



You wring out your dishrag and shake it, watching the droplets catch the light. It's morning and you have all the windows open to let the summer air move through the house. Dawn was barely two hours ago. The whole day stretches out in front of you, lazily, golden, and you take a moment to sit at the single chair in your kitchen and look out at the roses growing over the window. Huge, fat carpenter bees mingle with your tiny honeybees like different sized ships coming into port.

A bee drifts lazily through the window and alights on your outstretched hand. She walks across your palm before flying off again, a little touch, a hello. You follow her through the kitchen and out the back door.

Your garden is a thick, wild tangle, only half cultivated and bursting with color. This time of day it's teeming with bees, and when you walk into the grass you are careful about where you put your feet. You always walk barefoot in the garden, with breeches underneath your skirts so you can kneel and weed without worrying about your knees. You think perhaps you'll go up to the wild hive this afternoon; it's a three-hour walk up the mountain and the

bees don't know you nearly as well as your own, but their honey is new every time you taste it, a different flower, a different color, a surprise.

But there's a ritual that needs doing before that journey. Your own hives stand like a little row of houses towards the back of the yard. They're painted with splotches of colorful flowers in your own hand, not the best in the world but the best you can do.

The bees crawl up your arms, sit on your shoulders, in your hair.

"You are my bees," you sing to them. "I am yours, and you are my bees. You and I and the garden, in the sun." They hum *calm*, they hum *soft*. You wait for every bee to come out from under the lid of the box, so not a single one is crushed underneath.

You dip your bare hands in and reach to pull the comb out. It glistens in the sun, amber-colored, and you scrape and store it, start preparing it and pouring it into jars.

The honey is a strange hue this time. It's red, dark red, a little like avocado honey but distinctly not avocado honey. It's not a color you've seen before or even heard about, and you wonder what trouble this hive has been getting into.

You break off a piece of the comb and lift it into the light. You put it to your lips to taste and--

The air fills with bees, swirling out around you in all directions. They sing *alarm- alarm- alarm!* You drop the piece of comb and it rolls into the dirt.

There's someone standing outside your garden gate.

"Hello? Good morning," you call. There is no response, so you walk over and unlatch the gate.

It's a little girl, only as tall as your elbow, and she looks like she's been crying. Her eyes are half shut and she's hiccuping still, as if the sobs have just begun to quiet. You hum and wave at your hive, trying to calm them down.

"Come inside," you say, taking her small hand in yours. She's about eight years old, wearing a yellow dress, silk, which would explain why you don't know her. She's not one of the village children. Her hair is long and straight and straw-colored, hanging in her face, but it was carefully combed before she started crying. She swipes angrily at her eyes with one arm.

The moment she's inside, she begins to cry again, and tries to talk to you through the tears. "Oh, miss, miss," she says, and doesn't get any farther.

You sit her down in your one kitchen chair, then you turn and run your fingers along your shelf of honey jars before selecting the right one, a light golden clover, sweet and soothing. You dip a spoonful in and hand it to her. She pops it into her mouth immediately.

"Now," you say, trying to hold her gaze, "Can you speak?"

She swallows the honey very carefully before answering.

"My mother, miss, she's sick." She rubs her eyes harshly again. "And you're supposed to be a witch, I don't know..."

Your blood chills.

Witch.

You wrap the honey jar carefully shut in its cloth. You wish you had something else to do with your hands. Witch. This is the sixth time this month someone has come to you for help, and the more help you give, the more people know. And the more people know, but don't understand...

You shut your eyes. "I cannot do magic, but I know some things about healing, and midwifery. What's happened to your mother?"

"She, she was bitten. A while ago. It was a dog bite, a big dog, you know, but it was weeks and weeks ago. And it's not going away, the bite won't close up and it won't heal and it keeps getting worse." She shakes her head, "Papa sent for three physicians but nobody can do a thing, and I can't even look at it and it smells so bad. She's dying, probably, and I don't know what you mean that you can't do magic, you can. Everyone knows it."

You think of your sister, the herbalist. You think of what you came home to find, the night you left her alone to go after your swarming queen-- her dragged from her bed, her dress tangling in her legs and in tree roots in the lake; you think of the house your mother left the two of you— in flames, strange-smelling because of all that careful work burning. All her mixtures, her tinctures, her careful drawings of flowers in red ink curling, fluttering down, turned to nothing. Jars of willow bark heat up in the fire and explode. And for miles around for years after, babies die that don't have to die. People wither away. Doctors come to town and open veins for them, watch them bleed until they're ashen and empty. But doctors aren't witches, so it's allowed.

You've dreamed it so many times, it rings in your head like a constant warning.

You fled. You ran to the mountains and started a new hive, far enough from a new town that you thought no one would ask anything of you. You pulled yourself into a tiny shell like a snail, pulled back until there were enough spiral layers between you and the word Witch.

A coward. A coward. Your sister was no coward, but look how she ended, look how that town ended--

The girl is crying. Her tiny fingers press against her skull, white knuckles.

A bee crawls across the windowsill.

You can heal her mother. You know you can. The right honey, bandaged into the wound, will save her life and kill her pain and give her back to this child.

You stand and ask the girl to wait. And you walk through the garden, to the strange red comb. You break off a piece and put it into your mouth. It's salty and thick, heavy as iron.

The day before your sister's murder the bees had fled, leaving behind a comb of black, oozing honey. Bees floated dead in the murk. It had tasted rotten.

You close your eyes. Red sunlight through your lids. Iron on your tongue.

The bees swirl around you and land on your arms, in your hair, their tiny feet catching at you. They crawl over your closed eyes, dark and light and dark again.

The little girl has followed you out into the garden. The swarm flows around her too, and through their strange eyes you see the spark in her. Her own potential power is a glittering kernel in her chest. If you told her, it would grow. And with that growing, all the good and all the danger for her would grow too.

She stands behind you, waiting.

Wings beat around you like a storm.

You hesitate.

