

Daniel's first steps into the hive were slow, and careful. His wary eyes strained to see anything past the gray mist that filled the halls, a task that became especially difficult as warm fog spread further across his visor with each breath. He kept an arm outstretched, groping the space in front of him, lest he walk straight into one of the walls. His body froze as a shadow floated across the fog, the curved silhouette of a hive resident clumsily walked across his vision, but he could make out little more than a smoky shadow. He could hear her uneven footsteps, and he heard a breathy sound that he thought might have been giggling.

When silence returned, he continued creeping down the hall. He heard a crack as his foot fell on something hard. He stepped forward and spun, checking his surroundings again before switching his headlamp on. A white cone cut through the smoke, shining down on Daniel's discovery. He knelt down, and whispered a curse to himself as he picked up the shredded remains of a beekeeping suit. With his right hand, he lifted the empty helmet, fresh shards falling from the plastic visor where he had tread on it. He grabbed the shoulders of the suit and lifted it, spreading the arms wide for a better look at its condition. From the front he noticed a small tear in the side of the suit. The hole was tiny, but it would easily have been enough for the pheromones to penetrate the membrane.

Dan let out a shivering sigh as he turned the suit around in his hands. The lining on the back had been entirely shredded, split open in a huge, jagged tear. Dan shook his head and dropped the ruined suit on the ground, the ray from his lamp scanning the halls around him. He quickened his pace, hoping to find what he was looking for so he could accomplish his objective and get out. He peered through an opening to his left, illuminating a room lined with large, golden cells. He approached one of the hexes and drew his knife, reaching for the collection hose of his backpack. The blade plunged into the beeswax with ease, and with a twist, honey began to run from the cell in a single, amber rope. He withdrew the knife and squeezed the hose through the cut, as he took the backpack from his shoulders and placed it on the ground. With the flick of a switch, the pumps within the pack growled, drawing the sweet product in.

"Um... Should we be letting him do that?" her voice made Dan spin, his frightened eyes darting back and forth between the two bee girls, the light from his lamp glistening off of their glossy exoskeletons.

"I think, like, we're not supposed to? But I mean... We have *so much* honey, come on. He can just have it! He can just take it, we'll make more!" The voice of her sister was mellow, and relaxed. Their careless attitude confused Dan at first, until he remembered the smoke. The bees were genuinely fine with his presence, so long as they remained under its influence.

"Uhhh! Yeah! I'm just getting some of this here honey and I'll be on my way! I'm not talking all of it, just a little." He stammered. The girls looked at each other, before looking back to the human.

"Yeah, sure dude! It's cool!" As the one bee reassured him, the other walked towards him. He stepped out of her way, and she knelt in front of his whirring backpack, her antennae probing the outside of it.

"Man, that's wild. You guys like, gotta make tools and stuff to get honey. We can just, like, *make* it, though. With our bodies."

"Yeah. Hey, uh, how come we're as smart as humans are, but we don't like, market the honey ourselves?"

"... Oh my god you're right! I never like, thought about that? We should ask the queen!"

The jovial attitude of the pair put the man at ease. He glanced on as the girl rose to her feet. Her body was sleek, and smooth, yet her chest was covered in a thick, yellow tuft. Her eyes were completely black, yet very animated and lively. If he hadn't known how dangerous they could be, he could almost think they were cute.

"Wait... Tessa, you're high. We *can't* ask the queen because the queen dictates what we think, remember?"

“Ugh, Jill, that’s only like, when we aren’t high though. This stuff blocks out the pheromones, remember? We can ask her now. Like, *right now*.”

“Oh, right! Yeah let’s-”

“Girls!” A higher pitched cry rang out, as a shorter bee girl excitedly ran into the room. “Girls, look what I found!”

Jill and Tessa turned to the girl. With their eyes off of him, Dan turned around, checking the digital counter on the backpack. The counter had read 82% capacity – he was almost finished. Dan let out a sigh of relief, and he felt warm with the confidence that he would leave this place safely.

“It’s my old bee suit!” Dan froze, glancing over his shoulder. The Apid was clutching the tattered suit he had stumbled across earlier.

“Woah, Chrissy! Where did you find that!?” Their eyes were wide, and their antennae twitched toward the tattered artifact.

“It was out in the hall, on the floor. I think I just left it there when I tore it off? I don’t remember, though.”

“Wait, holy shit, that’s the same suit that guy is wearing!” Jill said, as the trio fixed their eyes on Dan.

“Uh!-” He could barely make a sound before Jill reached out and pulled him towards the group by the arm.

“That’s *crazy*, you used to look like *this*, Chrissy?”

“I know, it’s amazing, isn’t it?”

Dan gasped as he felt a pair of hands grab at the sides of his suit, pulling him into a tight hug. The sisters gawked at him, transfixed.

“You’re so... *squishy*. Chrissy, what’s it like to be squishy?” Tessa looked to her sister, her antennae pressing into the back of Dan’s helmet.

“I... don’t remember.” Chrissy held her chin for a moment, in pensive silence. “Wow, I don’t remember at all!”

“Hey, humie-yumie! What’s it like being squishy?” Tessa’s hands shook Dan lightly, and he could feel her chitin fingers poking at his skin.

“Uh, it’s-”

“Tess, come on, he just wants some honey.” Jill cut him off.

“Oh, but he’s cute! Look how nervous he gets!” She squeezed Dan again. He reached down and pushed her hands away. He took a few steps towards his backpack, brushing it off. Dan knelt and examined the counter again. 100%, the container was full. He grabbed the straps of the pack, now heavy with his harvest, and lugged it onto his shoulders. He turned and waved to the girls.

“Bye!” Chrissy bade him farewell with an excited wave.

“Seeya dude! Sorry about your suit.” Dan froze mid-stride, turning back to Tessa.

“My suit?”

“Yeah, when I was messing with you back there, I think I put a little hole in it?” Dan looked down and saw the tear. Already his exposed skin was beginning to stiffen, and his head felt fuzzy.