

Kingdom of Bees

You haven't talked to anyone besides your mom since the beginning of summer break nearly two weeks ago. The few friends you would normally see outside of school have moved away unexpectedly. So every day while your mom is working, you bike aimlessly by yourself through the streets near the apartment where the two of you live. She works a lot, sometimes even at night—she said to you last year that she had become a custodian, and to this day the only definition you have of that word is the way she avoided your eyes when she said it, the hesitation in her voice. Anyway, it has been a long two weeks, and at this point you are willing to investigate almost anything. You find yourself squeezing the worn handbrake on your bicycle when you see some movement in a grove of trees at the park.

The local park is a regular stop on your daily route. When one wanders as much as you do, especially in the summer, public restrooms and water fountains gain a special importance in your mental map of the world. You leave your bike against a fence circling the nearby playground, make a quick detour for some water, and approach the grove cautiously.

It was once a sandy clearing surrounded by a ring of trees, with pristine wooden picnic tables in dappled shade. Inevitably, teenagers happened. Traces of their activities remain: crushed cans and miniature bottles kicked under prickly bushes where nobody will try to retrieve them, phrases carved into the table legs with a variety of styles and tools. In the low branches of an oak tree towering over its neighbors, several formerly colorful kites flap uselessly, their mangled frames sticking out at odd angles, their line weaving chaotic webs among the leaves. Today, a man and a girl are busy hanging a banner which reads, "COMMUNITY BBQ TONIGHT! ALL ARE WELCOME!" from the tree. Some balloons bob gently against each other as they wait to be

distributed throughout the clearing. The picnic tables are covered in a plastic imitation of red gingham, and coolers of different sizes are being used to keep it from blowing away. Most of the trash has been swept into a neat pile in a corner of the grove, and some backpacks lie at the foot of a portable grill.

You must have stared for a while, because by the time you finish taking everything in, the banner has been hung, and both the man and the girl have noticed you. Before you can back away, the girl runs up to greet you, her dark pigtails bouncing behind her. The two of you are the same height. “Are you here for the barbeque?” she asks. “A lot of our neighbors are coming. I’m so excited! But we’re not ready yet—” she spins around. “Dad, when are we starting?”

The man strolls over, checking his phone and running a hand through the graying stubble on his chin. “Uhh...I bet most people won’t start showing up until six or so.” He ruffles the girl’s hair and looks at you warmly. “Hey there. What’s your name?”

It’s been so long. You clear your throat and straighten up. “Eddie.”

“Nice to meet you...this is Hana, and I’m Martin. Do you live around here?”

Your view is obscured by trees, but you know that the edge of the park is lined by neat rows of wide roofs. You ride there when you’re in the mood for smooth roads. “Umm, sorta?” you reply with a shrug.

“Cool...well, as Hana said, you’re welcome to join us tonight. Bring your family and friends too—I’m not sure we can eat all this food by ourselves.” He gestures vaguely at the whole setup, looking almost apologetic.

Hana grins at you. Her smile is brilliant, and suddenly you feel like you’ve been friends for years. You swallow and nod, hoping she can’t tell how light your insides are. Then, you’re racing

home on your bike at a speed you could barely have imagined yourself capable of half an hour ago.

You wait outside your front door on a flight of steps overlooking your apartment complex parking lot. You can recognize the sputtering of your mom's car before you see it, and when she arrives at her assigned spot, you are there to meet her. You knock at the driver's window and hop around in anticipation until she rolls the window down, and then you smother her with a hug and a flood of words. Your description of the interaction at the grove comes out jumbled even though you've rehearsed it over and over in your head—how could you possibly describe that smile? Still, she can sense your excitement, and when you tell her about the barbeque, she relents. “Only for a little bit, though,” she says. “I have a night shift to get to.”

The grove is filled with chatter. The adults stand in small groups, eating delicately from paper plates while the young children play tag at their feet. As soon as you spot Hana's dad, you break away from your mom and weave through the small crowd towards the grill. Hana is helping him serve hot dogs, her face illuminated by fairy lights. “You came!” she says when she sees you. “How many do you want?”

“Where are you sitting?” you blurt out, holding up two fingers.

She gives you two hot dogs on a plate and leads you to a nearby picnic table. A girl and a boy kneel on one of its benches, poring over a large notebook and eating in silence. They look strikingly similar in their matching uniforms, and the right sides of their collared shirts are decorated with an unfamiliar logo. As Hana waves to them, the girl narrows her eyes at you and asks, “Who's *that*?”

“Don’t be mean! We’re friends. Eddie, this is Claire and Connor. They’re twins! We go to the same middle school.”

Connor acknowledges you with a sharp nod but is clearly more interested in the notebook. Claire continues to gaze at you unflinchingly until you point at the table and ask, “What’s the notebook for?”

“It’s a secret,” she snaps back, hovering over it protectively.

Hana rolls her eyes. “Let him see it, Claire. It’s not even your game.”

Claire frowns but moves aside to make space for you at the table. Hana flips through the notebook to a map drawn in colored pencil. In large letters at the bottom of the page are the words, “THE KINGDOM OF ETHER.”

“So this is a story I created,” Hana says. “It takes place in space! See, this is our floating castle—” she places her finger on a familiar blue-and-yellow structure in the middle of the map.

“That’s the playground,” you say.

“Yeah, but *imagine* it’s a castle in space,” she explains. “And we all live here and play different characters—”

“I lead the space patrol and fight the Quasare dragons!” Connor says. At the edge of the map is a clump of trees labeled “DRAGON TERRITORY”. You look up at the branches hanging over the grove. Silhouetted against a darkening sky, the broken kites seem more menacing than before.

“And I’m the queen.” Claire tosses her light curls.

Hana turns to you. “You should join us! It’s better with more people, and I’m only partly playing because I have to keep track of everything that happens in the game. Dad, can Eddie play with us?”

“Sure...as long as his parents are okay with it.”

You know your mom won't mind, but then you remember the paper plate in your hands.

“Oh, let me go find her.”

She is standing alone near the entrance of the grove, watching the barbeque from a distance. You finish your hot dog, give her the remaining one with the plate, and drag her by the hand to the grill. Hana continues to explain the game as you return to the picnic table, but you keep glancing at your mom as she talks to Hana's dad and an elegant woman who must be the twins' mother. Your mom carries herself with dignity, but she looks small and stiff next to the elegant woman, who seems determined to outshine her. The woman is dressed in all white, and the perfect waves in her hair cascade across her shoulders every time she laughs. When a bee circles your mom, apparently attracted to her food, the woman exclaims, “It likes you!” Your mom shrinks away from the bee and laughs along nervously with the other parents. But when she notices you watching her, she flashes you an encouraging smile, and you can tell that she is providing you safe passage into the Kingdom of Ether.

Every Monday and Thursday after lunch, you meet Hana, Claire, and Connor at the playground with the supervision of Hana's dad. For the first part of the afternoon, everyone goes about their normal routines. Claire, the queen, takes her place at the top of the castle and surveys her vast kingdom. Hana, the seer, performs scrying rituals in a shady chamber and reports her visions to Claire. Claire instructs Connor, the patrol leader, to keep the peace among the masses, or to investigate a disturbance at the border, depending on what Hana sees. Connor brings you

scrap metal and debris from his expeditions, and you, the tinkerer, fashion weapons and armor in your workshop for him to use. You wish you had a more important role that didn't involve taking orders from Connor all the time. It's hard to argue with Claire, though, so you take comfort in the possibility of proving yourself during the second part of the afternoon, the event.

Today, while Connor is carrying out his patrol, Hana signals from the top of the castle for him to come back. He marches over dramatically and says, "My Queen! The patrol has discovered a crashed spaceship at the border."

"Take me there," Claire says. "I want to question the captain."

"Can I come with?" you ask.

"This has nothing to do with you. You stay here."

Hana rushes to your defense. "But Eddie's the tinkerer. I bet he would know a lot about the ship."

Claire makes a face. "Ok, fine. Let's go."

You gather at the edge of dragon territory. "The captain of the ship says that she and all her passengers came from a kingdom with a very cruel leader," Hana explains. "They stole a ship and ran away. But they cut through dragon territory not knowing how powerful the Quasare dragons are and got attacked. They almost didn't make it."

"They might still be dangerous. How do we know they're not lying?" Claire retorts. "We should just leave them here."

"Does anyone on the ship understand how it works?" you ask, sensing an opportunity to contribute to the conversation.

Hana consults her notebook. "Just the captain. And she only knows how to fly it."

You turn to Connor. “What if I fix the ship as a favor, and you make sure they leave our kingdom? Then we don’t have to take them in, and they might still help us in the future.”

“Oh, that’s smart,” he says. “What do you think, Claire?”

You hold your breath as Claire considers her options.

“Hmm...alright,” she says, putting on an authoritative tone. “Connor will guard the ship while Eddie makes his repairs.” Hana sees the triumph in your face and gives you a discreet thumbs-up before opening her notebook to record these changes under your character descriptions.

At exactly 4:15, a massive white SUV pulls into the parking lot near the playground. The car’s shiny exterior reflects the blinding afternoon sun into your eyes. Through the windshield, you can only see the elegant woman’s sunglasses against her pale face. Claire and Connor immediately say goodbye and dash off together.

“Why are they always in such a hurry?” you ask Hana after they leave.

“They have to go to swim practice, or art class, or something like that. Their mom signs them up for a lot of stuff and doesn’t want them to be late,” she says. “She’s really strict.”

The two of you walk to the bench near the water fountain, where Hana’s dad has been reading and watching over your bicycle. “Do you need a ride home?” he asks, peering over his book as you reach for your helmet.

“No, I can bike,” you say, shaking your head vigorously.

“I know I’ve said this before but...if you ever do, don’t be afraid to ask. It’s no problem at all.”

“Mhm. Thanks.”

You and Hana wave at each other as they drive away, and then you head home.

On an especially humid day late in June, you find Hana and her dad alone at the park. “Claire and Connor’s mom told my dad weeks ago that they have a swim meet today, but he totally forgot until just now,” Hana says, opening her notebook as the two of you sit down at a picnic table in the grove. “I was running out of story anyway, though, so I was going to come up with some new things that might happen. Do you have any ideas?”

You both tap your fingernails against the table for a few minutes, trying to think. Finally, you say, “What if the people living in the kingdom were unhappy and wanted a new leader?”

“Ooh, because the dragons get too close and start destroying some of the towns?” As she speaks, Hana starts scribbling notes onto a blank page.

“The commoners that survive come to the castle and ask Claire for help.”

“She sends Connor and his men to fight off the dragons, but it’s not enough. The commoners want a stronger leader and start planning a revolution.”

“Can I do it?”

“Do what?”

“The revolution.”

She stops writing and looks at you in surprise. “You mean, you want to replace Claire?”

“Yeah.”

“Well...it is more fair that way. Claire shouldn’t be telling us what to do *all* summer. But she won’t go along with it if you just bring it up, so we have to plan it out carefully.”

As you and Hana try to figure out the speech you will give when you become the leader of the revolution, there is a low rumble in the air. The branches above you start to sway violently in the wind, and before Hana can even close her notebook, the pages are covered in dark spots of rain. Hana's dad appears at the entrance of the grove, gesturing towards the parking lot. "We have to go! It's not safe to be here during a thunderstorm."

You scramble back to the playground to fetch your bike. Hana and her dad have almost reached his car when he realizes that you aren't following them. "Eddie, please come with us. I can't let you bike home like this."

He's right. Your clothes are soaked through, and you're shivering so much you can barely hold the handlebars still. Reluctantly, you climb into the back of his car with Hana. He loads your bike into the trunk before getting into the driver's seat, and the three of you sit in silence, listening to the muffled downpour outside.

"Alright, then," he says to you after a minute, still cheerful despite the rain dripping from his chin. "Where are we going?"

"So, if you leave this side of the parking lot and turn right..."

Your apartment complex is only a five-minute drive from the park, but each pause between the directions you give to Hana's dad feels unbearably long. Hana is staring out her window with a dazed expression, as if she didn't expect a neighborhood like yours to exist so close to her own. When you make eye contact, she quickly looks down, twisting her hands together in her lap while her face turns red.

Over the next two weeks, Hana gradually introduces the threat of the Quasare dragons and the growing unrest among the citizens of Ether. Claire and Connor are completely oblivious. Hana distracts them with visions of the dragons' terrifying powers, and you practice your revolution speech while pretending to tinker away in your workshop. One day, she returns from a meeting in the grove with the twins and whispers, "It's time!"

She leads you to the grove. "What's happening?" Claire asks.

You take a deep breath. "For too long, the Qua—Quasare dragons were allowed to destroy the homes of our citizens. Many are dead, and the others have nowhere to go. This cannot continue! The rev—revolutionaries have surrounded the castle and ap—appointed me as their leader. I demand an election to decide which one of us should rule this kingdom."

"*You?*" she scoffs. "No way. That wasn't even your own speech."

She wouldn't be allowed to treat you like this if you were king. You feel yourself tensing up, and Hana grabs your wrist to hold you back.

"Besides," Claire continues, "there's only four of us, and I bet it'll be a tie." She shoots a meaningful glare at Hana's hand.

Hana lets go of you abruptly. "I—I can flip a coin."

"No. If you think you can be a better leader, Eddie, then prove it. Let's have a contest. Whoever slays one of the dragons"—Claire points at the kites in the oak tree—"and brings its body back here first will get to rule the kingdom."

This was not part of Hana's plan. She turns to you and says quietly, "I don't know where this is going, but it might be your best chance. If you want to do it, you should go before my dad notices."

You try to picture what your world would look like from the top of the oak tree. More certainty, more freedom, perhaps. No more tiptoeing around everyone else the way your mom did when she was here for the barbeque. Your heart rises in your chest, straining towards the kites fluttering high above you. “Okay,” you say. “I’ll do it.”

Connor goes to the base of the tree and uses a stick to draw a line in the sand. You and Claire take your positions behind it, and he says, “On your marks...get set...go!”

Claire is up over the first branch by the time you get a good foothold. The bark scrapes at your leg when you pull yourself up, but adrenaline reduces the pain to a warm pulse. As you climb towards a kite hanging on your side of the tree, you can see that Claire is having trouble with hers; the line is so tangled that it can barely move. When she tugs at it, its frame flails in all directions, and she has to lean back to avoid getting scratched. You clamber onto a branch within arm’s reach of your kite, but as you start trying to pull it loose, there is a sharp, burning sensation near your wrist. An angry welt starts to form on your skin, and suddenly, over the rustling of all the foliage that Claire has disturbed, you hear a buzzing sound. “Claire, look out!” you yell.

She whirls around, her face contorted with rage. “What? What do you want now?”

Connor also notices the bees’ nest above her. “No, get out of the tree, Claire!” he shouts. “There’s a swarm of bees!”

Claire screams and thrashes about wildly, but as the buzzing intensifies, she gives up on the kite and starts lowering herself through the branches. Realizing that you are at an advantage, you seize the frame of your kite and try to free it from the branches so you can take it with you. But the bees sense your movements and surround you, stinging your arms and hands until you can no longer grip the kite. Refusing to leave it behind, you hug your swollen arms to your chest, curl up until your forehead rests against the branch you are sitting on, and squeeze your eyes shut.

“Eddie! Come down!”

You shake your head. There is some shuffling in the sand below you as Claire reaches the ground.

“Eddie, listen to me!” Hana is pleading with you. “This isn’t about the game anymore. We’ll say you won—you can be king—right?”

You open your eyes. Connor is nodding in agreement. Claire seems to be resisting the idea, but Hana elbows her hard, and reluctantly she nods at you as well. In that moment, you find yourself gazing into the faces of three children, desperate and powerless after all.

Hana’s dad reaches for his phone as soon as he sees all of you returning from the grove. Minutes later, the elegant woman’s SUV screeches into the parking lot. There is a flash of reflected light as the car door slams shut, the furious click of high heels on pavement, and then her shrill voice demanding to know what happened. Claire and Connor point at you in unison.

“The troublemaker,” she says, the word dripping with disgust. “Of course.”

You want to scream at her, but your throat seizes up. You stand with difficulty, stagger to your bike, and ride away as fast as you can so they don’t hear you cry.

Your mom didn’t ask you to explain anything when you came home yesterday, just tended to your injuries and put you to bed with a kiss on the forehead. Today, she returns from work holding a small paper box. Once you finish your vegetables at dinnertime, she winks at you and says, “Go see what’s in the fridge.”

It's a slice of blueberry pie, your favorite. As you dig in, the doorbell rings, and your mom goes to answer it. You are so busy enjoying yourself that you finish the whole slice before noticing the muffled voices at the door. You stop chewing and try to listen, but you can't make out any of the words. The front door closes. When your mom doesn't return to the table, you run to the window just in time to see the white SUV drive away down the street.

Your stomach churns. You go to the front door and see your mom leaning against it, weeping quietly into her hands. You throw your arms around her, bury your face in her shirt, and stammer, "I—I'm sorry—it was an accident—"

"I know you didn't mean to, Eddie, it's just—" She wipes at her face. "You don't deserve any of this. I wish I could do more." She crouches down so she can give you a proper hug. You pat her back awkwardly. She probably needs this as much as you do.

After a while, she sighs and says, "I'm going to be late for work. Can you help me with the dishes?"

"Mhm."

That night, you lay awake in bed for so long that you hear the front door unlock when your mom comes home from her night shift.

Lunchtime comes and goes. Normally, you would be at the playground by now. You are determined to stay home today, but as the minutes tick by, you start to feel increasingly restless. This game had been the highlight of your summer, and now—

You bike to the very edge of the park. When you see that it's just Hana and her dad, you relax and approach. Hana sees you first and hurries over. "Eddie! Are you okay?"

You tell her about the elegant woman showing up at your apartment.

She clutches at her head with her hands. "Oh no...my dad is so clueless sometimes! I'm so sorry—I'm sure he wouldn't have told her where you lived if he knew that would happen."

You step back, suddenly suspicious. "So...what happens now?"

Hana glances towards the grove. A cloud of static still twists itself through the trees, buzzing faintly. "Well, Claire and Connor aren't coming anymore. The game doesn't really work with two people, but...we can still hang out if you want! You can come over, or—" she falters, "or something. I don't know."

The crown is yours, finally, but only because the others have decided that it is no longer worth wearing. This is not the kingdom you wanted to inherit. Hana seems to recognize this too. You both stare at the ground helplessly until Hana's dad joins and says, "Hey, Eddie...uh...we have to go pretty soon. Hana has a dentist appointment today."

"Oh. Um...bye, Hana."

She gives you a weak wave as they leave but doesn't look you in the eye. You watch their car until it disappears behind the neat rows of wide roofs.

In the grove, the bees are waiting for their king.