

SAMANTHA HONEYCOMB

Scott Zarcinas

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SAMANTHA HONEYCOMB

10-Year Anniversary Edition

Scott Zarcinas



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To Martie, Zsa Zsa and Zenya

Acknowledgments

Just as a bee buzzes from flower to flower, for ten years now *Samantha Honeycomb* has flown from reader to reader, pollinating their hearts with her story and inspiring them to be more than they had dreamed they could be.

I would like to thank all the readers who have read this book and for those who have taken Samantha's message to heart—everything happens for a reason.

I would also like to thank my future readers, those like yourself who are picking up this book for the first time. I thank you because without you Samantha has nowhere to land and take rest. May her story resonate deep within you.

Thank you, of course, to my wife, Martie Botha, who like Samantha is made of infinite patience and sterner stuff than me. Thank you for your continual, unwavering support of my writing.

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Lastly, to God, for making it all possible and for giving me the inspiration to write *Samantha Honeycomb* and the motivation to keep going when it all seems too hard.

“Something is nothing and nothing is something.”

Gerald The Great

PART ONE



SAMANTHA B. HONEYCOMB buzzed around the garden admiring the hundreds of rose buds spread out before her. Only one thing occupied her mind of late: flowers. Tulips, roses, geraniums, lilies, orchids, pink ones, blue ones, red ones, yellow ones—she loved them all—but every day, it seemed, she changed her mind as to which one she favored. One day it was yellow pansies, the next day orange tulips, today red roses. There were just so many.

How terrible, she thought, hovering over the rose bed, that a teenage honeybee couldn't decide which flower she liked most.

She buzzed toward a rose the color of crimson fire. It seemed to welcome her closer, wanting to embrace her with its petals, and when she inhaled its perfume she was lifted away in a glorious, dreamy haze.

"I wouldn't even think about it if I were you," said a worker bee buzzing past. "You know the rules."

Though taken off guard, Samantha smiled and nodded politely, watching the worker bee buzz out of sight to some other part of the garden. She knew the rules all right. What bee didn't? Everyone not of the Sisterhood was strictly forbidden to enter the heart of a rose, the *corolla*, and there was nothing she could do about it. It had been that way for ever and ever, and it was a constant source of conflict with her mother. They'd even had an argument as recently as this morning over breakfast, in the kitchen of the hive-cell.

“Why is it a sacrilege to gather nectar from a rose?” she had asked.

Isabeella was readying herself for a hard day’s toil, making sure her wings were in working order, flapping them in short bursts every so often, wiping dust from her stripes, checking that her pollen sacks were clean and free of holes; doing everything, it seemed, to evade the question.

Samantha was well used to her mother’s delaying tactics, and she wasn’t going to give up that easily. She asked again, and Isabeella smiled, as if in resignation. A trying smile, Samantha thought, knowing what she was going to say next, what she always said in such circumstances: “Because, Samantha, just because.”

Samantha stared at her, not content to let it be. She wished her father was there to help her out, but he was still in bed. That was another thing she didn’t understand: only females gathered nectar. The drones just made sure the hive was kept nice and tidy and sometimes moonlighted as guards or cleaners to earn some extra honey. A lucky few, when summoned to the palace, kept the queen amused with tales of victorious battles and ballads of forbidden, sensual love. Reginald Honeycomb was particularly famous for his rendition of the epic battle of the War of the Wasps, a story the queen never tired of hearing.

“He’s never had a *real* job”, her mother had often complained (he had been chosen to stay in the queen’s harem as a younger drone, until he was too old to perform his duties; then he found a wife and slept late every morning).

Samantha had to agree—he certainly lived the good life—yet it bugged her that bees who entertained for a living had it much easier than those who had to labor in the garden for their honey. When she was older, she

promised herself, she was going to be a performer, or a queen, or whatever came first.

At that moment, though, she had greater things on her mind. "Why are roses sacred?" she asked again.

Isabeella plonked the nectar sack on the table, scowling. "Because they belong to the Sisterhood."

"Even the wild roses that grow near the border with the Crazy Lands?" Samantha asked.

Isabeella sighed. "Even those."

It wasn't fair, Samantha thought. There was no good reason why the Sisterhood should own every rose in the queendom while lay bees couldn't have any. The law was stupid and it was wrong. She was going to do something about it.

"Why do you want to gather rose nectar, anyway?" Isabeella asked. "It's no different than tulip or orchid or geranium nectar, and you can gather as much of that as you like." Her tone, if Samantha didn't know better, bordered on patronizing. "Besides, the rules are the rules," her mother added. "There's a reason the laws are written the way they are, and it's not for worker bees like us to ask why. There's no point in trying to change them. Not even the queen would do that."

"You're wrong!" Samantha said, and clenched her claws until they hurt. "I'm going to go to the queen and I'm going to ask her to change the law so that every bee can own a rose, too."

"Next thing you know, you'll want to change the law so that drones can work with females. How ridiculous," her mother said. "The law is the law and you'd do well to know your place and accept it." With that said, she left for work.

How often she had wished things were different, Samantha thought now, staring into the rose. It was the law and there was nothing she could do to change that. But,

oh, how she yearned to enter its corolla. Was she never going to know what it was like?

She wondered why the Great Mother Bee, the Creator of the entire universe, would give the world roses if only the Sisterhood were allowed to enjoy them. Wasn't it true that bees were around for millions and millions of years before flowers even existed? If so, wouldn't that mean that they were a gift for every bee?

Then a tempting thought made her giggle. What if she entered while no one was looking? It was an outrageous idea. Did she have the courage to do it? She looked around, left and right, over her wings, behind her stinger, and saw no sign of anyone else. Except, in the distance, in the direction of the hills and the setting sun, she saw a kite gliding on the wind. The pilot was obscured behind the maple tree on which the hive was hanging, most probably one of the humans that lived in the farmhouse nearby. The kite soared in the air, far, far higher than she'd ever dared to go herself, almost to the very clouds, a swirling red petal lifted higher and higher on invisible wings.

One day, she wished, she would buzz as high as the clouds too, maybe even higher.

She turned back to the rose below. If she was going to enter its corolla, it was now or never. The fear of being caught, however, was like a wingshackle. Her wings were suddenly heavy and an effort to flap. If she were caught inside the rose, she would be summoned before the queen, that was for certain. Then what? Punishment of some kind, most probably. Imprisonment, execution, she didn't know exactly. No one had broken the ancient law, ever, as far as she knew. No one had dared. Perhaps it was better if she didn't.

She was about to turn and buzz away when she heard a voice. It seemed to be coming from the crimson rose,

as if the Great Mother Herself was speaking directly to her.

“Samantha,” the voice said, ever so faintly. “Be a bee. Sip the Nectar of Life.”

The temptation was just too much.

Samantha Honeycomb landed on its welcoming petal and entered its secret and forbidden realm.



THE MOMENT SAMANTHA emerged from the rose, three worker bees buzzed overhead. Her eyes widened in alarm. From the looks on their faces she knew she was in trouble, even more than when she enrolled in aerobic flying school instead of attending hive-economics (her mother had immediately removed her from the flying school when she eventually found out, and had made her clean the hive-cell as punishment, but by then Samantha had already learnt some quite spectacular stunts), and within the time it took to pull herself from the rose, several royal guards had already descended upon her.

It was a bee’s worst nightmare. The guards swarmed down from the sky like wasps attacking the hive. She didn’t have time to hide. She didn’t even have time to try a mosquito roll, a forward somersault with a double-twist and pike, or a blowfly back flip, a full reverse-loop with a half-twist, or any of the escape maneuvers she had learnt at flying school. The guards completely encircled her, thrusting their stingers only bee-inches from her chest and back and sides.

“We’re arresting you on suspicion of poaching sacred nectar,” said the captain of the guards, and Samantha’s eyes widened further. “You’re coming with us to Hive Prison young lady.”

Two of them seized her wings, lifted her into the air, then began to haul her toward the maple tree and the hive.

It happened so quickly that she was halfway across the garden, past the spurting water fountain and pond in which the goldfish swam, past the birdbath and the sandpit where the swallows and the blackbirds frolicked, past the outdoor table that the humans often used on summer afternoons, and past the patch of rosemary, coriander, sage, and basil, before she even had time to wiggle her antennae. She barely registered the shock of the workers that had stopped gathering nectar to watch what was happening.

Almost at the maple tree, she heard her name being called. Her mother was hovering over a large geranium bush, staring in disbelief. A sack of nectar slipped from her grasp, bouncing off several petals before splattering onto the grass beneath.

“Where are they taking you?” Isabeella asked. “What have you done?”

Only now did Samantha realize the trouble she was in. She wanted to reply, but her voice seemed to have been captured too. She wanted to say that she was sorry she didn’t listen to her advice this morning. She wanted to say that she was scared, that she didn’t want to be taken to the dungeons, but her voice remained stuck and the guards didn’t slow. Then she was at the maple tree, and her mother’s calls were lost in the rustle of wind through its leaves.

Samantha glanced up, almost too frightened to look. Hanging from a high branch was the hive of the eastern queendom. It had never looked so daunting. The entrance yawned like some unspeakable monster from the Crazy Lands; and as she passed through, several sentries glared at her with suspicion. She felt very small, like a

young grub being reared in the nursery. Her wings flapped nervously and her legs trembled, but it only got worse inside. The lower level was buzzing with activity, by far the busiest of the hive's seven levels. Bees entering and exiting the gates stopped to stare, much to her dismay, and though the chamber was illuminated via small air vents in the honeycombed walls, it felt uncommonly dark and cool. Samantha shivered and trembled even more, thinking, for some reason, that her wings were feeling particularly brittle and fragile.

The guards set her down and marched her deeper into the hive. Samantha struggled forward, still unable to comprehend what was happening. Just above and ahead of her was the central bee-way, the chimney-like corridor that divided each level into two sectors, east and west, and on any normal day Samantha would ascend it to her hive-cell on the third level on the inner western side, the working-class neighborhood just across from the large pollen and nectar storage sites of the honey factories. Except this day had suddenly become anything but normal. It had mutated into something distinctly abnormal, with a capital A.

Some bees descending from an upper level stopped and stared before heading to the market over in the eastern sector. Samantha recalled the countless hours spent wandering through the sprawling maze of the Grand Beezaar, where anything and everything was for sale; beautiful caterpillar silks from the southern queendom; exotic pollens and nectars from the west; woodcraft—hiveware and furniture and such like—from the carpenter bees that lived somewhere near the Crazy Lands; gardening equipment from the bumblebees; and, of course, the one thing every bee desired (and the ants and wasps and aphids and termites, and just about every other insect Samantha knew about), honey: the common

bond that united every creature in the known world, the very reason the Grand Beezaar was the busiest place in the whole hive. Samantha usually loved the aromas of pollens and nectars and beeswax and honey, the tireless buzz and energy, but today it felt somewhat menacing, like a mob on the verge of rioting.

Samantha suddenly felt the sharp point of a stinger between her wings. She stumbled forward, almost falling over.

“Stop staring and get moving,” the captain said, prodding her again. “You know where the dungeons are.”

Like every honeybee in the hive, her wing-spines prickled at the mention of the dungeons. She had heard many rumors of what happened inside: torture, starvation, disease, and any number of horrors. Bees entered that unspeakable place and were never heard of again.

With legs still trembling, Samantha was marched to the front of Hive Prison. The walls loomed over her, almost touching the ceiling of the lower level. The gates were just as high; and hanging from them was a cage, inside of which was a rotting exoskeleton, yawning (or was it screaming?) back at her, its claws still gripping the bars. Samantha stood immobilized with terror. Even her hearing seemed to have seized, for as if from the other side of the hive she heard the captain yelling for the gate to be opened. Several seconds later, it creaked ajar.

“Move!” the captain said, prodding her again.

A waft of stench drifted past. Samantha didn’t budge, her petrified legs stuck to the ground as if she were standing deep in a vat of honey.

Then, after a brief moment, she felt herself being picked up from under her wings and hauled into the prison.



IT WAS PITCH black behind the gate.

When her eyes adjusted, she saw that she was being taken across a narrow bridge that spanned a deep, dark pit smelling of rotting carcasses. Another door was opened on the other side of the bridge, smaller and more conventional than the main prison gates. The guards took Samantha through it into a dank tunnel that dripped a treacle-like substance from its ceiling, a substance Samantha hoped wasn't the liquefied remnants of some prisoner's entrails.

They emerged into a large courtyard surrounded by four low tiers of prison cells, as many as five to six hundred in total. She was dragged to the other side of the courtyard and thrown onto the cold, hard floor of a cell. It smelled of vomit and bee-dung, and for a moment she lay there, stunned. She heard the prison guard laugh and the slamming of the door, followed quickly by the jingle of keys and the clunk of the lock.

After a short while, Samantha picked herself up and slumped her tired body onto the bed beneath the window. She had little or no energy, too tired even for tears, so she just lay there, even though the straw mattress stabbed her wings and legs and made it impossible to get comfortable. Time passed extraordinarily slowly. For what seemed hours, she wondered what she was going to do. Her thoughts also drifted to her godmother, the bee she'd always turned to for advice when she was feeling lonely or down.

"The Great Mother would want you to learn from this," she imagined the wise old bee saying. "She has a plan for every bee in the world and She makes sure that everything happens for a reason."

Samantha questioned whether she could really believe in a Grand Plan. It seemed that that sort of thing only happened in fairytales, to heroines falling in love

with handsome princes, never in real life to an everyday bee like herself. Why would the Great Mother bother with someone like her, anyway? She wasn't important. She was never going to change the world. Samantha drew a deep breath and sighed. It was too difficult to see the meaning in everything that happened, and much easier to believe that she was simply the victim of circumstance.

Then she remembered another piece of advice from her godmother. "When I was searching for meaning, I was like a bee on a tulip petal looking for a tulip." She had then paused and smiled. "So my advice to you, young lady, is this: When you are searching for meaning, look no further than where you are."

Samantha had to admit she didn't really understand what her godmother had meant, but she supposed there was no harm in trying to follow her advice, and so began to cast an eye over her new living quarters. There was not much there—a straw bed, a bucket, and a stool—and above her head on the adjacent wall, a bright white- and black- striped square cast by a ray of dusty light filtering through the bars of the cell's solitary window.

No, not much here at all, really, she thought.

The cell's grim reality made her feel even more depressed; and as she contemplated her miserable lot, something caught her eye, a shadow on the wall, like a black fly buzzing back and forth. At first she didn't know what to make of it, and then she realized that something was flying past the window. She sprung onto the bed and peered through the bars.

The window, surprisingly, looked directly outside the hive. Through the branches and leaves of the maple tree, she was able to see what was casting the shadow, a red, diamond-shaped kite, swaying to and fro in the sky. Who or what, she couldn't make out, was piloting it in the field of tall grass that spread west toward the hills

of the Crazy Lands. When the kite passed back again, its shadow crossed her face. Watching it soar filled her with a quiet sense of joy. She momentarily forgot her prison cell, flying free with the kite.

Then quite unexpectedly, it stalled in flight. Within the beat of a wing, it plunged toward the ground, spiraling and spiraling and spiraling until it dived into the tall grass and was lost to sight.

Samantha waited for it to rise again. After ten or so minutes she gave up and lay back down on the bed, then curled into a tight ball and cried herself to sleep.



THE TRIAL DATE was set for one week.

Samantha was allowed no visitors, not even her parents, and she had to make do with only one meal a day, stale honeybread and water. The wait was unbearable. Often she whiled away the hours peering through the bars in the hope of spotting the kite again, but she never did.

It only got worse. As the trial date neared, she became even more agitated and anxious. She couldn't sit still for a moment, as almost every minute was spent dreading what was to become of her. If she had to spend the rest of her life in this prison cell, she thought she would go as mad as a wasp. Execution would be more merciful.

As it was, she was already having strange and unusual dreams, and on the night before the trial she had the oddest one of all. Seated in the middle of an old theatre, Samantha found herself surrounded by rows and rows of empty seats. Ahead, on the bare stage, an old actress sat on a single chair. Apart from Samantha, the actress,

who looked remarkably similar to her godmother, was the only bee in the whole place.

"Hello Samantha," the actress said, "what scene would you like me to act?"

Samantha didn't know many plays, but she was aware of a famous writer who'd apparently written some pretty good stuff. "What about some William Shakesbee?" she said, hoping this to be sufficient.

"My, my," the actress said, and paused, trying to remember her lines. "All right, let me see what I can do for you." She went to the edge of the stage, then puffed her chest, tilted her head, and said: "There are more mysteries, Horatio Bee, in hive-heaven than can be dreamt in your hive."

The actress stood frozen, waiting for applause, but it was a number of seconds before Samantha realized what she was meant to do.

"Bravo! Bravo!" she said, clapping. "Bravo!"

The actress looked very pleased and dropped a curtsy. She turned to face the absent audience and gestured for silence. "To bee or not to bee, that is the question." She flapped her wings to stress the point. "Is it better to suffer the stings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or oppose them?"

"Bravo! Bravo!" Samantha applauded again, this time with more vim. "Encore! Encore!"

The actress shook her head. "You now know all you need to know," she said. "There is no more I can teach you. It is now up to you to go and bee."

Samantha woke early the next morning with one thought buzzing through her mind: *To bee or not to bee*. She was still lying on her bed, wondering what in the world it could mean, when she heard movement outside her door, then the rattle of keys, and then the unlocking of the door. The prison guard walked in, followed by the

captain of the royal guards. "Get up!" the captain said. "It's time."

Samantha sat up straight away. She suddenly felt very awkward. She looked shabby and smelled rather grim, really in no state to go to trial, but the captain was having none of it. She was hauled outside the cell, where five more guards were waiting to escort her to the courtrooms. Two in front, two behind, and one on each side, she was marched out of Hive Prison to the central bee-way and the long walk to the fifth level.

It seemed that word had spread that a poacher had been caught with her claws in sacred nectar, for many bees had taken position along the route to witness the procession, a once in a lifetime event. The size of the crowd was somewhat daunting. Six guards felt rather inadequate for her protection, and although most of the crowd watched her pass in silence, she heard some nasty comments from several older drones in front of the nursery on the second level, reinforcing her fears.

"Rot in jail!" shouted one, shaking his clenched claw at her.

"Prison's too good for you!" said another.

Their comments were followed with murmurs of approval.

Samantha's fear grew the closer she got to the courtroom, as did the numbers in the crowd. On the third level, onlookers were lining the bee-way almost three deep. The air was thick with the smells of pollen and nectar from the factories, smells that were as familiar as home-baked honeybread but unfortunately only reminded her of the hardships she was suffering. She was struck with a pang of homesickness, and desperately scanned the crowd for her mother and father. Unable to see them, she wondered where they were. It would be a terrible humiliation for them. Would they attend the trial or stay

inside their hive-cell? She could hardly expect them to show their faces in public, yet she knew she couldn't go through this alone. She'd never wanted so much to be with them in all her short life.

The guards then led her through the central bees-nest district on the fourth level. The crowd was now five or six deep. Samantha even caught many faces looking down on her from the old nests, the tallest of which touched the ceiling nine or ten cells high. Hundreds, if not thousands, of pairs of eyes were staring at her. A newspaper drone was selling this morning's paper, hot off the press.

"Get your Daily Bee!" he shouted above the restless crowd. "Trial of the Century starts today! Read all about it!" It seemed he couldn't sell them fast enough.

Samantha finally arrived at the courthouse in the eastern sector of the fifth level, where a menacing crowd had gathered with placards demanding her immediate execution. As the guards led her on by, Samantha heard someone shout, "There she is!" The crowd surged forward, baying and screaming and shouting obscenities. Samantha thought she was going to be ripped apart, but the guards closed ranks and pushed a path through the unruly mob. A moment later, she felt one of her wings being grabbed. Her squeals alerted the guards, who shoved the offending bee to the ground, and then marched on.

It was a struggle, but after a few minutes they were inside the courthouse. The doors were barred and they hastened down the empty corridor to Courtroom 3. Samantha breathed a sigh of relief, but her reprieve was only momentary. To her dismay, the tiny chamber was packed with hundreds of bees. Reporters had taken over the whole section behind the witness stand, some already writing on their pads, and the upper and lower levels of the public gallery were crammed. The low hum that was reverberating around the room hushed when she

entered. Her wings flapped and she buzzed fretfully, a childhood habit she'd never outgrown, and now wished she had.

Not wanting to look at the crowd, Samantha eyed the queen's golden throne. It sat empty on a high dais backing the far wall, on which a portrait of the queen herself was hanging, Queen Beatrix Bee IV. From the seat beneath the dais, the magistrate watched her every step as the guards led her to the prisoner's stand directly opposite. The room was still hushed.

"Prisoner in the docks!" the captain shouted.

Samantha cringed with embarrassment. Turning, she glimpsed the frightened faces of her mother and father in the upper gallery behind her. She was glad they were here. Her mother tried to smile, but her face was wracked with worry. A murmur then began buzzing around the chamber.

"All rise!" said the magistrate, and the room echoed with the thuds and scrapes of hundreds of bees standing as one.

After a moment, the queen duly entered from a door behind the dais and sat on her throne. Queen Beatrix Bee IV was judge, jury and executioner, and Samantha could see she wasn't in a happy mood. The rest of the courtroom then sat down, except Samantha; there was no seat for the prisoner in the docks, so she remained standing, head bowed. This was the moment she'd been dreading.

Soon, she'd know whether she was to live or die.



"SAMANTHA B. HONEYCOMB," bellowed the magistrate.
"You stand charged before Her Majesty, Queen

Beatrix Bee the Fourth, with unlawful trespass, poaching and wanton disregard for the law. Do you wish to respond or plea before the proceedings commence?”

An expectant hush lingered in the air. Samantha said nothing, just shook her head. The prosecution then called the first of the three bees who'd stumbled upon her as she emerged (allegedly) from the crimson rose, covered from head to stinger in pollen.

“I guess at first we didn't want to believe it,” the witness said. To Samantha, she looked tired and worn out, a worker bee that had come to the end of her wearisome life. “I had already warned her not to trespass on sacred ground. I was shocked when I came back and saw her. She had no right to go in there.”

The other witnesses were just as reproachful. One of them even dared to call upon the queen to sentence Samantha to death. It was greeted with an approving buzz from a certain section of the gallery, placard-waving members of the Committee for Beenevolence, otherwise known as the CB's. Worse, the prosecution then stood and called a surprise witness.

“I call the Guardian of Truth,” the prosecuting lawyer said, a bee with hairy antennae and a bad habit of picking dirt from her claws with her stinger when she thought nobody was looking. “Her Most Eternally Venerate, the Holy Eminent Designate of the Sacred Order, the High Priestess Bee.”

Samantha heard reverent gasps among the crowd. Even the queen seemed to be in awe of the Priestess as she entered and took the witness stand. Most bees had never seen her in the flesh, including Samantha. The Priestess rarely left the confines of the cathedral, and it was clear she was not amused to be called as a witness. Samantha caught her scornful look as she placed her claw on the Holy Beeble and swore to tell the truth, the

whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help her Mighty Goddess.

“Your Holy Eminence,” the prosecuting lawyer said with reverence, “would you please tell the court why the laws strictly forbid worker bees to trespass on sacred ground?”

The High Priestess sighed. “Very well,” she said. “As the Guardian of Truth, it is my solemn duty to safeguard the Secrets of Life. You could say that this is the fundamental concern of the Sisterhood.”

“And why is that?”

“Is it not true that bees were around for millions of years before flowers even existed?” she asked.

The crowd, including the magistrate and Queen Beatrix, murmured in affirmation. “Then flowers, especially roses, are extremely precious, are they not?” Again everyone murmured in agreement. “The Great Mother didn’t just bestow Her gifts onto everybody, did she? No! She gave us her precious gifts so that we would take proper care of them. If the Secrets of Life were to fall into the wrong claws, *evil* claws,” and here she turned and glared at Samantha, “chaos would take over the hive.” Then her mouth parted in a smile that made Samantha think of an executioner’s grin. “And if that were to happen,” she said, “then death would surely befall all of us.”

Samantha gulped as her gaze darted around the room. Everyone, including the queen, was nodding in agreement. A chorus of boos rose from the CB’s who, up until that point, had been overwhelmed into silence.

“The heart of a rose is sacred because it holds the key to the Secret of Life,” the Priestess said, her initial reluctance to take the stand now replaced by eager righteousness. “In its honey gland, what we of the Sisterhood know as its *nectary*, lies the sweet essence of the Goddess. It is found in no other flower. This essence

is one of the key ingredients that the Sisterhood, with a secret and holy ritual, use to transform nectar into honey, the life-blood of the hive. Without this sacred essence we could have no honey, and without honey we would have no hive.” She was in a frenzy of speech by now, her face seething with hatred. She slowly raised her hairy arm and pointed. “This bee has broken our ancient law and trespassed on holy ground. Will we allow her the opportunity to bring death and destruction upon us?”

“No!” shouted the gallery.

The High Priestess stood and faced the queen. “Then I beg your Majesty to ensure that she never gets the chance to do so.” Without waiting to be dismissed, she stepped down from the witness box and left the courtroom, shouts of approval following her as she went.

Samantha knew her fate was sealed.



HOLDING BACK THE tears welling in her eyes, Samatha’s wings flapped and her legs trembled. It seemed to take an eternity for the courtroom to settle.

“Do you have anything to say?” asked the magistrate.

Samantha didn’t answer, too afraid to speak. Every possible outcome was a disaster. Why was this happening? Had she really done something so terrible? Suddenly, an old nursery rhyme she used to sing hummed in her mind:

*I am a little honeybee
And Samantha is my name.
I buzz and sing and laugh at things
'Coz to me its all the same.*

*I like to fly as high as crows
Then dive into a rose,
'Coz a honeybee is not afraid
To bee what she is made.*

“Do you have anything to say?” the magistrate asked again, shaking Samantha from her reverie.

When she said nothing, a restless hum buzzed throughout the chamber, gathering volume by the second.

“Enough!” the magistrate shouted. The audience hushed at once.

The queen was sitting patiently on her courtroom throne, contemplating Samantha’s punishment. She gestured for the magistrate to be seated. “Before I pass sentence,” she said to Samantha, “there’s one thing I wish to know.” Samantha looked up at the queen, terrified. “Why did you do it?”

To Samantha, the answer was as simple and as natural as buzzing through the gardens and fields. “I was called to do it,” she said.

The whole audience sat with mouth agape. The reporter bees sitting behind the witness box, at first shocked, furiously wrote down every word and every detail.

“Who called you to break the law?” asked Queen Beatrix. “Name the bee who called you to do this terrible deed and I will spare you.”

“Nobody made me break the law,” Samantha said. “I did it on my own free will. It wasn’t such a terrible thing, was it?”

The courtroom gasped and buzzed excitedly and the reporters were furiously scribbling once again. SAMANTHA MOCKS THE LAW wrote one of them for tomorrow’s headline. The CB’s booed and demanded her immediate hanging.

“Silence in the courtroom!” the magistrate said, bellowing like a stung bull. “Silence at once!”

Queen Beatrix Bee IV waited until everyone was quiet before she spoke again. “Let me remind you that you have been found guilty of a crime that has no precedent in the history of the hive. This indeed makes it terrible.” She paused, allowing Samantha to fully appreciate the seriousness of the situation. “I have no option than to have you detained in Hive Prison indefinitely, or for however long I deem to be worthy punishment. Do you understand?”

Samantha understood at once. Her life was over. Detained at Her Majesty’s pleasure in the bowels of Hive Prison was a sentence worse than death. She would no longer smell the garden flowers, nor see them bloom in springtime. Everything she lived for was now to be taken away. She began to cry, and the courtroom looked on in disbelief. No one uttered a word.

“You will have plenty of time to contemplate the consequences of your actions,” the queen said. “When I’m convinced that you have shown sufficient remorse for the crime you have committed, then I will consider an appeal for you to be allowed back into the colony.”

Samantha sniffed and wiped away her tears, wondering what her godmother would say in such a moment of despair. Then the words just seemed to pop out of her mouth. “Everything happens for a reason,” she said.

“What did you say?” Queen Beatrix said, leaning forward on her throne. “I can’t hear you.”

Samantha lifted her head and looked directly into her eyes. The renewed determination in her voice surprised even herself. “Everything happens for a reason,” she said, this time loud enough for every bee in the courtroom to hear.

The reporters got busy once again and the queen’s

laugh was full of scorn. “Who taught you that, my dear girl? Everything happens because I say it will. That is the only reason. I have absolute power in this queendom—the power of life and death. Nothing happens without my consent.”

“You’re wrong!” Samantha said.

An audible groan lifted from the chamber, then someone from the CB’s yelled for her tongue to be cut out. Her mother even shouted for her not to argue with the queen.

Samantha wasn’t listening, not to her mother, not to the queen, only to her heart. Deep down she knew she didn’t deserve this punishment. In fact, she was sure everyone including the queen knew she didn’t deserve it, but no one was prepared to say what they believed was right. They all lived in fear of the High Priestess and were too afraid to make a stand for the truth.

Well, she was having none of it. If she was going to go to prison, then she wasn’t going to go without a fight. She was going to let everybody know that what was happening today was wrong and could happen to any one of them tomorrow if they didn’t do anything about it now. She recalled her dream from last night. This was her chance to bee or not to bee.

“There’s a reason to everything,” she said to the queen, “and it’s determined by the Great Mother, not you.”

The roar of disapproval almost shook the queen’s portrait off its hook. Even the floor began to tremble. The reporters scribbled like mad and the magistrate bellowed for silence, without success. At some stage, Samantha heard a drone shout that someone had fainted (she discovered later that it was her mother). Then one of the CB’s jumped over the railing with a placard held high above her head, bee-lining straight for the prisoner’s docks. Before she got to Samantha, luckily, two guards blocked her path and escorted her out of the courtroom,

kicking and yelling. It took several minutes before order was restored.

The queen took it all in her stride, seemingly amused. "Samantha, my dear child," she said, "you are young and naïve, and you are ignorant of the way this world works. This, I can forgive you for. I can not, however, forgive you for breaking the law."

"You do what you feel you must do," Samantha said, resigned to her fate, "but it will not change my belief. My life rests in the claws of Another."

The queen paused for a second, a curious glint in her black eyes. "Pray tell me," she said, "who is going to stop me from having you imprisoned, or executed, or even banished from the hive?" She didn't wait for an answer. "I will tell you, young lady: nobody. Your life lies in *my* royal claws, not yours, not anyone's, only mine."

Samantha nodded respectfully. "As your subject, I must accept your sentence," she said. "But I still believe that there is a higher reason than our own, including yours."

"We shall see, young lady, we shall see." The queen then nodded to the two guards standing on either side of the prisoner's docks. "Take her away!"

They escorted Samantha out of the courtroom with the howls and jeers of the gallery ringing in her ears. The mayhem was only brought under control when extra guard reinforcements arrived to escort the maddened throng outside. The reporter bees were to write that a riot had only just been averted.

But by then, Samantha was already locked away in Hive Prison.



SAMANTHA SAT IN the dark dungeon cell on the edge of the bed. Heavy with despair, her head drooped like a wilting sunflower and her wings flopped to her sides. She was faced with the undeniable truth that she was now a prisoner who had nothing; she had no hope of freedom, no chance of happiness, no foreseeable future to look forward to. If the Great Mother Bee had a reason for her suffering, she couldn't see it. It was frustrating, but she figured that if she didn't understand at this moment what it was she was supposed to learn, then perhaps she should just have the faith to believe that she *would* learn it at some other time, when she was *ready* to learn it.

Maybe, she mused, that was what was going on: her faith was being tested. Faith was kind of like knowledge in that sense. She could only show the teachers at bee-school how much she knew by writing exams. Likewise, she could only show the Great Mother how much faith she had by being tested, like now.

The idea slowly rekindled her hope that she would one day understand the reason for all her troubles. At that moment, she heard the rattle of keys outside. "You have work to do!" said the prison guard.

Before Samantha could reply, a worker bee with a large blue- and white- striped sack on her back entered and dumped it in the far corner. It didn't stop there. Bee after bee dumped similar sacks, one on top of the other in a pile that soon reached the ceiling. After the last bee had come and gone, the guard slammed the door and peered through its little barred window. "Finish them by this time next week, or you'll be punished!"

Samantha stared at the pile of sacks. Like a mound of large boulders, they took up almost a quarter of the whole cell. She untied one of them and peeked inside. It was filled with blue things with long legs and short arms. She removed one, unsure as to what to make of it. It

was ripped and made of some kind of material she'd only ever seen humans wear. Inside was a tag: PRODUCT OF PROCRUSTE ANT INC. ONE SIZE FITS ALL.

"They're overalls," the guard said. "You'll find socks and antennae warmers in the other sacks, all ripped. Your job is to mend them. Now get to work!"

"What's Procruste Ant Incorporated?" asked Samantha. "Whose are all these clothes?"

The guard laughed and told her that that kind of information was strictly on a need to know basis. Samantha shrugged, spying a red toolbox next to the pile of sacks. Inside was a tray of needles, thimbles and scissors. She lifted out the tray and saw a delightful rainbow of color. Spools of thread littered the bottom of the box. Red, green, blue, yellow, orange—they reminded her of all the flowers in the queendom, especially the crimson rose that had lured her into its corolla. She glanced at the sacks, now wishing that she had attended hive-economics, like her mother had wanted, rather than aerobatic flying school. She was never going to be able to stitch up the whole lot within a week.

Nevertheless, what else could she do? If she didn't at least attempt it, she'd never finish. Sitting on her straw bed, she removed a needle, threaded it with blue yarn, and then set to work mending the overalls. By the time of the changing of the guards at midnight, Samantha had almost patched and sewed all the items in the sack.

She turned to the large blue- and white- striped mound in the corner of the cell. There was still so much to do, and her claw was throbbing from the constant pricking of the needle, but she went to sleep knowing that at least she had made a start.

If she thought that was the end of it, however, the end of the week held a rude surprise. More sacks. More ripped clothing from Procruste Ant Inc. Sewing, sewing, sewing!

It was never ending, and it continued week in, week out, for months, but she always managed to complete the task before the deadline arrived. As she sewed, she dreamed of the day she'd be allowed to buzz around the garden and see the flowers once more. She received no guests. Not even her parents were permitted to visit, to her constant despair. There was one exception, however.

Every first day of the month, at precisely ten o'clock in the morning, the queen would pay a royal visit to Samantha's cell and inquire as to whether she still refused to acknowledge that her life rested in her royal claws. Samantha could sense that, like so many bees in the hive, what the queen wanted was to be told that she was right. She suspected that all she had to do was agree to what the queen said and she'd be set free.

Except, she couldn't, no matter how much she yearned to feel the wind in her face and the sunlight on her wings, or yearned to see her parents again. She couldn't because the queen *wasn't* right. She couldn't betray her beliefs, and she certainly couldn't betray the Great Mother, even if it meant that she was locked away in this dingy cell for the rest of her life, locked away from her family and the things she loved. It was at these moments she'd recall the old actress in her dream: *To bee or not to bee*, which, she figured, meant being true to her beliefs.

So, like the question, the answer was always the same. "I believe only in the Way of the Goddess, the Great Mother Bee. My life rests in Her claws."

Queen Beatrix would then smile, and say, "We shall see, young lady, we shall see." And sometimes she would add: "Keep sewing!"

Ten times this had occurred, always the same, and always with Samantha confined within these cold, dark walls with nothing to keep her company except tatty pairs of underwear and overalls. If at all nothing else, she

consoled herself, she was now a pretty accomplished seamstress. She had taught herself to double stitch, zigzag stitch, double zigzag stitch, spider stitch, blanket stitch, and loads more handy sewing techniques. She never thought she'd be so enthusiastic about such a menial task.

Sewing, however, was the last thing on her mind at that moment. Today was the anniversary of her imprisonment. It was also the first day of the month, and she sat on the bed waiting for the queen with a strange and uneasy feeling: today's encounter was going to be different than the previous occasions.



SHE DIDN'T HAVE long to wait. At precisely ten o'clock, she heard a rattle of keys outside the door. Samantha stood to greet her royal guest just as the lock was unbolted and two royal guards entered her tiny cell, each standing to one side. As was her duty, she curtsayed when the queen entered.

"Tell me if you're ready to answer my question," the queen said, summoning Samantha to rise. "Do you still refuse to believe that your life rests in my royal claws?"

To bee or not to bee, the old actress had said.

"I believe only in the Way of the Goddess, the Great Mother Bee," Samantha said. "My life rests in Her claws."

Queen Beatrix Bee IV frowned, and then sighed rather loud and unroyal-like. "You have become thin and weak and your stinger is blunt," she said, and glanced Samantha up and down. "You've become this way because I have wished it to be. How can there be any doubt that it is I, not you, not anyone, who controls your life?"

To Samantha's surprise, the queen dismissed the guards with a curt wave. They objected at once, claiming it was too dangerous to leave Her Majesty alone with a prisoner. She hushed them and waited until they had shut the door on their way out.

"Every month I come to your cell and ask you the same question," she then said, "and every month you offer the same reply. To say the least, I am beginning to find it tiresome."

"That's because you don't understand the Great Mother's Way," Samantha said.

Queen Beatrix stared at Samantha blankly. Then she chuckled. "Young lady, you are certainly one of a kind. But I've not come to philosophize with you. I've come to tell you something." She paused, and Samantha didn't like her smile. "I'm sending you to the Crazy Lands."

Samantha gulped and felt her wings suddenly stiffen. Fear rose into her heart from the cold floor like dank mist from a swamp. She glanced through the barred window to the distant hills, feeling more scared than the day she was sentenced to prison. No one had ever returned from the Crazy Lands in the living memory of the hive. She had heard that just a glimpse of one of the monsters that roamed there was enough to turn a bee into stone, and even if she were lucky enough to avoid them, then of course there was the wastelands. Miles and miles of barren desert littered with the withered exoskeletons of those unfortunates banished from the queendom. Nobody survived in the Crazy Lands for too long, and those that did went utterly, utterly mad. Up until now, she'd thought her life couldn't get any worse than it already had. How wrong could she be? This wasn't happening. This wasn't fair.

Just at that moment, a voice whispered through the window, carried, as it were, on the westerly wind. It was

the same mysterious voice she'd heard a year ago, calling her into the rose.

"Samantha," it urged softly. "Be a bee."

She didn't know what to make of the voice. She glanced at the distant hills again, then back at the queen, who was still smiling as she had.

"Things happen for a reason," Samantha said, holding her head high. "I am not afraid."

"Not now, perhaps," the queen said, "but you will be. You certainly will be."

She went to the door, but just before she knocked for the guards to enter, she faced Samantha and said, as if an afterthought, "I'm in need of something, something that will earn you a pardon for your crimes. If it's accomplished to my complete satisfaction, of course."

Samantha pricked her antennae as the queen stepped toward her. Speaking in a low voice so as not to be overheard by the guards outside, she went on, "As you know, the High Priestess has complete control over the production of honey in the hive. It has to stop." She glanced at the door before continuing. "Have you heard of Beebylon?"

Samantha's antennae suddenly went rigid with astonishment. Every bee had grown up with the fable of Beebylon, the magical hive where dreams came true, where everyone was happy and no one ever got sick. It was said that in Beebylon honey dripped from the walls of the towering cliff on which it was built, that they had discovered honeyroot, the magical substance that turned stone into honey, the secret of Infinite Richness.

"The place in the fairytale, you mean?" she said.

Queen Beatrix Bee IV now stood tall, towering over Samantha, her demeanor as hard as the cell walls. "For your sake," she said, "you'd better start believing in fairytales. I want you to go to Beebylon and bring me

honeyroot. Only then will I allow you to live with your mother and father again.”

Samantha’s hopes suddenly flew out between the bars of the window. The queen was asking the impossible, but what choice did she have? She could either stay here, rotting in this cell for the rest of her life, or she could risk everything and travel through the Crazy Lands in search of a fanciful dream. Crazy if she did. Crazy if she didn’t.

She drew a deep breath and said, “You leave me no option. I’ll find Beebylon and I’ll bring back your honeyroot. Maybe then your eyes will open to the Way of the Great Mother.”

The queen returned to the cell door. “Maybe, my child,” she said, knocking for the guards to enter. “But you forget, I have nothing to lose out of this. You, on the otherhand, have everything to lose. Including your sanity.”

