

Seven

The scent of the priestesses faded as Flora went deeper into the aromatic criss-crossing of her sisters, their body heat blending their kin-scents together in fragrance and gossip. To listen to their bright voices and understand all they said was a wonderful thing, and she was soon caught up in the major news, coming through the floor codes and the excited antennae all around her: the rain had stopped, the clouds had parted, the foragers were returning.

‘Nectar comes!’ shouted some bees. ‘The flowers love us!’

The comb shimmered and every bee felt joy running through her feet at the sweet smell coming up from the lower level. The bees pushed back to make a passageway through their numbers, and Flora found herself crammed wing to wing at the front of one cheering group, making space for those who were to come.

The bees redoubled their cheers as a forager ran between their cordon, her throat distended with the precious burden of nectar she carried. Filaments of golden scent drifted on the air behind her, telling of the flower that had yielded its sweetness. Flora stared enraptured as more and more of them came through – sisters of all ages and kin,

some with ragged wings, some young and perfect, all with the golden fragrance of nectar streaming behind them.

As the molecular structures of the flowers went into Flora's brain, a strange sound startled her. Sisters either side of her looked at her with compassion – and Flora realised it was her own voice, moaning incoherently as she tried to join in the cheering. The last forager ran past, calling for her sisters to follow.

The golden fragrance drew Flora on, until to her shock she realised she had passed unscathed through the scent-gates on the staircase to the highest level of the hive. There was no time to wonder at that, for now the party of nectar-bearers were passing down a long corridor whose immaculate pale tiles were inlaid with details of flowers. They were prayer tiles, preparing those who walked on them for the sacred mysteries beyond, and each step triggered chemical verses to unscroll.

At the back of the procession, Flora waited for an alarm to sound at her profane presence on this highest and restricted level of the hive – but a cloud of incense rose up beneath her feet just as from those ahead and joined her to the procession. And then, as the two tall double doors in the middle of the passageway swung open to admit them, her soul filled with joy. Waves of raw floral fragrance billowed out on warm air and as Flora entered the sacred refinery of the Fanning Hall, she beheld the genius of her people.

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A golden mist and soft harmonic chord shimmered from the centre of the great atrium, whose six towering walls were made of interlocking chalices of honey, all capped and consecrated with the Queen's seal, and curved in to make a domed ceiling. Far below stood hundreds of sisters

in concentric circles, all fanning their silver wings. Their faces were joyous and blank and before each was a large chalice of raw nectar. From these vessels the mist and music spiralled into the air as the water evaporated from the nectar, thickening it to honey.

Only now did Flora realise that every forager and receiver of the procession was busy decanting their precious load into open wax chalices, and that she alone had no function there. She knew she should leave – the very presence of a sanitation worker in this holy place must surely warrant punishment – yet it was so wondrous that she could not bear to. From the scented shadows she watched the foragers and their attendants emptying their loads, then straightening their wings and walking out. One of the last young receivers was clumsy and spilled some nectar down the side of a wax chalice, but in her hurry to remain in procession she just glanced down guiltily, then ran to leave with the others.

The tall doors swung closed and the rings of sisters resumed their silver shimmer. The Holy Chord rose up and their wing-beats stirred fragrance through the warm air. To hide in the shadows felt disrespectful so Flora stepped out. Some instinct impelled her to bow to the centre of the atrium, but no sooner had she touched her antennae to the wax floor than her wing-latches clicked open, her virgin wings trembled as her engine fired, and she was lifted off her feet.

Some sisters glanced up, searching for the sound. Flora clamped her thoracic muscles together and dropped down to the wax before they could locate her. She latched her wings tight against her back and looked around in alarm. Bad enough for a sanitation worker to be trespassing here, but to have used her wings—

The extraordinary sensation subsided into her body. To calm her racing brain, Flora looked for dirt to clean, but

the Fanning Hall was immaculate. The only minute element of disorder was where the young receiver had spilled some nectar, now drying down the side of the wax chalice, and the tiles on which it stood.

At the scent, Flora's belly clutched in hunger.

Desire is sin, Greed is sin—

But surely cleaning it would not be sin?

Careful not to let her profane body touch the chalice, Flora knelt down beside the spill and was overcome with the fragrance of honeysuckle. The living spirit of the crimson-gold blooms filled her body with energy, and she was licking up the last molecules from the tiles when she heard the commotion outside.

The massed vibration of many agitated sisters came closer down the passageway, voices raised in protest.

'Honey!' boomed a deep male voice. 'Now!'

'Please Your Malenesses,' cried a female voice. 'Stop!'

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Flora leapt back in alarm as a party of drones barged in and swaggered down the centre aisle towards her. They were huge and pungent with big handsome faces, sun visors over their eyes, and their thick fur was styled with pomade. The shimmering circles of sisters slowed their wings and turned their faces towards the intruders. No one noticed Flora.

'Sir Poplar, Sir Rowan, Sir Linden, all noble sirs,' cried another sister running after them, 'let us send to Patisserie or—'

'We said we want honey!' shouted another drone.

'A proper deep suck of it,' called one more, 'none of your dainty little sips.'

They began stamping their great armoured feet on the comb, chanting for honey and nectar. The mist from the

chalices evaporated, revealing the sisters' distressed faces.

'Keep fanning, pretty sisters,' called one of the drones. 'We do not linger, we are on a mission of Love! And you, old girl by the door with the long face – good cheer from you too, for we fly for the honour of our hive!'

'Worship to Your Malenesses.' A senior Sister Prunus dropped him a deep curtsy. Flora joined in as all around the other sisters copied the obeisance. As she went low she stared at the drones' armoured feet, their powerful tendons and thighs, and the underside of their huge thoraxes. Their smell was high but not unpleasant, and her breathing spiracles dilated to inhale more deeply.

'Might we most respectfully suggest, Your Malenesses' – and Sister Prunus rose to her feet – 'that because of the constant rains, and this time of austerity, you might confine yourselves to our recently gathered nectars? For instance—'

'Honey is our want, so honey we must have.' The drone threw a big muscular arm around Sister Prunus and his scent drifted across her face. 'Think now of those foreign princesses, waiting for us. How fatigued, how impatient for love must they be? Would you bind them in chastity a single moment longer? Or shall we fill our bellies with the strength of this hive, then free them with our swords?'

Sister Prunus gasped at his lewd gesture, her antennae waving wildly. The big drone laughed and released her, and all the sisters laughed too, avid for more of his scent. Sister Prunus quickly groomed herself to hide her shining face. Then she stepped forward and clapped all her hands.

'Their Malenesses will take their Right of Access.'

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