

Warm sunshine bathed green grass and the sweet perfume of flowers drifted through the air. To any lesser bee, it was the perfect time for harvesting and dancing. To Queen Beetrice the Fourth, it was the perfect time for diplomacy.

The queen smoothed her fur with her legs. Her wings hummed almost silently, drowned out by the loud buzzing of her impressive entourage. Twenty of her hive's finest honeybees accompanied her. Elite and disciplined, they could even fight off a hungry bird. Normally, she only needed several guards, but the terror in her scouts' eyes had persuaded her to make today an exception.

Close ahead, in the middle of a bright green clearing, lay a flower that towered above the rest. It was as tall as a baby tree, and its soft yet firm petals were a luxurious violet unmatched by any others. Many meetings had been conducted on those delicate petals, some of them important, others more trivial.

Today's was an important meeting, and she wished she was more prepared.

Her scouts had not been very useful with their descriptions. The new bees were described as big, ugly, and - most importantly - furless. Queen Beetrice had never seen a furless bee before, not unless it was dead. The idea of living furless bees was new. It was curious. For a queen of her age and wisdom, curiosity was a rare luxury, and dangerous to indulge in.

She alighted on the violet petals with years of practiced ease. She folded her sleek wings and held her furred head high, watching to make sure her entourage had settled down. Only then did she deign to look across the flower's surface, meeting the gaze of the two large figures who had been patiently waiting for her arrival.

A spasm struck her antennae and she froze. Around her, bees shuddered and buzzed in sudden agitation. Even she could not help the cold, instinctual terror that spread through her abdomen and made her fur stand on end.

The two bees were giants. That was her first impression. The smaller one was already double her size, and the larger one, clearly the rival queen, was at least a head higher. Instead of her hive's beautiful black and golden fur, these bees showed hard, bare bodies striped with orange and brown rings that glinted in the sunlight. The leader's large, curved mandibles spread in a confident grin, and a pair of narrow eyes watched her with a lazy glare.

Her wings twitched and her mind buzzed. *Get out of here! These aren't normal bees. They're monsters!*

She shook her head, stamping down the fear. Panicking would not do. She was the queen. Queen Beatrice the Fourth. Her hive was the largest one in the forest and undefeated under her reign. She did not succumb to her basest, vulgar instincts. If a first impression could make her flee like some cowardly fly, she would never live it down. Her *hive* would never live it down. Besides, there were only two of these bees. What could two bees, however large, do against twenty? And her scouts had made sure no others were lying in ambush - she was hardly a fool, after all.

Queen Beatrice took a deep breath to collect her thoughts. She stepped forward, clacking her jaw in greeting. "Queen Tai, I presume?" She said, clamping down on the waver in her voice.

“Please, Queen Beatrice.” The other queen’s voice was husky but cold. It filled her gut with revulsion. “Call me Tai.”

“Tai.” Queen Beatrice said, straightening her back. Already she was hiding the fear and disgust behind years of practiced calm. After all, only the strongest-willed survived to be queen. “It is an honor to meet you at last. My scouts reported they were most impressed.”

“Thank you, my queen. I am glad to be here. Now, what do you say we skip the pleasantries and get down to business?”

A flash of irritation crossed her face. It was painfully obvious that this other “queen” had never done any serious diplomacy in her life. Still, it was an issue she could work around. It wasn’t her first time working with newcomers.

“Of course, Queen Tai. Shall we begin by discussing the division of territory? I suppose that will be your greatest interest. As you represent a new hive, I am willing to compromise for both of our benefits.”

“Ah.” Tai crossed her middle legs. “And how do you propose we do that?”

Queen Beatrice almost laughed, amusement washing away her fear. Though the rival queen seemed intimidating, this was clearly her first attempt at negotiating territory, and it was the laziest attempt she’d ever seen. “Simple. My scouts reported seeing yours deep within the forest. We will draw the borders there, at the location where they first met.”

“And what of the other hives in the forest?”

Queen Beatrice paused. “You have met the other hives?”

“Of course. Our encounters have been quite...” Tai twitched an antenna.

“Agreeable.”

Why hadn't her connections informed her of this? “Then I trust you have already made certain arrangements.”

“Yes.” Tai cocked her head to the side. “In fact, we have been promised the entire forest to ourselves.”

“What?!” Queen Beatrice spluttered, aghast. This was outrageous! “Those forest hives have no authority to give away my hive's territory! Neither would they have any reason to even attempt it unless they wanted war, which they know quite well they would lose!”

Tai's antennae curled. “Indeed, they did appear quite reluctant at first. Fortunately, you'll find our ways of persuasion *extremely* effective. Isn't that so?” The other bee, who had remained silent until now, clacked her mandibles in agreement.

Despite the sunshine warming her fur, a cold weight settled in the pit of Queen Beatrice's abdomen. “What exactly are you saying?”

“Recently, we've been running into a problem,” Tai said. “Our food supplies have been dwindling. For all your numbers, you bees can only reproduce so fast.” Tai drooped an antenna in front of her face. “We are starving, my queen. We need food. Plenty of it. Most of all, we need *honeybees*.” Tai snapped her mandibles shut. In one swift move, she separated from her partner, each taking a side at the center of the flower. In response, Queen Beatrice's guards moved into position. Their wings and antennae were

twitching, mirroring the horror she felt, but their discipline held true: each stood firm, feet planted, stingers ready, and wings prepared for take-off.

If her understanding was correct, her hive was in trouble.

“This is a war you’re calling for!” Queen Beatrice waved a leg in agitation. “Your hive has no connections in this forest. My allies will *crush* your bees! Their forces will make those forest hives seem like weak, wingless ants!”

Tai didn’t even waver. “Bees? Oh, my queen, my foolish little queen. We aren’t bees. Not like you. That would make us cannibals.” She leaned forward and planted two pairs of legs on the ground. Queen Beatrice bristled and her guards spread their wings. A light buzzing sounded, vibrating the petals. “The two of us? We’re *murder hornets*, little queen bee.” Tai’s antennae stood upright. “And we’re *starving* for honey.”

Tai launched herself into the air, and the honeybees exploded into action. Queen Beatrice lunged with her stinger outstretched. The other murder hornet shot past her, jaws sinking into a bee. She tore the head off with a sickening snap. Four more bees piled on, stingers jabbing at the hornet’s body. Queen Beatrice watched in horror. Their stingers were bending against the hornet’s armor, unable to pierce the body. Another bee’s buzzing was cut short as her head flew through the air.

A laugh came from behind her. She turned her head.

A large swarm of bees covered Tai’s body, stinging and biting. An even larger pile of bees lay scattered on the petals. Some were headless. Others had their wings mangled and guts leaking like spilled honey. In the midst of it all, Tai was lying on her back, bellowing, mandibles shredding through bee thoraxes like they were thin leaves. Queen

Beatrice shuddered and moved away. She had to get back to her hive. If the murder hornets found it, the honeybees would be eliminated!

Her wings bumped into something hard. She whipped around.

The other hornet leered down at her, abdomen heaving and golden fur staining spiked jaws. Behind her, corpses littered the petals. “My,” she panted. “So the proudest bees in the forest *are* also the tastiest.”

Queen Beatrice only glared. Though the hornet was armored and twice her size, the queen poised her stinger in warning. Her last moments would not be spent groveling.

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The hornet jerked back. Her legs flailed and she crashed onto the petal, narrowly missing a furry shape jumping to the side. A honeybee, fur matted, spat out a tattered piece of the hornet’s wings. “Fly, my queen!”

Queen Beatrice leaped into the air and flew.