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**SAMANTHA
HONEYCOMB**

A PILGRIM'S CHRONICLE

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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“Something is nothing and nothing is something.”

GERALD THE GREAT

PART ONE



SAMANTHA B. HONEYCOMB buzzed around the garden admiring the hundreds of rose buds spread out before her. Only one thing occupied her mind of late: flowers. Tulips, roses, geraniums, lilies, orchids, pink ones, blue ones, red ones, yellow ones – she loved them all – but every day, it seemed, she changed her mind as to which one she favoured. One day it was yellow pansies, the next day orange tulips, today red roses. There were just so many.

How terrible, she thought, hovering over the rose bed, that a teenage honeybee couldn't decide which flower she liked most.

She buzzed toward a rose the colour of crimson fire. It seemed to welcome her closer, wanting to embrace her with its petals, and when she inhaled its perfume she was lifted away in a glorious, dreamy haze.

"I wouldn't even think about it if I were you," said a worker bee buzzing past. "You know the rules."

Though taken off guard, Samantha smiled and nodded politely, watching the worker bee buzz out of sight to some other part of the garden. She knew the rules all right. What bee didn't? Everyone not of the Sisterhood was strictly forbidden to enter the heart of a rose, the *corolla*, and there was nothing she could do about it. It had been that way for ever and ever, and it was a constant source of conflict with her mother. They'd even had an argument as recently as this morning over breakfast, in the kitchen of the hive-cell.

"Why is it a sacrilege to gather nectar from a rose?" she had asked.

Isabeella was readying herself for a hard day's toil, making sure her wings were in working order, flapping them in short bursts every so often, wiping dust from her stripes, checking that her pollen sacks were clean and free of holes; doing everything, it seemed, to evade the question.

Samantha was well used to her mother's delaying tactics, and she wasn't going to give up that easily. She asked again, and Isabeella smiled, as if in resignation. A trying smile, Samantha thought, knowing what she was going to say next, what she always said in such circumstances: "Because, Samantha, just because."

Samantha stared at her, not content to let it be. She wished her father was there to help her out, but he was still in bed. That was another thing she didn't understand: only females gathered nectar. The drones just made sure the hive was kept nice and tidy and sometimes moonlighted as guards or cleaners to earn some extra honey. A lucky few, when summoned to the palace, kept the queen amused with tales of victorious battles and ballads of forbidden, sensual love. Reginald Honeycomb was particularly famous for his rendition of the epic battle of the War of the Wasps, a story the queen never tired of hearing. "He's never had a *real* job", her mother had often complained (he had been chosen to stay in the queen's harem as a younger drone, until he was too old to perform his duties; then he found a wife and slept late every morning). Samantha had to agree – he certainly lived the good life – yet it bugged her that bees who entertained for a living had it much easier than those who had to labour in the garden for their honey. When she was older, she promised herself, she

was going to be a performer, or a queen, or whatever came first.

At that moment, though, she had greater things on her mind. "Why are roses sacred?" she asked again.

Isabeella plonked the nectar sack on the table, irritated. "Because they belong to the Sisterhood."

"Even the wild roses that grow near the border with the Crazy Lands?" Samantha asked.

Isabeella sighed. "Even those."

It wasn't fair, Samantha thought. There was no good reason why the Sisterhood should own every rose in the queendom while lay bees couldn't have any. The law was stupid and it was wrong. She was going to do something about it.

"Why do you want to gather rose nectar, anyway?" Isabeella asked. "It's no different than tulip or orchid or geranium nectar, and you can gather as much of that as you like." Her tone, if Samantha didn't know better, bordered on patronising. "Besides, the rules are the rules," her mother added. "There's a reason the laws are written the way they are, and it's not for worker bees like us to ask why. There's no point in trying to change them. Not even the queen would do that."

"You're wrong!" Samantha said, and clenched her claws until they hurt. "I'm going to go to the queen and I'm going to ask her to change the law so that every bee can own a rose, too."

"Next thing you know, you'll want to change the law so that drones can work with females. How ridiculous," her mother said. "The law is the law and you'd do well to know your place and accept it." With that said, she left for work.

How often she had wished things were different, Samantha thought now, staring into the rose. It was

the law and there was nothing she could do to change that. But, oh, how she yearned to enter its corolla. Was she never going to know what it was like? She wondered why the Great Mother Bee, the Creator of the entire universe, would give the world roses if only the Sisterhood were allowed to enjoy them. Weren't they a gift for *every* bee?

Then a tempting thought made her giggle. What if she entered while no one was looking? It was an outrageous idea. Did she have the courage to do it? She looked around, left and right, over her wings, behind her stinger, and saw no sign of anyone else. Except, in the distance, in the direction of the hills and the setting sun, she saw a kite gliding on the wind. The pilot was obscured behind the maple tree on which the hive was hanging, most probably one of the humans that lived in the farmhouse nearby. The kite soared in the air, far, far higher than she'd ever dared to go herself, almost to the very clouds, a swirling red petal lifted higher and higher on invisible wings.

One day, she wished, she would buzz as high as the clouds too, maybe even higher.

She turned back to the rose below. If she was going to enter its corolla, it was now or never. The fear of being caught, however, was like a wing-shackle. Her wings were suddenly heavy and an effort to flap. If she were caught inside the rose, she would be summoned before the queen, that was for certain. Then what? Punishment of some kind, most probably. Imprisonment, execution, she didn't know exactly. No one had broken the ancient law, ever, as far as she knew. No one had dared. Perhaps it was better if she didn't.

She was about to turn and buzz away when she heard a voice. It seemed to be coming from the

crimson rose, as if the Great Mother Herself was speaking directly to her. "Samantha," the voice said, ever so faintly. "Be a bee. Sip the Nectar of Life."

The temptation was just too much. Samantha Honeycomb landed on its welcoming petal and entered its secret and forbidden realm.



THE MOMENT SAMANTHA emerged from the rose, three worker bees buzzed overhead. Her eyes widened in alarm. From the looks on their faces she knew she was in trouble, even more than when she enrolled in aerobatic flying school instead of attending hive-economics (her mother had immediately removed her from the flying school when she eventually found out, and had made her clean the hive-cell as punishment, but by then Samantha had already learnt some quite spectacular stunts), and within the time it took to pull herself from the rose, several royal guards had already descended upon her. It was a bee's worst nightmare. The guards swarmed down from the sky like wasps attacking the hive. She didn't have time to hide. She didn't even have time to try a mosquito roll, a forward somersault with a double-twist and pike, or a blowfly back flip, a full reverse-loop with a half-twist, or any of the escape manoeuvres she had learnt at flying school. The guards completely encircled her, thrusting their stingers only bee-inches from her chest and back and sides.

"We're arresting you on suspicion of poaching sacred nectar," said the captain of the guards, and Samantha's eyes widened further. "You're coming with us to Hive Prison young lady."

Two of them seized her wings, lifted her into the air, then began to haul her across the gardens toward the hive.

It happened so quickly that she was halfway across the garden, past the spurting water fountain and pond in which the goldfish swam, past the bird-bath and the sandpit where the swallows and the blackbirds frolicked, past the outdoor table that the humans often used on summer afternoons, and past the patch of rosemary, coriander, sage, and basil, before she even had time to wiggle her antennae. She barely registered the shock of the workers that had stopped gathering nectar to watch what was happening.

Almost at the maple tree, she heard her name being called. Her mother was hovering over a large geranium bush, staring in disbelief. A sack of nectar slipped from her grasp. It bounced off several petals and splattered onto the grass beneath.

“Where are they taking you?” Isabeella asked. “What have you done?”

Only now did Samantha realise the trouble she was in. She wanted to reply, but her voice seemed to have been captured too. She wanted to say that she was sorry she didn’t listen to her advice this morning. She wanted to say that she was scared, that she didn’t want to be taken to the dungeons, but her voice remained stuck and the guards didn’t slow. Soon, her mother’s calls were lost in the rustle of wind through the maple leaves.

Samantha glanced up, almost too frightened to look. Hanging from a high branch was the hive of the eastern queendom. It had never looked so daunting. The entrance yawned like some unspeakable monster from the Crazy Lands; and as she passed through, several sentries glared at her with

suspicion. She felt very small, like a young grub being reared in the nursery. Her wings flapped nervously and her legs trembled.

It only got worse inside. The lower level was buzzing with activity, by far the busiest of the hive's seven levels. Bees entering and exiting the gates stopped to stare, much to her dismay, and though the chamber was illuminated via small air vents in the honeycombed walls, it felt uncommonly dark and cool. Samantha shivered and trembled even more, thinking, for some reason, that her wings were feeling particularly brittle and fragile.

The guards set her down and marched her deeper into the hive. Samantha struggled forward, still unable to comprehend what was happening. Just above and ahead of her was the central bee-way, the chimney-like corridor that divided each level into two sectors, east and west, and on any normal day Samantha would ascend it to her hive-cell on the third level on the inner western side, the working-class neighbourhood just across from the large pollen and nectar storage sites of the honey factories. Except this day had suddenly become anything but normal. It had mutated into something distinctly abnormal, with a capital A.

Some bees descending from an upper level stopped and stared before heading to the market over in the eastern sector. Samantha recalled the countless hours spent wandering through the sprawling maze of the Grand Beezaar, where anything and everything was for sale; beautiful caterpillar silks from the southern queendom; exotic pollens and nectars from the west; woodcraft – hiveware and furniture and such like – from the carpenter bees that lived somewhere near the Crazy Lands; gardening equipment from the bumblebees;

and, of course, the one thing every bee desired (and the ants and wasps and aphids and termites, and just about every other insect Samantha knew about in the world), honey. Honey, the common bond that united every insect in the known world, the very reason the Grand Beezaar was the busiest place in the whole hive. Samantha usually loved the aromas of pollens and nectars and beeswax and honey, the tireless buzz and energy, but today it felt somewhat menacing, like a mob on the verge of rioting.

Samantha suddenly felt the sharp point of a stinger between her wings. She stumbled forward, almost falling over. "Stop staring and get moving," the captain said, prodding her again. "You know where the dungeons are."

Like every honeybee in the hive, her wing-spines prickled at the mention of the dungeons. She had heard many rumours of what happened inside: torture, starvation, disease, and any number of horrors. Bees entered Hive Prison and were never heard of again.

With legs still trembling, Samantha was marched to the front of the gaol. The walls loomed over her, almost touching the ceiling of the lower level. The gates were just as high; and hanging from them was a cage, inside of which was a rotting exoskeleton, yawning (or was it screaming?) back at her, its claws still gripping the bars. Samantha stood immobilised with terror. Even her hearing seemed to have seized, for as if from the other side of the hive, she heard the captain yelling for the gate to be opened. Several seconds later, it creaked ajar.

"Move!" the captain said, prodding her again.

A waft of stench drifted past. Samantha didn't budge, her petrified legs stuck to the ground as if she were standing deep in a vat of honey.

Then, after a brief moment, she felt herself being picked up from under her wings and hauled into the prison.



IT WAS PITCH black behind the gate.

When her eyes adjusted, she saw that she was being taken across a narrow bridge that spanned a deep, dark pit smelling of rotting carcasses. Another door was opened on the other side of the bridge, smaller and more conventional than the main prison gates. The guards took Samantha through it into a dank tunnel that dripped a treacle-like substance from its ceiling, a substance Samantha hoped wasn't the liquefied remnants of some prisoner's entrails.

They emerged into a large courtyard surrounded by four low tiers of prison cells, as many as five to six hundred in total. She was dragged to the other side of the courtyard and thrown onto the cold, hard floor of a cell. It smelled of vomit and bee-dung, and for a moment she lay there, stunned. She heard the prison guard laugh and the slamming of the door, followed quickly by the jingle of keys and the clunk of the lock.

After a short while, Samantha picked herself up and slumped her tired body onto the bed beneath the window. She had little or no energy, too tired even for tears, so she just lay there, even though the straw mattress stabbed her wings and legs and made it impossible to get comfortable. Time passed

extraordinarily slowly. For what seemed hours, she wondered what she was going to do. Her thoughts also drifted to her godmother, the bee she'd always turned to for advice when she was feeling lonely or down.

"The Great Mother would want you to learn from this," she imagined the wise old bee saying. "She has a plan for every bee in the world and She makes sure that everything happens for a reason."

Samantha questioned whether she could really believe in a Grand Plan. It seemed that that sort of thing only happened in fairytales, to heroines falling in love with handsome princes, never in real life to an everyday bee like herself. Why would the Great Mother bother with someone like her, anyway? She wasn't important. She was never going to change the world. Samantha drew a deep breath and sighed. It was too difficult to see the meaning in everything that happened, and much easier to believe that she was simply the victim of circumstance.

Then she remembered another piece of advice from her godmother. "When I was searching for meaning, I was like a bee on a tulip petal looking for a tulip." She had then paused and smiled. "So my advice to you, young lady, is this: When you are searching for meaning, look no further than where you are."

Samantha had to admit she didn't really understand what her godmother had meant, but she supposed there was no harm in trying to follow her advice, and so began to cast an eye over her new living quarters. There was not much there – a straw bed, a bucket, and a stool – and above her head on the adjacent wall, a bright white- and black- striped square cast by a ray of dusty light filtering through

the bars of the cell's solitary window. *No, not much here at all, really*, she thought.

The cell's grim reality made her feel even more depressed; and as she contemplated her miserable lot, something caught her eye, a shadow on the wall, like a black fly buzzing back and forth. At first she didn't know what to make of it, and then she realised that something was flying past the window. She sprung onto the bed and peered through the bars.

The window, surprisingly, looked directly outside the hive. Through the branches and leaves of the maple tree, she was able to see what was casting the shadow, a red, diamond-shaped kite, swaying to and fro in the sky. Who or what, she couldn't make out, was piloting it in the field of tall grass that spread west toward the hills of the Crazy Lands. When the kite passed back again, its shadow crossed her face. Watching it soar filled her with a quiet sense of joy. She momentarily forgot her prison cell, flying free with the kite.

Then quite unexpectedly, it stalled in flight. Within the beat of a wing, it plunged toward the ground, spiralling and spiralling and spiralling until it dived into the tall grass and was lost to sight.

Samantha waited for it to rise again. After ten or so minutes she gave up and lay back down on the bed, then curled into a tight ball and cried herself to sleep.



THE TRIAL DATE was set for one week.

Samantha was allowed no visitors, not even her parents, and she had to make do with only one

meal a day, stale honeybread and water. The wait was unbearable. Often she whiled away the hours peering through the bars in the hope of spotting the kite again, but she never did. It only got worse. As the trial date neared, she became even more agitated and anxious. She couldn't sit still for a moment, as almost every minute was spent dreading what was to become of her. If she had to spend the rest of her life in this prison cell, she thought she would go as mad as a wasp. Execution would be more merciful.

As it was, she was already having strange and unusual dreams, and on the night before the trial she had the oddest one of all. Seated in the middle of an old theatre, Samantha found herself surrounded by rows and rows of empty seats. Ahead, on the bare stage, an old actress sat on a single chair. Apart from Samantha, the actress, who looked remarkably similar to her godmother, was the only bee in the whole place.

"Hello Samantha," the actress said, "what scene would you like me to act?"

Samantha didn't know many plays, but she was aware of a famous writer who'd apparently written some pretty good stuff. "What about some William Shakesbee?" she said, hoping this to be sufficient.

"My, my," the actress said, and paused, trying to remember her lines. "All right, let me see what I can do for you." She went to the edge of the stage, then puffed her chest, tilted her head, and said: "There are more mysteries, Horatio Bee, in hive-heaven than can be dreamt in your hive."

The actress stood frozen, waiting for applause, but it was a number of seconds before Samantha realised what she was meant to do. "Bravo! Bravo!" she said, clapping. "Bravo!"

The actress looked very pleased and dropped a curtsy. She turned to face the absent audience and gestured for silence. "To bee or not to bee, that is the question." She flapped her wings to stress the point. "Is it better to suffer the stings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or oppose them?"

"Bravo! Bravo!" Samantha applauded again, this time with more vim. "Encore! Encore!"

The actress shook her head. "You now know all you need to know," she said. "There is no more I can teach you. It is now up to you to go and bee."

Samantha woke early the next morning with one thought buzzing through her mind: *To bee or not to bee*. She was still lying on her bed, wondering what in the world it could mean, when she heard movement outside her door, then the rattle of keys, and then the unlocking of the door. The prison guard walked in, followed by the captain of the royal guards. "Get up!" the captain said. "It's time."

Samantha sat up straight away. She suddenly felt very awkward. She looked shabby and smelled rather grim, really in no state to go to trial, but the captain was having none of it. She was hauled outside the cell, where five more guards were waiting to escort her to the courtrooms. Two in front, two behind, and one on each side, she was marched out of Hive Prison to the central bee-way and the long walk to the fifth level.

It seemed that word had spread that a poacher had been caught with her claws in sacred nectar, for many bees had taken position along the route to witness the procession, a once in a lifetime event. The size of the crowd was somewhat daunting. Six guards felt rather inadequate for her protection, and although most of the crowd watched her pass in silence, she heard some nasty comments from

several older drones in front of the nursery on the second level, reinforcing her fears.

“Rot in jail!” shouted one, shaking his clenched claw at her.

“Prison’s too good for you!” said another.

Their comments were followed with murmurs of approval.

Samantha’s fear grew the closer she got to the courtroom, as did the numbers in the crowd. On the third level, onlookers were lining the bee-way almost three deep. The air was thick with the smells of pollen and nectar from the factories, smells that were as familiar as home-baked honeybread but unfortunately only reminded her of the hardships she was suffering. She was struck with a pang of homesickness, and desperately scanned the crowd for her mother and father. Unable to see them, she wondered where they were. It would be a terrible humiliation for them. Would they attend the trial or stay inside their hive-cell? She could hardly expect them to show their faces in public, yet she knew she couldn’t go through this alone. She’d never wanted so much to be with them in all her short life.

The guards then led her through the central bees-nest district on the fourth level. The crowd was now five or six deep. Samantha even caught many faces looking down on her from the old nests, the tallest of which touched the ceiling nine or ten cells high. Hundreds, if not thousands, of pairs of eyes were staring at her. A newspaper drone was selling this morning’s paper, hot off the press.

“Get your Daily Bee!” he shouted above the restless crowd. “Trial of the Century starts today! Read all about it!” It seemed he couldn’t sell them fast enough.

Samantha finally arrived at the courthouse in the eastern sector of the fifth level, where a menacing crowd had gathered with placards demanding her immediate execution. As the guards led her on by, Samantha heard someone shout, "There she is!" The crowd surged forward, baying and screaming and shouting obscenities. Samantha thought she was going to be ripped apart, but the guards closed ranks and pushed a path through the unruly mob. A moment later, she felt one of her wings being grabbed. Her squeals alerted the guards, who shoved the offending bee to the ground, and then marched on.

It was a struggle, but after a few minutes they were inside the courthouse. The doors were barred and they hastened down the empty corridor to Courtroom 3. Samantha breathed a sigh of relief, but her reprieve was only momentary. To her dismay, the tiny chamber was packed with hundreds of bees. Reporters had taken over the whole section behind the witness stand, some already writing on their pads, and the upper and lower levels of the public gallery were crammed. The low hum that was reverberating around the room hushed when she entered. Her wings flapped and she buzzed fretfully, a childhood habit she'd never outgrown, and now wished she had.

Not wanting to look at the crowd, Samantha eyed the queen's golden throne. It sat empty on a high dais backing the far wall, on which a portrait of the queen herself was hanging, Queen Beatrix Bee IV. From the seat beneath the dais, the magistrate watched her every step as the guards led her to the prisoner's stand directly opposite. The room was still hushed.

"Prisoner in the docks!" the captain shouted.

Samantha cringed with embarrassment. Turning, she glimpsed the frightened faces of her mother and father in the upper gallery behind her. She was glad they were here. Her mother tried to smile, but her face was wracked with worry. A murmur then began buzzing around the chamber.

“All rise!” said the magistrate, and the room echoed with the thuds and scrapes of hundreds of bees standing as one.

After a moment, the queen duly entered from a door behind the dais and sat on her throne. Queen Beatrix Bee IV was judge, jury and executioner, and Samantha could see she wasn’t in a happy mood. The rest of the courtroom then sat down, except Samantha; there was no seat for the prisoner in the docks, so she remained standing, head bowed. This was the moment she’d been dreading.

Soon, she’d know whether she was to live or die.

– End of Sample Chapters –

Dear Reader,

If you have enjoyed what you’ve read so far, please follow the link to www.doctorzed.com/orders to purchase your copy of the book and find out what happens to Samantha. I’m sure you won’t be disappointed.

Scott Zarcinas