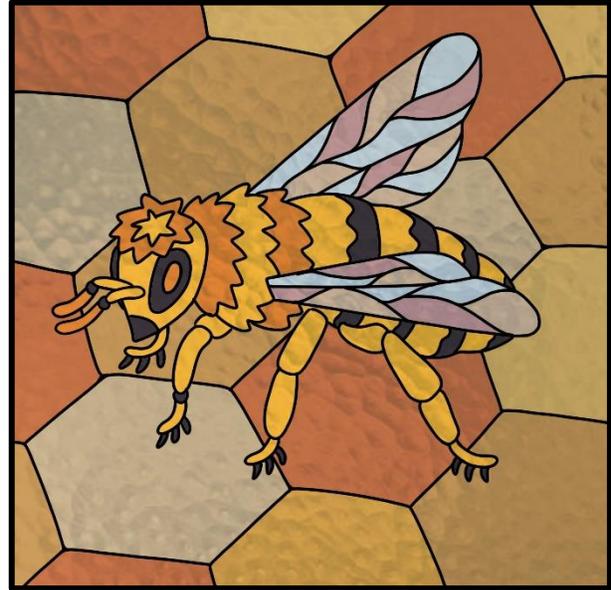




Of Bee and Stone

When Queen Iris and Heatherbow arrived, Azia was industriously cleaning her room and fixing a broken necklace. She looked up, slid the window open and let them in. The morning had seen a steady summer drizzle.

“Greetings from the happy plants,” smiled Heatherbow and Queen Iris in unison.



Azia chuckled. She looked outside and appreciated the wet leaves and dark greens of summer. Then looking inside at her room, she chirped, “Greetings from the disordered room!”

It was daytime and her mother was working at home, so Azia was afraid to use her elf vision. She felt extra big compared to her elfin guests, so she moved slowly and carefully.

Iris watched as Heatherbow tried to help Azia. Folding human clothes is hard when you are elf-sized and you don’t want to use magic.

Azia glanced over and wondered aloud, “How did you come to be a Queen, Iris of the Stone?”

“Yes... well asked. ‘Why’ is your favorite kind of question Azia,” observed Queen Iris. “And ‘why’ is always a good question, but in my case, ‘how’ is an even better one.”

Iris folded herself into a most unladylike squat and said, “Now is as good a time as any to tell you my story. Do you need pictures?”

Azia shook her head and pointed with her nose toward the beads she was stringing. But Heatherbow chimed in. “Yes. Pictures please! Stories are always better with pictures.”

Iris took a deep breath and in her best storyteller fashion, she began at the beginning.

“I was born to a peaceful woman during a time of great trouble. I didn’t worry about the war because Mother always told me how brave the people of my village were. So, though we rarely saw my father, and then only at night, I felt protected in the laps of my mother and my aunties. My mother wanted me to learn to tell all the stories of the village.

My cousins and I would take out the boats and dive for oyster and abalone – anything the sea would give us. At night, my mother told legends of old times, of the Magic Fish, and of brave journeys. We would shuck the oysters and set the flesh out to dry while we listened. Each of us would jealously guard the pile we were given to clean, and we’d always cut carefully in case the oyster held a pearl. Perhaps once a month one of us would find a pearl, and our mothers and aunts would gather around to admire it.



Sometimes the little ones would want to keep it. Then my mother would say, “Ah, but little one, you are worth more than any pearl. If you use the pearl to help others, then the Magic Fish will give you another. Tomorrow I will show you the sapphire in the sea where the Magic Fish hides.”

The next morning Mother would take the little one and show how the smooth places on the sea become a deep blue green and carry a blinding sword of light at sunrise. All the children would look and listen with open mouths, nodding in wonder and agreement. For days afterward, that pearl would be favored in her tales of the Magic Fish, and she would elaborate about the spells the Magic Fish had cast to create the oyster’s need for such a pearl.



In the days after finding a pearl we would try to dive deeper in the hopes that another pearl would be found. When the men returned, they would laugh and chat. They listened to my mother’s stories and ate the good soups of oysters, rice, and vegetables. To the ones who had found the pearls they would turn their grave faces and smile and nod their approval. Then they would show us the rice, millet, seeds, cloth, knives, tools, and pots we had won with our pearls.

My father was a diver when he was a young boy. He dove deeper than the others, and finally the Magic Fish took his hearing in one ear. He never dove for oysters

again, because he did not want to go completely deaf like some of the old men in our village. When he listened to my mother's stories, he always sat with his right ear cocked toward her. And when he listened for the sea or the wind, his head was always moving. But that is another story.

One night the war came to us. My Mother set my feet on the dolphin road, the blue Pacific. All of the children were put out to sea. We lost our families and took work on a tramp steamer out of Chile. We rounded the Cape Horn in fierce storms, and then traveled north into the Atlantic, the whale road. When we arrived in Wales, I was put off the steamer because the sailors had found out that I was a girl. After six months on the Whale Road I was now lost. I didn't speak their language and I couldn't find food. By the time the elves found me I was half-starved and didn't know how to get home.

I believe it was the Magic Fish who brought me to them, for the elvish Mab tells stories just as wondrous and wandering as my mother's. Mab's sisters make soups just like my aunties. Slowly I learned again to love and appreciate the light as it bends in the sea. Mab called me Iris. My human name had been Iringa.

One warm sunrise Mab took me and showed me a sapphire stone in the sea. I knew it at once. It was made of the light from the sea where the Magic Fish had hidden while a woman told the truth to a child who laughed. Comprehending what it was, I was able to use it.

I tried to explain the Stone and the Magic Fish to Mab. But he had not stood with my mother by the sea to behold the morning sword of light, so the stone would not work for him. Mab gave it to me. From that moment on, Mab called me Iris of the Stone.

I use the Stone to heal the wounded, or to travel to places that lie short distances over the water. Slowly, my own band began to form. It happened by accident and not by intention. If someone was hurt or dying, I would ask them if they wanted to join us. The stone heals, but it takes time. I can't heal someone instantly. After a few months the new elves can leave the band, whole and healthy. But some stay on. Only Teg, Skillywidden, and Heatherbow were elves of Mab's band.

We traveled to many places before I came here. I even went back to my old home to try to find my family. I saw my little brother, Kota, though he could not see me. He had grown tall and lean like my Father. I was surprised to find him exactly where we left him. Kota had taken on the work of the community doctor. The

previous doctor was by then very old. Kota was in the yard curing villagers with herbs when I arrived.

Kota has a sweet wife named Minang. She looked so much like the old doctor's wife when she was young. Perhaps Minang was her daughter. Or perhaps she was a found child, like Kota. There were so many children in the courtyard, too many for all of them to be his. One of them he called Iringa. I put a pearl for each child into Minang's shoes, then slipped a silver box into his sandal. The Magic Fish watches over the one who owns the silver box. Kota is an old man now. I will take you to see him one day if you like.



A frigate bird transported me back to Wales after the visit to my brother.

When I returned, all of the elves in my band were bickering. They began to ask me to make the principal decisions for the band. You see, after the stone has healed an elf, some of them form an attachment to me. Each elf is really quite independent, but I can continue to help and support them in this way. I can also sense when they need a bit of fun. As relationships among the elves grew more harmonious, they started calling me Queen. Elves join and leave us every year. Mab was gracious as we left. He gave me the lovely silver and pearl work that holds the stone. And

together we became a band that wanders; we are called ‘far friends’ by many.

My sapphire takes me to many places. Here we are now, sharing a tale.”

Queen Iris paused. “I hear a hum,” she said, listening intently.

“The Bees!” cried Heatherbow and Azia in unison. They all jumped up and scattered. Azia ran out of her room and down the hall. Heatherbow and Queen Iris leapt out the window.



Azia raced through the house yelling, “The bees!” with her mother close behind her. Her Mom paused for just a second at the back door, then dove back inside to retrieve Azia’s bee suit.

The hazy sun had made a brief appearance on this rainy day and the bees were taking advantage of it.

By the time they made it to the backyard, bees were swirling in the air, filling their backyard and part of the neighbor’s yard. It was a huge swarm. Azia walked carefully over to the Nuc boxes in the corner of the yard and called to the bees. “Over here.”

The bees ignored her and gathered slowly in a tree near her dad’s Sun Hive. The branch was soon loaded with small black and brown bees about twenty feet off the ground, too high for the ladder to reach. The shade of the upper branches made the swarm look almost black. As Azia walked over to the swarm her mother called her, “Put on the bee suit! Azia! Put on the suit.”

“No Mom. It’s a swarm. They don’t mind me. They won’t sting me.” Azia called to her Mom. Azia began to move in a slow, deliberate way, acting as if the bees had to swim around her, just as her Dad had taught her.

The Queen and Heatherbow arrived and stood with Azia directly underneath the

Swarm.

“Home. Home. Home.” The bees were chanting in unison. Twenty bees flew off in all directions.

Azia moved slowly over to the Nucs and called, “Home. Home. Home.” Three of the bees flew over and started investigating the Nucs.



“Azia, please put on the suit.” Her Mom was sweet and polite but this was an order. Azia walked away slowly at first and then more quickly.

Azia took the hat and veil. “Just the hat, Mom. Swarms aren’t defensive. I don’t have time for the whole suit. I’m trying to act like Dad does.”

Reluctantly her Mom nodded. But Azia could see she had her cell phone in her hand. She was ready to dial 911 if anything happened. “I’ll get the EpiPen.”

“No, Mom. Dad got that in case one of the neighbors gets stung. I have to go NOW!”

In a moment Azia was standing beneath the swarm. A few minutes later the bees that had left to find a home started to return. They did their waggle dances. A dozen more bees flew off in different directions in response to the waggle dances. Azia insisted to them. “Don’t go so far away. I’ll give you to a big Home.”

After about twenty-five minutes there were four worker bees waiting on the edge of the double decker medium Nuc. As several more arrived to do an inspection, Azia greeted each one saying, “Home.” After a bit she realized that she was just repeating what the guard bees at the door of the Nuc were saying, and so she waited silently.

After about a half an hour the swarm started to peel off the branch and there were thousands of bees in the air. They swirled and landed on the Nuc. A few landed on Azia, Iris, and Heatherbow. “Home. Home. Home.” As several hundred of them entered the hive they formed a counterclockwise curve. A small space opened up on the face of the hive as the Queen Bee landed. As she entered the hive, the space closed and the flow of bees changed into a thick covering of the Nuc. It was several bees deep. After about five minutes the last bees were straggling in. The small scattering of bees sitting on Azia, the Queen, and Heatherbow lifted off and flew into the Nuc.

Just as they were about to leave the Nuc, Azia noticed a few bees coming back out. They flew in little figure eight patterns around the Nuc. The figure eight pattern got bigger and bigger and then they flew off humming, “Nectar. Pollen. Propolis. Water.”

Azia lifted Queen Iris and Heatherbow onto her shoulder. “They are orienting to the new Home,” Queen Iris explained.

Soon half the Nuc was out doing orientation and flying off. Thousands of worker bees swirled around Azia, chanting about their search. Some of them landed on her. “Nectar.” “Water.” “Pollen.” “Propolis.” Each bee chanted about her favorite thing. After a short while the drones joined the flow, fervently repeating “Queens.” There were moments when Azia felt that she herself could almost fly,

caught up as she was by their energy and joy. By the time orientation was done, some of the worker bees were already returning heavy with nectar and with pollen in their baskets.

As things began to settle down, Azia's Mom walked down to join her. Queen Iris and Heatherbow ducked under the veil of Azia's hat.

Queen Iris spoke in a whisper. "An after-swarm is coming."



Azia looked at her dad's big Sun Hive. At first, she didn't see anything, but soon bees were coming out in a flow. "Mom! A new swarm," exclaimed Azia, both in excitement and as a warning.

Her Mom announced, "OK, I'm gone!" and beat a hasty retreat toward the house, but paused to watch from the back-door landing.

As the second swarm formed, it immediately split into two clusters. One cluster

was nearly black and the other was brown with grey stripes. “Why brown and black?” whispered Azia to Queen Iris.

“The bees know if a new queen is more closely related to them. They cluster around her accordingly. These are very small swarms. You will need to watch them carefully,” Queen Iris whispered softly. “Virgin queens need good weather to mate. I hope we get lots of sunny days! They are giving you three swarms for your four homes. They gave you as much as they could. They did understand you, even though they speak only a few words.”

The bees began sending out scouts. Azia moved between the black swarm in the tree and the brown swarm in the bush. Soon the brown swarm was vibrating; most of the bees on the surface of the swarm were dancing. “Sixty-three degrees. Close. Edges. Round Entry.” Others said, “175 degrees. Two minutes. Tree. Open top entry.”

“No!” Azia argued. “Stay close to us. I will give you a big home.”

Soon the bees in the brown swarm were all dancing the same dance.

As the brown swarm took off for the Blue Nuc, her Dad arrived at the back door and started toward her. He wasn’t wearing his hat and veil. He had observed the two swarms and the activity at the double decker Nuc. Azia knew that at a glance he had understood everything the bees had done.

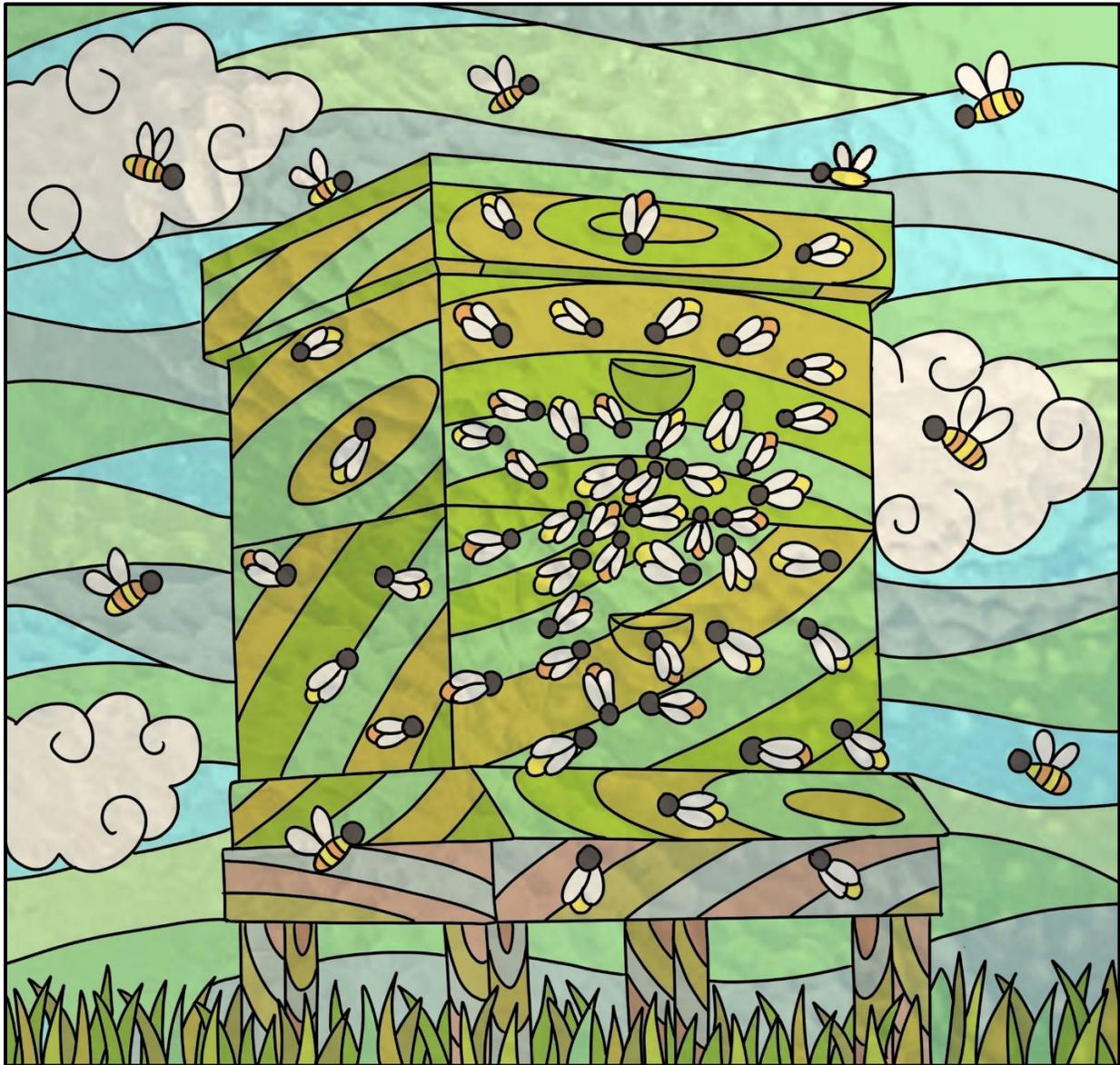
As before, bees occasionally landed on them and on her veil. Each bee buzzed “Home. Round Entry.” Azia smiled.

Her Dad watched her reactions. “You’re a natural beekeeper,” he said. “I’m glad you love them as much as I do.”

Azia wanted to tell her Dad everything. She wished he knew they were humming ‘Home’ to him. She was sure that he would like to talk to bees too. But she knew she would forget everything the moment she opened her mouth. So, she just replied, “They are so amazing. They learn and share information so fast. They make me happy.”

A few minutes later the brown bees began their orientation and left the Blue Nuc to forage for food. The black swarm started to vibrate, as the bees danced. Azia held her breath for a second as the hive took off and started to move into the Yellow

Nuc.



“That makes three Nucs. You have done well!” Her Dad was pleased with all that was happening. “The blackberry season is still in full swing, so they will all grow quickly. And the fall-bearing raspberries are coming on soon. They should be pretty happy!”

After taking in the bee activity, her Dad walked over to the garden and picked some corn for dinner. After he went inside, Azia sat down on a wet stone and stayed, watching. Queen Iris and Heatherbow took their leave. “Goodbye, Azia of

the Bees,” they called.

“Goodbye, Heatherbow. Goodbye, Iris of the Stone,” responded Azia softly.

It started to rain again, and she took off her veil and wandered over to thank the bees. “I’m so happy,” she thought. “I hope your new hives grow well.”



In her heart she said, “I hope ‘that little one’ is growing well, too.” Without noticing it she had adopted the elvish way of not using the name Moonsong. Even in her thoughts she didn’t use the name of the one who could be transformed by words alone. She thought of Dancer and Skillywidden. She thought of Tom and his work, caring for the foal. “I’ll give a Nuc to Tom,” she thought.

The raindrops began to fall faster. She turned and went inside. Her Dad was roasting fresh corn from the garden.