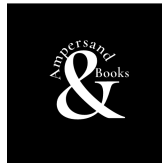


The Bee King Sample

Mathilda Zeller



Ampersand Books

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Chapter 1

Monsters

The summer was too cold and wet for the crops to survive, and that meant only one thing: the monsters would be here by winter. ***

Anyone else would tell you they were men. They had arms and legs and heads, all the things that men had. If you passed one on the street, you might not even notice anything amiss.

Alice knew better.

They were monsters.

Alice burned as a cool, steady drizzle misted her face and clung to her dark curls, too light to soak them, too heavy to brush off. Normally, Alice liked the cold. It gave the heat in her blood something to fight. But this late in the year, the cold meant blight and crop death. It meant skipped meals. It meant fighting to keep her sister and cousin safe.

She brought her ax down hard, cleaving the wood with a satisfying crack. The two pieces fell to the ground like dismembered limbs. She paused to pull her head to one side, stretching the thick cords of muscle from her neck to her shoulder. She chopped wood faster than

most men in the town, and even through the derisive glances and snorts, they admired her for it. She was proud of her strength. Usually.

“Rough morning?” Lyle asked, crossing his arms and leaning against the fencepost.

Alice swung the ax through another log as easily as if it were butter. The smack echoed through the clearing. “Didn’t sleep well last night,” she grumbled, picking up one of the pieces and setting it upright on her chopping stump. “And Helga came over to take my dress measurements and said she’d never seen a bride as muscular as me.”

Lyle’s mouth twisted into a half smile. “Good for you, then.”

Alice swung the ax again, harder this time. “She didn’t mean it that way and you know it.”

“How miserable for her, to be the sort of person who thinks like that.”

“In that case, this whole town is miserable.” Alice wiped her sleeve across her nose. Lyle was likely the only one on this wretched island who may notice that she’d been crying, but she hoped he’d just think it was the rain coming down, and perhaps a cold.

“Your family would have died ages ago without your strength.” Lyle’s voice had turned gentle, and she hated that. It made it harder to hide the fact that she was crying.

Alice grunted. “They’d have figured something out.”

“Baz would have sold Sarah by now.”

Alice grimaced at the thought. Her father loved whiskey, which meant they were always in need of money, but he lacked the resolve to wrestle his daughters into submission to the monsters. She’d always made a way around it, scraping and serving and bartering, threatening to never work again if he tried. As Sarah grew to an age where she caught the monsters’ glances, Alice worked harder. Sarah was brilliant. She was a scientist, out there in the field and forests with her bees and

flowers. She harvested honey, beeswax, grew lavender and roses and bee balm and hyssop. People sometimes even came from the mainland for her tinctures. The thought of her father selling her, making her do what others had made daughters do, brought a sour tang to the back of Alice's throat. She couldn't abide the idea. She wouldn't.

"You're not exactly in a position to criticize people selling out for money," Alice pointed out, desperate for a change of subject.

Lyle had become Ingrid VonBlurn's honeypuppy last year, and though he never complained, he spent as much time as possible out of her house, chatting with Alice or wandering the town.

Lyle shook his head, unabashed. "I'm in a perfect position to criticize it."

Alice brought her ax down again, so hard that splinters went flying. Lyle pushed himself off the fence and strode towards her, crouching to pick up the wood she'd just decimated.

He stood, his arms full, blinking the drizzle out of his blue eyes. "You don't have to marry him."

Him. Even unnamed, the reference to Old Vick made her stomach clench. Times had gotten harder and leaner. No matter how many errands she ran for Mrs. VonBlurn, no matter how many trees she felled and fields she plowed, there wasn't enough. She'd said yes to him last fall on the promise of his support for her family, and on Papa's promise to keep Sarah in school and out of a marriage bed. Old Vick had leered at Sarah, but settled for Alice.

"And do what? Let Papa marry Sarah off instead?" Alice couldn't allow that. If Old Vick's drunken rages didn't kill her sister, the smell at the tannery would.

Even the thought of the tannery made her nose curl in disgust. She'd be living there this time next week. She shuddered at the thought of

Old Vick's loose, wet lips; his yellowed hands; his sagging, sallow flesh. All the putrid things that awaited her on her wedding night.

"You don't have to marry him." Lyle repeated, his face growing sober. "Ingrid gives me an allowance. I could give it to you—it would easily support your family—"

Alice adjusted her flour sack dress, which was coming loose at the seams. "And where, pray tell, would I say I got the money from?"

Lyle grinned. "Take the ferry into the City once a week."

"And have the whole town assume I'm whoring myself to the city people?"

Lyle's grin turned wicked and he made sure to step backwards out of arm's reach before replying. "You're tired of going unnoticed."

Alice's tongue suddenly felt chalky. Has it been that obvious? She laughed, a little too loudly. "Because every man in the City is just aching for a woman who would break his fingers as easily as look at him." She squatted and began gathering wood. "Why would you do that for me, anyway?"

Lyle jammed his hands in his pockets, growing still as he looked out over the bluff towards the town. "Some men like strong women."

Alice fumbled her armload, dropping several split logs onto the wet grass. She squinted up at Lyle through the rain, blinking through the curls that had fallen into her eyes. His face had changed. There was an uncharacteristic sincerity in it that sent a current through her.

"Alice—"

"No."

"But—"

"You're married."

"To an old bat who needs me more for companionship than...companionship."

She snatched at the wood she'd dropped, gathering them back into her arms. "So you want my companionship?"

"I'd marry you as soon as she dies."

"Have you been drinking moon mead?" Whatever shock she had felt at his tenderness had fallen to a fire that was rapidly growing white hot.

"I've loved you my whole life." Lyle tried to take some of the wood out of her arms and she twisted out of his reach, the tightness in her chest almost more than she could bear.

"And I assumed you'd be a better friend than to ask me to be your whore! To accept the leftovers of a moth-eaten septuagenarian! To betray promises you've made, promises I've made!"

Lyle scowled. "You haven't made any promises yet."

"I will. Next week." She hated herself for saying it, and worse for the conviction in her voice.

"How is becoming my lover worse than marrying for money?" He scoffed. "Marrying Old Vick, of all people." He stepped in close, kneeling till he was eye level with her, closer than he had ever been to her before. She felt his breath on her cheek as he spoke, and the way it quickened her heart made her angry. "I love you, which is more than can be said for anyone involved in marrying you off to that ancient, smelly tanner."

"You love me so much you'd have the town believe I'm whoring myself in the City. And oh, when you, poor young wealthy widower, magnanimously take me to be your wife, even though I don't deserve you, city whore that I am—" She couldn't go on. She spat in the grass and stood, fumbling the wood again. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. She let the whole load fall to the ground.

She didn't care where she was going, what branches cut her as she pelted through the woods, what bears or wolverines awaited her in

the darkening forest. Nothing mattered besides getting as far away as possible, as quickly as possible. If she could have peeled off her own skin and left it behind, she would have.

Alice ran until she couldn't run anymore. Falling to her knees on the forest floor, she cursed Lyle, her father, every damned soul on this island. She hated all of it. Even the trees felt as if they were closing in around her. Her hands drifted to her back, tracing the scars that crossed her skin. She was a workhorse, a pack animal, and a strong one at that. And, like a pack animal, she was beaten when she couldn't—or wouldn't—do as she was told.

The thought of marrying Old Vick made her want to vomit. She knew in her bones, knew by the leering, lingering looks he gave her that life with him would be worse than it ever was with Papa and Sarah and Ina. But what if she didn't marry him? It was early summer and the crops were already failing.

The monsters would hear of the failing crop, and it would draw them here. They would come from the mainland with hungry eyes and fistfuls of money. They would come on the evening boat, the one that made port on Friday, and wouldn't leave till Sunday. Not all the mamas and papas would talk to them, but the hungrier the village was, the more families met them there at the port, ostensibly to provide them, as tourists to the island, with room and board.

But it was not a room with a view of the ocean that brought the monsters to their rusty little town.

The mamas and papas would not shake their hands or look them in the eyes, even as they took their money. Those parents were cowards, and, when the crops failed, that cowardice turned them hideous. The monsters would disappear with the daughters into the woods, or the hay loft, or the woodshed. They would steal away into the potato cellar, the attic, or to the very bedroom where the daughter had slept

since infancy. When the monsters re-emerged, they were much the same as they had been before—hungry-eyed and rich.

When the girls re-emerged, they had changed.

Alice had fought off the monsters, had fought off her father and had the scars to show for it. She'd gotten so good at fighting, at working, at running and hiding, that even her sister and little cousin, as poor as they were, had never known the touch of a monster. She'd die before that happened. Worse than dying, she'd marry Old Vick.

Lyle had posed a solution, but "solution" was the wrong word for it. He wanted to use her, just as Papa used her for farm labor, bartered her for money to tide them over, the same way Old Vick would use her as a tannery wife, in the same way the monsters came to the island and used the girls here until they were hollow eyed and empty. Lyle might be nicer smelling than Old Vick, but in the end it would be the same. He was bored, and didn't like his life with an old woman. Sooner or later, he'd get bored with her, and find someone less scarred. And even if he was using her to begin with, once he moved on it would break her heart.

The thought that haunted the space between waking and sleeping floated up through her throat and found a voice before she could stop it. *I am alone.*

She spoke the words to the rotting leaves beneath her hands, to the bark on the trees in front of her, to the small patches of sky visible through the leaves. "I am alone. I am alone. I am alone."

Three small bees landed on her hand, and she resisted the urge to slap at them. For all she knew, they were Sarah's. She loved her sister, and her sister loved the bees. She had built a whole world from them.

From the town, the church bells tolled and she snapped her mouth shut, painfully aware that she had spoken out loud.

She left the woods and found the path that wound through gorse and bracken and down the hill to where the town of Oxenbee lay, splayed like a skinned rabbit, along the island's rocky coastline. The rain had let up but the clouds still hung low in the sky. Lyle was nowhere in sight.

The church bells continued, their incessant clangs signaling a summons. There must be a fire, an emergency of some sort, something dire. There wasn't time to wallow, to bleat about what couldn't be fixed. There was only time to go, and pray that no one had heard her out here, saying what she had never before said aloud.

There was no acrid smoke in the air, no screaming mothers, no fire. Why had they been called? Most of the village had already convened when she arrived, gathering in the town square, gazing up at four men on a dais, silky veils of black where their faces should be.

Her throat tightened as she took in the men with their impeccable pinstriped suits, shiny leather shoes, smart ties, white starched collars, and dark veils that obscured their faces like widows' shrouds.

These were not the monsters who usually came—the philandering husbands, the thrill seeking playboys. These strangers only existed in whispers and rumors, in nightmares and dreams.

The Bee Men had come.

Chapter 2

Contracts

The Bee Men were smaller than she'd expected. It wasn't that she hadn't seen them before, but her memories had run together across the years with the whispers and stories of fearful housewives and old drunks to form a creature more suited to legend than reality. In those legends, they towered above mere mortals, with hands the size of frying pans and merciless stingers protruding from their hind ends. Alice craned her neck around to see if the bit about the stingers was true, but all she could see were coat tails and pinstriped trousers covering what appeared to be ordinary, if not flatter-than-average, buttocks. ***

Whatever banality their bodies carried was made up for in the black silk veils that fell from their bowler hats and covered their faces. It wasn't ordinary black silk. It fell like a fathomless shadow, reflecting nothing, revealing nothing. As Alice stared at one veil it seemed to grow wide and absorb all the light around it. She suspected that if she pulled it back, she would find a vast and terrifying eternity of nothingness, a darkness that would pull her in and swallow her whole.

The veils were so dark and blank that it startled her when the middle Bee Man finally spoke, his voice alarming in its normalcy.

Sarah joined her in the crowd, slipping her thin hand into Alice's. She was three years Alice's junior, and of course full grown at sixteen years old, but as far as Alice was concerned, she would always be her baby sister, wide-eyed and clinging to her for comfort at their mother's funeral. Where Alice was dark haired, Sarah's hair was bright red. Where Alice's skin was warm and brown, Sarah's was pale and freckled. In so many ways, she seemed a little fairy, springing from nowhere instead of the selfsame parents as Alice. It was alright, though. They shared the same irrepressible curls, the same disjointed laugh.

Alice squeezed her hand and Sarah leaned against her. Whatever brought the Bee Men to town, it wasn't to be trusted.

"The Honorable Alphonsus P. Wintersbury requests the honor of a young lady's hand in marriage," the middle Bee Man said. "A young lady from this town."

A whisper shivered through the crowd, like a cold wind blowing in off the coast.

From his perch on the Oxenbee Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument, Old Vick picked something out of his teeth and flicked it in the general direction of the Bee Men. "If he's so keen on marrying one of our girls, why doesn't he come woo one himself?"

The Bee Man ignored this and pressed on. "The Honorable Alphonsus P. Wintersbury requests the attendance of all eligible young ladies, ages twelve to eighteen, at the VonBlurn estate this evening."

Papa stood near the front of the crowd. Ina, Alice's orphaned cousin, stood at his side. "Twelve? What sort of bottom-feeding parasite is this Wintersbury, that he'd expect us to offer up our little lambs as brides to him?"

Alice bristled. The hypocrisy of this man! When she was twelve, he was beating her for hiding from the monsters until they gave up on her.

Across all these years, she was the only thing standing between Sarah and Ina and the monsters, and yet he had the gall to put on virtuous airs, a cheap facade to cover an ocean of vice.

Again, the Bee Man ignored the interruption and pressed on. "Each young lady will be presented with a fine gown to keep. The family of each young lady will be granted one hundred dollars, as a token of our goodwill, in exchange for her attendance tonight."

The entire village went silent. One hundred dollars was a small fortune. One hundred dollars would feed them through a bad crop year. And everyone on the island was having a bad crop year.

Alice's thoughts shifted to her own plight. One hundred dollars could buy her time. Perhaps, even, it could buy her out of a marriage to Old Vick. If she went, perhaps Sarah wouldn't have to. Perhaps Ina wouldn't have to.

Mrs. Pritchard sniffed so hard it turned into a snorting sound. "And what'll you be doing with those poor girls that you feel the need to pay us that much money for the pleasure of their company? We're an island of good, decent folk, not a cathouse."

Lies. Lies again, from the mother who had sold all four of her daughters. Not everyone on the island did it, but Mrs. Pritchard most certainly did.

"The Bee King will be choosing a bride," the Bee Man spoke as if he hadn't heard her. "Attendance at the ball requires a legal contract stipulating that, if chosen, the young lady will depart with us and marry the Honorable Alphonsus P. Wintersbury at the autumn solstice. Travel arrangements to the wedding for the family will, of course, be provided."

"And what'll you be doing with them in the meantime?" demanded Saul the butcher. "All summer long—and twelve! Do you really expect us to hand off our twelve-year-old daughters?" Alice chewed at a loose

cuticle on her thumb. Why, in a year of impending famine, were the guiltiest of the daughter-sellers bickering with such a generous offer? The sour, dark answer presented itself.

A bride was a bride once, and then gone. A daughter could be sold in the famine of one lean year, then sold again in the famine of another. The posturing, the false outrage of these people pressed on Alice's heart, pushing up a rage that simmered, barely repressed. The people's faces were anxious, but none more so than the daughters. They were the livestock, a safety net standing between their families and hunger, providing the cash to feed their families, to satiate the liquor addictions of their fathers by feeding the darker addictions of the monsters.

The Bee Man snapped his finger and another Bee Man stepped forward, bearing an ornate gilt box. He snapped his finger again, and a third Bee Man stepped forward, bearing a stack of papers. He snapped his finger a third time, and the final Bee Man stepped forward, bearing a beautiful fountain pen and a bottle of ink on a silver tray.

"Do as you will," the first Bee Man said. "But I hear the crops are suffering this year. There may be a long winter ahead." The words sounded like a promise, and a threat.

A chorus of murmurs and whispers and scattered shouts of outrage rippled through the crowd, as well as hollow threats. The Bee Men ignored these. Mrs. Pritchard stepped forward first, taking her time as she signed four contracts, one for each of her daughters, and accepted four hundred dollars. Alice's jaw tightened as she watched the money changing hands in broad daylight. There was no secrecy here, it happened in front of everyone's eyes. The respectability of marriage made it sanitized enough for the public square. Alice yanked on the cuticle with her teeth and tasted blood.

Saul the Butcher went next. One by one, the people of Oxenbee lined up to accept beribboned, gold-leafed invitations and sign con-

tracts promising their daughters to the Bee King, should their daughters be chosen as the bride.

It took longer for the wealthier families—the ones with enough put away that they never had to do more than look away as their neighbor's daughters suffered. But marriage was respectable, wasn't it? Marriage, that wasn't the same as selling one's daughter, wasn't it? It's not like early marriage never happened, and their daughter would be a lady if she was chosen. A bride to the wealthiest man in the empire. That was a thing to be proud of, wasn't it?

Alice wanted to scream.

Her father stepped forward to the line. "Oh, hell no," Alice said, loudly enough that several mothers nearby glared at her. She barreled towards him, elbowing anyone who got in her way, and nearly bowled over ancient Mrs. VonBlurn. She didn't even stop at the wealthy old woman's curses, but grabbed her father's arm as he stood in line.

"You can't do this."

He turned a tired eye towards her. "I can and I will. It's my right. I am Ina's guardian and Sarah's father and I'll do as I please."

"You're no father if you do this," Alice hissed. "You have no right to sell them like this. You never have and you never will and I'll die before you—"

Her father caught her arm, squeezing it so hard she feared her bone would crack in on itself. "Listen, little miss," he hissed. "Unless you want to be beaten out here in the town square like an obstinate ass, you'll turn around and go home. You've already earned a beating, let's not have it here and now."

His eyes flashed, angry and hard. He meant what he said. He'd done it before. She'd been ten the last time he beat her publicly, but the humiliation of it still burned.

From where they stood in the line, women peered at them from underneath their cloches, men looked away tactfully. She was older now, stronger, but his eyes were more sober than they had been in days, and she doubted she could escape his wrath if she tried, especially now that he had caught her like this.

She pressed her lips together and nodded, hating herself for the way her chin trembled. Hating herself for the way she stumbled when he pushed her. Hating herself for the way her face burned as she moved through the too-silent crowd.

But as much as she hated herself, she hated them—all of them—even more.

They were cowards and fools, the lot of them. The Bee Men had no faces, they were pits of dark nothingness, slinking into town for Oxenbee's daughters. They offered more money, pretty ribbons and bows, but in the end they were monsters, like all the monsters before them. Not only were they monsters, but they were cowards who would not even show their faces.

And the villagers? For all their fierce words and protective gestures, in the end, each of them would sell their daughters to the faceless baron in the west, running the mountain apiaries and guarding the secret to the wealth of the empire.

A strong hand closed around her bicep, and the acrid smell of hard liquor roiled over Alice. "You're not wanting to throw me over for the Devil-Man, are you, sweetheart?" Old Vick licked his lips, producing a sticky, rasping sound. "You want to go to the fancy ball and wear the fancy dress and catch the heart of a Bee King?" He squeezed her bicep where her father had just gripped her, where she was already beginning to bruise, and she winced. "He's not looking for a lady who can lift a horse onto a cart." Alice caught Old Vick's wrist and squeezed, forcing him to release her arm. He glared. "Watch it, young missy, or I'll cut

off our engagement myself. Would be tough luck for your old man to have so many girls to feed in a year like this.”

The Bee Men were looking now, their black, fathomless veils turned towards her, unseen eyes burrowing into her skin. She couldn't think here, not with everyone watching. She needed a plan. And a drink.

The smoky little speakeasy was full when Alice arrived. Clearly she was not the only one in need of a drink. Everyone there knew her, but no one looked at her, not after her outburst in the square. If they'd had consciences to prick, she'd pricked them.

Liquor was illegal everywhere in the empire, but here on their little island, bathtub gin and home brewed beer were bottled and sold in broad daylight. Just like daughters for marriage, apparently.

There was no way she could let Sarah or Ina attend the ball at Ingrid VonBlurn's, not without her, at least. Hell would freeze over before Alice saw her younger sister or even younger cousin married off to some Bee King on the mainland. They were both too bright, too sweet, too good. He'd eat them alive and spit out their bones. He'd make of them what the monsters had made of Penelope. Alice ran a hand through her curls and took a large gulp of beer. She shouldn't have thought of Penelope. She spent most of her time trying to forget that she'd had an older sister once. She'd had a sister who protected her.

The year Penelope turned fifteen, the late frost had killed all the crops, and unpaid tabs kept them out of the butcher's, the bakery, and the dairy. The butcher, the baker, and the milkman were all struggling with debts of their own, and would not extend the tab further. By late November, a monster had appeared with enough money to pay their debts and fill their larder. He had chosen Penelope. The monster didn't leave on Sunday. He stayed for a week. Penelope stopped speaking after the monster arrived. She limped through her chores and bled through her skirts. Alice screamed and raged at Papa, only to be met

with tight, pinched scowls and weakly feigned confusion. Alice threw rocks at the monster when she saw him on main street, and that landed her in jail. The morning they let her out, she found Penelope hanging from a rafter in the barn, swinging gently as the cows nudged past her stiff frame.

The sister that Alice had known—witty, irreverent, creative, and kind—had been reduced to a collection of parts to be sold. Her soul, vibrant and bright, could not abide becoming a collection of parts, a payment for debts. And so she had left in the only way she could.

Alice took another gulp and shook herself against the horror of the memory. The warmth of the alcohol matched the rage in her blood. No. It wasn't happening this time.

A Bee Man walked by her table. She grabbed his arm and pulled down hard, forcing him to sit on the bench beside her.

"I'm signing up." She normally didn't drink, especially not this much. It was going to her head. Her words were a little slurred, but she didn't care.

The Bee Man straightened his veil. It was even more unsettling this close up. Even shaken and off balance, he looked as if he could open up that darkness and swallow her down whole. She imagined leaving with him, across the sound to the City, across the City into the dark, mountainous countryside in the west, entering the mansion of the Bee King and walking into whatever darkness awaited her there. She shuddered.

"You're doing what now?" His voice was thin and reedy.

"I'm signing up. To be the Bee King's bride." She pushed her pint towards the veiled man. To her surprise, he took it, toyed with the handle.

"How old are you?" There was a sickly-sweet scent on his breath. Was that what moon honey smelled like?

“Nineteen.”

“Too old.” His voice was disparaging as his veiled face turned all its darkness on her. She imagined his eyes behind that veil, taking in her scarred face, rough hands, square shoulders. “Are you even a girl?”

That black silk veil was still terrifying, but now Alice was too irritated to care. She leaned towards it, her voice a low growl. “I’d show you but then I’d have to kill you.”

The Bee Man tilted his head and made a noise that almost sounded like approval. “What happened to your face?” He raised a finger, clad in a black leather glove, and traced her scar diagonally from her forehead to her cheekbone. Her eye twitched at the memory of the near miss.

Alice was in the habit of telling shoddily constructed stories to explain her scar, but she couldn’t bring herself to lie anymore. Not if Papa was willing to try to sell off Sarah and Ina to some faceless baron. He could go to hell, along with the whole rest of the town.

“My Papa has a drinking problem. This town has a daughter-selling problem.”

“Hard luck, that.”

“I’ll see to it that there’s harder luck for you if you take my sister. Or my cousin.”

“You’d leave her with your father with the drinking problem?”

“He doesn’t hurt her. Just me.”

The Bee Man made that noise again, a little louder this time, reaching over to tug at the neckline of her dress, as if he already knew that he’d see another scar, rising fleshy and discolored along her collarbone.

“That could have killed you.”

“But it didn’t, did it?”

The Bee Man was silent for a moment. “Were you afraid, when it happened?”

She shook her head. "There's no time for fear when someone is coming at you with a knife."

The Bee Man leaned back, and she almost wondered if he was smiling behind that veil. "You're still too old."

Alice ground her teeth. "What difference does a few months make?"

The Bee Man tilted his head amiably. "None, really. It only lowers the chances of...you know..."

"What?"

The Bee Man shifted in his seat. Finally, "are you a virgin?"

Alice choked on her beer. It shot up her nose and burned, splattering across the depths of her sinuses and making her eyes water. Between coughs, she snapped, "How-is that-any of your business?"

The Bee Man steepled his fingers together, leaning back. "Mr. Wintersbury isn't the first groom to care about the virginity of his bride."

"Is *Mr. Wintersbury* a virgin?"

"That is not your concern."

"But my virginity is his?" Alice knew these sorts of expectations, these sorts of double standards existed, but no one on the island had ever dared ask such an intrusive thing. When people did what they did here, they knew better than to ask those sorts of questions, or to care much about the answer.

"You're quite cozy with that Lyle fella. We heard people talking about the two of you when we arrived."

Alice shook her head. "He's married. I'm not that kind of girl."

The Bee Man folded his arms. "And what kind of girl is that?"

"The kind that trifles with married men."

"If you aren't a virgin, we'll know."

Alice highly doubted that.

"If you are lying, you will most surely die."

Alice breath hitched in her throat. "Excuse me?"

“On your wedding night.”

Despite the anger in her heart and the alcohol in her stomach, Alice felt cold. “By whose hand?”

The black silk-veiled face turned fully on her, and something shifted. Alice couldn’t put her finger on what changed but it was palpable, like the air pressure drop before a storm, or that silence after an ear-splitting shout. Then he shrugged, as if they were discussing something inconsequential. “You’ll see.”

He turned to his shiny leather briefcase and snapped it open, retrieving a creamy piece of paper with a flourish. He slid it across the table towards Alice.

The contract began with a large, curly “whereas” and continued in very small letters all crammed together for the length of the page. There was barely space at the bottom for her signature and date.

Alice scowled. “Not a one of them read this, did they?”

The Bee Man shook his head.

She squinted at the letters, but they blurred together. She needed glasses, but glasses, and the necessary appointments in the City on the mainland, cost money. And if they had money, she wouldn’t be staring down a contract like this to begin with. She would be free.

The Bee Man folded his gloved hands primly. “I don’t mean to be indelicate, but... you know that the Bee King is very wealthy, correct?”

“I don’t care about money.”

The Bee Man tilted his head and made an amused noise. “Then what do you care about?”

“Freedom. Safety.”

Power, said a little voice in her head. She kept that part to herself. But it was true. It wasn’t money that would buy them freedom and safety. It was power. But power was more easily gotten and kept if you had money, it seemed.

The Bee Man uncapped a fountain pen and offered it to her like an old pal sharing a cigarette. She took it but hesitated, nib frozen in the air above the paper.

“You don’t have to do this,” the Bee Man said softly. “There are any number of girls in this town who could be chosen.”

The words were like a match to a puddle of gasoline. She signed the paper so fiercely she nearly tore it. Alice pushed the paper back over to him. “You’re right. Other girls could be chosen. That’s exactly why I have to do this.”

She stood, nearly knocking over the table. It startled the people around her, and their eyes on her were more than she could bear. She pushed her way out of the tavern, out of the town, and back into the forest, back to the safety of leafy shadows, to hold herself tight and firmly refuse to think about the thing that she had just done.