

A Bee Story

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Chapter 1

ULRICK THE BEE, AS WAS NOTED IN HIS ANNUAL HIVE REVIEW, WAS “A solid but eccentric performer.” If he had been born a human instead of a bee, he would have been a test fighter pilot; while other bees tended to stay close to the hive, Ulrick was an explorer. There was no raindrop that could fell him, no flower too far to collect nectar from. He had flown further and higher than any bee in the hive, a true maverick that was particularly well-suited for scouting missions.

In other words, he didn't really fit in.

Being part of a Hive was about conformity, doing what you were told, and keeping to the Schedule. Ulrick hated schedules, preferring to take leave when the wind happened to catch the underside of his wings. Invariably, he would find some rich pocket of flower pollen and dance out its location. The Ancient Bee Code, of course, was what he danced. This is a series of repetitions of turns and wing movements that detail, with remarkable accuracy, the precise direction and distance relative to

the hive by using the position of the sun as a reference. The Bee Code was highly effective, and could be communicated back down to the rank and file without having to actually talk; the Hive is way too loud to have even a shouted conversation in. You might as well try getting nectar out of a rock.

Ulrick was having a particularly bad day. He liked being away from the Hive far more than being in it, and during moments of solitude he caught himself thinking dark thoughts about his coworkers. “Drones, all of them”, he thought. “Doing what they’re told. There’s got to be more to Life than collecting Nectar.” He had once asked this very question of his supervisor, back when he was less cynical about such things: “Sir, what more is there after collecting Nectar? What is it all for?” His supervisor had just gaped at him for a moment, then explained in a very slow and careful voice just in case Ulrick was an exceptionally stupid bee, that Nectar was Life. Life was Nectar. This was the Great Bee Cycle, perhaps even older than the Ancient Bee Code itself. What else could there be for a bee? The Flight Deck had even grown a tad quieter, as the other bees paused to stare at the young bee who somehow didn’t understand the Great Bee Cycle. “He must have grown up on the Fringe”, he heard one bee

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whisper (or what passes for whispering in a noisy hive, which is basically yelling). Another bee had nodded sagely, “Yes, all that exposure to the weather will addle a young bee’s mental development; he probably should have been kept closer to Hive Central where it’s warmer. What a shame. What a shame.” After that, the other bees started treating him with the formal courtesy that people sometimes offer to children who can’t go swimming because they are susceptible to ear infections: kindly and with understanding, tinged with a slight veneer of caution in case the infections were somehow communicable.

The incident had irritated Ulrick in ways that he hadn’t known was possible, and after that he kept his questions to himself. Determined to prove himself a strong bee, he developed his flight technique to go faster and higher than any bee he had met. He had subsequently developed a reputation for being a great asset to the Hive, but how was the Hive an asset to himself?

His reverie was interrupted by his supervising flight deck officer, a stolid drone responsible for dispatching the morning’s nectar seeking squadron from the Hive to the wide world outside. The season was starting to change, which called for a wider search pattern than normal. Ulrick would probably be flying an

extended patrol to tag his flowers quota for the day.

“Top of the morning, Ulrick”, said his supervisor.

“Whatever”, grumbled Ulrick, “Show me which direction to scout.”

The supervisor started dancing out the Bee Code. Ulrick, despite his bad temper, was drawn into it. Unlike the normal unimaginative dancing he’d come to expect from his supervisor, this one was a bit different. It was clumsily executed, with the poor leg extension and awkward wing gestures that belied the non-flying status of the deck supervisor, but it clearly was different. Ulrick was intrigued.

“I’ve never seen you dance one like that before,” commented Ulrick. “I’m not even sure I got it the first time through. You better dance it again.”

“It’s correct,” said his supervisor. “It got danced in just a while ago by the Dawn Squadron. I have duplicated it in exact detail.” His supervisor had a habit of assuming that Ulrick was a bit slow on the uptake, ever since he’d asked that question about there being more to Life than Nectar. Ulrick bristled internally at the perceived slight.

“Do you want me to dance it again, more slowly?” asked the

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supervisor, helpfully but still annoyingly.

“No, I got it. It was just...different.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s a WEIRD one alright, but sometimes it’s the weird ones that are the biggest scores. Ready?”

Ulrick hopped to the Hive entrance. “Ready.”

“SCOUT ULRICK IS ON DECK. FLIGHT DECK CLEAR FOR LAUNCH... CONFIRM?”

“SCOUT ULRICK, DECK LAUNCH POSITION CONFIRM ACKNOWLEDGE!”

“Safe flying, Ulrick”

And with that, Ulrick launched himself out of the Hive, rushing the sky in a steep vertical climb. It felt good to be free of the Hive, alone with his thoughts. His automatic bee autopilot had already started adjusting his flight path based on the unusual instructions he’d gotten from his supervisor, using the position of the sun to calculate the distance and direction that he was to scout. It would have been a pretty easy flight for Ulrick, if there hadn’t been more than one sun in the sky this day, playing tricks on his bee senses.

It was not a good day for safe flying.

Chapter 2

THE SKY WAS TURNING SMOKY, AND THE RISING HUMIDITY STARTED TO PUT Ulrick on edge. Bees are not big fans of smoke, because it makes them drowsy, and a drowsy bee is a lazy bee. The concept was downright terrifying, because lazy bees tend to be dead. The smell of smoke is, to a bee, the very smell of death. The sky, usually so comforting with its welcoming openness, was not herself. The rising humidity was a lesser but still valid concern, as it was a precursor to the possibility of rain. Though Ulrick himself was a champion raindrop dodger, that didn't mean he liked it. Rain made everything take longer, watered-down the nectar, and made his wings damp and less buzzy. A damp bee, though not lazy, was certainly not a happy bee either.

These two environmental factors alone were not enough to deter Ulrick, but the strangeness of his mission—the unusual destination plotted by his supervisor, and the surprising lack of surety about his flight path—was enough for him to consider a rare (for him) stopover at a sheltering structure to think things

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over. And maybe find a bit of something sweet to replenish his tired wings; Ulrick realized that he'd been flying for quite some time, and he needed a bit of a pick-me-up if he was going to last the mission. His antennae detected the faint hint of sugary molecules beneath him. Thus orientated, Ulrick let himself drop from the sky with a lazy flutter, performing an un-powered controlled descent toward the source of whatever sugary goodness beckoned. This turned out to be a small house, typical of the kind you'd see in New England, in the kind of yard that was usually friendly to bees, with a nearby orchard offering both shelter from the wind and flowers to draw nectar from: in other words, it was a prime destination. They called them "primes" for short, and primes were the supply backbone for the entire nectar-industrial complex. Ulrick had in fact scouted a similar prime, in the southern zone about 3 long buzz steps from Hive Central, and knew it well. That there was another prime off to the northeast, about the same distance away, would be good news for the Hive.

"Hello, Ulrick! What are you doing here today, of all days?"

Ulrick startled. It was Tiffany, the small domesticated hamster from the southern prime, watching him from outside an

open window. He almost collided with the house, one wingtip nicking a rough wooden clapboard with a slight snicking sound. Tiffany watched with some concern.

“You ok, Ulrick? Maybe you should have a sit. It’s not a good day for flying!”

Ulrick settled down on the window sill, still disoriented. Was he dreaming? Did the smoke get to him? Maybe he was already gripped by laziness, and was already dead. He kicked out his legs in a spasm, seeing if being dead affected his ability to move. Apparently, it did not. He blinked in surprise, as well as he could as he had no eyelids. It looked more like a spastic shrug to the casual observer, but Tiffany picked up on the general idea. She scurried back into her cage, and got a sweet piece of fruit to toss out for Ulrick to refresh himself with. His autonomous bee instincts kicked in, and he hopped toward the fruit to suck dewy droplets of sustenance from its moist surface. Kiwi!

This was rather perplexing, because Tiffany also gave him fruit at the other prime. Not this one. There had to be two Tiffany hamsters, because his bee senses told him that he had flown toward the northeast, not south. He explained this to Tiffany II.

“Oh, but I’m the same Tiffany” said Tiffany.

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“It’s possible that you think you’re Tiffany” countered Ulrick, “but clearly you’re not, by the Rules of Bee Logic, which tell me that I’m in the Northeastern Zone.” He explained that bee logic was very precise and infallible, as it was based on bee intuition, which itself was based on the constancy of the very cosmos itself. The sun went up and the sun went down every day without fail. Bees woke with the sun, and danced with it to show each other the way to life-sustaining flowers, themselves sustained by the very same light that bound their fates together. “Q.E.D.” concluded Ulrick.

Tiffany was impressed. “Wow, we don’t have anything like Bee Logic here in the hamster cage” she said. “We’re mostly chewing up stuff, and we don’t go outside. I really DO want to go outside someday though!” She gnawed a pellet nervously, simultaneously terrified and excited by the very concept. “But not today, because of the suns.”

“You mean ‘sun’, of course” clarified Ulrick pedantically. “There’s only one sun. That’s the whole foundation of Bee Logic.”

“Oh no, there are two suns today. Didn’t you see?” Tiffany pointed out the window. Indeed, there was the regular sun,

bright in the sky, casting friendly sunbeams through the gently swaying leaves of the apple trees outside. But there was also a darker, brooding sun, and this was the one Ulrick noticed for the first time. It looked like an angry sunset that had been forced to do not only dusk, but the dawn and afternoon shifts as well, becoming swollen with resentment. His bee senses resonated with its power, and whispered to him that he was indeed to the northeast of the Hive, and not to listen to foolish hamsters. But if there were two suns...

Tiffany shuddered. "It's been like that all day. I tried watching Oprah, but it didn't help."

Ulrick peered into the room that Tiffany occupied. "Say, is there another window on the other side of the room? I'm going to go check it out."

"Yep!" said Tiffany. "Go for it! Just stay focused on the light at the end, and not the light at the top of the room. Otherwise you'll get hurt." Though Tiffany was not schooled in the rules of Bee Logic, she did know that bees tended to be confused by competing light sources. It all came from believing there was just one sun, she gathered. If your idea of the sun is a bright light, then you're bound to think everything bright was the sun, with

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predictably hilarious results. Fortunately, she thought, hamsters were not bound by such dogma; it was a lot more practical to just be scared of everything that moved.

Ulrick had successfully navigated the room, and sat on the window sill. The view was different here, and he felt himself bathed in the light of the other sun. It filled him with images of flowers and nectar, not the specter of smoking death. His bee senses also told him that he was, indeed, south of the Hive. Not to the northeast, as the other sun had told him in savage whispers. He buzzed back to Tiffany's cage, perplexed.

"THERE ARE TWO SUNS!" he buzzed with great alarm and earnestness.

"Yes, that's why it's not a good day for flying" Tiffany said. "Isn't your bee dancing code based entirely on the sun? If there are two suns, what does that mean?"

"I...I don't know" said Ulrick. He felt quite lost. His entire world had been shattered. If there were two suns, he had to question everything. Just when he was starting to get the hang of that whole 'Nectar = Life, Life = Nectar' equation with everyone else.

Tiffany sensed Ulrick's unease, and adopted a comforting

posture by lying on her belly so she was a little more at his level. Ulrick's gaze was unfocused, even more so than usual for an insect with a nearly 360 degree field of vision, but the small hamster's presence made him feel a little better.

"Back when I was a hamster attending Columbia University," said Tiffany, "I sat in on a seminar about Einstein and Relativity. Did you know that Einstein got the idea for Relativity by watching trains go by as a youth? He watched them go by and go by, and he noticed that if something were to fall on a train moving by him at a certain speed, to an observer on the train it would look like it was falling straight down. However, to the young Einstein sitting on the bank watching the train, the path would appear curved. So that's how he apparently got the idea."

"Columbia? Einstein?"

"Oh" said Tiffany modestly, "I was in the cognitive science program, assisting Dr. Pankow and Dr. Musso in their research on incentive-based spatial mapping strategies for small mammals. I was their fastest hamster, but my data didn't quite fit in with the other data so they labeled me an 'outlier' and Musso took me home. This is her house. She tells me sometimes that

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I was meant for greater things, but I don't really know what yet."

"And, um, who is Einstein?"

"Einstein was a famous scientist who invented something called Relativity, and it's all about how things look different depending on where you are standing. The math gets a little hairy, I'm told, but I can only count up to 1 so I just remember the part about things looking different."

"I have no idea what you're talking about" said Ulrick, suddenly wishing that he too had gone to college.

"Well, I'm just saying that so there are two suns, and that's really confusing and damaging to the bee logic principles you just told me. But it's all really just kind of a point of view, right? I thought that maybe that would make you feel better."

Ulrick mulled it over. His strength had been restored by the fruit, and though his faith in Bee Logic had been seriously questioned, Tiffany somehow made sense in her hamsterish way. The red sun still was wreaking havoc with his bee senses, but really...it was just another point of view. It was likely that the strangeness of his supervisor's bee dance was due to the two suns. Well, if that was the case, maybe the dance still led some-

where that it was supposed to. All dances led somewhere, didn't they?

"Are you going to stay to watch Ellen with me, Ulrick? Harrison Ford is on!"

Ulrick hopped to the windowsill. "Maybe next time, Tiffany! Thanks for the fruit, and for the help...I've got some flying I need to do."

Tiffany waved. "Fly safe, Ulrick! Come back and visit me soon!"

Ulrick launched himself into the sky, waggling his wings by way of waving back.

Chapter 3

ULRICK FLEW ON FOR A WHILE, ALLOWING HIS BEE SENSES TO GUIDE HIM despite the confusion from the two suns. He wasn't sure where he'd end up, but he persisted in believing that all dances led somewhere, the number of suns be damned. He'd never given up a mission before in his life, and he wasn't about to start today.

With some surprise, he noticed that he appeared to be flying over a body of water, the Atlantic Ocean, in fact. To his even greater surprise, he sensed the unmistakable scent of a flower looming in the distance. A flower in the middle of the ocean! How odd. Perhaps this was his destination after all.

The flower, he noted, was one of those really tall yellow ones, and was of the female persuasion. The head of the flower, yellow petals surrounding a rich brown core, seemed to follow him as he tiredly buzzed in for his approach. At last! The last thing he expected was the flower to swat him away with one of its leaves. "Back off, Bee! Watch where you're putting that thing!"

Ulrick buzzed back in puzzlement. Usually flowers were pretty welcoming of his visits, bees being part of the pollination cycle of many thousands of plants. Bees were welcome just about everywhere in flowerdom. He didn't recall the tall yellow flowers ever having a problem with their services, so he peered a little closer. Maybe this wasn't a flower.

"I'm warning you, Bee! I've got a black belt in Taekwondo, and I'm a ranked Capoeirista, and I will absolutely guarantee that I will go medieval on your ass if you dare pollinate me!" shouted the flower angrily, its head shaking with rage. "Stupid bees!" Ulrick watched in fascination as the flower flexed its long thick stem back, the leaves weaving back and forth in a mesmerizing dance-like pattern. He was almost caught unawares by the flower's mighty lunge toward him. It would have taken out a lesser bee, but Ulrick was a master dodger of raindrops. He reflexively dipped to the side, feathering out his wings for just an instant, just enough to read the shape of air pressure wave of the onrushing flower with his sensitive antennae. His instincts, honed razor sharp by hundreds of hours of training, took over. He flicked easily out of harm's way, the flower's thrust dodged neatly.

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“BASTARD!” screamed the flower, and she riposted backwards with even greater speed and fury. Ulrick, now attuned to the flower’s mode of attack, merely rode the pressure wave out of the way again. He buzzed in confusion. He had never come across an angry flower in his life. They were usually so happy and conversational, spending most of their time flirting with each other and passing notes via the bees, who enjoyed gossiping and spreading rumors between them.

“Flower!” he cried from a safe distance. “Why are you so upset?”

“So is that it?” muttered the flower bitterly. “Is that what I am? I can’t even see myself.” The flower cursed under her breath, quietly so Ulrick couldn’t quite make out what she was saying. However, from what Ulrick could catch, it didn’t sound very flowerlike at all.

“You’re not a flower?” asked Ulrick.

“No, that makes sense, a lot of sense. Tell me, bee, what kind of flower am I? And keep your distance, or I’ll POUND you.” The flower tensed, leaves weaving again in that mesmerizing motion. It was a lot like bee dancing, thought Ulrick, except far more dangerous. He surveyed the flower from a safe distance.

“You’re a big yellow flower, very tall,” said Ulrick. “You’re the kind of flower that is very tall, the closest to the sun. Bees like you very much.”

“Don’t get any ideas, Bee! I also know Jeet Kun Do and Thai Massage! The combination, I assure you, is quite deadly.” The flower shook menacingly, but stopped to reflect on Ulrick’s observation. “Wait, did you say I’m a tall flower? Like how tall? Like a sunflower?”

“Yes, I think so, but I’ve never seen such a...such an energetic sunflower before. Sunflowers are usually very friendly and mellow, and like to tell lots of stories,” said Ulrick.

“Son of a bitch,” exclaimed the sunflower to herself. “I did it. I really did it. I’m a freaking genius.”

“What?” asked Ulrick

“A GENIUS,” repeated the sunflower loudly, again mostly to herself. “Holy shit. The possibilities are beyond what I could have imagined!”

“Possibilities?”

The sunflower turned to face Ulrick for the first time, standing proudly and tall “I have achieved the greatest feat of Science since, since...well, my feat is perhaps unprecedented in

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all of history. I have achieved TRANSMOGRIFICATION!" The sunflower paused dramatically, graciously allowing Ulrick the necessary time to gasp aloud with wonder and perhaps pass out from excitement. Ulrick, however, was not quite following along.

"Trans-?" he asked tentatively.

"GAH!" exploded the sunflower in frustration. "Why am I talking to a stupid bee! All you do all day is stick your hoo hoo in ya yas and pollinate them! And then you make honey and let people rob you blind while you sleep! STUPID! STUPID! STUPID!"

This was the most unpleasant flower Ulrick had ever come across.

"Look," buzzed Ulrick indignantly, "I'm a bee. I collect nectar. We do a lot of dancing and a lot of flying. I have no idea what the heck you're talking about, so why don't you explain it to me?"

"Oh, why not," sulked the sunflower. "It's not like the seagulls are listening. I don't know what the frig I'm doing out here in the middle of the ocean either. It's freaking weird. Are you sure I'm a sunflower, you stupid bee? In your vast experi-

ence as a bee, have you ever known a sunflower to grow in the middle of the freakin' OCEAN?"

Ulrick considered. "No, you are the first one I've seen on the ocean."

"Crap," muttered the sunflower. "Maybe I'm a new kind of sunflower, one that the transmogrifier somehow conjured up. When I get back to the lab, I'll have to recalibrate the DNA sequencer and tighten the freakin' beam phase diffuser so this doesn't happen again." The sunflower trailed off, lost deep in thought.

"Bean dip mooser?" interjected Ulrick.

The sunflower sighed heavily, and turned to face Ulrick. "Maybe you will stop asking such stupid questions if I tell you who I am. I am Apollonia De Groot, researcher extraordinaire in matter beam physics and substructural DNA sequencing. I practically INVENTED these fields, and today, I have achieved what many have thought to be impossible: TRANSMOGRIFICATION! The changing of one thing into another, through SCIENCE!"

Ulrick was impressed, much as he had been by Tiffany's surprise college background. "Wow!" he buzzed.

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Apollonia nodded in acknowledgement, pleased to have finally gotten through to her dunderheaded audience. "Yes. A great day, indeed."

"So what is it that you did?"

Apollonia scowled, her petals scrunching sourly together. "Isn't it obvious? I've transmogrified a genius college student into a sunflower!"

"Oh." said Ulrick.

"Oh? OH? That's all you got? OH?" yelled Apollonia in outrage. "Do you think these things happen BY ACCIDENT? One moment, I'm in the our rural research facility setting up for the transmogrification run, and BOOM, I succeed beyond my wildest dreams! I'm a freaking sunflower!"

"Why are you a sunflower in an ocean though? Wouldn't it have been enough to have been a regular sunflower?"

"Dolt! Imbecile! I didn't WANT to be a sunflower! I was just testing the sunflower sequence on a daisy, and obviously my genius was such that the matter wave transmogrification field caught ME in it, and...here I am."

"Cool!"

"Cool? COOL?!?!?! THIS IS TERRIBLE!!!" sobbed Apollinia.

“Don’t you like sunflowers? Sunflowers are really awesome.” said Ulrick, feeling bad for Apollonia’s sudden shift in mood. “You’re one of the prettiest ones I’ve ever seen. If I had a hoo hoo, I’d ya ya you in a second.”

Apollonia sniffled, lost in her own sadness, otherwise she would have whacked Ulrick for his indelicate attempt to lift her spirits. “I like sunflowers a lot too...they’re so tall, graceful, and stately...much more so than super-genius human girls. It’s not fair!” She looked up, suddenly self-conscious. “This wasn’t supposed to happen...I was going to transmogrify the daisy, not me. Now I’m stuck, all alone in the ocean talking to a bee.”

“Why don’t you just wish yourself back then?” suggested Ulrick.

“I don’t have any of my equipment. I don’t have any of my notes. I don’t even have HANDS!” growled Apollonia through gritted petals.

“You don’t need any of that. It happens all the time with bees.” said Ulrick.

Apollonia perked up. “It does?”

Ulrick bobbed in assent. “Yes, it’s a well-known fact that when you make a wish three times in the forest, it comes true.

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Bees turn into flowers, and flowers turn into bees all the time.”

“That sounds like a load of horse shit.” Apollonia said.

“I don’t know about that,” said Ulrick. “But it’s part of our training. Don’t make wishes in the forest that you’re not meant to. Didn’t you say that your lab thing was in the forest? You didn’t happen to wish something three times in a row, did you?”

Apollonia startled. “Uh...yeah...I sort of did.”

“What did you wish for?”

The sunflower turned away sheepishly. “I...I wished I was taller, so I could reach the top of the transmogrification chamber without asking that asshole Jenkins for help. I hate that guy.”

“I’ve always been so short.” continued Apollonia, warming to the subject. “In college, I was like a foot shorter than everyone else. I couldn’t reach things. People couldn’t see me when I raised my hand, and when I sat in the front row so I could see people would sometimes think I was a professor’s visiting kid and give me CANDY. I just want to be taller. Taller. Just want to ...”

Ulrick buzzed in alarm, dive-bombing Apollonia’s face before she could complete her sentence. “That’s what I’m talking

about!" he buzzed sternly. "Careless whispered wishes in the forest...very bad! I think you wished yourself into a sunflower by accident."

Apollonia looked doubtful. "The transmogrifier..."

"Never mind the transmogrifier! All you need to do is wish yourself back!"

"Hm. It sounds too simple."

Ulrick buzzed in exasperation. "Yes, for many years we bees thought that it was a one way trip, but two of our number happened to witness a human girl do precisely the same thing. Poof! She's a flower. Everyone told her that she was stuck as a flower, and could only wish herself into other forms, but she said "Oh yeah? Why's that?" and no one knew." Ulrick paused in reflection. "Though the part we haven't figured out is why anyone would want to go back to being human. They smell terrible, and you can't make honey from them or with them."

Apollonia was silent, thinking about her predicament. She was so tired, and rather unhappy about being a sunflower despite the ramifications her transmogrification had for Science. If indeed, it had been her after all, and not due to the insane claims that the crazy bee had just made. Ulrick waited patiently.

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“I wish I was Apollonia again,” said the sunflower.

“I wish I was Apollonia again,” said the sunflower again, a little more earnestly.

“I wish I was Apollonia again...please...” said the sunflower once more.

And Ulrick was suddenly alone in the ocean. He suddenly felt very tired, and wearily bumbled his way back the way he came. This bee dance had led him to one very strange flower, and he wasn't sure what to make of it. Fortunately, that job belonged to his supervisor, not him. With a flick of his wings, Ulrick reset his bee sense to RETURN mode, and made a bee line back to shore.

Chapter 4

“APOLLONIA SOUNDS LIKE SHE WAS VERY UNHAPPY”, COMMENTED TIFFANY, back at the Southern Prime.

Ulrick looked up from his fruit to bob his head in acknowledgment. “Yes, I’ve never come across such an unhappy flower. I thought they were ALL happy.”

“You would think so, from your perspective as a bee. What do bees say about flowers?”

“The Queen Bee says that every flower is delightful in its own way, and that the Hive reflects that through the honey we make.”

Tiffany chattered in excitement, and ran around in three quick circles around her cage. “That’s so awesome! It’s so true!” she cried. “So what do you think was delightful about Apollonia?”

Ulrick buzzed in surprise. “Delightful? She wasn’t delightful at all! She was rude and self-centered and I don’t think she really was a flower to begin with. Therefore, what the Queen Bee says doesn’t apply. At all.”

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Tiffany's nose twitched in disagreement. "Well, she WAS a flower when you saw her. She must have been delightful. And I think what the Queen Bee said applies not only to flowers, but to hamsters and bees as well."

"That is a novel idea. Bees and hamsters don't have nectar, so how could they possibly be delightful?"

Tiffany started hopping up and down in consternation. "What do you mean? What do you mean? Is EVERYTHING nectar to you bees? What about her DRIVE? Her DETERMINATION! Her PASSION! Doesn't that count?"

Ulrick blinked in that odd unblinking way that bees have. "I don't think so. Why should it?"

Tiffany sighed heavily in exasperation, and sat on her haunches with a soft thump. "Silly bees", she grumbled. "And you wonder why you're so grouchy all the time."

Ulrick, taken aback, buzzed with surprise. "I'm grouchy?"

Tiffany nodded. "Yeah, you're really grouchy! Ever since you asked that question about there being more to life than nectar! You've lost the buzz in your bottom! You're just going through the motions, going where you're told, complaining about your supervisor. Maybe if you looked at something else than nectar

for once, you'd be happier."

"Hm..." hmm'd Ulrick. "What else is there other than nectar collection?"

Tiffany shrugged. "How should I know? I'm a hamster. But there's got to be SOMETHING. Especially today, with those two suns in the sky! I think Oprah said once that it's these kinds of unusual events that tend to shake us from our usual perspective and allow us to see things for what they are! Um..."

Ulrick waited for her to finish her sentence, but Tiffany was not looking at him. He hopped around and looked up in the sky, and noticed that the red sun was MUCH BIGGER than it had been before. In fact, it seemed to be floating quite rapidly toward them, spewing fire in a serene manner around its perimeter. It floated down in the apple orchard, setting most of it on fire and sending smoke billowing in their direction. Ulrick froze, feeling the sleepy feeling starting to come over him. Tiffany remained frozen.

The red sun, which was about the same size as the house, cooled to a silvery blue color, and a door opened near the top, about even with the 2nd story window on which Ulrick and Tiffany were perched. A lizard-like creature appeared, wearing

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a dapper black suit and carrying an alligator skin briefcase. He paused at the doorway, taking a moment to breathe in the fragrant applewood smoke. "Ah, that's the stuff," he said. He then checked his watch, a very nice Omega, and noticed them for the first time. He smiled pleasantly, and waved.

"Hello, earth creatures!" he waved.

Ulrick buzzed in confused alarm. Tiffany remained frozen, petrified.

The lizard, about two feet high, took this in stride. He made a small gesture with his tail, and a silvery walkway extended before his feet to the windowsill where Tiffany and Ulrick were rooted. With an otherworldly grace, the small lizard bounded lightly over and inspected the bee and hamster with friendly interest.

"A bee and a hamster! How wonderful!" the lizard beamed. "I wish I could stay and chat, but I'm on a bit of a short schedule and have to get to New York City. Can you tell me if I've parked nearby a train station? I'd prefer not to have to drive into the city at this time of day."

Tiffany squeaked the tiniest of squeaks, so paralyzed with fear she was. The lizard looked enormous to her, and smelled

of alien smells that were frankly terrifying. Her nose quivered a thousand times a second, racing with her heart. It's a wonder that she didn't pass out. The lizard looked slightly puzzled, and then a wave of realization washed over his toothy face. "Oh, don't worry. I'm not him. I'm his brother."

Ulrick managed to pull together some of his wits. "Who's brother?" he buzzed questioningly.

The lizard looked surprised, "Surely you recognize the resemblance. My brother is the infamous Gojira, god lizard, king of all the monsters! He'll be playing Paris, New York City, San Francisco, and of course Tokyo this year, as part of his MEGA TOUR of the Earth! We may hit Albuquerque this year too, just to mix it up a bit. I do operations."

Tiffany squeaked again, not at all reassured, but her curiosity was piqued. "Operations, Mr. Lizard?"

The lizard laughed melodiously. "Call me Joe...my DAD is Mr. Lizard!" His eyes twinkled in amusement, pleased to have finally gotten to use that corny joke on someone. "Joe Gojira, financial operations and tour manager, at your service, young miss. I'm sorry, but I did not catch your name..."

"Tiffany. And this is Ulrick the Bee."

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“Splendid! How wonderful to make your acquaintance, Tiffany and Ulrick. Can you tell me how far I am from New York City? Or whether there’s a train station nearby?”

Tiffany scratched her ear. “I used to go to Columbia, so I think we’re nearby. But I don’t really know. We hamsters aren’t so good with long distances.”

Joe nodded understandingly. “That’s OK, Tiffany. How about you, Ulrick?”

Ulrick buzzed. “I’ve never been to New York City.”

Joe nodded again. “Well, I’m sure I’ll find some way to the city once I get my bearings. There will be a lot of rampaging to do over the next week; a few days delay won’t appreciably set back the schedule. In fact, this might work out to our advantage. It lets the markets heat up a bit more now that people know we’re coming. Do either of you invest?”

“Invest in what?” asked Tiffany, who was somewhat familiar with the idea.

“Stocks, futures, real estate...you name it” said Joe breezily. “It’s a little late to get into the speculation on basic survival necessities, but the post-Gojira market trends would be well-worth looking into.”

Tiffany and Ulrick looked at each other blankly, and then affixed their confused gaze upon Joe. He chuckled to himself in mock-exasperation.

“Oh, I forget that hamsters and bees don’t follow the markets. Are you familiar with the Gojira Effect?”

Tiffany and Ulrick shook their heads no.

“The Gojira Effect is the economic response to one of our ‘events’. When Gojira awakens and exacts terrible vengeance from mankind for their sins, the world financial markets react accordingly with great volatility, which leaves them open for manipulation by the lizards with their pulse on current events. I rampage through the indexes and exchanges with perhaps greater destructive power than even my mighty brother, though with considerably more grace and subtlety.” Joe smiled pleasantly, and winked at Ulrick conspiratorially.

Tiffany was horrified. “That’s...that’s terrible! You’re a monster!”

Joe threw back his head and laughed throatily, his diamond ear studs twinkling redly in the glow of the burning orchard. “Thank you, Tiffany. It’s not often I’m called that. Most would presume that what I do is not on the same scale of destruction

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that my brother so capably demonstrates. As it is, I just skim 20 percent off the top, and sink most of it back into the organization and operations. As for the world, insurance pays for all the damage, everyone gets a check, and the world goes on having learned a valuable lesson.”

Tiffany stamped her foot. “That’s not what happens at all! People die, people get sick, families go broke, dreams are crushed! You’re just EVIL!” She sobbed, tucked her head under her forearm and snuffled noisily.

Joe, surprised by Tiffany’s reaction, knelt down to reassure her. “Oh, don’t worry about the humans. There are plenty of them, and they’re more than capable of surviving the Gojira Effect. Think of it as a redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor, and my 20% as a gratuity for a service competently performed on behalf of the Earth herself.”

Tiffany’s head abruptly popped up, her eyes glistening and red with determination. “No no no! You’re hurting innocent people. You’re stealing their dreams and their livelihoods. The checks don’t come soon enough, because the insurance companies are in the business of surviving, not reconstruction. You are a terrible, terrible lizard.”

Tiffany stood up, drawing herself up to her full height of 6 and one half inches to face Joe, who took an involuntary step back away from the cage. Ulrick tensed, his stinger ready to back up his friend. The lizard, at over four times the height of the hamster, appeared amused at Tiffany's sudden change of mood. Tiffany lowered her chin, quelled her shaking whiskers, and looked him right in the eye.

"Oprah is going to get you."

"Op-rah?" Joe's eyes widened slightly, professional interest piquing his curiosity. "I have not heard of this kaiju. Is she local talent?"

"OPRAH is the DEFENDER OF OUR PEOPLE, a force of POSITIVE CHANGE, and she controls the MINDS AND HEARTS of everything good that I believe in!" cried Tiffany. She lowered voice a shade, and then whispered defiantly. "She will bring you down, and I will be there with her."

Joe smiled. "I like your spirit, Tiffany. So, what can you tell me of this Op-rah?"

Tiffany, by way of answer, hopped to the door of her cage, reached around to unlatch it, and burst onto the windowsill. It was a tense moment. Ulrick was sick with anticipation at what might

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happen, stinger quivering. Joe, though appearing unconcerned, had subtly shifted his balance to the balls of his feet. Tiffany, however, hopped off the windowsill into the room, and jumped on the Tivo remote.

“I will show you Oprah,” she said.

With amazing speed and fluidity, Tiffany hopped up and down on the remote, calling up an episode of “The Oprah Winfrey Show”. Joe watched with great interest, eager to catch a glimpse of Gojira’s latest opponent.

“This is Oprah at the Superdome after Katrina,” said Tiffany. Joe watched with interest, but it was soon followed by a feeling of discomfort.

“This is Oprah talking to survivors of 9/11” said Tiffany. Joe started to shrink a little bit, the imagery on the screen causing him to sweat. Reptiles can’t actually sweat, but the sharp creases in Joe’s impeccably tailored pants seemed to lose their snap. He winced as Tiffany hopped on the remote for one last time.

“And this,” said Tiffany with a gravity never before seen in a hamster her size, “is Oprah giving free cars to everyone in the studio audience, to people who really needed them.” Exhausted from her impromptu presentation of daytime television, Tiffany

flopped over and lay panting on the top of the coffee table.

Joe was silent for several minutes, processing what he had just seen. At last he spoke.

“I must confer with my colleagues in Toulouse”, he said crisply. “We have not fully considered the scope of our actions, particularly in the current socio-economic climate. Clearly, there are critical second- and third-order factors that we have failed to take into account in our model.”

Joe bowed to Tiffany, and smiled warmly. “We shall meet again. Well played.” And with that, he strode back across the walkway to his ship. With a slight whooshing sound, the walkway retracted and the ship rose majestically into the sky. It bobbed, much like Ulrick did when he waved goodbye while in flight, and then streaked east toward the ocean.

Ulrick hopped up to Tiffany. “Wow, that was amazing.”

Tiffany groaned. “I think I’m going to be sick. I’m not used to moving so fast.”

Ulrick pushed his head against Tiffany’s furry side in a comradely fashion. “And you’re outside of your cage too. Are you going to be ok?”

“Yes. I think so.”

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And after that, Ulrick and Tiffany stayed up late chatting about sunflowers, Oprah, mysterious lizards, where “Toulouse” was, while watching the fire engines put out the orchard fire. Ulrick didn’t know it at the time, but it was the beginning of the rest of his life, and he was learning how to make the best of it.