

Blood in a Field of Marigolds:

A novella

by

Brion T. Schwery

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of English

April 2024

Sean M. Keck

Dr. Sean Keck

Thesis Advisor

4/10/24

Date

Rick Van Noy

Dr. Rick Van Noy

Committee Member

4/10/24

Date

Justine Jackson Stone

Mx. Justine Jackson-Stone

Committee Member

4/10/24

Date

Acknowledgments

I would like to give recognition and thanks to:

My uncle, Brandon Smith, for support and feedback throughout my writing process.

Dr. Chet Bhatta of the Radford University Biology Department for answering my many questions on honeybee behavior and anatomy.

Bees

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments ii

Table of Contents iii

Pronunciation/Character Guide iv

Introduction v

Blood in a Field of Marigolds 1

Bibliography 84

Pronunciation and Character Guide

Jieatani'I (Jay-a-tawn-ee-ai) – Honeybee term for wasps

Hespiri (He-spear-ee) – Slur for beetles

Senadej (Cena-deg) – Honeybee term for birds

The Hive

Balia II-XXI – A young scout

Yumé III-XVIII – An old soldier

Ha'shet II-III – Talented competitor

Efrati I-VI and Mimu III-VII – friends of Balia

Queen Min'el – A kind mother

Queen Nerati – Ambitious princess

Mahari II-I – Next generation soldier

Renpet II-X – Empathetic worker

Inaru IV-VIII and Au'na IV-IV – Friends of Mahari and Renpet

General Aujet – Cunning and vicious commander

Introduction

In the quiet hours of a soft spring morning, a low buzzing breaks through the air. The vibrations from the near-transparent wings of a small, gold and noir creature thump endlessly. It whirls through a wall of emerald, juniper, and moss until its eyes spy a new target. A pale and sweet-smelling structure many times larger than itself rising from the shifting earth below. It lands with satisfaction, knowing its purpose is once again fulfilled. It drinks in plenty and feels new joy. Such is the life of nature's mathematical and lovely wonder: the honeybee.

I have always held a deep fascination with the operations of their world. Such tiny creatures that naturally understand what our species took millennia to learn, building stable architecture and running logistics in a way early humans could never dream of. Yet they have such a beauty to them. They take naps inside flowers. They hold political debates through dance battles. They make candy that literally lasts forever. Honeybees are tiny, dramatic, pseudo-fairies that keep the world from falling into an eternity of starvation and the loss of all that is green and beautiful. That is why they have become the muse that has built my novella, *Blood in a Field of Marigolds*.

The origin of this story goes back several years to when I had first started really getting into fantasy stories during the COVID-19 pandemic. I would take long walks while living at my grandma's house, as the local elementary school was a near perfect two miles away and was easy to track the time there and back. During these walks, I would often imagine a wide variety of stories. While most were barely more than fanfiction, two of them stood out. One was a story about a culture of people who planted seeds in their heads to weave the stems into living flower crowns. The other was the rise and fall of a kingdom of bees.

The original version of this story leaned far more into more typical, medieval fantasy tropes. The character focus was more aristocratic, centered on the various queens and leaders of the many hives that comprised the “kingdoms” of the setting. It had a general atmosphere of great houses playing political games to see who would sit the throne. The queens of the main, largely unnamed, hive would have served as the central characters, and the plot would have followed them throughout their lives. The other species, such as wasps, yellowjackets, and carpenter bees, would have served as the other “kingdoms” to be conquered by the heroic and noble but tortured and complicated queen bees. It was all very melodramatic.

As time went on, I have learned to try and check this tendency in my writing. This, along with a healthy amount of research and feedback, has resulted in the main focus of the narrative shifting dramatically over the last year. The scope of the narrative is much smaller, with only two hives playing a large role in the plot. The roles my main characters take is also more intimate, going from powerful queens to average, ground level workers. This largely came as part of the realization that the main aspect of bee life is the community formed within the hive. It is the interactions the animals have with each other, rather than the stereotypical top-down rule of a monarch, which allows the hive to function. This also allowed for a greater sense of mystery to form around the plot, as average workers would not be privy to the private thoughts and plans of a queen.

This has led the themes of the novel to shift as well. The original plot would have carried a heavy theme on the creation and development of culture. As the honeybees grew into a larger and more powerful empire, they would have started developing things like holidays, festivals, funerary traditions for the queens, and something close to ancestor worship. Such would be compounded by the very medieval imperialism of the honeybees towards their many neighbors.

This left the story often feeling both typical and lacking introspection. I was attempting to have this message that different groups can come together to create new wonders but was framing the means of that unity within the concept of colonialism. Over time, the more personal scale of the narrative led it to taking on more contemporary themes of unchecked capitalism, generational conflict, racial politics, and the loss of the natural world.

This heavily influenced the methods I used to explore the anthropomorphizing of the honeybees. As the great mythic narrative melted away, so too did certain elements of how I humanized the characters. The language was originally going to be much different and incorporate a larger number of fictional words and phrases. The original plan had been to create a fairly substantial library of possible words. Yet, as the writing process developed, I realized that only having a handful of them used sporadically would give a sense of cross-cultural understanding. The words that would have originally been used for the environment (such as hive, trees, sky, etc.) were removed solely to keep the ones that referred to other animals like wasps and beetles.

This applied to both the linguistic and physical attributes of the honeybees. The level of anthropomorphizing that I intend to place on the bees decreased as the project went along. Earlier on they would have taken on a furry-esque appearance of near humanization. There were times where I imagined them as full humans where it was largely aesthetic and clothing choices that determined which species they stood in for. However, as the actual plot of the novella came into focus, this level of humanization quickly disappeared. In its place I decided to keep them as close as possible to realistic bee bodies, with the exception of small interactions that were meant to humanize them on a more symbolic level. It became humanization through action rather than

form, with them doing things like dancing, cuddling, and fighting in ways closer to humans than strictly what bees are physically capable of.

Many of the broad changes to my characters came about through my research process. The first and foremost change in this regard was switching from fantasy to science fiction as the main genre. I had created a selection of novels and short stories to read as part of my research process. Among these were *Jurassic Park* by Micheal Crichton and *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood. These stories inspired me to take the narrative of *Marigolds* in a more grounded, science driven direction. Crichton's work in particular has always been among my favorites, with both the *Jurassic Park* book and movie being foundational to a lifelong obsession with dinosaurs. The way that Crichton interweaves his plot with the occasional in-universe documents, lectures, and books published by the characters and companies heavily inspired *Marigold's* scientist plotline. Crichton is also well known for his adherence to making things as scientifically plausible as he could. Even if the central conceit, genetically reverse-engineering dinosaurs from the corpses of mosquitos from millions of year ago, does not make sense scientifically, he always tries to make it seem possible by keeping the science surrounding the story relatively accurate. He creates a bubble of truth around the one creative lie to make them blend together. I often try to do the same, especially in my novella by framing the company behind these experiments as a nebulous but very real threat to environment they are modifying. In *Jurassic Park*, Ingen is more of a force than an actor. Individual players within the company make, and are often destroyed by, their own decision, but the company itself continues on.

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* provided a unique inspiration in the tone of the story. Atwood's narratives are often defined by a semi-realistic nihilism: the idea that the worst possible option can often be the most likely. Her stories focus on characters who are constantly

three steps away from fully giving up, surrendering to the forces around them and letting themselves be swept away in the tide of apathy. This leads to the main conflicts often being between those who have yet to let go of their hopes versus those who have. *Oryx and Crake* features such a conflict between its main character, Jimmy aka Snowman, and his best friend and main villain, the titular Crake aka Glenn.

Jimmy and Glenn both grow up in a world consumed by corporatism, genetic engineering, and climate change. As they live through both the physical and moral rot consuming their society, Crake becomes disillusioned with the existence of humanity. In an emotional confrontation, Crake kills Oryx, a woman both he and Jimmy were in love with, and unleashes a virus that wipes out most of humanity, forcing Jimmy to kill him. This apocalyptic loss of hope for the future and the people creating it is the core of Atwood's story. The debate between Snowman and Crake over Crake's increasing nihilism spans most of the book's backstory, and ultimately leads to Jimmy gaining a newfound purpose protecting the last of Crake's "children" - genetically engineered pseudo-humans that Crake believed would be better suited to the new environment he creates.

This prolonged debate over the fate of the world is one of the central ideas of *Blood in a Field of Marigolds*. It is carried both interpersonally through war and generationally through rising tensions that threaten the very fabric of the society this hive has built. There are two theoretical lenses I wish to explore my narrative with: the Capitalocene and the intersection of race and labor. Within the all-consuming maw of the capitalist system, anything and everything that can be rendered a commodity will be. From the largest of mountains turned into tourist traps, to the microchips they try to put in your head to beam advertisements directly into your brain.

The central conflict of *Marigolds* revolves around the many ways in which capital interacts with the natural. The capitalocene is a concept proposed by geographer Jason Moore in 2015 that would either follow or replace the concept of the Anthropocene, which is the designation given to the era of time in which human activity has had dramatic impact on the climate and environment of the planet. The capitalocene proposes that most of the negative impact of humanity on the global climate was not due to something inherent to humans, but the rise of capitalism as a purely extractive and exploitative enterprise. It is not simply the rise of industrialization that has led to the rising threat of climate change, but *how* and *for whom* industrialization has operated (O’Lear et al., 5).

In his book, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*, Jason Moore discusses what he refers to as the “Capitalization of Nature.” This is understood as the broad restricting and reorganizing of the natural world to better accommodate the capitalist system. It does so with two priorities, “One is to squeeze more work/energy out of older, appropriated zones...[the other] is to render more efficient the industrial processing of Cheap Natures appropriated elsewhere” (111). He continues by remarking on the idea the capitalism cannot be the solution to the rising crisis of climate change due to the fact that its existence necessitates expanding into unclaimed natural systems and the creation of new industry. This creates a series of systems where the natural state of capitalism bumps against the natural state of the world and seeks to commodify and consume it.

The instinctive need of capitalism to commodify the world, as well as change it for that commodification, is a common trope within the sci-fi genre. *Jurassic’s Park* unhinged dinosaur island is the most obvious example, but the book is filled with subtle references to the fact that capitalism has doomed this project to failure. Jon Hammond famously brags how he “spared no

expense” in the creation of the park, yet most of his vital programming and systems were written by one underpaid employee who sold him out the second the opportunity arose. Constantly, you see signs in the novel of the many cost-cutting measures that ultimately causes the park to crumble. So too in *Oryx and Crake* the titular character of Oryx participates in disturbing experiments paid for by powerful corporations, including engineering new bioweapons tested on the poor, creating and curing new diseases, and a tree that grows fully formed organs for the black market.

The second key element of my narrative is the complicated relationship between race and labor. The power disparities being different social, political, and ethnic groups has long been a factor in how capitalism operated. From its inception, it was billed as a way to extract even more wealth and resource out of colonized nations for the benefit of the white aristocracy of Europe. Within the modern capitalist system, you often see this continued through things like the private prison industry and wage disparities between racial groups. Charles Flynn Jr. discusses this in his book, *White Land, Black Labor: Caste and Class in Late-Nineteenth Century Georgia*. He charts a timeline of the many ways in which the powerful white capitalist caste tried to maintain many of the economic systems of slavery by the manipulation and abuse of Black people. Flynn mentions a quote repeatedly cited by Carl Shurtz, a surveyor and reporter working for the Johnson administration, which had become common in the post-war south, “you cannot make the Negro work without physical compulsion” (7). He continues with the idea that for most of American history, Black labor was viewed as having a unique form of value, in that the labor itself and the byproducts of it were indispensable to the success and economic growth of the nation, but that the people performing that labor held little value themselves. This meant that Black labor was desired so long as it could be gained as close as possible to slavery.

This also meant that Black land, property, and safety was continually placed second to white economic needs. This is seen environmentally with the long history of parks, highways, and housing developments often being built on top of forcibly seized Black and Native neighborhoods and land. This is also seen in small ways, such as how public pools in the United States became increasingly closed down or privatized following the signing of the Civil Rights Act in 1965. As white communities could no longer forcibly keep Black people out of now shared public amenities, like pools, parks, zoos, etc., they increasingly slashed the budget for these places (Meyersohn, 7 - 9). In this way, capitalism is defined by selective violence and dehumanization, much as the absence of humanity in nature becomes a convenient way to ignore the devastation caused by industrial development.

Within the narrative of *Marigolds*, this racial and environmental violence is kept deliberately subtle. The races of the scientists are never disclosed, yet the company itself is known as a government-controlled company. This places its relationship with the explicitly non-white honeybees, whose names were all taken from various African and Middle Eastern civilizations, as being inherently racially charged. Such a charge is continued during the main conflict of the narrative as we see the honeybees take on the qualities of both the enemies they fight and the company that seeks to alter their bodies. As the company seeks to alter the bees in order to make them more productive for capitalist exploitation, so too do the bees inflict violence on the species around them for their own exploitation.

Much of this development of the narrative and central thematic cores came about during my research process. I owe two people considerably for helping me in my research: Dr. Chet Bhatta of the Radford University Biology Department, and author and researcher Dr. Thomas Seeley. Towards the beginning of last semester, I sat down with Dr. Bhatta to discuss many of the

questions I had about honeybee anatomy, behavior, and society. We discussed topics such as how honeybee hives interact with one another and how one hive branches off to create another. Dr. Bhatta provided clarity on the presumptions I had had on honeybees at the time, such as the fact that mother and daughter hives have functionally no relationship once the daughter hive splits away. He also helped me understand the more chaotic nature of war and conflict between hives, in that most conflict came in the form of violent raids to pillage food and resources away from hives that were in competition for territory. It was this interview with Dr. Bhatta that fully transitioned the narrative of my honeybees away from one of conquest and subjugation to one of senseless loss within an increasingly damaged environment.

Dr. Thomas Seeley is, unfortunately, not someone I could meet in person. However, it was his books that formed the basis of much of my independent research. Dr. Seeley is a researcher and teacher at Cornell University who is considered to be one of the nation's foremost experts on honeybee anatomy, behavior, and social organization. It was his books that helped me define the early aesthetic of the daughter hive in the novella, particularly in terms of structure, dimensions, and expectations. His research and information were also the primary inspiration behind the great dance debate towards the end of Act 1. His book, *Honeybee Democracy*, provided much of information that allowed me to plan out the early plot and tone of the novel, and the information needed to make the modified bees reach the kind of melittological uncanny valley that I was aiming for in both their actions and appearance.

This unnerving element is part of the larger goal of having the audience question what it means to hold empathy for another creature. While the principal goal of any piece of literature is creating a form of dialogue with the audience's capacity for empathy, I want to create a sense of unexpected bond between the reader and the subject. This was especially true for how I went

about writing the relationships between my characters to carry a more individualistic and intimate weight. It was not enough for them to simply have romantic relationships; those relationships need to be contrasted with typically expected honeybee behavior. As the rising tide of empire and the twisting hand of capital rock the small world of the bees, the bonds they create and fight to maintain become all that they really have in the end. Even as things reach their absolute lowest, it is their community that allows them to survive it all.

Blood in a Field of Marigolds

Early Spring

Balia II-XXI considered herself lucky. At least in here she did, with the great empty space stretched out above her, shrouded in the dark. The old cavern felt natural enough, with a large base that tapered off into two moderately sized cones at the top, one rising up mostly straight, the other jutting off at an odd angle. The entrance, with its soft, marmalade light shining through, did little to illuminate the space. But still, she was sure. This was the spot. It had to be. It was warm and dry, the tree it formed in having died long before she hatched. She could sense the musty air and found no poison in it. If something was growing in here, it at least had the good manners to keep to itself. But something had been here. Balia wiggled her short antennae, clicking her mandibles together in contemplation. She had crawled around its walls for what felt like hours. Smelling, tasting, listening. No combs or holes could be found anywhere she searched, so the echo of a scent was definitely not from any hive or colony. That might prove a problem for the others. But, she decided, that would be an issue for them, not her.

The beating of her wings resonated throughout the grand space, christening it in soft, echoing tones she hoped would be the first of millions. She carefully poked herself out of the entrance that dwarfed her minute body. It was later in the day than she'd wanted. Balia checked her surroundings with utmost care, in the exact way Yumé told her. Up: clear, down: clear, left: clear, right: clear. "*Most attacks come from above or below; rare is it that your flanks are most vulnerable.*" Yume, grizzled veteran that she was, was a great fan of mentioning the supposedly horrid Ambush of the Tulip Field: droning on about the "*dozens of great beasts that laid low hundreds of our hive.*" Balia wasn't exactly primed to believe her when she claimed to have

personally saved the previous queen from a nebulous number of nefarious nightingales, yet there'd be no convincing the other scouts without her.

The route back to the hive was more complicated than Balia would have liked. The search for a new one had taken her farther afield than recommended, even if the results had been worth the effort. *"No more than a half day's flight away. Any scout whose route puts the Queen in more danger than needed will face consequences."* Yume had drilled that into the heads of every scout she'd trained. Too much distance could leave them exposed, picked off, and too weak to set up a proper hive. She counted the marks in her head as she flew, the faint scent of herself guiding the way home.

She whirred on past the lavender that Mira kept trying to make her own honey with. She'd been convinced for days that it would produce a new version that would taste like *"putting the night sky in your mouth,"* whatever that meant. She apparently forgot to tell more than four drones about this plan, so her carefully selected combs kept getting filled by other workers, causing her would be experiments to be ruined. According to some of the other scouts, this wasn't the first time she'd tried this, having attempted the same thing with a large patch of orange roses not two days after being born. That, of course, led to her being labeled as the least productive worker in the history of the hive. Balia hoped she wouldn't have to tell her about where her route headed.

The small patch of swaying lavender disappeared behind her as she swerved left, passing the burnt-out oak. Its billowing darkness passed long, long ago, leaving behind the violent scar as its legacy. Its now fragile branches hung bare upon it, having become fit only for the occasionally passing bird. She'd heard through the combs somewhere that it had possibly been considered for a hive long ago, but Balia refused to take stock in it. History was brief, cruel, and

relentless. No one bothered to remember what might have been when what they had now would be gone far too soon.

As she neared the hive, she was reminded it had been an uncomfortably wet day, with it having rained the day before. The outside of the hive, with its smooth, pale surface, had been too wet to crawl on. The hive had felt cramped to all within as no one dared venture out into the waiting hellscape. Too dark. Too unstable. Too easy to die. It had delayed the searches for new hives, and the fear was that all the spots that had already been scouted may be rendered useless. Worse yet, any of them could be stolen by those Jietej.

Two other options had been presented in the last two days: the first, found by Efrati I-VI: the ruin of a colossal fallen tree. It was large, and close to the fields the hive tended to use for nectar. It also had ample space for storage and expansion as needed. However, age had weathered it greatly, turning its marbled, gold and brown interior a dark gray. It had multiple entrances, most due to rot, moss, or insects. Despite its position, few viewed it as stable enough for use. It was mossy, exposed, and several older scouts feared it had deep rot. Not to mention it was at ground level, and everyone knew that was dangerous, lethal even. Efrati had been naïve to think it a viable option.

The second, found by Ha'shet II-III: a wall. A towering blue wall made of a rough, stony material. The kind of wall that gives one pause trying to look up to its peak. It'd be vertigo inducing if they hadn't trained for it. Roughly halfway up, there was a hole. Not a particularly large one, even for bees. Yet beyond that lay something truly wonderful. If you believed her, Ha'shet had found a place absolutely teeming with literal mountains of food in all forms. Nectar, pollen, fruits, everything. As if she had found paradise itself. She'd already won over a solid

enough number of other scouts to be more than a fair challenge, even if Balia were lucky enough to convince the old guard like Yumé.

Balia didn't like her chances. Ha'shet was otherworldly in her dances. Young, only a day or two older than Balia, vibrant, and filled with a passion that was hard to match. Some workers even whispered they saw the queen herself observing one of her dances. Seemingly everyone in the hive had tried to see her at least once. Every eye glued to her. The sway of her legs and hips held the hive locked in rapturous pause. Every moment, every turn, each push and pull of her muscles was a testament to her truth. Her reality. A gospel in motion. The only way Balia could possibly win against that was strength of numbers.

She landed with a hard thud and took off running the second her feet hit the floor. She had literally one shot at this. No scout had ever lived long enough to be part of more than one hive selection. The only way it could happen was by a right and true catastrophe befalling a hive, and those tended to kill basically all colonies more often than not. History was cruel, and the opportunities for a legacy for anyone outside of the queens were few and far between. It was a chance only seen once in several generations. She zoomed past everyone, trying to find Yumé. She'd be near the other, older workers who were overseeing the scouts and organizing the debates. Someone as universally cynical as her would be tough for Balia to convince, but the same would be true for Ha'shet.

On and again, past the endless throngs of older workers, and the new generations that would eventually leave with their new queen, the buzzing crowds were alight with discussion and debate. Even with the oncoming move, the work must continue. Food production could not stop for a single moment if the opportunity was there, and several would-be scouts had been double tasked with searching out new hives while on foraging trips. Queen Minn'll have touted

this as a new system for reducing the number of workers that had to turn to scouting full time. Only the movement of generations would tell if it was successful.

She found Yumé standing quietly atop the fourth great column. She stood stiff, resolute as always. Her three arms were crossed in front of her, rendered asymmetrical by the missing upper left that had been severed long ago. Although, Balia could never get a straight answer as to which of her mentor's many stories could be the one where that happened. Yumé III-XVIII was old, nearly three months now, a child of winter. She'd likely not last long past the move. Yet for now, her opinions, and those of the other oldest workers, were considered as close to law as possible. Her dark eyes scanned the debating scouts below, forcing her increasing thoughts of potential failure down. Her once sharp and powerful mandibles now clicked beyond her command more often than she'd ever willingly allow. Her joints had been aching more lately, and it had become more difficult to keep food down. *Yes, it won't be long now*, kept itself well occupied in her mind. Ha'shet had died only four days prior. *Her* Ha'shet. Ha'shet I-I. The one she had been born only three combs away from. The one who'd carried her back after the accident. Who'd lied then, and every day since, for her. To her, this new generation of Ha'shets were all lacking in her resolve.

Balia made little attempt to conceal her excitement and energy when she ran up to Yumé, almost barreling into her. "Captain! Balia Two Twenty-one reporting in."

"So, I noticed," Yumé responded without looking. She could smell her two columns away, giving off traces of old oak and the wet afternoon air. "Where have you been?"

"I found a potential hive site ma'am. Had to be thorough inspecting everything." Her excitement was palpable, her wings twitching with anticipation. Yumé turned to face her fully now.

“You did, did you? Report then.”

Balia stood at attention, rigid and defined, “Yes ma’am. The site is one hour, twenty-two minutes to the south by south-east. It’s a cavern in an old tree. Entrance is wide enough for three or four to enter at a time, by my estimate.”

“And what of the living space?”

“Large, dry, no signs of prior occupants, growths, or leaks.”

“Hm...could be an option.” Balia’s eyes lit up at that. “Take Efrati One Six and Mimu Three Seven and have them inspect it and report back.”

“I thought Efrati had her own site to endorse?” Balia said as her head tilted slightly to the right, searching the lower crowd for her.

“Taken over by Hespiri. Besides, it wasn’t going to work anyway.” Balia quietly regarded the new development as Yumé seemed uninterested in providing further details. The young scout was flooded with newfound determination. With Efrati out of the way, it could potentially be just her and Ha’shet competing. She might actually stand a chance now. “You can find them both below. Let them know you’ll set off in the morning.”

“Thank you, ma’am, but I had been hoping to take others there today if possible.”

“Absolutely not, too late in the day. It’ll be dark by the time you’d get back.”

“Of course.” She paused for a moment. “I was also hoping you’d be willing to take a look, captain?”

Yumé studied her face for a moment, looking deeply into Balia’s pleading eyes. Relenting with a sigh, she lightly clicked her mandibles. “Fine, but only if both the other two endorse it as strongly as you do.” Balia struggled to contain her grimace.

“I’ll do everything I can to convince them ma’am.”

“I certainly hope you would,” the captain sighed with exasperation. “Now go find them, little scout.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Balia flew off into the lower levels to find her now mandated companions. After a minute of half-hearted searching, she found them both sitting around halfway down, Mimu doing her best to comfort a clearly distraught Efrati. Balia approached slowly, letting her presence be known without having to interrupt their conversation. “I just didn’t expect it to go this wrong,” Efrati choked out, trying not to let her sobs draw too much attention.

“I know sweetie,” Mimu whispered, running her claw through the soft hairs of Efrati’s midsection, careful to avoid the wings. “There’ll be other opportunities. Besides, it’s not your fault.”

“Those damn Hespiri! I hate them! Ruined everything!”

Balia thought it best not to mention her (or anyone else’s) comments on the state of Efrati’s choices. It wasn’t a great spot by any means but to have it taken over by Hespiri, truly terrible. She stood there, awkwardly waiting for them to acknowledge her arrival. After a long moment punctuated by more of Efrati’s sobbing, Mimu finally looked up at her.

“What do you need Balia 2-21?” Mimu had always been very insistent on the use of designations for basically everyone that wasn’t Efrati I-XI.

After clearing her throat, Balia replied a little more curtly than intended, “Captain Yumé has ordered you to accompany me to a hive site I plan to promote. Says I need more scouts to check it out.”

Mimu clearly wasn’t happy with the news. “Maybe now isn’t the best time. There’s still the potential that Efrati’s could open back up.” At this Efrati herself jerked up with a loud inhale.

Breathing sharply, she began reordering herself. Cleaning her antennae, wiping down her face, and standing with an almost too stiff attention.

“Fine...fine. Those Hespiri can go fuck themselves, and apparently so can I.”

“I’m sorry. I should have waited to ask,” Balia half stammered out.

“No. It is fine. Where is it?”

Balia did not like the tense air she was feeling, but it was too late to pull back now.

“About an hour south-ish in a hollow tree. Cap’n says to head there first thing in the morning.”

Neither Mimu nor Efrati seemed overly thrilled at the idea, but orders were orders. Efrati dusted herself off the best she could and sighed.

“Alright, we’ll see you in the morning then.”

With a short bow, Balia left them to find any other scout she could potentially convince to join them, as she did not relish the idea of only travelling with the less-than-happy pair.

Descending further into the crowds, she could make out a few others who might help. Yet there, through them all, she saw her: Ha’shet. Surrounded by a throng of supporters already, radiant among them like the morning sun slicing through the night’s clouds. For a moment, their eyes met, and Balia could not help the fluttering in her heart seeing what felt like the endless sea of the night sky staring back.

The next morning had been slow, and by the time the scouting trio had begun to make their way back to the main hive, Balia was teetering on the edge of murder. Neither Efrati nor Mimu were the least bit excited to head to the potential hive in the first place and were no strangers to letting that be known. She must have reassured them twenty times of the validity of the selection. Mimu, being filled with her expected and absolute adherence to any and all procedure, had no shortage of questions on the most minute or miniscule of details. “*Did you*

make absolutely sure that the smaller antechambers had no issues of rot or fungus? How is the structural support? Did you check the rest of the tree for issues? Are the walls deep enough for combs? How is the water access? Is the entrance up to code? Do you feel confident in its location? Did you measure out the volume of the interior right?" It had taken everything Balia had in her not to rip off Mimu's wings and throw her out of the tree.

It did not help at all that Efrati either stayed silent or directed basically all of her questions, thoughts, or opinions to Mimu rather than her. She mostly lingered in place, occasionally flying up to a new point to knock on the walls a handful of times, nominally to check the quality of the material, before going back to staring off into space. Efrati had been one of the most thorough workers of their generation. Now, she had been reduced to an occasionally catatonic mess basically being carried through life by Mimu. Both of them were doing little to nothing to actually help Balia make her case. Of course, she knew why they were both doing this: Efrati did not care, and Mimu was looking for excuses not to. It had taken so much unneeded effort to get them both on board, Balia thought she would've had a more constructive time with a hungry sparrow.

The flight back had been equally infuriating for Balia. Mimu and Efrati had been more inclined to converse with one another, rather than coordinating with her on the next steps. She needed to have a clear plan of action when they landed, or Yumé, not to mention any other captains, would never seriously consider her position. Turning in the air to face the pair, she posed the obvious question, "So, who else can we find when we get back? We will need at least ten of us to get this comb carved."

Mimu contemplated the prompt for a moment, “Well, we had Jasta One Thirty-two, Mimu Three Nine and Three Seventeen, and Yume Four Twelve on board with Efrati’s plan, so it would be easiest to convince them.”

“If they haven’t already been snatched up by Ha’shet,” Efrati added dryly.

“Well, Captain Yumé said that if you both support the location, she’ll-,” Balia said, moving closer to the pair.

“Three Eighteen,” Mimu cut in.

“Yes, Captain Yumé Three Eighteen,” retorted Balia, trying to hide her sarcasm. “She made it clear that if you both put your support behind the idea, she’ll go inspect the place herself.”

“She would certainly lend credibility. Who else might you have?”

“The only other scout I can think of is Au’na Two Nine. But we should have more options once we have more on our side.” Both of her companions nodded approvingly, the hive approaching quickly. They landed swiftly in the lower entrance. Balia turned to her mildly enthused allies, “We will talk to Yumé Three Eighteen first, then you both go find the others and we’ll all meet back up in around two hours. That work?”

“I find no objections. Efrati?”

“Sounds fine,” she responded with a shrug.

“Good. Then I will see you both later.” The trio went their separate ways for the time being, intent on growing their small army of social backers. Balia rushed over to the scouts’ meeting ground, frantic to find Yumé among the other observing captains. It took several more hours, and a considerable amount of begging, arguing, and half-veiled threats, to convince a solid group of supporters to Balia’s cause. Seven more trips to the prospective hive would be made

throughout the day, each one filled its champion with mortal panic. But it worked. She finally had enough, and now the real work began.

Several hours of intense arguing and practice followed. Both sides swelled in number to a couple dozen each. Ha'shet still maintained a slight lead when the first rounds of debate were set to begin. Balia outwardly stood firm, staring across the chamber at Ha'shet and her closest supporters preparing their opening moves. They moved low, turning on their heels to rise, spinning with their arms raised. It was clear that Ha'shet was not playing around. Balia was as ready as she could be. Yumé, Efrati, Mimu, and Jasta ran through the routine again, trying to ensure the rest followed suit. As much as Ha'shet normally drew her attention, Balia could not help but stare at Au'na. That traitor. She had hoped to have her to herself. Au'na had promised to help her, yet there she stood with Ha'shet. It had been an unexpected setback to have her already in the enemy's arms, and it stung deep to lose her.

As Balia turned back to regroup with the others, a mighty hum resounded through the chambers. A hive in unison, beckoning the arrival of the Queen and Princess. All on the floor and walls stood at attention with eyes fixed on the arriving pair. Their procession floated down from the top of the hive. First came their attendants, followed by the guards. Then there they were. Towering and resplendent. A set of gold beacons that captured the minds, hearts, and eyes of all who observed them. Queen Minn'll stood to the left, slightly ahead of her younger counterpart. She had just completed her previous rounds of eggs, the next generation lain into the walls. It would be a day or two before she returned to the task, most likely after the departure of the new hive. Her age had not worn itself upon her face, that the sharp lines of her well tested youth had barely faded. She bore that well-known, serious expression that had come to define her. A look that spoke of ever-calculating thought, strategies yet implemented, schemes nearing completion.

Min'el had led the hive for just over two lesser lifetimes, a fixture in what all expected of a ruler. Even behind her, Balia could feel Yumé tense at the sight of her queen. The old soldier's absent arm twitched, seeing again who it had been sacrificed for.

Then there was the Princess, soon to be Queen, Nerati. Slightly shorter than her mother, but wider with broad shoulders and a muscular physique. She radiated a form of power very much unlike Min'el's. Balia got the distinct impression Nerati could break her if they got close enough. No one was quite sure what to make of the new Princess. Beautiful and vibrant as she was, something felt different about her in ways not easily put to words. Looking out at the champions making their claims, her eyes fixed on both Balia and Ha'shet in turn. Balia felt so small then. Her lowest instincts were telling her that she was not even being viewed as the same animal as Nerati. Something about the Princess' cold, black eyes felt almost hungry. A deep desire for ownership lingered in her gaze.

Queen Min'el flew forward then, pausing in the air to bask in the undivided attention of her hive. Four of her guards flanked her, two to the sides, one above, one below. All remaining ambient chatter, the hushed and rushed whisper of the crowd, melted away as she spoke. "Good morning, everyone. I find myself ecstatic at today's events. To see all the hard work and effort our brave scouts have put into finding a new home for so many of their fellows. What each of you has accomplished over the last several days has been nothing short of extraordinary." She now bent down to address the scouts directly. "Ha'shet Two Three and Balia Two Twenty-One. Are you both the only candidates left to present a hive on this day?" The crowd held its breath, scanning the formation of scouts to see if anyone would come forward with a new and exciting challenge. None did.

Above the somewhat disappointed mumblings of the wider hive, Min'el continued, "Well then, as it appears that no one else has come forward, and given that the window for settling either new hive is short, I decree that no new submissions may yet be made in this debate except by the authorization of myself or Nerati." A soft wave of murmurs swept across the expansive corridor, then died just a quickly. "All unaligned scouts, clear the area now. Ha'shet. Balia. You shall both be given a few moments to prepare with your routines." Min'el moved back to the great beam across the walls and retook her place beside her daughter. The crowds below began to part with any worker bee taking their places on the walls and the great swath of neutral scouts moving back to allow the two sides room.

Amidst the parting throngs, Yumé quietly approached Balia, placing a claw on her back. "Are you prepared for this, Balia?" The young scout looked back at her commander with a look of trepidation. Looking between her group of roughly a dozen, and Ha'shet's maybe one or two more, Balia II-XXI felt oddly calm.

Returning her mentor's gaze, she abounded with confidence "Yeah. Yeah, I think we can do this."

"Change that 'I think' to an 'I know' and you might be right."

The next few minutes were flushed with last-minute reminders, a couple of way too late suggestions, and a handful of groans that only added to the nervous air. Mimu kept looking over at the opposition, trying to guess at their strategies from what little could be seen beyond their wings. Yet somehow Balia kept them focused on her. Every single one of them needed to know which position to go to, when they switched, and who to follow. It was all on her now, and no amount of preplanning could make up for the fact that ultimately this was her vs Ha'shet. Everyone else was simply a visual indication of the cohesiveness of their rationale.

The low hum of the crowd was starting to become noticeable. The background noise of thirty-five thousand vibrating bodies. The metronome of lively debate. Soon the thumping of limbs against the walls would start. A song of destiny and decisions was forming. The minutes moved by quickly, and Queen Min'el arose once more. "My children, the time has come!" The crowd erupted in rhythmic buzzing and cheers in response, a chorus heralding the coming change. "This day marks a great triumph and great tragedy. For soon, we shall decide where shall serve as the seat for the magnificent kingdom of my daughter." Tuning back to face Nerati she added, "I know it shall be one worth twenty times its weight in honey." The jubilant Queen returned her attention to the crowd, "And yet, we shall also have to say goodbye to so many of our sisters and brothers. I know I shall miss you all terribly."

"Yet, for as all things must end, so too must new life make its journey upon the earth and within the sky. Balia. Ha'shet. You may take your positions. Now, Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to introduce the leader for this ceremony's musical accompaniment: Autep Five Four!" She introduced him with a wide flourish signaling a wave of applause. Autep was old, almost three months, but his reputation for vocals was still unrivaled. He descended slowly to the platform next to the Queens, bowing to both in turn.

"Thank you so much, your grace. It is truly an honor to be chosen for such an occasion." His voice was loud and dynamic, far more so than anyone would have expected, after his injuries a few weeks prior. A falling branch had knocked him and several others off an oak tree, leaving seventeen dead and twelve injured. Yet here he stood, that great, beaming confidence not having lost its luster. With a dramatic signal to his band, the hum of the crowd was joined by a magnificent set of deep drums and a range of scratching and strumming sounds, the band playing instruments made of hollow nuts, leaves, and tube-like stones.

Both Balia and Ha'shet approached the center of the platform, each flanked by two of their supporters. Ha'shet with Au'na and an older scout named Lirani, Balia with Mimu and Efrati. The music swelled around the small congregation. Balia could barely stop herself from drinking in Ha'shet's image. Her thick frame, powerful legs, and those eyes. The eyes filled with determination strong enough to blot out the sun. One beat, then two. The two trios stopped, waiting for the beat to drop. Only a few more seconds. Balia found herself staring at her opponent's mandibles. So lost in the imagery of tasting them she almost missed the drop.

Ha'shet's side went first, dropping low and moving at a speed that nearly threw their enemies for a loop. Up and down again, arms swinging in a display of shocking synchronicity. The song's first switch came almost as fast. Balia had mere moments to push one thought through her mind: "*MOVE.*" The floor clicked beneath her feet with each stomp. Right. Up. Cross. She forced herself to remember to keep her arms coordinated with her legs. Moving them parallel in the rise, perpendicular in the fall. Mimu and Efrati were keeping up nicely. Yet it was hell on her body for Balia to create so much on the fly. The routine completely evaporated the second Ha'shet's glorious sun burned the dance floor.

She was relentless. Unwavering. Her reputation and legacy on the line fueling something Balia had never had the pleasure to see. All she could do now was stay consistent. The remainder of each of their sides began closing in, joining the dispute in motion. Over time they started to draw other scouts in from the crowd. From this moment forward, it was a numbers game. First to reach an overwhelming majority won. Kick. Spin. Bend and slide back. Her work was solid if she could be so bold as to give herself the credit.

Yet Ha'shet was faster. Cleaner. Smoother. Natural beauty rendered shining and clear with every flourish and wiggle. She drew the eyes and envy of all. The music seemed to bend

around her, surrounding her form in vicious power. She dropped into a sharp spin, clutching her chest while looking back over her shoulder into Balia's eyes, almost knocking her from her concentration mid-plie. She recovered smoothly by adding a jump into a hopefully effective pose. Both leaders found themselves pressed nearer as the growing throng of performers began filling the space behind them.

Suddenly, the crowds lurched forward, and Balia found herself up against Ha'shet's back. The shock of actually being so close was the one reason she was able to repress a scream. Whether of joy or sudden embarrassment, Balia was not really sure. Her hands ran themselves through the soft, gold hairs of her enemy's abdomen. Nothing had ever felt quite so smooth and perfect. The crowd somehow caused them both to compress even smoother, with Ha'shet now wedged firmly between Balia's legs. The now quite flustered young combatant could now feel Ha'shet's hands travel across her, sliding delicately along her left wings, every rustle against her finger sending cruel shivers charging up her spine. Their eyes met briefly as Ha'shet turned her head toward her. Balia was entranced by her utterly and wholly. This wonderful creature that held her in such gentle arms. She wanted nothing more than to stay in her rival's embrace forever. To hold her more. Feel her more. Feel her everywhere. For a brief moment she could feel Ha'shet's mandibles press close to her neck. It took so much of Balia not to crane her neck forward, not caring if she meant to nibble at it or tear it out. Anything to know what it would be to be tasted by her.

As Balia tried to reach a trembling arm up to Ha'shet's face, the crowd suddenly pushed itself back, resetting the newcomers onto the flanks. That godly figure pressed into her frame now moved swiftly away and the poor creature wanted only to scream at the absence. She

wanted to go back more than anything. Send the crowd forward again. Crush them into each other. Dying in Ha'shet's arms was a privilege she had prayed a hundred times to feel.

A rough tug from someone she could only assume to be Yumé brought her back to her senses. A cutting command confirmed her assumption. "Keep focused." Balia wheeled, posed, forced herself to take a breath, shove down the desire to cry, and begin again. Her movements were shaky at first, almost clumsy. Ha'shet, on the other hand, seemed filled with newfound energy. Faster and more complex than ever, her new rapture and testament. Balia did not dare look into the crowds, knowing what had to be the reality. She was losing.

The only thing she could do now was simplify. Keep things short, no flashy moves, only arguments. Yet still, the music swelled, pregnant and waiting to birth the reality of victory. Balia was running out of options, and no way of knowing if she was leading ten dancers or one hundred. And there was Ha'shet, still going strong. The stomping and buzzing of the crowd were nearly drowning out the music. Balia was barely keeping track of the beat. *It is all falling apart*; she thought almost tripping over herself. She was barely able to disguise it with a short tap and stomp. It all grew on her. Ha'shet's unequalled talent, the music, and crowd, all of it. She was on the verge of throwing up her hands and flying away.

Then she felt a hand on her shoulder. A large one. Silence filled the hive as she froze, the echoes of a thousand noises. Balia dared to look up, finding the measured, smooth face of Princess Nerati contemplating her own. Springing up to attention, it finally dawned on her that the rest of her followers had paused only moments earlier. "Your Grace. I...um...I"

"You have won." Her tone was as calculated as the rest of her.

“I- what?” Balia stammered, only now looking behind herself and finding a crowd far larger than the one she had at the start. Yumé and Mimu beamed back at her, with Efrati offering a small grin. “I won?”

“Yes, little sister, you have. Revel in it.” At that the crowd erupted in cheers. A winner was decided, a new home awaited those who would leave with their Princess.

“But how? I do not understand...” The words had scarcely left her lips when she looked over at Ha’shet, fighting back tears. Visibly shaking, and clearly as confused as she was. Mimu walked up behind Balia and clapped her on the back.

“Nicely done! Brilliant work getting her worked up in the tumble,” Mimu laughed.

I was then Balia understood, the same realization seemingly crossing Ha’shet’s mind: she had been too good. Too spontaneous. Her unrivaled talent led to unsupportable claims. No one could keep up, and so went to Balia. Princess Nerati waved a hand and the roars of the audience died down. “My deepest congratulations Balia Two Twenty-One. Your skills and rhetoric have won you the day. By tradition, not only shall your location serve as my new hive, but the next-born queen of that hive shall bear your name.” Balia could not wrap her mind around any of it, even as her friends were all hugs and smiles.

Yumé popped up beside her, pulling her into a tight embrace. “Fantastic work, kid! Absolutely fantastic.” Yet even amidst all this praise Balia could not stop looking at Ha’shet. Through the throng she could see her start to shake, then right herself. It seemed for a moment like she mouthed the word *congratulations*. Then Ha’shet turned away, wandering off deeper into the hive, and Balia was stuck with the overwhelming horror that she might never see her again.

February 13, 2034

ABSOLUM International

1



ABSOLUM Intl.
Research and Innovation Department
Project Appledore
Feb 13th, 2034

To the Desk of Dr. Howard Mayfield,

This is Jannet August, Head of Recruitment at ABSOLUM International. We here at ABSOLUM are truly delighted to have you joining our Research and Innovation Department. Dr. Joeins and the rest of the team on Project Appledore have been excited to welcome you. To answer some of your questions from our last meeting: the salary position is fixed at a particular rate, however the Project Manager, Laurna Stipwell, has approved the company covering your moving and travel costs. Furthermore, Dr. Joeins has confirmed that the project is currently in what he describes as a “waiting period”, and that your introduction now will not negatively impact the expected timescale.

Your position as Head of Genetic Testing and Design is one that will have to meet several federal and company requirements. The most obvious, all of your testing, research, discoveries, and/or potential modifications are owned by, and subject to the use of, ABSOLUM International. This will include the use, modification, distribution, and handling of live animals in accordance with corporate regulations and company instructions. You should already be familiar with most government regulations, and the company policies are more or less identical. Further details on the subject can be found on page six (6) of this packet.

I would also like to remind you that as of October of last year, ABSOLUM is now owned by Patriot Federal Technologies™, which means all of your work, research, and communications are subject to government review and use.

If you have any further questions or concerns about anything not stated in the following packet, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Ms. Jannet August, Recruitment and Retention Division, ABSOLUM Intl.

Mid Spring

The high columns of the hive shone with newly made gold and gentle brown, now carved in anticipation of an unknown future. The towers rose along the walls and in one large, lopsided pillar near the center, built to account for how deep into the tree the hive had gone. The original space found nearly a month ago had proven just enough for the daughter hive to make their space. Since then, patches of soft, wet wood had been removed following a storm, leaving the cavern significantly larger than before. The rear and right sides had been pushed back, giving the space a large concave shape.

It was a bright day, the sunlight streaming in through the large entrance at the base, and the many small holes formed as the construction settled. Ever-shifting patches of yellow moved along walls as workers climbed and flew in all directions. Honey production was in full swing. The constant drone of fifteen thousand pairs of wings weighed heavily in the air. A low, rhythmic thumping vibrated the ground as a group of scouts danced for their fellows to show a freshly found patch of roses to the south. Mahari II-I watched this demonstration with quiet interest. Her body was fresh, still working off the last stiffness from emerging out of her comb just two weeks earlier. She was still working to get her bearings on things now. Her wings still twitched half a beat behind the rest of the crowd. Her body was a viscerally dark black with two thick stripes of what seemed to be an almost neon yellow. She was not alone in this appearance. In her very brief time, she had already heard and seen countless hushed and hidden whispers.

“Odd,” “different,” and “freaks” were getting thrown around quite often. Mahari did not know exactly how to feel about this. Context had yet to become her specialty. The gentle thrumming of the hive soothed her fears, though not by much. She knew she was not the only younger worker to have these concerns. Renpet, Inaru, and Au’na had stayed up deep into the

evening with her, passing around their anxieties like a ball. Mahari could not help but dwell on it. Inaru IV-VIII had been on the verge of tears for hours, and Renpet II-X had openly bawled for half that conversation after an old scout tried to bite her. The incident had left a couple of ugly bruises on her legs and thorax, but she was otherwise fine.

The idea that Renpet had been put through something so unnecessary was infuriating. Mahari considered her to be one of the kindest bees she knew, and to see her face bruised like that filled her with an unspeakable level of rage. It was something that several younger workers had wanted to discuss with their superiors as quickly as possible. The hum and drum of everyday work had made it difficult. Queen Nerati had begun laying a fresh round of eggs only yesterday, and food stores needed to be boosted in preparation. Rumor had it that this was unusual, especially compared to her mother, who had been very careful about planning ahead on these things. Mahari did not let herself dwell on this; it was not her place, and she knew that.

She found herself wandering near the peak of the chamber. It was always slightly quieter there, at least as much as a busy hive can be. The wood was still mostly untouched, as digging into this area had proven to be more difficult. The queen had decided not to lay eggs here, for fear of loss, and few workers wanted to leave their honey here after a large chunk of the space nearly broke off. They had patched it up, but the spot was now viewed as almost cursed. Mahari enjoyed resting here. She ran her legs over the deep grooves of the wood, scratching an itch against them. The temperate surface was taut above her, and she let her wings slow as she rolled onto her side. She almost let herself fall asleep clinging to the rough ceiling.

The arrival of a wing over her eyes sent a jolt through her. She bounded up as her surroundings struggled to return to focus. A soft laugh and beating wings filled her ears. Steadying herself, she turned to see Renpet giggling in the air. "Sleeping on the job, Mar?"

“Buzz off, Renny,” Mahari demanded while trying to hide her naked joy. She tried to lay back down and received a sharp nip in the thorax. She swung halfheartedly at the invasion of her space.

“C’mon. You know we have work. We are assigned to pollen collection today, so get up and let’s go before the captains notice you”, Renpet insisted.

“They won’t see anything if you go away.”

“Hmm, nope. Let’s go,” she replied with a swift tug on her partner’s wing. Mahari groaned softly as she lifted herself off the ceiling, falling down and flying back up to meet Renpet’s eyes.

“You’re a prick,” she said, mildly annoyed.

“Yep.” Renpet flew ahead of Mahari, heading down towards the great gateway. They exited swiftly into the bright afternoon sun. Streams of emerald, blue, quiet crimson, and sharp violets whirled past them. Other workers buzzed to and fro carrying nectar back to the hive or leaving to find more. They flew for around four miles, searching for a large patch of marigolds they had been told about yesterday by another scout, Au’na VI-VIII. Mahari was not confident in her instructions, as a leg injury had left her dance skills questionable at best. But she trusted Renpet to get it right.

It took a while, but the marigolds were just as lovely as described. Their scent was intoxicating and rich, filled with gold and release. They seemed to stretch on forever in an eternity of loving fire. Renpet zoomed among them as Mahari watched in reverence. They had not been the only scouts to find the place. At least two dozen others were already hard at work. Their lithe forms floated in the air in focus and joy. Marigolds had become exceedingly popular since this field was discovered. Many scouts had come to the area on a rumor that the Queen had

loved the taste of the marigold's nectar. They were easy to work with, and the honey produced with them had a wonderfully bitter taste. Mahari was not overly fond of the texture of it, finding it on the wrong side of thick to be fully enjoyed. But she knew Renpet loved it, so decided to keep her opinions to herself.

Renpet moved through the petals and leaves with a grace that left Mahari transfixed. Her injuries meant nothing next to her desire to move. She danced through the field without a care. Mahari followed as best she could. *It's hard to keep up with her when she's this excited.* Renpet's motions were fast, alternating between short jerking shifts and smooth wiggles. Slowing down and speeding up again and again. She quickly attracted more eyes than just Mahari's. Other scouts watched in awe and envy at the way she moved. A couple that she and Mahari knew elected to join in, having seen enough of her personal recitals over the weeks they shared to get the gestures and actions right. The newly formed troupe performed on the backdrop of half a dozen marigolds, framed within the burning petals.

They moved this way and that in the air, alternating between work and dance. Even if she was not fond of the feel, the smell of the marigolds was a wonder to Mahari. She had just finished eating from one when Renpet tugged on her leg. Using her antennae to clean her face, she turned to look at the one so desperate for her attention. Mahari was slightly annoyed at the amount of pollen on her legs, as marigolds were not always forthcoming with it. "Hey, what's up?"

"Not much. Wanted to see if you would join me for a dance," Renpet replied while trying to pry her friend from the flower.

"I'm too busy."

"Too busy for me?" she whined playfully.

“Never,” Mahari laughed back. She whirled and grabbed Renpet out of the air and pulled her down into the flower. They laid there laughing as Mahari tickled her captive. The beating of wings resonated above them as one of the other scouts, Au’na IV-IV, landed next to them with a thud.

“Hey slackers. Have either of you seen Inaru?”

Mahari replied with a sarcastic, “Which one?”

“Funny. Obviously One-Eleven.”

Renpet pulled herself off her fiery bed, “I think I saw her heading north.”

“Finally, someone actually helpful. Thanks.”

As Au’na rose to leave, a shrill cry cut through the air before being swiftly cut out. Every scout within sight froze in the air or turned sharply towards the disturbance. Somewhere off in the distance it had rung. It had sliced through their space like a blade and passed just as smoothly. But the distress remained, tainting the air. One of the captains arrived, moving above the silent crowd. With a short gesture she signaled a trio of scouts to follow her as the rest of the formation steadily moved into a defensive huddled orb. The captain, Jasta I-XXXII, moved cautiously with the three scouts that followed. As they disappeared into the thick line of fire, Mahari could hear her blood pounding in her head. She moved closer to Renpet. They interlocked their arms hoping to make a quick escape if it came.

A breath passed. Then two. Then ten. No one dared move up, even as the formation slowly shrank into the coverage of the leaves. An ugly silence overtook the small group. There was maybe a dozen or so of them stuck together, quietly trying to whisper questions and anxieties. “How long are we going to wait here?”

“Should we go look for Captain Jasta?”

“We were told to stay put.”

“What if they’re dead?”

“Maybe she’s on her way back?”

Mahari tried her best to stay calm, but the silence was deafening, and the whispering worse. Renpet squeezed her arm, pulling her closer. “We’ll be fine,” she said with conviction. Mahari looked back to her with what she hoped was a look of assurance. The entire formation froze as the leaves shifted in front of them. From the green shadows emerged a large, floating figure. The shifting light revealed smooth armor, large wings, and a pair of formidable mandibles covered in translucent blood. The warrior emerged into the light, revealing the emaciated form of Captain Jasta dangling from her hand.

“Leave now, these fields are claimed in the name of the great Queen Eliza.” Her voice was as smooth as the rest of her body. She towered over the nearest scouts who were doing their best to not carry that distinction. Her colossal, dark frame was wreathed in the bitter, running tones of the marigolds. The sun shone down, casting her long shadow over the scene. Mahari could see more wet blood splattered on the intruder’s body. She was definitely a Jieatani’i. She tried weighing their options. They could fight. They certainly maintained a numbers advantage. But how many of them would die before they drove her away? Most of the scouts here were young and inexperienced, herself and Renpet included.

“Have the gods not given you ears? I said leave. We are sick of having to explain this to your hive. You will not be warned again.” Her voice never rose nor fell but remained clear and sharp. To punctuate her point, she tossed what remained of the late captain at one of the scouts, a poor soul designated Mimu V-VIII, who was sent backwards by the force. Coming to a stop, she looked down at the body in her hands and tried not to scream. Two other scouts rushed to help

her. They were stopped by a beat from the warrior's wings. The Jieatani'i simply pointed away and half the group broke. They scattered in all directions, anywhere that was further away from this attacker. Mahari was pulled from her frozen stupor by Renpet. They rushed off back toward the hive, trailed by a sobbing Mimu still carrying their commander's body. The dark warrior quickly shrank into the distance, before turning back into the field of sweet fire.

Anitax System Chatlogs: January 2034

Jan 3rd

- | Mat-attack: anything new about who they're replacing Jerry with?
- | Joeins: None yet.
- | Mat-attack: the board hasn't said anything??
- | Joeins: They'll get to it when they get to it.
- | Dr. Sarah Getler: It's been almost a month
- | Mat-attack: The workload on the dna review is piling up
- | Joeins: We have interns to assist us, Matt. Use them.
- | Dr. Sarah Getler: You can count the amount of them that can keep a proper sequence table on Erica's left hand.
- | Joeins: Don't be rude Sarah.
- | Mat-attack: She isn't wrong.
- | PurpleWarfare: [Image failed to send]
- | PurpleWarfare: [Image failed to send]
- | PurpleWarfare: [Image failed to send]
- | Dr. Sarah Getler: Having trouble?
- | PurpleWarfare: I got the memo from Jane about who they're bringing on.
- | Joeins: That's fantastic news!
- | Mat-attack: Thank god 😊 Took long enough
- | Dr. Sarah Getler: Woooo
- | PurpleWarfare: She should be sending out the announcement in a week or so.

The pounding of wings in the air was nearly drowned out by that of her blood as Mahari half crashed back into the hive's entrance. Renpet still clutched her arm tight as they fell over each other on what could generously be called a landing. Mahari struggled to catch her breath. They had flown well above recommended speed, and her wings were still vibrating hard against her back. The force of it was slowly sliding her across the floor. The brutal pace had not been helped by everyone constantly checking behind the group for a dreaded pursuer. Every few seconds someone jumped at any slight movement in the corner of their eye. Every rustling leaf, falling twig, or bit of dust in the air just had to be her. She just had to be watching them, hunting from a distance.

The rest of the party landed nearly as ungracefully. Au'na barely touched the ground before breaking down and sliding on the rough floor while sobbing. Most of the group just froze on landing, piling up together in a mound of tension. Hy'la II-XI and Balia III-VII were among the last to arrive and did so running. Even as other workers rushed in, they were already shouting, "Guards! Arms! Intruder!" A wave of panic filled the scene as others started flying up in all directions. The low thumping of the alarm began to sound as the survivors picked themselves off the ground. The entire hive would soon be roused into action, and they needed to be ready.

Renpet had barely gotten Mahari onto her feet again when Inaru slammed into the ground behind them. She was soaking wet, and her wings were sticky and restrained. In all the terror of the moment, the rest had forgotten her. She lay there motionless for a time. The bisected body of Captain Jasta I-XXXII had landed with Inaru still entangled in her arms. Her cold eyes sat unmoved by the increasing sobs and guttural moans coming out of the young thing laid across from her. The captain's body was still warm. More pieces of her had fallen off in the flight home.

It was hard for the group to recall the extent of the damage originally, as while the missing thorax had been hard to ignore, the smaller details seemed so much more so in the moment.

Au'na was at Inaru's side faster than Mahari could track, her own grief forgotten to lessen a friend's. She pulled Inaru closer to her, softly stroking her head as she belted out her pain. Both of them were shaking terribly, and Mahari could not help but watch the unfolding display. Seeing the blood smeared between them, she almost felt a pang of jealousy for the excuse to be so intimate.

“Just what do you freaks think you're doing?” erupted from behind Mahari, causing her to let out a quick yelp. A large group of captains descended rapidly towards the growing crowd. The whispering, anxious throngs parted for them less smoothly than normal.

Several of them landed as only half the group stood at attention. Captain Aujet II-V approached first. Her usual quiet, strait-laced manner showed very visible cracks at the sight before her. Her eyes darted everywhere, and over everyone. Taking a short breath, she addressed herself to the group. “Who is the highest-ranking worker here?” No one moved to answer her for want of the truth. Standing uncomfortably in the silence, Renpet stepped forward.

“Ma'am. Renpet Two Ten. Captain Jasta One Thirty-two was our commanding officer. The rest of the company are just scouts. We were attacked, ma'am. By a Jieatani'I warrior around two miles northeast. Near the marigolds, ma'am.”

She had spoken with what confidence she could muster. Aujet was taken aback for a moment, the shock clear on her face far longer than she was normally comfortable showing.

She recomposed herself quickly, continuing, “And where is Captain Jasta One Thirty-two. No doubt covering the rear.” Renpet froze. The cold reality stuck in her throat. The shaking overtook her again as she slowly pointed behind herself, where Inaru looked back at the pair

from within Au'na's tender arms, then down at the cold body next to them. One of the captains rushed forward and latched onto Renpet. The scout tried to avoid her eyes as best she could, stunned at the physical force. It was one of the older captains who now gripped her body roughly, her mandibles jittering beneath a pair of frantic eyes.

“What?” the captain shouted.

“I- I'm not-”

“Captain Balia Two Twenty-one! Let go of her. This is no way for a Home Maker to behave,” Aujet injected harshly. Her order fell on deaf ears as Balia rushed forward. She fell onto the ground next to the eviscerated martyr.

“No! No!” sliced through the air as Balia tried desperately to check for any sign of life. She shook Jasta's body, grabbing her face and arms. The room fell silent. Balia held the corpse close, laying over it as if to protect her from the world. Frantic mutterings filled the halls again as it now seemed as though the entire hive was transfixed on this new development. Correcting herself again, Aujet turned to the other captains around her.

“Jouna Three Nine and Hashta Four Eleven, go alert Her Grace, she'll want to know about this. Jasta, Mimu, Yumé, and Wan'met, each of you take two squads and secure everything within a half mile.” Her voice brought renewed focus to the crowds. The other captains frantically moved to follow her commands. Bodies started being pulled in several directions as squadrons formed. “Renhet, take Hashta Four Fourteen, Wan'met Three Eight, and four squads and get a couple of the... less traumatized survivors and go check out the scene of the attack. I expect you all back by nightfall.” Turning to the remaining crowd her voiced boomed, “And the rest of you: Get back to work!”

“Yes Ma’am,” resounded through the halls as the hive regained its composure. The beating of hundreds of wings shook the air as streaks of frenzied black and yellow passed. Captain Aujet returned her gaze to the now thoroughly focused party. “Now which of you is going to escort the squads back to the scene?” Three of them stepped forward to meet the order. She sent them off with a nod, then turned to Mahari and Renpet. “Now you two: take the Home Maker and go find a place to dispose of Captain Jasta properly. The three of you will then report back to me immediately.” She did not even bother waiting for a reply before flying off to deal with the now multiplying crises.

Mahari and Renpet stood frozen. Neither had fully expected how swift the response to the attack would be, let alone that they would be asked to help dispose of the body. Steadying herself, Mahari turned back to the entrance. Most of their sorrowful company was gone now, scattered in the excitement. Renpet quietly squeezed her hand in soft reassurance. Both now turned their attention to Captain Balia. Inaru and Au’na had slipped away in the chaos somewhere, leaving her alone with the body. She had mostly calmed down, simply kneeling beside Jasta, and stroking her head. She was muttering to herself, her wings tensing with each pained enunciation. As the pair nervously approached her, they could just make out the words, “All of our work.”

Mahari spoke first, “Captain Balia, we’ve been ordered to –”

“I know what she ordered.”

Clearing her throat, the scout continued, “Then, Lady Home Maker ma’am, we should get moving. The squadrons are going to be pushing off soon.” Balia stayed still for a moment before rising to her feet. Wiping the blood off herself as best she could, she gave the two a cold look. “Fine. I’ll carry her and you two find somewhere suitable.” She bent low and raised Jasta

with a careful tenderness. Pulling her close with her jaws and cradling the body in her arms, she gave a short gesture to her unwanted companions. Before they took off, Balia added, “and there’s no need to use my title, “Captain” will do just fine.” Renpet tugged Mahari into the air and the unhappy trio took off. Standard practice was roughly a minute or two’s flight from the hive then simply drop the body at or to the ground. However, Mahari sensed this was going to be unnecessarily complicated. For one, escorts were almost never done outside of multiple bodies or dangerous weather conditions. Even flying a couple of feet ahead of her, she could feel Balia’s insistent stare.

They had flown for only a minute or so before Renpet signaled for her to stop. Balia had paused in the air, settling under a bright green leaf. The colors passing through it shone radiantly on the tragic gore. Mahari and Renpet cautiously approached the captain, who was now whispering something in the unresponsive ear of her lost comrade. Renpet spoke in her usual understanding tone. “Captain Balia, is everything alright?”

“Yeah, kid. Just thinking.”

They all floated there in varying levels of patience. Mahari nervously rubbed her legs together. Unlike Renpet, moments like this were not her strong suit. She did her best to hide her fidgeting as Balia held Jasta for one more somber moment. Releasing her grip on her fallen friend, Balia slowly let her slip out of her grasp and fall to the world below, disappearing into the emerald foliage. Her look of contained sorrow slowly turned into overt annoyance as she returned to acknowledging the pair. Renpet offered out a warm hand, “I’m sorry for your loss, sister.”

Wiping her eyes quickly with her antenna, Balia returned with a simple, “and I yours.”

Mahari awkwardly replied, not fully sure who's loss she referred to. "Thank you. We should be heading back to the hive now."

Balia simply nodded, cast one last look down, and turned to leave. The trio was entirely silent on the flight back. It felt like an eternity to Mahari before they saw the outer sentries still getting into position. Several squads still zoomed past them on the way to their stations. The hive was officially in lockdown mode, and it filled her with an odd serenity. The whole apparatus of state snapped into action for her, and the others, was almost humbling.

The guards let them pass without issue, and a large crowd was already gathering in the main hall. It was unusually quiet, and almost shockingly still. Balia gave a short farewell before heading off to join the rest of the command staff. Captain Aujet floated separated from the crowd in the air in a bubble of command. As Mahari and Renpet arrived next to the hovering ball of anxiety that was Munat III-XV. Renpet rushed up to give her a warm hug, "Hey Munat!" The pitiful thing nearly exploded out of her frame in surprise before realizing who it was.

"Renpet. N-nice to see you again."

"Sorry," she replied with an awkward giggle, "have we missed anything? Why's everyone just standing around?"

"Queen Nerati is about to make a speech on the attack."

Mahari rushed forward, laying a claw on Munat's arm. "Really?"

"Y-yeah. She'll be down soon." Looking up, the three of them could see a ball of activity near the top of the hive. None of the crowd dared move too close to it, especially with Captain Aujet in the way. Mahari could not make out anything being said from this distance, but judging solely based on the frantic moves made, whatever was being discussed was big. Suddenly, a dull thumping rang out. The signal of the Queen. The ball at the top of the hive broke, and several of

its members descended into a large cone. There behind the formation, towering and golden, was her Grace, the Queen.

As her guards moved to form a ring around her, Nerati made a short gesture to Captain Aujet to join her. With her majesty in position, Aujet took a spot slightly below and behind her. The entire hive fell silent in a way Mahari had never heard before. Several breaths passed and no one dared move, all eyes transfixed on the Queen. She was truly beautiful to the young scout. She was large, with dark eyes that scanned the crowd slowly. She was sharp, dark, and muscular, with the thick lines of power in her body cut sharp across her frame. She definitely bore an appearance strikingly closer to her daughters than her sisters. She had the unorthodox flatter hairs and longer legs but had the same darker color as the rest of her generation. Mahari had only seen her once or twice, and only from a good distance. Never had she imagined getting such a clear image of someone so consequential. For a moment, a new thought popped into her head: what did her father look like? Paternity meant nothing; he was just one of maybe dozens of nameless dead men whose material was recycled as needed. But she still wondered what, if anything, she took from him.

Nerati moved forward, raised her hand in the air, as though any attention could possibly be placed on anything but her. She stood statuesque, taking in the crowd's gaze. There was a deeply unnerving waft in the air. The cold became all too noticeable for a time before the Queen's voice hacked through it like an ice pick. "My children," she began with a stern breath, "I had hoped to speak to all of you like this only under positive circumstances. I rarely get such an opportunity. But tragedy seems to have a way of making the exceptions feel distressingly ordinary. For those of you unaware of today's events: early this morning several of our sisters were viciously assaulted by a Jieatani'I warrior."

Murmurs washed through the audience like waves. Nerati's face showed something akin to sympathy. "This senseless violence has left a wound on our home. Several of our sisters, my daughters, have been unjustly murdered. While we do not yet know how many we have lost today, the number may be as high as thirty. Death is an everyday occurrence. But this massacre is a horror we cannot allow to continue. Our workers were not killed in rightful combat or on the whim of a passing predator, but deliberately snuffed out by a monster."

"These Jietej have no mercy for us. The killings of dear Captain Jasta One Thirty-two, along with many of her trusted friends and followers, were done in order to steal life and land from our hive. The survivors of the attack have all given the same motive for this assault. The Jietej seek to rob us of the land that is rightfully our own." The image of the warrior flashed into Mahari's mind again, and her grip on Renpet tightened. Nerati continued, "the enemy is here, my children. They are here to take all we have built. Our food. Our home. Our future."

"I know things have been difficult here of late. We have had our own struggles. I have seen the scars of division cut their way through my children. I mourn for the pain you have felt with a mother's heart." A sob forced its way out of her. The entire hive seemed transfixed by her cries. Mahari felt a new form of shock. She found herself realizing that she never imagined the Queen was even capable of crying. She quickly glanced over to Renpet, who now covered her mouth in horror.

Suddenly a cry crashed through the silence somewhere from the crowd, "I'm sorry Mother!" More cries followed quickly as the crowd was worked up into a frenzy.

"We'll do better, my Queen!"

"Jasta will be avenged!"

"Forgive us, Mother!"

A thousand cries smashing into one another. A thunderous chorus of voices rolling across the hive. Apologies and promises flooding the air. Mahari could barely hear herself think. The crying and buzzing were quickly becoming the only thing seen or felt. Renpet held her closer and whispered to her, “breathe.” The queen raised her claw again and the storm slowly receded. Cries and scattered sobs were still lingering when she continued.

“I thank you all for your devotion and understanding. I’m proud of the power you have shown tonight. Now I must ask more of you. I cannot allow the murder of my daughters to go unavenged. In good faith, it cannot be done. These Jietej believe they can inflict these crimes on us without repercussions. We must prove them wrong! They must learn what happens when they assault my children. When they attack my children. When they kill my children! I dread to ask this of all of you, but the action must be taken.” She paused for a moment before resounding into the air, “will you fight for me? Will you fight for your sisters? Will you fight for your future?”

The roar of the crowd returned, and Mahari and Renpet were there with it. Both screamed at the top of their lungs, “Yes! Yes, Mother!”

“Vengeance! Justice,” tore the air apart as the thrill of realization filled Mahari’s mind that war had come to their home.

November 18th, 2034

CONFIDENTIAL

MEMORANDUM OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Telephone conversation concerning experiment F-871B Appledore
PARTICIPANTS: Dr. Sarah Getler, Dr. Johnathan Wilkins, and Dr. Howard Mayfield
DATE, TIME, AND PLACE: March 2nd, 2034, 11:25 am – 11:40 am, ABSOLUM Intl. Research Facility.

SG: Hey.

HM: Morning guys.

JW: How's it going?

SG: Fine.

HM: How's the gene splicing going?

SG: Incredibly slowly, could be over a month before I make major headway again.

JW: Damn.

SG: Yep. Did facilities get your room adjusted yet, Howard?

HM: Not yet.

JW: Matthew was mumbling about some movie over breakfast this morning.

HM: Yeah, I wanted to ask about him. Is it normal for him to play the same song on repeat? Cause I swear I could hear him playing some song that sounded like it was about dim sum for like twenty minutes yesterday.

SG: Oh yeah, he and Melissa get like that sometimes. They both like to claim it helps them focus.

HM: Ok, but why dim sum?

JW: Who the hell knows with those two. Anyway, did you two see the new memo that came through this morning?

HM: Afraid I haven't had the chance to check my email yet. It bad?

JW: Well, it ain't good.

SG: John don't be dramatic. But yes, it's a mixed bag.

HM: Fuck.

JW: They're trying to find out if we can, and I quote, "only have them go for specific plants. One of the shareholders is interested in all-natural blueberry honey."

HM: What the fuck does that mean?

JW: Hell, if I know.

November 18th, 2034

CONFIDENTIAL

SG: Clearly whoever suggested it has no idea how honeybees work.

JW: Exactly! They go with whatever's closest, not specific.

HM: We'd have to basically build a species from scratch to do something like that.

JW: Probably multiple species.

SG: Well, they're clearly not going to give us the billions that would require, so what's the plan?

HM: I have no idea.

JW: Well, they expect us to figure it out. There's a barely subtle threat at the end about our, "project funding being reassessed."

Late Spring

The air was filled with ceaseless drumming. Wings beating in sync. Thick lines of floating bodies assembled themselves in carefully constructed rows. Four such marks had now been drawn across the early morning haze. A canvas of shimmering copper gave way to a fresh spring azure above the gathered throngs. The fog of the previous afternoon's rain still hung heavy. It stuck to the chattering wings of the moving crowd, almost causing many to lose equilibrium and plummet to the ground.

Mahari's wings were starting to feel heavy, but her focus stayed unchallenged. They had been set the task of unified formations, and the longer they kept up the exercise the sooner they could fulfill their queen's ambitions. So, she stayed there as she had for the last nearly two hours, contemplating the new reality of their situation. She had no idea what was really expected of her now. She found herself questioning what really went into the concept of war. Raids were one thing, but this would be different. Time, land, and food were all too limited resources, and they had all been prepared since hatching that the day might come when all three must be robbed from another hive without question.

But this would be no raid. There were no worthwhile resources that the Jieatani'i could have that they could take, certainly none that they could take in any usable quantities. The doubt lingered in her mind like a bad cold. The mood of the hive had changed considerably in the previous days. The righteous energy whipped up by Queen Nerati's speech had not so much been replaced as it had now been reorganized alongside the growing sense of dread. Even among the more experienced captains there were questions of the feasibility of it all. Yes, they had the numbers, almost thirty thousand, but they were still a young hive. Infrastructure was still being built, eggs laid, food stores expanded. Mahari had heard several of them discussing the

possibilities of what a failed, or even underwhelming, attack could mean. One word kept coming up, “collapse.”

Yet the regiments had still been ordered. Drills were to be run daily to improve coordination. Battle plans were being drawn up by the captains and scouting squads were being sent to locate the enemy. While they had yet to find the hive itself, several of its members had been spotted near the marigold field galivanting about in their fresh conquest. Latest figures put their known numbers at between five and eight thousand, but that was a half-educated guess. Rampant speculation warned of a force twenty thousand strong ready to rip and tear its way through their walls and home.

Three battalions hovered in the air, with a line of just over a dozen captains slightly above them. General Aujet flew along the lines surrounded by those selected as her assistants. Her eyes scanned for any possible sign of weakness or disorder in the wave of bodies. Stopping every few seconds, she would affix her attention on one unlucky soul, and with a wave of the hand had them dismissed. Mahari was not quite sure where the failures went but felt a deep sense of luck every time the General passed by without noticing her. In spite of the many warriors around her, she felt alone. United in collective rage, shame, and humiliation, but still alone.

Against their protests, she and Renpet had been placed in different divisions. The workers surrounding her were strangers. Talking during training was expressly forbidden, so there was not much hope of changing that status. Their only task was to focus on following the commands of the captains in front of them. Ironically, Mahari had been placed into Balia’s command. Though she could not prove it, she suspected the captain had pulled strings to ensure Renpet was placed elsewhere. To be placed under the Home Maker’s command should have felt like an honor, but it only left Mahari feeling somewhat bitter. She let her eyes drift up to the captain’s

face. She moved steadily in the wet air, alternating between verbal and silent commands with ease. Their eyes seemed to meet briefly, and Mahari felt such an odd mix of pity and fear.

Balia looked like she had not been sleeping for days. That seemed to apply to half the hive these days. Their division moved down along with the adjacent three. These four formed the left flank of the second formation. One hundred and fifty workers to a squadron, four squadrons to a division, four divisions to a battalion. Each large, octagon shaped division consisted of three layers with the top and bottom being slightly smaller. They were led by a captain assisted by three chosen workers who would relay orders on their behalf. As far as Mahari was aware, at least eight battalions were being prepared. She wondered, not for the first time, whether the hive could afford to gamble such a significant section of the population on this maneuver. The division fell suddenly, and Mahari almost found herself noticeably asynchronous. If the lines were not already mildly disorganized, she would have stood out like rotten smell. When her eyes snapped back to Balia, her leer had fortunately gone elsewhere. *Could she have done that on purpose?*

A loud drum ripped through the air. Aujet's signal to return to standing formation. The dozens of divisions neatly slotted themselves back together as the captains returned to their positions near the General. The soldiers floated silently as the command staff discussed the day's mixed results. Mahari did not like the waiting. The commands she was hardwired to deal with, but the waiting felt improper. She could see almost frantic conversation above her through the small gaps between the workers' bodies. Small whispers moved through the crowd like a phantom. Mahari felt jittery. She wanted to move somewhere. Grab something. She wanted Renpet.

The cadre of captains returned to their divisions as Aujet moved to address the whole battlegroup. Taking a deep sigh, she began, "I must admit I wish we could be more prepared for what lies ahead of us. Yet I am still proud of the work and coordination you all have shown today." Scattered cheers grew in the crowd. "When the time finally comes to avenge our fallen, I know that those Jietej won't have any clue what's coming for them!" A brief moment of uproar made itself known. Cheers died as quickly as they began. Mahari found herself feeling unmoved by the General's words. Aujet concluded, "now then, the captains shall escort you all back to the hive. For now, you will return to your normal duties and await marching orders." All workers saluted as the General ended with, "For Queen and Mother!"

The canopy was filled with the responding chorus, "For Queen and Mother!" echoing in the air. The words felt an odd mix of wonderful and hollow in Mahari's mouth, like the memory of being kissed sweetly in the warm light of morning. The large battalions disassembled in large pieces, shouting captains left overlaying orders in the air. The flight back was noisy and difficult. Soldiers bumped into each other, causing a flowing tide of traffic. Of all the parts of war preparation, Mahari hated this most. The random pausing, the unexpected shoves, the shouting and cursing, it all drove her insane. It was even worse as they passed the next three battalions going out to train as several groups came dangerously close to crashing into each other.

She genuinely was surprised she hadn't bitten anyone by the time they arrived by home. Splitting off from the group, she moved towards one of the barely less crowded upper entrances, her gaze met Balia's for a moment. She looked almost as exhausted as Mahari and carried a look of extreme discomfort and seething rage. Their eyes locked briefly and Balia's looked softened somewhat. She offered a curt nod and flew off somewhere else. Mahari still wasn't sure if Balia liked her or not, or if she even wanted her too.

When she finally managed to make her way inside that general flow of bodies kept her from moving on her own for a time. Breaking free of the crowd had not been fun, and it took hours to finally track down Renpet, Au'na, and Inaru. The three of them had placed themselves near the top of the hive by the old rot patch. They were not the only group to have the idea, as the spot had become somewhat popular for the younger generation. It was relatively empty and quiet compared to the lower sections. While still filled with bees, they could at least hear themselves talk out loud without shouting.

When Mahari arrived, Inaru was trying to get any amount of sleep she could, while Renpet tried to massage the cramping stiffness out from Au'na wings. A subtle pang of jealousy stabbed at Mahari, but passed when Renpet gave her a beaming smile. Au'na offered a strained, "hey," as she flopped on the floor.

Mahari chuckled lightly as Renpet pulled her into a hug and whispered, "I missed you" in her ear. Mahari finally let herself breathe fully and took a seat next to Au'na.

"How'd your training go," Renpet offered.

"Exhausting", Mahari groaned.

"You said it," Au'na said with a stretch.

Mahari had just allowed herself to be comfortable, snuggling into Renpet, when a loud thumping noise ripped through the hive. It was a call to arms. Inaru shot up in alarm as throngs of workers dropped what they were doing and rushed towards the entrances. The quartet rose into the air in confusion. Au'na flagged down a passing friend, shouting over the crowd, "What's happening?"

The friend paused only for a moment to answer, "we found them! We found the Jieatani'I!"

November 18th, 2034

CONFIDENTIAL

COPY OF OFFICE NOTES

SUBJECT: Notes taken from the office of Dr. Matthew Atkins regarding the progression of Project Appledore

DATE, TIME, PLACE: March 28 – March 31, 2034. ABSOLUM Research Facility, Winsboro, IN



November 18th, 2034

CONFIDENTIAL

COPY OF OFFICE NOTES

SUBJECT: Notes taken from the office of Dr. Matthew Atkins regarding the progression of Project Appledore

DATE, TIME, PLACE: March 28 – March 31, 2034. ABSOLUM Research Facility, Winsboro, IN

Transcript:

March 28, '34

- These surveys are getting tedious
- Q32 dem. consistent egg production, mods to raise numbers seem to be worthless
more tests needed
- New hive is interesting

March 29

- 30 specimen of Gen 3 captured across 4 nectar traps
- Neat new mods
 - o Darker color - longe antennae
 - o Wings have slightly thicker membranes, longer? - recheck records

Crude drawing of a honeybee with wings outstretched with the notes, "More diagonal matrix" and ".03 mm longer?"

- o Lovely color pattern on abdomen
- o Told John I could get the colors right
- o Need to see the queen, test genetic material
 - ask Sarah for additional time with DNA seq[ue]er

March 31st

- Derrick asked if it was possible to get naturally flavored blueberry honey
 - o Gods he's dumb
 - Check if the new micro-cams were ordered yet

Sketch of a jar labeled "all lab grown. 100% fake. Blue Honey"

The hive was alight in action. The deep thumping of war drums seemed like it was vibrating the inside of Mahari's body. She could practically feel her organs shaking with each *dum dum dudum dum*. Her formation was quickly assembling alongside the five others just outside the hive. The shouts of dozens of captains and hundreds of scrambling workers only made the beat of the drums louder as it punctuated each command and far-off battle cry. Mahari rushed forward, wings outstretched for takeoff, before a soft tug on her leg made her jolt around. Renpet's solemn face looked up at her. Mahari fell to the ground and pulled her into a tight embrace. Renpet breathed deeply, "be careful, and make sure we find each other when this is over."

Mahari squeezed her tighter and half whispered, "you too."

They stayed like that for a fleeting moment before one of Renpet's squad mates called out to her in the chaos. Their bodies slowly slipped from each other, and the pair hesitantly retreated in opposite directions. By the time Mahari reached the lower entrance of the hive, her division was almost fully assembled. She counted herself lucky that she was only the third to last member of Captain Balia's squadron to arrive. She did not relish the idea of potentially getting chewed out right before such a pivotal moment. She could see other latecomers suffering that same fate further down the line. As she settled into place, she could see General Aujet conversing with her staff and Queen Nerati above her, hovering somewhere near the third battalion. A loud grunt from Balia brought her and the rest of the squadron to attention.

"At attention, soldiers. We move out in two minutes." The stern reality of it all hit Mahari like a rock to the head. In only mere moments they would be leaving for battle, and she couldn't decide if she was excited or afraid. A feeling of cold duty washed over her, sobering her thoughts. Excitement was not necessary. Following orders and winning the war was. The seconds

ticked away as the last squadrons were fully prepared. Of the twelve battalions, nine would be participating in the battle, and the other three would stay back at the hive to provide organized security. That put them at what should be exactly twenty-four thousand soldiers.

This would be a solid number. They would have anywhere from three to five times the number of the Jietej. Even accounting for the fact that Jieatani'I were up to three times larger than them, they still held the advantage. The force had been divided into two large groups, one above, the other below. Mahari tried to look up and see where Renpet might be in the upper formation. All chatter and order stopped at a signal from the General. She paused several moments, before jutting her arm out to the horizon with a booming, "Advance!" The entire attack group moved forward slowly, the weight shifting like a great beast awaking. Their take off was slow but gained speed quickly.

It was not long before they had reached the squad of scouts the General had sent ahead to secure the area. Mahari could smell the tension in the air floating between the nervous bodies. She could not see anything through the crowd. The noise of thousands of beating wings felt like it was stabbing into her head. A command was relayed down the line. Balia gave the signal to advance as the whole battalion lurched forward. The two swarms emerged from the tree line into a small open field. Two waves of movement from the captains relayed vital pieces of information: 1) the enemy knew they were coming, which was to be expected, and 2) their forces were already swarming out of their hive straight for them. Mahari took a breath. She could barely hear Balia talking to herself, her words only coming in scattered bits between the fervor of the crowd, "Fools...stayed...doom." A thunderous cry erupted from the parallel battlelines as they charged forward to meet the enemy.

They gained speed faster than Mahari was expecting. The air felt sharp and heavy, filled with the screeching of two bitter armies. The moment before contact seemed to go on forever, then she slammed headfirst into the back of the soldier in front of her. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a towering Jietej warrior reeled back with a screaming bee in her claws. She brought her newfound weapon down on the squadron, sending Mahari and several others flying. She could hear the crunch of someone's body near her as she righted herself. One of her squad mates grabbed her arm and shoved her next to them and several others forming a line as another Jietej charged towards them. Her colossal jaws were already wet with someone's blood. Right before contact, two other bees slammed down on her wings from above. Her stunned shock left a perfect opening, and Mahari's group charged.

Mahari grabbed onto whatever part of the warrior she could, sinking her jaws into her thorax. She could feel it give way under her pressure as her mouth was filled with an ugly yet slightly sweet taste. The warrior thrashed under them as the squad clung onto her. One of them had been thrown off, and Mahari felt what was likely one of the warrior's legs smack her side. The Jietej let out one last gargled yelp before falling limp. Mahari slipped off her and watched the body fall. Balia's yell brought her back to herself as the remaining members of their squadron reformed. Three more Jietej were almost on top of them. Mahari felt herself duck forward, narrowly avoiding the sharp jaws almost as big as her head. The scout next to her was not so lucky, her thorax was crushed in one foul motion. She was directly under the warrior now and lunged up into her neck. Again, she felt blood oozing into her mouth, and almost found herself enjoying the taste.

The warrior's arms latched onto her and shoved her off. Mahari was staring directly into her widening mouth when someone's stinger pierced into the Jietej's head. The left side of her

head went limp as Mahari pried herself free. The brave soul that delivered the blow fell with her kill. Mahari had just enough time to look above herself and see the absolute carnage. At last, she understood the General's plan. The two battle groups were a mutual distraction, luring the Jieatani'i into the space between so they could be overwhelmed from two directions. Hundreds of them were now covered in bees tearing at their bodies. They were falling like rain. Then something else clicked: the front lines were almost entirely younger, new generation workers. She had put them in front to take the brunt of the Jietej attack. With dawning horror, she realized that could mean Renpet was also at the front.

She was snapped from this epiphany by a body smashing into her back. The wind was fully knocked out of her as she went flying forward. Rolling in the air, she managed to untangle from the corpse and let it fall away. The battle was now in full swing. She looked behind her and found Au'na and Inaru dealing with a Jietej fighter. All three were soaked in blood, with Au'na trapped in the warrior's jaws and hands while trying to use her own to hold the warrior's mouth open. Inaru was on the attacker's head slamming trying to attack her eyes. Mahari rushed down, quickly gaining speed before ramming into the Jietej's left wings. Gripping them tightly, the warrior's body was pulled sideways and down with a yelp that allowed Au'na to slip free. All three bees rushed the warrior's face, and Mahari could feel her victim's face break under her jaws. The warrior whirred ineffectively, throwing Inaru off briefly.

She quickly righted herself and rushed back just in time to push Mahari out of the way of an oncoming stinger. It tore into Inaru's side with a rough swipe. She let out a vicious scream and started falling. Au'na let out a fierce, "No!" before tearing at the Jietej's eye and pushed herself off the warrior's face to grab Inaru. Mahari slammed her body into the head of the warrior, before attacking her bent wings. She ripped several holes in her left wings. The Jietej quickly lost

her balance and started falling fast. Mahari tried to take off from her, only for her right, rear leg to get caught in the fighter's jaws. She tried to pull Mahari down with her, only for her bite to rip clean through the scout's leg. The warrior fell away as Mahari let out a loud scream.

Au'na grabbed her and rushed back up to the center of the battalion with Inaru in her other claw. The bleeding had fortunately stopped by the time they got there, but Inaru was still in bad shape. Au'na handed her off to one of their squad mates, before turning back to Mahari and pulling her into a quick hug. "Thank you, now go find your squad before you're left behind." Mahari suppressed her pain and returned the hug. She gave a quick nod to Au'na before flying off. She zoomed through the scenes of chaos, passing fights and falling bodies. She slammed herself into the back of a Jietej fighter about to strike another squad, sending both of them spiraling.

Righting herself again, she found the rear of Captain Balia's squadron. The group was engaged in fighting four Jietej. The small group was keeping close to one another, forming a wall against the squadron. Several members of the squad fell, either to their opponents or their own stingers. Mahari thought to herself for a moment. She zoomed up into the line of a neighboring squad. Sneaking behind the enemy, Mahari latched herself onto the rear of the Jietej fighting Balia and three others, attacking the space between her thorax and abdomen. She felt a distinct crunch between her jaws, and her mouth was filled with sweet blood again. The warrior curled in on herself, opening up to four more of their squad to attack. She was down in seconds. One of the Jietej grabbed Mahari as their comrade fell, headbutting her hard enough to completely disorientate her. She could feel her left eyes bleeding as the warrior moved to crush her in her jaws. A stinger slammed into the Jietej's face, causing her to drop Mahari while scratching her face.

Looking above her, Mahari saw Captain Balia with a look of burning anger. She had flung the body of one of their slain squad mates at the enemy. By pure luck, the stinger had landed perfectly. Balia swung around the warrior's head and pulled the stinger hard to the left. It cracked through her with a soft crunch, and the Jietej fell. The squad quickly overwhelmed the remainder of the enemy near them. Mahari could hardly see to her left as Balia grabbed her and started wiping the blood from her face. "Do you have any idea how stupid that was of you," she shouted in the scout's face.

"No, but it feels pretty bad," Mahari choked out. Balia gave her a stern look before one of the nearby captains called to her.

"Bal, look!" The squadron turned to the front as they saw hundreds of Jietej moving back towards their hive. They were retreating. A new war cry broke through the chaotic sounds of battle as thousands of bees followed their enemy. The entire attack force blasted forward, attacking whatever Jietej was unlucky enough to not be fast enough to escape. The tree their hive was built into was large, with the hive being largely exterior. It stretched between three branches and was far smaller than what Mahari expected it to be.

Unorganized swarms of bees rushed the entrances to the hive, only to be met by a fierce defense by the remaining warriors. Clusters of dead bodies fell from the holes, several of which were starting to get plugged up. The Jieatani'i were certainly not giving up their home quietly. The battle was turning ugly as every square inch of the hive was getting covered by layers of angry bees. What Jieatani'i remained outside the walls were putting up a fierce but fleeting resistance. As they fell, new holes were being torn into the sides of the hive. Their attackers flooded in, and the fight began to devolve. The complex plans of the open field gave way to the

violent siege of the enemy. Tunnels and rooms filled with shouting and blood as the Jietej made their foes pay for every inch of ground.

Balia's squadron began to squeeze themselves into one opening near the top of the hive. As the captain directed her troops as they entered ahead of her, her eyes met Mahari as she paused outside the hole. They paused silently for a moment before nodding in agreement and slipping in together. The tunnels were dark, tight, and loud. The ground was crunching and wet no matter where Mahari stepped. She had to squeeze her way past multiple piles of bodies. Most were still lying where they fell, others were being removed through new holes. The Jietej were trying to use what bodies they could grab to plug up tunnels. The sounds got increasingly louder as the packed in group made their way towards a large, open chamber. Mahari could barely see light ahead of them, most of it being blocked out by the scouts squeezed in front of her.

The ground suddenly slipped out from under her as they burst into the chamber. The dark brown walls were barely illuminated by three holes torn into the top of the chamber's roof. The combs along the wall shined slightly as the light reflected off the eggs. Other squads were trying to enter through the new holes, only to be met by a tight sphere of Jieatani'I warriors. Many bees were being cut down barely after entering the chamber. Mahari tried to move herself away from the entrance and closer to the wall. The growing mound of bodies made it hard to walk, and she could not risk flying with how many Jietej were in the room.

Then, outlined in the dark, she saw her. The warrior from the marigold fields. She was smothered in blood and gruel on the edge of the sphere. Unbridled fury filled Mahari, and she charged the line. She narrowly avoided Balia's attempt to grab her. She clawed her way over the bodies of her comrades before meeting the eyes of the warrior briefly. An odd mixture of

emotions seemed to unfold on her face then. Shock, guilt, joy, confusion. The warrior shouted into the dark, “come then, little worm, and die.”

The warrior broke rank and charged Mahari, careening towards her madly. The scout barely had time to dodge as her attacker slammed into the wall behind her. “Abigail! Get back in formation now,” rang out from somewhere in the riotous darkness. The warrior only crouched low towards Mahari and let out a deep clicking growl. Abigail charged again, and Mahari grabbed one of the bodies under her, raising it as a shield. Abigail’s head slammed into her, sending the body flying and Mahari sliding across the ground. The Jieatani’I warrior reared back up, taking a fighting stance. Mahari threw herself into the air, then threw the head of some random corpse at her opponent.

She charged behind it, and as Abigail swatted the head away, Mahari rushed to attack her face. The trick failed miserably as the Jietej jumped back and grabbed Mahari’s face and slammed her into the ground. The scout felt herself being lifted from the ground, only to crash into the hard wall. She felt limp, and Abigail dropped her to the ground. With a creaking laugh, the warrior struck Mahari’s face again and again. She could feel her jaw being almost, if not fully, dislocated. “Goodbye, little creature,” was barely perceived over the noise of the rest of the room.

Abigail let out a violent scream as two bees slammed into her back and face. Mahari pushed herself off the ground to see Captain Balia tearing at Abigail’s wings. The Jietej launched herself backwards into the wall, slamming into it with a hard thud. Balia fell from her back and was quickly snatched into Abigail’s claws along with the other attacker. She slammed them both together before hurling them across the chamber. She turned back to Mahari, before realizing that the battle in the rest of the room had quickly fallen apart. More holes had appeared in the Jietej’s

lines after her, and the formation was crumbling. Ignoring her prey, Abigail tried to rush to the aid of her sisters. Mahari leaped onto her and started clawing at her sides. The warrior roared as Balia, and several others, now piled onto her. She tried throwing them off as best she could, once again slamming herself into the walls and floor repeatedly. Several of them were flattened, others flung off. Eventually someone got ahold of her wings and held Abigail long enough for her to fall.

Balia rushed to her face, sinking her jaws into her left mandible. Mahari and two others went for her legs and arms. The scout could feel the cracking of Abigail's legs in her mouth. Spinning abruptly, she hurled most of them off her. Falling low, she continued to struggle against Balia's ferocity. The two thrashed in the dark, biting and clawing. Mahari could feel her whole body ache watching them fight. She pushed herself up and hurled herself one last time onto Abigail's back. She sunk her half-broken mandibles into her enemy's neck and pulled. The Jieatani curled back in the air, before Balia's stinger sliced through her neck and into her head. The captain hung there, stuck to her foe as the mighty warrior fell hard on the ground, lifeless.

Mahari crawled over to Balia as two of her squad mates rushed to help them both. The stinger was lodged deep in the body. "Balia...captain," Mahari forced out. The captain's body was in an ugly shape. Most of her legs and both of her antenna were gone. There were deep cuts and holes in her body, and both sets of wings were heavily damaged. The Home Maker looked up at Mahari, and let out a series of short, haggard breaths, then laid still.

Anitax System Email Log: April 2034

April 9, 2034, 1:19 am

To: SGetler71@antiax.com, JohnWilkins@anitax.com, HMay621@anitax.com, matattack@anitax.com

From: melodyN64@anitax.com

Guys Help,

How the fuck do I make these bitches blue? The only species that even slightly works is Orchard Mason and I can't make it work with the wasp or carpenter genes. They keep breaking down and I don't know how to fix it. They're just incompatible,

It just isn't working =(

- Mel

April 9, 2034, 7:48 am

To: SGetler71@antiax.com, HMay621@anitax.com, matattack@anitax.com, melodyN64@anitax.com

From: JohnWilkins @anitax.com

I've been having similar issues. The initial round went so well, but now I have no idea how to expand it out further. I got a memo yesterday asking me to make them, "Fluffier". Cause apparently that tracked well with the "6 - 12-year-old demographic". I have no idea what they even mean here. Bees aren't fluffy. There's no fur or hair like a dog's. are they expecting us to make bee/dog hybrids??

What the hell is a fluffy bee?

- Dr. John Wilkins

April 9, 2034, 7:51 am

To: SGetler71@antiax.com, HMay621@anitax.com, melodyN64@anitax.com, JohnWilkins@anitax.com

From: matattack@anitax.com

We might be fucked here.

Anitax System Email Log: April 2034

April 9, 2034, 7:52 am

To: HMay621@anitax.com, matattack@anitax.com, melodyN64@anitax.com, JohnWilkins@anitax.com

From: SGetler71@antiix.com

Hey All,

I think we're getting worked up over nothing here. This is the job we're paid to do. We can find a way to get through this. What we should do is all sit down later and draft up as many possible solutions possible over lunch. We take a step back and reassess like last time.

- Dr. Sarah Getler

The violence had been winding down slowly. Small clusters of resistance still remained either in the air outside or in the little chambers and hidden rooms of the hive. But the fight was effectively over. Someone had pulled Mahari to the wall, where she found herself slipping in and out of consciousness. Her whole body hurt. She could barely move her wings and her jaw felt locked in place. What rest she found was fraught at best and filled with visions of the day's carnage. Visions and shadows passed over her. She kept trying to pull herself back up onto her feet, only to have her arms give out.

Several of her sisters tried to help her, and she was vaguely aware of at least Au'na being present at some point. But she remained at the wall for what felt like years. She would later learn just how spread thin the medical aid was during the closing phases of the fighting. Chewed up wood pulp was stuffed into open wounds or on cuts to try and stem the bleeding. The medics tried to keep the wounded fed and hydrated, but they had not brought enough for everyone, and no one wanted to test the Jietej stock just yet. Most of the injured had to be abandoned or put down. The struggle with the Jieatani'I had been so vicious that being injured at all had effectively become a death sentence. It had only been because so many of her comrades had taken the time to watch her that Mahari had not been left behind.

It was Renpet that had finally managed to wake her up. Mahari came out of a low daze to see her battered face staring down at her. Renpet was holding her gently in her arms as Mahari slowly recovered her senses. Her vision had become exceptionally blurred, but her antennae could still pick up enough to know who was there. "Easy now, don't rush yourself," rang softly in her ear. Mahari slowly rubbed her claw over her head. A deep gash cut its way through where her left eye should be, then continued down to her mandibles. Seeing was one thing, but if her mouth was as damaged as it felt, she would be dead in a day. One of her antennae was not

reaching down as much as it should. She feared it was lost too. Rolling onto her belly, she was thankful for the soreness in her wings.

“How ya feelin’,” came from somewhere on her left. Mahari struggled to crane her neck enough to just barely make out Au’na resting on the floor. Inaru was restlessly sleeping next to her, curled into a twitching ball. All around them, the chamber was filled with other scouts. Hardly an inch of space was left on the floor or walls not taken up by someone sleeping or nursing an injury.

“Depenepy en ender,” croaked itself out of Mahari’s wrecked mouth. Au’na let out an obnoxious laugh that startled Inaru and several others awake. She tried to cover her face with her antennae but only succeeded in mildly masking her giggles.

“Sorry, sorry,” she forced out while rubbing her hand over Inaru’s irritated head. Mahari just gave out a loud huff before finally sitting up. Rubbing at her wounds, she tried to relieve the blistering headache creeping its way up her skull.

“Haow ong-”

Renpet gently put a claw on her hand with a soft smile, “only an hour or two.”

Mahari tried to twist the pain out of her thorax. She huffed with a short sputter of her wings. “Balua?”

“The Home Maker’s body was released with the others.” Mahari felt a wave of mixed emotions at the news: grief, pride, and serenity. She took as deep a breath as injuries would allow and tried to rise to her feet. Renpet tried to hold her with a grip of measured reassurance. Mahari simply looked down at her with burning conviction.

Inaru piped up with a curt, “I’ll go too.” She rose to her feet and wiped the dust from her face. Taking a short hop forward, she hovered on her wings before giving Mahari a gesture to

follow. Mahari's wings were still too injured to fly, so she and Renpet followed Inaru and Au'na by crawling over and around the many other resting soldiers. Their walk was not a long one, despite the grumbling of the many feet and wings they accidentally stepped on.

Inaru led the group down a short corridor that, by Mahari's estimation, had to be one of the preexisting tunnels with how careful and smooth it was. The quartet made their way to the end and exited the tunnel into the late-afternoon light. Mahari had to cover her remaining eyes with her antennae in the blinding sun. Her missing leg nearly made her slip crawling onto the outer surface of the freshly looted hive. *It's safe to assume*, she grumbled internally, *that I'm never getting used to that*. Taking a seat between Au'na and Renpet, she let her eyes adjust to the outside light. The image coming into view was not a pleasant one.

The wide, green field was littered with a truly uncountable number of bodies. There had to be thousands out there. Tens of thousands more likely. She wondered just how many of the small pieces were the bodies of her comrades, or pieces of their enemies. The large forms of the Jieatani'I were almost indistinguishable among the small black and yellow dots surrounding them. Flittering among the green were a handful of blue and grey Senadej plucking the field clean slowly. A feast had been laid out before them, and only a fool would reject the offer. Their massive bodies leaped and hopped along, snapping up anything. The older generation had some outdated name for it that she couldn't bother with. From their vantage point, the group could barely make out other, smaller creatures moving among the bodies.

Mahari couldn't help but wonder how many more of those bodies she knew. Her mind flashed back to her observations during the battle. *How many of my sisters are down there?* No doubt more than her elders. She imagined a cold smirk on the General's face as she planned that out. A large portion of the controversial generation destroyed as simply a byproduct of war. So

easy to explain away, and with the next generation of eggs being born the entire social dynamic of the hive will change completely in the coming days.

The four of them sat in exhausted silence for a while. Other groups wandered in and out of the hive, some resting, others clearing out the last of the dead. Standing orders from the General were to take time to recover and deal with the injured until the battalions could be reassembled and return home. Inaru had resumed her nap almost immediately, and Mahari wasn't that far behind her. It was still warm outside, and she wanted to feel the sun for a while.

A low rumble shot through the entire hive, jolting those resting on the outside to attention. Hundreds of soldiers burst out of the many exits in rushed lines. Captains started grabbing random soldiers and groups and shoving them in whatever lines were open. Someone none of the quartet recognized rushed up to them shouting, "Move! In formation! Now!" She pushed them into the air as Renpet grabbed onto Mahari to keep her in the air. The two battle groups were now reforming in parallel outside the Jietej hive, forming a pair of long rectangles leading up to the hive itself. Mahari was confused. This didn't appear to be a battle line. The captains wouldn't have picked such a loose and vulnerable configuration if they were being attacked.

She and the others took a place near the center of the right formation. Below them, Mahari could see squads trying to scare away any of the remaining Senadej. Their huge forms weren't easily irritated until the scouts started going for their eyes. Several of them flew off in random directions, taking more than a few bees with them. The captains were flying up and down the lines reorganizing and imposing order. Surprisingly quickly, nearly the entire force had been assembled outside of those guarding the perimeter. That's when she heard it, a low and constant drumming. Looking off to the south, she could see a thick cloud of bodies approaching.

They were assembled in a tight sphere, with what appeared to be a second, smaller circle in the center. The sphere was flanked by maybe half a dozen large squadrons on either side.

As it approached the assembled armies, the great sphere opened up to reveal the procession of the Queen's honor guard. A flood of shocked murmurs and cries fell over the crowd at the sight of the Great Mother, Nerati. Most of the captains did their best to quell the excitement and maintain composure, but a quick gesture from Nerati brought the entire crowd into stunned silence. She flew forward, flanked by several guards. She was silent for a moment, surveying the crowd. This was the closest Mahari had ever come to her, and it felt like their eyes met for the smallest of moments. She didn't quite know how to describe the mixture of pride and fear inside her then.

After a beat, Nerati's voice boomed through the air, "My children. The sacrifices you have made here today weigh heavy on my heart. But the victory bought by your courage and determination cannot be understated. I am so proud of you all. The senseless murders of your sisters have been justly avenged here. You have done this. You. My pride and my love. You have made these monsters pay for every death we endured a thousand-fold!" The crowd erupted into roaring cheers. Mahari struggled to meet the volume, her broken mandible making it painful to yell. She could feel Renpet's cry of victory in her ears, with Au'na and Inaru in front of them reaching out to the Queen.

The roars were cut short again as Nerati continued, "now, for this devotion, I bring you all a gift. The sight of final justice." With a flourish, she pointed the crowd's attention towards the main entrance of the Jieatani'I hive. A small group of guard flew out, splitting to either side upon exiting. Behind them was a prisoner. Her limbs were damaged, and her body was covered in bruises and cuts. Her large wings were ripped in multiple spots and struggled to hold her

properly. She flew slowly, almost crawling through the air, flanked by a dozen soldier bees. She was colossal, even by Jietej standards. Her marvelous black and orange shell shone like fire in the sunlight. She'd had her antennae covering her eyes but raised her head now at the thousands assembled before her. It was then Mahari realized that this wasn't a normal worker or soldier, this was their queen, Eliza.

Mahari was awestruck at her beauty. Even now, she held an almost holy presence. She wondered how it had even been possible to capture her, and counted herself lucky she hadn't been part of that fight. The two queens approached each other slowly. Nerati watched her rival with a hungry intent. They paused in front of each other. Nerati looked so small compared to Eliza. Their eyes lingered for some time. The entire crowd was eerily silent. After a beat, Nerati approached her large counterpart. Flying alongside her head, she seemed to whisper something in Eliza's ear. It seemed as if the whole of the audience was craning to try and hear what was being said. Widespread moans of soft disappointment were heard as Nerati moved back. Eliza seemed frozen for a moment before looking at her with abject horror.

A soft, "No. No!" escaped her in the air. The larger queen started to shake violently, almost curling in on herself in the air. Then, faster than almost anyone could react, she lunged forward. A guard pushed herself past Queen Nerati in an instant, throwing herself into Eliza's crushing jaws. Vicious fury overcame the assembly as hundreds of daughters rushed forward. Eliza was covered before she could attempt to fight back. Her convulsing body jerked and thrashed in the air as dozens of bodies bit and clawed at her. Her agonized screams filled the atmosphere before they crescendo in a loud, wet cry. The mob melted away from her, and Eliza fell limp to the forest floor.

Mahari was stunned. The whole scene was over in seconds. She stared hard at the spot in the air where Eliza had been moments before. Her attackers were covered in blood. Shaking, her eyes flickered back over to Nerati. She had not moved, merely looking down at the falling corpse, and Mahari swore she could make out a sharp smile on her mother's face.

Federal Bureau of Investigation

MEMORANDUM OF TEXT CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Text conversation concerning experiment F-871B Appledore
PARTICIPANTS: Dr. Sarah Getler, Dr. Johnathan Wilkins, Dr. Melody Newton, Dr. Matthew Atkins, and Dr. Howard Mayfield
DATE, TIME, AND PLACE: April 9th, 2034, 8:01 am – 9:40 am, ABSOLUM Intl. Research Facility.

8:01 am

Sarah: Why?

Howard: I think the company is monitoring our emails.

Matthew: well, no shit, it's AB

Sarah: That's not news, Howard. It's an internal email system.

Howard: Yesterday the department head made a reference to a lab report draft that I'd sent to Melody.

Howard: Only Melody.

Melody: Shit

Melody: The one on the recent aggression spike?

Howard: yeah. He'd reiterated the "importance of safety and calm in the animals".

Sarah: Are you positive it wasn't just a regular thing.

Howard: I'd barely spoken to him in two weeks at that point, so yeah I'd say it's suspicious

8:02 am

Matthew: fucking Derreck

Johnathan: What lab report?

Howard: The one on the wasp next near site A.

Sarah: how did that end up?

Melody: fucking weird,

Howard: We now have potential evidence of the honeybee swarms displaying rudimentary battle tactics. I'm still trying to determine whether or not it could be intentional.

Matthew: What?!

Howard: the hive at site A attacked a nearby wasp hive, and somehow left a large gap in the center of their line that the wasps flew right into and got swarmed.

Howard: the trouble comes in trying to figure out if it was planned.

Federal Bureau of Investigation

Johnathan: Jesus fuck Howard! You should have told all of us. Do you know what that would mean?

Howard: I'm well aware of the implication, but again how can I be sure it isn't coincidence.

Sarah: This could be the development of the century. You need to keep us in the loop going forward.

8:03 am

Melody: Is that why you switched us to the chat?

Howard: Yes, if we're right about this, the company can't know yet

John: Legally we can't refuse that information

Matthew: What do you think Absolum will do if they found out we made hyper-intelligent super bees??

Matthew: It's a gov company John. Can you imagine if they weaponize this shit.

Sarah: We have no real evidence of "super bees". But the aggression is concerning.

Howard: true. They've attacked four hives so far.

Matthew: If they can spread next spring, who knows how many more wild hives could get brought down.

Melody: if AB or the government find out about this, they could put them almost anywhere

John: From now on, monitoring site A needs to be a priority.

John: Any reports going on company servers need to be normal and positive.

John: Anything else stays between us on private servers and physical paper.

John: Until we know more, they will know nothing.

John: Got it?

Matthew: yeah

Howard: agreed

Melody: yep

8:06 am

Sarah: agreed.

Early Summer

Renpet crawled over the broken body of a small worker, now long dead from the deep gash in her side. She had to step carefully, not wanting to get more of a mess on herself than she already had. She hated the feeling of blood on her body. How hot it was. The way it stuck to her hair and joints. It was worse when it cooled off, still sticky but somehow smelling worse. But the worst part was definitely the taste of it. It felt like bitter paste in her mouth. It insisted on lingering, even when she tried to wash it out. Right now, she was trying to scrub more of it from her face. She'd gotten some in her eyes from a screeching drone that had thrashed at just the right angle to fling the blood on her.

She stepped over another body and found herself contemplating the fact that they'd gotten lax with disposing of them. Enemy and ally being left where they fell. *How long until they abandon me somewhere?* She could hear a chorus of thumping and screaming above her. "Still fighting up there," she whispered in the ear of no one. The hive had put up a good fight, certainly a brutal one. They'd been vicious in a way Renpet had not expected. Their hive had been well constructed, and she'd almost mourned getting to see the inside of such a place. There was an odd beauty to their dark walls, filled with something almost edible that tasted too pulpy for her palette. She ran her claws and antennae over their combs, which were larger and rougher than the ones she was raised with, but they smelled smooth and rich. She longed to step inside one and see if she couldn't sleep the rest of this horrid day away.

Renpet hated fighting. She hated the screaming and dying bodies. Her body ached from it all. This hive had been a rough one to break. The last two had been quick and quiet, relatively speaking. She counted herself lucky she'd been on the flanks for this one, as their center had gotten nearly overrun. The casualties had been significant there. It felt ugly, knowing how many

of her sisters were dying. But seeing all they took from it seemed to make it worth it. The mountains of food their raids brought in would keep the whole hive fed through winter. The burden of industry seemed to fade compared to the machine of war. *Is this what we are now?*

Her mind flashed to Mahari, as it was often wont to do. Her injuries had been severe enough to limit the number of tasks she could accomplish. Her flight range was smaller now and shrinking by the day. She'd been increasingly sluggish in the mornings and complaining about her aching wings more and more. As much as she tried to avoid the topic, they both knew she was only getting weaker. They weren't the only ones in such unwanted woes. Au'na had died six days ago, killed in an ambush. Mimu had been utterly inconsolable, refusing to eat or speak. She disappeared in the middle of the night three days ago and hadn't been seen since.

The hive seemed filled with such stories lately. Each battle separating companions and friends. It felt as though the pomp and circumstance of death had drifted away with each passing war. Mass graves had become distressingly commonplace. Not simply in the aftermath of battles, but as the wounded started piling up. Renpet mourned this next generation, as hers did not have much longer before the last of them were gone. While the old trick the now dead general Aujet had used in their first battle couldn't be easily repeated, new ones were still being devised against them. Longer scouting missions took them to unsafe territory, smaller skirmishes leading to losses here and there, and some of her sisters had complained that it felt like it was taking longer for them to get what medical attention could be provided. Taking a short rest on top of the bodies of two enemy drones, she wondered if the hive could even survive this level of internal division. The next generation had no idea what they'd be walking into.

The noises above her quieted down, and she knew the battle would be over soon. She found a slightly close acquaintance, a younger worker named Ni VI-XVI, kneeling over another

worker Renpet didn't recognize, but who was torn up pretty bad. The unnamed worker drew her final breaths as Renpet knelt down to provide what comfort she could. Ni laid her head down gently on her lost comrade's head, then rose to her feet to leave. Her eyes met Renpet's for a short moment, the quiet moment passing between them like a warm meal.

"Did you know her well," Renpet offered.

"Not long, but I'd like to believe she thought we were friends." They stood there awkwardly before Ni continued. "Were you injured at all?"

"Fortunately, no. You?"

"Some prick took a bite out of one of my legs, but otherwise fine."

"Ow. So, how'd your squad hold up?"

Ni let out a sharp click before laughing, "like an egg out of its comb. Pretty sure half those idiots died in the first hour." She kept laughing as Renpet remembered why they didn't talk much and offered a half-hearted chuckle in response. "At least the enemies were slightly more useless. Would've been embarrassing. I mean you should have seen them out there. Flying around with absolutely no plans. Just zipping about going after whoever. I'm pretty sure I saw two of those idiots killing each other." She punctuated her disdain with a rough kick in the face of a dead bee whose bright yellow body rolled slightly. "Dumb fucks can't tell their own workers from the people trying to kill them." Her vicious laugh rang out around them, attracting the attention of a handful of other bees trying to gather nectar from the pillaged combs. Renpet grimaced as she worked unsuccessfully to avoid their judging stares.

She grabbed Ni's arm and pulled her somewhere else, throwing a silent, "sorry" at the nearest worker. As Renpet scooted them both along, Ni dug her feet into the ground to stop her.

“Listen,” the younger scout said softly. Renpet paused, then felt it. The low thrumming of alarm. The signal had been given. The Queen was coming. The entire chamber alighted all at once in movement. The workers threw down their pillaged goods and rushed towards the exits. The deep rumbles grew louder as captains ran about, organizing soldiers into formation. In mere moments throngs of energized bodies were being placed into a pair of familiar rows outside the hive. Renpet lost Ni somewhere in the crowd and settled herself into place wherever she could fit.

The low thrumming of the assembly soothed Renpet somewhat. It felt nice to move in such clear, chaotic synchrony with so many others. The day had shifted to a calmer afternoon. The sky was slowly taking on an orange tint as the cool air ran through the masses of hovering soldiers. Every time they played out this routine it got slightly less horrific. The battalions would be assembled, the queen would arrive with her escorts, and the guards would bring out the queen of the conquered enemy to be executed. It was an odd little dance they played at the end of each and every battle. Renpet doubted whether or not most of the queens she’d seen being killed were actually queens. Most of them were likely particularly large drones that could pass at a distance, maybe a young princess if they were lucky.

This time, they’d gotten lucky. From what she’d heard, the old queen of this hive had died not long before this attack, so the large, battered thing before her was her recently anointed successor. *How’s that for a first day?* She was queen for only a few days and looked like it. She was young, barely more than a hatchling. Younger than Renpet and Mahari were during that first battle so long ago. The small queen was trying so hard to keep herself composed, but she was unsteady in the air, and Renpet could see her shaking from here. She paused in the air for a quiet moment, seemingly intent on waiting for Nerati to come to her. One last tiny act of defiance.

Nerati did not take it willingly. The soldiers escorting the younger queen grabbed her roughly and dragged her forward as she let out a cutting cry. They pulled her the rest of the way to Nerati before almost throwing her at their Queen's bodyguards. The small figure started crying out for help as Nerati grabbed the sides of her head. The violent silence held its breath for a moment. Renpet could see her mother say something but couldn't make it out. The quiet was terminated with a hard snap. The body of the young queen went limp and fell from Nerati's hands to the littered battlefield below.

Renpet found the display to be nothing really impressive. It was no different to her than the other two she'd sat through, and likely would be the same as the next ten. This sentiment was not shared with her sisters, who roared in celebration. She could see Ni, only a few rows ahead of her, waving her arms around and shouting like a madwoman. Renpet settled for a polite clap and waited until the crowd died down. Nerati gave a short speech of thanks, congratulations, and feigned sympathy, then dismissed her armies back home.

The flight back went fine, all things considered. Things were kept orderly, and the raid had been declared a complete success. Minimal casualties and a high number of resources were taken. Renpet was exhausted, not just today, but every day. Each battle wore her out more and more. She felt like her age was starting to catch up to her. Her body ached more with each passing morning. Each scouting run left her slightly more winded. She was approaching thirty days old. Mother willing, she'd make it to thirty-five, maybe forty. Some part of her knew she shouldn't have lasted this long already.

Getting back into the hive after these raids was always a massive pain. Most workers elected to go fulfill other duties. The queen's retinue would always reenter first, followed by those carrying pillaged food, and then the wounded. Everyone else flew around, waiting for a

moment to slip in. It was normally over an hour before Renpet was able to finally get back in. Today was no different. She tried to keep herself from grumbling the whole time. The sun had nearly finished setting by the time she got inside. She wasn't surprised to find Mahari missing from their usual meeting place. She was always one to sleep early and rise late.

Renpet flew up to the top of the hive, to the place she always knew Mahari liked to sleep. That same quiet place as always. She found her curled up into a ball half nestled into an empty comb. Renpet sighed deep and stretched out her limbs to get them to loosen under the pressure. She settled down next to Mahari to try and get at least some rest before they were both called up for their early morning routines. She snuggled close, only to find her partner surprisingly cool. Renpet gently nudged Mahari, half to tease and half to make more room in the comb. She knew it'd only wake her for a minute or so and didn't quite care if she was going to be huffy about it. Mahari gave way under her pressure and started to fall out of the comb. Renpet snapped forward to stop her from falling before letting out a small chuckle.

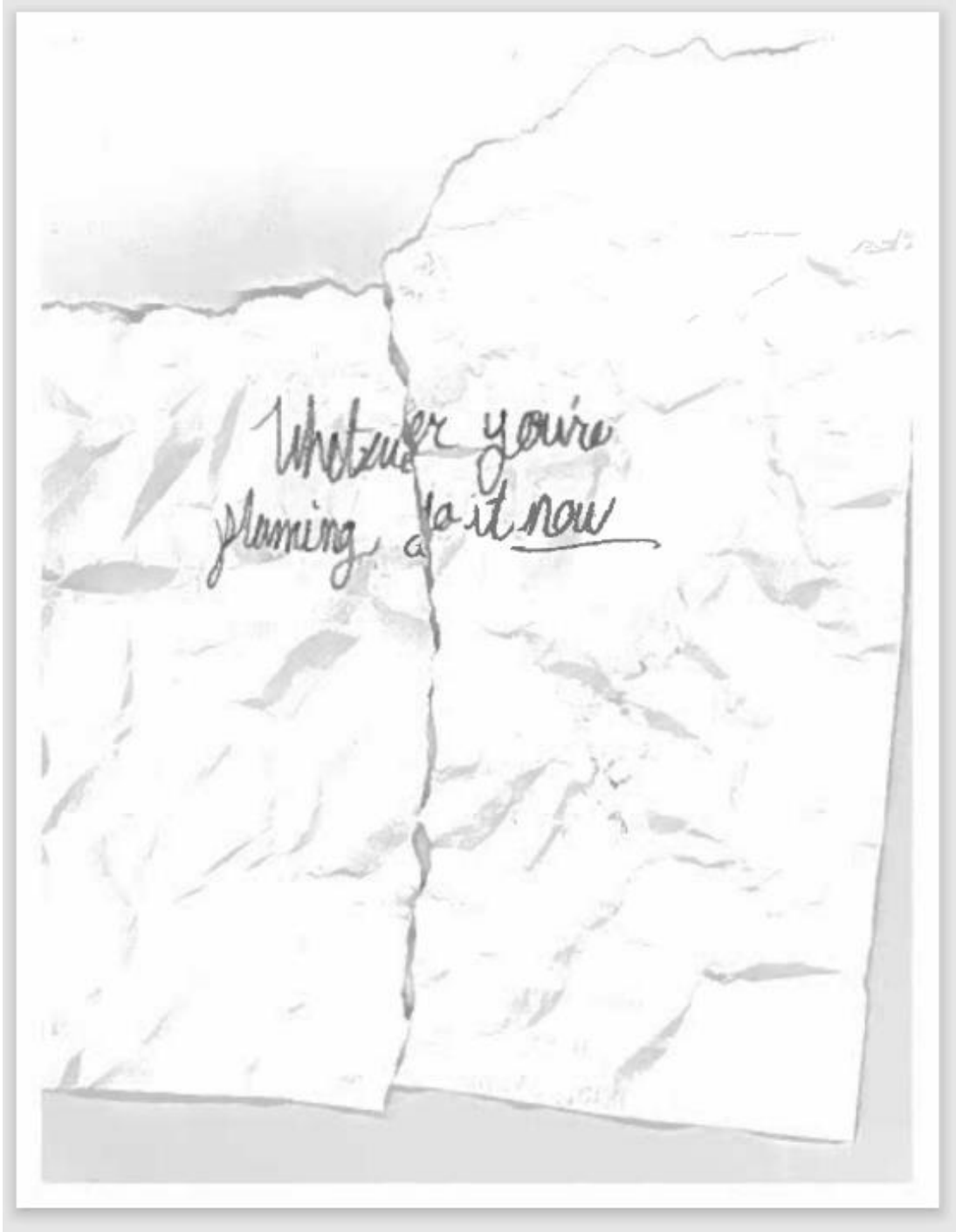
She started to pull Mahari back in, only to realize that her wings had not moved. Even when dead asleep, Mahari's wings always twitched whenever she moved too much. Concerned, Renpet pushed them both out of the comb and out onto the wall. Mahari did not move. She was as still and quiet as the wall itself. Renpet ran her antennae over her partner's face, trying to coax her awake. Mahari did not move. Panic started to well in Renpet's chest. She rubbed her limbs over her lover's prone body, finding it cold to the touch. She started to shove her, bumping her head against Mahari's.

“Hey. Wake up now. You're freaking me out,” Renpet insisted with a shaky laugh.

Mahari did not move.

“Hey! Mahari. Say something please.” Her panic was all-consuming now. Renpet shook her partner hard. She tried to catch her breath, but it was getting caught in her throat.

Mahari did not move.



Mid Summer

The nights had become rough for her. The days at least presented the half-successful distraction of work, but the warm nights of summer had become frigid to her now. Renpet was barely eating, forcing herself to consume anything. The pointlessness of it weighed heavy on her. She wanted desperately to have anyone to talk to about this, but this new generation could not understand it, and the old couldn't be trusted. She felt alone in a way that she hadn't since she hatched. Constantly surrounded by her own sisters, but not one friend.

She'd seen to Mahari's body herself. No one had even tried to touch it for fear of losing a leg. Renpet had carried her out early, just before dawn, and released her in the marigold fields. She felt sick remembering the feeling of Mahari slipping out of her hands for the last time. As she flew along her scouting path, through the wild green of trees and shrubs, Renpet found herself trying to smell her arms. The scent had long faded, but she needed something.

She was weighed down by sacks of nectar and moving slow in the air. Other workers rushed past her to head to or from wherever they were needed. It was only now that Renpet found herself truly processing the deaths of Au'ni and Mimu. Even having just one of them would have been enough. The isolation, arguably more than the grief, held her hostage from herself. She passed through the entrance of the hive and landed with a slump and handed her nectar off to whoever was closest. Renpet found herself questioning the state of her reality more than ever. She hated the endless battles. She hated the queen. She hated that both had taken Mahari from her. She hated the fact that despite the success of both, she still had to gather food.

Weren't the wars supposed to end that?

She tucked herself away in a small corner and tried to go to sleep, even as her stomach rebelled at the idea. She couldn't bring herself to care anymore. The whole hive meant little to

her old heart anymore. Thirty-two days in this empty world and what did she have to show for it? A part of her wanted to stay around longer just to watch this next generation learn the same hard lessons she did. *They're all doomed anyway.* Yet looking around, it didn't seem so clear. Most of the captains were members of her generation. Even if the current general was one of only maybe a dozen left of the one before her, they'd be dead likely within days. So maybe her sisters could do more for their youngers than she thought.

Either way, she'd be glad to be rid of it all. The comb felt emptier yet cramped. She was no longer the young, sleek creature she had been. Sleep came in bursts these days. She felt lucky if she got more than twenty minutes at a time. She couldn't feel comfortable anymore, and her dreams had started to haunt her. Blood and screaming filled her mind, insisting on being remembered. It made her irritable, to herself and others. After what felt like hours of barely effective dozing, she finally slipped into restless slumber. Renpet felt herself surrounded, drowning in an endless sea of pale, transparent blood. It filled her body, blinded her eyes, and muffled her screams. Below her, endless legions of bodies sank deeper into the abyss. She felt unseen jaws tearing into her, pulling her down. She thrashed and shook, crying into the murky darkness. She was on something solid now. Gazing below, she found herself on a rotting branch, pieces falling into a pit below, filled with a writhing mass of Jieatani'I reaching out to her. The branch snapped. Her wings were gone. The beasts below cried to her in Mahari's voice, "Come. Love me. Feed me."

She awoke in panic. Something was wrong. The air felt wrong. It was dark and almost sticky, and a rolling mass of grey lumbered through the hive. It crept along with a hundred tails and a thousand limbs reaching out to snatch at the chaotic mass. It curled around bodies, consuming them in the foul haze. Its prey flailed around in the air and rolled themselves along

the walls and floor bleeding and breaking themselves. They were screaming, thousands of them in a chorus of unbridled pain. The shrinking space was filled with cries of “Mother” and “help” before being quickly snuffed out. Its dark maw opened, and an avalanche of death poured forth.

Renpet was still near enough to the entrance to hear it. Something was outside, howling in one long and unbroken note. It shook the hive as it did so. A low vibration knocking many off their feet so the encroaching darkness could feast on them all. A giant thud rocked the entire hive, sending a fresh wave of screams in all directions. Renpet fled, trying to get to one of the other exits. The one near the bottom of the hive had disappeared into the black tide. The others around her were quickly being filled by fleeing workers. She wondered for a moment if they’d gotten the queen out, then cast it from her mind.

The old scout now climbed up the walls as fast as she could. The air was too disordered to risk even a quick flight. Workers were colliding into each other constantly, breaking wings and cracking exoskeletons. Injured bodies fell like rain and all sense of order or control had been lost. Captains tried shouting commands into the whirlwind but were drowned out or ignored. The deep drumming alarm trembled in Renpet’s ears. She flew to the upper levels of the great column. Panicked workers were desperately trying to pull their younger sisters, yet unhatched, from their combs. Their small, wriggling bodies screamed at the noisy and distressing air. Several of them slipped from their would-be saviors’ grasp and fell like screeching stones into the pitch darkness. Even if they could be pulled out and removed, most would die of exposure in minutes. The crowd at the top of the hive was growing rapidly. Stalactites of frantic bodies growing down to meet their encroaching death.

Renpet found herself pressed between an unknown number of bees. A leg in her eye, a face pressed into her thorax, wings entangled in her own. She could barely breathe, let alone

move. The burial mound around her weighed on her body till she felt something snap. She tried to cry out in pain, but the sound was muffled by someone crushed against her face. Their scent engulfed and choked her. They reeked of blind fear and desperation. Her body pressed even further into Renpet's, blocking out the last of her sight. The old scout was now imprisoned completely. The overwhelming pressure of the terrified horde was sucking the air out of her. Even through the bodies surrounding her, she could still hear the chorus of agonized shrieking.

Then, somewhere above her, Renpet felt a giant snap. The entire mass seemed to lurch upward. Another loud snap and a torrent of air rushed between the bodies. A great cry rose from around her as she found herself pushed up. A thousand commands went up at once, "Move!" Renpet felt the gravity above lessen. Her wings broke free, and she started to climb. Climb as though there had never been anything else in the history of existence but this act. She could almost see it now, the cold blue of the afternoon sky. Nothing had ever seemed so beautiful in that moment. She latched onto the bodies of anyone near and pulled herself up.

She felt someone grab onto her legs and pull. They heaved themselves onto her and tried to use her head as a step stool. She bit down on the offending arm and pushed them away. The attacker sank back into the writhing hoard with a sharp yelp. A second thunderous crack rang out, and the entire mob paused. The gap had opened further. A renewed sense of desperate joy flooded over Renpet. Her roar rattled her ears, and she found hope again. The sky was there, and she would reach it. The crowd closed in on itself again, crashing like waves. Renpet scrambled to escape. She sunk her claw into anything that could give her leverage. She could smell the warm summer air through the gusts. She was so close now.

Several bodies fell on her, pushing her down and knocking the wind out of her. She felt the crunch of a body beneath her and the great weight of several above. She managed to wiggle

out from under them quickly and her dark race continued. The opening was nearly hers. She reached the edge, trying to push past two poor creatures that had gotten themselves stuck. She and several others grabbed them and shoved the blockade forward. One of them was screaming, wailing that part of her was stuck in the wood. Her gnarled form cracked above the pressure, then burst forth with a scream cut too short.

Renpet half fell, half flew forward, sucking the crisp air in. She pushed herself up further onto the tree to try and get out of the way of those behind her. Stopping to catch her breath, she turned her attention down below her. Behind her sisters escaping the gap, far below the rising tide of night, beneath the raining bodies was a creature. Something large that she did not recognize. It was shockingly pale, like the heavy-set clouds that signal a heavy rain. It had a tall, bulky figure, standing on four thick legs. It was reared back on its hind legs. There was a fifth, bright red leg, or maybe a giant stinger, sticking out of the left side of its body. It had no face, only what appeared to be an amorphous blob of thousands of dark, yellow eyes. Its front legs were pointed up towards the tree, with a single colossally long claw aimed at the hive. It seemed to be trying to reach the lower entrance.

Renpet hovered off the tree to try and get a better look at the thing beneath her. It was then she could see that the rolling mass of black death that seeped out of the hive was also coming out of the creature's long, thin claw. She watched the end of the claw spew its opaque vomit into the air. Suddenly a realization occurred to her: this thing was trying to kill them all. Trying to choke them out so it could climb up and eat the dead or steal their food. A great and terrible giant had come to envelop their home, and she could do nothing.

Renpet felt so weak. So small and alone. She rested herself on a branch, wishing it still had its leaves. The green world around her blurred into a swirling mass. Twisting and folding

into and out of itself. Hives and combs of emerald and mint rose from the violent mass. Workers made of roses, tulips, and marigolds crawled among them, filling their spaces with nectar made of sweet things. The sky rained down in massive drops, streaking the air with the calm midday of spring, the violent stormy nights of summer, and the soft glow of the evening. Yet there, at the center of the universe, was the creature. It stared at her with a billion piercing eyes, before moving its long claw up to stretch into the sky. She could start to see it more clearly now, and realized it was no claw at all, but the head of some giant, thin Senadej. Its face pointed towards the holes that had been ripped open by her sisters, inspecting them with four large eyes. It gazed upon them thoughtfully, bobbing and swaying in the air. The survivors stopped moving, most of them frozen in shock. After a moment, the creature righted itself and let out a horrid screech. It was low and piercing. Renpet tried to cover her head to block out the sound.

The creature's screech rose in pitch. The black mass spewed forth onto the tree and enveloped its horrified victims. Renpet could only watch as more and more of them either fled off in all directions or died screaming where they stood. She backed away as far away as she could and waited for it to reach her. Huddled against the tree, she could not stop violently sobbing. She wanted her friends, her comrades, her home. Above all she wanted Mahari. Renpet was frozen there, listening to the screams of her sisters as they got steadily silent.

She wasn't sure how long she stayed like that. It could have been minutes, more likely hours. By the time Renpet worked up the courage to unstick herself, the creature was long gone, and her mind felt clear again. A great billowing, black tree rose from the hive, shaking in the air and leaving its stench everywhere it touched. She dragged herself to the edge of the branch and saw nothing now, no signs of life or activity from anyone. It was quiet. Far more so than she'd ever felt. Even in the dead hours of night the hive had been alive with noise. The darkness had

seemed to leave with its creator, but she was in no hurry to go back inside and check. It was then she saw a figure floating in the distance. Some poor, exhausted looking soul slowly circling the tree.

The old soldier let out as loud as cry as she could manage. Her voice had become gnarled and rough from the screams. Yet she had been heard. The figure turned towards her, pausing for a moment to find the source of the noise before letting out words Renpet could not hear yet. She expected a captain, maybe even one of the royal guards. She only saw the face of a young scout, no more than eight days old. She was breathing heavily, sobs falling from her as she tried to gain some form of composure. Renpet took her into her arms and pulled her upright. “Child, what’s wrong? Talk to me.”

The young scout back up and straightened herself slowly. “Sorry ma’am, I’ve b-been sent by Captain Surna Five Twelve to f-find any survivors and b-b-bring them to the upper tower.”

Renpet snapped up to her feet, taking a long breath before feeling a deep chill shake her. She looked at her visitor with tenderness, pulling her into her arms and stroking her head. “Breathe little one. You’re okay now.” She suppressed her own turmoil for the moment, letting the small thing in her grasp work through her own. They stayed in their embrace for some time, Renpet doing all she could to coax some semblance of peace out of the girl. “Tell me your name, sweetie.”

“Ha’shet Three Four.”

“Well, Ha’shet, we’ll stay here as long as you need.”

When the child had finally stopped shaking, the sun was preparing for its descent into the west. Renpet squeezed her arm gently, guiding them both up into the air. The pair rose in silence as they took a wide path around the remains of the hive.

The upper tower was a small station built high up into the thicket of a neighboring tree. It was typically used by scouts to plan their excursions, or just to store extra food. Now, it was the miniscule remnant of their entire world. This moon had become their planet. When Renpet and Ha'shet arrived, the feeling was abysmal. Hundreds crammed into a space meant for a few dozen. There was nowhere to sit or move. Whatever command was left to wield was now delegated to a young captain, Surna. Not that it mattered much, as few of the other remaining captains had any real desire to assert their authority.

The pair pushed their way closer to the back where they found an extremely burdened Surna. She was being pushed in many directions at once, with the air filled with calls for her attention and time. Upon seeing Ha'shet, she flew into a rage. Pushing past the crowd, she grabbed the young scout by her antennae, shouting in her face, "where have you been? We're struggling as it is, and you disappear for hours."

Renpet stepped forward, shoving herself between Surna and Ha'shet. "I apologize ma'am, the fault is mine. I got stuck in a hole, and this scout was gracious enough to help me."

Surna released her grip with a huff, "Fine. Go settle yourself somewhere and try not to cause any more problems." Renpet gently pulled Ha'shet back towards the entrance. The tower was cramped but felt so unnaturally quiet. Most of the workers here just sat themselves wherever they could and waited silently for something they weren't sure was coming. The next two days were brutal for everyone. After a time, survivors just stopped trickling in. Search parties turned up empty handed, often with fewer scouts than they left with. By Surna's count, the hive had been reduced to less than five hundred.

It was late in the day, and Ha'shet slept restlessly next to Renpet. The old soldier knew they would all run out of food soon. All of their stockpiles had been rendered a toxic mess by

that monster. Anyone who ate the wrong food got sick, and most of them died. At this rate they would run out of stock in four days, maybe five. Renpet tried to let herself sleep but found it somehow even harder than before. It hurt to breathe since the hive fell. The cold dark of sleep was barely upon her when a chorus of shouting voices pulled her back to reality. A small procession was frantically approaching the hive, calling for help. Two of them were carrying something, but Renpet could not see it well in the flurry of onlookers.

Captain, sometimes General, Surna pushed her way to the front as the air around her filled with sheets of curious throngs. Hundreds of them all trying to get a clear image of what was happening. A manic scout landed before her, and her distress was deeply apparent to all. As the rest of the group landed, Surna shouted for the crowd to calm itself. Turning to the group, she asked, "What has happened?"

The scout that landed first choked out in-between violent retching sobs, "It's the queen ma'am. We found her. She's dead!" The shock tore through the crowd as the group gently laid the Queen Mother's body onto the floor of the tower. Neither Surna nor any observers could hope to control themselves now. The captain fell to the floor with a visceral moan. Ha'shet pressed herself into Renpet who struggled to process what she heard. The Queen's body looked so small, so unlike the proud figure that commanded her devoted followers to their conquests. Renpet was unsure how to feel at the moment. She knew her feelings weren't supposed to be complex. She was meant to feel grief and pain at the sudden loss.

Yet some part of herself had seemed to write off the queen days ago. Even if it hadn't, Renpet was not sure she would have cared. Her mother was dead, and so much of her felt nothing. For the moment, she elected to support Ha'shet in her grief. The young scout had never had the chance to truly know the hive as it was, and the fantasies of youth still held strong in her.

As chaos unfolded around them, Renpet softly guided them both upward. They placed themselves at the top of the tower, looking out through the dead branches. As Ha'shet mourned next to her, Renpet turned her gaze out onto the world. Far across the canopy, rising from the green expanse were several black towers. Some seemed miles off, but they all meant the same. She would count them later, for now there were more pressing things to measure.

Bibliography

- Angelella, G. M., et al. "Honey Bee Hives Decrease Wild Bee Abundance, Species Richness, and Fruit Count on Farms Regardless of Wildflower Strips." *Scientific Reports*, vol. 11, no. 1, Feb. 2021, pp. 1–12. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-81967-1>.
- Atwood, Margaret. *Oryx and Crake: A Novel*. 1st ed. in the U.S ed., Nan A. Talese, 2003.
- Auguscik, Anna, et al. "Speculative Fiction and the Significance of Plausibility: Dystopian Science in the Critical Response to Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*." *Under the Literary Microscope: Science and Society in the Contemporary Novel*, edited by Sina Farzin et al., vol. 7, Penn State University Press, 2021, pp. 101–25. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.5325/j.ctv1mvw8k2.9>. Accessed 14 July 2023.
- Bezerra da Silva Santos, Karen Cristine, et al. "Pollen Collection by Honey Bee Hives in Almond Orchards Indicate Diverse Diets." *Basic & Applied Ecology*, vol. 64, Nov. 2022, pp. 68–78. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.baae.2022.07.006>.
- Bommarco, Riccardo, et al. "Flower Strips Enhance Abundance of Bumble Bee Queens and Males in Landscapes with Few Honey Bee Hives." *Biological Conservation*, vol. 263, Nov. 2021. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2021.109363>.
- Crichton, Michael. *Jurassic Park: A Novel*. 2012 Ballantine books Mass Market ed., Ballantine, 2012.
- Danforth, Bryan N., et al. *The Solitary Bees: Biology, Evolution, Conservation*. Princeton University Press, 2019. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvd1c929>.
- Flynn, Charles L. *White Land, Black Labor : Caste and Class in Late Nineteenth-Century Georgia*. Louisiana State University Press, 1983.

Matias, Denise Margaret, VerfasserI, *Thinking beyond Western Commercial Honeybee Hives: Towards Improved Conservation of Honey Bee Diversity*. 2017. EBSCOhost,

<https://doi.org/10.1007s10531-017-1404-y>.

Moore, J. W. (2015). *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (1st ed.). Verso.

O'Brien, William, et al. "Estimating the Number of Drones at the Entrance of a Honey Bee Hive Using Machine Learning Tools." *SoutheastCon 2022*, Mar. 2022, pp. 397–404. EBSCOhost, <https://doi.org/10.1109/SoutheastCon48659.2022.9764040>.

O'Lear, Shannon, et al. "Disaster Making in the Capitalocene." *Global Environmental Politics*, vol. 22, no. 3, Aug. 2022, pp. 2–11. EBSCOhost, https://doi-org.radford.idm.oclc.org/10.1162/glep_a_00655.

Sammataro, Diana, and Jay Yoder. *Honey Bee Colony Health: Challenges and Sustainable Solutions*. CRC Press, 2012.

Seeley, Thomas D. *Honeybee Democracy*. Princeton University Press, 2010.

Stengler, Erik. "Beyond the Techno-Thriller: Michael Crichton and Societal Issues in Science and Technology." *Fafnir: Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2015, pp. 23–30. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=2016391232&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Sumner, Seirian. *Endless Forms: The Secret World of Wasps*. First U.S. ed., Harper, an Imprint of HarperCollins, 2022. 2nd Floor QL569.4.S86 2022

Underwood, Benjamin, and Rahman Tashakkori. "Detecting Anomalies in Honey Bee Hives Using Their Audio Recordings." *SoutheastCon 2022*, Mar. 2022, pp. 173–

77. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi.org/10.1109/SoutheastCon48659.2022.9763931>.

Vreeland, Russell H, and Diana Sammataro, editors. *Beekeeping: From Science to Practice*.

Springer Nature, 2017.

Whedon, T. (2011). Notes on the Novella. *Southwest Review*, 96(4), 565–571.