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Opening Extract from...

The Bees

Written by Laline Paull

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LALINE PAULL

The Bees

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1

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For Adrian

Prologue

The old orchard stood besieged. To one side spread a vast arable plain, a dullard's patchwork of corn and soy reaching to the dark tree-line of the hills. To the other, a light-industrial estate stretched towards the town.

Between the dripping trees the remains of a path still showed. A man in early middle-age kicked at the tall nettles and docks to widen it. Neat in her navy business suit, a younger woman followed. She paused to take photographs with her phone.

'I hope you don't mind but we've put out some feelers, and we're already beating them off with sticks. Prime brown-field location.'

The man stared through the trees, not listening.

'There – thought for a moment it had vanished.'

An old wooden beehive stood camouflaged against the trees. The woman drew back.

'I won't come any closer,' she said. 'I'm a bit funny about insects.'

'So's my father. He calls them his girls.' The man looked up at the low grey sky. 'Is that more rain? What happened to summer?'

The woman glanced up from her phone.

'I know! I've forgotten what blue sky looks like. Must be hard with the kids off school.'

'They barely notice. They're always online.'

He walked forward and peered closer at the hive.

A few bees emerged from a small hole at the bottom. They walked along a narrow wooden ledge and hummed their wings.

He watched them for a while then turned back to her.

'I'm sorry. Now is not the right time.'

'Oh!' She put her phone away. 'Have you changed your mind?'

He shook his head.

'No. I'll sell …' He cleared his throat. 'But not yet. It feels wrong.'

'Of course.' She hesitated. 'I suppose it's very hard to know approximately …?'

'Could be months. Could be tomorrow.'

The woman allowed a respectful silence.

'Well, rest assured that when you *are* ready, it's a seller's market.'

She began walking back along the path.

The man stood alone by the hive. On impulse he put his palm against the wood, as if feeling for a pulse. Then he turned and followed her.

Behind them, bees rose into the brightening air.

One

The cell squeezed her and the air was hot and fetid. All the joints of her body burned from her frantic twisting against the walls, her head was pressed into her chest and her legs shot with cramp, but her struggles had worked – one wall felt weaker. She kicked out with all her strength and felt something crack and break. She forced and tore and bit until there was a jagged hole into fresher air beyond.

She dragged her body through and fell out onto the floor of an alien world. Static roared through her brain, thunderous vibration shook the ground and a thousand scents dazed her. All she could do was breathe until gradually the vibration and static subsided and the scent evaporated into the air. Her rigid body unlocked and she calmed as knowledge filled her mind.

This was the Arrivals Hall and she was a worker.

Her kin was Flora and her number was 717.

Certain of her first task, she set about cleaning out her cell. In her violent struggle to hatch she had broken the whole front wall, unlike her neater neighbours. She looked, then followed their example, piling her debris neatly by the ruins. The activity cleared her senses and she

felt the vastness of the Arrivals Hall, and how the vibrations in the air changed in different areas.

Row upon row of cells like hers stretched into the distance, and there the cells were quiet but resonant as if the occupants still slept. Immediately around her was great activity with many recently broken and cleared-out chambers, and many more cracking and falling as new bees arrived. The differing scents of her neighbours also came into focus, some sweeter, some sharper, all of them pleasant to absorb.

With a hard erratic pulse in the ground, a young female came running down the corridor between the cells, her face frantic.

'*Halt!*' Harsh voices reverberated from both ends of the corridor and a strong astringent scent rose in the air. Every bee stopped moving but the young bee stumbled and fell across Flora's pile of debris. Then she clawed her way into the remains of the broken cell and huddled in the corner, her little hands up.

Cloaked in a bitter scent which hid their faces and made them identical, the dark figures strode down the corridor towards Flora. Pushing her aside, they dragged out the weeping young bee. At the sight of their spiked gauntlets, a spasm of fear in Flora's brain released more knowledge. They were police.

'*You fled inspection*.' One of them pulled at the girl's wings, while another examined the four still-wet membranes. The edge of one was shrivelled.

'Spare me,' she cried. 'I will not fly, I will serve in any other way—'

'*Deformity is evil. Deformity is not permitted*.'

Before the bee could speak the two officers pressed her head down until there was a sharp crack. She hung limp between them and they dropped her body in the corridor.

'*You*.' A peculiar rasping voice addressed Flora and she did not know which one spoke, but stared at the black hooks on the backs of their legs. '*Hold still*.' Long black callipers slid from their gauntlets and they measured her height. '*Excessive variation. Abnormal*.'

'That will be all, officers.' At the kind voice and fragrant smell, the police released Flora. They bowed to a tall and well-groomed bee with a beautiful face.

'Sister Sage, this one is obscenely ugly.'

'And excessively large.'

'It would appear so. Thank you, officers, you may go.'

Sister Sage waited for them to leave. She smiled at Flora. 'To fear them is good. Be still while I read your kin—'

'I am Flora 717.'

Sister Sage raised her antennae. 'A sanitation worker who speaks. Most notable …'

Flora stared at her tawny and gold face with its huge dark eyes. 'Am I to be killed?'

'Do not question a priestess.' Sister Sage ran her hands down the sides of Flora's face. 'Open your mouth.' She looked inside. 'Perhaps.' Then she inclined her head over Flora's mouth and fed her one golden drop of honey.

The effect was immediate and astonishing. Clarity washed Flora's mind and her body filled with strength. She understood that Sister Sage wished her to follow in silence, and that she must do whatever she asked.

As they walked down the corridor she noticed how every bee averted her eyes and busied herself, and how the dead body of the young worker was already far ahead of them, carried in the mouth of a dark hunched bee who walked in the gutter. There were many more of the same type, all moving on the edge of the corridor. Some carried bundles of soiled wax, others scrubbed at broken cells. None looked up.

'They are your kin-sisters.' Sister Sage followed Flora's eyes. 'All of them mute. Presently you will join them in Sanitation, and perform valuable service to our hive. But first, a private experiment.' She smiled at Flora. 'Come.'

Flora followed gladly, all memory of the killing lost in her longing to taste more honey.

Two

The priestess walked swiftly through the pale corridors of the Arrivals Hall. Flora followed closely, her brain recording all the sounds and scents as different kin broke free of their emergence chambers. Many more dark sanitation workers moved along the gutters with bundles of soiled wax. Noting their sharp distinctive odour and how other bees avoided any contact with them, Flora drew closer to Sister Sage and her fragrant wake.

The priestess paused, antennae raised. They had come to the edge of the Arrivals Hall where the countless rows of emergence cells finished, and a large hexagonal doorway led into a smaller chamber. A burst of applause from within carried out a thrilling new odour. Flora looked up at Sister Sage.

'Unfortunate timing,' said the priestess. 'But I must pay my respects.' Once inside, she put Flora to wait by the wall then went to the front of a crowd of bees. Flora watched as once again they burst out clapping, gathered before the entrance of a still-closed emergence cell.

Flora gazed around this beautiful room. It was obviously an Arrivals Hall for more favoured bees, for it was spaciously arranged around two rows of central cells, each

one made up of six grand and beautifully carved individual compartments. Sister Sage stood in the welcoming committee before one of them, where many bees held platters of pastries and pitchers of nectared water. The delicious smells sharpened Flora's own hunger and thirst.

Muffled curses and thuds came from within the decorated walls of the compartment, as if the occupant was leaping and jumping. At the sound of breaking wax, the assembled sisters redoubled their applause and their kinscents flowed stronger with excitement. Flora detected a molecule of a different scent and her brain knew its pheromone signal: *A Male – A Male arrives!*

'Worship to His Maleness!' cried several feminine voices as a big carved piece of wax fell out, followed by screams of delight as through the hole came the plumed head of a brand-new drone.

'Worship to His Maleness!' the sisters cheered again, and they rushed to help him out, pulling the wax free themselves and making a staircase of their bodies.

'Quite high,' he said as he walked down on top of them. 'And quite tiring.'

He puffed his dronely scent around himself, rousing more sighs and applause.

'Welcome and Worship to His Maleness.' Sister Sage curtsied low. As all the other bees graciously did the same, Flora stared in admiration and tried to copy the movement. 'Honour to our Hive,' said Sister Sage as she rose.

'Too kind.' But his smile had charm, and all the sisters returned it, gazing at him avidly. He was rumpled but elegant, and very concerned with the exact set of his neck-ruff. When he had finally arranged it to his liking, he bowed with a great flourish. Then, to the sisters' fervent applause, he showed himself off from many angles, stretching out his legs in pairs, puffing his plume and even treating them to a sudden roar of his engine. They

screamed in delight and fanned each other, and some scrambled to offer him pastries and water.

Flora watched him eat and drink, her own mouth dry and her hunger keen.

'Greed is a sin, 717.' Sister Sage was beside her again. 'Take care.'

She walked on, and before Flora could look back at the drone her antennae tugged sharply from the line of scent the priestess had attached without her knowledge. She ran to catch up.

As she followed, the vibrations in the comb floor became more insistent, stronger and stronger as if it were a living thing beneath her, energy running in all directions. With a buzzing sensation through all her six feet, a torrent of information rushed up through her body and into her brain. Overwhelmed, Flora stopped in the middle of a big lobby. Under her feet spread a vast mosaic of hexagonal floor tiles, the patterns scrolling across the lobby and down the corridors. Endless streams of bees criss-crossed around them and the air was thick with scent broadcasting.

Sister Sage came back to her.

'Well! You appear to have accessed every floor code at once. Stay very still.' She lightly touched both Flora's antennae with her own.

A new fragrance cocooned them. Flora breathed it deep inside and the rushing confusion in her brain subsided. Her body calmed and her heart filled with joy, for the fragrance told her with utter certainty that she, Flora 717, was loved.

'Mother!' she cried out as she sank to her knees. 'Holy Mother.'

'Not quite.' The priestess looked gratified. 'Though I am of the same noble kin as Her Majesty, all praise to Her eggs. And as the Queen most graciously permitted me to attend Her today, I am richly blessed with Her scent. That

which you feel is but a tiny fraction of the Queen's Love, 717.'

Sister Sage's voice came from a great distance and Flora nodded. As the Queen's Love flowed through her body and brain, all the different frequencies and codes in the tiles slowed and clarified into a map of the hive, constantly running with information. Everything was fascinating, and beautiful, and she turned her gaze to the priestess.

'Yes. Very receptive.' Sister Sage looked at her, then pointed to a new area of the mosaic. 'Now stand over there.'

Obediently Flora moved, feeling how the comb transmitted subtly different vibrations and frequencies. She adjusted her feet to receive the strongest signal, and the priestess watched with keen attention.

'You feel something – but do you comprehend it?'

Flora wanted to answer that she did, but her physical bliss prevented her speaking and she could only stare. At her silence, Sister Sage relaxed.

'Good. Knowledge only causes pain to your kin.'

As they walked on, Flora's euphoria stabilised into a feeling of deep physical relaxation and heightened perception. Only now did she fully appreciate the beauty of Sister Sage's elegant form, how her pale gold fur lay in silky stripes against the thin brown gloss of her bands, themselves exactly matched by the shade of her six legs. Long translucent wings folded down her back and her antennae tapered to fine points.

They continued deeper into the hive, Flora entranced by its carved and frescoed walls of ancient scent and the beautiful blend of her living sisters. She did not feel how the golden tiles changed underfoot and the bare pale wax began, or how the priestess spread her cloak of scent over them both as they entered an empty corridor which held no vibration at all.

Only when they stopped before a small plain doorway did she feel how far they had travelled, and that she was still very hungry.

'Soon.' Sister Sage answered her as if she had spoken. She touched a panel in the wall and the door opened.