

To Bee Or Not To Bee



"You're late, Naomi." Father, at the head of the table, spoke with absentminded sternness to the five-year-old who'd just come clattering into the dining-chamber. "Sit down with the other children, please, and have your lunch before it gets cold. Where were you?"

The little girl climbed up onto a heavy wooden chair between Geoffrey and Eric, nearby. "I was looking for Vincent."

"I told you before," Geoffrey said, "he went with Cullen."

"But where'd they go?"

"Vincent and Cullen," Father replied, "left to work on the lower chambers. Jeremy, Andrew and some of the others went down as well."

She wrinkled her nose at the steaming bowl of tomato soup Brooke set before her. "After lunch can I -- "

"No, you may not," he said pleasantly. "It's heavy work, and I hardly think they need an audience. Thank you very much for asking, though. Now, tell Brooke 'thank you' and eat your soup before it gets cold, please."

"Thank you," Naomi said insincerely. (Her feelings regarding tomato soup were well known.) "Can I have -- "

"May I -- "

"May I have some honey bread too, if I eat it?"

"Hey," Kipper teased, as the patriarch reached for a slice of William's fresh brown bread and slathered it with honey. "Isn't that kind of a bribe?"

Father eyed the ten-year-old with a dour practicality born of long experience. "Absolutely." He handed Naomi the bread and watched her bite into it, her eyes squinched shut with bliss. "Now remember, you're to eat your soup as well."

Pascal resumed their conversation thoughtfully. "You know, this is the first really new area we've opened up in a long while. We're going to have to run some pipe down there, before anyone can actually move in."

"And water," Rebecca said. "Mouse, didn't you say you had a plan for rerouting -- "

"Been working on it." The young man beamed. "Got it all worked out -- almost." And then, with a sly look toward Father, "Won't even have to blow anything up... much."

"'Much,'" Father muttered, to everyone's frank amusement. "A great comfort that is, I must say."

"Is there anything living down there?" young Jesse asked curiously.

Black-haired Zach looked up from his meal. "You mean, like goblins and hobbits and stuff? 'Course there are. It's just that the noise we make, working, scares them off. Sometimes."

"Now *don't* tell them that," Father scolded the grinning teenager. "You'll have them all too frightened to take the men their meals."

Pascal chuckled. "Remember when Devin had Vincent believing there were dragons in the Catacombs?"



"Well, monitor lizards at the very least." Father smiled at the slight, balding pipemaster. "You and Winslow were willing accomplices, as I recall."

A shadow crossed Pascal's features, very briefly, at this reminder of their lifelong, recently-departed friend. Then he smiled. "Winslow was in charge of footprints," he said. "Tail-dragging was my job."

"Always thought you had a talent for it," William rumbled; and they all laughed.

" -- Don't do that, child," Father said suddenly. He rescued the honey-jar from Naomi, who'd finished her bread and was now covertly raiding the source itself. "That isn't polite... and you haven't touched your soup."

The little girl didn't look the least bit chastened, but sucked her sticky fingers with gusto. "Where does this honey come from, Father?"

His irritation faded before the opportunity to teach her something. "Why, our honey is made by bees."

"Yeah," Kipper put in. "Tunnel bees."

Her blue eyes widened. "*Tunnel* bees?"

"*Big* tunnel bees." His expression serious, but his dark eyes sparkling with mischief, he hurried on. "Didn't you know? 'Way down below, where the Maze becomes the Catacombs, it's like a great big honeycomb in there. And there's *bees* living in it."

"I don't like bees," Naomi said doubtfully.

"I do," Jesse boasted, with five-year old bravado. "Like to squoosh 'em."

"Well, you couldn't squoosh these," Kipper told him. "These are *giant* bees." He elbowed Geoffrey in the ribs. "Isn't that right?"

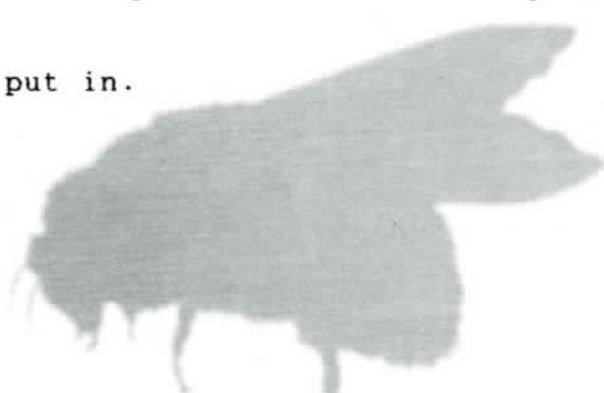
Swallowing his astonishment, Geoffrey nodded. "That's right, Naomi. We've got bees -- "

" -- As big as tigers," Zach put in.

"Now, boys," Father began.

"Bees big enough to *fill* up a tunnel," Julio added.

"With stingers big as *this*." Catching the spirit,



Eric brandished his butter-knife.

"Yeah," Kipper went on. "Big blind, fuzzy, hulking tunnel bees -- "

"Blind bees?" asked Pascal, intrigued in spite of himself.

"Sure." Warming to his tale, the boy leaned toward Naomi. "Like the blind cave fish, you know?"

Her mouth dropped open. "You mean they got no eyes?"

"Nope. Just big antennas." He raised wrists to temples, flapping his hands overhead. "They *feel* their way through the tunnels. You can hear 'em sometimes, buzzing around down there in the dark. You've got to watch out, because if they catch you, first they feel you all over with their big fuzzy antennas -- "

Father cleared his throat, warningly.

" -- And they make tons and tons of honey," Kipper rush on. "Every couple of months William goes down with a couple of great big buckets -- "

"Not me," William drawled. "I'm not going down there with those big killer bees."

"Killer bees?" squeaked one youngster.

"William," Mary scolded.

"Father," Naomi cried.

"Kipper," Father said severely.

The boy looked up innocently. "Yes, Father?"

"I think this has gone quite far enough, don't you?"

"But gee, I was just telling them about the -- "

"Father!" Like the other little ones, Naomi was sitting there wide-eyed. "There isn't really giant tunnel bees, is there?"

"No, child, no. Of course not." He reached out to tousle her blonde curls reassuringly. "They were just having you on." He cast a keen, affectionate glance at the boys, who were now chortling shamelessly among themselves. "Quite a picture you were painting, however -- I must admit."

Kipper paused long enough to catch his breath. "Did we do it good, Father? Good as Devin, maybe?"

"It was very effective," Father said drily, wondering if there were going to be nightmares in the nursery that night. "Now finish up, all of you, and go on back to class. You've delayed the inevitable long enough."

When the children had all gone, leaving the adults to themselves, Pascal said, "Actually, Father, it's funny that came up... because we do have a sort of a bee problem."

"Eh?" The older man turned to regard him with suspicion.

"No, no -- nothing like that." The pipemaster smiled. "It's up, not down... just inside the north Park exit."

Father noticed, not for the first time, that what others might call "entrances" were for Pascal, who almost never went Above, always "exits." "Yes," he said enquiringly, "and what exactly is wrong there?"

"A Helper leaving this morning signalled back that some hornets have built a nest inside the exit. He had to leave by another door."

"Inside? How on earth -- "

"Andrew went up to check it out, before he went below to work with the others. He said it looks like they found a crack or a hole in the masonry of the tunnel outside."

"Well, that's all it would take," Father sighed. "We've had this sort of thing happen before, outside the doors, but they've never actually gotten inside before. We'll have to do something about it before someone blunders into them and gets stung."

"And before the Helpers begin arriving, tomorrow, for Spring-fest brunch," Rebecca said.

"Yes, there is that... There's no way to get word to them all, so it will have to be today or tonight, then."

"I'll put out the word to everyone Below that that exit's off-limits," Pascal offered.

"Yes, do," Mary said, "but I don't think we should mention why, to the children. You know how they are -- they'll only want to go and see it."

"Yes, exactly so. Well then," Father said, "any suggestions?"

"Wait until Vincent and the others get back?" Sarah said hopefully.

"I think we can deal with a few bees," Father said, sitting up straighter in his chair.

"Hornets, Father," Jamie reminded him uneasily.

"Yes, I know, Jamie -- and you're not to go near them, either. Remember your allergy. At any rate, the others want to finish the work tonight, and may not be back until quite late. So, I think we're on our own."

"Who, then?" asked Mouse.

"Yes, who?" Mary said, "With Vincent down below with Andrew, Cullen and the others -- "

"And Jamie, allergic," William added.

"And I won't even ask you," Father told the big man, smiling wryly. "You're still busy with Springfest preparations, I know. Hmmm -- what about Kanin?"

"He's busy helping Olivia with the baby," Mary replied. "Luke's had a touch of flu, these past few days, and she's exhausted."

"Ah, yes, I'd forgotten." He scowled. Pascal had charge of the main pipechamber; Zach and Brooke were assistant-tutoring in the classroom chamber, where Mary must soon return; Rebecca was turning out a new batch of candles; Lena was on her way to Dr. Wong's for spices and medicine; Mei-Ling was Above carrying messages. Precious few of their people were free today for any kind of activity. "Well, Mouse," he said finally, "I guess it's up to you and me."

"You and me?" the youth echoed faintly. "Us?"

"Yes, of course." The old man squared his shoulders. "You do think we can handle it, don't you?"

"Father," Pascal said tentatively, "are you sure?" Jacob Wells seldom went near the surface; and with his "cranky hip," was not in the most vigorous of health. "Are you sure you don't want to wait till Vincent -- "

"I hardly think we need Vincent to deal with this," the patriarch said loftily, his pride plainly injured and his beard outthrust. "Isn't that right, Mouse?"

"Okay good," Mouse said, beginning to rally. "Okay fine. Just some bees, after all."

"Hornets," Jamie said stubbornly.

"Hornets then," Father acceded. "But I'm sure I have a book somewhere in my study... I'll just do a little research, and if the others don't return in time then we'll handle this whole thing scientifically. How does that sound?"

"Scientifically," Mouse agreed. "Father and Mouse!" Tossing the bowl-cut yellow hair out of his eyes, he looked toward the others almost defiantly. "Vincent's not the only one who can do things."

Pascal leaned back in his chair and covertly nudged Rebecca, beside him. "We'll see," he murmured.



By evening, word had been received from the "nether regions" that the laborers had after all elected to go until the work was done -- rather than returning to it in the morning -- and could they please have their suppers sent down?

Zach, Samantha, Geoffrey and Kipper were dispatched (with an insistent, tag-along Naomi) carrying armloads of boxed meals.

"Well then," Father said to Mary and Mouse, who'd happened to be there in his study when the word came. "I expect they'll be very late. Mouse, it looks as though it's all up to us."

"Father..." Mary shook her head. "I wish you'd reconsider. It could be dangerous."

"Nonsense," Father said brusquely.

"Are you sure? Perhaps you really ought to wait for -- "

"Now, I am perfectly capable of handling this." He leaned forward in his desk chair and tapped authoritatively at a volume lying open on his blotter. "It's all here in black and white."

"What is that?" She stepped around the corner of the big desk to get a better view, frowning.

"A book on beekeeping, of course. It's chock-full of useful information. Why, when this is all over we might even consider starting our own hives here Below. Come here, Mouse, and look at this. You see? It describes very clearly, here, what we must do."

"What?" asked Mouse, craning his neck and squinting at the upside-down pages.

Father adjusted his spectacles and drew the book back toward him. "It says here," he said, "that in order to get rid of a nuisance hive or hornets nest, it is necessary to wait until nightfall. This ensures that all of the nest's inhabitants are at

home and safely abed, so to speak."

Mouse looked up startled. "Bees sleep?"

"So it would seem." Father scanned the page again. "At least, since these insects can't see in the dark, they can't *fly* in the dark; thus they must return to the hive every night until sunrise." He looked up. "It's night now, Above. Did you do as I asked, and turn out the lights in that tunnel?"

Mouse nodded. "Already done."

"Good lad. We may assume, then, that our hornets have all retired for the evening. Now then, it says here that our next move would be to make our approach in the dark, carrying a flashlight; knock the nest quickly to the ground, and set fire to it before any of the insects can escape."

Mary shook her head. "I don't like this. What if they -- "

"Now, Mary, this is all perfectly simple and straightforward. It says here they will not fly in darkness, so we will both be quite safe -- "

"Knock it down with what?" Mouse interrupted him. "Stick? Shovel?"

"Well, the book suggests a baseball bat. However..." He lifted his walking-stick, and studied it as though with a fresh appreciation of its versatility. "I'm sure this will do as well."

Thus reminded of his infirmity, Mary said doubtfully, "It's an awfully long way..."

"Don't give it a thought," Father said with some asperity. "I'm not *completely* helpless, I assure you."

"I didn't mean -- "

"Come, Mouse, you and I must have a meeting of the minds."

Mouse eyed him warily. "Whose?"

"Why, ours, of course -- yours and mine. I mean that we need to discuss our strategy before we set out. Now, here's how I think we should approach it..."

Mary watched them for a moment, her eyes narrowing. Then she said, "I think I understand now. You're *enjoying* this."

"Now, Mary, don't be absurd -- "

"Don't you 'now, Mary' me," she snapped with unexpected temper. He looked up, startled, to see her standing there with her

hands on her hips, fixing him with a look she might have levelled at one of the children. She said, "You are enjoying this. Anything could happen -- but you can't wait to get up there and do battle. Jacob Wells, I'm surprised at you!"

He felt his ears begin to burn, and he stood up. "Mary," he said with ponderous dignity, "this is a perfectly reasonable solution to the problem at hand. And I -- *Mouse* and I, are certainly capable of dispatching a few bees." He rounded on his accomplice. "Isn't that so, *Mouse*?"

"Just a few bees," *Mouse* agreed, with a snap of his fingers and a fine show of careless bravado. "Got a plan, Mary. Follow the plan, no problem. No danger. No *bees*. Right, Father?"

"Right." Clapping the boy on his patchwork shoulder, the elder sat down again. "Well, I hope that puts your doubts to rest, Mary -- "

But with a disapproving sniff she swept toward the door, leaving him staring after her. "That was rather unlike our Mary," he murmured. "What do you suppose has gotten into her?"

Mouse gave him a crooked grin. "Bee in her bonnet," he quipped; and the sound of their smothered laughter followed Mary out the door and echoed down the tunnel after her.

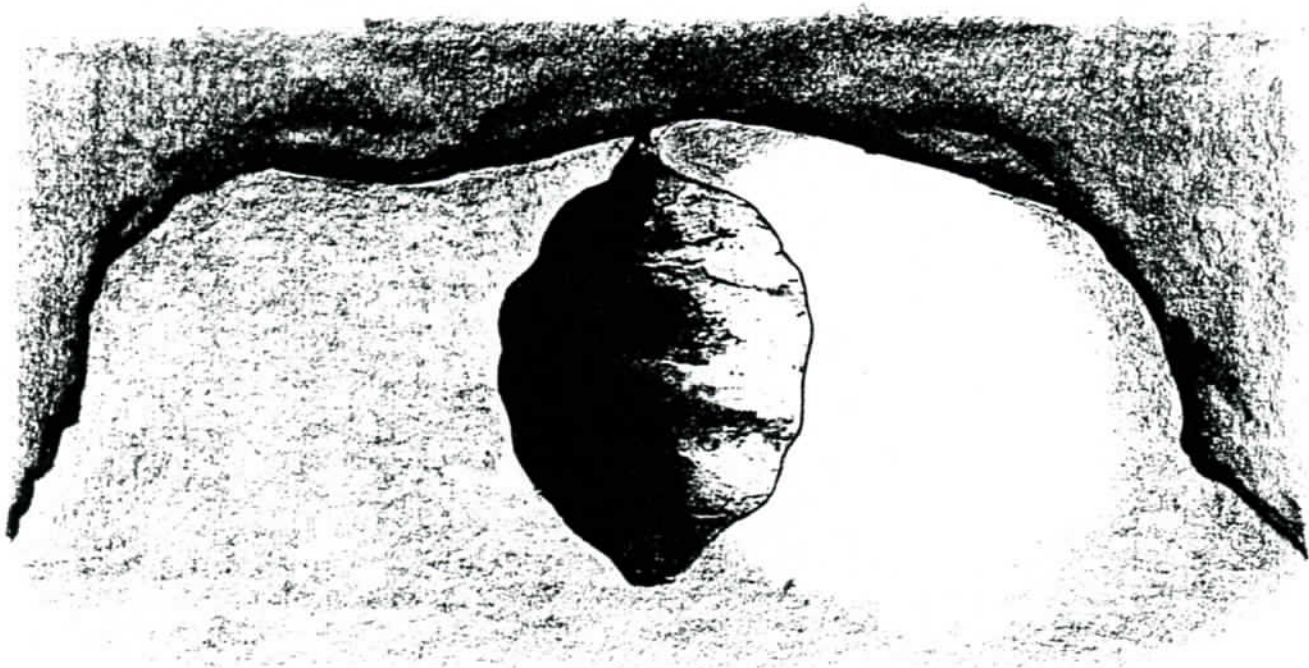


"There it is," *Mouse* whispered, nodding toward the darkened exit. Twin flashlights, attached to the earflaps of his leathern helmet, sent their beams dancing crazily over the walls and ceiling.

"*Mouse* -- please, *Mouse*, don't nod!" Catching him by one shoulder, Father clamped his other hand firmly over the boy's head and directed the light toward the desired spot. "Ah, yes. I do see it."

The hornets' nest hung from the rocky ceiling as naturally as it might dangle from the limb of a tree outside. It was quiet, seemingly lifeless; a miracle of construction but an ugly thing, he thought, grey and bulbous, bald as a tumor and larger than a man's head. Even so, he felt a little regret at the task they must perform; wherever possible, the tunnel-world worked with nature rather than against it.

Still, there was no help for it. This had to be done. The Helpers would start arriving before midday on the morrow, and it



wasn't as though he could put a hand-lettered sign up outside for all to see -- "*Beware of Bees, All Those Who Enter Here.*" No, there was nothing else to be done -- and no one better, he thought determinedly, to accomplish it. He'd show them -- Mary, Pascal, Vincent and the others -- that he wasn't yet past being able to deal with a crisis. Releasing Mouse, he took a firmer grip on his stick. "Right. Do you have the kerosene?"

"Got it," the other nodded, giving the bottle an audible shake.

"Please, Mouse." Father shielded his eyes until the weird strobe effect again subsided.

"Sorry, Father."

"I knew we should have brought a lantern."

"This is better," Mouse defended his unique headgear. "Hands stay free -- ready for anything."

"Yes," Father said drily, "so you explained, earlier. Well -- are we ready to proceed?"

"Ready!"

"Don't shout," Father admonished him. "We must *sneak up* on them. Slowly... quietly... that's right..." Following the paired funnels of light, they crept toward the nest on tiptoe. "Now," Father whispered, "I'm going to strike it with my cane. The moment that it falls to the ground, carefully pour a little kerosene on it

-- not too much, you understand, and mind you don't splash any on us. Then I'll light the nest, and make certain none of them escapes. Is that clear?"

Mouse's mute and vigorous nodding this time caused such a dizzying light-show that Father had to reach out for the tunnel-wall for support. "Just say yes," he said tightly, "or no, please."

"Got it," Mouse stage-whispered, his round blue eyes shining with excitement.

"All right then. Stand back -- " And so saying, the patriarch lifted his stick and took careful aim at his target. He allowed himself one practice swing -- very much like a pitcher he'd seen once at Ebbetts Field, arms extended, feet well apart -- and then, swinging the heavy stick back over his shoulder again, he dealt the nest a bold, heroic blow.

It did not fall.

Swinging wildly on its slender stalk, it flashed in and out of the light as Mouse tried vainly to track it with his "head-lights." Heads jerking back and forth like metronomes, the two men watched in a gaping silence as the pendulum movement began to slow.

Mouse whispered, "What's that?"

"What's what? -- Oh." Now Father could hear it too; an ominous low-pitched humming, coming from the nest and growing louder every second. "Dear God," Father said. "I know."

"They sound mad." Mouse took a step back. The humming became a *buzzing*, and seemed to fill the darkness around them.

"Now it's quite all right," Father told him, without taking his eyes off the spotlight nest. "We're quite safe -- "

A papery rustling drew their attention to the nethermost tip of the thing. There, at the nest's only opening, almost at eye-level, something was stirring.

Mouse gulped audibly with dread.

Father raised his voice to a level meant to be reassuring. " -- Quite safe. The book stated very clearly that these insects will not fly in the dark -- "

At that moment a very large hornet thrust head and fuzzy shoulders upside-down out of the nest. It focussed its multi-faceted gaze and bristling antennae unerringly on the intruders.

Mouse gave a gasp of pure panic. He dropped the kerosene

bottle, turned and fled.

"Mouse!" Plunged into darkness, Father could see the flash-light beams bouncing crazily away down the tunnel. "Mouse, come back here! Mouse!" But the sound of running footsteps faded; and in the black ensuing silence Father heard the hornet before him echo the furious buzzing of its fellows.

Or were more of them emerging now? "Mouse?" he called again. "You took the light, Mouse -- "

A small sound -- *plop!* -- caught his ear. And again -- *plop, plop!* He clutched his walking-stick but could see nothing. "Mouse, I'm not angry, but I do need the -- *Ow!*" he bent to slap frantically at a fiery pain in his ankle. "Mouse! Come back -- *Ow!* -- with the -- oh, no -- come back here with the -- *Oh, bloody hell!*"



"He did come back," Vincent said later in the boy's defense, trying very hard not to smile.

"Yes -- once I'd stumbled back round the bend. It's a wonder I didn't break my neck."

"Yes." Carefully, Vincent added more hot water to the tub in which Father, his trousers rolled up almost to his knees, had submerged both swollen feet. The smell of epsom salts filled the great library-chamber, where Father had been "holding court" all day. "But he did come back."

"Now, don't defend him, Vincent," the old man said darkly. "Or you either, Catherine. I'm still very upset. Was he at least able to tell you *why* he fled so abruptly?"

Setting the bucket aside, Vincent looked up with a gravity Father found suspect. "When you struck the nest," he answered, "one of the hornets put out its head and... it *looked* at him."

"And that was it?"

"That was it."

Catherine, nearby, gave an unladylike snort of laughter as Vincent settled into the chair beside hers.

"What's happened to Mouse, by the way?" Father asked them. "I didn't see him at all during Springfest."

"It was a wonderful day, by the way," Catherine said of the festivities.

"Yes, William outdid himself again, didn't he? But several of the Helpers asked me about Mouse. How is he?"

"Chagrined," Vincent replied, more seriously. "Embarrassed. Reluctant to show his face."

"Afraid you're not going to forgive him, I think," Catherine put in, brushing the light brown bangs out of her eyes.

"Oh, I'm not really angry," Father grumbled. "It's only that... I didn't know Mouse was afraid of hornets."

"Neither did Mouse, until that moment," Vincent said drily. Leaning back in his chair, he laced his fingers across his middle. "I think that, in the excitement of accompanying you on this 'quest,' he saw himself as a sort of Sancho to your Don Quixote."

"Don Quixote?" His mouth quirked. "Tilting at windmills, eh?"

Vincent tilted his head. "A valiant effort, Father... if a little impulsive."

A sharp look. "You're saying I should have waited -- for you, and the others?"

His son raised steepled fingers and gazed calmly over them. "You could have been much more seriously hurt." It was the same gentle voice he used to correct Naomi, and Catherine turned, startled, to look at him. His tawny features were serious in repose.

Father's eyes narrowed. "You don't think I should have attempted it?" The answering silence was eloquent... and at last he allowed himself a rueful smile. It was true; he'd taken a ridiculous chance, with no one nearby to offer help but Mouse. And while Vincent would never rebuke him openly, he was plainly enjoying the reversal of their roles. "All right," he sighed. "You're right. It was foolish. I... don't know what got into me."

"You wanted to show you could handle it," Vincent shrugged -- forgivingly -- as though finding it perfectly understandable.

"In my world," Catherine said gravely, "we have a technical term for this syndrome. We call it... a 'guy thing.'"

"A 'guy thing.'" Father grimaced at her. "How reassuring, to know that whatever wisdom the years have brought me, I am still susceptible to 'guy things.' Thank you, Catherine." He was rewarded with her gamin grin. He shifted his gaze back to Vincent. "And thank you," he said, "for not taking me too much to task."

His tone was ironic. "Mary, too, has been remarkably restrained."

Vincent lifted his hands with a humorous grace, as though to say, *All in a day's work*.

"Mary did mention coming to see you later," Catherine warned.

"Ah. Then it seems I am not, after all, completely out of danger... She's been putting the children to bed?"

"Yes. We were just helping her."

"Oh? Was there some difficulty?"

"Not really, but..." Her smile was a little puzzled. "For some reason, Naomi was convinced you'd been attacked by 'giant tunnel bees.'"

"Giant *blind* tunnel bees," Vincent added, his eyes widening. "Several of the children mentioned them."

"Ah, yes," Father chuckled. "One of Kipper's most recent inventions. A new denizen of our 'deep.' I trust you reassured her?... Good. Well then. Back to our original problem. Vincent, you're certain you were successful in getting rid of all our little 'guests'?"

"All of them," Vincent assured him. "Kanin and I went up before dawn and disposed of the nest. They'd settled down by then and it was quite safe." His blue eyes twinkled. "As I believe you know, bees and hornets *never* fly in darkness."

"No," Father said grimly, lifting one foot from the water to exhibit the bright swellings there. "They don't fly, that's true. They will, however, *walk*."

Catherine covered her mouth with her hand, sputtering with laughter.

"Yes, you may well laugh -- both of you," Father said with comic indignation, seeing that Vincent was now chuckling too. "You weren't the ones dancing on hornets in pitch blackness!"

"I'm sorry," Catherine giggled helplessly, "I know I shouldn't -- I'm sorry you got stung -- but it really is so funny!" And the sight of Father sitting there, pant-legs rolled and white shanks exposed, his feet in hot water, did nothing to restore her composure.

"Father?"

They looked up, startled, to see someone standing in the doorway. "Hello, Mouse," Vincent greeted him as Catherine swallowed her mirth.

"Found somebody out here," the young man said; and drew Naomi forth into the light.

The little girl was frowning her surprise at him. "You didn't find me -- I found you."

"Well, hello, Alice," Father said. "What are you doing out of Wonderland?"

"Yes," Vincent said. He watched as, letting go of Mouse's hand, she hopped one-footed down the short metal entry-stair. "I thought we put you to bed."

She hesitated, her small hands catching at a frayed ribbon on the front of her nightgown. "I'm ascaresd of the big bees."

Catherine leaned forward. "Did you have a bad dream, sweetheart?"

"No..." Naomi endeavored to look even more pathetic. "But I thought I *might*."

"Oh you did, did you." Father glanced over her head at Vincent. "Would she like some warm milk, do you think?"

Catherine smiled. "A warm *lap*, more likely."

At this the child brightened; it was all the invitation she needed. Flinging herself forward, she scrambled up over Vincent's knees and into his lap.

"All right," he murmured, wrapping her in a warm hug and tucking her blonde head beneath his chin. "Hush now, and try to be still." He looked up toward the door, where her escort was still hovering. "Mouse? Are you all right?"

His hands thrust into his pockets, Mouse's hunched and huddled stance bespoke his feelings more clearly than words could have done.

"It's quite all right, Mouse," Father said gently. "All is forgiven... I might even say forgotten, except -- " He glanced fondly, ruefully at Catherine " -- except I think it's going to make such a good story, later on."

The boy's expression cleared; his shoulders relaxed to a more normal level. Then his gaze fell to the steaming tub, and his face fell again. "Sorry, Father."

"Don't give it another thought, my boy. It was as much my fault as it was yours. More, perhaps -- now that I think of it, you weren't 'volunteered' so much as shanghaied, eh? Come -- come and join us," he said, waving him magnanimously down the steps and toward a chair close by. "We were only talking."

"Yes," Catherine nodded. "Come and join us. We all missed you today."

Vincent said, "I asked William to save you part of our feast. I'm sure he has it waiting for you in the pantry."

"Okay good," Mouse smiled, taking a seat. "Okay *fine*" -- by which remark they knew he was himself again.

"Vincent," Father said, "hand me that box of epsom salts again, would you?... Thank you."

Naomi sat up to watch him pour more of it into the tub. "Did the bees sting your feet, Father?"

"Not nearly as badly as they stung my pride, child," he sighed, pretending not to notice her elders' smiles. "Now, isn't it time you were off to bed -- again?"

Quickly, she snuggled back into Vincent's arms and asked him, pleadingly, "Will you read me a story?"

Father cocked his gray head. "Yes, Vincent," he said unexpectedly. "I did notice you had a book in your hand when you both came in. Read something to us."

"It isn't a children's story," his soft voice warned Naomi.

She shrugged happily and closed her eyes; and Father told him, "Oh, we don't care, whatever it is. Have you found something that, er..."

"Resonates?" Vincent smiled. He reached for the old leather-bound volume he'd laid down on the table nearby. Ruffling carefully through its pages, he looked up to share with Catherine a long and humorous look that left Father puzzling.

"Find what you were looking for, there?" the old man asked, just a little impatiently.

"Yes, I think so," Vincent replied, settling back. And dropping his voice dramatically he began, "*To bee or not to bee.*" He raised innocent blue eyes to Father's. "*That is the question.*"





*"To Bee or Not To Bee" is dedicated
to my parents, Bill and Susie Combs,
the real-life "Father" and "Mouse"
without whose actual adventure
this story would not have been possible;
and to their local expert,
One-Eyed Sheets, the Scourge of Beedom.*

