

Copyright © 1991 by Carolyn Ives Gilman, All rights reserved. First appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, October/November, 1991. For the personal use of those who have purchased the ESF 1993 Award anthology only.

THE HONEYCRAFTERS

Carolyn Ives Gilman

The motherhold of Magwin Ghar had prospered for nine journeys, until the day Renata Oblin came out of the west.

The band of beeherders had come to the very brink of Dawn to begin their nectar quest. They were erecting their dome tents on a sparse meadow beside a swift, chalky blue meltwater river. The immobile sun hung low in the east; to the west the sunlight touched the tips of ice peaks under the dark bank of clouds that always hung at the edge of permanent night. Here, they were at the beginning of things, where land was born from ice and night. Everything around them was young.

The children were playing with their enormous shadows when they saw the stranger coming down the pathless slope of scree. They stood still to stare. She was dressed in barbarian leathers, and coming from the west, where only storm and glaciers dwelt. As word spread through the camp, people stepped from their tents to watch her approach. When she drew near they saw what they had half feared, half hoped: a ceramic broodpot in a pouch strapped to her chest.

She raised an arm in greeting and called in a clear, strong voice, "Whose motherhold is this?"

"Magwin Ghar's," someone answered.

She dropped to one knee to touch the ground in thanks. When she rose, her eyes swept them all in. "I am Renata of Oblin Motherhold. Many whiles ago I journeyed into the Dawnland to seek my future. I have found it. I bring you a new hive mother!"

She touched the broodpot at her breast, then looked around, exhilarated, as if she expected them all to cheer at her hero's deed. But the people's looks were grave and uncertain. Because of her, their lives were all about to change.

Dubich Rhud had always known the day would come. Ever since he and Magwin Ghar had walked the marriage line together it had been there, somewhere in the future: the day a challenger for the motherhold would come, and Magwin would have to face death. But he had never guessed how full of helpless rage he would feel.

His voice sounded eerily calm as he told her the news. They sat inside her tent with their favorite pillows drawn close together. The beeswax candles cast a soft light on the intricate patterns of the woven wall-rugs and the comfortable layers of carpet on the floor.

"I am not ready to die just yet," Magwin said grimly. She still had the look of the wrestler she once had been--strong neck, solid, muscular torso, stocky legs. But now her close-cropped hair was the color of granite, and her face was leathery from years in the sun.

"There cannot be two leaders in the same motherhold," Dubich said, fingering the long braids of his gray beard. "*Someone* is going to die. Unless you step aside."

"Ha!" was Magwin's response. She raised her arm, clenching her fist and staring at her bunched biceps. The skin was loose, mottled with age spots. But there was nothing old about the flash in her eyes.

"Why not give way, Magwin?" Dubich said quietly. "It is the way of nature. Youth should replace age."

"When age has nothing more to offer," Magwin said. "I built this motherhold. I know how to run it."

It was not what she had said nine journeys ago, when *she* had been the one challenging old Borsun Ghar for control of the motherhold. She had been a whirlwind then: a swift temper, a loud laugh, forthright and bold, with a tender side only Dubich and a few others knew about. Gods, he had been proud of her.

"So you will fight her?" Dubich said unwillingly.

Magwin reached out for his hand. There was a teasing twinkle in her eye. "Don't worry, old man. I still have some brain cells that are as good as new, you know."

She loved it--the challenge, the conflict. Once, Dubich had enjoyed watching her, advising from the shadows. But lately, he'd lost his taste for battles. It had been so quiet, the last journey since their children had left for other motherholds. He had grown used to a maturer marriage and the slower rhythms of age. He did not want to lose it all. The stakes in this battle were just too high.

Someone shook the door rattle and Magwin shouted, "Enter!" It was two of the master honeycrafters, come to get good seats for the confrontation everyone expected. Magwin welcomed them from her pillow, and Dubich rose to serve some hydromel in carved horn cups. Soon more arrived, and more, till the tent was crowded, and people began to collect outside, where they could hear through the tent sides.

When Renata Oblin entered the tent, Dubich was startled at how young she was--younger than their own daughter. Yet she stood at the entrance with a careless self-confidence. She was tall and agile, with a long braid of brown hair. An archer, Dubich thought, or a climber.

"You are welcome to my tent, wanderer," Magwin said formally.

Dubich held out a cup of hydromel. Renata shook her head and, in a supple movement of tanned limbs, settled down, legs crossed. Now everyone knew how the land lay. Renata would not accept hospitality from someone she intended to kill.

"What is that around your neck?" Magwin asked.

In answer, Renata placed the brood pot on the soft carpet, then opened it.

People leaned forward to see. Slowly, a large insect crawled free of the pot, too young yet to fly. There were several indrawn breaths, for she was a larger mother bee than any in Magwin Ghar's hives; and stranger yet, she was a glossy black all over.

"That is a fine creature," Magwin said. Her voice was bland, but Dubich could hear the envy in it. It had been a long time since their own hives had had an infusion of new bee-blood. A motherhold could not last long with puny, inbred bees. "How did you find her?"

"I left Oblin motherhold a journeypiece ago," Renata said. "I had five companions, young women like me who had all reached the wander-age. They went to find new homes among other motherholds, but I was not content with that. I turned toward the land of Dawn. I set out to find a new hive mother and bring her back.

"The Dawnlands are wide and cold, and constant storms rage along the boundary where night begins. I traveled through unmapped new lands, along the edges of the glaciers. I lived among the rockfalls, eating lichen and beetles; the sun was only an orange ball on the horizon. I always looked for a nest where a mother bee was hatching from her winterlong slumber. Once I found a nest but the mother had flown east hours before I got there. I thought I was cursed.

"But I would not give up. At last, as I lay too tired to pull myself upright, the ground began to rock under me. There was a roar fit to bring the sky down and near me a hillside collapsed into a valley. Afterwards, I staggered out onto the fresh brown slope and saw there a mother bee climbing from her nest. The avalanche had cleared away a thick layer of gravel the glaciers had left. Without it, the mother would have perished, buried; and so would I."

She looked around at her spellbound audience, and her voice became forceful. "I set out to find my own people then, for I knew I was fit to lead a motherhold." Her eyes turned to Magwin Ghar.

"That may be true," Magwin said in a voice of calm and ice; "but you will not lead *my* motherhold."

"Then we will quarrel," Renata said. "Look at my bee. Have you got her equal?"

No one answered. Everyone knew they hadn't.

"I can have your bee," Magwin said.

"Do you challenge me?"

Dubich held his breath, hoping Magwin would not be impetuous. She must not challenge; she needed to choose the weapon.

Magwin said nothing. "I smell old blood here," Renata gave the ritual taunt. "Are you afraid?"

Still no answer.

"Very well, then," Renata said, impatient. "I will challenge you. Prove your fitness to lead this motherhold."

"All these people are witness that you have made the challenge," Magwin smiled, a predator who had trapped her prey. "It is my right to choose the contest."

Renata straightened in surprise at the sudden vigor of her opponent's voice. She looked as if she suspected trickery. "Choose, then," she said.

"The times are gone when a holdmother needs brute force to rule. Leadership skills are what count now. I challenge you to a test of leadership. Each of us will take a swarm and the people to tend it. We will compete for one journey. At the end, whoever produces the best honey, wins."

"Who will judge?" Renata asked, narrow-eyed. It was a highly unusual proposal.

"The honey buyers of Erdrum," Magwin said.

"Will you give me the right to pick from your swarm?"

"They are all good bees. You may pick if you please."

"And what of the honeycrafters -- the hivekeepers, blenders, and refiners?"

"Persuade as many to follow you as you can."

A smile flashed across Renata's face, as if this challenge were to her liking. "And equipment?"

"We will share fairly."

"This is not a bad proposal, old woman," Renata said. "It is realistic."

"Then you accept, little girl?"

"I do."

The listeners looked troubled, for the decision would be on their shoulders, in a sense. Each one would have to choose whom to support. It would be the strangest journey a motherhold had ever taken.

Renata rose to leave, but before reaching the tent flap she paused. "What about the loser?" she said.

Magwin Ghar hesitated. There was only one proper answer. "It must be an honorable death."

To die by one's own bees was the only way to be sure of honor. It was a painful death, but natural.

For the first time that night, Renata looked less than sure. With a slightly exaggerated confidence she said, "Very well."

When all the witnesses were gone, Magwin turned to Dubich. "Ah, she's strong and brave, Dubich. But she can't match me in wits."

Dubich moved slowly around the tent, gathering the horn cups the visitors had left. Her plan gave him a deep foreboding.

When he didn't answer, Magwin said, "Dubich? Are you criticizing me?"

"I didn't say a word," he said.

"No," she said. "You just freeze the air with your silence. What is your problem with my plan?"

"This contest will set the young against the old," he said. "The youth of the motherhold will want to follow her."

"So? I will have wisdom, experience, and skill on my side."

"She will have energy and creativity on hers. And a new mother bee. She has a chance of winning, Magwin."

Magwin grinned. "It would not be a contest if she didn't."

Dubich wanted to smash the cups and roar. He held it back. It was not the right way. He must be clear-minded, clever, and quiet if he was to help her. She must never know. He picked up a cloak.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To the extraction tent," he said.

But he lied. He was going to start fighting for her.

On the edge of camp, remote from traveled paths, lay the hive tent. At the start of each journey, the bees were kept there till they acclimated to Dawn, resetting their biological rhythms and starting their life cycles over. It was a dark and buzzing place. The tall ceramic cylinders were stacked in shadowy ranks, so thick they left only a small circle open in the center. There, alone as usual, Hivekeeper Yannas No-Name paced the claustrophobic circle of her skull.

Normally, the quiet music of the bees calmed her, drew her from her thoughts. She pressed her palms, then her cheek, against the side of a hive, to feel the soft vibration of their humming. On good days, she could sense their love radiating out, washing her clean of past. But not today. She mouthed a silent profanity at herself. Her life was a rotten tooth, existing only to cause her pain. The hive circle, her last refuge, her cocoon, had trapped her in an empty round of ritual self-delusions.

She picked up a metal bar and pried loose the lid of the nearest hive. Inside, it was dark, crawling with buzzing shapes, like the memories inside her head. Her skin prickled, overactive nerves fighting for her attention. She reached in, picked a bee at random from the comb, and took it to her table, where a candle burned.

The bee was a healthy worker, sleek and yellow. It was half the size of her thumb, and a vestige of caution made her wonder if it were too large for her

purpose. With a shrug of careless self-riddance, she rolled up her sleeve, then placed the bee over the prominent blue vein near the elbow. Her forearm was pocked with old red puncture marks.

She took a sliver of wood from the tangle of gray hair behind her ear and bent forward to tease the bee. At first it was quiet, sluggish with cold. When at last it raised its unsheathed stinger in warning, she aimed a threatening jab at its head. It sank its barb into her arm.

She clenched her teeth, enjoying the pain. Her hand twitched in spasms as the muscles convulsed. Her face grew slick with sweat. The bee was trying to withdraw its stinger, but the barbs prevented it; it thrashed about, its last throes pumping out all that remained in its venom sac. At last the stinger ripped from its body and it fell twitching to the floor.

The vein stood out, deep blue all up her arm. She panted for breath, her heart racing unevenly. In another person, a sting so severe would have caused convulsions. Yannas clenched her teeth to keep from emitting a sound as the poison spread. If there was no seizure, the lancing pain would wear away; and as it did, the gnawing void inside her would fade. She would be able to hear the bees sing to her again.

There was a footstep outside; someone was coming. Yannas quickly rolled down her sleeve and flicked the dead bee into the shadows. She turned away from the entry to seem busy and hide the trembling of her hands.

Dubich Rhud stood for a moment holding up the tent flap to let the sunrise light in. He watched Yannas' tall, lean form moving restlessly among the shadows. "Have you heard?" he asked.

Yannas turned. Her face was flushed; angular brows, nose, and cheekbones jutted out from the gaunt, obscure landscape of her face. "Heard what?" she said too alertly.

Dubich frowned suspiciously and crossed the tent. He seized the hivekeeper's arm and bared it to the candle light. The stinger was still embedded in the skin. With an exasperated oath, Dubich took a clip from his cloak and used it as a tweezers to pull the barb out, careful not to touch it himself. At last he looked at Yannas' eyes. They were glassy, bright, pain-free. Dubich's pent-in anger erupted, and he slapped Yannas in the mouth.

"Damn you! I don't care what you do to yourself, but it's Magwin's life you're playing with now. She has trusted your loyalty to save her. God, what a delusion! Her secret weapon, her genius -- nothing but a wretched addict. If Renata knew, she would laugh her sides out."

The hivekeeper backed away, startled, fingering her face. Her flush was gone; she was clear and cold now. "It's not as if you didn't know."

"You promised to cut down."

"I have," Yannas said; but Dubich could tell it was one of her many lies. He and Magwin had gotten used to them over the years.

It was seven journeys since they had come across her in the Summerlands, lying in a roadside ditch, a skeleton wrapped in skin. She had been dehydrated, near death, but when she came to consciousness in one of their tents it was not water she asked for, but sinnom. Then they had known the fault lay with one of the motherholds. For sinnom was a kind of honey -- dangerous, addictive, forbidden, and fabulously valuable. Someone, lured by wealth, had perverted their bees into distillers of liquid death.

Magwin had still been new as holdmother then. Partly from a keen sense of honor, partly from rough kindness, she had adopted Yannas and sworn that she would turn the evil act of some unknown beekeeper into good. No one had ever lived to give up sinnom; but coached by Magwin, Yannas had done it. The bee venom had been the key: it dulled the craving, yet brought no pleasure itself, only pain. Seven journeys had passed, and each one had taken two journeys' worth of life from Yannas, yet the grip of the old addiction failed to fade.

Dubich already regretted having lashed out; it only gave her the excuse to lie. He breathed in and tried to draw on the reserves of patience he had used raising children. Though no child had ever given them the trouble Yannas had.

"You have to give it up, Yannas. If not for yourself, do it for the rest of us. You're the greatest hivekeeper this motherhold has ever had. You may be the greatest one living. And Magwin has made a foolish bargain trusting her life to you."

He told Yannas about Renata then. Yannas watched immobile, her face as complex with shadows as her life was with falsehoods.

"She can't win this contest without your help," Dubich finished.

Yannas was silent a long time. She would not look at Dubich's face. "She was wrong to trust me," she said at last.

"She had reason to. She saved your life. She would never ask for your thanks, but you owe it to her."

"I suppose I do." Yannas' voice was soft, but thick with irony.

Dubich studied her face, searching for a glimmer of love or loyalty. Droning, monotonous music filled the silence--the voice of the fine swarm Yannas had created, first as apprentice, then as assistant, finally as master hivekeeper.

Dubich turned away, defeated. "How is the swarm?" he asked.

"They weathered the last journey piece well," Yannas said. "One hive is raising a new mother. We will be able to start a new hive soon." Her voice warmed when she spoke of them, as it never did for any mere human. Not even a human who needed her gratitude. If only, Dubich thought desperately, she felt toward us as she feels toward the bees.

"We will have a new mother bee soon, one way or another," he said; the words ached. "You will have to choose sides. I hope you will choose Magwin's."

He waited for an answer, but Yannas said nothing, and he had to leave without knowing her choice.

When Yannas gave out word that the bees were ready to dehive, the whole camp began to stir. Spirits were high; it was the beginning of the human journey cycle as well as the bees'. Soon a procession of wicker litters was winding up the path to the hive tent. A crowd of workers helped shift the heavy hives onto litters, each bound for a preselected site on the plain around them. Yannas stood at the center of the hubbub, passing out directions. For a space around her everything was quiet, as if her presence stilled the chaos and vitality of the day.

She had marked the hive sites carefully in advance, and each pair of workers set off surely over the uneven ground with a sealed hive slung between them. Soon the hives would be scattered to the alpine meadows nestling in sheltered spots amidst the glacial washwater and scree. The nectar from these Dawn-flowers was too earthy for human tastes; but the bees needed it to strengthen them for their long pilgrimage east.

The hive tent was only half empty when Yannas called a halt; the rest of the hives were marked as Renata's. When the crowd had gone, Yannas slung a pack of tools over her shoulder, fastened a pouch of food to her belt, and set off to open the hives. She always did this part alone.

Up out of the river valley, the land was flat as far as the eye could see -- a vast, glacier-scoured plain. A cold wind swept down off the ice from the west, unimpeded by anything but a few solitary boulders. It was not the same place they had come to start the last journey. That place had passed on into morning. This was new land, released only recently from the grip of night. Over their lifetimes, the children in camp might see this spot mature, bear fruit, and pass on into searing day; but they would never live to see it reborn. That was left to their descendants.

Yannas strode like a grim spectre through the rock-and-water world. Her distended shadow leapt from rock to rock like something younger than she. She wore a one-piece suit, the legs tucked into high boots and the neck and cuffs cinched tight to prevent stray bees from entering. Her dark bee-veil was draped shawl-like over her shoulders, but as she neared the first set of hives she made no attempt to draw it over her face.

The hives lay in a valley, sheltered by a snaking ridge of gravel. Yannas checked to make sure each hive entrance faced the low sun, and that the cylinders were firmly placed on the rocky ground, tilting slightly forward so no rain would run inside. Where the tilt didn't satisfy her, she shimmed up the back with a flat piece of shale. Then she cracked open the tops with her pry bar to check the bees' supply of feed honey, noting down hives that were low. Last, she took the netting from over the broad hive mouth and sat down on a nearby rock to watch the bees emerge.

They were tentative at first, unsure of the new world that lay outside their doorway. At last a few began circling the hives on unpracticed wings. When

Yannas saw one fly off toward a nearby clump of blooming everweep, she smiled. It transformed the gloomy landscape of her face like sun on a leaden lake.

She had never believed that any human was responsible for rescuing her from the ruins of her past. It was the bees who had done it. They had taught her to stop seeing herself everywhere, and look at the world as they did.

Yannas studied the spot beneath her feet, making herself mentally into a bee. The apparent barrenness of the land was an illusion. It was a human mistake to see nothing here, for humans looked on the wrong scale. It was a world for the small and subtle. In every crack and nook, life had taken hold. Lichen first, then mosses with tiny white flowers, then grasses that grew more down than up. In the silence, Yannas could almost hear the burrowbugs sliding through the thin soil, the roots rustling and sipping water, the earth breathing in, released from the weight of winter.

When she set off toward the next hive site, she no longer stared gloomily at the ground ahead, but breathed the fresh air, head back. She went out of her way to visit a spring-fed pool where a few maiden's-tears bloomed. The names of the Dawn flowers were all sad. Yannas had named some herself, following the tradition.

The second cluster of hives had been carelessly placed, probably by youngsters who knew no better. Yannas set about righting the damage. This time she had to light her smoker to calm the bees in one hive where the comb tubes inside had been jostled from their places.

It was not until she reached the third cluster of hives that she realized she was being followed. Looking up from her work, she saw a shadow move against a faraway rock. Its source was invisible; but it was an old mistake in this country, to hide yourself and forget your shadow.

She sat down near the hives to eat her dinner and think about whoever followed her. She was a long way from the camp. If it was one of the roving barbarians, the hives were her best protection, for they knew and feared the bees. But she guessed it had to do with events in Magwin Ghar's motherhold.

There was a patter of falling gravel to her left. She looked up. Standing with one foot on a nearby boulder was Renata Oblin, one elbow on her raised knee, the other hand on her hip. She looked like the dashing heroine of an old story, ready for anything.

"Are you sitting there out of recklessness or bravado?" she asked. She had some pebbles in one hand, and was working them around, scrape, clack.

"No," Yannas said. She turned back to her brown bread and nuts.

"You're three feet from a hive, and not wearing gloves or veil. I watched you. You didn't even put on the veil when you opened that hive."

"The bees know me. And the stings don't bother me as much as most."

"That's lucky. Most people would be long dead before they could get back to the motherhold if they were swarmed out here."

She came forward, but stopped five paces from Yannas. "I am Renata Oblin. Pardon me if I don't shake your hand."

"I am Yannas." She nodded in Renata's direction, barely polite.

"Yannas No-Name," Renata said. "I know. I heard about you even in Oblin motherhold. Our hivekeepers were in awe of your Sweettooth and Morning Green blends. They used to say you were possessed."

Yannas' jaw muscles clenched as she chewed over the nuances of that statement.

"You should be back taking care of your bees," she said, putting the rest of her dinner back in its pouch. "They'll start to pine if you leave them sitting in the hive tent. They want to be free."

A smile crossed Renata's handsome face. "Offering advice to the enemy? What would Magwin Ghar say?"

"I am saying it for your bees' sake, not yours. Not that you'll listen." Yannas sounded sour and elderly even in her own ears.

"Oh, I will listen," Renata said seriously. "I will listen carefully to whatever you say."

Yannas turned a sharp, skeptical gaze on her. "What do you want?"

"I should think that was obvious. I want you on my side."

There was a long silence. The drone of bees and the distant, everpresent trickle of water were the only sounds in the chill, birdless air.

Renata spoke first. "In the camp, they told me not to try. They said you owed too much to Magwin Ghar. But it seemed to me you had another loyalty as well: to your craft. And I can make it possible for you to do things Magwin Ghar would never dream of."

She threw down her handful of pebbles and walked restlessly around, too full of energy to keep still. "This motherhold is lax; the standards are low. They don't produce nearly as much honey as they could, nor as high quality. It's not a lack of talent, it's a lack of leadership, of drive. I want to organize things more efficiently. I'll give you helpers for the drudgery, so you can concentrate on the creative part. I will improve the processing and distilling so it's equal to your hive culture."

She turned to face Yannas intently. "I want to give you a chance to achieve the recognition you deserve. We can set standards here. You're a brilliant artist working with poor tools. I can give you better ones."

It was like someone had snipped time with a scissors and overlapped the edges, so that Yannas was faced with an earlier version of herself. She could remember how magical those words had been: ambition, achievement, success. She, too, had set out to be the best once, but not at hivekeeping. The bees were a refuge -- an end, not a beginning.

"You've misjudged me," she said. "There is nothing I want to accomplish. I learned long ago that the world never thanks you for doing well. If you raise your head up above the rest, you're only more likely to get kicked in the face."

"That's not true!" Renata said positively. "You've got to have goals. You have

to fix your eyes on something, then put every ounce of skill and strength into achieving it. Your success is in your own hands."

"Is it?" Yannas said. "How do you know?"

"If I didn't believe that, life would be like this land here--"

"Yes," Yannas said, looking out over the scoured plain where life was taking hold against all odds. "Life would be like this."

"--a barren, desolate plain. No peaks, no valleys, nothing noble or useful in it. Well, *my* life isn't going to be like that."

Yannas could remember when she had yearned for crags and gorges, for dangerous rapids and rainbows. Those had been years of glorious, self-destructive gestures. Now, the bees had taught her to see fine textures, to praise little things.

"I had goals once," she said. "As lofty and compelling as yours."

"What happened?"

"The world paid not the slightest attention."

"Don't blame it on the world. It was you who gave up."

Gave up. The words chafed a spot still raw after all these years. "Yes, I gave up!" Yannas bit off the words. "Because I couldn't have made myself what I wanted to be."

"I don't believe that."

"Of course you don't. Why should you believe me just because I have lived twice as long and seen twice as much as you?"

She got up, hefted her pack to her shoulder, and started off. She heard a step behind her, Renata following. She wheeled around, angry and bitter.

"Prove, prove, prove!" she said. "You youngsters always want to prove something, as if that's all that can make you solid and real. You all want to set yourselves apart, draw lines around yourselves and say, 'Here, that's where I begin and the rest of the world leaves off. This is *my* achievement. *I* am real.' And it never makes a damn bit of difference."

She turned and stalked off, stones crunching under her boots. I am a bitter, cynical old woman, she thought. I am dry and twisted like a brittle-root. I am a scarecrow on her path, with a sign hung under my neck: "Don't pass this way."

The grasses bent unheeded under her heels, then sprang up again when she had passed.

When the bees were safely out, the master honeycrafters met in Magwin Ghar's tent to plan the journey. For the first time in memory, Magwin posted sentinels to keep their deliberations from reaching the wrong ears.

The six who arrived were each experts, representing the hundred and three things one could create from bee culture: there was Brahm, the fermenter of wines and

liqueurs; Bogdan, the chandler of sweet-scented beeswax; Zabra, the mixer of soaps, lotions, and pomades; and Reema, the creator of medicines and rubs from the potent honey of plants that calmed the heart, thinned the blood, or purged the digestion. Extractor Dubich Rhud was there, who purified, cured, and stored the raw honeys in his vast tent -- now almost empty, but soon to become an archive of varietal honeys, each culled from a distinct blend of flowers. Last of all, Yannas came in and sat in the shadows by the tent flap.

As was customary, Magwin Ghar served a rich mead from the last journey. They sat awhile, tasting the sunny meadows in their cups, remembering the peaceful days spent gathering the honey they now drank. It had been a good journey, and they had had huge wagonloads of products to sell as they had retraced their steps west from day to dawn. Now the honey was almost gone, and the wagons were instead rich with grain, cloth, and tools bought from the towns and farms along their route.

"Ah, you should have seen the honeys we gathered in my third journey," old Brahm said, as if to forestall anyone impertinently suggesting that last journey had been the best. "Why, we must have had fifty wagons, and our vats were twice as tall as I. We lived sweetly then!"

Not to be outdone, Bogdan spoke up with a reminiscence of his favorite journey, a story all of them had heard a hundred times, till they knew even the pauses and where to laugh. And all of them did laugh, except Magwin, who seemed preoccupied, and Yannas, who never laughed at anything.

The tent was filled with memories brighter than the candles, and everyone was expecting Magwin to refill their glasses, when instead she said, "We need to put our minds to strategy, my friends. We need to plan a honey that will humble young Renata Oblin and win us her queen."

"The upstart chit!" Zabra grumbled. "She knows no more about honey than my elbow does."

"Maybe so," said Brahm, "but my best apprentice has gone off to join her."

This led to a long series of complaints and recriminations. Half the young people in the motherhold seemed to have defected, the other half were getting forward about proposing crazy new ideas. Three girls who had reached the wander-age, inspired by Renata, had set off to seek a mother bee despite all their mothers' dissuasion. The young men thought of nothing but jockeying for Renata's attention. At last Magwin held up her hands impatiently. "There is nothing we can do. We knew it would be like this."

"I never heard of such a duel," Zabra said half under her breath. "Dragging the whole motherhold in--"

Magwin spoke loudly to drown her out. "I thought of using our Crystal Dew. We've done well with it for three journeys now and it's a favorite in Erdrum."

"I can't keep our apothecary honeys stocked without going farther south to get some forest flower honey," Reema said. "It's been two journey since we've gotten any bloodbloom or hoar. My stores are almost gone."

Others spoke up with objections. Journey plannings were always contentious, and the final route was inevitably a compromise hammered out to balance conflicting needs.

After much wrangling, Magwin squinted into the shadows by the door. "You've said nothing, Yannas. What do you think?"

Yannas had been thinking how much like molluscs they all were: all crusted round with shells of experience. Every experiment they had tried, every idea explored, had formed another layer of crust. By now Magwin's honeycrafters were nearly impervious to mistake, but paralysed by the accretion of things they had tried. Yannas could feel her own experience dragging like a dead weight on her. She didn't want to add more.

"I think Crystal Dew is a bad idea," she said at last.

"But it's your own formula!" Magwin protested.

"It's become too familiar. Can we win with an old honey if Renata creates something novel and new?"

"She hasn't got the experience," Zabra said, as if that settled everything.

Magwin raised a hand to silence her, eyeing Yannas curiously. "So you think we should try a new formula?"

"I think we need a honey like none that has ever been tasted. A honey so bewitching a single drop captures the senses. It must be a distillation of rain, time, sun, and the souls of flowers."

Their faces showed that they had all dreamed of such a honey, once. Perhaps in their youths they had even believed it was possible.

"What formula do you have in mind?" Magwin asked softly.

"You will not believe me if I tell you."

"Try us."

So Yannas began to recite the list of flowers whose nectars she would blend through the alchemy of the bees. The others listened, concentrating. They had all learned as children to decipher the formulas, composing little songs to remember the hard ones. Every child in the motherhold carried in his or her head the formulas for the staple honeys; but only the honeycrafters knew the hundreds of specialized formulas passed down through the generations.

When Yannas finished, there was silence; it had been a long time since any of them had had to critique a new formula, other than the brash and clumsy inventions of the apprentices. This one was not clumsy, but there was a recklessness to it.

"You depend heavily on the border flowers, those at the edge of night and day," Magwin said at last.

"Those are the flowers whose tastes are deep," Yannas said; "they are the ones who have suffered."

"Meadowmatch?" Brahm asked. "It's a stimulant nectar, not a culinary one. It stings in the mouth, like nettles."

"It will be very dilute in a comb blend with primweed and shattercup. You will scarcely taste it, but it will leave a tingle in the mouth that will cleanse the palate like spring water."

They raised more objections. At first Yannas justified her choices; but as the criticism kept coming, she became touchy, then defensive, then finally lapsed into a glowering silence.

When they had demolished virtually the whole formula and suggested a dozen substitutions, Magwin said, "Well, what is your verdict? Dubich?"

"It might work," he said, "but with so much hanging on the outcome, it is terribly risky."

"Brahm?"

"Not without revisions."

"Zabra?"

"It's a reckless experiment. We can't afford it."

"Reema?"

"The route would be too hard."

"Well." Magwin looked around. Yannas' eyes were on the smokehole, her jaw clenched. "Yannas?" Magwin said softly. "Has Renata approached you?"

They all looked at her. Yannas stared at Magwin, knocked from her self-absorption by the bluntness of the question. At last she said, "Yes."

There was a hiss of indrawn breath from Zabra. "The bitch!"

No one else spoke. The next question was on all their minds: What had Yannas answered?

Magwin did not ask it. Instead, she leaned back against her pillows and said, "I have decided on our journeycourse. We will follow the route of Yannas' formula, without revision. It will be hard on us, and there will be little chance to gather the ingredients for our staple honeys. We will have to cope. It is for a good cause."

Her tone closed off discussion. Zabra rose abruptly, then turned to the tent flap, sparing only a single suspicious look at Yannas. The others followed more slowly. Yannas sat frozen, staring at Magwin Ghar. Last of all, she turned to go.

"Yannas," Magwin said.

Yannas turned. They were alone.

"Did you think you could goad me into giving you an excuse to join Renata?" Magwin said.

It was true, yet not true. Yannas felt a surge of anger that Magwin knew her so well. "Renata?" she said contemptuously. "She's a vain, reckless dreamer. A child. I would no more work for her than..."

"Than what?"

Than grasp after lost youth? Yannas was silent.

"Well, I hope you will work for me now," Magwin said seriously. "I have put my life in your hands."

Yannas looked down, scowling. There was so much past between them that their shells were fused. There was no pulling apart.

"Don't worry," Magwin said, "I am content with the risk. Just do your best."

After Yannas had gone, Dubich returned to the tent. He blew out the candles, then sat down and watched Magwin sip a horn of mead. "You're taking a big risk," he said. "Zabra is saying that Yannas is a turncoat and her formula was planned to make us lose. She is saying you took Renata's bait."

"Jealous old whiner. We have to stop her, Dubich. Everyone must have absolute faith in Yannas."

"What about you?" Dubich asked. "Do you have faith in this formula?"

"I was about to ask you."

"I told you already: risky. It might be inspiration or delusion. Now you."

"I don't know, Dubich. But I've learned over the journeys that if you have a genius on your hands, you don't try to steer her. Just leave her alone. That's what I'm going to do."

"I'm glad it's not my life staked on it."

A smile spread across Magwin's face. "I'm glad it's not yours, too. Come here." He took the pillow next to her. She ran a finger down his cheek, then playfully kissed his nose. Not in the mood for joking, he drew her against him, aware how every knot and hollow of their bodies fit together. All the things he had taken for granted--the softness of her skin where the sun had not touched it, the contented little "Hmmm" she gave--all seemed impossibly precious. They rolled back on the pillows together, every touch poignant with the knowledge that there would be no long forever together.

Before long, Renata's group packed up their hives, tents, and equipment, and pulled out of camp, bound for the first stop on whatever journeycourse they had chosen. People gathered to watch them go, expecting to see amateurish disorder--but they didn't. The move was smoothly run without a single voice raised.

Yannas stood at the entrance of the hive tent, glumly watching a troop of bare-chested young men hoisting the last of the hives onto litters. She had tried to offer them advice to avoid jarring the bees, but they had told her they knew what they were doing. The galling thing was, they did. Yannas knew her own hives would not be moved with such swift efficiency.

"Sure you won't change your mind?"

Yannas turned; it was Renata. She was dressed in leather: tight-fitting boots and elbow-length gloves that glistened as she moved.

"Whose formula are you following?" Yannas asked. She wondered which of this group was capable of more than mimickry.

"Several of us have ideas," Renata said. "I gather Magwin Ghar will follow yours?"

Yannas nodded.

"Then I suppose you are my mortal enemy," Renata said. Her tone was light, but her eyes were serious.

It came to Yannas that if she succeeded, Renata would die. All of that boundless daring, arrogance, hope, silly flamboyant gloves -- all would cease to be. Utterly extinguished, never more to tempt or tease her with memories. Dead as surely as that other youth like her, that youth Yannas had once been.

"Go away," Yannas said harshly.

Renata stood watching her, puzzled.

"Go on! Go join your young heroes and athletes. Leave me to my crones and codgers."

A smile flashed across Renata's tanned face. She turned and trotted down the slope after the litter-bearers, like a frisky young colt. When she came up to the last one, she clapped him on the back with a comradely gusto. Yannas could hear their laughter faint on the air.

They saw no more of Renata's group for a long time. Even at the well-known meadows where they often encountered other motherholds, there was no sign of her. "She must have led them far away," Magwin Ghar said to Dubich. "Too bad. I was counting on some defections."

"Maybe she foresaw that," Dubich said.

Magwin shook her head. "She's clever, damn her."

For Magwin's group, the journey started out badly. Lacking many strong young workers, Magwin had to transfer the hard work onto older shoulders. Grandfathers who had happily retired to campwork were again pressed into carrying hive-litters and scouting. To free up young mothers with children, Magwin organized a child-wagon and persuaded some grandmothers to take on its wailing load.

As the journeypieces passed the grumbling grew. Everyone was working harder, yet the vats of honey in the mixing tents were not as full as they should have been. Long after the motherhold should have passed east into the gentle plains of Morning, they were still seeking out rare stands of flowers in the rough, unmapped country on the edge of Dawn.

The cold began to get into Dubich's bones. It took them fifteen long whiles trudging through torrents of rain to reach their fourth stop, and at the end people set up the tents wherever they fell, in a bedraggled line. After supervising the erection of the mixing tent, Dubich came home to find his and Magwin's tent no more than a

heap of soggy canvas on the ground. Silently cursing, he wrestled the sopping cloth over the poles, then went inside to start a fire. Another supper of pea soup was ahead, for there were no farms from which to buy better fare in this country.

Magwin arrived soon after. "Damned stubborn *artist*," she said, and Dubich knew she had been speaking to Yannas. "There was an easier route, you know. But she had to have the sweet-memory with the blue veins, even though no one but she can tell it from the regular kind."

"Close that tent flap," Dubich said irritably.

Magwin took off her dripping cloak and hung it up, though everything was equally wet. "The scouts say this river we're camped on leads down to a nice, fertile prairie," she said glumly. "Lots of marsh-crowns and meadowcup there. Birds, game. Sunshine."

Dubich said nothing. That was how their quarrels always started, with him silent and icy. It drove her into a rage.

This time she didn't rise to it. "What are people saying, Dubich?" she asked wearily.

"What do you suppose? They're cold and tired and angry, and they're blaming Yannas' formula."

Magwin was silent a while, then came to a decision. "We're going to leave this country. I have more to consider than just her formula."

Suddenly afraid he had persuaded her, Dubich said, "The formula is your life, Magwin."

"I know. But I'm still holdmother."

The way down the river valley proved to be a steep, rocky trail. The wagons could barely get through. Magwin walked back and forth along the slow-moving line in the driving rain, joking to encourage people. From his seat in the vat-wagon Dubich wondered how she managed to hide how low her own spirits were.

Ahead, the trail plunged into a torn shred of mist. As the hive litters passed a slippery patch, one exhausted litterbearer stumbled. The heavy ceramic cylinder teetered, hit the ground, then fell. It toppled slowly, end over end down the steep slope.

While Dubich still watched, frozen in horror, a streak of gray rain-gear appeared from nowhere, flying down the slope. It was Yannas. Dubich jumped from the wagon and clambered after. When he arrived a small crowd of people had gathered. He saw with a sickened heart that the hive was cracked open, irreparable. The hivekeeper was kneeling beside it; confused bees circled dizzily. When Yannas looked up at Magwin, her face was streaming wet, and Dubich did not think it was just the rain.

"We will have to sacrifice the mother bee," she said in a tight voice. "We have no spare hives."

Magwin looked grim. Mother bees were scarce enough without losing healthy

ones. "Do what you have to," she said.

"Get away, all of you," Yannas said fiercely. "Leave me alone."

Magwin motioned them away. From a distance they watched as Yannas located the mother of the broken hive. For a moment she bowed her head over the large, helpless insect, then smashed her with a rock.

It took a long while to coax the swarm into another hive. Many of the bees would not leave their old home, where their mother's eggs lay in their broken combs. There was nothing to do but leave them to perish.

It was a silent camp that night. They had lost a hive. Such a thing had not happened in ten journeys. Only a slovenly, ill-kept motherhold could be so careless. Shame slunk from tent to tent, and people began talking of the ill luck that followed them.

As they traveled east, pausing often to let the bees feed, the sun gradually rose higher in the sky, and the broad, level plains spread before them. Morning was a pleasant, settled land where they came across farms, villages, and even slowly moving cities--since as Ping turned everything on its face turned with it. Everyone welcomed them--especially the children, who saw only the confectionary wagon--but also the bakers, cooks, and canners, who haggled for the special blends. Everyone needed honey. There were sometimes rumors of plants or trees with sap sweet enough to make sugar; but most people laughed at the thought of anything replacing honey.

But this journey they could not loiter long in Morning. Yannas' formula called for few of its rich, sanguine honeys.

They passed quickly through the time of primweed and aspen groves, then skirted the fertile wineberry bogs. They were making for the Straits of Carriwell, the narrow bridge between the seas that lay across their path to the Summerland. The motherholds often met there and celebrated the mid-journey Festival of Flowers together. Everyone was looking forward to it.

As they neared their final Morning camp, Yannas traveled ahead to locate sites for her hives along the Windroot River. The Dawnlands had left a glacial chill inside her. She had come away to warm her mind--not in the sun, but in the sight of the maturing land. She halted at the edge of a marsh, letting the healing breeze wash over her. Nearby a pair of whoorowits was courting. The male erupted from the reeds, a flash of iridescent green scales. The female met him in midair and they pirouetted together, synchronized as jugglers, the biology of youth in rushing flight. Yannas smiled at the sight. Her face felt cracked, like a statue trying to smile.

She waded in knee-deep among a flaming stand of marsh-crowns, pinching off spent blooms to help the new buds grow. They were skinny-stalked flowers, awkward adolescents, brash and still a bit vulnerable, like the rest of this land. As she reached out for another bloom, she stopped--for a bee was already working this

stand. There was no way to tell, but somehow she felt it was one of *her* bees--or had been.

When she looked, the hive was there, sheltered under the gentle bluff. It was a Ghar hive; Renata was here. For a moment she hesitated, for it was bad form to inspect another motherhold's hive; but her desire to be sure her bees were not being mistreated overcame her manners.

The bees seemed active, shuttling in and out of the hive entrance with their burdens of pollen and nectar. But as she watched, it occurred to Yannas they were almost *too* active. A pungent smell hung about the hive. Suspicious, she took her stout pry-knife and cracked open the hive cover. As she lifted it, the smell enveloped her.

"Get back!" a male voice ordered.

Yannas looked up to see Hudin, Zabra's son, standing bare-chested on the lip of the bluff several yards away. He had a bow and arrow, drawn and pointed at Yannas.

"Put that thing down!" Yannas ordered angrily. "Didn't your mother teach you anything?"

Instead of obeying, he gave a loud whistle. Two figures appeared nearby, then came dashing through the grass toward them.

"Get away from that hive," Hudin ordered, gesturing with his bow. His voice was tough and arrogant. Yannas lowered the hive cover and moved away. He came up and took her stick and knife. As the other two arrived he said, "I caught a spy."

"Stop this playacting," Yannas said. "You make me laugh."

He gave her a rough shove. "Move."

Guarded by the three young men, Yannas walked north.

They came upon Renata's camp where the river broadened into a placid lake, dammed by its own delta. The camp was compact, laid out with discipline; Yannas could not help but think of the straggling collection Magwin Ghar's camps had become. Hudin left them to run on ahead.

"So Magwin Ghar has finally caught up," Renata said as she strode toward them across the camp circle. Her hair was swept back and her sleeves rolled up. She walked side by side with Hudin, hips almost touching, with a bravura that reminded Yannas of the whoorowits.

"We've been on the lookout for you," Renata said. "You took your time in the Dawnlands. The Festival of Flowers is over; the other motherholds have gone on."

"We were following a plan," Yannas said sourly.

"While you froze your bees, we have been enjoying ourselves," Renata said airily. "We have learned a lot, and tried out many new ideas."

"Like drugging your bees?" Yannas accused.

Renata glanced at Hudin. He said, "We caught her snooping in one of our hives."

There was a pause. "It's a distillation of meadowmatch," Renata said at last. "We put it in a tray at the bottom of the hive and it stimulates the bees. We get a third more honey in the same time."

"Did no one tell you about the harm to your bees?"

"There was some old wives' tale. But we tried it, and our bees don't seem harmed." She paused. "Will they be?"

She was pumping for information. Yannas felt outrage; they had experimented on their bees without even knowing the risks.

"Old wives' tales are there for a reason. Your bees will be fine this journey, but you will wear them out. You will get nothing from them next journey."

Renata shrugged. "It's *this* journey I'm worried about."

"A good holdmother always worries about next journey."

"Tell me that when I'm holdmother."

Yannas wanted to slap her. Irresponsible, self-confident girl, so full of her sense of control. She did not know how quickly events could take it from her. How could she know? She had never yet failed.

Hudin was whispering to Renata. He looked restless. Renata nodded. "Far better to hold her. Without her hivekeeper, Magwin Ghar would be doomed."

The words made Yannas' heart hum with anxiety. But she knew Renata, knew her too well. In a proud, slightly contemptuous tone she said, "It would be a dishonest way to win. Everyone would say you could not win fair."

They were the right words. Renata said, "She is right, Hudin. We don't need to use tricks. I have a better idea." She whispered into the young man's ear. He frowned, but turned and walked off. "Come with me," Renata said. "You will not leave without tasting our hospitality."

Renata's tent was spartan and functional, the tent of a field commander. But the food she served was good and plentiful, better than Yannas had eaten for journeypieces. She tried not to look like she was enjoying it.

As they were finishing the meal, Hudin came in with a honey pot. Renata opened it and spread some pale honey on a rice cracker. She held it out. "We just finished this blend."

Yannas took it, consumed with curiosity. It had a delicate aroma. "Sweet-memory," she said.

"Yes, we've got quite a lot of it."

Yannas let a drop of the sunshine-colored liquid fall onto her tongue, letting the smell drift up her nostrils. Then she bit into it.

The honey had been blended with striking originality. It was a simple formula that tasted of dawn and early blooms. It filled Yannas' mouth with a distillation of young things, long-legged flowers and a land that had never known failure. Memories rushed to her head. She could never make a honey like this. Not now.

"You like it?" Renata said.

Yannas looked down to hide her face. For the first time, she realized she might not win this contest. Renata had no expertise, but with simple green vitality she might prevail.

"I am no judge," Yannas said. "This is a young honey. Too young for me."

All the way home, as she pushed through the tall grass, the memory of that taste haunted her.

They had come to the sun-baked shortgrass prairie when the epidemic struck. It started among the children. One moment they were swimming and running half-dressed in the sun, brown as mud; the next they lay shaking with a fever, dry cough, and rash.

Reema, the apothecary, brought the diagnosis to Magwin Ghar's tent. The motherhold was camped by a wide, muddy river that meandered through the plains till it disappeared in the blue distance. Dubich had rolled up the sides of their tent to let in the cool eastern breeze, and now sat crosslegged, repairing some leather. The sun hung unblinking in the sky.

"Spotted fever," Reema said. "And I used the last of my hoarhoney today. We took a risk not going south to replenish our curative honeys. Our grandchildren may pay for our mistake."

Magwin Ghar said nothing to the reproach, but Dubich knew how she flinched inside. Everyone had something to blame her with these days.

"It is not too late to go south," she said.

"It is if we want to spend time gathering desert honeys."

"We can do both."

Dubich's bones ached at the thought. He said quietly, "It is a long way to the forests where the hoarflowers grow. We cannot get there and back again in time."

"We will have to," Magwin Ghar said doggedly. "I will not have my grandchildren die."

It was a hellish journey. Half the motherhold was sick, the other half worn out with doctoring, yet Magwin still pushed them to travel fast. By the time they reached the forest, two children had died, and some said it was the journeying that did it.

"But if we hadn't hurried, more might have died," Magwin said desperately to Dubich. "What do they expect from me?"

They stayed to milk the hoarflowers only till the sickness had crested. When they turned wearily toward the desert again, they met other motherholds heading for the Erdrum market, their wagons heavy with brimming honey vats, ready to trade. A third of Yannas' formula was still ungathered.

Their last camp lay in a dusty canyon under the glaring forenoon sun. The desert flowers had never seemed more scattered or fleeting. Yannas worked like a fiend, scouting out the stands of flowers and checking the hives. She would come in after long, solitary trips, her hair and eyebrows white with desert dust, her face and hands black from the sun. Then she would work feverishly with Dubich in the hot mixing tent, experimenting with new combinations whose ingredients she refused to reveal.

The boys who went out to fetch in the combs told of a pungent odor emanating from the trays Yannas had placed in the hives. Their grandmothers hushed them and said, "Don't you repeat stories like that." When Dubich mentioned the rumor to Magwin Ghar, she simply said, "I don't believe it." But her eyes said she did, and didn't care.

But there was another secret Yannas kept closer. There was one hive whose location no one but she knew. On the edge of a wind-scoured gully she had found a stand of spike-leaved plants, spiral cones with a single white flower on top. The first time she came upon them, she stood looking for a long time. Their name was sinnom, and it did not appear on any lawful formula. A few drops of honey from this plant would bring such pleasure and comfort that a lifetime of happiness crowded into a minute could not equal it.

The smell of sinnom honey came back to her as vividly as if it were yesterday. She had kept it in a thin-necked green bottle. At first she had taken it only in leisure, lying entranced in its spell instead of sleeping. Then she had started taking it in waking times, and all the little miseries and defeats of life became lost in its glow. The honey had been her success, her fulfillment. She could see it even now, the color of gold and more precious, the antidote to everything.

She turned away, feeling the aching cavity the sinnom had left. She stumbled blindly down the path toward the nearest hive. When she reached it she seized one of the guard bees from the entrance. Furious, it stung her hand, and she sank to her knees, clutching her wrist, letting the pain burn through her till it had cauterized her nerves. Then she closed up the hive, strapped it to her back, and cursing herself, moved it to the gully where the sinnom plants stood.

Since then, the bees had slowly been filling their hive with the priceless, deadly nectar. Whenever she came to check the hive, Yannas soaked a rag in liquor and tied it over her face to keep herself from smelling its intoxicating perfume. She told herself she needed it only for insurance, only as a last resort. She would never take it again.

The combs filled too slowly, and time passed too fast. At last they had to take what scant honey they could get. The hives were brought in and the half-filled combs were taken out and marked; then, in the busy extractor tent, workers loaded the cylindrical comb frames one by one into the spinner. Everyone took turns pushing the treadle lever that kept the spinner constantly going through sleep and waking, till all the combs were empty.

They were the last motherhold to arrive in Erdrum. The broad plain south of the

city bubbled with white dome tents as if someone had lathered it with soap. All the shady camp spots were taken, so Magwin Ghar's motherhold had to camp on a sun-baked spot far from the well. As they moved slowly to erect their tents, her people looked like leaves blown in off the desert: dry, dusty, cracked-leather-skinned. They were like wizened relics among the crowds of visitors and shoppers.

Their task was far from over. As soon as the mixing tent was erected, a new stage began. The pots of labeled honeys were sorted and strained; then Dubich banished all visitors but Yannas and set about the task of measuring and mixing. His worktable was a labyrinth of glass vessels, gleaming with bottled sunlight. Each honey had its signature: clear as water, milky as wax, diamond, gold, garnet, and amber. Some were thick as reluctant syrup, others poured like wine. Some were sweet, others spiced or heady. He knew them all.

Every motherhold in the huge camp soon knew of the strange battle brewing. As he toiled side by side with Yannas, scarcely sleeping, Dubich knew the other honeycrafters were probably sitting around their campfires speculating on strategy. Would the combatants gamble on one of the new spiced blends -- Amberfoil, perhaps, or Cinnabar? Would they modify their stronger honeys by heating them first, or use them raw? Would they strive for a striking color, or emphasize bouquet and flavor? Through the haze of weariness Dubich sometimes smiled to think how surprised they would be.

For it was a honey like no other. As he tasted and tested, Dubich alternated between manic confidence and fear. Sometimes he thought it was inspired. At others, insane.

Word came that Renata had visited Magwin's tent to bargain over the time and place of the contest, the identities and number of the judges.

"She was shrewd," Magwin said when he came, exhausted, to her tent to rest. "I wonder what happened to that reckless youngster who came down out of the hills." As he drifted off to sleep his last sight was of Magwin curled on her cushions like a wily old lizard. Her hair had gone entirely white since the journey started.

Yannas could not sleep. She had been at Dubich's side for many whiles; now she sat alone in the closely guarded mixing tent. Her masterwork was almost done. She dipped a tasting-stick into the glass beaker and let a drop of honey fall onto her tongue. A drama of conflicting flavors unfolded in her mouth. Dark, brooding spices followed by a tingle of shattercup like the near passage of death; then a hint of aftertaste, fleeting as intuition, that might be fresh-born flowers, and might not. It was a masterful honey; but one addition could make it irresistible. Hidden deep in her inside pocket was a small flask of sinnom honey. She had extracted it herself when Dubich was asleep in his tent. One drop mixed into the pot would be impossible to detect. But it would make the judges crave the honey beyond reason, yearn to recapture the taste as if it were youth itself.

The flask felt hard against her ribs. She rose and walked out into the hot sun, her eyes burning from dust and overwork. She wandered aimlessly among the tents,

past a boy washing clothes and a noisy marriage party, past a jeweler from the city hawking golden bees.

"Yannas No-Name," a voice said at her side. She turned and saw Bosna, Reema's daughter, who had left a journey ago to become one of Renata's troupe.

"Is your honey ready?" the girl asked. But no, she was no longer a girl. There were frown lines in her forehead and her mouth had a pinched look.

"Almost," Yannas said, distrusting the woman.

"Renata's is done," Bosna said. She waited as if expecting a question; when Yannas said nothing she continued, "It is very good."

"I have no doubt," Yannas said.

Bosna glanced around. "Would you like to taste it?" She unbuttoned a pocket and drew a glass flask out. "I managed to get a sample from the mixing tent. I want Magwin Ghar to have the advantage. I never thought she was a good holdmother till I had to put up with Renata. She's an arrogant bitch, that one."

And you are a treacherous viper, Yannas thought. She took the flask, intending to dash it to the ground, but its color caught her eye: a light gold, like a young child's hair. She clutched it, overcome with the desire to taste.

"You won't tell anyone, will you?" Bosna whispered.

"No," Yannas said. She was already an accomplice. She turned and walked away. Oblivious of all around her, she threaded through the busy camp till she found a deserted cul-de-sac and crouched down, gazing at the contraband flask. Slowly she uncorked it and let the aroma drift up to her nose. It was unspiced. Renata had wagered on simplicity. Yannas tilted the flask and let the honey drop to her tongue.

Its flavor was faint at first, and Yannas groped to place it; but it grew more vivid as it warmed and dissolved on the tongue. Yannas took a second taste, then a third. A sharp, nostalgic ache pierced her. She was surrounded by long-gone years of rustling grass, and wind-pleated lakes, and birds playing catch-'em in the sky out of sheer joy in their wings. It was a cordial of youth, of exuberance. It was simple, yes, but astonishingly original. There was even a hint of tree sap in it. Yannas had never thought of feeding her bees on tree sap.

She realized there were tears in her eyes. No honey had ever moved her like this, not since the old days. She wondered if she had been beaten. Beside this, her own honey was like the tears of tortured flowers, a honey of pain and endings. Would it be enough to kill the spell of Renata's youth? Yannas fingered the other flask in her pocket, longing to let it erase the terrible choice before her.

The judgment was held under the walls of Erdrum, in a broad space cleared of tents for the occasion. When Magwin Ghar arrived, surrounded by her master honeycrafters, the crowd was already large; toward the back, people perched on

wagons and barrels to see. The three judges were waiting, seated on campstools in a wagon. Magwin Ghar took her place beside Renata. Behind them, their respective hivekeepers waited, each with a buzzing broodpot that carried death.

Renata went first. As her extractor came forward with the flask, she stood watching confidently, arms crossed and head thrown back. The judges passed the flask around to scan its color and held it up to the sun to test for clarity. Then they uncorked it and each sampled its aroma. At last they took glass tasting sticks and dipped them into the flask.

Dubich watched their expressions intently. One was smiling, a faraway look on his face. Another was slowly nodding. The third looked deeply impressed. The honey was clearly not the amateurish, patched-together job Dubich had desperately hoped for. The judges tasted again, then discussed it among themselves. At last they took water to cleanse their mouths for the second honey.

Dubich stepped forward from Magwin's side. He kept the flask veiled till he was before the judges, then swept away the silk cover and revealed its deep garnet color. There was a murmur of admiration from the crowd. The judges took it, smelled, then finally tasted. One frowned in concentration; then, as the aftertaste came, his expression changed to surprise. The judges tasted again, avidly. Their discussion this time was animated. At last one stood. The crowd fell still.

"These are both excellent honeys," he said. "Each has broken new ground which we hope other motherholds will follow. But the choice is clear. For skill, drama, and subtlety, the prize must go to Magwin Ghar."

The crowd hummed like a thousand bees. Giddy with relief, Dubich put his arm around Magwin and gave her a quick squeeze. It had worked. Renata turned with unbroken poise to concede, offering her hand. Magwin took it, then quickly turned away.

Two men stepped to Renata's side. She greeted them without a hint of fear. They led her to a cleared spot, then brought forward the pot of bees that would have been hers. Her face serious, she stripped off her gloves and rolled back her collar and sleeves. A woman came forward to rub her arms and neck with the extract that would simultaneously attract and madden the bees. The crowd melted back, clearing a wide space around her.

Raised voices came from near the judges' wagon. A heated debate was going on amid the honeycrafters who had gathered to taste the contesting honeys. One of the judges called out, "Stop! There has been a serious challenge."

The extractor from the Borg motherhold emerged from the crowd, holding the wine-red flask. "This honey has sinnom in it!" she announced.

Magwin Ghar wheeled around upon Yannas. The hivekeeper's face was waxy with astonishment. "No!" she said. "It doesn't!"

"Liar!" Magwin growled low. "Damned crazy addict! Did you think you could get away with it? They'll have my life for this."

"There is no sinnom in it!" Yannas strode toward the judges' wagon. People

hastily made way for her. She took the flask and faced the judges. "I will prove it. If I had put sinnom in this honey, I would not dare to taste it." She took a long draught.

As the honey took effect she froze, her face rigid. The flask slipped from her senseless fingers and shattered on the ground. Her eyes glazed in the unmistakable grip of sinnom addiction.

"Damn you, damn you," Magwin whispered, her fists clenched.

"This is shameful!" Holdmother Alpha Borg stepped from the crowd, other holdmothers close behind. "This crime will slur all the motherholds unless we punish it swiftly. We cannot allow sinnom in our tents." Her voice dropped, but kept its metal edge. "I would not have thought it of you, Magwin. You know the penalty. You and your hivekeeper will die together."

Magwin's jaw muscles knotted. Nearby, Yannas stood like a statue. There were tears streaking down her face.

"No!" Dubich stepped forward, and his weary voice made them all fall silent. "Magwin knew nothing about it. It was I who put the sinnom in the honey. I stole it from Yannas; she never knew."

Magwin stared in disbelief. "Dubich! You?"

He turned to her, unable to meet her eyes. His gamble had lost; he had turned her victory into unspeakable dishonor. "I'm sorry, Magwin. I couldn't bear the thought of your losing."

He would not have blamed her for denouncing him. He had betrayed her, dissolved her lifelong reputation in a single drop of sinnom. But she took his hand and gripped it in her strong fist. Quietly, she said, "I pressed you too hard, and you broke. Broke out of love and loyalty. You're too good for me, old man."

"Is this your defense?" Alpha Borg demanded. "That Dubich Rhud is the one to pay?"

Magwin paused. She looked out at the horizon and took a deep breath, as if savoring life and the vitality still in her. Then her eye fell on Renata, standing to one side. Renata, who had accepted the consequences and faced death so coolly a moment ago.

"No," Magwin said. "I am responsible. The whole crazy contest was my idea, my plot to cheat nature just a little longer. But I couldn't win without breaking those who love me, and whom I love." She looked at Dubich, and suddenly her eyes were glassy with tears. But she spoke on, turning once more to Renata, her voice swelling: "I have one consolation. I have created myself a worthy successor."

Alpha Borg said slowly, "Then you and Dubich Rhud will pay the price."

Magwin turned to Dubich, a pang in her look. He said softly, "I am willing."

Tenderly she reached out and touched his hair. She looked as if she was seeing him for the first time in many months. "It's all white, Dubich. Your hair. You've gotten to be an old man. So old, so tired. And still a romantic fool."

They embraced then, pressed close against each other with the darkness at their backs. Then, holding hands tightly as new lovers, they turned together to where the broodpot stood waiting.

The drug was leaving. Yannas knew it, though the taste still lingered on her tongue, sweet with oblivion. She was falling away, falling back into the world of longing and loss. She struggled not to return to it, but someone was gripping her hand and urging her back. It was Magwin Ghar. So many times over the journeys she had dragged Yannas back against her will, forcing her to bear the emptiness of the sunlit world.

"Go away," she said.

"No," the voice replied.

It was not Magwin Ghar. Yannas looked down and saw it was not Magwin holding her hand either. It was Renata. "What are you doing?" she said.

They were sitting on camp stools in the open field beneath the walls of Erdrum. There were no crowds any longer; a last few people were filing away or standing about in clumps, talking.

"I am seeing to my hivekeeper," Renata said.

"Your--" Yannas stopped, realizing what must have happened. Grief seized her, sharp as a bee-sting, numbing her even to the drug-hunger. She bent over in pain.

"Is she gone?" Yannas asked at last.

"Yes," Renata said. "And Dubich Rhud, too."

A tear dropped on Renata's hand. "I loved her," Yannas said.

"A lot of people loved her," Renata said softly. "I hope some day I can say the same." She tightened her grip. "Yannas, you have to help me now. I have a lot to learn. I need you."

Yannas wanted to howl out, No! I can't! I am too tired. I can't start over again.

"We all need you," Renata said.

There was no strength left in her to push back hunger, and age, and emptiness, and try to go on.

The sunlit field swam before Yannas' eyes. She rose, clenching her jaw. "I have to see to my bees," she said.