you belong - do not concern yourself with things that happen here.”

The honeybee sensed that this was not just the caprice of a flower. Something had happened after her return to the garden. She moved closer to the wildflower, but on doing so her sensory systems began warning of an imminent danger. There was a strange aroma in the flower’s perfume, as if adulterated by something alien and noxious.

“No! Stay back!” the wildflower warned.

Confused by the message; torn between conflicting impulses; the honeybee retreated to what seemed like a safer

distance to evaluate the situation. The flower was suffering from some sort of illness and reticent about the condition.

“I’m sorry, I’ve made a mistake,” whispered the honeybee, climbing and banking away; hoping the flower would glance up as she departed. She was duly disappointed, and much impressed, as the flower maintained a disciplined aspect of concealment. She suspected that it took a concerted will to remain secluded - and admired the flower for it. She was deeply concerned by the flower’s behaviour and appearance, though she was also glad to get away from such a distressing sight and the aura of menace that hung in the air.

Finding Zeb without the assistance of the wildflower would be a difficult task, so she thought, as she began a search of the triangular area between the wildflower and the two other approximate locations where she knew the earthworm had surfaced in the past.

A fruitless search all morning continued through until the afternoon, when the tired honeybee was about to give up for the day and set a course for home. Then she noticed two familiar characters; one wearing a grass hat, the other large and black; nestled among the coarse grasses below. She descended in graceful circles to land neatly between them.

“Hey, look who’s just dropped in,” Zeb cheered. “How’s them wings a-flappin’ these days? Last time you dropped out o’ the sky, I thought you was a thunderbolt sent by the Almighty for all my sins. Good to see you landin’ like you’re s’posed to.”

“Are you ever going to let me forget that?” the honeybee protested.

“Nope!”

“It was a painful bump for me as well as you.”

“They say the only antidote to mental torture is physical pain,” he quipped.

“What brings you back, HB?” Naph inquired. “It’s bin a long time.”

“Do I need a reason to look up old friends?”

“Honeybees don’t have friends,” the slug quickly reminded her.

“I’m different,” she insisted.

“And you know we’re always glad to see you,” Naph confirmed, with a welcoming grin and a pat on the back that nearly flattened her. “You should drop by more often though.”

“What happened to Deborah?” she asked.

“You’ve seen Deb?” Zeb asked, with a hint of concern.

The honeybee nodded. “I can understand a wildflower not wanting to see me again, but why would one look all drab and beat-up like that in midsummer?”

The pair seemed mute in the face of the question; one looking away at the sky, the other at the ground.

“Maybe I should just go back there and land on a petal to find out for myself?” she suggested, motioning as if about to take off.

“No, wait,” Zeb sighed. “You weren’t s’posed to know. Barak was gonna find you and tell you but Deb swore him to silence.”

“Tell me what?” the honeybee asked anxiously.

“When the spider found out about us helpin’ you, he worked the flower over pretty badly. There was nothin’ we could do to stop him.”

The honeybee absorbed the news with a bland expression on her face. “When did this happen?” she asked, in a flat voice belying any emotion.

“The night you left.”

“But that was ...” the honeybee found herself counting back the days. The number disturbed her. “Will the flower ever recover?”

“Sisera is usin’ the flower as a honeytrap,” Naph disclosed ominously. “He’s ready to jump any flyer that gets too close. Barak would have been the first but Deb cried out a warnin’

to save him and got more brutal treatment because of it. After that, word soon spread to all the other flyers to keep away.”

“You mean the spider is in the flower?”

Zeb nodded, his impotent expression confirming the worse fear of the honeybee who felt her stomach churn with revulsion at the invidious dilemma the flower had faced on her return. The word game made sense now.

“Sisera stays concealed all day, then goes huntin’ at night,” Naph explained.

“Barak should have got word to me,” the honeybee vouched angrily.

“Imagine yourself a flower brutalised and infested by a vile spider, slowly dyin’ from neglect and the terrible wounds he inflicts. Would you want anyone to know?”

“We had no reason to think you would ever come back.”

“I promised I would,” the honeybee declared.

“Is that why you’re here now? For the flower?”

“No, there’s another reason,” she had to admit. “I came to see you. We need your help in the garden.”

“We?” Zeb queried, breaking the solemnity of the mood with a bemused smile.

“The swarm. We need you to sculpt in the hive. Are you interested in a job?”

Zeb studied her cagily. “I might be. What’s in it for me?”

“The chance to work with beeswax.”

“So how do I get up into the hive? I can’t slide up those smooth wooden stilts, I’m covered in slippery slime.”

“We’ll lift you using grass straps.”

“That could be fun. Do I get paid for my time?”

“Honey, nectar, pollen, whatever you want.”

“You’ve thought of everything, haven’t you? What is it you want sculpted? The Queen?”

“She might like that, but no. I want a representation of a landscape.”

“You mean a relief map?”

“Yeah.”

“A map of what? The garden?”

“The wilderness. Everything lying within a half-day flight radius of the hive.”

Zeb frowned. “How you gonna get all that information?”

“Survey flights.”

“And what you gonna do with it?”

“Colonise the wilderness.”

“Colonise the wilderness? That’s a bold step. What if the wilderness don’t want colonisin’?”

“One thing at a time.”

“Hey fellas, ain’t we forgettin’ somethin’. We’ve still got a terrible down-to-earth problem to solve before chasin’ after blue skies,” Naph reminded them both. “Don’t you think Deb’s got guts to face up to Sisera and still be lookin’ out for you even now?”

“Looking out for me? In what way?” the honeybee asked, surprised by the remark.

“You’re a honeybee, ain’t you? Honeybees don’t usually lack offensive spirit.”

“What makes you think I lack offensive spirit?” the honeybee retorted, stung by the remark.

“Deb’s afraid you might do somethin’ rash - like sacrifice your sting.”

“This is no time for jokes,” the honeybee pleaded.

The other two made no reply and she realised they were not joking.

“Are you serious? A ground spider? Any spider, never mind a monster like Sisera?” She laughed; a skittish laughter at an unreasonable expectation that deeply embarrassed her. “It would be suicide, even for a bumble bee. A single sting wouldn’t be enough to kill him, and he’d snatch any flyer from the air who got within range.”

“Maybe that’s why Deb didn’t want you to know,” Zeb

concluded quietly.

“Tell me how? Any tactic that might conceivably work, I’ll try,” the honeybee pledged. “But there’s simply no way a honeybee can defeat a huge ground spider - even one prepared to die in the process.”

“How about the swarm? Couldn’t you talk ’em into comin’ out here and drivin’ the spider away?” Naph suggested. “We hear you got some influence there now.”

The honeybee shook her head wearily, recalling the difficulties she had faced persuading the committee just to authorise a few survey flights. “You know the swarm never leaves the garden. If it did, we’d have to kill the spider in the first strike before he went to ground. That would mean sacrificing a lot of stings for a wildflower. If we failed, he’d return and wreak his revenge on Deborah after dark - then he might retaliate by raiding the garden at night and killing one of the sunflowers.”

“Are they worth more to you than a wildflower?”

“They deserve the same consideration.”

“From what I hear, those sunflowers secretly hate the honeybees - and all the flyers. You don’t owe ’em nothin’.”

“Not all of them,” vouched the honeybee. “That’s just the way of the garden. There’s no law against what you think. Life can be cruel there too, we just don’t go as far as eating each other.”

“Is there no way of flyin’ at night?” Zeb interjected. “Seems like it’s never bin tried before.”

“There may be a way,” the honeybee predicted, thinking of the fireflies. “But it hasn’t been properly developed yet. In summers to come, the swarm may undertake police actions in the wilderness, but this summer we’re on our own.”

“You must have friends - associates - who could help?” Naph proposed.

“How do I ask them to die for a wildflower they’ve never

met? And if they did, there would be serious ramifications when the news reached the hive.”

“Ramifications? We’re talkin’ about Deborah’s life here, and you’re talkin’ politics!”

“We’re not just talking about one life ...”

“We understand, don’t we Naph,” Zeb tried to assure her, prodding the slug to agree.

“Yeah, sure,” the slug concurred half-heartedly.

The honeybee nodded and slowly rose into the air, cursing her luck. The business of the survey map would have to wait until a better time.

“Don’t go back there,” Zeb urged. “There ain’t nothin’ more you can do. Goin’ back’ll just make things worse ...”

The honeybee nodded again as she drifted up out of sight.

“Maybe we should have told her what the spider really wants,” Naph suggested.

“What difference would it make?”

“None, I guess. This way it just don’t seem right somehow.”

“What’s right got to do with it? This is the wilderness! Down here, might is right,” Zeb sighed, his grim stare fixed forlornly on a faint hope vanishing into the sky.

3

High overhead in the sky above the wilderness heath and scrubland, the honeybee spiralled around in wide, aimless circles; wondering what course of action could remedy the terrible situation initiated by her past insanity. She wanted to help the wildflower who had saved her, but greatly feared the consequences for both of them if faced with a practical demonstration of the spider's brutality.

She approached again quietly, to a wildflower deeply withdrawn; face barely visible behind the twisted, shrivelled petals. "Deborah?" she whispered, hoping to wake the flower gently.

"I told you not to come back," the wildflower answered weakly.

"We have to talk," she insisted, as she moved closer; sensing danger, but holding down the bile of fear and nausea rising in the presence of a predator. "You should have got word to me. I thought you trusted me that much, at least."

The petals parted and the wildflower's face lit up for her; transformed in an instant by the memory of happier times impinging on a wretched state. Still, the tear stained scars and bruises struck deep into her heart. She wished there was something, anything, she could do to alleviate the flower's suffering.

A strange, dark object, tucked away at the back of the flower, caught the honeybee's eye. Overcoming her abhorrence, she homed in on the malignant entity in an act of solidarity and reckless provocation to try and winkle out the

vile parasite.

“No, stay away!” the flower pleaded.

In the back of her mind, the honeybee recalled the earthworm’s eulogy of the wildflower’s bravery. In the fore, all her attention was fixed on the surreptitious spider curled up and compressed into an innocuous looking ellipsoid bundle, not much larger in bulk than the body of a bumblebee.

“Come out where I can see you,” the honeybee taunted the nocturnal beast. “Why do you skulk and hide in the shadows? Are you ashamed to show yourself in the daylight?”

The transformation that followed, one which the honeybee had deliberately provoked, was disturbing to behold and filled her with an instinctive dread. She felt each muscle in her body tighten and her hackles stood on end as the spider, realising that there would be no ambush now, obliged by stirring from its seclusion. The long, hairy, muscular legs unfurled, creating a span which straddled the flower; and from beneath the belly, tucked away, the huge, hideous head emerged; an adjunct on the abdomen which almost doubled its visible size.

“We’ve been waiting for you,” the spider informed her, in a low, casual drawl, as if having just woken from a sleep. “You can always rely on the honeybees for two things - their vanity and their stupidity.”

The grotesque shape of the black spider squatting on the delicate wildflower; the spanned legs covering the spread of the coloured petals like bars to a window of sunlight; filled the honeybee with disgust and loathing.

“Have you nothing better to do with the summer than wait for me?” the honeybee replied, frustrated by the hostage situation.

“I have summers and patience enough, unlike the frantic little bees who work themselves to death and accomplish nothing.”

“Why can’t you spare the wildflower? What harm can a flower do to you?” she entreated, wishing she had some form of diplomatic leverage to support the request.

“This is our sovereign kingdom and the flower is guilty of treason. Subjects should be made to pay if they betray their sovereign, don’t you agree?” the spider motioned ruefully.

“What if the sovereign betrays his subjects, then who should pay?” the honeybee countered.

“Ah, radical opposition. We like that,” the spider professed. “We see so little of it here. Most of our subjects are sycophants or merely apathetic. But can you expand your views into a worthwhile polemic?”

“To what end?” the honeybee demanded to know, surprised by the intellectual wit of the tyrant.

“A plea of mitigation. You are both complicit in this offence,” the spider adjudged, with a judicious smirk. “We have no facility for holding prisoners indefinitely, so our punitive powers are, by necessity, kept simple. We can only inflict a measure of pain or mutilation for any crime - leading to the ultimate sanction of death. But if you believe there are grounds for a reprieve, then you should present an appeal - before it is too late.”

“How can a flower commit a crime?” the honeybee pleaded.

“They have limited mobility,” the spider conceded. “But giving succour to the enemies of the wilderness is a serious matter which has compromised our security. What is the basis of your appeal?”

The honeybee stared angrily at her accuser. “I am not, and never have been, an enemy of the wilderness. I suffered cramp and had to make an emergency landing near here.”

“Why were you flying over the wilderness in the first place - if not to spy for the swarm?”

The honeybee had flown over the wilderness in a bout of madness - but doubted whether an appeal of insanity would

carry much weight.

“I was on a routine flight near the border when I lost steering and was carried on the wind,” she explained. “I glided and finally crashed inside what you call wilderness territory without knowing my position.”

“We know exactly where you came down,” the spider revealed. “It was far to the east of here. Why did you not head directly east back then - towards the garden?”

The honeybee took a moment to regret not having done so. But then she remembered the physical examination performed by Zeb.

“I hit my head and became disorientated. I wandered around in a confused state for several days.”

“Until this flower gave you sanctuary?”

There seemed no way to deny the fact.

“At least she saved me for you,” the honeybee proposed wryly. “Otherwise, I would have been eaten by one of the other funny little monsters which scurry around your fiefdom.”

“You flatter yourself,” the spider mused. “Honeybees always do. This isn’t a personal matter. As an individual, you mean nothing to us. A safe territory and a secure border is all that we desire.”

“Why do you think I pose such a threat to your security?” the honeybee felt compelled to ask, almost flattered by the grandiose arrogation.

“Because of the danger you represent. You bring ideas of a garden utopia which are destabilising to our regime - and because there have been honeybees in the past who believed it was their destiny to spread the swarm westward towards the mountains. Survey flights are a precursor to that.”

This was a startling revelation. The honeybee had often wondered whether there could be such a thing as an original philosophy, or whether there must always be antecedents; but this was good evidence, if the spider were to be believed,

that she was not the first from the garden to seek a westward expansion - and so would not be the last - assuming the swarm survived and maintained its cohesion in the summers to come.

“Why are you flying over our territory today?” the spider demanded to know.

“Vanity - you said it yourself,” the honeybee quickly answered. “I came to see the wildflower.”

The spider smiled with his malevolent features. “We pride ourselves on being a good judge of character. It comes from years of performing interrogations before the kill - and we are able to see straight away that you are not just a vain honeybee in search of nectar. You’re the subject of much chatter around here. The honeybee who fell from the garden and befriended the ground dwellers; who humbled the seeress, fought with the ants, and who escaped the wrath of Sisera. But there are a couple of things you should know about us. First - our policy is to liquidate those who interlope on our territory - even if we have to stalk the garden and enter the hive at night to accomplish it. And second - we know when you are lying.”

“The seeress thought she knew what I was thinking too,” the honeybee recalled, with a sarcastic sigh. “But cold-reading can get you into trouble.”

“Are you going to put your sting in my mouth?” the bemused spider queried, twitching and grinding his jaws invitingly.

The honeybee envisaged the tip of her abdomen being chomped off and the spider using her sting as a toothpick.

“I’d rather slip it into your brain,” she replied.

The spider smiled mendaciously at her spirited reply.

“I came back to see the wildflower,” the honeybee reiterated, trying to wring the truth from a half-truth.

“The one guilty of harbouring and concealing you, and conspiring with the earthworm called Zeb?” the spider

ventured, as if questioning her on a set of charges.

“Why is compassion in a flower such a crime? In the garden it would be a thing of great beauty.”

“Because it brings you back - and others like you. Why do you seek the earthworm?”

The honeybee paused, glaring at the foul ground-dwelling spider; whose massive head must contain a much greater intellect than the average honeybee’s - albeit one devoted to vile intrigue and the destruction of other creatures.

“I want him to teach me his art.”

“For what purpose?”

“There are creative activities - artforms - which you engage in down here that interest us greatly in the garden.”

“And the more interested you become, the more you will want to know; and more bees will fly west in search of artists and artisans. First the long survey flights, then the colonies, and then gardens will be established everywhere. Sterile gardens, cleansed of the wild inhabitants, in which only selected species will be allowed to live and flourish in safety.”

The honeybee laughed at this naive proposition. “The swarm did not create the garden. We police and defend it, and exploit its resources; but we do not currently have the knowledge or the vast power which would be needed to create another - in the wilderness or on the moon.”

“We know that perfectly well,” the spider mused. “The other predators do not, but it serves our purpose for them to believe it. Honeybee colonists would have to give up the comfort and security of the garden; but swarms can nest in tree trunks and live off the wildflowers, which you would try to appropriate; and since you are not predators, but disciples of the sun-god, you would feel compelled to challenge with force the customs and creed by which we live.”

The honeybee decided to indulge in this game of rhetoric in the slender hope of achieving some relief for the flower.

“You invited me to lodge an appeal. What use is an appeal against an unjust law when the legal system is so corrupt and oppressive?”

“We could find you in contempt for such remarks,” warned the spider.

“The court is already deeply prejudiced against my client,” the honeybee complained indignantly.

The spider, in his capacity as presiding judge, concurred with this point, and seemed prepared to concede something in response to the challenge. “Very well. If you can demonstrate that the law is unjust or unreasonable, then we will entertain a plea of mitigation on behalf of the flower. But you will have to hurry.”

The honeybee knew the spider was just toying with her. She hoped Deborah would understand that any attempt to humour or appease the spider would almost certainly be in vain. Nevertheless, she spoke out for the sake of the flower.

“Law making without consultation or representation is always liable to be oppressive. Who did you consult before imposing predator law on the territory?”

“All laws oppress someone or other,” the spider chuckled. “Winners and losers. If you want to persecute A, you justify it by claiming to protect B. Representative law is much more likely to oppress minorities. Our laws may seem harsh, but they are fairly and evenly applied. You must concentrate on the issue of unreasonable oppression if your appeal is to have any chance of success.”

The honeybee feared that she was stumped from the start, merely grappling for sophistry in a nihilistic void; but was loathe to concede that the tyranny of convenience could be justified, as seemed to be the case here.

“The justification for your law is a perceived threat from the garden. In which case there is no reasonable foundation for your law since no such threat exists. That pretence is being used to maintain a regime of terror. You are guilty of

misleading your subjects.” The honeybee paused for effect, wondering if by some miracle, this point might achieve something.

“Go on,” the spider urged.

“This is an abuse of arbitrary power,” she argued. “The law here serves the vested interest of a privileged minority - the predators. The majority are denied any form of representation, the right to assemble, or the right to communicate freely with each other or with the denizens of the garden on pain of death. These rights are inalienable and should not incur sanction.”

“Anything else?”

“No.”

“Very well.” The spider cleared his throat. “We have examined thoroughly the points of your appeal and find nothing contained therein to alter our original judgment in this case. Usually, when we reject a politically sensitive appeal, we give our reasons at a later date - we need time to think of some good ones - but on this occasion we can reveal them straight away. Firstly, the question of consultation and representation is invalid. In a sovereign assembly, laws can be passed with a representative majority of just one, therefore enabling the legal oppression of an arbitrary number of those enfranchised ...”

“Not if the law makers were subject to some form of constitutional restraint,” the honeybee maintained, rudely interrupting the summation.

The spider smiled again, a mentor pleased by a naive and impetuous challenge. “Then the assembly wouldn’t be sovereign, but a branch within a division of powers. Even with such a system in place, constitutional doctrines are open to differing interpretations, which blow with the prevailing wind of taste and fashion.”

“That might not be true,” the honeybee interjected again. “They could fluctuate along an asymptotic course towards

protecting the fundamental rights of the individual.”

“No matter, we are not hindered by such inconveniencies here. This is a parliamentary system; and since the predator peers hold all the hereditary seats, we have a permanent majority; and are therefore able to instigate any law we choose,” the spider declared, considering this delivery a *coup de grace*. “On the second point of a pretence, of being misleading about the threat; you are in error, since your very presence here, this passionate appeal, and the arguments which you are so cleverly presenting, are in themselves a grave threat to our society. They are what you in the hive refer to as anarchic, we prefer the term ‘seditious’. The third point dealt with vested interest, simply another word for representation. How large must any majority become before it is legitimate in your eyes? We represent the wilderness, we have a mandate and a divine right to rule, and therefore our interests and those of the wilderness are identical, are they not? Legislators crave power incessantly when out of office and when we finally get some we don’t like seeing it watered down. And lastly, ah yes, the inalienable right thing. We hate to disillusion you, but those rights are not inalienable - anywhere. They may be granted from time to time, as a concession to high-minded idealists; but then they are quickly suspended or ignored when applied to issues we find problematic or embarrassing.”

“They exist in the garden!” the honeybee interjected passionately.

“They may exist for the honeybees. But what about everyone else? What would happen if your hoverfly friends tried to assemble in the garden or communicate with a sunflower? There’d be a lynching, would there not?”

“The swarm is moving towards inclusion. These things take time.”

The spider roared with laughter. “Oh, the days that we have seen! I can remember when the garden was still

wilderness more than twenty summers ago. In that time the swarm has moved, in both locality and social development, precisely nowhere. Your queens are usually conservative in their outlook, and have wisely sought to repress change.”

“How can you know anything about the politics of the hive?” asked the honeybee.

“Because there have been times in the past when we were the power behind the succession - the queen-maker.”

“How can you, a mere ground-dweller, influence the succession in the swarm?” the honeybee probed.

“By removing the incumbent.”

“But why?” she asked, intrigued as much by his motive as his claim to wield such far reaching power. “What does it matter to you who rules the hive?”

“It matters a great deal. The previous slip of a honeybee queen was foolish enough to authorise a survey. We discovered her plans from a grounded bee we tortured to death. That was four summers ago. I thought the present incumbent knew how to keep her head, but she is in grave danger of going the same way as her predecessor.”

“The swarm would never allow a predator to murder a queen,” declared the honeybee, with uncharacteristically partisan zeal.

“There is so much you don’t know and so little time left for you to learn,” mused the spider. “In autumn, which you will never see, there are only a handful of cold, inert bees left to guard the hive. And there are ways into the garden and the hive unknown to anyone except those who witnessed the early days of their creation.”

The honeybee was horrified, but intrigued by the wider ramification of the spider’s revelations. “Do you know how the garden and the hive were created?”

“Of course.”

“Tell me.”

The spider grinned, thinking he’d found a greater source

of leverage, perhaps, than holding a wildflower hostage. “Each summer we hear stories of the garden moving towards a final Utopian state. Do you think your ideas are original? They’ve been spouted by past generations - mad honeybees living and dying with each summer.”

“How was the garden created?”

“What would you give for that knowledge? For now, I shall tell you why the honeybee society will never amount to anything more than a bunch of hedonists drunk on nectar.”

“Was it created by the tall-spirits?” she interjected.

“That’s an insightful speculation - for a honeybee. Come closer and find out,” the spider suggested.

The honeybee declined the invitation and continued to hover at a safe distance.

“Few individuals in your perfect society want to know the truth about their existence. Dealing with such knowledge requires a degree of intelligent self-discipline and reliance possessed only by elite minorities, who are mistrusted by the masses. The majority in any well-organised society don’t want to think, they simply want to feed well and believe in their imaginary spiritual friends. There is no serious learning in the garden any more - just flying and tending to the brood and the flowers. The intellectual climate has been dumbed down to accommodate the agenda of the dumbest majority who form the base of the pyramid!” the spider chortled. “So much for evolution. Fortunately, the sovereign power in the hive manages reproduction for you - because you’d be too stupid to bring up offspring of your own.”

The honeybee listened intently, absorbing as much as she could. From the spider’s putrid mouth gushed the wisdom of many summers ruling a fiefdom in the wilderness that bordered the garden.

“Suppose we set up enclaves of learning for the most intelligent, well-motivated bees?” the honeybee proposed, with radical zeal.

The spider's mirth suddenly ceased. "Why would you want to do that? A pointless distraction. Your summer is waning, enjoy what's left of it in the air."

"To leave a legacy of knowledge. Next summer's swarm will build on the advances of this one rather than starting from scratch. The one that follows thereafter will benefit fourfold, and so on, until we are able to refute statutes and prohibitory values which cannot withstand rational scrutiny by logical minds."

"Yes, but how?" the spider smirked. "The legacy of your hard-fought summer will die with you and any like-minded peers. Honeybees have no oral tradition and garden flowers lack the intellect to be efficient repositories for complex ideas."

"An effective system of information storage and retrieval. Something I learned from one of your disloyal subjects. He has the skill and we have the beeswax." It was the honeybee's turn to gloat. "Isn't it ironic that your summers may be brought to a close by a braindrain of your own oppressed subjects. The results of their work are going to eat you from within like parasitic worms."

"Hmm. That is something to think about," the spider mused. "But a technical revolution in the garden will take more than a single summer to complete and that is all the time this swarm has left."

The honeybee was intrigued again. "Are you saying that the whole swarm is going to die out?"

The spider nodded slowly, with a triumphant grin across his features. "Wiped out would be a better way to describe it."

"How do you wipe out the entire swarm - even in winter?"

"By killing the Queen and all her attendants. With no male seed or royal court organisation to facilitate a succession there'll be anarchy in the hive and no brood for the spring. The tall-spirits will destroy the surviving remnants and

introduce a new swarm whose bees will know nothing of the previous society. They'll believe the garden is no older than they are - created especially for them in a few preceding days - and hopefully they'll stick to being honeybees for a while and leave politics and philosophy to the predators."

The honeybee drifted perilously close to the crouching spider, but was poised to viff away. Fortunately, the swaying flower was not a good platform for the spider to launch from.

"So we come from the tall-spirits?" she presumed.

"Same old question," the spider sighed. "You come from the sun-god - a gift to the tall-spirits who fashioned your garden and your hive."

The honeybee was awed by the revelation of her origins, though tried not to reveal it. "And where do you come from?" she asked.

"The ground. The earth is my mother and the darkness my father."

"Why should I believe anything you say?" the honeybee asked on reflection, trying to remain sceptical in the face of what could be no more than a spider's sophistry.

"What difference does it make? The nature of your questions have convinced me that you form a far greater danger than I first realised. Perhaps I should destroy the swarm before the summer is over - a purifying act to eradicate any chance of a legacy. But for now we have to deal with this breach of the law which you have inspired. Not one which can easily be excused, unless you can think of some way in which the wildflower's perfidy can be nullified?"

The honeybee sensed an opportunity to make a deal. "A faction in the swarm are proposing to survey the wilderness this summer in prelude to a programme of colonisation and westward expansion. If I can convince the Queen that the swarm is under imminent threat, and that we must take pre-

emptive action, those plans will assume a fresh new urgency with greater resources devoted to them. However, if you leave the flower now, I give you my word that no such plans will be undertaken.”

“Do you have that much influence over policy in the swarm?” the spider queried doubtfully. “You’re not even a member of the royal court.”

The honeybee nodded tentatively. “I have access to the Queen, and she is not the type to be impressed by your threats.”

Scepticism stretched the thin lips of the spider. “Then you would give up all your long-thought-out high-ideals and the opportunity for progress by your species just like that - for a wildflower?”

The honeybee looked at the battered wildflower and recalled her debt. “Not just any flower - the finest flower I have ever known.”

“Come closer,” the spider urged. “I wish to see if you are lying.”

The honeybee held back, away from the hypnotic eyes, wisely reluctant to be drawn into the striking range of the loathsome being.

“This has been a rewarding exchange,” the spider remarked, realising that the honeybee wasn’t going to allow herself to be taken. “I admire your tenacity and loyalty to your friends. You have strong views which you are willing to defend. However, if you are serious about pursuing a line in politics, you have one more lesson to learn. Only two types of creature seek legislative power in this territory - censorial egotists and brutal psychopaths. Guess which one you are dealing with today?”

The spider grinned as his fang slashed the face of the flower. Deborah held in the scream, but the strike was enough to make the bee lunge forward angrily. The spider leapt up, jaws poised to snatch the soft body from the air.

The honeybee vectored sideways, avoiding the lethal kiss by a whisper. Seething with rage, she flipped round in a tight turn to face the spider again.

“We’ll settle this your way!” she declared, then realised the futility of her hollow words even as the spider’s bellicose laughter cut in.

“Big talk from a little honeybee. Suppose we make it easy for you? There’s plenty of daylight left. We’ll climb down from here and stand in open ground to give you a clear run.”

The spider slashed the flower again to encourage the flyer. This time a pitiful scream escaped the flower’s lips.

“Come to the garden. I’ll meet you there on any terms, I swear,” the honeybee declared, forcing herself to negotiate more reasonably, hoping to entice the parasite far away from his host with a dubious invitation that could lead to his destruction by the swarm.

The spider raised an eyebrow as if surprised, then smiled sardonically. “No doubt you would, little bee. You and all your devious little friends. Though we are not ungracious in the face of such a generous invitation. We accept your challenge.”

A flicker of triumph flashed across the honeybee’s face. The wildflower would be free and the monstrous spider, overwhelmed by numbers, wouldn’t survive the bloody encounter with the swarm to return and wreak more vengeance.

“But when we come, it shan’t be in the daylight. We’ll creep into the garden by night while you sleep in the hive. Then we’ll steal up to the sentries on a cold moonless night and tear them limb from limb before they have a chance to scream. And each night, we will do this until we find you. In the meantime, this flower is our hostage, and will suffer every time we see a honeybee or hear the drone of wings until the flower withers and dies. Only then, will we seek you

out in the garden.”

The spider struck again and again to tempt her within range, each time the wildflower screamed in terror.

The impotent honeybee closed her eyes and hurriedly withdrew from the scene of torture, knowing that the wildflower would only suffer more if she lingered. The lessons of the past were well learnt and this time she was prepared to accept the inevitable loss without an inner struggle, consoled by the knowledge that there really wasn't anything else that could be done until the spider came to the garden. She wasn't prepared to give up her summer, not for anyone, and in any case did not believe that such a sacrifice would save the wildflower. That was the brutal way of the wilderness, and the flower was just another victim of its rapaciousness, just as the honeybee had so nearly been. She'd been lucky; but for the flower there would be no such luck, save a change of heart in a creature without a heart.

The honeybee still had much to live for and achieve in the garden and the wilderness; too much to be distracted by selfless gestures that would accomplish nothing and be forgotten faster than the memory of yesterday's sunshine. Flying away seemed the only course of action open to her, chased unbeknown by another conscience on swifter wings.

4

Another day closed on the wilderness. One more page of summer consigned to memory and lost to eternity. Two conspirators came together under the cover of darkness to plot against the cruel invasive shadow which hung over their lives. The question was always the same. How to induce the spider to leave the flower. An effective answer was always beyond their grasp, but Zeb insisted, so long as any hope remained, that they address the problem and search for a solution.

“We need the honeybee’s sting,” the hoverfly proposed. “That’s the only way we can inflict a mortal wound on the spider. If I were a honeybee or a wasp - if I had a sting - I’d do something about the spider - never mind all this talk. Why didn’t you ask the honeybee to at least try?”

“Sshhh, keep your voice down,” Zeb whispered. “If Sisera hears us plottin’, the flower’ll suffer all the more for it.”

They both looked up at the withered silhouette, outlined by the full moon breaking through a gap in the swirling clouds that were gathering overhead as a storm front moved in from the west.

“HB was right, it would be hopeless to attack full on. That’s just what the spider wants. All you would do is get yourself killed, and the flower too. The spider ain’t gonna let the flower live once he gets the honeybee.”

“Deborah is dying anyway, what is there to lose from an attack?”

“If you’re gonna play the game, you may as well play to win. The honeybee knows that, she’s a lot smarter than you think. She knows it’ll take more than a single sting to kill Sisera.”

“She’s only got the one sting, where are the others going to come from?”

“I don’t know yet - maybe she’s workin’ on the other members of the swarm.”

“But you’re still going to help her in the garden?” the hoverfly mooted in disgust. “Even if she refuses to help us out here?”

“Sure, it’s a great chance to sculpt. I’m not just helpin’ the swarm, I’m tradin’ with ’em. Both communities benefit from trade. But Sisera’s our problem, this is our backyard. We gotta find a way to get rid of him ourselves.”

“You could persuade the honeybee, Zeb. She’d listen to you. Why don’t you bargain with her? Make it part of the trade?”

“She wants me to sculpt. You want her to get herself killed. That ain’t exactly a fair trade,” Zeb judged wryly. “Besides, it ain’t her fight.”

“Not her fight? Sisera is holding Deborah because of her!”

“The flower’s bin plottin’ against the spider all summer. The honeybee’s just a pretext for a show trial. This is somethin’ we gotta do by ourselves, and we don’t need a bee-sting for what I’ve got in mind.”

“What can we possibly do without an effective weapon?”

“Deb used to say the monster is headin’ for extinction – so why don’t we help him along with a gentle shove in the right direction?”

The moon was hidden once again behind the clouds and the silhouette of the wildflower was smudged against the tenebrous sky. Absorbed in their plotting, neither conspirator noticed the perverse awakening of tentacular petals, as if opening to worship the unholy night. The black spider

emerged from its despoiled domain, a monstrous angular growth corrupting the smooth curves of the withered floral tableau. The spider held the ephemeral pose for a fleeting moment; consulting its mentor, the darkness, before silently descending on powerful limbs, with a grace defying gravity, to slip into the undergrowth and vanish. Night swallowed the apparition of the predator, and night would conceal its dark ward until the fatal moment of a strike.

“But how?” the still sceptical hoverfly demanded to know, though he tingled with excitement at the prospect of action, inspired by the ebullient optimism of the earthworm. Zeb had clearly thought of something good.

“An idea I’ve bin formulatin’ for a while now. I talked over the logistics and plannin’ of it today with Naph.”

“Where is he? I thought he’d be here.”

“I told him to stay away. Sisera already knows I’m involved up to my long neck in a plot against him, but he don’t know about Naph yet. It’s gettin’ dangerous for the big, slow fella to be seen with us. He ain’t got no weapons or armour - just that huge gut o’ his.”

“But Sisera wouldn’t want to eat a slug.”

“He don’t eat flowers either. We don’t know what Sisera would do any more. He’s bin in power so long he’s just gone crazy. Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely. Naph is too vulnerable. I don’t want to bring him into strike range until we make our move.”

The hoverfly pressed him for more details. “So what have you got in mind?”

“We ain’t exactly a balanced fightin’ force, so we just gotta make use o’ what we got. That’s the key to all o’ this. You can fly, Naph is big and strong, and I can dig. But what you said about not having an effective weapon ain’t quite the truth. We got a weapon, the best weapon anyone could ask for!” Zeb tapped his temple.

The hoverfly frowned, unconvinced by what seemed like

an idealistic sentiment. “You can’t fight Sisera with your brain, Zeb.”

“Sure I can. Smartest beats strongest, you’ll see. It just takes a little time to figure out a way, that’s all.”

“But he’s got a big brain too. A huge brain - from all that meat he eats. He’s older and wiser than all of us put together.”

“He may be older, but there ain’t nobody wiser than me,” Zeb boasted.

“Pride comes before a fall,” the hoverfly warned.

“That’s right – but I’m not the one who’s gonna be doin’ the fallin’. He thinks he’s got an unbeatable mandate and we can’t touch him, but I’ve got a way o’ endin’ his leadership for good.”

“Tell me how?” the hoverfly begged eagerly.

“Keep your voice down and don’t get so excited, it’s only a slim chance.” The earthworm flashed darting glances about the undergrowth. “It could get us all killed, but like you said, we gotta do somethin’.”

The hoverfly noticed Zeb’s palms were pressing down on the soft earth and his gaze seemed to shift warily from side to side as if scanning the surrounds. A momentary glint of concern flashed in his eye. He suddenly spoke out loud, as if wishing to be overheard, despite his advice to the contrary seconds earlier.

“There’s nothin’ more we can do. We oughta just forget all about it and get on with our lives - freedom under the law,” the earthworm counselled, then dropped his voice to a subdued whisper as his grip tightened on the loose soil. “Somethin’s comin’, I can sense it through the ground. Meet again tomorrow - usual place and time. I’ll brief you on the plan. Now get goin’!”

The earthworm vanished into his hole just as the undergrowth parted; rent asunder by a thunderous, crashing blow, and a charging roar that shattered the still silence. The

hoverfly turned and froze in terror; confronting a primeval nightmare bearing down on him. He was fully aware of the ambush but unable to move; transfixed by the roaring cacophony in his ears and the red glare of eight eyes that seemed to fix and bore their malevolence into him.

The hoverfly realised, in an instant, that the end of his summer had come quite unexpectedly; and that all the plotting and planning to rescue the wildflower wouldn't amount to anything now, for no power on earth could undo the fatality which had enveloped him. Resigned to dying, he was overcome by calm acceptance as the image of the charging beast flooded his senses and overpowered him.

An incongruous blow came from below, knocking him aside. An urgent voice in his ear delved deep into his state of petrification, wrenching his attention from the entrapping glare. "Go! Go now! Lift off!" a voice yelled in his ear as a hand slapped his face.

The hoverfly looked down to see Zeb screaming and punching his side. In that instant, the spell was broken. A reflexive downstroke lifted his lithe body into the air as the great mass of the spider passed underneath like a juggernaut.

Barak circled overhead, shaking with anger and fear at the close encounter with death and his own momentary failure to respond to the threat. He dived and hovered perilously close to the spider in order to restore his pride and regain his nerve.

Sisera roared with laughter. "That was close, little hoverfly. Next time, I'll eat you for breakfast."

The jaws dripped, but with salivating toxins rather than blood. The hoverfly assumed that Zeb had made it back into his hole unscathed and sighed with relief.

"Closer than you think," the hoverfly retorted, with a provocative grin, passing low over the spider's back and viffing left then right as the great beast reared up and tried to snatch him from the air.

Honour partially satisfied, he soared up into the tempestuous sky where he lingered until dawn; seeking much needed catharsis on the thermal currents and soothed by the warm buffeting caress of an approaching summer storm.

5

The sunflower kept a wary eye on the distant speck banking through a wide turn against the backdrop of a blue sky. The destination of the honeybee was unclear. What bearing would she hold on pulling out? What flower, if any, was her intended target? The answer lay elsewhere, the sunflower concluded, as the honeybee flew past high overhead, leisurely perusing the serried ranks of ochre and gold.

Disappointed; the attention of the sunflower turned to other things, and in that instant the honeybee plunged in an outside loop before rolling and levelling off; then darting toward the unsuspecting sunflower at grass top level; banking away slightly at the last second then turning, unseen, into a tightly ascending helix about the sunflower's stem.

The sunflower squealed with delight as the honeybee's wings fluttered the sepal tips; rising higher up the stem with each revolution until the tips of her wings teased and tantalised the sensitive underside of the sunflower's petals.

Aroused, the soft curtain offered no resistance to penetration; parting as her head slipped into the flower and lunged forward; her tongue probing the carpels for their rich nectar whilst the overhanging stamens enveloped her in their pollen bearing caress.

A sudden alarm overhead drew the honeybee's attention away from the flower. She rose up into the sky to investigate the cause, guessing from the rallying nature of the cries that an intruder had been detected entering the garden.

The honeybee felt a knot tightening in her stomach at a

disturbing prospect. Since refusing to engage Sisera in the wilderness, a fear had lurked in the back of her mind that the spider would find a way of compelling her to fight. But for the spider to enter the garden in broad daylight seemed to lack any air of reality and the honeybee became sceptical of her own anxiety as she joined a group of honeybees hovering overhead.

They seemed fairly unperturbed by whatever may have triggered the alarm, and were laughing and joking among themselves. Clearly, this was not a threat to be taken too seriously.

“Do you think he knows where he is?” one of the bees mused. “He must have drank something really sweet.”

“Maybe he’s drunk the wilderness dry and now he’s looking for more.”

“What’s going on?” the honeybee asked, searching for the source of their amusement.

“There’s a hoverfly coming this way - on course for the sunflowers. He must know he’ll be intercepted before he reaches them.”

The honeybee tracked the slow, erratic approach of a hoverfly into the garden. He didn’t appear to be on course for the sunflowers, or anything else, but rather seemed to be searching for something in the air.

The honeybee recognised the striped pattern on the hoverfly’s back and groaned aloud at the risk he was taking.

“Come on, let’s have some fun,” one of the other bees urged, peeling away, followed by a second on her wing.

The pair dived on the hoverfly, which had very unwisely entered a highly restricted and heavily policed airspace. Gathering speed, the two blurred deltas swept down on the fragile target with sufficient momentum to knock it out of the sky; which they might well have done but for a beautifully timed and executed manoeuvre by the hoverfly. He viffed sideways and the bees shot through the empty

space.

“Did you see that?” the bee next to the honeybee exclaimed in amazement. “That was a clever move. He’s good, whoever he is.”

“Makes you wonder,” the honeybee murmured, quietly concerned for the reckless adventurer.

The hoverfly had crossed the lawn undetected; but knowing he was now a target, he went into a steep climb and began shouting at the top of his voice, deliberately alerting all the bees in the vicinity to his presence.

“What’s he saying?” one bee asked.

“Sounds like - HB!”

“Is that an insult of some kind?” another chortled.

“No, it’s a name with phonetics. HB - honeybee, get it?”

“What?”

“If he’s looking for a honeybee, he’s come to the right place. But who’s going to be seen talking to a hoverfly?”

“Maybe he’s looking for one of the survey bees? I heard they were going to start using names for identification.”

“How would he know about the survey?”

“Rumours spread fast, reaching far into the wilderness. Maybe he knows some of them. Maybe they invited him here to scout for them.”

“They can’t be serious? Invite an alien flyer into the garden without the sanction of the court? More likely he’s just drunk and lost his way.”

“Whatever the reason, he’s going to have a headache tomorrow - if he ever wakes up.”

Observers from all over this part of the garden looked on as another bee dived at a shallow angle, slower than the first attacking pair but coming in from behind the hoverfly and out of the sun. This time the hoverfly could not possibly see his assailant before the strike.

The honeybee shouted out a loud, urgent warning to the imperilled intruder.

Barak heeded the call and viffed again. Too late, he was struck a vicious glancing blow across the back.

The honeybee watched in horror as he began to drop out of control. Mercifully it seemed, the autogyration of his winged frame slowed the descent, though he showed no signs of consciousness. The extent of his internal injuries were unknown to the watching honeybees; he might be injured, or even dead. Then again, he might simply be stunned, in which case the next attack could cause serious injury; and another bee was already swooping in, determined to inflict a *coup de grace* before the hoverfly reached the soft earth; regarded as a sanctuary by the flyers. The latest glory seeking combatant was familiar enough to the honeybee. Neither fast nor poised, but brash and boastful, with a reputation for picking easy jousts.

The other bees hovering near the hoverfly's ally were surprised by the warning shout.

"Why did you do that?" a stern voice inquired.

"I like to see a fair contest," the offender pleaded.

"You just helped an intruder - a threat to our security!"

"Isn't the garden wonderful?" the grinning honeybee declared, then turned to one of her survey team. "We need that hoverfly alive - I'll explain later."

The survey bee acknowledged the instruction with a silent nod and banked away.

The honeybee turned to her accuser again with a smirk. "Watch this! You ain't seen nothin' yet!"

She began to dive, closing on the assassin from above and behind as the assassin closed on the helpless target. Speed ate into the two crucial distances, bringing the three players together as if coupled to converge at the same point.

Just before impact, the brash bee felt her tail flipped round by someone passing from behind. Losing all control, she tumbled harmlessly passed the hoverfly; recovering and pulling up with angry threats as she searched around for the

foiler. She didn't have far to look.

The honeybee hovered in descent, covering the unconscious hoverfly against further attacks with her own body. She was surprised to notice the body was covered in dark, congealed blood, but there were no obvious open wounds. Below, beneath the bright canopy of petals, the finely tilled soil of the flowerbed waited. They were nearly there now, just a few more seconds to go.

"He's no longer a threat, he's been disabled," the honeybee mitigated on behalf of the hoverfly.

"He's disabled? In that case maybe you'd like to take his place?" the brash bee taunted her.

"Maybe I would," the honeybee retorted, sorely tempted to beat this obnoxious character into the ground; but many others were arriving on the scene and taking up station behind the brash bee.

The honeybee's supporters, alerted by the survey bee, were also arriving. Though far fewer in number, they represented an idealistic and determined minority who would resist any assault on one of their faction. Their loyalty impressed the honeybee and she was loathe to squander it in a brawl that ought to be settled by reason in the court chamber.

"We need this hoverfly for the survey," the honeybee iterated loudly, as she cradled the limp form, cushioning Barak's impact with the ground before rising into the air again to speak before the swelling ensemble. "He knows the wilderness better than any of us and he has contacts with the artisans we need."

"The survey hasn't been approved by the court yet," the brash bee reminded her.

"It will be soon - and when it is we want to be ready. We've wasted enough time. The days are growing shorter - the summer is already starting to wane."

"We're not interested in your survey. And we don't want

his kind in the garden.”

“He’s a messenger, a go between, and a scout,” the honeybee lied, still not knowing the real purpose of the hoverfly’s visit; though she could guess it would be connected with Deborah in some way, perhaps news of the wildflower’s passing.

“Can’t you rendezvous outside of the garden?” a second bee suggested. “We know what you’re trying to do; first one then a dozen, and before we know it the whole garden will be overrun by them.”

The hoverfly’s presence was no longer a problem but an issue which had unexpectedly arisen ahead of time.

“He must be allowed to communicate with me as and when the situation demands it,” the honeybee insisted, appealing to those hovering behind the brash bee. “Suppose he brings news of a honeybee down in the wilderness and needing assistance?”

“Any honeybee stupid enough to venture out into the wilderness deserves what she gets,” the brash bee sneered derisively. “The wilderness is no business of ours, we want no entanglements there. The swarm should stay in the garden.”

“Or warning of a major incursion by predators?”

This caused some consternation.

“Predators have never ventured into the garden *en mass* before,” the second opponent stipulated. “They keep to their side of the border fence so long as we do the same.”

“There have been no significant raids in our living memory; but in previous summers, predators from the wilderness have killed queens and broods, and wiped out entire swarms in our hive.”

“How do you know this?” asked a sceptical bee.

“A ground spider told me,” she revealed candidly.

“You’ve spoken to a ground spider?”

“I have. An articulate and powerful predator from the

wilderness, whom we should all fear greatly.”

“If what you say is true, then your survey could endanger us all,” the brash bee pointed out.

“You’re already in danger, you just didn’t realise it until now. Ignorance is bliss, as they say, but it won’t make the predators go away.”

“What about the other dangers? From wilderness flyers, for instance? You risk destroying the whole fabric of our society from within just to serve your expansionist ambition. What gives you that right?” asked another bee.

“What gives you the right to deny freedom to others simply to preserve your own privileged status?” the honeybee argued, then offered a compromise as a way of diffusing the tense situation. “Let the hoverfly stay - just for today. He’ll be gone by nightfall. Do I have your consent in that - or are we to lose the only source of intelligence on predator movements that we currently have in the wilderness?”

The brash bee hesitated, her companions nervous and uncertain of the best course of action in contrast to those steadfastly loyal to the views aired by the honeybee. For the honeybee too, it was a tense moment; one of those in which she could not be certain of the wisdom of her own counsel; knowing only that time and history would eventually reveal all the answers.

“Do I have your consent?” the honeybee asked again. “Or would you deny the Queen a valuable agent at this crucial time?”

Aware of the possible consequences of displeasing the Queen, though perhaps persuaded more by incredulity than anything else; the brash bee shook her head in disgust and began to back away, pausing only to confirm the proviso, “Just for today.”

The mob dispersed, murmuring amongst themselves about the things which they had seen and heard, but unable to fathom the honeybee’s concern for a hoverfly; suspecting

her to be mad and more than a little anarchic. The honeybee's supporters likewise dispersed as she descended to land near the still form of the hoverfly.

"That was a close call," the nearby survey bee adjudged with a sigh of relief as the others departed. "We just don't have enough support to see this thing through in the face of so much determined opposition. No one really wants to get into a fight over the rights of hoverflies and no one believes the predators would really attack the hive."

"Then why did you support my position?"

"You said we needed him for the survey."

"Maybe we can use him, maybe we can't; but are you going to let a mob decide that for you?"

"Things are moving much too fast," the other bee protested. "We all want to do the survey, but not if it leads to a major break-up of order in the garden. You don't seem to care about the consequences of your actions. There's even a rumour going about that you secretly want a dissolution of the swarm."

The mask of the honeybee assumed a strange demeanour. A dark, manic shade of revelation from which the other bee recoiled.

"No one in their right mind would seek the dissolution of their own society," the honeybee insisted.

"No sane individual, perhaps. But what's in your mind?" the other bee demanded to know. "Are you mad?"

"It's a question of degree, I suppose," the honeybee mused with a chuckle. "My madness takes the form of obsession. But I love the garden, and the garden needs the swarm to maintain it, so I don't want to see it break-up just yet. Do I still have your backing for our great enterprise?"

The other bee nodded grudgingly. "You have it for now," she confirmed, then banked away.

The honeybee wondered, with private pessimism, how much longer she would need it for, as she watched the other

bee climbing away. She looked down at the hoverfly, still motionless on the ground below. The alien flyer had brought with him the shadow of a dreadful premonition, creeping insidiously into the cogs of a well-oiled machine. The honeybee sensed that her two worlds were about to collide at a very bad time.

The hoverfly groaned, stirring back to life as his lithe frame was being examined for signs of damage. The blood was a mystery. It was too old to have been caused by the recent impact and the honeybee suspected that it wasn't from the hoverfly's body. No hoverfly could lose so much blood and still fly. There was a bruise developing on his back, but fortunately his wings showed no visible signs of impairment. He would probably fly again.

"How do you feel?" the honeybee inquired.

"Like I've just been hit by a honeybee," came the acerbic reply.

"Well, my friend, it just so happens that you have."

The hoverfly struggled to stand, swaying slightly; still dazed, but trying to fix his accusatory stare on the other flyer.

"They could have killed me!"

"But they didn't."

"No thanks to you! I thought honeybees were against taking life?"

"Sometimes we're prepared to let providence lend a hand."

"Then I'll thank providence for my good fortune and not the inept flying of your friends."

"They're not my friends, they're associates; and you're alive because they refrained from using their stings on your soft body. You must have known the reception you'd get by coming here. Why take the risk?"

"How else am I supposed to contact you?"

The honeybee was silent, recognising an oversight in

making no provision for communication with his contacts in the wilderness. This was another irksome issue that would have to be thrashed out at a lively committee hearing.

“Lucky for you I was in the air. You were outnumbered; you flew straight and level for too long; and you allowed a bee to come straight out of the sun.”

“If I wasn’t looking for you, I could have flown all the way through, and even grabbed some nectar from a sunflower on passing. The air space above the garden is not as well-defended as everyone seems to think.”

In a flash, the guileful mind of the politician considered the propaganda value to her cause of a hoverfly who could run the gauntlet of the defending bees and traverse the entire garden, west to east, and take nectar from a flower. She doubted whether any honeybee could do it.

“Why were you looking for me?” she asked.

“Why do you think?”

“Deborah?”

The hoverfly nodded.

“Is the wildflower still alive?” the honeybee inquired, as if surprised.

The blunt question belied all emotion, and her unyielding sternness provoked the hoverfly.

“Why should you care - now that you’re flying again?”

“If you thought I didn’t care, you wouldn’t have come all this way and taken a beating just to deliver bad news,” the honeybee replied, her voice low in resignation.

The hoverfly shifted his face to the ground, then looked away thoughtfully; as if deeply discomfited by a dreadful memory. “We fought Sisera this morning,” he revealed.

“What? How?” asked the honeybee, with a sceptical frown.

“Just before dawn. We caught him in the open - returning from a night patrol.”

“We?”

“Zeb, Naph, and myself. I buzzed and goaded him until he was lured to where Zeb and Naph were both waiting.”

“Zeb and Naph?” The honeybee’s incredulity leapt an octave at the thought of the slow, soft skinned, unarmed ground dwellers engaging the monstrous spider with his swift legs, powerful jaws, and deadly fangs.

“Yes, Zeb and Naph. Who else? There were no honeybees to call upon.” The hoverfly glared at her accusingly. “I had to make the initial attacks myself to lure him into the trap.”

The honeybee immediately began to suspect that things had gone disastrously wrong. She listened impassively, resisting the urge to interrupt again. From the anguished state of the hoverfly, it was clear that something terrible must have happened.

“Zeb excavated a pit around the mouth of one of his holes. The earth piled up to one side, concealed by bracken, with Naph hiding behind it. Once I got Sisera to the edge, Zeb took over; taunting with that sharp wit of his until the spider roared and lunged in after him; tearing at the earth to widen the hole at the bottom. Naph, meanwhile, bulldozed the earthpile into the pit on top of the monster, burying him alive.”

“Is Sisera dead?” the honeybee asked in disbelief, staggered and amazed by the audacity of the plan, and the courage of those who had carried it out.

“We thought so. Zeb escaped through his tunnel at the bottom of the pit and resurfaced from a different hole nearby to join us as Naph was flattening the earthfill. We stood over the unmarked grave just as the sun was rising, glancing at each other with tears of joy in our eyes; our hearts alive with celebration and relief that it was finally over and Deborah was free. But then, the dawn sky suddenly seemed to grow dark again as the leaden clouds gathered from nowhere. There was a rumble of thunder overhead as if we’d angered the heavens, and lightning forked to earth,

striking the burial mound. We realised then that Sisera is divine - just as he claims - he cannot be killed.”

“Anything that lives can be killed,” the honeybee insisted grimly.

“Not Sisera. He is blessed by a dark-god, more powerful than any sun-god. The earth beneath our feet began to tremble as if a primeval monster, entombed since ancient times, had been woken in rage from a sleep of aeons. Tremors spread as the earth cracked, and the air began to shimmer as the heat of Sisera’s fury poured out of the ground; and to our horror, we watched, helpless, as the soil began to move, then part, and the monster clawed his way up out of the earth with murder in his eyes. Zeb dived underground, and I took to the air, but Naph was too slow to run, too big to hide; too slow, too big ...” the hoverfly repeated himself over and over again, shaking his head. “We were sure it would work, we gambled everything, but we forgot the *deus ex machina*.”

“What happened to Naph?” asked the honeybee, apprehension constricting her voice.

“Sisera fell upon him, slashing and stabbing with merciless fury. I tried to come between them but nothing could have stopped the terrible onslaught. All those stories, everything we ever heard or were told about the spider’s strength and ferocity - it’s all true,” the hoverfly disclosed, in a shocked state of disbelief, reliving the event through glazed eyes.

“Is Naph dead?” the honeybee inquired gravely, knowing now the source of dried blood on the hoverfly’s usually immaculate silvery wings.

“Ripped apart; literally torn to pieces by Sisera’s jaws and shredded by his fangs. There was nothing left in the end. Nothing recognisable. Just a mangled heap of flesh and blood, blood everywhere. I’ve never seen so much blood; pools of it were left soaking into the ground.”

The hoverfly looked up earnestly at the other flyer with

tears in his eyes, as if needing to be believed and granted absolution.

He was greeted by an unfeeling expression, even though a heavy mixture of anger and inner guilt harried the honeybee. The rising toll for her escape from the undergrowth now encompassed the death of a fine friend; the gentle giant who had stood by her through the dark night when she so desperately needed help.

In a moment of solipsism, the honeybee considered that Sisera, through his actions, could be deliberately reaching beyond the wilderness to taunt and antagonise her; stirring up those base emotions which were detrimental to her equilibrium and could destroy her political ambitions; before ultimately drawing her back to fulfil her role in a tragedy.

“What about Zeb? Is he safe?” the honeybee pressed, conducting herself with a stoic pragmatism she barely felt under the circumstances, but knew to be correct.

“Oh yes, Zeb is safe,” the hoverfly confirmed bitterly. “Will you ask the same of Deborah? The flower was next to suffer for our failure.”

“When will it ever end?” the honeybee cursed.

“There is only one way it can end. The way it should have ended the day you came down in the wilderness. The flower would have been summarily executed as a reprisal, but I made a deal with the spider.”

“What deal?” the honeybee asked, quite unnecessarily, since a cognitive answer swept through her like a chill breeze.

“To bring you back before sunset.” The hoverfly swallowed an apologetic lump in his throat for what he was saying. “It was the only way, it is the only way.”

The words sang to the honeybee with a prophetic resonance, calling up a haunting melody from the pit where dark memories are disposed. Her *todesangst*. The familiar overture of death which had haunted her since early spring.

“You said that Sisera cannot be killed,” the honeybee recalled, like an advocate carefully considering the facts of a testimony.

“I know, but you must, don’t you see. We have no other choice. With Naph gone, there is nothing more we can do before sunset, even if we had another plan. I don’t expect you to simply fly into his jaws, we’ll coordinate an attack. I’ll divert him for you. With your sting, we at least have a slim chance, a fighting chance. Would you deny the flower that last hope?”

“What chance?” The honeybee laughed; a shallow, skittish display of mirth without conviction. Then she reiterated the belief of the hoverfly. “You said that Sisera cannot be killed.”

“In the wilderness, there are some who say that about you.”

“That’s superstition.”

“Superstition for you - but not for him?”

“Sisera’s summers have no beginning and no end compared to our puny lives. We’d be raising the flower’s hopes for nothing. Better to slip away quietly than be given false hope.”

“Is that all you can say? How can you be so cold and calculating after all we did for you? Deborah saved your life, got you flying again, and is now paying the ultimate price. How many lives does it take just to keep you in the air?”

The honeybee turned sharply on the recriminating hoverfly; deciding it was time to throw some retrospective light on the valour of the sacrifice, despite her admiration for the courageous action of the brave wildflower. “We both know that Deborah has been conducting a private war against Sisera all summer. The flower is a casualty of that war after saving me to fight the spider with the help of the swarm. But the swarm won’t deploy outside of the garden this summer and any unilateral action by a single bee is

certain to fail.”

The hoverfly seemed taken aback by the remarks. “How long have you known?”

“Deborah raised the subject on my last night in the wilderness. It’s easy to see why an isolated flower, inordinately fond of a few flyers, might be driven to obsessive behaviour by the loss of so many precious friends. Deborah denied Sisera another victim, then hoped that I would destroy the spider. A rational objective, but one that can never be realised.”

“That’s not strictly true,” the hoverfly remonstrated. “Deborah may hate the spider but still loves you. I was forbidden from getting word to you because of what you might do. Deborah could have welcomed you into Sisera’s ambush and perhaps been freed as a reward, but warned you off instead.”

“A moot point,” the honeybee declared coldly. “The flower is dedicated to a cause even now as the selfless martyr, denying Sisera at every turn, trying to invoke decisive help by a subtle deception. You’re a pawn in that deception. We all have our causes. Mine is not the destruction of the spider unless he enters the garden.”

“No, yours is to see out the summer with these facile flowers who can’t tell one flyer from another, even when they’re crawling on their bellies.”

“The rules of etiquette are strictly observed for a good reason. They allow us to compete and achieve all the things we do best in partnership with the flowers.”

“Achieve what? What did anyone ever achieve in the garden?”

The honeybee looked up at the towering sunflowers in the distance and wondered how to explain to the impassioned hoverfly the advantage of aesthetics over emotion. The bees of the garden had evolved away from their primitive, emotive roots into a highly productive, efficient, and wealthy

species.

The honeybee, in the aftermath of great trauma, had regressed temporarily to a more immature state and nearly lost her life in the process. Now, the hoverfly was exhibiting the same symptoms; becoming obsessed with the fate of a single flower; just as the honeybee had when her half-sister was caught in the tunnel web.

The honeybee was certainly afraid of fighting the spider, afraid of dying; but there was something else haunting her - fear of failure; of squandering her precious existence without a tangible reward for that sacrifice. There was so much more to consider now, so much more at stake than relationships between individuals.

“You don’t call this an achievement?” the honeybee inquired, with eyebrows raised and a hint of pride in her voice. “The most highly evolved and enlightened society in the world. We fly on nothing more than the nectar the sunflowers produce from the sun while so many others out there in the wilderness exist on a diet of flesh.”

“There are nectar-drinkers in the wilderness too,” the hoverfly reminded her. “And there’ll be one less highly-enlightened flower out there if you don’t come back and help us.”

“Fighting Sisera isn’t a realistic option, it’s certain death. Do you think that’s the outcome Deborah would want to see?”

“We can’t just stand off and watch an execution.”

“You could stay here in the garden. It’s something you’ve always wanted to do. The other bees won’t bother you again - not today - maybe not ever if you keep a low profile and assimilate quietly.”

A weak smile broke through the strained features of the hoverfly. An expression of pity rather than contempt. “I used to envy the honeybees their beautiful garden, but not any more. The price of your materialism is just too high and

you're all so terrified of losing it. The greatest gift of all is something none of you will ever know." The hoverfly rose to his feet and tested his wings, shaking his head in a dispirited fashion. "I have to go back, to be there for the wildflower at the end of the day ..."

The honeybee experienced a sudden flashback. For a split second she was back in the dark tunnel facing the web spider again. Another bee was hovering nearby. The confused honeybee realised that now she was the one caught in the web, struggling in vain.

The hoverfly's voice cut in again. "... I can buzz and strafe with dry runs until the spider kills me or ends it for the flower."

The honeybee implored her not to go, aware that her failure to dissuade the hoverfly would result in another needless death. "You don't stand a chance," she pleaded. "The last thing the wildflower sees will be you in the jaws of the spider."

"It won't come to that if I can help it. But if it does, then Deborah will understand. No one in the garden would - it hasn't been codified here."

The flashback struck the honeybee violently again. She looked at the other bee, hovering nearby, and recognised her own desperate features mirrored in the face before the memory vanished.

She faced up to the present reality once more and focussed her argument to keep the hoverfly from going.

"You talk of gifts. The greatest gift of all is summer. You've still got yours, hold on to it for as long as you can."

"If that were true, then you would never have left the garden."

"I wasn't behaving rationally then."

"Maybe that's what you'd like to believe. I think you risked your life out there searching for something you couldn't find here. Something that doesn't exist in this demi-

Eden. Something that only the wretches in the wilderness possess. We both know that Deborah is unlike any flower in the garden.”

“There are so many flowers here; so many varied individuals; they’re not all the same,” the honeybee sighed, trying not to think of the peculiar merits of any single one.

“Where were they when you needed them?”

“Where was I when they needed me?”

“You were down in the wilderness. Since that day you’ve been living on borrowed time and you’ve made good use of it. But now it’s payback time.”

“There’s no way I can ever repay that debt,” the honeybee insisted, holding a pragmatic line. “If there were, I would have done it by now.”

“If Sisera entered the garden and attacked a flower there are plenty who would challenge him. Would you fight then to defend your precious sunflowers? Your friends were brave enough against an unarmed hoverfly.”

“My ‘friends’ gathered behind me to protect a stunned and senseless hoverfly against further attack until he reached sanctuary,” the honeybee revealed angrily.

The hoverfly conceded his error with a nod and an appreciative smile, but continued pressing the case for some form of action. “You’ve laid claim to part of the wilderness on behalf of the swarm. Your first foothold - your first colony. Now you must defend that claim against the predators.”

“The swarm would deploy against a serious threat to the garden to defend a principle - not for the sake of territory,” the honeybee countered.

“What principle?”

“To prevent the predators from encroaching on the garden from the wilderness and establishing a carnivorous hegemony here.”

“It is being said, in the wilderness, that Sisera will enter the

garden this summer and lay waste to it.”

The honeybee recalled the challenge she had issued to try and save Deborah, and wondered if Sisera really were crazy enough, or powerful enough, to declare war on the swarm at the height of summer. She dismissed the fanciful proposition. “That’s just wildtalk.”

“Sisera doesn’t make idle threats. When he’s finished with the flower, he’ll come here to kill you and any other bee who opposes him; then you’ll have to fight. Think how hollow that war will seem then, after your appeasement of him. Do it now - while you still have something honourable to fight for.”

The honeybee shook her head impatiently. “We both know that isn’t true. To seek me here would be as suicidal for Sisera as it would be for me to attack him in the wilderness. The entire swarm would be directed against him as soon as he crossed the border.”

“What if he doesn’t seek you out straight away? What if he creeps in under the cover of darkness, finds a place to hide up or defend during the day, then emerges each night to take out one of your precious sunflowers until you give yourself up to him?”

The honeybee shifted uneasily as an image of the spider emerging from the tunnel at night flashed vexatiously in her mind’s eye. The hoverfly, in his emotional state, might not be thinking very clearly, but this was an apposite and disturbing proposition. What if Sisera firmly believed that the swarm was preparing to extend its influence into the wilderness? Such a move would inevitably bring the two super-entities into conflict. Far better for Sisera to strike first in the enemy’s homeland before advances in organisation and flying, especially night-flying, made the swarm too powerful to contest.

The honeybee wilfully put aside thoughts of the garden’s strategic vulnerability, and concentrated instead on the

condition of the hoverfly who had just seen one friend butchered and had still to accept the imminent death of another. In time, he would come to realise the futility of it all and accept the tragic apportionment of his life without self-destructive emotional recalcitrance. But the hoverfly had very little time left if he returned now - perhaps not even the remains of a single day.

The gut numbing chill of old returned at the realisation of another life about to collide with the debris strewn by her past. Even with so much new wisdom and experience, it seemed that the honeybee was not immune to the extravagant ravages of conscience, festering with the words of the hoverfly.

The option existed of pursuing the hoverfly and knocking him out of the sky to save his life. The honeybee toyed with the impulsive idea until it faded, suppressed by a sense of tragic fatalism. The flower should have a hero and the hero his loving gesture of sacrifice; not the enmity and cruel disjuncture that a facile honeybee's intervention would bring. No, let the gallant hoverfly die with his wildflower. Still, the option was unpalatable. There had to be an alternative, the honeybee decided, her eyes on the dazzling canopy overhead.

Diffuse sunlight from translucent petals mixed in the glade where they had landed. In peripheral vision, the air seemed to sparkle, as if tiny little phosphorescent fireflies were dancing away the last few hours of daylight. The honeybee looked for the reflection in the dulled glaze of her companion's eye.

The hoverfly, having to endure the longest and most traumatic day of his life, shifted uncomfortably beneath the searching stare; and the bee wondered how much energy was left to spend in his lithe body before closure with the sunset.

"There is one other way," the honeybee sighed. "Maybe

not to save the wildflower, I don't believe such a power exists, but perhaps a way to resolve the situation without needlessly sacrificing ourselves."

"There is only one way," the pale, vacant-looking hoverfly insisted.

"Perhaps," the honeybee conceded. "But first you will have to convince me of it."

"How?" the hoverfly inquired desperately, impatient and suspicious, as if expecting fraudulent trickery.

"Can't you see?"

"See what?"

"All of this," the honeybee cried, with a sweeping gesture of her arm.

The hoverfly tried to fix his stare on the honeybee, but was irresistibly drawn to the magnificent splendour all around. The garden, with its heavily scented perfume and psychedelic colours, seemed to communicate through a narcotic spell; enticing and provocative to one from the wilderness.

"My birthright!" the honeybee proclaimed. "Soon it could be yours, and every other flyer from the wilderness who wishes it so. Would you deny yourself all of this for the sake of a wildflower?"

"Yes!" The reply was emphatic and quickly delivered; perhaps too quickly.

"Then prove it by staying on my wing as I show you around," the honeybee ordered, airborne without warning and rising up out of the flowerbed before offering the main prize. "If you can do this, then I'll engage the spider before sunset."

The honeybee gave him no chance to question the terms and conditions of the offer. The hoverfly simply had to follow, inadvertently brushing against the tip of a petal as he rose past an attractive flower who smiled at him invitingly.

Drawn to the welcoming gesture, the coarse wilderness

flyer momentarily forgot the grave circumstances of a mission to which he was bound by duty and loyalty. The instinctive pull disquieting in the wake of his pledge which, by a fine diminution, seemed less binding now than in the heat of rhetoric.

The honeybee climbed leisurely over the flowerbed until the colourful assembly merged below into an enchanting mosaic. The hoverfly followed; the aesthetic being within becoming aroused by the visual stimuli unfolding below. There was no comparable imagery in the plains and woods of the wilderness; nothing with the intensity and power to burn through the barriers of existential pain. The honeybee dipped a wing and slowly began descending in wide, lazy circles. The hoverfly did likewise, gliding effortlessly on the flank of the bee, buoyed weightless by the rich scented air.

The hoverfly closed his eyes for a few moments then opened them again, momentarily casting aside the shackles of his predicament. The bright, enticing petals were nearer than before, and more fantastic to behold, the impulse recharged. He did it again, so that the petals became nearer still. And again. The hoverfly was aware of his growing dissociation and yet helpless in the face of sensory intoxication. The sights, sounds, and sweet smells of the garden were soporific beyond anything he had ever experienced, and the trauma of events had left him unusually susceptible to their influence. He needed an escape from harsh reality, if only for a short while, to replenish the energy lost and regain his strength. There was still plenty of time; he could still return before sunset, with or without the honeybee, and fulfil his pact.

The hoverfly cursed his decadent thoughts and closed on the honeybee's wing again, reaffirming his commitment to maintain the station. The honeybee dived, the hoverfly followed, both shooting through the clusters of petals into the shadowy world of mixed colours from where their little

odyssey had begun. The honeybee weaved in and out of the stems with ever increasing speed, building up the energy to an extent that even the manoeuvrable hoverfly found difficult to match. The honeybee drew further and further ahead, jinxing in and out of sight until finally no longer there.

The hoverfly slowed until stationary, now alone in the glade; angry and exhausted, he conceded defeat on the point of collapse. It had been an unfair test, considering his fatigue and bruised condition; a strain on his limited resources which had failed to resolve the situation.

The honeybee had deserted him, but the hoverfly was not completely alone.

“That was quite something to behold,” a voice noted; clipped and articulate, with a velvet timbre that enveloped the enervated flyer.

Drawn to the source, his gaze met that of a striking red tulip with subtle highlights.

“We know the honeybees are not the only flyers in creation,” the flower remarked. “But they do like to think they’re the best.”

“We’re usually better at low level,” the hoverfly testified wearily.

“Are you from the wilderness?” the flower asked keenly; disturbed by the melancholy of this strange flyer, though curious about his origins and presence here.

The hoverfly gave an affirmative nod; allowing himself to drift away on a gentle breeze which offered a chivalrous escape from the flower’s overpowering aura.

“We hope to see a lot more of you soon. The honeybees are in a state of confusion at the moment, they don’t know what they want, which is good for us. We can sense change coming to the garden.”

“You mean you actually want to meet flyers from the wilderness?” the hoverfly asked in surprise. He paused;

vectoring against the breeze; momentarily distracted by a revelation contradicting all that which he had ever been taught.

“Some of us do, yes. We want the choice. The honeybees have too much control over our lives.”

“The first honeybee I ever met couldn’t even fly.”

“Where is she now?”

“Dead,” he pronounced, with some sadness. “Her summer ended in the wilderness.”

The puzzled flower issued a quiet condolence. The hoverfly studied the floral expression for the signs of affectation which the honeybee had once spoken of. Under different circumstances, flirting with such a beautiful adversary in this demi-paradise would have been enthralling.

“How did you make it past the pickets?” the flower inquired, an enchanting quality in the lilt drawing the flyer closer again.

“I was lucky; but it looks like that luck has just about run out,” the hoverfly sighed, still hoping to sight the honeybee; though each sweeping glance seemed to end with a vision of the tulip. He tried to resist the enchantment. “I have to go now, there’s something I have to do ... before it’s too late ...”

Staring into the eyes of the flower, even from a distance, unnerved the hoverfly, as if he’d never seen anything so beautiful and beguiling in all his philandering life.

“Stay awhile, maybe your luck will change,” the tulip urged.

The hoverfly was drawn closer, allowing himself to drift towards the flower until there was no longer a divide between them. At the last moment he hesitated, held back by the distant memory of a world in discord, but in that moment the decision was made for him.

6

High overhead, the honeybee waited patiently for the outcome. Either the hoverfly would emerge feeling understandably indignant at the unsporting odds and protesting vigorously; in which case integrity would compel her to keep her word and carry out some limited form of action against the spider that would only cause the wildflower further distress; or he would not emerge, in which case the honeybee could calculate that she had at least saved the life of the hoverfly.

Deborah would understand. Having twice stood between the honeybee and Sisera, it seemed inconceivable that the wildflower would not wish her to do the same for the hoverfly.

A respectable time passed, and the hoverfly failed to emerge from the glade. Satisfied with the outcome, the honeybee climbed back into the heart of the swarm, losing sight of the thoughtful tulip to whom she had entrusted the life of a wilderness flyer.

The honeybee flew to the hive, landed, and walked past various busy bees to the chamber of the royal court. A sentry greeted her.

“I have to speak with the leader of the survey committee - urgently,” she insisted.

The committee leader was informed and appeared a short time later, looking grim and unimpressed with the summons, but duty bound to receive news of further developments. The honeybee was shown into a consultation chamber.

“What do you want?” the counsellor asked gruffly.

“An audience with the Queen.”

The counsellor laughed. “Why would the Queen consent to that? Even if she were sympathetic to your plan, which she certainly is not, you’ve been causing us a lot of trouble lately. Uppity flowers, brawls over alien rights - if she sees you, she’ll probably want to kill you for being anarchic.”

“Perhaps, if you were to inform her that I know how her predecessor died, she might be willing to see me.”

The counsellor appeared nonplussed at such a ridiculous remark. “We all know how the process of succession works. It may seem brutal - but it’s the only way to maintain brood production when an old queen falters.”

“This was no ordinary succession. Tell her, the killer is planning to do it again - very soon. If she wants more information, she’ll have to see me.”

The counsellor continued to eye her warily, and the honey bee realised that she was ignorant of the circumstances by which the previous queen had been deposed and murdered.

“The history of each summer should be chronicled in beeswax,” the honeybee suggested. “Another proposal for your committee to consider.”

The counsellor frowned, then disappeared into another chamber for a short while before reappearing.

“Come with me,” she ordered. “And be warned - this could cost you your summer.”

The honeybee was led into the royal chamber, accompanied by the counsellor, to face the Queen. The mother of the honeybee, and all the workers; though as the seeress had speculated, that familial relationship counted for little in the hive. The Queen was a formidable looking creature to behold, twice the size of a worker honeybee and armed with a smooth rapier sting with which to stab repeatedly without fear of disembowelling herself. But after the horror of facing up to Sisera and the predators of the wilderness, the Queen

instilled very little fear in the honeybee. She knew the Queen could sense this and would regard the honeybee as even more of a threat as a consequence. The pheromones of the Queen were designed to make all other bees docile in her presence and subservient to her will, as well as repressing the urge to have offspring of their own. The honeybee had no desire to have physical offspring, but was giving birth to ideas that were just as threatening to the established order of things.

“We are informed that you wish to speak with us on some urgent matter,” the Queen remarked, with cold menace in her tone.

The honeybee bowed her head slightly as a mark of respect that jarred slightly with her egalitarian vision for the future of the swarm. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

“How may we help you?”

“The spider called Sisera, a predator from the wilderness, is using a flower as a honeytrap.”

“What flower? Our standing patrols are supposed to protect against any infiltration by predators.”

“A wilderness flower, Your Majesty,” the advising counsellor pointed out. “So I have heard.”

The honeybee was not surprised that the counsellor knew. The court took a keen, but surreptitious, interest in any affair of the wilderness that might impact on the garden.

“Why does this concern us?”

The counsellor smiled weakly and directed the Queen back to the anarchic honeybee.

“Sisera claims to have killed your predecessor,” the honeybee divulged. “He’s threatening to destroy the swarm this autumn by raiding the hive.”

The Queen absorbed this significant information without displaying any outward emotion. “Do you have communication with this - Sisera?”

The honeybee nodded, suspecting that the Queen knew a

lot more about 'this Sisera' than she was ready to reveal at this stage.

"Why would he want to destroy the swarm?"

The honeybee swallowed hard, realising that this could be a pivotal moment, perhaps her last. "He is claiming that the swarm is a threat to the security of his territory."

"Why would he think that?"

"Because of our survey plans."

The Queen sighed deeply, as if greatly displeased. "In that case, all plans for a survey will have to cease - immediately." She glanced sharply at the counsellor, who nodded compliantly.

"These claims are simply a pretext for aggressive action on the spider's part," the honeybee insisted.

"Then we can hold you personally responsible for this breakdown in our relations with the predators of the wilderness," the Queen presumed.

"I didn't know we had relations with the predators of the wilderness," the honeybee professed.

"Officially we don't. But there are back-channels to facilitate communication in a crisis," the counsellor explained.

"Why is the spider using this particular flower as a honey trap?" asked the Queen.

"As punishment for aiding a grounded honeybee. The wildflower sheltered me when I went down over the wilderness."

"What were you doing flying over the wilderness?"

"I got lost," she answered briskly, not wishing to relate the embarrassing details of her past.

"Sometimes we despair of this new generation," the Queen disclosed wryly, shaking her head. "The predators of the wilderness fear the swarm; they keep to their sphere of influence and expect us to do the same. We cannot force individual bees to stay out of the wilderness, but we will not sanction any activity which threatens to rebound on the

harmony of the garden. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Now, what is it this spider really wants?”

“My head.”

“Then perhaps we should give it to him as a gesture of our grace and goodwill.”

“Ma’am, such appeasement would simply mark you out as weak in Sisera’s eyes and make no difference to his plans. He may humour you for a while, but he is not going to be appeased forever. He has made it be known that his intention is to destroy our swarm and its legacy, and I believe that is the course he will follow, no matter what else transpires.”

“How can you be so sure of your assessment?”

“Because I have seen and spoken to him at length. He is neither passive nor hedonistic. He is an ascetic killer; a crazed warlord who lives for conflict and would die in pursuit of it should his adventure not succeed. Previous queens have been killed, and their swarms destroyed by Sisera, and this autumn it will happen again.”

“Are his boasts the sole source of your information?”

“The brood workers at the start of your reign; those who lived through the deposition; must have warned you about the threat he poses.”

“That was a long time ago,” the Queen mused grimly. “We thought such times had passed. So what policy would you advise us to follow now?”

“A pre-emptive strike in daylight. He’s sitting on the wildflower, exposed to an attack - we can take him out with twenty stings.”

“Twenty stings would mean twenty dead bees. We have no prerogative to order such an operation in the wilderness. Where are you going to find twenty volunteers for a suicide mission so far from the garden?”

“There’s a technique called strafing - it means that we drag and slice with the tip of our sting rather than impale with it.

This way we can strike repeatedly and survive.”

“Where did you get this idea of ‘strafing’ from?”

“The wilderness.”

“The wilderness is clearly a dangerous place,” she mooted. “It puts innovative thoughts in the heads of worker bees. If we were to colonise the wilderness there would be further decoupling from our traditional mores at the frontier of our expansion.”

“I would like to see that frontier hypothesis tested,” the honeybee admitted. “We each have a right to develop as individuals and influence the social order.”

“Yes, but haven’t you noticed that we rely heavily on the labour of those who are willing to work without thinking too much about anything? Without those workers, our society could not exist.”

“In its present form,” the honeybee concurred. “The whole *raison d’etre* of the swarm seems to be survival of the species through a massive effort to reproduce each summer. Thousands of worker bees live brief, frenetic lives according to a preordained program. We need to evolve thinker bees who can survive for many summers and advance the species with knowledge and innovation.”

“What you are saying could be interpreted as anarchic,” warned the Queen.

“My desire is to leave a legacy that will inspire thoughtful progress in summers hence. But ma’am, you face a very real danger this autumn if nothing is done. Sisera claims to know the layout of the hive - he claims to have witnessed its creation. He is immensely powerful and will come when the bees are few and inert due to cold; and if he finds you in this chamber, he will kill you.”

The Queen remained impassive as she considered this threat. The honeybee concluded that she was taking it seriously - her impertinence would not otherwise have been tolerated.

“You claim to know how to destroy him, but have you ever used this strafing technique before?”

“No.”

“Do you know any bees who have?”

“No.”

“So how long will it take for them to learn?”

“We don’t have time for training. If we don’t strike this afternoon it’ll be too late.”

“Too late for whom?” she inquired.

“The flower is in a desperate condition and dying as we speak.”

The Queen smiled sardonically. “Are we to infer that you are fond of this wildflower?”

“No, of course not. But when the flower is dead, Sisera will go to ground and be hard to locate. We cannot afford to miss this opportunity.”

“We must confer with the court first,” the Queen decided. “To deploy the swarm beyond the confines of the garden, even to deal with a confirmed threat, would set a very dangerous precedent. How will the other predators react? At the present time, we have only your word that Sisera intends to move against us. At the very least, we need corroboration. Your survey will go ahead after all; but to gather useful intelligence on the predators and their allegiance to Sisera, as well as the layout of the land.”

The honeybee bowed her head and left the chamber, having achieved a partial success. She made her way to the entrance of the hive and watched for a while as the flights of honeybees, heavily laden with nectar, touched down on the platform before carrying their precious cargo into the factories where it was transmuted into honey for the sustenance of all. She suddenly felt envious of those honeybees who lived for their simple pleasures and knew nothing of the geopolitics that threatened their existence.

She launched herself aggressively into the air and refused

to be troubled any further by a sense of guilt or responsibility in the matter of the wildflower. The acquisitive, murderous nature of the spider desired her destruction and had skilfully manoeuvred her into an untenable position by arraying Barak and Deborah in the line of fire. The honeybee had also moved by intensifying her survey plans. But Sisera possessed a key advantage in this game, beyond the wisdom of years. He was a psychopath and possessed no soul or conscience. The lives he took were merely a statistic. The honeybee wondered whether the spider could perceive the strain the captive wildflower's plight placed on her embryonic notions of loyalty and affection?

The sense of persecution was disturbing; the corollary being the threat of further sanction by the spider from beyond the confines of the garden once he had finished with the wildflower. In appeasement, the honeybee was willing to sacrifice the wildflower for the sake of her ambition; though only if the account were closed and the dark days of the past finally put to rest. By winter, she would be with the sun-god, and the Queen would have to deal with her ruthless nemesis in her own way or succumb like her predecessor. The thought of Sisera killing the Queen did not disturb the honeybee; though the certain knowledge that so long as Sisera existed the swarm would never be allowed to evolve as an intellectual entity lay at the heart of her despair. The great gulf between garden and wilderness had lately narrowed to the point where conflict seemed inevitable.

And what if the spider found some other way to attack her after killing the flower, as he had threatened to do? The omnipotent nightmonster would find a way to strike, if only to haunt her dreams and gloat on the deaths caused by the self-indulgent folly of a naive honeybee who had lost her way in the spring.

She continued climbing in a vacant state of mind, in denial of her responsibilities; knowing she was missing the point

though somehow unable to grasp the kernel of the solution; but able to envisage it lying somewhere ahead through the swirling mists of thought space.

High above her convoluting peers; riding on the thin air conducive to fanciful circumspection; the honeybee searched for any conceivable alternative that might be constructed from a limited set of options.

Conscience was a key factor playing on her mind and would continue to do so throughout the summer if she pursued her present course. The alternative was to end all her ambition in a suicidal attack on the spider. If she failed to make the attack, a sense of guilt would soon cripple her again and render her useless in the political battles to come.

She came round to the inevitable course of action and considered how to attack the spider. The orthodox approach would be to dive out of the sun, unseen until the last second. If skilfully deployed, her sting would almost certainly strike the spider and pump venom into the monstrous creature; but in that instant she would be dead, mangled by the spider's jaws, and the great beast would probably recover from the effects of a single bee sting; unless a lucky hit pierced the brain or a vital nerve junction. If she were to have any chance of success and survive, an entirely different tactic was needed.

The garden had matured since spring, losing much of its gaudiness; groomed into a sleek bronze and lush green texture by the sun. The honeybee saw a parallel with her own perceived development, and somewhere in that change lay a key to unlock the solution to her dilemma. The term 'sculpture' came to mind. That's where the earthworm found his answers - sculpture. She recalled the ebullient wit of their first encounter and mused over her naive and youthful innocence back then.

She couldn't sculpt or compose verse. All she could do was fly - but could she fly with a zest and passion to outstrip

the artists on the ground? Could she fly fast enough to evade the spider's fangs and deliver a lethal strike unscathed? As the honeybee pondered over the seemingly intractable problem, she was suddenly overcome by a maniacal compulsion to try.

7

Abandoned by normal conjunctions with reality, the hoverfly knew only the discomfort in his head, the nauseous grip on his stomach, and the darkness all around.

Beneath his numb, prostrate form lay the ground. Cold, hard, uncomfortable soil. He was lying in the flowerbed. Not in the previous psychedelic world of day, but a silent, monochromatic graveyard of monolithic flora closed up for the night. Mute grey tapering forms, like sentinels towering over their charge. Sleeping sentinels oblivious to the stirring hoverfly.

The hoverfly tried to rationalise the situation; terrifying and surreal. He didn't belong here at this time; he knew he should be somewhere else; but where? He could not quite remember; though a rising sense of panic spurred him to lift off and circle a catatonic tulip.

The tulip! He recalled being with the tulip. If he had fallen asleep, the flower would have ejected him. But the fall was puzzling; the fall should have woken him up; unless the narcotic perfume was to blame, cushioning the impact. A plausible explanation, not that explanations mattered greatly in the midst of such surreal confusion.

The hoverfly suspected that he was dreaming, but could not afford to be wrong; indeed, he was intimidated by the threat of reality that lurked within the awful consequence he now faced, so ill-prepared. A planned rendezvous with a sunset. But where? He'd missed the sunset, it belonged to the past now, to another summer on another world; not here

where it seemed that the sun would never rise again.

Frantic, the hoverfly soared up through the still night air, as if to puncture the black slick blocking out the light he knew to exist beyond the confines of this nightmare. A futile endeavour which he soon gave up on.

Blind, without even the charitable gift of moonlight for guidance, he swooped low again, eyes straining to identify landmarks from shadows. As he circled, the hoverfly realised he was blessed with impunity, able to navigate the garden in ever increasing circles until finally finding the familiar wooden fence which marked the border with the wilderness.

He shivered crossing the line of demarcation. The air space of the garden had been relatively clear, but now he encountered dendritic grasses and bushes looming out of the darkness at the last moment with grasping, skeletal hands reaching out to snatch him from the firmament.

The hoverfly flew blind, yet always seemed to clear those obstacles that should have brought him down; as if another force, invisible and divine, were guiding his wings and navigating for him; since, in the absence of light, he could neither identify a mark nor establish a bearing. He weaved his course through the still night air, knowing his thoughts alone were carrying him home to a place that no longer existed.

His hopes grew all the same; feeding on eternal optimism with the approach of journey's end; until an enormous incandescent fireball suddenly lit up and revealed the grey line of the horizon with awesome glory.

He was flashblinded by the sudden brilliant light, brighter than a thousand suns. A searing blast of air followed, forcing the hoverfly down into the soil where he crouched with his head buried in a divot to escape the rushing roar of the apocalypse overhead.

The hoverfly remained where he lay for the rest of the long night; shivering as the temperatures plummeted; finally

emerging with the wintry dawn as the first snowflakes began to fall. Flying was more difficult now, despite the daylight. Impacts from the descending flakes were impossible to avoid, each one knocking him to earth and lading his wings. Snow began collecting on the scorched earth below, as if to cover the scar and let it heal beneath a sanitary white dressing.

The hoverfly flew in towards the epicentre of the blast; instinctively knowing where it lay, and what would be there waiting for him when he found it. The wildflower still stood as he remembered, before the spider had wreaked its apocalyptic vengeance on the land. The petals of the flower were withered and torn, though untouched by the flames.

He landed on the cold visage; a pale beauty frozen by the icy air. A tear drop from his eye fell onto a glazed petal; running the length of the curve; stripping the frost beneath the rivulet and restoring a glimmer of the flower's former lustre before cascading off the pointed tip of the petal to indent the snow below.

The hoverfly tried to stem the welling emotion that was buoying him back to consciousness. His eyes opened to a genial countenance.

"You're weeping," the tulip noted. "I've never seen a flyer weep before. Is Deborah the name of a flower?"

The hoverfly nodded wearily, blinking to clear the tell-tale moisture from his eyes.

"A wilderness flower?"

"Yes."

"A very lucky flower," the tulip observed.

"Why do you say that?" asked the hoverfly, struck by a sense of irony.

"To have such a beautiful name."

"What's in a name?" he shrugged, gazing at the sun with some relief. It was low, but there was still time.

"Something to make you cry out in your sleep," the tulip

inferred shrewdly. "Do all flowers have names in the wilderness?"

"Not all. Some are secluded and never get noticed. Others simply refuse to have anything to do with the flyers, but most accept a name as a gift when they first bloom."

"Did you name Deborah?"

"No."

"I'd like to meet the flyer who did. Maybe he'd have a name for me. Is he an associate of yours?"

"We never met. The name is from a previous summer."

"Have you ever named a flower?"

"It's quite rare to find one without a name in the wilderness. Most are perennial."

"Wouldn't you like to? You could think of a name for me."

"I'm not your first flyer."

"We could pretend."

"I shouldn't be here at this time. I have to go back to the wilderness."

"Why don't you stay a while longer - at least until the sunset? There's a lovely view from here at this time of year."

"I can't," the hoverfly insisted. "Sometimes we don't have a choice ..."

"What's happening out there? Everyone's talking about surveys and predator incursions and new flyers coming into the garden. The world is changing very rapidly."

This perceptive entreat almost moved the hoverfly to reply candidly; to stay and explain; but he was anxious to return before the sunset. "Not rapidly enough, unfortunately," he observed sadly.

The flower took this as a compliment and a desire on the hoverfly's part to spend more time in the garden. "Will I ever see you again? We can pretend it's the spring and you can give me a name."

"No, that won't be possible," he sighed, knowing his path

was laid out for him, and that he would never return - though in his heart, he wished it were otherwise.

8

The head of the high-flying honeybee dropped as if having suddenly taken on a great tangible weight of guilt; her miasmatic thoughts condensing into matter; resolution tipping the balance of the sleek aerodynamic frame.

She made no attempt to forestall the steep dive, gathering speed under gravity as she dipped through a slow curve, asymptotic to the vertical, in response to the uncompromising pull of the ground. She soon attracted attention from some bees hovering far below.

“Look up there!” a bee yelled out, alerting others from the swarm, and dozens of eyes locked onto the vague, plummeting delta-figure; still far away, though clearly nothing less than a honeybee.

“Pull out, why don’t you?” Another voice cried, attracting more attention to the terminal descent.

The sunflowers and roses giggled and chattered gleefully at the edifying sight, while the other bees looked on in horror and fascination; fearfully awaiting the inevitable jarring impact and broken body bouncing on the ground.

“Why doesn’t she pull out?” one observer asked. “Has she gone mad?”

A series of nods and glances gave succour to the proposition.

“She can’t hear you,” advised an old veteran of the skies. “She can’t hear anyone. It’s too late now anyway. At that speed the air would rip her wings off.”

The veteran was right, the honeybee couldn’t hear a thing,

such was the weight of air rushing past her ears. Except the pounding of her own heartbeat; a drum roll to accompany the swift dive. Disdainful of her imminent demise, she arrogantly swept back her wings and continued to accelerate; slicing through the strangely stilled swarm like the tip of a rapier; willing herself into the maw of gravity and raising the terminal velocity of her frame beyond anything its designer would have approved. But by now, that approval no longer seemed to matter very much. In one way or another, the honeybee had been raging against the designer all her life, and one final act of angry provocation against those constraints seemed the inevitable climax to her unnatural existence. One which might drive her into the soil and carry her to the gates of the underworld.

The cloak of anonymity began to fall away at lower altitude. A dozen members of the survey group looked up in dismay at the self-destructive actions of a leader whose judgment they had come to trust. As if linked by a concatenating current, they turned to each other, plagued by mutual doubt about the stability and sanity of the honeybee and hence the work she had entrusted to them. Why? Why now? Just as they were ready to embark on their awesome enterprise with royal assent?

It seemed that the sceptics, and those who had cast aspersions on her character and her past, had been right all along. They were not to know that the honeybee was far from suicidal, but rather driven by nature and circumstance to search for an answer in a state beyond the ordinary experience of her kind. She needed an edge, for the sake of the wildflower, and for the future of the survey and the garden, and was determined to avail herself of it.

Over the heads of the sunflowers, she sought to deny the underworld her soul by engaging the wings which should have torn but for the heavy blood pumping through their veins and the oblique angle at which they buffeted the

turbulent flow.

The amazed onlookers bore witness to her clawing tenacity as she gradually twisted her wings into the flow and curved away from the up-rushing ground to merely graze the tips of the lawn. The living sling shot, propelled by gravity, rent the air over the short green grass and sped away like a bullet.

“How did she do that?” a wavering member of the swarm gasped, joining the survey group observers. Other neophytes followed, barely able to conceal their admiration.

The questioned bee shook her head, but a more experienced campaigner cut in, recognising a gifted opportunity to franchise the feat with her frontier sentiment. “Something she learned in the wilderness. Something we can all learn to do.”

Beyond earshot of the commotion, and in any case disinterested in honeybee eulogies, the despondent hoverfly cruised over the taller grasses of the border territory. His straight, ponderous course through the long shadows of early evening characterised a single minded melancholy at the hopeless situation.

Thinking not of death, but of life; of the happy times he had shared with the wildflower; he regressed into the past in search of resolve, and to escape and savour those things which were now gone for ever.

The honeybee’s adjuration had made little impact on his intention, though the tulip had made him pause and given him ample cause for regret. In the maturing weeks of summer, the hectic life of an itinerant flyer, visiting flower after flower, not even asking their names, had become facile and less meaningful than in spring; but the tulip had reignited an aesthetic spark in him which he had thought was lost.

With sadness, he realised this would be the last sunset he would share with any flower. A summer cut short, for like

the honeybee, he was under no illusions about the spider's ferocity. He would say goodbye to the wildflower, then harry the spider until the end. In meditation, the hoverfly began praying to the sun-god for the first time in his life.

An answer to the prayer came in the form of an unlikely deity; blurred but recognisably distinct as it passed his flank at great speed. The shock wave from the delta-shaped flyer caused his light frame to bounce and roll as he climbed to escape the strong turbulence; but he soon recovered and gave grim chase through the bumpy swirling vortices of its wake.

9

The wildflower spent the days drifting in and out of a sleeping twilight induced by weary decline and a desire to escape the awful grip of a reality which had largely crushed from life all worthwhile reason for existence.

The early evening sun had yet to kiss the horizon and still glowed warmly for those wishing to partake of its life-giving sustenance. The wildflower declined, instead maintaining an aspect slumped to the ground, bowed by the weight of the curse, hoping to speed the end through abstinence.

A protective shield of shrivelled petals covered the wildflower's face, concealing from the outside world a visage of scars, loneliness, and shame. A warning to others contemplating similar acts of compassion for the enemies of the wilderness.

The wildflower dreamed vividly in this twilight world; an alternative existence compensating for one lost. Dreams of the past; of smiles, laughter, sunny days, and friends once known; though often the happy scene would shift into a grey and disturbing backdrop of confusing ambiguity and then pain at the hand of something omnipresent and unseen lurking in the shadows of every dream. Then, the wildflower would regain a startled consciousness and begin to shake as if feverish.

The embellished harmonics of a dream state were perturbed by something irregular intruding on the wildflower's senses. Something familiar, yet at the same time incongruous and confusing.

The wildflower woke, felt the weight of the spider, and was reminded of the harsh reality of life once again. But there was something different about this reality, not experienced before. This reality seemed less intense, less overbearing, less painful, somehow easier to bear; as if the full state of consciousness could no longer be restored in its awful entirety.

The flower recognised the proximity of death and was no longer afraid. Death was willing to help shoulder the burden - for a price. The wildflower was willing to pay that price in full, and would have but for a sudden, last minute intrusion by a third party; an absent bidder for the flower's soul, forestalling the intimate negotiation.

Intrigued, the wildflower drifted out of the semiconscious state and woke again in the realm of scarred tissue and scab-covered wounds. The unmistakable vibrations of a pressure wave were building in the air like a gathering storm. Unmistakable, and yet the cruel, omniscient spider seemed oblivious to them.

The curious sound puzzled the wildflower. This optimistic delusion was pleasurable to behold, as if an authority existed above and beyond the torment; whispering and urging the flower to discard as false the ambivalent notions of affection developing for the captor and for death.

Even while breaking from delirium, the wildflower knew there were no such things as elemental spirits; yet pictured one infinitely bright and dazzling to behold; an image of a seraph in the form of a ghostly honeybee. One that might take pity on a wretched flower and dance before the voracious spider until seized by its ignorant, murderous jaws. Then a transmutation to a searing ball of phosphorescent light would engulf and vaporise the monster.

Nearby, Zeb still grieved over the ragged, bloody remains of his friend. From the depths of emotional despair, he too heard the strange call; so faint and distance that it might be

emanating from within his own head, or a note in his ear from an atmospheric horn heralding the approach of a storm.

But unlike the semi-conscious flower, Zeb was still in full command of his senses. He stretched up from the protective sheath of his hole and scanned the skies. He couldn't be sure, the bearing was unclear, but it seemed to be coming from the east, from the garden.

The shock wave was emanating from just below the horizon. A construction of vortices set up by an aerodynamic projectile slicing through the air at turbulent speed. The source kept a low profile; deliberately hugging the grassy contours and weaving between the wild, sprouting flora protruding above the grass canopy in the hope of avoiding detection until the very last second, when only reflex action might save the target from a swift, pre-emptive strike.

If such a strike were successful at the outset; if some part of the spider were visible; an appendage to hit and destroy with the element of surprise; the odds against a favourable outcome might be very much reduced.

The honeybee experienced a gung-ho sense of euphoria and relief as she closed towards the coordinates inscribed in her memory at breakneck speed. The decision to engage; originally inspired by political expedience; seemed the right one now, as if taken from the heart. Instinct and concentration kept her in the air, whilst her ego applauded each minute twist and thrilling turn of a wing to pass or clear an impediment of passage by the narrowest of margins.

She understood now why the other bee, so long ago, had elected to explore the dark, dangerous tunnel in the garden. An innate desire to challenge the gods had lain in her psyche, awaiting a chance which never came.

The honeybee could not decide whether she genuinely despised the spider, or revered the great being bathed in evil

glory; though for once this ambiguity did not inhibit or undermine her course of action. To the best of her knowledge, no honeybee had ever contemplated the destruction of such a monstrous predator; though previous generations had possibly tried and failed, with the victorious Sisera ensuring that their histories were lost to posterity. The stakes in this conflict were high, but the potential dividends enormous. A threat to the garden would be removed forever and her personal prestige would ensure that the survey would proceed in accordance with her design; cultural ambassadorship rather than an instrument of espionage. And, of course, she would have the opportunity to chronicle the first history of the swarm.

The song of the sirens continued to evolve in the ears of the wildflower. With eyes closed, the flower listened intently to the chorus of approaching angels; their sweet song promising to deliver the flower to another wilderness, or even a garden in a new spring in a lush world in which there were no spiders. Zeb listened too. The high pitched hum rose monotonically, lucid logic suggested a powerful flyer - like a honeybee.

The inbound honeybee saw the wildflower only briefly; establishing visual contact seconds before the strike; fixing on the dejected drooping petals, a sad shadow of former vitality, looming nearer and more vivid and painful to see as the range fell away.

The honeybee continued to close at speed without sighting the spider. She cursed it for the efficacy of its concealment. Without the advantage of an effective early strike the honeybee realised that she was dead - unless she aborted. Overwhelmed with pity and rage at the sight; losing all the self-centred logical cynicism of the garden; she pressed home the attack with determination and precision; continually adjusting roll and bearing; eating up the distance dividing them; closing rapidly until there could be no turning

back. Committed to the final, irrevocable strike, with strafing sting projecting downwards to rip open any flesh it encountered, the honeybee shot through the sombre petal tips.

The twilight world of the wildflower exploded with the energy and momentum of the pass; a shocked stem swayed violently in the slipstream; petals were whipped into a flurry by the wind that exposed the spider curled in a clandestine corner.

Surprised by the lack of warning, the spider was bowled over and nearly toppled out of the flower. He quickly regained his balance and rose up on his haunches; bellowing furiously and waving his fangs in the air whilst dripping caustic, discolouring poison onto the floral host.

The eyes of the wildflower opened wide and looked to the sky in amazement and wonder, seeing the honeybee nose up into a vertical climb. Vitality flushed back into the flower's face; a virulent joy at the gesture of solidarity - at not having been forgotten - not yet realising the full extent of the honeybee's commitment to the cause of liberation.

The honeybee guessed the effect of her dramatic gesture on those far below and waggled her wings in defiance; confirming her intention to return even as a mere speck in the afterglow of the sky.

Zeb cheered loudly from the sanctuary of his hole; presuming that Barak had got word to the honeybee, and now vengeance had arrived on swift wings.

His voice soon attracted the malevolent attention of the spider. "We're gonna bury you, Sisera! D'ya hear? Bury you in a deep hole that you won't ever crawl out of!"

The spider merely smirked at the worm; disdainful of the tearful passion on the face of the impotent cipher; knowing the real threat, however minimal, came not from the ground but the sky. "When we're finished with her, we're going to dig you out of your hole and skin you alive - very slowly," the spider assured him.

The honeybee dived again, regaining the kinetic energy lost in the climb, then pulling up sharply and racing along the ground in the same low level attack pattern as before; calculating that this would offer the best chance of success and survival against such a formidable target. By skirting the position in a wide arc, the spider would not know precisely which bearing the attack was coming from until the last few seconds, leaving him less time to prepare a defence.

Neither Zeb nor the flower knew either. The song of approach had faded into silence. Besieged by time, the tension grew for all as they waited for the attack to resume. *Deja vu.* The flower recalled the youthful display of vigour between the rival flyers when the honeybee had first regained flight. It seemed so long ago now, like a previous summer.

A moving speck on the horizon caught Zeb's eye. Mesmerised, he watched it grow rapidly; aware that he may be giving the bearing away to the vigilant spider but unable to take his eyes off the winged projectile as it curved round on an inbound course and headed straight for him. The front profile of the flyer seemed to hover in the air at eye-level for several seconds before passing overhead with a 'whoosh' that made the earthworm duck down instinctively.

The spider saw her coming too - in time to meet the engagement. The flower gasped, awed and flattered by the power of the combatants closing for a deadly joust, but as helpless and frustrated as the earthworm.

The honeybee came in straight and fast; feinting left at the last moment to try and fool the spider before pulling up; intent on dipping and strafing the monstrous head with her sting as she passed.

The spider reacted quickly; recovering from the feint and rearing-up on powerful back legs; ready to snatch the attacker from the sky. Dismissing inner cries to abort, the honeybee dipped left again for the spider's flank at the

instant of the pass and the rapier point of her sting strafed a strong limb above the upper joint, just as the spider dropped and lunged at the honeybee's exposed flank with dark glistening fangs.

The flower flinched, splattered by a spray of blood, and was stunned by the sudden, brutal, and decisive outcome of the clash. Peripeteia in the briefest blink of an eyelid.

A single slicing blow had reduced the aerodynamic frame of the honeybee to a crumpled wreck, now tumbling through the air as if drunk. The once vital specimen, so recently jousting for the wildflower, was now writhing and rolling in undignified convulsions, as if punctured and deflated like a balloon. The glimmer of hope carried on her silvery wings had been jettisoned into the mud below.

A simple thrust had instantly destroyed all the optimism and great expectation built up by her return. Why did she come back if this were all she could achieve? On reflection, the wildflower lacked the faculty for reproof; and with silent charity bade farewell to the gallant honeybee as she drifted up on a thermal, seeming now to lack power or steerage.

"How very disappointing. She didn't put up much of a fight," bemoaned the spider. "So much for the vaunted honeybees. They may be highly regarded in the garden, but out here in the rough they're no more than a fancy shade of bluebottle."

The spider guffawed at his own wit, but then one of his legs collapsed and dangled limply by a shred of skin from a bloody stump.

"You seem to have lost a leg," the flower observed wryly, cheered by the gruesome sight.

"No matter, it'll grow back," the spider growled, seizing the useless limb in his jaws and tearing it away from the stump before spitting it out to fall, discarded, into the mud below the flower.

"That was from a single honeybee. In the garden there are

tens of thousands of them. They'll cut you to pieces in no time."

"They'll never know what happened out here. She won't make it back to the garden, her belly's ripped open. She's made her last flight anywhere. Her summer is over. All that effort to save her and for what?" The spider flexed his stump so that the vile-smelling blood dripped over the flower. "This is all she could manage for you in return. Your stalking-horse wasn't much of a challenge to my leadership. One leg to hold on to a mandate - that's a fair price to stay in politics. You should have just left her to me and saved yourself a lot of trouble."

The wildflower scanned the skies anxiously, but the honeybee had vanished in the distance. The flower, like the spider, had no logical reason to think that she would ever return.

The spider continued to savour the triumph. "You've made a terrible mistake, rebellious flower. All this suffering and for what? If it wasn't for her, you'd still be pretty; with many happy summers ahead of you."

The flower began sinking into delirium again, beyond fear or despair, but conscious enough to reply. The tone of her voice suddenly changed, becoming measured and trance-like, as if possessed by another being. "What use are summers to us under your tyranny? She can't die, we won't allow it. Her task is not yet finished."

"We?" the bemused spider queried.

"The children of the sun-god - who value light and life above all else."

The eyes of the flower suddenly opened wide and stared into those of the spider; revealing the legions of souls whom he'd so cruelly dispatched in summers past. The prophesy unnerved the spider.

"Why should we care about your sun-god? We worship the darkness. And why do you care who rules the wilder-

ness? You're just a flower - designed to look pretty and feed the flywits in the air."

"You've killed for the last time, Sisera. It is the end of all your summers. The earth is calling you back to make fertile the soil. Your kind must make way for a more enlightened form of rule."

"Enough foolish talk," the spider growled. "Look upon your own demise - once pretty wildflower. I no longer have any use for you - this is your final moment."

"Wait!" a shrill voice cried from the air.

The spider turned his attention to the hoverfly, who was hovering nearby.

"I did as you asked," Barak pleaded. "I brought you the honeybee to vanquish. You've got what you wanted. Why can't you spare the flower and leave us in peace?"

The spider grinned magnanimously. "If only such a thing were possible. If the honeybee had been an ordinary flyer, such as yourself, we might consider leniency; but they're a breed apart and must remain taboo lest they are encouraged by our hospitality to expand and colonise before we can destroy the swarm. There can be only one penalty for breaking that taboo. All trace, all memory of her being here, must be erased."

The hoverfly drifted nearer, pleading with the spider not to inflict more pain on the wildflower. The spider chuckled, clearly relishing the enforcement of his laws as he climbed out of the flower and gripped the stem with his remaining legs.

"Enjoy the sunset, rebellious flower ..."

The wildflower struggled more in reflex than in fear as the spider bit into the vascular stem.

"Nooo!" Barak cried out, lunging forward to butt the spider with such unexpected force that it almost dislodged the predator from his grip.

The hoverfly pressed home the attack by beating the

spider's head with his wings. Gripping tightly with hind legs, almost choking the wildflower; the spider reared up, forcing the impudent new aggressor to back away to avoid being snatched from the air by deadly pincers; but true to his word, the hoverfly returned resolutely to harry the murderous creature. Amused, the spider indulged his unarmed, lightweight opponent in the deadly game of cat and mouse, delaying the execution of the flower.

10

In the instant of delivering her own strike, the honeybee realised her worst fear. An excruciating pain spread like fire through her side, confirming that the spider had managed to smite her exposed flank with a fang. Her speed had proved to be inadequate armour against such lethal heavy weapons, skilfully wielded; and now she bore a deep, grievous wound along the length of her abdomen next to the old scar.

Despite the inevitability of the outcome from the start, the honeybee despaired at this second defeat in a duel with her natural enemy; and even now, as the debilitating effects of the spider's toxin began spreading through her system, her febrile brain was methodically searching for a different strategy - one that might have worked. She recovered from the roll and was carried on a charitable updraught, away from the shadowy earth and into the welcoming sunlight.

There was no hope now for the wildflower and precious little time left for the honeybee. Her frame shook and shuddered and her nerve endings were taut and tingling as never before. She looked down through narrowing vision to see a hoverfly beside the emaciated beauty. The sands of time were draining away; the final curtain would soon descend on them both, unless, with honour satisfied, the spider was willing to accept his triumph gracefully and grant mercy.

The dying honeybee was strangely detached from events on the ground, finally relinquishing responsibility for the fate of the flower for whom she had felt love, empathy and

regret; and the hoverfly whose pluck and ethos she had so much admired. It was sad to see their fate, but there was nothing else to be done. She had tried and failed.

Not wishing to witness the tragic end, the honeybee turned her attention to the sky, her spiritual home; seeking escape from the secular world where she had lived, but never really belonged. She asked to be taken by the sun-god and waited to be swept away to oblivion and eternal rest by an enveloping embrace.

The reality was more torment by a nightmarish vision of hell. The azure canopy of scattered sunlight was obscured by the curved silhouette of a giant web-dome, anchored to each horizon. An entanglement of dense, wiry strands enmeshed the sun-god and blocked out much of the remaining light. A small black object; darker than the web itself save for its red, glowing eyes; plucked the fibrous strands with its legs; composing a macabre euphony as it crawled towards the celestial prey.

The world of the honeybee grew darker as the shadow of Death's web descended over her. Resigned to fate, the vanquished bee made no attempt to escape; there was nowhere to run except the ends of the earth; nothing to do but calmly wait for the hideous mesh to envelope her soul and deliver her unto a devouring death. Perhaps, if she showed no fear, her courage would be rewarded by a swift end.

She looked down at the earth once more, but could see nothing; as if hovering over the land on the darkest night, without so much as the moon or stars to illuminate the ground. But from somewhere high overhead, there came the faint sounds of droning wings. There were flyers high above this dark web; flyers still enjoying the sun at the height of their summer.

The thought of their vitality and freedom gave vicarious pleasure to the damned honeybee. Life continued to exist in

clear skies above and beyond the darkness. She listened carefully to the joyous sound of honeybees climbing and diving as the suffocating darkness closed in to claim her soul; picking out the rolls and the turns in her mind's eye, recalling blissful happy memories of her early days in the garden as she waited now for the cold grip of the web to seize her wings and ground her forever.

Her ear picked up a surge in pitch of a swift bee and she experienced the exhilaration of the dive. But diving where? The entire earth of twilight would be covered by the deadly mesh.

Panic suddenly gripped the honeybee as the volume increased and the pitch rose to a whine, and she realised that her unseen compatriot was plunging straight towards her - towards the web. Why couldn't she see it? See the danger she was in?

"No! Keep away! Keep away from the web!" The honeybee screamed out the warning repeatedly, but her voice was lost in the roar of flight building towards a cacophony that flooded her senses with such vibrant intensity that her head seemed unable to contain the acoustic energy and was about to explode. Her head held - but the web didn't.

An explosive blast tore a gaping hole in the fabric as a fiery bee dived straight through the dark tangle of silk. Flashblinded and deafened by the blast, the honeybee swallowed to clear her ears and blinked rapidly to try and remove the purple and yellow hues dancing before her eyes, before searching around for a honeybee with the power to wreak such havoc and destruction on a web.

Sunlight poured through the gap in the torn fabric and projected onto the ground far below like a spotlight, picking out the ill-matched duel between the spider and the hoverfly for the life of the wildflower.

Hovering in the shaft; a protective sheath; the web descended over the honeybee; harmless but for the severed

drooping strands; vile tentacles swaying and grasping at her flesh. Emerging into the light of early evening once again, the honeybee searched the blue sky for her saviour. The airspace seemed strangely still and devoid of all flying activity. The other bee and her compatriots had simply vanished.

Looking down again, the honeybee saw that the web had also gone, as if it had fragmented and dissolved in the warm evening air; leaving a breathtaking and spiritually uplifting view of the rolling landscape of the wilderness, and the scene of a deadly struggle taking place long after it should have been decided.

11

Zeb punched the loose earth scattered around his hole in frustration and despair; shouting obscenities and hurling puny mud balls at the tyrant, though to no avail. Those that didn't fall short landed with the destructive efficacy of dew drops.

An incongruous speck began creeping into his peripheral vision; unnoticed at first, but growing intrusively until it could no longer be ignored. His frantic bellowing died away, like the cessation of a summer storm, as he watched, open mouthed, the golden delta shape coming out of the sun; eerily silent as if acoustically cloaked, closing on the pair of antagonists engaged in dancing around the flower.

Recovering his wits, Zeb resumed his tirade with the disguised passion of a jingoistic heckler; cursing the spider to hell, hoping to distract him, praying that his attention would not wander to the sky.

The descent was measured and controlled and silent, falling like an autumn leaf to earth. The stooping honeybee was in no particular hurry, having but one thought on her mind. This time would be different. This time she knew how to achieve the objective.

The target lay clearly defined, looming up with magnificent clarity; no longer a spider in a flower but a spider in a web. A diminutive shiny black blister with red markings and a small head. With precision she locked onto the vulnerable mark, and guided by delirious obsession she homed in on her destiny, her grail.

The honeybee descended like a ghostly shadow. The silent, deadly glide gave no indication of her approach until the very last second when her wings surged into life, affirming her commitment to the attack, and drove her down into the strike with all the power a honeybee could generate.

Warned by the sudden drone of wings, the spider looked up; realising in an instant that he was a victim of an unforeseen vicissitude; the prophesy of Deborah. The destroyer had descended from the heavens to claim his dark soul in lieu of the wildflower's.

Honeybee and spider fused on impact; a deadly embrace; and became a monstrous, unnatural, flailing hybrid joined by a slender bond of death. The sting had pierced the spider's head, penetrating through his thick armoured skull to lodge deep in his brain.

The spider roared; bucking and turning to throw the alien weight from his head while lashing out awkwardly with talon-like fangs; breaking a fragile antenna and lacerating the face of the assailant, but unable to grip and dislodge the assassin.

Calmly, the dying honeybee held on fast; riding the convulsions which caused the barbs of her harpoon to dig even deeper into cartilage and brain tissue, whilst her venom-sac frantically pumped the toxins needed to destroy the delicate neurons that hosted the spider's psyche.

This frenzied fit of savagery brought dark fountains of blood spurting from the head wound of the spider; vile, caustic fluid flaying skin wherever it settled on the honeybee; though her berserk state mercifully forestalled the pain.

The spider reeled beneath the onslaught until the honeybee disengaged, leaving her sting embedded in the skull and the attached venom-sac still pumping the toxins through the hypodermic needle. The huge arachnid fell and landed heavily on the ground below; where he lay on his back and reflexively curled-up into a pathetic, twitching ball.

The honeybee hovered unsteadily over the hoverfly and the wildflower, bleeding profusely from the flank and from the tip of her abdomen. The irregular drone of her wings testifying to the toxin of the spider being pumped through failing muscle by an unwitting agent of destruction - a heart keeping faith with its vital function. Her fading vision could barely discern their mute forms, her sensitive auditory system had failed. There would be no more communication with anyone this summer.

They regarded her with a mixture of repulsion and awe, just as she had the spider. No longer a magnificent golden bee but a bloody harbinger of death; torn, bleeding, and covered in dark, congealing carrion.

To destroy the thing which had invaded and terrorised their lives, they had invoked a dark angel, and now they shrank beneath the fearful shadow of the seraph. A broken antenna hung limp and useless over the scarred face, transformed by the ordeal into a demonic mask; a spirit of the wilderness baptised in blood, ravaged by fury, and still possessed of a dissipating rage. This was the primitive elemental they had deployed against the spider.

Through their terrified gaze, they noticed the peculiar marks on her abdomen; their shocked wits appreciating the significance of two jagged lines; parallel as if in company; one old and grey, the other fresh and bloody. The ancient wound now spoke the words which had not passed the honeybee's lips, not even for the flower.

From the ground, a different perspective. Zeb observed the final chapter silently, his anger spent with the conclusion of the struggle. He wanted to sleep and expunge the cold, hollow sense of loss which bedevilled him now. He wanted to feel warm and whole again. But for the honeybee, still hovering nearby, there would be no healing; the summer was clearly over. Zeb felt deeply for her sacrifice, recognising the pattern and the inevitability of her tragic fate without

detailed knowledge of the intricate events which had led to this twilight. The trap, set early in the spring, had finally closed on its victim.

For the honeybee, delirium was opening up the old wounds; confirming the irony of her affinity with the spider whose crumpled remains lay in a pathetic, decomposing heap on the ground; soon to be reclaimed by the same dark humus which had given it birth. All her hard won knowledge and experience had been lost in the course of an afternoon, reclaimed by the wilderness, and with it went any chance to shape the destiny of the swarm. She could only hope that the bees of the survey group would be sufficiently inspired to carry on her work.

In death, the spider had wrested some part of her soul and dragged it down into the earth. A trade to free the flower from the brutality initiated by her fall. The honeybee craved a Valhalla of the intellect, not a seat in the hall of heroes, and left the scene without valediction; without knowing what to say to the flower; knowing only that some things can never be said; that some things never change; though she was comforted by the thought that the hoverfly would remain constant throughout the flower's long recovery.

The honeybee tried setting course for the garden, the place where she ought to be; civilised, ordered, safe; but seemed unable to maintain the bearing; for each time the setting sun, glowing red on the western horizon, veered back into view.

Weak and disorientated, she closed her eyes and yielded to the pain, leaving her body in a steep dive to plunge it into the earth where it would join the spider for all eternity.

Conscious of another honeybee on her wing, she opened her eyes again to admire the bright, golden form of an escort whose coruscating wings danced elegantly on the last kaleidoscopic rays of sunlight. The other bee waved, her countenance vaguely familiar, her wings biting into the light

ether as she flew on at a speed the wounded veteran couldn't possibly hope to match.

Much impressed, the honeybee vaguely wondered whether this escort could be fast enough to catch the sinking sun and make it rise again; then chuckled at such a preposterous idea, like crossing the peaks at the edge of the wilderness. The chuckle grew into the same old manic laughter mocking her slow, ponderous climb. Shrugging off the tiresome taunts, the honeybee gathered speed for a chase.
