

# Under the Honey

by Liz Williams

She's La Papesse always and he knows this when she goes down under the honey. He knows she'll come back up again, carrying future glimpses with her, gasping like someone who's nearly drowned and stammering out the yet-to-come. Joan in the never-never, white eyed and shaking, in the gloom of the ruin of the palace with all the bells of Avignon ringing out beyond her.

Joan hears singing, sometimes, very far away. She thinks it's something waiting up the line and the knowledge lends urgency, makes her keep on going, just in case the *something* catches up. It's why she likes the Beekeeper to stay close to her, though she knows that if the singing thing ever does break through, not even the Beekeeper can stop it. But the Beekeeper looks on with his wise and golden gaze and Joan feels a little better for it, at that.

#

From high beneath the arch of the dome, a figure plunged down in a shower of roses. Below, in the ring, the dancers leaped high to catch the falling flowers. At the centre of the ring, a woman lay prone, holding a lotus. The figure swooped, quick as a swallow, and seized the cluster of pale petals. As the crowd gasped, he was snatched upward by the band which secured his ankles and sailed back into the airy heights of the ruined cathedral to spin and land upon the wire.

Without a pause, the show continued. The sunset light flooded through the great rose window, each crimson pane casting a watery red shadow across the stone flags. This window was all that remained; the rest of the glass was long gone, blown out by a blast early in the war. Minou knew that this had once been a silent place where people gathered to sing, but now the Cirque du Reve had come and she was in the front row, watching. She had never seen such wonderful sights. A mime appeared, in harlequin diamonds, masked with the long head of a swan. The mask swept up at the back of his head to a nodding plume and his costume tapered to a twitching tail. A second mime appeared.

Seeing the audience, they started in exaggerated surprise. Delight dawned across their faces. They had spied a woman in an elegant, fur-collared suit. Laughing soundlessly, they took her arms and gently rotated her in a neat somersault. She shrieked, laughing with them. Next to her sat a portly, jowled gentleman. Minou stared. Surely they wouldn't—but they lifted him from his seat, grasped his elbows, and bent him inexorably backwards. There was a clap of thunder and the ringmaster Monsieur Loyal appeared in a flash, mid stage, in his customary top hat woven with lilies. Horror struck, ashamed, the mimes vanished into the giggling crowd. Minou watched in gaping silence.

Then from frivolousness to tragedy, like life, a woman was carried out upon a bier. Monsieur Loyal cavorted around her. Dramatically, he drew his sword in one black gloved hand and severed her head. The air rushed from the ring in a sigh as the crowd drew breath. Monsieur Loyal held the dripping head aloft. Comically, it grimaced, and rolled its eyes. With a mocking courtesy, Monsieur Loyal introduced the head to the body. The head looked longingly towards the clean break at the neck. Monsieur Loyal gestured. He might have been at a cocktail party: *head, meet body; body, this is head*. Mimicking reverence, he placed the head down on the cushioned bier. A moment later, the woman sat up, arms extended in supplication. Monsieur Loyal reached out a velvet-gloved hand, and, taking his arm, she danced from the ring. The crowd was on its feet, applauding wildly.

When he had heard that they would be going to the circus, Minou's aunt's boyfriend, the one she did not like, had told her that the act which had been setting the French countryside alight for the last month was nothing more than a crude trick, designed to entertain fools. It was what happened after wars, he told

her. People would put up with any nonsense if it took their minds off things. They were fools, he said. The smart-bombs could be raining down on their heads and they'd still be wondering what the latest actress was up to. Minou was only eleven, but she had not believed him then, and she did not believe him now. She could feel the *realness* of it: the pulse of miracle through her blood. It seemed familiar, like something she had always known. She put a hand to her face and her skin felt smooth, as though the scars had disappeared. Minou knew that this was not true, that if she stared at her face in the mirror she would see the familiar, hated stretch of shiny skin, but nonetheless she sat wide eyed in the front row, until the canopy grew shadowy and the audience began to file outside.

Outside, Minou waited until her aunt became distracted, and then she slipped away. She ran around the back of the huge tent, then through the little shanty-town of vans towards the entrance. Halfway there, she ran into a girl in wellington boots and a ragged raincoat, whose face was still painted with spirals and stars beneath a dandelion crop of hair. She had been up on the trapeze, impossibly far away; now, she looked somehow smaller. She was carrying a bucket.

"Hello," she said to Minou. "Where are you off to?"

"Where is she?" Minou said, then shut up like a clam.

"Who?"

"The woman who dies."

"Firouche? She's round the front. Are you all on your own? What's your name? Mine's Emilie."

But Minou scowled, refusing to be diverted, and ran round the girl with the bucket and away.

She found Firouche sitting in temporary splendour under a canopy that dripped with rain. For a price, Minou knew, you could put your ear to the silk at her breast and hear the robust heartbeat within. The crowd queued up, waiting patiently to have their chance at a glimpse of immortality. Most of them were local people, some of whom Minou knew by sight.

Essay Ertegun, the Baron, the wealthiest man in Avignon, for instance. A retainer held an umbrella over the Baron's neat dark head as he engaged Firouche in a series of questions. His pale face wore a careful smile, as artificial as a mask. Minou watched with a curled lip. She was too far down the queue to hear what he was saying, but Firouche seemed to be answering him graciously enough, before turning to the tall blue-eyed man at her side. Bank notes changed hands, via Monsieur Loyal's black glove.

At last, it was the turn of Minou. Faced with the object of her heart's desire, she ran forward, only to stop stock still and gape in fright at the last moment. Firouche reached out a long hand and drew a gentle finger down Minou's cheek.

"How do you do it?" Minou whispered, and received a sad shrug in reply before her aunt, finding her at last, gave her a slap and pulled her away.

#

La Papesse takes a card and turns it over.

*The High Priestess*. Only to be expected. *That's me, after all*. Another choice and that's the Devil, which makes Joan smile an arctic smile. Uncoiling from the couch, she goes to the door and summons the Beekeeper.

But the Beekeeper will not come. He's down among the hives, he tells Joan's runner. He's busy. Joan

clicks her tongue, pulls on her gloves with sharp, rapid movements, buttons her boots, picks up her cane and taps down the stairs. Her footsteps echo on dusty wood: the palace is falling apart and there's nothing that can be done about it. The shell fell more than a year gone now, and the place still stinks of burning.

Outside, Joan blinks in sudden sunlight. She's never got used to the day: too many years of working in nightclubs, going to bed at dawn, rising at twilight. It's like living back to front. Remembering that, she grimaces, lurching on the cane, and the runner, the boy, hovers nervously beside her, not daring to touch, scared that she'll fall. She won't be dancing again, she thinks, not in this body. But out in the Unbound, she dances all the time.

She knows she is lucky. The Beekeeper could have chosen anyone. But he tells her that she's special: she has a gift. He spotted it straight away.

*"What kind of gift?" Joan asked, frowning.*

*"You can see the future," he said. "Can't you? In snatches."*

*And she wondered how he'd known, because it was true, had been true ever since the beginning of the war, as if the bombs had jolted something loose in her head.*

*She remembers his hand, gently tilting her chin as though she was still a child. "You're a new breed, Joan. The war, those weapons they used... You don't know it yet, but you will."*

Now, she can smell the honey before she even reaches the hives. It lies hot and golden, heavy in the air. Joan closes her eyes for a moment, leans on the runner's arm as faintness overtakes her.

*You mustn't take too much, or too often, the Beekeeper said when all this began.*

*"What's the difference? I'm dying anyway."*

*But the Beekeeper smiles and Joan knows what he's thinking: it's not about you. We need you to be operational for as long as possible.*

*But I'm La Papesse, aren't I? the younger Joan would have protested. I'm special, I'm important. Aren't I?*

*I'm here to be used and when I wither, they'll find someone else. Because she knew that the Beekeeper had already been looking.*

"Madame? Are you all right?" The runner is staring at her, concerned.

"I'm fine. Let's go and talk to the Beekeeper, shall we?" And Joan limps on, into the honey-drenched light, into the hum.

#

There was always one, in every town they visited. It had always happened—or so Firouche supposed, because she was unable to remember the medium-term. Memory, after all, is the prerogative of those who are truly alive. Merlay had told her that it started when they first arrived, after their first show. War breeds cynicism and faith: plenty of people said that her death and resurrection was nothing more than a conjuring trick, but plenty of people believed. The war had brought strange things; people were more open-minded than they had been before. With the arrival of that first believer, Firouche knew that she'd made a mistake, but by then she had no choice.

What she could recall, however, was the day-to-day, and something of the time before they came. She remembered Seresay, Carachay, the summer seas and the endless skies, where her talent was a rite of passage, not a circus act. In Carachay, it was done every few years, a rehearsal before the mercuriers came for the toll. Here, she was using up her lives quicker than a cat.

“So, Firouche,” Merlay said to her after each show, his ritual greeting. “How *are* you?” and she would turn to smile, tell him that she was fine. When she had heard requests and bestowed what favours she could, she would lean against him as he took her back to the trailer. As she removed her make-up, she would look at her face in the little mirror over the sink. It was always pale, which was only to be expected. She could see her own scars, very faint beneath her skin, the ghosts of wounds long gone.

Merlay came back the next morning, sliding his arms around her as she turned the corner of the trailer and making her jump.

“Have fun last night?” Firouche asked, very sly. His face rested against her cheek and she felt him grimace.

“Of sorts. I’ve got a booking, though.”

“In Avignon?”

“In Avignon. The Baron thinks we’ll get a big crowd there.”

“We’ll get a big crowd anywhere, Merlay.”

They had another stop near Avignon, in a town called Reve-sur-Meuse. *Dream on the River*. It was not such a spectacular venue as Chartres or some of the others, and they had to put the tent up. It was still raining, pouring down, and they were all stumbling about in the mud before it was done, slipping and cursing. Firouche’s fans wouldn’t recognise her now, she thought, dressed in mudstained overalls and rainslicker with her hair in rat’s tails. But at last the dome billowed up, white as a dove in the rainy dark, and it was time to get ready for the show.

#

“So who do *you* think she is?” the Beekeeper asks Joan. She looks at him as he lounges on the couch, the frock coat undone to display immaculate cuffs. His skin is the colour of ebony, a black without shine. The engineered eyes are the colour of suns. He grins a sharp grin, shoots a cuff.

“I don’t know. She seems to have just–appeared. Out of nowhere. You’d think one would have *heard*.”

“It’s the war,” the Beekeeper says idly. “A lot of things have come out of the woodwork, since then.”

Joan nudges him with a toe. “That’s what you always say. ‘It’s the war.’”

“And I wonder, too, if she’s one of the Baron’s creations.” It hangs in the air, unspoken: *she’s not one of mine*.

“I don’t think she is,” says Joan, remembering the cards, and the conversation.

“*What can you see, Joan? What can you see?*”

*And Joan falls back, seeing the cells of the hive beneath and beyond, whirling out into starlight, as the fiery drop on her tongue takes her soul and spins it out like taffy.*

*“I can see—”*

*There’s an island, golden-green. White buildings crown it, and Joan’s suddenly there, among mimosa and lilies. Everything glows. Tears come to Joan’s eyes: it’s so different from post-Third World War France. She’s been here before: it’s where she saw the woman, when the woman was a child. Joan remembers silver eyes—but the woman’s not here now. She stands on the terrace, watching through someone else’s gaze, sipping information, as a ship like a hummingbird comes in low over the water.*

*The person she is inhabiting can’t hear the vessel’s engines. She’s wearing earplugs, just in case, because it’s a Majaharai ship and it carries a mercurier. It’s come looking for the woman, Joan understands. Something’s gone wrong: Carachay’s toll hasn’t been paid. The toll has, in fact, escaped, and Joan feels the wonder of that.*

*Then, suddenly, she’s snatched back and the Unbound unfurls out before her, banners of plasma galaxy wide, stars like pinpricks in pockets of time. The honey takes her back, subsiding into sweetness and memory, and Joan’s there among the hives and the sleepy day, with the Beekeeper bending over her.*

*“What do you see, Joan?”*

*But there is nothing more.*

Now, she rises, unsteadily, from the couch. Beyond the window, Avignon is dark under the curfew.

“Well, Beekeeper. Whoever this woman might be, with her mysterious circus friends—shall we go and see her for ourselves?”

#

An immense iron box was pushed onto the stage, fire blazing within. Monsieur Loyal opened the furnace door. Bound to a wooden cross, her hair trailing, Firouche was plunged inside. The audience strained forward until the heat turned their faces rosy and sweating. Minou, once again in the front row, was too hot. She fidgeted, but her eyes never left the furnace. There was a hiss, a burst of steam, and the door was wrenched open to reveal a flying cloud of ash. Nothing remained.

Monsieur Loyal’s painted face was filled with glee. He sifted the ashes, soft as a moth’s wing, through his fingers and they floated to the sawdust floor. As the ashes congealed, the artiste fell back with a living sigh into his arms. Her snowy gown was unmarked.

Minou’s mouth was a perfect, empty circle. The dome must have been leaking, for suddenly the air was full of rose petals and rain.

#

There was a timid knock on the door of the trailer. Firouche knew who it was even before she stumbled out of bed and opened the door. The little girl was standing on the step, her mouth buttoned tight.

“*How do you do it?*” was all she said, determined. Firouche sat down beside Minou in her dressing gown, in the rain.

“Oh, my dear, I couldn’t tell you. I’ve never known.”

“Why can’t I?” the child murmured. In the lamplight from the trailer, the scars across her face shone like the tracks of tears.

“Perhaps you can,” Firouche said, but she was not hopeful. She thought: *I can’t tell her it’s because she’s human and I—well, I am from somewhere else. Somewhere and somewhen. And who knows, maybe in some manner she can make the journey, for I can die and come back all the time, except inside, knowing that there’s no going home across the Unbound and I’m stranded here forever.* She thought that perhaps the child understood this, for she did not ask again. And there was something about the girl, too, something half-recognised, not-quite-familiar. . . Not like Emilie, who was from this place and time, who’d come to them as a waif. Now, here was another one, but this one was different.

“Minou? Do you ever—see things? Do you ever see the future?”

Minou was silent for a moment. Then the little girl said, “Sometimes. I think I might have seen *you*.”

There was a pause.

“My aunt,” was the next thing that Minou said. “She’s gone. All the stuff at her house is gone.”

Firouche felt a spasm of dismay. “Do you know where?”

“I expect she’s gone off with her boyfriend. She didn’t want me anyway,”

“So where will you go now?”

“I don’t know.” But from the sidelong glance she gave Firouche, it was clear what Minou hoped.

They sat side by side on the step of the trailer in silence and gradually the rain passed and the stars drifted out.

#

“It’s a very clever trick,” the Baron Ertegun said, lazily. His eyes reflected the candlelight, burning like dark bronze. From the little brazier, a thin thread of smoke wound up towards the ceiling. Merlay turned his head.

“A trick?”

“That your lady manages so convincingly to accomplish. The simulation of death. The peasants are really rather impressed; they seem to see her as some sort of *priestess* . . . Almost a Christ figure, I suppose: rising again on the third beat of the heart.” He paused, then asked with careful nonchalance, “How’s it done?”

Merlay smiled, relaxing back against the faded crimson velvet of the couch.

“Trade secret.”

“Ah, you artists. . .” Ertegun said. He leaned over the brazier, so that shadows flickered across the smooth oval of his face. “Always aspiring to mystery. Perhaps that’s what people need these days. Something to believe in. They’ve always held a place for the goddess in their hearts in this region—Saint Joan, the Black Madonna. . . And now our own Firouche. Such a classically *evocative* name. Is she Egyptian, perhaps? She has a look of the Maghreb about her. Apart, of course, from those silvery eyes. . .”

Merlay said nothing. The Baron leaned languidly across the table and prodded the crumble of opium with a sharp fingernail.

“Not so bad, this last shipment. It comes from the south, you know, from Tangiers via Marseilles. Talking

of the Maghreb... That's the wonderful thing about war—it frees up commerce.”

“Is it lucrative?” Merlay murmured. The Baron glanced at him in mild surprise.

“Oh, drugs are always lucrative, my dear. You must have led a very sheltered life if you don't know that. Dreams and visions have an enduring popularity.”

“And what about your dreams, Ertegun?”

“Oh,” the Baron said. “I have the most *magnificent* dreams...” He took a deep breath of the smoky air and sighed. “All the way into the past, all the way into the future...” He gave Merlay a slanted look. “I think you understand what I mean.”

Merlay stared at him, suddenly uneasy, but the Baron only smiled.

“Come here. Sit with me for a moment...” And, after a moment, Merlay complied.

#

“It isn't a trick,” Joan says, stumbling a little. The Unbound seems to unravel under her feet, splitting the mud and the puddles, fracturing the solid world. The Beekeeper takes her arm, steadying her.

“You don't think so? They're very clever, some of these illusionists.”

“Not an illusion.” Joan's voice feels suddenly thick, clotting in her throat. There's the taste of honey on her tongue and it sickens her. “I can feel it.”

“Then *who are they?*”

“They're what we brought back. We opened a door and they came through.” She turns in anguish to the Beekeeper. “What have we *done?* They're from the future. They're from the future we're making.”

“You don't know that.”

“Of course I do. I could *see* it, when we were watching them. All the visions I've been having, through the honey... I had them again, watching the show.”

“So Firouche is from the future, is she?” He is smiling at her gently.

“Isn't that what we're supposed to be looking for?” Joan turns to face him. “To find a way across the years, to cross the Unbound?”

“Joan...”

“When we started this, you said it was my task, to learn to travel. Because I could glimpse the future. You told me it would give us an edge, to learn what was coming after the war. But it's more than that, isn't it?”

The Beekeeper shrugs. “I'm a scientist, Joan.”

“You were a drug dealer.”

To her surprise, he looks a little hurt. “They're not incompatible, surely?”

They walk on in silence, but Joan is thinking hard. All the little jigsaw pieces: the honey itself, bred from engineered bees. Its effect on her, and the things she sees. The Unbound, and Firouche walking out of

fire. The Beekeeper has said that he'll always protect her, but what is that promise really worth? And yet Joan knows that without him, she would not have a life at all, because he holds the drugs that make her existence possible.

#

From her high seat on the edge of the trapeze platform, Minou could see that the Baron was once again attending the show, sitting in a front row seat. His hands, primly concealed beneath a pair of satin gloves, were folded in his lap, and he was wearing a high black cravat above which his face shone in an oval of light. From this distance, Minou thought, he looked a bit like a monk. It wasn't until you got closer that you saw the flat look in his eyes, the skin sagging in upon itself beneath its layer of powder.

Up here, high on her trapeze, was as close as Minou wanted to be to Baron Ertegun. He was watching Merlay, she saw, his eyes never leaving Monsieur Loyal. Minou knew that the Baron was paying for their tour down to Avignon, but she hated his presence, every night now for four nights. She clutched the trapeze rail tightly, waiting for the dandelion-haired Emilie to swing back and smile at her, or the juggler Semirami to swing the other way. She could still not quite believe that she'd been allowed to come with them. The rope by which Firouche had insisted she be tied to the platform was rough under her hands.

*If you're high enough and you're not allowed to fall, everything seems all right,* Minou thought.

Backstage, she watched as Emilie pulled off the glistening rags of her costume, bundling them up and stuffing them into a carrier bag. Her leggings were stiff with mud, but her jeans were still wet and so she drew the leggings on, pulling a face as she did so.

On their way out, Minou saw Merlay, still in Monsieur Loyal's black coat and tall hat. The Baron's face gleamed in the darkness; his hands were on Merlay's shoulders, and as Minou backed away into the shelter of Emilie's arm, she saw the Baron draw him closer. Merlay's eyes were open and unreadable. Beneath the greasepaint, his face was devoid of expression. Emilie and Minou turned and fled back the way they had come.

#

They loved the death by fire, and Firouche preferred the erupting, golden warmth rather than that great dull thud as the sword came down. Back in the trailer, Merlay squinted down at her, amused. He had an invitation to the Baron's hotel, later. Now, his prematurely grey hair was dishevelled.

"I don't know how you do it," he told her, affectionately mocking. "This dying thing..."

"That's because you're a man. Women do it all the time," she replied.

But the truth was that she didn't know either. She had not the faintest idea how she got away with it, that matter of death and resurrection, but it was certainly very popular.

"Nine o'clock," Merlay said, with regret. "I've got to go..."

Minou was with Emilie this evening; they'd gone into the town to buy *frites*. Left to herself, Firouche sank into the folding chair and switched on the radio. She turned the dial through lines of static, catching a sudden burst of music, faint and far away, then the brief news.

Firouche listened half-heartedly. There were riots along the Côte; more North African refugees were flooding across the Med and up through the Basque Republic. There had been a further series of explosions in Brussels, bringing what was left of the city to its knees. Destruction visited daily; they would have to wait until the last of the missiles fragmented towards the moon or plunged towards their outdated



targets. So much ruin, and yet this was what Firouche herself had been made for, in a very different place and war. The radio subsided into static. She reached out a hand and turned it off, then closed her eyes and thought of Carachay. She could see her mother's white house, floating behind her eyelids, on the hillside above the bay. Lilies grew along the garden wall, long tongued and gilded with pollen, and the air was sweet with mimosa. Every evening, Firouche would listen for the sound of the sails in the wind, as the fishing boats sailed out into the bay, and they would wake her in the morning as they creaked back against the wharf. The Colony was quiet, except for the fishing boats, and the hooves of the cattle along the roads, and the women's voices, singing to tell one another the news underneath the linden trees.

The Majaharai had not foreseen this, when they established the Colony. They had arrived on Seresey in force, so her grandmother had told her, seizing the southern port of Estarra, taking slaves. The Sereseyans had ignored them, sitting down and smiling Merlay's vague, stubborn smile, and refusing to acknowledge the gravity of their situation. The Majaharai killed them, one by one, but it made no difference. Even under incendiary weapons, they behaved as though the invaders were not there. The Majaharai, their power thrown back into their faces, were at first angry, then bewildered, and at last frightened. Their choice was to kill everyone or leave, and their wiser generals decided on the latter. To save face, they gave the islands of the Sabaya–Carachay, Jeneda Ecocheyen, and Caillou—to their mercuriers and thus established the Colony for the reconstructives.

Reconstructives, like herself. The ones who could not die, the ones who could travel into the Unbound. Remnants of a long experiment, guarded by the mercuriers, kept in the confines of the Colony.

Firouche's dreaming thoughts were far away, under the electric scent of the linden trees and the wash of the sea. She did not hear the trailer door open. She dreamed of the bees in the mimosa, and when the needle entered her arm, she awoke for a second at the sting and then fell back limply into sleep.

#

Minou, asleep in the back of Emilie's van, was woken by the sound of voices, speaking rapidly and anxiously. Merlay, Emilie, and Semirami were standing outside in a damp huddle.

"What's going on?" Minou asked sleepily.

She met Merlay's blue eyes, and saw in them a sliver of fear, swiftly concealed.

"Firouche is gone. Don't worry; she's probably around somewhere." He did not sound convinced.

"Where would she have gone?" Emilie said.

"Well, there are two possibilities," Semirami said. "Either she's gone out of her own accord, or someone took her."

"Who?" Merlay asked.

"The obvious choice, if you'll pardon me for saying so, is your boyfriend."

The stare that Merlay turned upon him was glacial.

"Hardly an appropriate choice of words, under the circumstances. You *know* why I'm doing what I'm doing. We've got to survive."

"Well, what do *you* think?" Semirami asked, clearly exasperated. "Firouche's one hell of a commodity, after all. Even to the casual observer, she's a woman with a very odd talent, which people seem to think can help them. The other possibility, farfetched though it might be, is that someone knows what she really

is. That means a mercurier is here.”

“Is that likely?”

*What’s a mercurier?* thought Minou, but something in their faces stopped her from asking.

“You just never know. I don’t know how far they’d come to get her back. I mean, we’ve stolen their property, after all. They might well have sent someone to retrieve her, or exact retribution, stop other people getting the same idea.”

“Merlay,” Emilie asked. “What is Firouche?” Minou shivered as she leaned out into the rain. In the vaporous darkness, Merlay’s face floated before her like a ghost. She had to strain to hear his voice.

“She’s a memecure, a reconstructive.” Emilie looked blank, and he continued patiently, “She’s an engineered biological entity. They were supposed to be the perfect soldiers, to be able to withstand massive physical onslaughts and capable of changing reality by entering into a between-state called the Unbound. They can die, and come back to life, and die again, but they won’t willingly kill. Why should they? You need aggression for that, and behind that lies fear. So their creators abandoned them, in an enclosed colony on—well, never mind. They take a few every year, like a tithe. I’m not sure why; Firouche thought that it was for experimental purposes, to see if they could be made to do what their creators wanted. Firouche was chosen; she never wanted to be a killing thing, and we didn’t see why she should....So we rescued her, and escaped from where we were, and we stranded ourselves here.”

“You’re not *human*?” Emilie’s face was disbelieving, yet she did not sound surprised.

“Oh, we’re human. Well, more or less. We’re most of us related, somewhere or other along the line. At least, myself and Semirami. Some others—maybe not so much.” Minou’s hands were cold and moist. Automatically she wiped them on the unyielding surface of the macintosh.

“Why the circus?”

“What better way to hide strangeness, than by making it visible?” Merlay said.

#

Firouche was woken by the sound of the sea, endlessly breaking on the shore of Carachay, and the hum of the bees in the green vines. Then, as she opened her eyes, she knew that it was only the night wind in the eaves and the slow burn of a generator far below. Her head ached, pounding with the generator’s rhythm and with the smell of stale incense that permeated the air. Firouche rolled over and stared into the empty room. It was bare of furniture. Tracks in the dusty floor showed where chairs and tables had once been. Experimentally, Firouche flexed her fingers. Nothing was broken. She sat up and rubbed her sore eyes. She was still wearing her dressing gown and her feet were bare. With care, she rose from the couch and crossed to the door, which was locked. The only other means of exit was a tiny grating high on the wall, through which the wind drifted. After a careful inspection, Firouche sat back down on the couch and waited.

#

Minou was about to creep out of the shadows when the limousine drew past. It came silently out of the darkness and speeded up as it passed the trailers.

“God, who’s that?” Merlay murmured, but Minou was looking at the car. It was a long, gleaming machine; the chrome trim glittered under the rain and the trailer lights, and the windows were as black as a raven’s wing.

“Ertegun,” Semirami said.

#

Joan gasps, choking for breath. Her mouth is honey-filled and when she opens her eyes, all she can see is gold.

“Steady, now.” The Beekeeper’s voice sharpens. “Hold her down—don’t let her up.”

Joan, drowning in thickness, fights with sudden tiger force, but it’s no good. The Unbound opens up before her: she sees a planet hanging in the never-never like a clouded jewel and knows it’s Earth, but it’s *wrong*, the continents are all wrong. There’s a bright spark shooting up from it, glittering, and Joan hears a thin piercing song.

“Enough!” She doesn’t realise she’s shouted until she’s sitting up on the couch, clawing at the Beekeeper’s arm.

“All right, Joan. Everything’s all right.”

“No,” Joan manages to say. “No, it isn’t.”

Later, hurtling through the rain-soaked, bomb-blasted streets, she hears it again, seeping through the windows of the car.

“Beekeeper!”

“What?” He doesn’t look round from the wheel.

“Can you hear it?”

His eyes narrow. “I can’t hear anything.”

It’s like a wire, humming and singing under tension. It reminds her of a wasp, or a bee in flight. She’s heard it before.

“There—” She lurches forward in her seat, pointing into the shadows of the old palace wall.

“What?” The Beekeeper is very patient, but even he doesn’t understand that sometimes she sees things that shouldn’t be there, that there’s bleed from the Unbound, that there’s *seep*... A white, pointed face, a mantis jerk of the limbs as the thing sails upwards, onto the roof, and it’s singing again, sweet and insidious...

“Nothing,” Joan says. “Nothing at all.”

#

After a time, Firouche, far away in memories of Carachay, heard the door opening.

“Ah,” she said, without opening her eyes. “I thought it would be you.”

“Welcome to the chateau, madame,” Ertegun’s voice said.

“Is that what it is?”

She felt Ertegun’s weight settling on the end of the couch. The Baron said, “Well, only the tower’s left now, and part of a wing. It used to be a chateau, though; the resistance used it over a hundred years ago

during the German Occupation, and again, during the last conflict, before they realised there was nothing to resist.”

“And now *you’ve* inherited it.”

“I thought it was good enough for a country home,” he said, deprecatingly.

“So,” Firouche said. She opened her eyes and looked at the Baron. “Now you’ve got me. What are you going to do with me?”

“That’s a very good point. I’m not sure. I think you might be useful. I’ve seen what you can do, every night, in a shower of roses.” He smiled at her. She could hear the lie in his voice. Ertegun crossed his legs so that one elegant black slipper dangled. He appeared to be considering his words. At last he said, “My involvement with Monsieur Loyal...d’you mind that?”

“Why would I? And why should you care if I did?”

He made a little gesture. “Idle curiosity. A sensual man, Merlay. I can see why you’re so attached to him.”

Firouche said nothing. She considered taking him into the Unbound, but she wanted to find out what he was up to. The Baron seemed to be gaining confidence. She was aware of Ertegun’s gaze, lambent, amused, and there was something that lay behind it, the shadow in the pool. *This is not my only enemy*, she thought with sudden intuition. *My real enemy is not far away.*

“That’s very effective, that trick of yours,” he said, breaking the silence. “Except it isn’t a trick, is it?”

“Everything’s a trick, Baron. What were *you*, before the Fall?”

Ertegun made a small, modest gesture.

“A great many things, like most of us. I performed, like you, though never quite so dramatically. I–arranged things. Put people together. Then, the war came, and I saw an opportunity to reinvent myself. A lot of people did that.”

“If I choose to walk from here, I don’t know that you could stop me.”

Ertegun looked at her curiously.

“Yes, it’s an interesting point, isn’t it? What possible threat could I provide to you? After all, what am I to do, *kill* you? You who die every day? I think the solution is obvious, don’t you?”

After a moment, Firouche nodded.

“So who is it to be, held over my head? Merlay? Emilie? Minou?”

“Merlay, I think, will put up with much for your sake, certainly death. He’s volunteered once already, hasn’t he? And you might even sacrifice that blonde young woman for a matter of principle. Old fashioned...So it’s to be the little girl. Oh, and if you’re contemplating trying anything with me, my men are under instructions to kill her anyway. Just–not right away.”

Firouche nodded in resignation. “I thought so.”

#

“So where would he have taken her?” Semirami asked. Minou, concealed against the side of the van, listened.

“There are a number of choices. There’s the house in Avignon, which is the stronghold. He has places here and there; the town houses in Rêve and Orleans, a country house not far from here. He’s a powerful man, after all.”

“So who is he, this Baron?” Emilie asked.

“He’s involved in the heroin trade, for a start—and other drugs, new ones, like liminale and eftun. I asked some discreet questions around the locality. He used to be a fence, but during the war he started dealing in arms—military equipment from the east. Must have gone like hotcakes. That’s how he got his power, and he still keeps a tight rein on the traffic. Then, it seems, he turned to narcotics. In his own field, he’s talented.”

“Not talented enough, if he wants Firouche,” Minou heard Emilie say.

“Evidently not.”

#

Firouche waited, remembering the waves breaking against the shores of Carachay, and listened for the sound of a car in the driveway below the tower. At last, there was the sound of gravel grinding beneath the wheels of a vehicle and the thud of a door closing. Firouche shut her eyes. Down beyond the tower, a blackbird started to sing, the sharp clicking notes of warning. Firouche listened. Along the edge of the air, the furthest point of hearing, she could hear a child’s laboured breath. Augmented senses, designed to stretch beyond radar, caught the most surprising things. Without haste, Firouche rose and padded over to the door.

#

They had split up to search. As plans were made, Minou ran into the trailer, hauled the blanket over her, feigned sleep. But when Emilie had glanced in through the trailer door and closed it gently behind her, Minou jumped from the bed once more and ran out into the darkness.

Emilie and the juggler were heading for the small white van, the ancient Renault. It was not locked, Minou knew. She bolted around the back of the trailers, making sure that she stayed unseen, then into the back of the van through the open door. Huddling behind a crate, she waited until Semirami slammed the door shut, and they were away along the Avignon road.

The van bounced and lurched as Semirami sent it skidding between the potholes. Minou gripped the edges of the crate and hung on, but she could see through the gap between the seats that the juggler’s face was serene. They hit a ramp going up over the bridge and swerved on the rain slick road, narrowly missing the parapet. Emilie drew breath sharply.

“Are you all right?” Semirami asked, cheerfully.

“I’d rather have the high wire,” Emilie said, through clenched teeth.

“Sorry about that.”

“Where *did* you learn to drive?”

“What? Oh, just picked it up. Someone sold us this, and the trailers. We seem to pick stuff up. So I

thought I'd better learn to drive it. Trial and error. It's not that hard."

Grimly, Emilie nodded.

"Where are we heading?"

"Apparently, there's a place the Baron's got just outside town. An old chateau. It's as good a place as any to look."

They drove on in silence for a few kilometres, then Semirami turned off the road and parked the van on the verge.

"*Autre ville*. See the sign? It's somewhere near here."

He and Emilie got out and started up the road towards the village. Minou followed. The rain was easing off now, and she could see the morning stars through the break in the flying clouds.

"Do you think that's it?" she heard Emilie say.

The squat tower rose up at the end of a long low building, visible in a dip across the fields. Lights showed along the courtyard, throwing the silhouette of the tower into black relief.

"Could be. I've no idea where this place is supposed to be. But something's been down this lane recently—you can see tyre tracks in the mud. I don't imagine too many people around here have cars. Not anymore."

"Not any more," Emilie echoed. Slipping in the mud, she followed Semirami down the track towards the farm, and Minou came after.

#

Joan is listening, sitting bolt upright in the back of the car. Her eyes are open but she can see nothing but rain. The Beekeeper is watching her, but Joan can't look at him: every time she does so, phantom honey floods her mouth.

She can still hear it, and hearing brings vision. It isn't human. It watches her, crouched in a corner of her sight. Its head swivels from side to side: hairless, a pointed jaw which moves in a way that a man's does not, eyes like beads of mercury. The mouth purses, and instinctively Joan claps her hands to her ears. The thing raises a long white hand from the depths of its cloak and beckons mockingly.

"Joan?" The Beekeeper's voice is urgent. "What can you see?"

She's about to answer him, but the song begins, and she feels her bones turn to glass and her flesh to water. She tries to speak, but the song drowns it out, and Joan, fumbling, opens the door of the car and is out before the Beekeeper can stop her. The air is filled with an acrid tang.

It's standing in the rainy light, under a lamp. Its limbs jerk and twitch beneath the cloak, and then it pulls the cloak aside and Joan sees that it is playing something, strumming its long fingers across the strings of a lyre—except that it isn't an instrument, it's the thing's own ribcage. Joan's scream breaks the sirensong and the Beekeeper's hand is an iron band on her arm, dragging her back out of range, back against the side of a trailer, stuffing something round and warm into each of her ears.

He mouths, "*Hush*."

It must be coming after them, Joan thinks, and that thought's enough for her to break and run, panicking

through the circus ground. The place seems deserted: where is everyone? Has it killed them?—and with sudden intuition Joan knows that this is its purpose: she can see it creeping against those white walls, through the fronds of mimosa, very far away. It's all wrong there and it's wrong here, too, doesn't belong, like a tiger in a formal garden, and it doesn't care.

A predator. Joan's glad of the wax plugs in her ears, even though the seep of the honey smell is almost enough to catapult her into the Unbound. It isn't even looking for them, Joan realises. It's on the hunt for another quarry, but that doesn't mean it won't play. As stealthily as she can, she creeps around the side of the trailer and sees it heading off into the darkness. It doesn't move like a man, or an animal. It simply stands, and its attenuated figure grows smaller, as though it's folding space to transport itself, and every time it does so, Joan glimpses the Unbound's dizzying reach in flashes of midnight and fire.

Every time she takes the honey, she's tossed through time like a leaf in a whirlpool, but this thing travels with clockwork precision, jumping through the Unbound, and away.

But not for long.

#

It happened so quickly that Minou didn't have time to scream. Hands reaching out from the thick laurel hedgerow, a palm clamped over her mouth, and she was lifted bodily off her feet and hoisted into the air.

Thrown over a man's shoulder like a sack of beets, Minou struggled, clawed, kicked. It earned her the ground again, but also a slap to the ear that made her head ring and the world fill with stars. Briefly dizzy, she tried to run, but was again hauled back. Something was thrust over her head, and then the cool air on her skin was replaced by stuffiness and a sweet, repellent smell. She felt herself being dragged down a flight of stairs. Then freedom, but a door slammed behind her. Minou tore off the bag over her head and still could not see. Feeling her way around the room told her that it was small, with rough walls, and higher than she could reach. There was nothing in it, except straw. Fuming, Minou at last crumpled down at the furthest end of the room and prepared to wait.

#

Firouche could hear footsteps approaching down the corridor. She waited until she heard the key in the lock, an electronic hum. Fancy technology, in this day and age, and for such an ostensibly primitive place. The door was opened by a short, broad man in a puffed jacket. Firouche had never seen such an obvious henchman. Her lips twitched. Evidently the Baron reserved his more personable associates for public view. Her eyes moved to the automatic weapon in his hand, and her smile widened.

"The Baron insists—I mean, can you come with me?" His command turned into a plea.

"Of course," Firouche said, graciously, the grande dame in her dressing gown. She considered whether to take the man *elsewhere*, but there was Minou to consider. . . Besides, she still wanted to find out more about the Baron. So she brushed past the proffered gun to the door. Downstairs, the hallway widened into a cavernous dining room. Ertegun sat at the end of the table in state. Minou sulkily waited by his side.

"Good morning." Firouche said to the Baron. To the child she said "Minou? Are you all right?"

"No." Minou was not wasting words.

"I'll make this charitably brief," Ertegun said. "What I would like is a demonstration. A little show."

"Oh?"

The Baron gestured towards the door at the far end of the hall.

“Bring him in.”

The man was blindfolded, masked in a helmet of white silk that looked like part of a tablecloth. His feet were bare beneath a ragged suit.

“A business associate?” Firouche enquired.

“Of sorts. No longer, though, I fear, which is why I’d like an illustration of your talents. The gun’s on her.” He gestured towards Minou, who regarded him with a stoical gaze of contempt. He was keeping his right hand beneath the table. Firouche was searching the room for the characteristic chemical presence of a mercurier. She found nothing, but that was not necessarily conclusive. Her concern must be Minou: she was not confident of acting quickly enough for the Baron not to fire, and she had no doubt that he would. She nodded.

“Very well. You haven’t given me much of a choice, have you?” she said mildly. She moved around to the further end of the table.

“Careful,” the Baron murmured. “Not too close.” The gunman gave the barefooted man a push towards Firouche.

“This will take a moment,” she said.

“All in good time.” Ertegun was leaning forward, an avid audience of one. Through her half closed eyes, Firouche could see the glint of the gun beneath the table. She took a deep, steady breath, released it, took another. Gently, her fingers flexed. She appeared, she knew, composed. Then—a sound from beyond the window and Ertegun’s gaze flickered. Firouche threw herself forward, past the unseeing victim, and landed sprawling into the Baron’s lap. As she did so, she clutched Minou’s waist, burying her against the skirt of her dressing gown. The gun, an inch from her temple, gave a bellowing roar as it went off.

Ertegun’s hired man cried out at the silent blast of light, and when his vision cleared he found himself at the centre of a falling cloud of ash. The room was filled with the scent of roses, heady and overpowering as the height of summer. Of the Baron, the child, and Firouche, there was no longer any sign.

#

Joan and the Beekeeper pull into the courtyard of the chateau as the rain comes down in torrents. Joan eyes the Beekeeper askance, says, “How do you know it’s come here?”

“Two and two makes four,” is all that the Beekeeper says. He gets out of the car with the gun drawn, a long, heavy weapon, brought in from the east. In the rain, his coat flaps like a crow’s wings. He helps her from the vehicle and Joan winces against the lash of rain. “Make sure you put your earplugs in.”

She does so, her hands trembling. She’d rather face the Unbound again than the thing with the ribcage. There’s no sign of it, but she can smell something in the air, above the freshness of water.

“Where is it?”

She has serious doubts that the gun will even prove a deterrent, let alone affect the killing that the Beekeeper has in mind. She has never met anything that frightened her more.

The Beekeeper puts out a hand and draws her with him.



“Don’t worry, Joan. I’ll look after you.” Through the wax plugs, his voice is a long way away.

They skirt the house, the gun held ahead. There are signs someone’s been here before them: a door open at the back. Joan and the Beekeeper go in. Through a kitchen, which looks barely used. Into a long hallway, then up the stairs. It occurs to Joan, belatedly, that the Beekeeper seems to know exactly where he’s going—and she’s about to tug at his sleeve like a child and ask him why, when he turns through a doorway at the head of the passage and it’s already too late.

The thing is sitting there, like a man. Its legs are crossed beneath its cloak, but they don’t seem to bend the right way. It taps a long finger against the stained wood of the armchair. It is grinning, too white and too wide.

The Beekeeper says something, very softly, but Joan can still hear him in spite of the wax in her ears.

“I’ve brought her.”

Joan spins away, but the Beekeeper is there, as he always is, ready to catch her if she falls. The thing in the chair probes her mind and says, “You were right. She’ll make a good enough brood queen.” Its voice whistles out of its glistening mouth as it leans forward in the chair, gripping the arms like a skeleton. Joan, watching paralysed, glimpses the Unbound once more—and then it’s standing in front of her even though she hasn’t seen it move, jumping through time, and it takes her by the hand in its hard cold fingers and jumps her easily through. The last thing she sees through the opium-tinged air is the Beekeeper standing motionless in the centre of the room and she cannot interpret the look on his face.

*Unbound.* She knows now what it is that is holding her by the hand and it’s called a mercurier. It’s a recruiter, itself a soldier, engineered, controlled from a central core yet whimsical in its cruelty. Like an artist, Joan understands, and cruelty is its tapestry... The mercurier revolves within the airless space of the Unbound, taking Joan with it like a captive moon, and she can see the island of Carachay far ahead, a long way up the line. Waves roll onto a golden shore, there’s the scent of mimosa—and Joan closes her eyes, conjures the taste of honey in her mouth.

*Brood queen.* The thing that controls the mercurier breeds people, Joan understands from her contact with the thing. She will become an experiment, used to make daughters, like the queen of a hive. Or if that doesn’t prove satisfactory, then simply killed and cloned, her honey-changed DNA used to produce other human sports. And behind that, Joan realises that it’s already too late, that the Beekeeper has started something, is working to change humanity...

The Beekeeper’s always controlled the supply, like any good dealer, but fear and a growing rage burn up in Joan, stoking the furnace, until light bursts yellow behind her eyes and the honey’s in her veins. She can feel it changing in her blood, and the mercurier hisses, surprised, as Joan’s hand melts down into something soft and boneless, sliding from the mercurier’s grasp and slipping into the realm of the Unbound.

She sees the mercurier revolve away, too slow in this realm of between to respond, as with infinite care its mouth-parts begin to purse. But the Unbound holds it, and Joan is used to *slow*, used to the long drag of the honey, and she spins it out, reeling the line in until she’s past Carachay and the islands fall behind.

Joan watches, her flesh solidifying once again. She knows their names now: they are the islands of the Sabaya peninsula, and she thinks that they used to be part of the Caribbean, before North America is torn to rags and ribbons by the rage of the tides. Then the world beneath her turns and the Sabaya itself slowly drowns. She watches as the remaining land fades white and then blue: the world’s a sapphire against the sea of the Unbound, with one high spot of land just north of the equator.

Joan thinks: *landfall*.

#

“Look,” the child said softly. “There’s a river.” Through the twilight haze, they could see the faint gleam of water, flowing like oil between its shallow banks. Firouche held one of Minou’s hands; from the other trailed a long plume of mimosa. Behind them, something lay unmoving in the grass. The air was humming. Minou switched the mimosa as she walked.

“We’re not far from the coast. In my day—ah, never mind. Leave that alone, now,” Firouche murmured.

The child gave her a slanted look.

“I’ve been here before.”

“I don’t think so, Minou. But—perhaps you might come again, in the future.”

“Are we staying?”

“No. We’re going home,” Firouche said, momentarily hesitating, and she picked up the child and stepped into the empty air. The feather of mimosa brushed against her face, releasing sweetness into the wind.

#

There was no one in the house. They left the opium-fug of the inner rooms and went out into the quiet courtyard. The flagstones were grey and shining with rain. A blackbird was running along the ridgepole of the roof, clucking like a hen. Firouche and Minou slipped beneath the dripping eaves and through the silence of the barn. There were bales of the summer’s hay, dusty and sweet underneath damp tarpaulins. Fragments of an old engine, rusted red, were scattered across the floor.

“Nothing here. Only snails.”

As they came out again, Firouche put out a warning hand, but the people who came to meet them were Emilie and Semirami: relief, greetings, information were exchanged.

They went back into the house, but it was empty apart from the motionless body of the Baron’s hired gun. Semirami grinned when he saw it, offered no explanation. A few of the rooms were in use. One, clearly the Baron’s, was hung with velvet curtains. Minou buried her bruised face in their mossy greenness. They smelled faintly of mould and cigarette smoke, the smell of age. In the early morning light, the room was faded and peaceful. Candles, set in a tall holder, had guttered to nothing and there were soot stains along the wall from the blown flame.

They ran downstairs, across the courtyard and up the lane. There were primroses, pale and starry in the hedges, and the clouds raced away from the sun. The van would not start. Semirami uttered prayers, or perhaps threats, in a language like water. The engine coughed, then rattled into life. He turned the van around and they flew back along the Avignon road.

#

The mercurier has landed with her, but Joan’s no longer afraid. The thing is a rattle of bones, the meagre flesh already falling away. For Joan has it honeybound, tied into time with sticky strands. What gift she has grown into is still beyond her comprehension; she flexes unfamiliar muscles of the mind, of the soul. But a mercurier has no soul and so can be trapped.

And a reconstructive? Joan doesn't know. She looks across the plateau of rock, wondering about Firouche. The mercurier crouches, straddled with invisible bonds, watching her with something that might be fear. There's nothing green on this island. In fact, there's nothing at all, and Joan opens a door between worlds and closes it as quickly behind her. There's a whistle of terror, as swiftly cut off, as the Unbound opens up in front of Joan and she steps once more into the tides of time, heading for home.

The Beekeeper is waiting. Joan steps out among the hives and it's strange, she thinks, how she can now see them for what they are: each hive a living entity. The hives speak to her as the Beekeeper steps forward and Joan says, "Now."

The hives respond. A matrix opens up between the domes; through it, Joan once again glimpses midnight fire. The Beekeeper starts to speak, but Joan raises a hand and the matrix draws him backwards, sucking him in.

She wonders whether he'll find the mercurier. She hopes so.

#

Later, she explores the laboratory underneath the Beekeeper's greenhouses: old cellars, with a wealth of high tech equipment. Did he make his money through dealing, or did he have a sponsor? She stares in silence at the jars of embryos, some still squirming faintly in a glistening current of fluid. It seems to her that some of them already have her face. She remembers the child who is with Firouche, who seems so familiar. She thinks about bee genes, transmuting, alchemical: herself, an experiment. She picks up a schematic, printed on plastic. The contents make no sense to her, but she can feel the bee-mind behind her now, imparting information. She thinks of Firouche, what this could become, millennia away. She makes up her mind.

#

Firouche came out of the van, shortly after dawn and their return. Merlay was close behind her, protective. It was a cold sky, but the rain had stopped. She took a breath of damp fresh air and looked at the woman who stood there.

"I *thought* someone was here," she said.

"You don't know me," the woman said. Beautiful, once, Firouche thought, now gaunt-boned and hollow-cheeked. The wide blue eyes had a golden glaze, like fired porcelain. A stranger, and yet known, like Minou.

"I feel as though I should." Firouche pauses. "Are we related?"

"Maybe." The girl doesn't smile. "They call me La Papesse—the one in the tarot? I travel the Unbound, you see, like you. My name is Joan."