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**Beehive and Icci**

By

**Nicolas Charlton**

A Creative Writing Project

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through the Department of English and Creative Writing  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts  
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2020

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*Beehive and Icci*

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## ABSTRACT

*Beehive and Icci* is a novel chronicling the adventures of its titular animal protagonists. The novel focuses on the characters of Beehive, an anxious bear, and Icci, a sociable bird, throughout their travels within a forest of anthropomorphized animals. This animal narrative is framed by the story of its fictional author, Wilhelm of Aurgarten, whose own eccentricities influence the shape of Beehive and Icci's goals and inner conflicts. The story of the author is communicated through occasional footnotes, which serve as either informative or humorous anecdotes surrounding the novel's writing process. Beehive and Icci — and, by extension, Wilhelm and his adopted niece, Mariena — explore questions regarding the value of life, how authority, social norms, and mental illness construct identity, and what it means to be a “person,” regardless of humanity or animality. By exploring human issues through animal characters, *Beehive and Icci* blurs the boundaries between how we perceive ourselves and others.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dearest thanks and gratitude to the following (and even those not listed here):

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And, finally, to that bunny I may (or may not) have run over last summer. You deserved better.

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## BEEHIVE AND ICCI

### Introduction

*Beehive and Icci* consumed my childhood.

Whenever I got sick, my grandfather would read it to me — and always in Mivoltan, a language I could never entirely grasp at that age. He would make a very heavy, very salty soup with rice and I'd eat it — delicately — in his expansive bed, covered in two or three layers of blankets. My grandfather's voice rose and fell with the tone of the story. Sometimes he spoke his homeland's tongue with too much of its lilting ferocity, when everything he spoke melded into a single word tumbling from his mouth and landed — with aplomb — into nonsense. Yet I never asked him to repeat himself.

The story stuck with me. *Beehive and Icci* never drifted far from my thoughts as I got older. I'd reference events from the book to my peers, as one would a Grimm tale or any Disney film — it never occurred to me that *Beehive and Icci* was a unique signifier of my third-generation quarter-Mivoltan upbringing. And so my obsession with this obscure work grew. Now, as a self-styled purveyor of literature, it became my duty to share this relatively unknown Mivoltan masterpiece with a wider, more appreciative, audience. I have translated *Beehive and Icci*, for the first time, into another language.

The question remains: why am I, an amateur scholar, the first person to attempt this literary feat? *Beehive and Icci* remained relatively unnoticed by scholars over the last century — its impact seemingly never left its homeland in Mivolta. Much of this obscurity is likely due to the work's author, Wilhelm of Aurgarten (henceforth noted simply as "Aurgarten"), and his extreme privacy bordering on hermitage. In fact, when the author completed *Beehive and Icci* (his self-proclaimed "life's work") and faced publication, he

considered the novel unpublishable and nearly destroyed his manuscripts. Luckily for us Aurgarten's niece, Mariena Nespola (née Aurgarten), published the work following the author's second (of four) successful attempts to fake his death.

We know very little about Aurgarten's life. He was born between the years of 1898 and 1900 on the island of Mivolta, a small independent state off the coast of Slovenia. He wrote *Beehive and Icci* over the course of his entire life, and it was finally published in 1953. Aurgarten took passing fancies in numerous subjects such as literature, zoology, anthropology, and music, and could both read and write in at least three different languages. He pursued these interests in nearly total isolation, spending all his time in and around his home, within Mivolta's wilderness, or in public libraries (though only during closing hours). Aurgarten never set foot outside his country's borders.

I should mention that scholarly work on Aurgarten is sparse – so sparse, in fact, that only one scholar, Benjamin Clive Jermock, has written on the man. Much of what we know about Aurgarten is documented only in Jermock's biography, *The Little Things: The "Quiet" Life of Wilhelm of Aurgarten*. While one normally does not accept a single work as hard-boiled fact, Jermock's text remains the sole authority on Aurgarten's life. It is certainly a very well researched book, as extensive contact with Mariena Nespola — the author's only surviving relative — inspired Jermock to credit her as "coauthor." It is my hope, of course, for Aurgarten to receive much more scholarly praise, and for his work to be welcomed into the literature canon.

My bias for this work is something that I cannot ignore. *Beehive and Icci* holds sentimental value for me, but I believe that Aurgarten's work may yield value for other

readers like myself. While it is impossible to translate Aurgarten's prose perfectly, my translation bears a contemporary voicing, while remaining true to the original novel's spirit. I include my own thoughts on the material in the form of occasional footnotes. These are necessary to distinguish between the work of Aurgarten, my own translation, and the personal intricacies through which Aurgarten constructed *Beehive and Icci's* narrative. Apart from these interjections, everything about Aurgarten's original text remains unchanged. My intention is to retell the episodic tales of Beehive the bear and Icci the bird in their original form and for you, dear reader, to fall in love with them just as I did.

- N.C.

## ***Spring***

### Episode 1: Beehive

Before dawn, Beehive's paws sank in the mud while he waited for just the right fish. Out from the short waterfall shot salmon, catfish, koi — Beehive could catch any one of these, but he let them all pass as he let out a stretched out yawn. *The very first fish of spring*, Beehive proclaimed in his head voice, *needs to be special. Not just any will do...* He was a bear, after all, and bear nature demands nothing less than perfection.

Small melodies peeking out from the woods always accompanied the rising sun — but nothing else mattered to Beehive, his senses darting back and forth, fish to fish. In his focus, he caught bits of conversation gurgling out of the water, most of it

unintelligible from the surface. Beehive paid it no mind. By bear standards, he considered it rude to listen in on one's breakfast.

He spotted a keeper: aloof, alone, and just the size Beehive liked. With a well-timed dunk, he snatched the poor fellow mid-swim. Beehive gave a pleased grumble and, prize in paw, ambled towards the shore. "What? What... WHAT!" the fish protested. "Put me back at once!" His voice crackled, dry like a hot stone. "You oxygen-breathing dolt! Boy, I tell you, if our roles were reversed, oh the walloping and wollaping I'd give you..."

So the fish continued his barrage of insults, all the way to shore. Beehive had heard them all a thousand times before. *Have I really eaten a thousand fish?* He thought to himself, craning his chin up towards the treetops. *Is a thousand too generous a number... or not generous enough? And even if I've had that many — or that few — how many insults did they each throw my way? I don't suppose they all spoke the same amount... but then I'll never know. Maybe I should have kept count...*

Beehive finally noticed the fish had calmed down. When he stopped his fidgeting, Beehive gave out a cough and a hum to ensure his voice still worked. "So," the bear intoned, "any news from your neck in the woods?"<sup>1</sup>

"Well," the fish sighed, "I don't hear much about you surface folk." His breath grew more haggard. "But spring came early this year, not sure if you noticed. Some crabs

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<sup>1</sup> Aurgarten — as many Mivoltan linguists know — was the first author to coin this phrase. This colloquialism of course refers to the ancient Sumerian myth that tree trunks were actually the "necks" of an underground species popping out of the earth. According to Aurgarten, each "neck" stretched out uniquely and all manner of animals — humans included — used its features to mark geography.

<sup>2</sup> Luckily for us, the reader, Aurgarten measured time in "human-units," as he so lovingly called them. Mariena, in fact, suggested this choice — Aurgarten wanted to represent "a more animal-centric measurement" (as he called them in his notes.)

<sup>3</sup> Jermock dedicates close to five pages of his biography criticizing Aurgarten's word choice here.

down the way keep debating whether or not they're spiders — *spiders!* Well, you know what they say about crabs... Oh! You're acquainted with the Lilypad family, yes?"

Beehive scrunched his nose. "Can't say I am."

"They're going through a bit of a domestic," the fish continued. "Apparently Gemma isn't happy Errol spends so much time at the old beaver dam, but I'm sure they'll eventually talk it out." The poor fish coughed something fierce, so Beehive did what any upstanding bear would do: he dipped the fish's head in the running water and pulled him straight back up to the surface. "Thank you!" the fish gasped. "Now what did I... ah, yes! They say Badstorm's coming around sometime soon."

"Never heard of them." Beehive snuffed, settling down beside a nice flat rock.

"Bad news, so the babble says! Sounds real nasty. At least I think, since there's 'bad' right in the name." The fish flapped his tail at the stream, now several paces away. "I thought you might know 'em. You're both big-like."

Beehive didn't know how to respond. *Mind your manners*, his thoughts suggested. "Thanks for the talk," said the bear.

And with a sturdy whap he slapped the fish's head on the stone.

Beehive spent his morning savouring the meal. His nose proved right once more, of course — this fish tasted delightful. The meal appeared tiny next to the bear's massive head, yet Beehive ate with a delicacy unparalleled elsewhere in nature. *A bear does not gnash like any common beast*, Beehive recited as he ate. *A bear savours taste. A bear must be grateful for every bite*. Even when he wanted to consume it whole, face-to-tail, the words rebounded in his thoughts. *Thank you, Earth Bear*, Beehive concluded.

By the time he finished, the sun had fully peaked in the sky. After winter, even the faint warmth of noon reminded him of the changing season. “Another spring, Beehive,” he said to himself.

The flat rocks along the beach had already absorbed the sun’s heat. Beehive’s lids drifted down, and he felt his whole body start to slink into sleep. *Alright*, he thought, *only for a —*

A thunderous snort woke him. Instantly the bear tumbled onto his feet, ready to defend himself. “Who’s there?” he growled.

The shore had no other movement besides the running stream and the occasional spurting of the waterfall.

In such moments of doubt, Beehive could only trust his nose. He sniffed. *Nothing. But where did that sound come from?*

Only then did Beehive notice the time:<sup>2</sup> the noon sun had fallen, in that brief instant, nearly an hour into the future.

*Where did that hour go?* Beehive thought.

## Episode 2: Beehive Abused

For many weeks afterward, Beehive walked. He always walked. The slight chill of winter no longer nipped at Beehive’s pads and the forest awoke with the relaxed

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<sup>2</sup> Luckily for us, the reader, Aurgarten measured time in “human-units,” as he so lovingly called them. Mariena, in fact, suggested this choice — Aurgarten wanted to represent “a more animal-centric measurement” (as he called them in his notes.)

conversation of gossip and the blooming of flowers Beehive could never name.

Springtime arrived, a long-awaited guest, at the forest of Nirgenswald.

And through all this, Beehive walked. With the uneven rise and fall of a trunk-like leg, Beehive left legible imprints in the earth. The smallest animals scurried off at the thud of his footstep, with the same urgency as though thunder had exploded without warning. Yet carrying so much weight gave Beehive a rhythm, momentum with purpose.

Beehive found this purpose in food.

A bear's nose, they say, could sniff like no other person's nose could sniff.

*Always trust your nose*, the Earth Bear taught him. *Any good bear could sniff a sunflower on the other side of Nirgenswald*. Beehive didn't need to smell that far; his nose – bulbous and black with some pink sneaking through – caught the scent of raspberries, walnuts, pears...

Beehive blinked and found himself at the source of the sweet concoction. Hidden within the crevice of a tree trunk, his nose delighted at the pleasant musk of assorted nuts and berries – already Beehive's claw gingerly scratched at the small hole.

"I'm sorry, Tree," Beehive said. "You have many somethings I want." And with an upward push, the bear stood on his back legs and shoved the tree over with practiced ease. "Thank you, Tree. Or should I thank you, Earth Bear? You put all of these treats here for my nose to find." With that, Beehive dived head first into the pile, crunching<sup>3</sup> both on his bounty and the coarse drool sprayed across his snout.

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<sup>3</sup> Jermock dedicates close to five pages of his biography criticizing Aurgarten's word choice here. The idea of putting "strawberries" and the word "crunch" so close together is, according to Jermock, "one of the most controversial creative choices in the entire novel". He claims that the texture of nuts

Beehive eventually snacked on individual pieces in different combinations. He tried raspberries with chestnuts, blueberries with chinkapins, walnuts with plantains, hickories with kola nuts and kiwi topped off with an entire mango. Beehive could not decide which mixture he preferred most.

“I must confess,” Beehive stated — sorrowfully — to the uprooted tree, “that all of these tasted delightful, in their own way.” An irritated squeaking chattered above. “Perhaps the pistachio with lime? No, no, I cannot ignore the complexity of the melon and kurrajong.”

“What to try next?” Beehive thought for the briefest of moments, then ate half the pile with a single scoop of his jaw. The squeaking erupted then, and loudly, but Beehive chewed louder. *Surely*, Beehive thought, *no other flavour can compare to all of them at once.*

Beehive kept chewing. Two moving shapes in the trees descended to a branch above Beehive’s head and, with horror, Beehive’s brain set on fire.

Above him loomed the enemy of all bearkind: *squirrels*. A pair of deceptively tiny mouths barked at Beehive, but the bear’s continuous chewing drowned out their words. The red squirrel’s pointed ears quivered hideously, while his partner, a grey squirrel,<sup>4</sup> whiffled her tail menacingly against the leaves. Beehive hunkered his shoulders down, ready to flee.

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would not contradict how “juicy” most berries are – the nut-berry ratio would need to be enormous to justify the verb “crunch”. Admittedly, I am ambivalent on the issue. In a conscious choice on my part, I decided to keep the word in so that I can remain as close as possible to Aurgarten’s intended meaning.

<sup>4</sup> Those squirrel enthusiasts among you will note that these two breeds come from entirely different continents. This diversifying choice on Aurgarten’s part is meant to establish, early on, the eclectic nature of Nirgenswald as a global natural habitat.

Beehive finally finished chewing and raised his paw in the air to hush the squirrels. “Could you repeat that?” Beehive asked.

“*Could you repeat that?*” the grey squirrel mocked.

“Sure,” said Beehive. “I said, ‘could you repeat that.’ I chew loudly, so I didn’t hear what you said before.”

“Well we could see that!” screamed the red squirrel, his fur standing straight as pine needles. “You nearly devoured our entire winter stockpile!”

Beehive tilted his head. “Winter? It’s been spring for - ”

“We know it’s spring!” interrupted the grey squirrel. “We wanted to get ready for winter early. And we’d done such an excellent job...”

Beehive sat. “I did you both a favour, then. Your stash would have gone bad long before winter.”

The grey squirrel scratched her nose. “Only a conniving thief justifies his own actions!” She leered at the bear. “Didn’t you ever think that all this food — so neatly collected and organized — belonged to someone else?”

“The Earth Bear sometimes leaves food behind for me.”

The squirrels exploded in laughter, laughing in the way that squirrels laugh.<sup>5</sup>

“*Earth Bear, Earth Bear,*” the grey squirrel grumbled, imitating the bear’s low voice.

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<sup>5</sup> This phrase, or variations of this phrase, appears throughout *Beehive and Icci*. I believe Aurgarten wanted to avoid anthropomorphizing his characters, maintaining as much of their “animality” as possible. Of course, he does give animals their own respective socially constructed culture and, of course, names.

“What even *is* an Earth Bear?” the red squirrel asked. “Some kind of plant?”

*How can squirrels not know about the Earth Bear?* Beehive marvelled. “No,” the bear replied, “the Earth Bear is not a plant. The Earth Bear is a bear. Perhaps either of you have seen her?”

“What does she look like?” the red squirrel chortled.

“Hmm... She’s much larger than I. Brown fur, like me. Also a bear.”

“Impossible!” shouted the grey squirrel. “There ain’t a person in Nirgenwald who’s bigger than you!”

“Yeah,” interjected the red squirrel. “And there ain’t a person in Nirgenwald as big or as STUPID as you either!”

The squirrels laughed, as only squirrels laugh, once more.

Beehive didn’t get their joke. Did squirrels always insult a person’s intelligence? After about three minutes of tolerating their laughter, Beehive spoke: “I’ll be on my way now.”

“Hey! We’re not letting you go that easy!” the red squirrel shrieked.

Beehive froze. He’d heard what squirrels do to their victims.<sup>6</sup> He’d survived many fights before, some by the thinness of a hair, but could he face off against a squirrel, much less two?

So he ran.

---

<sup>6</sup> Aurgarten’s contempt of squirrels seems to be a cultural one, as they are commonly called the “wolves of Mivolta.” The name, I hear, is entirely warranted.

Nothing stopped the bear – bushes and small trees collapsed under his charging weight. He careened in this destructive course until the smell of cool water slowed him down and he stopped to take a drink. “I just barely escaped,” Beehive panted. He’d live to eat and drink another day.

### Episode 3: Beehive Evades the Flood

A few days after Beehive cheated death, the bear smelled... something. *It's the Smell-less Smell*, he thought to himself. The Smell wafted by his nose — the keenest in all of Nirgenswald — perhaps once a year. Beehive knew what to do.

He changed directions and stomped uphill. A flock of birds soared above him in their pointed shape towards lighter sky. *What a coincidence*, Beehive thought, walking just a fraction faster than before.

Others smelled the Smell-less Smell. A coven of lizards scrambled into their holes, and families of weasels huddled together, whispering. An emu ran about in circles, calling out names that meant nothing to the bear.

Beehive passed a tortoise, her shell cracked with stories of a long life. “Just a bit of rain, everyone!” the tortoise shouted in her shaky voice. “Raindrops and puddles never hurt anyone before!”

A groundhog approached the well-weathered tortoise. “Old-timer, shouldn’t you find somewhere safe to go? This storm’s smellin’ like a nasty one.”

The tortoise snorted. “Son, I’ve known every corner of this valley since before your ancestor’s ancestors dug their first hole. I ain’t leaving it now.”

Beehive didn’t catch the rest of the conversation, as his legs kept padding forward. *This valley’s no different from any other valley in Nirgenwald*, the bear thought. *Why stay here?*

Beehive felt his legs strain against the earth’s angle: he’d finally reached higher ground. Deep grey clouds smothered everything, the entire world darkening under their stampede above. The wind followed suit, crashing into Beehive and tossing his fur about. *Keep moving. Remember to keep moving.*

In his haste, Beehive reached the top of the hill. He turned to survey the forest below him, the darkening green of the trees stretching as far as bear eyes can stretch.<sup>7</sup> The first drops of rain landed on Beehive’s nose – then the downpour swiftly collapsed around him. *There must be shelter close by*, he pondered, but the crashing rain drowned out his inner voice.

With the assistance of his trusty nose, Beehive found a cave opening — small, but serviceable. The bear pulled apart the stone piece by heavy piece, the rocks tumbling behind him downhill. The rumbling of thunder grew. “It will have to do,” the bear said, crawling on his belly into the opening. His temporary home started small, but grew comfortably spacious, by bear standards. The cave extended deeper underground, but Beehive settled himself not far from the entrance. *I won’t stay long*, he thought,

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<sup>7</sup> There is a common myth that bears do not have good eyesight, but rely instead on the strength of their noses. In truth, our vision is much closer to bears’ than we are willing to admit. Further, bears see quite well in the dark. Regardless of whether Aurgarten believed in the myth or not, he argued — anecdotally, mind you — that the reader needed to “see Nirgenwald through the eyes of a bear.”

shimmying himself a comfortable position in the dirt. *I've earned some rest, I think, after all that climbing.*

The Earth Bear raised him in a cave like this: dark, damp, cozy, and – most importantly – quiet. Small talk never penetrated stone and, to Beehive's satisfaction, he could ignore the world. *The world can ignore me too*, he thought, and let out as vast a stretch as he could in the confined space.

An explosive *boom* shook Beehive from his spot. *Thunder. It's only thunder.* The thunder continued, eventually accompanied by steadier percussion as rain smacked into the earth. He nearly fell asleep to the rhythm when the *booms* jolted the bear up once more.

His thoughts kept drifting back to the Earth Bear. *She's in a cave like this, somewhere.* But where? *In Nirgenswald, surely – but the world's a big place.* Season upon season, Beehive found many caves, but he never found the Earth Bear. *One day*, he thought, as sleep finally shrouded him.

~

The beating rain never stopped, until some days later small bits of the sun peaked through the hole he'd dug. His stomach proclaimed its discontent. *Time to eat.* And with that, he clambered out of the cave to stretch.

From his vantage point, Beehive thought the storm didn't change the forest at all. *Everything still looks green*, he thought, and Beehive descended with firm and steady stomps. Mud spewed upward into his fur with each stride. *It's only mud. I can handle mud.*

The muddy hills made way for the forest floor, covered entirely with a layer of squelchy water. *Now this won't do.* Beehive stomped and a colossal jet of the murk sprayed his face. *I don't mind walking. I don't mind swimming. I mind the two together. All this water...*

An idea struck him. *Where there's water, there's fish!* But tragedy struck when Beehive's nose smelled no fish. *What good is water if there's no fish in it?*

Aside from the squish and splash he made with each step, Beehive realized no other sound came to his ears. *Did the people leave the valley to escape the flood?* A second sound piqued Beehive's ears: a loud, discontent rumbling in his stomach. *There's nothing to eat here,* he complained. *No wonder everyone left.*

The bear continued on, though each step displeased his feet. He missed the crunch of leaves and the snap of twigs; he liked how solid the ground felt whenever his foot landed.

"Things better go back to normal soon," he said aloud. He startled at the sound of his own voice.

#### Episode 4: Meeting the Troublesome Bird

While he ambled onward, Beehive heard the trees singing cheerful, peppy tunes.

Ecstatic worms wiggled up from the earth, doing whatever worms do following a storm. Across this stretch of forest, where the sun squeezed through the squinting leaves, birds pranced about in the muck. They plucked the gross little wigglers from the ground with an audible *ploint*. Beehive cringed. *Food should never squish or wiggle.*

So he lumbered forward, crushing mud and twig beneath his age-hardened paws.

Everywhere he stepped, birds pranced about in his way, delighting in their good fortune. Beehive trudged all over the feeding ground. The formerly ecstatic worms squished beneath Beehive's careless stomp. Some frustrated birds might have cursed him, but all inevitably scurried out of his way.

"But Mummy, why do we have to mooooooove?"

"Don't you see? That's a bear! He'd crush you with his claws, eat you whole, then murder your whole family. Bears don't care for anyone but themselves, so get out of their way while you can."

Everything squished beneath the bear's mighty paws, and the hungry birds could do nothing but gawk and sling insults.

A colourful blur rushed at Beehive's head. He did not flinch.

The blur — a bird, as it happened — fluttered about Beehive's face, calling out in a shrill voice, "*Arctos! Arctos!* You vile, grotesque, poorly-groomed interloper! You deserve every misfortune imaginable! I hope you sleep on displeasingly jagged rocks, but can't actually sleep because you're too uncomfortable! I hope... I... may you die at least 516 deaths, or at the very least break a nail on that mangy paw of yours!"

Beehive stopped. "Hmm," he commented and went about his way.

"Don't you 'hmm' me!" the bird snapped, whizzing by the bear's nose. "I know your type. Big, menacing, and absolutely no concern for the little guy..." She tackled a tuft of fur by Beehive's ear — the bear didn't feel it, and only knew it happened because he heard the impact. "Do you know what you just did? Hey!"

Beehive sat in the mud and snorted at the pest. He noticed how her plumage — a vibrant red and yellow — stuck out from the green-and-brown scenery. *At least she's easy to spot, if she attacks me again.* “What could you possibly want from me? I have nothing to offer.”

The bird perched on a nearby branch and huffed her chest. “Someone your size should practice some level of self-awareness. All teeth, all claws, and — gosh, you're so darn *big!* You probably did more damage than that flood with your gigantic claws and your... ugly face. And worst of all, you squished a worm very dear to me just now.”

Beehive scratched his head. “All this trouble over a worm? When I lose a nice fish, another always comes along.” Mentioning fish made his stomach grumble.

“A *worm?* WORM!? Worms like that don't just come around often. So fat and round and...” she paused, trotting on one spot. “Nutritious! Would you deprive a growing young tanager like myself the essential nutrients I need to survive?”

Beehive got back up, regretting his choice to sit in the mud and listen to this babbling. “I'll be on my way then.”

“On your way *where?* I need payback! Recompense! You owe me big time, you big... bear.”

Beehive shrugged and ambled away.

The erratic bird flew after him. “Hey, don't you amble away! Didn't you hear me? BIG. TIME.”

The bear sighed. “You want another worm? Would that end this conversation?”

She shook her head. “You can't just replace one work of art with another.” The bird's body lurched downward, nearly crashing into Beehive's behind. “Oh, my wings...

they tire so from keeping up to your gigantic strides of mass destruction.<sup>8</sup> Maybe you could... slow down? Just a tad?"

"If you want to rest, stop following me," Beehive intoned.

"Too late, big guy. I'm not leaving until we're even." She landed on his back and buried her feet deep in his fur, then gave a light and satisfied chirp.

Beehive groaned. The tiny bird's tiny toes dug into his skin like tiny teeth. "Don't you have somewhere else to sit?"

"*Perch*: that's the verb you're looking for. Besides, I'm a bird. I can *perch* wherever I want," the tanager announced. "Except my wings... by the sky, so sore! Flying all around the world ALL winter really takes the flight out of you." She stretched her entire wingspan, her tiny talons gripping deeper into Beehive's fur.

"Birds don't fly in winter."

"Sure they do! And I'd know. Where do you think we all go when it gets too cold.

Beehive perked his ears. "Never thought about it."

"Yeah, I'm sure you don't think about A LOT." The bird tucked her legs further in, wiggled around, and sat among Beehive's field of fur. The movement pricked Beehive's skin. "You don't mind if I perch here do you? Gosh, you're warm."

"I'm not your legs. You have wings, use them."

The tanager cawed. "I would, but... I'm just *so* in shock from the flood, uh... everything... shaking! Do you know it's nearly impossible to fly while shaking?"

Beehive furrowed his brow. "No, I don't have wings."

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<sup>8</sup> In her contributions to Jermock's biography, Mariena consistently emphasizes her uncle's long, lanky legs. Apparently the author felt quite embarrassed at his own leg proportions, and would go into "melancholies" (as Mariena put it) whenever someone pointed out the irregularity.

“Let me tell you,” the bird continued, “it’s a burden at times. And these times? Most certainly trying! Sure, it’s spring and whenever spring arrives in stories, it brings along change... but the world keeps getting weirder and weirder.”

*I suppose that’s true, Beehive thought. I’ve never had a bird plant itself on my back before.*

The bird cooed and settled deeper into Beehive’s fur. “Hmm, I’ll stick with you for a while... at least until you pay me back for that worm.”

“How?” Beehive asked.

“That’s for me to figure out, and for you to accomplish.” Beehive felt her whole body crane upwards, as if toward the sun. “Say, do bears have names?”

“Beehive. I’m Beehive.”

“Huh... not what I’d call you, but it’ll do. Well, I’ll tell you my names: Iccipiani Wingelli Marcelau — you can call me Icci, if that’s easier to say.”

“Itchy. Understood.”

“No, I-CHI. Iiiiiiii...”

Beehive scanned the ground for worms. With every step, he found another one wriggling in the mud, enticing the bird-brain on his back to gobble it whole. But Icci never told him to stop. *She’s waiting for the right one to come along*, Beehive imagined.

“Well, Beehive, I’m famished,” Icci chirped. “What do you say about finding us some food?”

## Episode 5: A Day at the Beach

“...So of course Aunt Maeve<sup>9</sup> gets *furious*. She starts yelling at us all — so that’s myself, Ognyan, Naoki, Edita, Juniper, Sebastianus, and Jim — telling us not to go too close. But the closer we got, the funnier the whole thing became. Aunt Maeve, she’s real sweet, but get on her bad side... well, I’ll leave some of the details to your imagination... So the Lilypads — I’m sure you’re well-acquainted — they’re making sure we’re all right, but then...”

*I need something to eat*, Beehive thought.

“And not to mention their Queen. Oh, you could talk to her for hours about the most interesting things. Did you know that owls can see in the dark AND stay up past curfew? Imagine that!”

Beehive nodded, shaking Icci about.

“Well,” Icci said, “can you imagine it?”

Beehive nodded again, more agreeably.

Icci squawked. “Stop nodding whenever I ask you something!” She dug her tiny talons into Beehive. “It’s rude, you know, not to listen when I’m talking to you.”

“If you say so,” Beehive responded.

“Ugh, what does that mean, ‘*if* I say so.’ Of course I said so, I just said it!” Icci sighed. “If anyone had to step on my worm, couldn’t it have been someone more... likeable?”

“I stepped on your worm, bird,” Beehive said. “*If* is irrelevant.”

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<sup>9</sup> A recurring character in *Beehive and Icci*, she is apparently based on Mivolta’s “founding” lady, Maeva Tinori Straus de Volkovski. Mivoltans call her the Lady of Many Flags, since Milvolta — during her lifetime between 1601 and 1709 — was colonized by Italy, Portugal, Yugoslavia, and what we now call Austria.

“Oh, he speaks more than five words at once!” Icci clapped in the way birds clap.

“Bravo.”

Beehive’s ears heard a tender *sshhh*, rising and falling. *Water*. And water — almost always — meant fish. He sharply turned towards the *sshhh* and lumbered over.

“What gives,” Icci squawked. “Why the turnaround?”

“Do you not hear the water?”

“What water?”

“There is water nearby.”

“So?”

“Water means fish.”

“So??”

“I’m hungry.”

“Why should I care about what food *you* want? You still owe me that worm.”

“Worms live near water. You’ll find your worm at the water and be on your way.”

“Fine,” Icci huffed. “Let’s go get those worms.”

A sand-covered beach waited for them and the clopping of tiny waves accompanied the *sshhh*. The bear’s eyes, as good as bear eyes get at his age, couldn’t spot any shore on the other side. *How will I find a fish in so much water?* Beehive’s shoulders dropped.

“This water...” said Beehive. “It doesn’t flow — where does it begin? And this sand...” he mumbled, lowering his paw and cratering the ground. “You will find no worms here, bird.”

“*Bear*, you’re useless. You don’t know how to scavenge for worms.” Icci jumped down from the bear’s back and onto the sand. She cooed at the impact. Shaking her feathers, bits of sand flew around her tiny body as she hopped around. Her feet left twig-like markings in the damp, crudely-packed sand.

“Why do you move about like that?” Beehive asked. “Does hopping help you find worms?”

“It feels nice!” Icci yipped, not stopping her prance. “How could your paws not appreciate that? Besides, anything’s better than suffocating in your rough, mangy fur.”

Beehive turned away from the bird and marched into the water. *I have more important business.* A fish swam up around his front leg and Beehive scooped it into his awaiting paw. Still hungry from his days-long famine, Beehive chomped down on the fish before he returned to shore.

*This is the first fish I have caught in a while,* Beehive thought, not minding the sand sticking to his fur when he sat down. “Might as well savour it.”

Icci hopped over. “Who are you talking to? You know the fish can’t hear you anymore, right?”

“Mind your own business, bird. Find that worm.”

“You don’t think...” said Icci, poking her beak around Beehive’s meal, “that maybe, just maybe, fish eat worms?”

Beehive shooed her away with a mighty paw. “No. Worms do not live in water.”

“Well maybe if you didn’t gobble it up so fast you can check if one’s still... in there.”

“That’s not how eating works.”

Icci resumed her playful hopping. “How would I know? I’d never debase myself by eating another person’s flesh. But that wouldn’t mean much to you. You don’t have morals.”

*Aren’t worms people too?* Beehive thought to himself. *I’ve never really considered that before...*

Over the sound of Icci’s soft patting, Beehive heard a scuffling coming from the forest. His nose noticed a pungent smell, somewhat familiar. *A bit too strong for my taste. Like too much at once. I hope it doesn’t come closer.* The source of the noises emerged from the forest: a wolverine. Large and rotund for a person of its size, he waddled towards the water, mumbling under his laboured breath.

The wolverine gave Beehive a drowsy glance. “Say, old-timer,” asked the wolverine, a rough voice cracking from his parched lips, “this water dry?”<sup>10</sup>

“No.” *Old-timer?*

The wolverine sniffed at the water, then guzzled it. He drank so forcefully that Beehive thought the lake would shrink.

With the odour so near, Beehive coughed. The wolverine must have exploited the devastation of the flood, since only water-clogged flesh carried that rotten smell.

*Putrescent,* Beehive thought. *How am I supposed to breathe with this... person standing around me?*

Icci flew up to the wolverine’s side, his entire body still thrashing, swallowing up the lake. “My thirsty friend, what brings you to this neck of the woods?”

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<sup>10</sup> The exact meaning of “dry” in this context remains somewhat ambiguous. Most likely, it refers to a distinction between salt and fresh water – for an animal, salt water cannot be consumed, and thus the oxymoron “dry”. The term is used so rarely in the novel (especially since the ocean never appears) that its definition remains unclear.

The wolverine stopped his drinking and turned to Icci. He smiled in the way wolverines smile, water gushing out from his jaw. “Sweet one, I must say, you have quite the plumage. Those colours together look divine on you.”

Icci splished and splashed in the shallow water. “I’m glad to hear you say so.” She turned to Beehive, who’d gone back to eating his fish. “Hear that, bear? That’s how you properly compliment someone who’s only been nice to you.”

“When were you ever nice?” the bear asked.

“Pfft,” spat Icci, waving off Beehive’s comment. “That one’s a lost cause. I can’t get any good conversation out of him.”

“If it’s conversation you’re looking for,” said the wolverine, “I’m happy to provide. I bet you have all sorts of interesting stories to tell.”

“Finally! It’s about time someone asked me about *me* for once!”

The wolverine shuffled closer to Beehive, blocking the bear’s view of Icci. “I can tell you’re quite well-spoken. I bet you’ve learned about all manner of things the world over.”

“Yes! I’ve been everywhere, you know...”

“Where, exactly?”

“Oh, you know... everywhere.”

Beehive zoned out, went back to eat his fish, but got another whiff of the wolverine’s stench. *If he stays much longer, I’ll...*

Beehive didn’t know how to finish his thought. Leave? Vomit his perfectly fine meal? Beehive decided to stand. “I’ll be on-”

“Hush!” shouted Icci. She gestured to the wolverine. “Please, continue.”

“A-HEGHM. You seem quick-witted for one so young. Why slow yourself down by travelling with a bear?”

ICCI laughed. “You think I want to travel with that fish-head? Please. He owes me something, that’s all.”

“Well, when you’re done with the bear, you should come along with me. I promise I don’t bite,” He chuckled, his voice cracking. Apparently, all the water he drank didn’t soothe his throat.

“Ha! Have you seen yourself?” said ICci. “Even if you tried, I’d just hop out of the way – I wouldn’t even need to fly!” She flew around the wolverine’s head anyway, whizzing about at lightning speed and finally landing with aplomb. “Because you’re so fat.”

Beehive snorted. “Don’t say rude things to strangers, bird,” he recited, remembering the Earth Bear’s lessons.

The wolverine, splats of watery drool dripping into the sand, nodded. “No, she’s right. I admit, I’m... indulgent when it comes to eating. Just a way to be, for me and my kind. Real gluttons, people call us. Can’t change that though.”

“Hmm,” Beehive grunted. *Your gluttony is why I feel so...* just then, Beehive nearly lost his lunch. Beehive nudged the fish he’d lost his appetite for. *A perfectly good fish, ruined. Wasted. It’s that stench...*

“I’m curious, ICci,” asked the wolverine, “what genus are you, exactly? I’ve never met your kind before.”

“Obviously not! I’m unique! Ma and Pa always said we were, and I quote, ‘birds of a feather, all tanagers, all clever!’<sup>11</sup> NO ONE’s as clever as Ma and Pa. Except Aunt Maeve. Or maybe—”

“Oh, a tanager.” The wolverine scratched his nose. “Your plumage, it’s really remarkable – the way the red runs into the yellow, so delightful. I could almost...”

The wolverine soared into the air. His flight almost peaked beyond the horizon, but the poor glutton dived lower and lower and lower, right into the water. Beehive, without realizing he’d knocked the wolverine sky-high, didn’t even hear the splash.

Beehive sighed. *The stench is finally gone.*

“*Bear!!!*” squeaked the bird, her chest puffing back and forth.

“My name is Beehive, bird.”

ICCI’s lower beak dropped. Her face sloped downwards, bobbing. “My one chance at a real conversation, blown...”

“He smelled.”

“What smell? Are you trying to ruin my life? You step on *my* worm, then smack my new friend into a lake! What do you have against me?”

“Truly?” Beehive thought for a moment. “I don’t even remember your name. Go find your wolverine friend.”

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<sup>11</sup> ICci may resemble a summer tanager, particularly in its diet and colouring, though apparently Aurgarten intentionally ignored the bird’s truthful physiognomy. Mariena told Jermock an anecdote about how, when she was younger, she greatly admired a photo of a red tanager, calling it “a beautiful ruby princess”. Aurgarten apparently didn’t have the heart to tell her that only male summer tanagers were red, while the females are a boring yellow-ish colour. There are numerous evolutionary reasons for this distinction (such as males needing to attract mates, and females needing to not attract predators), but Aurgarten ignores these facts in favour of portraying the character of ICci. And so, ICci seems to be a middle ground between the two colours, as well as having a widely assorted diet, making her a somewhat fantastical creation.

“I’m not going anywhere! Besides, I can’t... see where he ended up. And hey! You still owe me, Beehive, don’t you forget it!” Icci tried, once more, to hop about in the sand, but her motion seemed stiff. “And my name’s Icci. Did you *seriously* forget my name already?”

“I forgot you told me,” said Beehive. “Well, Itcher, I’ll be on my way now.”

“Not this again!” Icci flew back up on Beehive’s back. “It’s Icci! And you *promised* you’d get me a new worm. You might not value the unbreakable bond of a promise, but you better learn how. You never break your word, bear, and you better not forget that.”

Beehive tried to remember if he’d actually made this promise.

### Episode 6: A Night of Tension

Before the sun had fully set on the forest, Beehive searched the stones and greenery for the trace of a hidden cave. With luck — and generosity from the Earth Bear — Beehive found a spacious cave wide enough for him to enter standing on two legs. Of course, Beehive preferred walking on all fours. He’d have room to stretch, a comfort sorely missing from his last cave.

Beehive reached the threshold of the cave before a voice stabbed into his ear.

“Oh no, no way, not in there!”

*I almost forgot about the bird.* “You don’t need to enter. I’ll sleep here, you can sleep... wherever birds sleep.”

“I’m not letting you out of my sight! Especially not in a cave... don’t you know they’re all cursed?”

“Caves... what?”

“Cursed, Beehive, cursed. With Bads.”<sup>12</sup>

“Bads...”

“Yes! Never go anywhere you can’t see the sky, Ma and Pa always said.”

Beehive walked straight into the cave. As he inched his head inside, his ears heard the mutterings of some other animals deeper within. *Best to avoid them. I’d rather face an annoying voice than one I don’t know.* He turned around and marched out.

“You’ve finally listened to reason, have you?” Icci piped in.

“I listened to the cave,” Beehive said. “It’s already full.”

“Full of Bads, I told you!”

The blue of night set in, yet describing each sound would never do them justice.

Beehive found the fallen trunk of a massive tree, much larger than himself. His nose smelled the area for any territorial animals, found the barest trace of a passer-by ocelot — *three days ago, by the smell of it*, Beehive proudly thought — and decided to try and sleep at its base.

“That’s one big tree,” commented Icci. “Must have been a big noise when it fell. Boooooom. Still, I’ve flown over larger. Way, way out west. Bigger than ten of you, Beehive, if you can imagine that.”

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<sup>12</sup> The old Mivoltan word for bats, though *denevér* became more commonly used sometime during the 20th century. Just as squirrels were called the “wolves of Mivolta,” bats were said to be living devils and carried plague. In 1889, the entire species was routed in a plague scare — to this day, bats avoid the shores of Mivolta in what biologists call “mass terror of a second genocide.”

“Hmm.” *Should I burrow to make a resting place?* thought the bear. *I’ll nest my head here. There. Does she talk still? I need this rest.*

“Back with the living yet?”

“I never left.”

“I find that hard to believe. Here I am, trying to start a conversation, and you’re spacing out! While you’re helping me find a new worm — a real nice one, not just *any* worm — you can at least learn how to speak. Here, let me show you. You can ask ‘Icci, what *types* of trees did you see out west,’ or, ‘Icci, how big *was* this massive ginormous tree’.”

“You would tell me anyway.”

Icci puffed her feathers. “Of course I would, it’s fascinating! And the tree—”

“Doesn’t matter. I need sleep.” And with that, he curled up against the huge trunk, facing away from the bird.

“Well where’m I supposed to sleep, huh?” asked Icci. With no answer, she flew off.

*Finally*, Beehive thought. He stretched out his back, cracking his body in all the places he’d grown stiff. *How much does a worm cost to this bird*, Beehive thought, stretching and rolling about – *she must worship these worms, or else why bother me with this nonsense* – and a knob in the wood interrupted his thought; Beehive could move somewhere else, anywhere else, but he’d already stretched and warmed the ground beneath him, so he stayed in his warm — yet knobby — spot, continuing his thoughts on the Icci dilemma: *her antagonism to enter a cave will prove troublesome – I might find the Earth Bear’s cave any day now, and if I find it the bird might stop me from entering,*

*or she might direct me away from the Earth Bear, or the bird will lead me right into the nest of bloodthirsty squirrels – or perhaps she herself might get eaten or worse, in which case I could continue my search, but I’m off my course now because of this bird and this promise I never made and I may never reach the Earth Bear in time – in time, in time: how much time do I have, and how much of it will I waste on this bird, all the time I have left gone because of a bird – this will not end well.*<sup>13</sup>

With a clutter, Icci returned. She cradled a branch of some kind and dragged it to a spot Beehive couldn’t see. The bear didn’t care what Icci had — but his nose did.

*Plums? How did she carry plums?*

“What are you doing here?” Icci snapped.

Beehive found himself standing in front of the tanager, pecking away at a bundle of plums.

“I guess... my nose led me here. I smelt plums.”

“Yeah. I got hungry.” She went back to her eating, peeling off the skin of a plum and jabbing her mouth into the soft flesh.

“How did you carry all those plums here?”

“With my feet, obviously.” Icci glared at the bear. “Do you mind? I need to eat my pre-sleep meal.”

“You eat before you sleep?”

“Of course I do, why wouldn’t I?”

“Are you going to eat all those plums?”

---

<sup>13</sup> I believe it goes without saying that this sentence does not translate perfectly well from Mivoltan. I can assure you, dear reader, that the sentence in its original Mivoltan is one of the most beautiful passages I’ve ever read in all of literature. Somehow, the sentence incorporates an almost musical quality to its prose, creating wordplay and a poetic rhythm that would rival Eliot. It is a shame – a shame all my own, in fact – that the original passage must lose its quality in translation.

“I’d love to... but admittedly, I’ll probably only finish the one.”

“Then why carry seven of them back here?”

“So, the bear counts! What happens if I get hungry again?”

“Carry back two.”

“Bah, it’s easier to grab the whole branch. But what would you know about plum cuisine?”

Beehive sauntered over to Icci and her plums. *Well if she’s not going to eat all of them...* He reached out for one.

“Don’t! You’ll squish them all!”

“I won’t.” Beehive, with all the delicate tenderness of a sloth, poked one of the plums and inched it closer to his face. Instead of gorging on the flesh, as he did with meat, he took soft nibbles from the fruit. *Perfectly ripe.* His behind sat itself down and he slowly dissected his meal one sliver at a time.

“I have to admit, I’m impressed!”

“It’s not hard to eat plums. Kiwi—”

“Ugh, I hate kiwi. Gave me a stomach ache once.”

“Have you tried it again since?”

“Naw. Why would I? It made my stomach all... gross.”

“I had the same experience when I first ate kiwi.”

“First? You ate more than one kiwi, even when it didn’t sit right?”

“Sure. Kiwi’s good. I got used to it.”

“And now you can eat kiwi, no problem?”

“Now I eat kiwi no problem.”

“I thought bears just ate fish.”

“Fish tastes good. Fruit tastes good. I like both.”

“And plums... they’re your favourite?”

“No. Don’t be ridiculous. My favourite fruit is...”

### Episode 7: The Monstrous<sup>14</sup> Melon

“I don’t understand you, bird,” Beehive said between bites of a carrot the next morning. “I thought birds only ate worms.”

Icci ruffled her feathers and bounced in place. “Oh, I love all sorts of things! We tanagers, we’re not picky, you know. I’ll eat almost anything edible!”<sup>15</sup>

Beehive nudged his carrot. “You do not eat carrots.”

Icci sneered at the orange vegetable in Beehive’s paw. “Roots don’t count as food. They’re too much like trees! Just... blech. Other than that, I’ll eat anything.”

“Not true.” Beehive concentrated on the chewed end of his orange snack.

“Dandelions. Apricots. Broccoli. Squash. Remind me, do you eat wood?”

“Disgusting! Who eats wood?”

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<sup>14</sup> I choose to translate the word for the divine Melon as “monstrous,” for the Mivolta word Aurgarten uses shares a name too similar to a 21<sup>st</sup> century figure, whose name I refuse to share here. Its original meaning spans many words in the English language: holy, sacred, cursed, tempestuous, titanic, magic... the list goes on.

<sup>15</sup> Most birds have very selective diets based on many factors: environment, beak shape, the bird’s body shape, and so on. Why Aurgarten leaves Icci’s diet so vast – we see her eat everything from worms to fruits to vegetables and even honey in Episode 31 – appears, at least to me, an intentional choice. The ambiguity of Aurgarten’s selection in what Icci can or cannot eat provides her with a more “global” personality and palette. While he does not stick to a single interpretation of Icci, I postulate that Aurgarten makes the clever choice in making Icci a sort of “every-bird” of contradictory qualities.

“Wood. Mint. Kiwi. Most leaves. Ivy. Oak seeds.” Beehive finished his carrot.

“And pineapple.”

“Well none of those taste any good.” Icci remarked. “You know what else?”

“I assume you’ll tell me.”

“I’ll tell you — I don’t eat meat! Eating innocent people... why hunt for food when you can just eat off the ground!”

“I don’t remember hunting anything.”

“Hypocrite!” the bird shouted. “You hunt fish!”

“I do not *hunt* fish. Fish find me.”

*Stop*, Beehive’s nose told the bear. In all his years, Beehive’s nose never smelled something so heavenly, so awe-inspiring. *Do you trick me, nose?* But Beehive knew his nose would never trick him – if it smelled something, that something existed. Beehive waltzed in the direction of this particular smell. Carrots do not fill up bears, after all.<sup>16</sup>

“This again?” Icci asked, but she followed the bear anyway.

They did not travel far when Beehive heard Icci sigh loudly. “It’s gaspable!” she gasped.

Then Beehive’s mouth went slack. For there, on a small rising out of the earth, almost as though the thing hovered above all lowly creatures, lay the largest melon that ever existed. Even the “largest” would completely understate this Melon, for its size

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<sup>16</sup> Jermock’s analysis shows its age in his criticism of this line. Jermock claims that a carrot could fill up the stomach of a specific type of bear: the koala. By now, we are well aware that koalas are not bears, and so Jermock’s argument may appear somewhat foolish in the eyes of history.

eclipsed even Beehive's entire form.<sup>17</sup> Its stripes shone with a green more rich than any forest fern, and its orange hews outmatched ten thousand sunsets; the rays of sunlight floated down to drape the scene with a hazy dream-light.

*Did the Earth Bear leave this gift for me? No, this relic exists far beyond even her influence.* The melon sang out to his nose, and Beehive knew what to do.

"I'm speechless..." stammered Icci. "Beehive, break it open so that I can eat it."

*My whole life has led to this moment. I will not waste this gift on some stranger.*

"No, bird. You couldn't eat this Melon, even if you tried. I smelled it first."

"Well I *saw* it first. Besides, you'd eat the whole thing in two bites and just get hungry again. If I had the Melon, I could eat it for... I dunno, my whole life! I'd never go hungry, Beehive! Do you want me to go hungry?"

"I don't care what you want. Unless you only want to live a few days, the Melon will rot. I would honour it and eat it with the respect such a Melon deserves. You would waste this *gift*."

"Of course I'd show respect, and stuff, you're the one who just gobbles up food without a thought. You wouldn't even savour the flavour!"

"What do you mean by 'show the Melon respect'? When have you ever shown respect?"

---

<sup>17</sup> Melons of any kind could not be anywhere near this size during Aurgarten's time. In fact, melons were never seen in Mivolta until well after the release of *Beehive and Icci*, since the island's soil could not support their growth. In all my research, I could not find any evidence proving whether or not Aurgarten had even seen a melon in his life, which could possibly explain the size disparity. It is worth noting how Mivoltans celebrate "Aurgarten Day" to recognize the novel's publication. Every year, a festival takes place during which a "Monstrous Melon" competition occurs where the Mivoltans compete to grow a melon deserving of its namesake. Of course, the largest recorded melon weigh in at a total of 3.4 kg – no larger than the average house cat.

“I respect all the time! I even respect you, when you’re not being a total wet feather. You’re the one who doesn’t respect me!”

“I have no comment on this subject.”

“See? You just ignore me, or say I’m annoying, or say I’m wrong and then end your sentences with ‘bird’. I have a name, Beehive!”

“I’m well aware you have a name, b-”

“Don’t say it!”

“Say what? You’re young? And flippant? You say too much, and never think?”

“So what, I’m supposed to mumble and talk slow and enter into some pseudo-deep intellectual dialogue with myself about how hard life as a bear gets *so* impossible and complain about how old or fat I am?”

“I do not complain.”

“I don’t either! I’m not a bear! And even if I were, I doubt that’d make you happy.”

“You have no bearing on my happiness.”

“Well maybe if you learned to appreciate what I have to say, maybe you’d be a lot nicer. And I do know things! Lots of things! I might go so far as to say I know almost everything! I could teach you about stuff, if you ever cared to listen.”

“Stop speaking in Vaguely. What could I possibly learn from you?”

“Well, we could start with how to treat people more courteously. Or at least how to end a conversation without saying ‘I’ll just be on my way now.’”

“How many winters have you survived?”

“What does that have to do with anything? Speaking of vague...”

“How many?”

“A whole bunch! I’ve seen trees and mountains and—”

“Answer the question, bird.”

“Okay, three! Two! I don’t know!”

“Correct. You don’t know.”

“Now you’re speaking in Vaguely! What don’t I know?”

“Whatever *this* is. You ‘travelling’ with me. *This* does not last.”

“I know that! Once you find me that worm, I’m gone! Poof. The worm’s gonna fix everything. We both go back to the way things were before. Finally.”

“Worms come and worms go. One worm will not bring you satisfaction. You’ll always need another.”

“Same thing with the Earth Bear, right?”

“What?”

“You heard me. When you find the Earth Bear, then what? *Satisfaction?*”

“I find the Earth Bear. No ‘then what’.”

“It’s not like finding the Earth Bear will change anything either, right? What happens after?”

“Bird.”

“What happens after, Beehive?”

“Mind yourself.”

“You made me answer your question, so you answer mine!”

“You do not know what you ask.”

“Stop talking down to me!”

“Give me a reason not to.”

“You’re impossible!”

“Then leave.”

“Fine! Give me the Melon.”

“No.”

“You’ll never see me again Beehive. I won’t even eat all of it, just enough to fill my tummy – you won’t even notice anything’s missing. Then I’m gone. For good.”

“For good?”

“Yes. Good.”

“Good.”

Beehive turned to his prize. No Melon. He hadn't heard the melon move. So Beehive trusted his nose – only traces remained, but the holy Melon itself no longer existed.

*Not again*, the bear thought. An image of the Earth Bear rose in front of his paws and his heartbeat rose up into his throat. His paws and legs and even his nose no longer felt like his own and he wanted to curl up into himself and stretch out like a leaf. His breath became conscious but the function collapsed as soon as he realized it existed. He found a tree – the closest one. He clawed at it, scraped his fur across it, smacked his whole body against it until something broke. A loud crackle and thud finally snapped him back into his mind.<sup>18</sup>

Beehive shifted his attention to Icci. She huddled into the ground, as though she'd forgotten how her bones worked. “Maybe it flew away,” Icci said, sound barely escaping her beak.

Beehive found his nose and could once more use it. He breathed. “Melons don't fly.”

“But it... *was* the Monstrous Melon. Anything's possible. If it wanted, it could fly... For all we know, it could speak.”

Beehive, perhaps for the first time he could remember, knew just what to say. “If it could speak, then you could not eat it. That'd make the Melon people.”

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<sup>18</sup> Aurgarten projected his own human experience with panic attacks into this section, though it is not clear that bears have a similar or even equivalent experience. The author's attacks were apparently very extreme and could happen at the drop of a hat – once literally, according to one of Mariena's anecdotes.

“Just because something speaks, doesn’t mean it’s *alive*. Worms wiggle, but that doesn’t mean they’re alive.” Icci popped back up onto her feet. “Well, no use moping around, the Melon couldn’t have gone far.”

*But... worms, they’re...* Beehive coughed. “Agreed.”

Icci tucked her head down to the grass. “Look... let’s just try to find it. Then we’ll part ways. Deal?”

Beehive took a long breath, relieved that he could breathe again. “Agreed.”

“I’d ask to go on your back, but after what you did to that tree...” Icci shrugged and flew up, taking off with a light-hearted spin.

With Icci flying ahead, Beehive trailed behind as she pranced about the trees. *My throat...* the bear thought, but interrupted himself with a cough. *I’ve never said so many words out loud before... and never so loudly. I could use a drink.*

### Episode 8: Standoff At the Watering Hole

Beehive trudged on; Icci, collapsed on his back, only moved with the pitiful rise and fall of her chest. “You can’t eat if you’re lying down, bird,” Beehive huffed.

“I’m not hungry, I’m *dehydrated*. But now that you mention the Monstrous Melon... Now I’m dehydrated AND hungry. We’ve had nothing to drink for weeks!”

“We drank yesterday. We’ll find something soon.”

“How could you know that?”

Beehive itched his nose. “My nose always finds food. And water. If my nose smells it, I’ll find it.”

“Well if your nose really worked, it would’ve sniffed out the Mon— oh, I cry just thinking about it.”

After another heavy hour, Beehive smelled a somewhat sizable pond. At its edge kneeled two mangy creatures, but the bear gasped: “Water.”

“By the sky, I don’t believe my eyes! I survived!” she said, fluttering about Beehive’s head.

“Where’d all that energy come from?”

“Who cares! I need a bath.” And she dove right towards the pool.

The hunched figures — a thylacine and an anteater — sprang up and blocked her path.

Icci kept hovering towards the water. “Hey, outta the way, I need a—”

The thylacine struck at Icci. She dodged the blow and skirted up to Beehive’s ear.

“Keep your paws and wings where we can see them,” the anteater snarled.

“You’re surrounded.”

Icci froze midair. “Do whatever they want, Beehive,” she whispered right into his ear.

Beehive sat, rubbing his jaw, body slacked, trusting only his nose. *Clean water, breezy grass, trumpeting elephants — that might be my ears — and...*

“Nope,” his voice boomed. “They’re bluffing. There’s nobody else here.”

“Well shucks,” the anteater said. “That didn’t go as planned.”

Icci zoomed about the anteater's long face. "Ha! Don't you bolonds know you can't fool a bear's nose? He might not have all his teeth, and he's got this funky hard bubble right behind his ear, but this beefhead's still got it!" She fluttered back to Beehive's ear. "Sic 'em, bear!"

The two thugs huddled together. *Why lie?* Beehive thought. *I hope they're not talking about my ear bubble.*

"Say," Beehive interrupted the brigands' chatter. "Mind if we drink from that pool there? We're thirsty."

The anteater's jaw dropped as low as an anteater's jaw could drop. "Foolish bear!"

The thylacine slinked in front of her partner. "Don't you know? You stand on the precipice of Nora and Rodney's Watering Hole!" pronounced the thylacine. "Everyone who wants a drink's got to go through us."

"Then we'll go through you! Actually, I can just go *over* you."

"Don't risk it bird. You don't know what these people can—"

Icci's feathers flared. "Come on, bear, let's just take a drink and get outta here."

"NO! DON'T DO IT!" A voice erupted beneath the water.

*Who else is here? Except... the pool! It must know how to speak.*

"Aww, you ruined the surprise you dumb lug!" Rodney, the anteater, spoke towards the water. "Well come on out. No reason for you to hide anymore."

Out of the pool arose a great round boulder. As the water gushed out around the huge shape, a square face and jaws took forms. The creature couldn't compare to Beehive in size, yet each step it took out of the pool resolved in squelching *thuds*. Rodney gave a

flagging sign with his tongue and the hippopotamus waddled over to him with hunched shoulders.

“YES RODNEY?” the hippopotamus bellowed.

“Athenodorus!<sup>19</sup> You water-clogged sea sponge!” Rodney gave a heavy kick to the hippopotamus’s shin, but the collision barely made the thick hide jiggle. “You blew your only job! You’re supposed to wait underwater until we tell you. Remember? Wait qui-et-ly.”

“SORRY RODNEY,” Athenodorus moped. “THEY DIDN’T DRINK THOUGH.”

“Doesn’t matter! We didn’t give you the *sign*.”

“THE *SIGN*! I FORGOT THE SIGN — TOO RECONDITE. I WANTED TO HELP.”

“If you wanted to help,” Nora the thylacine interjected, “then listen to us! We’re the brains behind this operation. Now remind us what you’re *supposed* to do.”

“WAIT IN THE WATER UNTIL SOMEONE DRINKS WITHOUT YOUR PERMISSION AND THEN BITE THEIR FACES OFF...” he recited.

“That’s right,” Rodney said. “See what happens when you listen — good things! Just believe in us.”

“BUT I’VE GOTTEN NOTHING FROM YOU GUYS.”

Nora put a paw on Athenodorus’s arm. “It’s called *investment*, darling. Give it time.”

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<sup>19</sup> Athenodorus shares his name with Aurgarten’s half-brother, Athenodorus Aurgarten. This brother — quite the extrovert if we are to believe the half-forgotten accounts of Mariena — and his wife, Lada, eventually met their end in a nasty ship wreck some years after Mariena’s birth. Of course, this tragedy left the orphaned child upon Aurgarten’s doorstep, and so the reclusive author found himself a guardian to Mariena.

“BUT...”

“No ‘buts’ from you, ya butt-head.” Rodney pointed at Beehive and Icci, a grin crawling across his face. “We have guests.”

Athenodorus careened his entire body towards them. “HELLO GUESTS.”

Icci bowed. “Hello.” She nudged Beehive. “Say something!”

Beehive grunted and gave Athenodorus a curt nod.

The hippopotamus smiled in the way hippopotami smile. “SAY, FRIENDS, WOULD YOU LIKE A DRINK?”

Nora and Rodney yowled in unison. “Athenodorus!” Nora yelled. “You’re supposed to *prevent* them from drinking our water, not offer it freely!”

“OH... WELL WHY NOT?”

Rodney shrieked. “Because we asked you to? And hey, when did we say you could question us!”

“YOU DIDN’T BUT... I’D LIKE TO HAVE A SAY AROUND HERE. I THOUGHT WE WERE PARTNERS?”

“Athenodorus, darling, you’re the *muscle*! Rodney and I, *we’re* the partners — it’s in the name, isn’t it? Nora and Rodney’s Watering Hole. I don’t hear Athenodorus in there. It’s not your job to question our judgement, alright?”

“BUT I WANT MY NEW FRIENDS TO HAVE A DRINK WITH ME.”

“Them? They’re not your friends, they’re trying to use you. They just want our water, *your* water. Don’t you see them turning you against us?”

“MAYBE THEY’RE RIGHT.”

“Right about what?” Icci piped in. “We haven’t said anything...”

“PLEASE FRIENDS, COME DRINK WITH ME.”

Icci shrugged. “With pleasure!” she flew right over to Athenodorus. “Come on over, Beehive, who cares what these wet feathers think.”

Beehive sauntered over next to Icci. He noticed Nora and Rodney cowering ever so slightly away. “What?” Beehive asked them. “Is it my ear bubble?”

“Y-you’re B-B-Beehive?!” Nora stammered.

“BEEHIVE? FROM THE STORIES?”

*They must have me mistaken with someone else.*

“Oh, they’ve heard of you!” Icci gurgled between swigs.

The two rogues backed away from the bear. “Nora...” said the anteater, his little claws shaking.

“I know, darling. Run.” The two left a trail of dust flying far behind them, and off they vanished into the woods.

“Finally!” Icci splashed water on herself. “I couldn’t stand those two.”

“ME NEITHER,” Athenodorus boomed before crashing his face into the pool.

“Then why hang around them, Athenodorus?” Icci asked.

“THEY’RE MY FRIENDS. RODNEY DOES A GREAT LEMUR IMPRESSION. AND I LIKED WHEN NORA SAID DARLING. DAWW-LAAANG. I LIKED STAYING AROUND THEM, WHILE IT LASTED...”

The three sat by the pool, content in their drinking.

“Hey Beehive,” Icci asked, “those guys knew you. What’s that all about?”

“ARE YOU KIDDING? EVERYONE’S HEARD OF BEEHIVE. MARCUS BARKUS, MY TEACHER, ALWAYS TELLS ALL KINDS OF STORIES WHEN ALL

THE CHILDREN GO TO SLEEP AND THE STARS SHINE ESPECIALLY TWINKLY. HE SAYS THEY'RE OUR ANCESTORS STARING DOWN AT US... I DUNNO IF I BELIEVE THAT, BUT THE KIDS HANG ONTO EVERY WORD HE SAYS — I THINK.”

“Ah, Marcus Barkus,” Icci sighed. “He’s always told the best stories. Though the star thing isn’t true.”

“Who’s Marcus Barkus?” Beehive asked.

“THE SAGE OF THE FOREST. MARCUS BARKUS KNOWS EVERYTHING. IF YOU EVER MEET HIM ON YOUR TRAVELS, TELL HIM I SAID HELLO.”

Athenodorus hummed a tune and blew out bubbles in the water.

### Episode 9: Marcus Barkus Begins the Ballad of Eshishos

On a late spring day, Beehive — and Icci — heard laughter burst from somewhere not far off. Beehive’s ears had never heard so many voices at once, much less voices so carefree and... *happy*.

“Oh!” Icci squealed. “Sound like they’re having so much fun! We should join in!”

“Why bother? They didn’t invite us.”

“Don’t be such a wet feather! I bet you’ve never had fun in your life.” She darted off towards the laughter.

“Hmm.” Beehive found his legs following Icci once more. *I can always run.*

They reached a small grove with a hill sitting at its middle and a grand oak tree on top. Children of all sorts played around the hill – buffalo with rhino, kittens with swallows, foxes with rabbits,<sup>20</sup> and even a little elephant, his tusks not grown in, chasing a marten. Beehive’s ears recoiled at the noise. *Too many people in one place.*

Icci zoomed into the fray and joined in their confusing game. *I don’t understand these children*, thought Beehive, *but I appreciate the space from the tanager.* He set his mind on sitting underneath the grand oak, and circled around the children to reach his destination. The bear lay down, let the soft breeze ruffle his fur as Icci swooped swiftly around a skunk, too fast for the poor youngster to follow.

A strange rock accompanied Beehive beneath the shade. *Odd*, he thought, until Beehive’s nose told him that this thing once lived. *It’s dead. Would the children mind if I ate it?* Beehive sniffed its splayed out paw. The old thing’s hair matted together and stunk, fallen out in places and thinned in others. Ribs poked out from its chest like a shell and its stony flat face caked with dust and cracks.<sup>21</sup>

Beehive licked the hand and received an icky dirt taste. A voice cracked from the body like a pus: “Do you remember what I said to you all those years ago, Beehive?”

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<sup>20</sup> Jermock criticizes Aurgarten’s suggestion that a fox would chase a rabbit around, as it suggests too readily a predator-prey relationship. I would consider this idyllic scene to trump any form of realistic animal-to-animal relation; I do not see Aurgarten’s insistence on a rabbit playing with a fox to be a contradiction as much as it is tangible evidence of this being an ideal utopian playground.

<sup>21</sup> It seems that Jermock and I have very different ideas of what, or who, Marcus Barkus is. Jermock, preposterously, claims that Marcus Barkus is in fact human, the only one to appear within the story. This hypothesis directly contradicts the rest of Aurgarten’s novel, which focuses only on an anthropomorphized animal world – humans have no place within this setting. To entertain his (void) argument, Jermock claims that Marcus Barkus appears as “the novel’s wiseman and sage within Nirgenswald, a moral and comical shepherd who guides his animal flock into self-identity.” I condemn Jermock’s position here as heretical to Aurgarten’s work and downright unscholarly. It is my theory that Marcus Barkus is actually an orangutan. If Jermock had done his research more consistently, he’d remember the old Mivoltan folktale, “The Orangutan Ruler.” This also ignores the strange Mivoltan obsession with orangutans painted over pastoral nature, known as the Orange Moment of 1850. So there is a precedent for orangutans being in the spotlight of Mivoltan culture, and I believe Aurgarten references this cultural idea directly in his depiction of Marcus Barkus.

Beehive shrunk back. *Carcasses don't talk.* "You mistake me with another Beehive, Carcass. We've never met."

Icci flew over to the figure's side. "Hey there! Haven't seen you in while, you old fart! How're you gliding?"

The dead figure patted Icci's head slowly, his paw shaking. "I'm trying out something new, Iccipiani — I call it 'playing dead'. You children have your games, but it seems I've won my own of sorts. Tricked Beehive's nose! But my, you've gotten quicker since last I saw you."

"Well you haven't aged a day!" Icci chirruped, landing on the corpse's shoulder. "Beehive! You better not try to bother Marcus Barkus, he's delicate — but wily!"

"Who?"

"This guy!" Icci said, bouncing on the old cretin. Beehive thought the thin body would tip over at the bird's light touch. "Marcus Barkus! *Everybody* knows Marcus Barkus!"

Beehive grunted. "I don't."

Marcus Barkus coughed. "That's quite alright Beehive. I didn't think you'd remember. But then, why ask if you remember me? Well, I thought it'd startle you if I asked! Forgive me, remembering can hurt — downright torture, at times. Can't say I blame you." He motioned for the two to sit – Beehive obliged. "I must honest you, I never thought you'd make a friend, Beehive. You bears get ever so stubborn at your age."

"We're not friends," Beehive stated.

“Yeah,” Icci piped in. “He just owes me, that’s all.”

Marcus Barkus creaked his hands together. “I have just the story for you two. Have you ever heard the Ballad of Mount Eshishos?”

“Yes,” sighed Beehive. *Everyone knows this story.*

“No!” exclaimed Icci. “Hey everyone!” She screamed out to the children, still playing. “Marcus Barkus’s gonna tell a story I’ve never heard before!”

All of the children ran up to the shade under the colossal oak, to Marcus Barkus. They sat together in a huddle around Beehive. The little elephant boy sat right next to the bear, stroking his trunk against Beehive’s fur.

Beehive turned to the young elephant. “If you pull, I’ll eat you.”

The elephant boy smiled as elephant boys smile up to the bear’s muzzle and continued his petting.

Marcus Barkus cleared his throat. “I would start by welcoming our new friends, Beehive and Icci, to our group. When I finish my story, I hope you will tell your parents that you made new friends today – learning from others, you may find, can fill a stomach just as well as beets. Though no one can survive on lessons alone. And so begins our glorious tale – The Ballad of Mount Eshishos!<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Worth mention here is how Aurgarten writes Marcus Barkus’s dialogue when telling the Ballad. He writes in a very old dialect of the Mivoltan language – perhaps a fitting analogue for English speakers would be our language now versus the 1400s. To insert my own personal history, my grandfather would read this section within the original dialect and for years I believed this section to be intentionally written in complete gibberish. It was only when I began my research into Mivoltan culture that I realized that Aurgarten was even telling a story, but using an old dialect of Mivoltan from before the country’s numerous issues with being colonized.

“Long ago, all the world existed on top of the greatest and tallest of mountains — Eshishos. Here, the rocks and trees and water protected all living things, big or small. Here, all people cooperated and never — in their most impossible dreams — imagined eating one of their own. And here, in Eshishos, animals of differing species could form bonds with one another that would be considered impossible in our world today. The lion and the gazelle held meetings, the frog and the heron would gossip, and even the bear and the fish could fall deeply in love.”

“That’s weird,” shrieked the fox.

“That doesn’t even make sense,” whined an ocelot.

“I don’t get it,” the elephant mumbled.

*That’s not part of the story,* Beehive thought.

Marcus Barkus raised his paw and the children fell silent. “You must believe me, young ones, that every word I tell of this story is true. Now, of all the couples made up of all combinations of animals, none were as pure or as beautifully matched as Princess Ronna and her Luffstein. They were a sheep and a wolf, which may surprise some of you, but their love was mightier than any substance our world can create, and prophesied to last to eternity by a wise old frog.

“I hate love stories, Marcus Barkus,” chirped Icci. “Can’t you get to the good parts?”

“I’ll get there when I get there, Iccipiani. A good story takes time to tell. Now, you all must understand that Eshishos — while the greatest paradise to ever bless any history ever told — knew only a singular, unbreakable reality: that its residents could not

live forever, even though their lifespans far surpassed our own. Since the peoples of Eshishos respected their departed friends, they would not eat them even when their bodies could sustain them. Instead, the bones of their people decorated different spots along the mountain — yet they were not feared as we might fear bones, for instead they sat undisturbed as a reminder for the living of their deceased friends.

Yet for Princess Ronna and her Luffstein, the bones meant something else. The duo were constantly reminded of their own mortality — something they had made their peace with, as did all the peoples of Eshishos — but the thought of death parting the two for all time constantly disturbed both their waking and sleeping hours. ‘I could not ever bear to part from you, my Luffstein, even for a moment’, Princess Ronna would say. And Luffstein would always answer back, ‘Nor I you, oh dearest and closest to my heart — there is nothing I would not do for my Princess Ronna’.

“And always, the two clung to a local legend that had been told since the peoples of Eshishos first settled on the mountain (or so they say). The legends say that when a couple from Eshishos became one in both body and mind, a unique and mighty gift would await them at the highest peak of Mount Eshishos: a Star. Yet a normal Star this was not, for this Star would land atop the peak when the legend came true — and for this couple of one mind and one body, should they consume the Star together they shall be gifted with immortality. Such a legend appealed to all the peoples of Eshishos, but none believed it more than Princess Ronna and her Luffstein.

“‘Just think’, Luffstein would say, ‘if we ate the Star, we could spend the rest of eternity in each other’s company!’

“‘That would be bliss!’ Princess Ronna would respond, ‘And I do believe our bond is truly, unfathomably unbreakable. We cannot let a little thing like mortality get in our way!’

“‘And so the couple eventually decided to pursue the legend, and retrieve the fabled Star from the peak of Mount Eshishos. But none had ever climbed up so high, for the peak rose far above even the whitest of clouds. But the two lovers were desperate, and were willing to brave any danger to preserve their love — but how would they go about climbing the world’s highest peak?

“‘And so they asked their neighbour, the badger. ‘You should climb it, Luffstein!’ said the badger. ‘With your stamina and muscular build, you could face any obstacle the mountain throws your way.’

“‘Then they asked their other neighbour, the kangaroo. ‘You should climb it, Princess Ronna!’ said the kangaroo. ‘With your smarts and even balance, you could outsmart any problem on your way to the peak’.

“‘Finally they asked the oldest person on Eshishos, a komodo dragon. ‘You’re Princess Ronna and Luffstein!’ said the komodo dragon. ‘Your love is so strong, I bet you could both conquer the mountain through sheer will!’

“‘The couple didn’t know what course to choose. They refused to part ways, so climbing the mountain alone was out of the question; yet journeying together meant their pace would slow, and the two lacked patience since their time was short...’”

“Why’s that?” Icci asked. “Are they super old? Or is this one of those stories where the characters need to do something before an arbitrary amount of time — like, say, a full moon or something?”

“Yes, in fact, that is what’s going on. They must retrieve the Star within a week or it’ll vanish. Didn’t I mention that?”

“No!” the children shouted.

“No!” the little elephant trumpeted, a moment too late.

“Wait,” Icci said, “why a week? If it’s a magic Star or whatever, can’t it just wait for the two to climb up the mountain?”

“Who cares?” a chipmunk squeaked. “Keep the story going!”

“I will, Olwyn, in a moment. If it helps clear things up, Iccipiani, think of the Star as... a ripened fruit. As a part of the tree, it grows and fosters, ripening. At its sweetest moment, it falls down to the ground and will only remain edible for a short amount of time — then it rots. Such is the way of fruit.

“So Princess Ronna and her Luffstein grew desperate, since they knew their time grew short. But they were soon blessed by the arrival of one of their closest most trusted friends. His name was Yolk, a young monkey known among the peoples of Eshishos as a trickster. When this monkey saw his dear friends in a dire way, he asked them what bothered them. ‘Such an existence as yours’, he said, ‘is a blessed thing, for nothing is better than finding accompaniment for one’s soul. ’Tis a shame for such perfect beings to worry so’.

“And so the duo told Yolk of their plight, and when they finished Yolk simply cheered. ‘I’d love to assist Princess Ronna and her Luffstein in their quest to preserve true love!’ the monkey clamoured. ‘And I know just what to do! I’ll climb up to the peak of Mount Eshishos, as fast as a word through the air, and retrieve that Star for my dearest friends!’

“Elated, Princess Ronna and Luffstein agreed. And so Yolk set out on his noble quest, skipping with glee.”

Marcus Barkus narrowed his eyes and rattled out a deep breath. “I think that’s all for today, children.”

“Another day?” Icci fumed, feathers a-whirring. “I want to hear it *now*.”

Beehive stretched his paws out. “Why do you need to hear this story? It doesn’t even end well.”

Icci stomped up to Beehive’s side. “And what would you know about good stories, huh? Or endings? Come on, Marcus Barkus, keep going! I want to judge for myself whether or not this Ballad ‘ends well’.”

“Then I’ll tell you,” Beehive said. “Luffstein e-”

“DON’T YOU SAY IT,” Icci screamed, fluttering violently up to Beehive’s face.

*Whoosh.*

Everything went quiet. Beehive noticed the children craning their wide faces up to him. The little elephant waddled away from the bear’s side. *Where did the tanager go?*

“I don’t think she’s coming back,” a bunny cooed.

“You killed Icci,” one of the swallow children cried.

Out of the oak’s voluminous leaves, a familiar red and yellow blur darted in front of the children. “BAH!” Icci shouted and they all screamed — one even gave an audible toot from surprise. *Probably the elephant*, Beehive thought to himself. *But wait... why’d she...?*

Marcus Barkus laughed with a guttural croaking tune. “Well done, Iccipiani! You nearly convinced them Beehive swatted you halfway across the forest!”

“Of course he didn’t! He’s fast, I’ll admit, but still *sloooooow* in comparison with these ladies.” And she flourished her quick wings, to *oohs* and *ahhs* from the stunned audience.

Only the bear refrained from praising her stunt. “I thought I hit you. I didn’t hit you, did I? Not even—”

“Psh, not even close! Stop doting. It’s not like you.”

“Are you hurt?”

“Since when do you care about—”

“Are you *hurt*, Icci?” Beehive snapped.

“I’m fine,” Icci mumbled. “You?”

Beehive nodded. *I could’ve killed her. I didn’t want to, but... how careless of me. I can’t let that happen again. Can she forgive me? Do I actually deserve her forgiv—*

Icci interrupted his thinking with a whistle, landing once more among the fur between his ears. Her feet burrowed, soothingly, in their spot. *I'm used to that feeling now. I... don't want to lose it.*

Beehive turned to the group. *They heard all that, huh?* The bear harrumphed. “I suppose... we'll be on our way now,” he said, wandering back into the forest.

## ***Summer***

### Episode 10: The Best — and Worst — of All Possible Worlds

Days — months even — passed for the denizens of Nirgenwald. In those dull and uninteresting days,<sup>23</sup> Beehive and Icci continued their strange partnership.

Yet they — and all other citizens of blissful Nirgenwald — noted how the forest grooved and shifted into bountiful Summer. Trees of all shapes and statures swayed and breathed in meditation, and breezes brought gifts of nectar-coated air (which Beehive's nose appreciated). Sweetness permeated the earth, enveloping Beehive's bare feet with

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<sup>23</sup> It's somewhat of a shame how Aurgarten skims over these so-called “dull and uninteresting days.” The strengths of his novel truly blossom in witnessing the bonds of these characters grow in front of our eyes, and so such any gap in their development is all the more significant. Who knows what kind of adventures Beehive and Icci could have experienced in that time? Admittedly, having such adventures shrouded under the descriptor of “dull and uninteresting days” sparked my imagination as a child — this narrative gap in Beehive and Icci's travels is thus forever “infinite” in both possibility and scope. Still, knowing there was the possibility of more tales of Beehive and Icci to enjoy and savour will always remain somewhat irksome.

every step; water ran clearer, and food — fruit and fish alike — tasted all the better, and the sun's light constantly flickered through the dancing green leaves.<sup>24</sup>

Beehive noticed his own behaviour change along with the season. When Icci requested a rest on his head or she flew within Beehive's reach, Beehive's movements shrank, his feet barely leaving the ground. *I must be growing more careful in my old age*, he thought. *I hope I don't get too stiff during the winter*. His thoughts, inevitably, drifted back to the Earth Bear. *I hope I have another winter in me*.

On this particular day, the two companions ate raspberries straight from the very same bush. Icci fluttered around the top, pecking at each and every berry. Beehive settled on a few stragglers hanging around the leafy bottom. *Not even the bush liked these*, thought the bear. He slumped down as low as he possibly could and plucked individual berries with a gingerly touch.

“Hey Beehive,” said Icci, still pecking away, “you waiting for something? You're eating the worst berries!”

“I thought I'd, uh, wait.”

“For what? The berries to grow into new bushes?”

“Um, uh, no.” Beehive grabbed some of the finer berries higher up. “You sure you're...”

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<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting here (if not stated elsewhere in my footnotes, though this fact is well documented in Jermock's text) how Aurgarten spent his own summers exploring Mivolta's forests. With no natural threats in these forests (aside from the previously mentioned “wolves of Mivolta”), they were a safe place to gallivant and explore and vast enough to be an unlikelihood for chance human encounters. Thusly, Aurgarten enjoyed his nature walks to the extent that he would share them with Mariena. Such influences of these walks — on both Aurgarten's imagination and his relationship with Mariena — are worth mentioning in brief passing.

“Yes, yes! And you don’t have to do it so SLOWLY. You’ve gotten extra sluggish lately.” She stopped poking at her meal. “I don’t mean slimy, I mean you’re just slower. More slower. And you’re even more skittish than when I met you! Like, you flinch when I fly anywhere near you — which happens all the time! It’s weird.”

*Why would she care?* Beehive thought. “It’s the weather.”

“Weather?!” Icci blurted, seeds spraying from her beak. “It’s *summer!* You’re supposed to get more lively and energized and clear-headed, not... whatever you are.” She went back to the bush. “You’re probably just too *old* to appreciate anything good.”

*Maybe she’s right,* Beehive thought, popping the berries into his mouth. *How long have—*

“Say,” Icci exclaimed, interrupting Beehive’s thought. “How old are you anyway? I mean, you’re old-old, but I guess I don’t know just *how* old that is. Especially with bears. I can never tell.”

Beehive scratched his cheek. “Hmm... well, I wouldn’t say I’m ‘old-old’, but... Hmm... I honestly don’t know.” *Does it matter? Why bother counting?*

“Well, I guess you seem more ‘old’ than ‘old-old’,” Icci responded. “But not old-old-old. We birds — the birds that count, anyway — we count our age based on the cycle of seasons. Do you realize that seasons go in a cycle? Always the same four seasons, in the same order, year after year... Doesn’t that just blow your mind?

*Haven’t we discussed this before? Or am I thinking of someone else? But — who else would I discuss seasons with...* “The thought crossed my mind.”

“Yeah, well I think about it a LOT. By my calculations, I’ve lived through two whole winters.”

“Even I know birds your size don’t live through winter,” Beehive argued. “They migrate to escape the chilly weather.”

“Correct! But that doesn’t mean winter DOESN’T happen! It just means birds don’t spend their winters anywhere cold. ‘As long as you’re in the know for where to go, you’ll never freeze from beak to toe!’ That’s an old proverb my cousin Naoki always says. While you mammals get cold, we birds go on vacation!”

Icci darted towards some moving shape on the ground nearby. She gobbled up a worm and zoomed back to Beehive. “That’s the other great thing about summer! There’s so much food to eat, no one has to worry about starving! Not that I worry about starving in the OTHER seasons, but summer? Summer’s special.” Icci, with a single swift motion, swooped right onto Beehive’s head.

The bear momentarily flinched. *She’s right*, Beehive admitted, *there’s something different about summer*. Beehive decided to share this thought with the bird.

“You’re right,” Beehive exclaimed, “there’s something different about summer.”

“Well that’s a change of pace! I’m tired of our whole ‘I say something brilliant, then Beehive stewes on it for hours’ thing. Now we’re keeping things fresh and breaking the cycle! I like this new Beehive.”

“But I’m the same Beehive.”

“Oh fine, fine.” Icci hummed for a few seconds then huffed. “See what I did just there? I let you have the final word, for once.”

~

The time Beehive and Icci spent together seemed to blur together, the events of each day rhyming with each other, to the point of monotony.<sup>25</sup> So did these boring days pass effortlessly for Beehive and Icci. On these tedious summer days, a singular night stands out.

~

Beehive and Icci rested under a sturdy maple tree, awaiting the embrace of rest and sleep. Small bugs drifted about in the dark, their butt-lights briefly blinking in and out of sight.

“Alright Beehive, tell me this,” said Icci. “Those bugs with the yellow lights... what do you call them?”

“Truly? You don’t know something for once?”

“Sheesh, just answer my question. What do YOU call them?”

“They’re... starbeetles.”

“Interesting! Everyone I ask, always calls them something different. How do you suppose they do the light thing?”

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<sup>25</sup> Jermock found this particular sentence to be particularly indignant towards “the universally appreciated artform of rhyming” and regards Aurgarten as anti-rhyming due to this remark. It is worth commenting here (if only for the sake of understanding Jermock’s mindframe) that the biographer had previously pursued a career in writing children’s novels. Jermock’s singular creative work, a politically-critical “introductory text to undervalued mythology” called *Democrat in the Ziggurat*, was tragically overshadowed by a similarly entitled piece. This interpretation of one of Aurgarten’s throwaway lines, of course, infamously coloured Jermock’s entire perspective on Aurgarten’s writing.

“How do you fly?”

“That’s easy, I... well, that’s not what we’re investigating. I remember, during my post-hatch phase, thinking that they blinked in and out of existence. But the whole light thing never did make much sense.”

“...People don’t make sense.”

“I guess. Actually, no! People do make sense. It’s just easier when you can talk to them.”

As night drew on, they settled down beneath their maple tree. The blinking of lights distracted Beehive’s sensitive eyes, so he simply lay prone to avoid disturbing Icci (on this night, she nested in a particularly cozy pile of grass). Yet the bugs’ glow could never hold a butt-light to the round moon, floating well above the trees. Rays of moonlight pierced into the clearing, a mimicry of the sun.

Then, on cue with the moon’s arrival, Beehive’s ears heard the soft voice of an insect in the tree above. “A cicada?” the bear whispered groggily. “In deep nighttime?”

“Shh!” shushed Icci. “Can’t you tell I’m asleep?”

“How can you speak if you’re asleep?”

“Well I’m not asleep *any more*, now am I?”

The singular murmur of the cicada steadily expanded until a choir of voices surrounded them. Beehive had no idea how so many people talking at once could say anything in such disturbing unity.

“*Scrip... Scrape... Scrip... Scrape...*”

*“Do we hear them coming?”*

*“Yes, yes...”*

*“The crunch of feet and toes in the dirt.”*

*“Yes, yes...”*

*“And all of the trees gone too?”*

*“Yes, yes...”*

*“And the people?”*

*“Yes, the people...”*

*“Like trees, like people, they all melt, melt like rain in soil...”*

*“Into the earth, into the ground...”*

*“Yes, down, down, into the ground we go...”*

*“Gone, yes, all gone...”*

*“Finished... we’re all finished...”*

Icci fidgeted in her spot. Beehive tried asking her, *“should we move?”* though the words — smothered by sleep — came out, *“Zhugh duh moo?”*

Icci didn’t respond.

“Hmm,” Beehive grumbled as his body arose with a crack. *We’ll never sleep with all this noise about,* Beehive thought. *Someone has to do something about it. But why me?*

Beehive lumbered into the clearing, squinting in the moon's light and weighted down by the need for sleep. *Just ask them nicely to stop talking*, Beehive thought. *What would Icci say?*

The words Beehive found sounded nothing like what he wanted to say: "Hub-buh-nuh-nah Bah-huuuuuuuuuh." *Maybe, like Icci, I'm still asleep.*

Words escaping him, the bear instead chose to make noise in other ways. He continued to burble while drumming the ground and knocking on the trees around him.

The chanting stopped steadily, one at a time, until the last voice quivered away. Beehive panted. *That took a lot out of me.* Beehive still heard the voices, but only as hushed whispers.

*"Did he leave yet?"*

*"No, he's still there, just... standing there."*

*"Perhaps he was...?"*

*"No, he's just a bear."*

*"Just a bear..."*

Beehive, to his alarm, felt a sudden buzzing right around his ear. He ducked too quickly, and a sharp pain shot into his neck. *Did one of them bite me?* Beehive wondered. *Or did I pull a muscle?*

"Hey bozo! Go make noise somewhere else!" a voice — the bug who zoomed by him — shouted. "I'll not let some bozo of an ursine apocalypse corrupt *my* Nirgenwald! Hyah!"

*Such a hassle*, the bear thought. The warrior charged at Beehive once more. He quickly stood on his back legs, held his head high, and faced his harasser. The stiffness of the last few weeks vanished, and in its place Beehive's bear blood burned. *When a foe comes to take your life*, Beehive recited, evoking the Earth Bear's words, *do not hesitate — you kill, or you become another's food, Others do not share a bear's sense of mercy.*

Yet when the buzz irritated the bear's ears again, Beehive didn't raise his paw. *Icci'd never let me hear the end of it*, Beehive reasoned. Instead, he flumped onto all fours and waddled back to Icci and their tree.

As Beehive slumped down, he noticed Icci ruffling her feathers. "Do you think they'll keep making more noise?" she murmured.

"If they do, just eat one of them."

"Ugh," she grumbled, "you know I'd never eat another person."

Beehive sighed. *She's always forgetting about worms*, he thought. The bear returned to his groove in the earth. "*Of course, my mistake,*" he tried saying as sleep smothered him — to Icci, it sounded more like, "Guh-buh-naauuh."

### Episode 11: A Bear's Foundation

For Beehive, no summer had ever made his coat so irritable, or his tongue so dangly outside his mouth. *I haven't slept well in such a long while*, the bear thought, his head dipping along with Icci's fluttering. *Too many people about... I can't let anything*

*happen to us. But what exhausting work it is, to care. Yet there's no telling what could go wrong, what with so many people about.* Such did Beehive spend his days, grumping about the forest while Icci criticized his low energy.

With no reprieve from summer elsewhere, Beehive found a new appreciation in drinking the cool running water of Nirgenswald.<sup>26</sup> Every chance the bear got, he'd guzzle the drink down with a violent, yet gleeful, splashing. Even the colour, to Beehive's tired eyes, sparkled out under the all-too-bright sun, occasionally glinting right into Beehive's view. Yet closing his eyes, too, made the water sweeter.

During one such watery daydream, he barely noticed Icci swiftly flutter up next to him. *Did she go off to fetch us food?* Beehive thought. *I didn't even notice her leave — something bad could've happened.*

“You busy?” Icci bounced in place, her feet lightly tapping against the rock.

Sops of water cascaded down Beehive's face. The bear kept his head above the water until it stopped to a few droplets. “Not anymore. What do you need?”

“Follow me!” Icci whooshed off from the ground. “You'll wanna see this!”

Beehive followed to where Icci led him. *My thirst will have to wait,* he thought.

She eventually pointed out a strange object on the forest floor, hunched at the foot of a tall redwood tree. Beehive thought the shape might be the bones of some creature,

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<sup>26</sup> Up until the mid-2000s, Mivoltans could drink water right from the island's numerous streams without cause for worry. This mysterious quality gave the island a somewhat mythic reputation among Mivolta's colonizers and visiting foreigners alike, culminating in 1587 during the Battle of the Bucket between Italian and Hungarian privateers searching for the Fountain of Youth — such was the influence of Mivolta's clean waters. Aurgarten certainly exploited this feature of the landscape throughout his walks in Mivolta's woods. According to Mariena, with enough food her uncle could live in the woods for a very long time indeed. Such a fact, I believe, influences our conception of water in Aurgarten's novel, to at least the extent that the explicit mention of clean water, here, is worth noting.

but the small concentrated holes decorating its surface didn't match the curvature and wear of the no-longer-living. The holes reflected partial bits of the sun's light, and Beehive cautiously distinguished a slick, wet surface. *It's nearly as large as my head*, the bear thought. *Not bones... Perhaps a mushroom?*

"I thought you'd appreciate this!" said Icci, fluttering by his side. "Go on, closer!"

The bear paced towards the mass. His nose, always honest, nearly startled at the aroma: heavy and thick, overwhelming, like blood, though more fragrant and slightly nostalgic. *I remember...*

"It must have fallen off this tree," Icci followed Beehive's movements with quick and spritely hops. "Well, that's what bees get, if they build such a bulbous and clunky home." Icci sprang between Beehive and the object. "Get it? It's a *beehive!* Like you! Because your name!"

"What's a beehive?" the bear asked.

"You're, uh, joking right?" Icci's shoulders slumped. "Wait, you never tell jokes... do you not know beehives?"

Beehive shrugged. "Never heard of one."

"Huh. Well, a beehive is... a hive... where bees live."

"And... bees?"

"They're, uh, bees! You know, *bees!* The ones that go *buzz buzz* around flowers?"

Beehive knew the sound. "That's a *danger* sound. Like thunder and honking geese."

“You know about geese, but not bees?! I figured you ate beehives all the time — by the sky, your name is Beehive! So, you love to eat beehives.” Icci kicked her feet and pouted in the way birds pout. “I dunno, I thought bears got named after what they eat.”

Beehive leaned in towards the shape on the ground. “Why would anyone want to eat that?” He did admit that it smelled pleasant, if a little untrustworthy. “Besides, bear names come about in ways more complex than what we eat.”

“Well I still think it’s perfect that we found a beehive — for Beehive!” She leaned in to flutter above the hulking mass, then hovered level with the bear. “So, you going to eat it or not?”

Beehive smelled the beehive once more. Heavy. Thick. *Sweet*. His nose appreciated this new yet familiar presence. “It does smell...” he said, right before diving his head into the mass.

The taste of honey (*honey!*) brought Beehive back to a simpler time.

The world: so much bigger back then — or, as Beehive thought, perhaps the world had grown smaller. The nostalgic smell of honey — its clinging stickiness, its flowery taste — aligned with that long-ago day of his naming. *Blissful*, the young bear remembered thinking as he climbed a tree to snatch up his prize, before the biters ate at his nose, his ears, even the inside of his throat. *They’re eating me from the inside out!* The pleasant air shut away, his nose — his favourite nose — burning. *SHAME*. The cub could only flee for his life. And so he did.

After hours of concealing his face with his helpless paws, dunking it again and again in a river, he remembered how the world then shook in unified percussion.

Nirgenswald thrummed with the sound of safety, of knowing where to go and what to do. The cub opened his eyes to that familiar towering sight: the Earth Bear. Her massive and thick coat swayed with every movement, each of her steps cratering the ground in her paw-shaped signature. *She never would have been stung*, thought the cub. Her fur could break even the strongest of teeth and even the smallest sound of her footfall terrified every last one of those biters. *She's untouchable. Without her, I'm nothing.*

“Small one,” boomed the Earth Bear, as her words rooted themselves in Beehive’s memory. “Remember this moment for all your days. All living things, even those who marked you, know only two truths: one must eat other people to survive and one must defend oneself from being eaten. People will try to harm you — even when they smell sweet, always ends in hurt. You can only trust your stomach. It will know when you hunger and it will protect you. Remember this. Your name is Beehive: a revelation of the world’s cruel truth.”<sup>27</sup>

Beehive turned towards Icci. “How long have I been eating?”

“A while! Just don’t get too close to me, you’re absolutely covered in sticky beehive juice.”

The honey caked nearly the entire front half of his torso. “I can feel it... all over my face,” Beehive groaned. “Still, it’s a shame to waste any.” And so he licked about his

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<sup>27</sup> Jermock discusses the aspect of Beehive’s “naming event” at some length. He compares the story to a similar series of events within A. A. Milne’s *Winnie the Pooh*. Both Aurgarten and Milne, according to Jermock, approach the same event — a hungry bear trying to steal honey from aggravated bees — in entirely different ways. Jermock bluntly summarizes the difference between the works of Milne and Aurgarten: “In the very first chapter of the very first story, Pooh Bear falls into a thorny gorse bush, gets swarmed by bees, gets shot, and unceremoniously plummets to the ground without a scratch. Such is the power of a life divorced from consequence.” (87). Jermock claims (with no backing, but I would perhaps agree with him) that Beehive’s origin inverts the well-known Milne story and that Aurgarten himself despised when animals were depicted as both immune from harm and pliable within human hands.

face, as far as his tongue could reach, and what he couldn't reach he tried to scrape with his paws — which only spread the honey even more. So the bear, every stomach-pocket full, spent the next half hour cleaning himself.

The unfamiliar substance swirled about within his stomach. He stumbled, then sat down once more. “I think I might just digest for a while.”

“You're lucky those bees built such a big hive!” Icci flew about him in a laughing dance. “And you're even luckier that I found it for you!”

Beehive heard his meal roll about. “I... don't know how much I left, but you're welcome to have some. You found it.”

“What! Don't be silly! Birds don't eat beehives! And I found this for you. You haven't eaten much lately. And, well, the whole ‘beehive’ thing... absolute poetry!”

“It's not the beehive I ate, Icci. There's honey inside.”

“Oh, so now you're the expert? An hour ago, you didn't even know beehives existed!”

“It... took some remembering.” Beehive sighed, still trying to groom the last bits of honey from his fur. “And I last had honey such a long time ago. That's how I got my name. Beehive, the Earth Bear named me Beehive.”

“I still don't understand your bear name conventions — especially Earth Bear. We birds, well, we use words and sounds like straw and thatch to create our own cozy nest of a name.”

“No, Earth Bear isn't her name. She's above names, like the earth.”

“Above names? Gee, she sounds like a big deal...”

“Yes, big. Much larger than I.”

“Woah... But if she’s as big as you say, wouldn’t she be super easy to find?”

“She... It’s more complicated than that.” Beehive shrugged. He logicked a simple explanation: “She’ll let me find her when it suits her best.”

“Sure! But it’d be much easier to just... find her, no?” Icci jumped in place. “Got it!” she said, her voice whirring by Beehive’s ears as she darted straight upward.

Icci returned. “I thought I would’ve spotted your Earth Bear from up high, but I realized I had no idea what she looks like! I mean, I know she’s a giant bear, and I didn’t see any giant bears, but what if — theoretically speaking — I saw more than one? I wouldn’t know which one to call the Earth Bear!”

“I’m surprised you bothered to look.”

“Posh! Easy as flapping. I just had to fly up and...” Icci trailed off. “Maybe if you could fly, you’d find her, easy!” She whirled about in the air and landed, with aplomb, on a branch.

“Perhaps. But I’ve searched for years, and my nose still hasn’t caught her scent.”

“Oh, you mean like a quest!”

“I... suppose, yes.”

“Well look at us! Icci, exploring high and low for the most-legendary Monstrous Melon; and Beehive, filled with resolve — and honey — to find the great and mighty Earth Bear. We’re quite the team, you and I!”

Beehive shrank back. *Why did she let me have the honey all by myself anyway? Just lying there for the eating? But maybe she's still scared of me, and she's trying to... appease me, somehow? Or maybe, if she's genuine, then what? I want to think the best of the situation, but I can't help but feel like I don't deserve—*

“Hey, Beehive! You're in your head again!”

“Did you say something?”

“I did! When someone gives you something, you say ‘thank you’!”

“Oh. I'm sorry.”

“Don't be sorry! Just thank me.”

“Thank you for the honey, Icci.”

“Don't mention it! Just don't eat so much of it next time, you're a mess!”

## Episode 12: The Melancholic Lion

The duo found a nice berry bush alongside a gushing stream – a perfect resting spot. The leaves danced in the wind, the ground soft from the previous night's rain, and the sun shone joyfully.

Icci pranced about in the water, singing some whimsical, percussive song. Beehive lapped up the clear water with precision, careful not to swallow a rock.

“Did I ever tell you about peacocks?” Icci said in her sing-song chirp. “Lovely feathers. And their colours, ah! Not as radiant as mine, but pretty in their own way.”

“They can’t fly like you can.” Beehive lay down on his stomach. The grass buried into his fur.

“Oh, and here I thought you knew nothing about birdkind.” Icci scrambled out of the water and gave her feathers a nice shake. “Lovely people, don’t you think? Peacocks, I mean.”

Beehive grunted. “They’re just birds.”

Beehive’s ears heard the thud of heavy paws before Icci responded.

The bushes shimmied and a deathly thin lion emerged. Icci darted her way next to Beehive as the lion lumbered towards the stream. He drank deeply, his face drooping along the running surface.

The big cat sloped his head upwards, finally acknowledging Beehive and Icci. “Hello,” said the lion, his voice as flat as his mane.

Icci gestured to Beehive as she hopped closer to the lion. “Hello!”

“What’s your name?” he asked, his head still, but his eyes darting back and forth. Beehive knew this movement as the sign of a dangerous predator – or at the very least an unstable one. *If he comes for Icci, I’ll—*

“I’m Icci, and this is Beehive. You?”

“I-I’m King.”<sup>28</sup>

“Hey King, you’re looking in pretty rough shape,” Icci said. “What happened to you?”

The lion wormed his lips. “Long story.” He faked a yawn and flicked at a rock in the water.

Before Beehive could move a paw, Icci flew over to the cat’s side. “We got time! Hey Beehive, let’s get him some berries. You can tell us your life story, I can tell you mine, Beehive can have his own inner monologue... let’s make it a picnic!”

“No, I’m fine, really,” King said. “I couldn’t eat another bite, I’m full. Ate a whole kiwi for breakfast, don’t worry. I’m fine.”

“No wonder you’re so crestfallen — kiwi’s the *worst*. Let’s get you some real food.”

*He doesn’t smell like food at all, Beehive thought. He’s lying about the kiwi too.*

“What is it Beehive? You smell something? Is it the Monstrous Melon?!”

“The lion’s lying. Lions don’t eat kiwi.”

“How would you know what they ate?”

“I’ve met a lion before.” *Have I? They all... blend in together.*

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<sup>28</sup> An interesting note about the name of the lion, King, is the Mivoltan word Aurgarten uses in its place: *reginatfi*, or “queen.” Mivolta never had its own monarchy, instead being ruled by occupant states. Aurgarten had an odd obsession with Queen Victoria (a short phase, according to Mariena) and so the name stuck in his mind. Perhaps my translation as “King” changes its meaning too boldly, but I believe it aligns more prevalently with the Western concept of lions as “kings of the jungle.”

“You haven’t met me!” King yelled. “You don’t know...” He breathed in, trailing a claw across the water’s surface, and exhaled. “I should speak honest with you both... I’ve decided, after careful deliberation, that I want to die.”

Icci couldn’t speak. Beehive followed King’s paw, still tracing the water.

“As you know,” King continued, “us lions are all named King — male, female, all of them.”

“How do you tell each other apart?”

“We don’t need to. We’re all King, and it’s... hard to explain to someone that doesn’t know what it’s like. To share a name with your family, your peers... everyone you know.”

“What if we helped you find a good meal? Maybe you’re just not eating right. I know how I get when I eat too many worms – you gotta get a more diverse palate! You’ll feel SO much better with some food in that lion belly of yours. What do you say, King?”

The lion cringed at his own name. “That’s sweet, Icci. Eating’s the problem. Kings eat meat — we can’t live on fruit alone. But I... hate killing for food.” The lion ran his paw over his face, missing it. “One time, before I left my pride, I got to thinking... If I hate meat, and Kings love meat, am I King? I can’t be. But I also need to eat and I can’t take off these... murderous paws. I can’t rip my people-eating stomach out of me either... so I’m done eating. Maybe I can pass on with dignity.”

“But King,” Icci pleaded, “you’ve got so much to live for! Like antelope! And cantaloupe! I’m sure the other Kings would miss you.”

“Why would they miss *me*? There’s other Kings, stronger Kings, smarter Kings, Kings more King than I can ever dream of becoming. A King can’t be a bad King.”

Icci puffed up her chest. “Well I’m not letting you throw yourself into the wind, King. You’re just grumpy cause your stomach’s empty. I’m gonna find something for you to eat – I promise you’ll like it, lion belly or not!” She gestured to Beehive. “Make sure he stays put!” And off she went into the forest, faster than sound.

Alone with the lion, Beehive cleared his throat. King got up from his spot and shifted next to the bear. The lion clenched his paws together, and Beehive hunched over the running water.

“I have heard of you, you know. Beehive: the invincible bear, the one who’s never lost a fight. The great warrior of Nirgenwald.”

*What’s a warrior?*

King bowed to Beehive, his whiskers treading the ground. “I ask you this now while your friend’s away. Beehive, I beg of you – kill me. It would be so easy for you. You’ve done it so many times, what’s one more worthless life? Just take your paw, bring it down on my head. Bring it down hard. And quick.”

The lion’s tight chest moved irregularly. *I guess... I’d hate being a bad bear, too.* Beehive raised his paw in the air. The lion’s eyes stiffened, witnessing the bear’s arm inch upwards. When the claw reached its peak, it slammed straight down, crushing the earth with a grotesque thud. The lion shivered, gasps escaping from his mouth.

“You didn’t do it! I thought... I thought...”

Beehive lifted his arm, a hole planted where he struck. The lion crouched several paces away. “I didn’t expect you to move.”

“Then you... really tried. Tried to kill me?”

“You moved.”

King nodded heavily. His breath haggard, his fur standing on end in terror — but still standing, still breathing.

“It’s not cowardly, you know.” Beehive said. “To run away. The Earth Bear says fish come and go. You can waste your time wondering how that one salmon you missed might’ve tasted... but then you’d miss other fish. I don’t know how to apply this lesson in your situation — you’re not a bear. But fish taste good. Most of them. Not all. Can’t stand basa, myself... something about the texture.”

The lion sobbed.

The bear yawned. “All this fish-talk... makes me hungry.” Beehive knew what to say. “Don’t worry. Icci’s coming back soon. Maybe she’ll bring some blackberries. They’re in season.”

### Episode 13: Entering the Domain of the Mole Monarch

“Oh Beehive, don’t act so glum,” said Icci, leaning over her spot on the bear’s head. “It’s not your fault, you know.”

Beehive grunted. “You’re right. You’re the one who made me fight it.”

“I could’ve sworn, by the sky, he looked exactly like a worm — a slithery, constricting worm.<sup>29</sup> An easy mistake, anyone could’ve thought the same.”

“Worms don’t get that big. I’m lucky I survived.”

“You? Lucky? Have you seen yourself? I don’t know anyone who could fight something that big, much less beat it. You don’t need luck. You’re the biggest, baddest guy in the forest!”

“I wouldn’t call myself bad, much less baddest... and biggest? You’re forgetting the Earth Bear.”

“I bet you could do anything you want with your physique. Where’s your ambition? You can climb mountains! Knock down trees! Beat up whoever you want! I’d beat everybody up, if I had your claws – I wouldn’t have to fly away anymore.” She shook her feathers. “Not that I’d want bear claws, of course. I couldn’t handle staying on the ground or... the smell.”

“There’s more than one smell,” Beehive corrected.

“Riiiiight... But nobody messes with you.”

“Except you.”

“Exactly. Let’s keep it that way.”

A mountain stabbed itself into the sky, dominating the Nirgenswaldian landscape — yet far below, the bear and the tanager followed the path into a clearing. Small

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<sup>29</sup> Apparently Aurgarten wrote a number of “lost episodes” which he never intended for publication — this exchange remains the only trace of their existence in the final novel. This particular chapter was called “Beehive Versus The Anaconda,” in which Beehive fights the giant snake upon thinking it a giant worm. Another such chapter, “The Duck, Michael Mallard” contained the so-titled duck that slings non-stop “punishment” at Beehive and Icci. The throughline for these, clearly, corresponds to their violent content.

mounds of dirt dotted the ground and reminded Beehive of misshapen mushrooms. He sniffed at them, by instinct. *Just dirt. And a trace of—*

The earth beneath him quietly rumbled and out sprang dozens of dust-covered persons. Their curious snouts wiggled menacingly as more and more popped up.

In moments, they surrounded Beehive and Icci.

Icci darted around the air. “I knew it — *moles!* Watch out Beehive, give them one wrong look and they’ll cut you in half with their claws!”

“They’re just moles.”

“You should never underestimate an enemy, especially when they come out of the ground—”

“*Silence!*” an authoritative voice shrieked. One of the moles, whose fur glistened brilliantly in the sunshine, shuffled towards the two. This one resembled a small and hairy pig, yet possessed the stride and the elegance of a golden retriever.<sup>30</sup> Moles left and right bowed deeply to this princely presence, their snouts kissing the dirt. Up close, the shiny mole stood nearly as tall as Beehive’s ankle.

The gold-clad mole spoke upwards to the massive bear. “You, great oaf, trespass on my Domain.” Mutterings of *great oaf* reverberated across the field. Beehive felt heat surge to his face and his body froze. *All those voices... did I offend them?*

“Yeah, well, who’re you to tell us where we can or can’t go?” Icci shouted down from the top of Beehive’s head.

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<sup>30</sup> Myself, Jermock, and even Mariena herself have no idea why Aurgarten referred to golden retrievers here (outside of the association with “gold”) — the reason remains lost to the ages.

“Who am I?” the leader flounced, clasping a claw to his heart. “You speak to none other than His Holeyness Preston du Staundigg, and your doltish companion stands on sacred grounds belonging to the Mole Monarch.” A murmuring of *Mole Monarch* broke out among the earth-dwellers.

“I thought I saw mushrooms. I just wanted to—”

“Mushrooms? *Here?* What ridiculous, bear nonsense!”

*Bear nonsense, bear nonsense, bear nonsense...* The repetition infected Beehive’s thought, and he too repeated their words without end.

Icci let out a polite *ahem* to the moles. “Listen, Preston. I feel like we’ve got off on the wrong wing here...”

“Wrong *claw*, you mean,” Preston muttered.

“Wing, claw... same forest, different tree, you know? My point, Holyness...”

“*His* Holeyness!”

“Right. We didn’t know *you* owned this... fine, fine mole territory. Whoops. Our bad. That said—”

Preston scoffed. “Watch your words carefully, bird, or else I will throw you into the deepest dungeons of the earth and you and your friend will never fly again.” *Never fly, Never fly...*

“I’ve never flown before, so...” Beehive interjected.

Icci loomed over Beehive’s snout. “Let me handle this, Beehive. I know how to speak Royal.” She faced Preston. “My Holeyness, allow me to explain our situation.

Weary travellers, are we, forging ever onward t'wards the lofty goal of finding that most blessed of treasures – to say, simply put, we need food. Surely, no greater cause with which one of your social standing may sympathize and will, having thusly spoken, let us go?”

Preston stroked his chin. “Well... We see no wrong in releasing you, wingéd one. But... Beehive, you say? That name’s cursed all molekind for... too long. He must remain in our keeping to receive punishment for his crimes.” Professional prisoner-takers shuffled about Beehive’s feet, claws at the ready.

“That’s preposterous!” Icci yelled.

“No!” Preston stated in his high-pitched mole voice. “It’s justice.” The chanting returned in a din.

*Beehive the bad bear, Beehive the bad bear...*

*Selfish and old, selfish and old...*

*Waste of fur, waste of fur...*

Beehive repeated them all to himself as the fearsome moles led him away.

“Beehive, are you alright?”

The bear’s breathing hastened. “Icci— Don’t— Stay—”

“Shush. I’m not going anywhere without my legs.”

*I got her into this... because of my crimes.* Beehive marched alongside the contingent of moles, careful not to crush the jailers with his mighty paw.

## Episode 14: Under the Mole Monarch's Domain

The mole company surrounded Beehive in a wide-spread formation, leading him towards the dark, looming mountain. The bear stunted his pace to match the speed of the company, yet his feet stumbled awkwardly forward. *I really am a burden, if I can't even walk right*, the bear thought. *They're right — waste of fur, waste of fur, waste of fur...*

Up ahead, at the stoney base of the mountain, the cave opened far, far up high into the mountain. The cave's jagged maw made way for a deep mass consuming all incoming light. *So, the moles live in the belly of the mountain.*

As Beehive craned his neck up while passing through the threshold, Icci let off a trilling hum. "We're not, uh, going into that tunnel? That dark one, right there? Can't really miss it..."

"We must!" one of the moles shrieked. "Our wondrous home has many entrances deep within the earth — tunnels and tunnels of entrances. But the fatty prisoner won't fit through those."

As they marched forward, the air corroded and mixed with stone-ground dust. Icci's breath hastened each step forward. "You know, Icci," Beehive said, "I'm the only one under arrest. You're free to..."

“I’m free to go wherever I please! I’m not ditching you because of something as minor<sup>31</sup> as going underground.”

“But Icci, you’ve never...”

“Exactly! A perfect opportunity to go where no bird has ever gone before. Imagine! Flying *underneath* a mountain!”

Each of the mole escorts stood at attention in the way moles stand at attention. “Edict #854: Creatures of flight perverting natural order within the Halls of the Mole Monarch shall be arrested posthaste and await their rightful sentence,” each mole said in unison.

“Ridiculous! Do you know how many people fly!”

“None, in the Hall of the Mole Monarch,” a mole snickered, proud of her own wit.

Icci settled deeper into Beehive’s fur. “Well, there’s no point in BOTH of us getting arrested. Let’s get this drawn-out charade over with.”

As they passed under the cave’s entrance, Icci inhaled all the air her tanager lungs could carry and held her breath. Beehive found the cold rock against his paws damp, and his nose kept sneezing out all the dust as they trod deeper underground. Beehive found his footing difficult to maintain following the slow scuffle of mole feet. Gradually the tunnel shrank and diverted into dozens of smaller, snaking paths. Here the majority of

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<sup>31</sup> My apologies — Aurgarten (naturally, since he wrote in Mivoltan) never made this pun, but I couldn’t resist. Unfortunately — or fortunately, depending on your worldview — I do not have the creative aptitude to insert any more original puns throughout these mole-centric episodes.

Beehive's mole escorts splintered off until only two chaperones remained. Their snuffling and their march remained identical to each other.

Beehive, as ever, trusted his nose. *The older one... must have tried some onion recently. The other, she... hmm, that's mint.*

Beehive jumped when Icci gasped dramatically for air. "I really can't stand all this dour energy! Seriously, I figured all you moles would strike up a little more conversation, what with so many different genuses all over the place!"

"All those who would call themselves Mole have been given purpose under the Mole Monarch," said one of the guards. *The mint-smelling one. I'll call her Mint.*

"Shush!" the other mole — *this one's Onion* — interjected, his voice gravelly and weathered. "There's no need to exchange pleasantries with their kind."

"Is it not our purpose to spread the word of our glorious Mole Monarch?" asked the first mole.

"Grah! I know his teachings just as well as you," the older mole snuffled. He led Beehive down yet another steep tunnel descending farther into the mountain. Before his nose detected another presence, Beehive's ears heard strange voices mumbling from within the walls. *The moles, they're everywhere!*

"Say," said Icci, "what's the deal with your king anyway?"

"Monarch!" shouted Onion.

"Fine, *Monarch*. I guess I'm just wondering... you've got moles of every size and shape, why not have a larger mole as your Monarch if you, uh, had to have one?"

Mint gasped, straightened her shoulders, then gave a short sigh. “Our kind serves His Holeyness because of his generosity, his dignity. All moles under the earth, once, in eviller days, lived as equals. But do you see how his coat glitters in the light? You’ll notice how our cave bears the same Holey essence — he’s at oneness with our home and with the earth. How could any other being even hope to match such divinity, such providence?”

“So if the cave glowed green,” Beehive responded, “would you worship grass?”

“Foolishness!” said Onion. “Grass does not teach of the just life, nor does grass offer kindness, or promote fairness, or teach wisdom. And it is not the place for a lawbreaker to speak of divine divinity.”

As they ventured deeper into the cave, Beehive noticed moles peeking out from crevices too dark to sniff. These walls bore a softer texture than the rest of the mountain stone, and a soft murmuring crept out of the moles’ mouths. *It’s too dark for me to distinguish the stone’s colour, but...*

Beehive coughed out his dusty throat. “Icci, can you see at all down here?” He felt her tiny talons dig into his drooped scalp.

“Not a peck! I can tell there’s fresh air somewhere around, but golly this place... the dumps!”

The moles shrouded in the walls sneered, some calling out to the duo.

“Disgusting *drug*.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> To this day, *drug* remains a derogatory slur for Mivoltans in bordering European countries. Aurgarten and Mariena debated about preserving the term in *Beehive and Icci*, but they eventually agreed that it had to

“Get out of our home, *drugi*.”

“I’m glad I’m not one of those *drugi*, such nasty creatures.”

*Drugi, drugi, drugi* — the word followed them across the cavern walls.

“My,” exclaimed Icci, “what an ugly word. I’ve never heard a word so vile in my life.”

“Vile, indeed, if you think so,” said Beehive. “I wonder what it means.”

“I’ll tell you what it means,” said Mint. “It’s our word for your kind.”

“Bears?” Beehive asked.

“No.”

Beehive grumbled. “Brown-furred bears?”

“No.” The mole gestured with her claw, pointing at Beehive and then the bird atop his head. “*Your* kind.”

“*Our* kind?” Icci squaked. “Beehive and I aren’t a kind! We’re different kinds!”

“Sure you are! But answer me this: are either of you moles?”

Icci scoffed. “Pleasantly, no.”

“Then you’re both *drugi*! On one claw, moles; on the other *drugi*. Simple distinction.”

In all the hubbub, a clod of dirt struck Beehive’s side. Though he could barely feel it splat against his fur, the bear knew its intent — he could smell the anger reach out

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stay. Jermock, of course, criticizes its use — I argue for the necessity of preserving (untranslated) this small corner of Mivoltan identity, no matter how ugly.

from a dark, hidden crevice nearby. *I'm glad Icci didn't see that*, the bear thought. *She wouldn't understand why I deserved it.*

“So let me get this straight,” said Icci, continuing her own conversation.

“According to...”

“Edict 6: Any creature being not a mole is hence categorized as being *drugi*. *Drugi* who do not abide by our Edicts are...”

“... still subject to mole law, yes, yes. But it makes no sense! How can anyone know mole law if they're not a mole?”

“Well, if you knew any better, you'd know children, at an early age, deeply familiarize themselves with the Edicts. Everyone knows them.”

“Every MOLE! You can't blame people for not knowing mole religion, and then arrest them because no one taught them the exact same set of rules!”

“Don't worry,” piped in Onion, “all your *drugi* kind will become very familiar with our ways, someday. Someday soon, perhaps!”

“That's... ominous.” Icci's head danced trying to find the direction of the voice. “Who's that talking?”

“Onion,” Beehive answered.

“Beehive, he never said his name — and I doubt it's Onion. But seriously, who's who?”

“*We* escort your *drugi* friend to his containment zone.”<sup>33</sup>

“I know that! My apologies, but it’s really dark in here. Tell me your names! Let’s chat.”

The two moles frowned at each other. Onion chuckled. “*What are your names?*” he squeaked in imitation. “What a ridiculous question! Don’t you know anything? You can’t even see in the dark!”

“I know lots!” Icci trumpeted. “For example, moles typically live solitary lives and rely on their own instincts, not going around following some weird underground cult like a bunch of rabbits. When I DON’T know something, I ask! Let’s try again — names, they’re what?”

“So you really don’t know?” asked Mint. “Edict 1, the most important Edict: All moles must relinquish or abandon any past, present, or future names to better service His Holeyness, The Mole Monarch.”

Icci tapped her toe for a few moments. “So what happened to your name? Have you forgotten it?”

Onion harrumphed. “Doesn’t matter. The only name we carry in our hearts is the name of His Holeyness, Preston du Staundigg. Little else matters, no person or thing. Moles will live and moles will die, but while we serve a greater purpose — His Holeyness’ purpose — our worthless lives may be given some meaning.”

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<sup>33</sup> The term I translate as “containment zone” actually arises from Mariena’s childhood. She tells, in Jermock’s biography, how poorly Aurgarten upheld discipline in his household — that is to say, not at all. It eventually happened that when she did something “bad” — as children inevitably do — she quarantined herself in her self-made “containment zone” as punishment.

“Yeesh, what a downer answer,” Icci said, and she gestured in the direction of the other mole. “And what do you think of that? The other mole, girl one, wherever you are.”

“She’s Mint,” Beehive stated.

“My compatriot and I are one, and so are all moles one at service to the Mole Monarch. Please, do not call me *Mint*. Having an identifier — even a fake — disgusts me.”

They continued ever downward. *Could we walk below the mountain?* Beehive thought, noticing the slightly strained breathing of his bird friend. “How much deeper?”

“We have a special place for you, *drugi*,” said Onion. “We think you’ll find your new home... particularly unpleasant.”

Beehive’s nose picked up a waft of fresh air. The guards stopped. A large cavern spread before them, yet the ceiling high above opened up into a great hole into the sky. Sunlight blazed into the room and a spacious pool coloured with a pleasant light blue. Beehive felt Icci’s jittering feet as she stretched up towards the light.

“Beautiful, wonderful sky!” she shouted.

Onion chuckled harshly. “Madness has already taken you, small *drugi*. This *room* is our most torturous containment zone and it will contain you until the day of your trial. Your punishment begins now!”

Beehive expected some kind of pain to course through his body. He stood at the ready along with the moles. “This awkwardness... that’s part of the torture?”

“No, the sun is! Now await your trial — don’t let the sunlight burn your hide!”  
the older mole laughed in the way that moles laugh.

Mint turned to Beehive. “I’m sorry, *drugi*. I wouldn’t wish this punishment on anyone, even one of your kind. You must endure unbearable pain in this sunlit hell. You have my pity.”

Onion scratched at Mint’s snout. “His Holeyness, Preston du Staundigg himself, designated the Sun Chamber to be the interloper’s punishment. Would you question His judgement?”

“No.” Mint gripped tightly to the earth at her feet. “I hope you get a sunburn, *drugi!*” she yelled. “And remember, your life is in the Mole Monarch’s claws! Whatever he decides, he is supported by every mole with reason on their side.” And the two moles scuffled back into the darkness.

Icci cocked her head forwards, side to side, and swiftly soared up in the air. “What suckers! Your prison’s a tropical paradise! Add some gulls and sand, and it’s practically a beach! Better yet, we can make the PERFECT get-away, and they won’t even know we’re gone. C’mon Beehive, climb your way to freedom!”

The bear squinted up at the sun, and with a thud he splayed down next to the water’s edge. “I couldn’t make it out. My leg hurts.”

“Your leg?! Sounds like an excuse to me!” Icci landed next to his paw and poked it, consistently, with her beak. “Cmon! This whole adventure’s run its course, let’s just move on to something, *anything* else! I don’t want our WHOLE story to focus on moles, they’re just too... weird for me! And that’s saying a lot.”

The bear sat unmoved. “I’ve... already come to terms with whatever’s about to happen to me. You can fly out of here, free as a—”

“Don’t say it.”

“Well — you shouldn’t stay. You can’t. They’ll find a reason to arrest you too.”

“Not if we leave! They can’t make you stay, and besides, they gave you a way out! No point in staying to get punished for some made-up crime.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Huh?”

“I have done something wrong. Many somethings wrong. And I’ll accept whatever punishment they deem fits my crimes.”

“That’s... so unreasonable, Beehive. You’re not as brilliant as a tanager, as the saying goes, but I know you’re not THAT unreasonable.”

“I broke their laws. No one’s ever held me accountable for my actions before.”

“That’s not true! I held you accountable for that worm when we first met?”

“But I still haven’t paid you back.”

“Well, we settled that score forever ago. And who cares what moles think? You’re Beehive, the biggest baddest bear ever! Just do your whole ‘we’ll be on our way’ thing! You don’t have to let them stomp all over you.”

“It’s about time that someone did. I... for too long, I’ve done things.”

“Everyone’s done things!”

“But I’ve done... a lot of things. I never realized... Nirgenswald, its people, hate me. I never cared before — it never crossed my mind — but knowing... knowing what? I don’t even remember. Some things come back, things that burn when I try to remember them. But I never got punished. Until today.”

“Beehive, you’re doing that thing again where you’re super vague and I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’m sorry. Truly.” Beehive grumbled, causing the pool’s still waters to ripple outward. “I don’t know how many people I’ve hurt over the years. Some tried to eat me, some of them I didn’t even realize I hurt. And you! I very nearly hurt you too. I deserve... this. I can’t run away.”

“Bear!” Icci shouted, her feathers ruffled and quivering in a frenzy. “You’re hopeless!” Icci flew off to the other side of the room and paced about.

*My stomach turning, my mind quickening...* A stray memory drifted into Beehive’s head: a dark cave, a rocky wall, tracing the grooves and bumps of stone with his snout, anything to avoid the dread of turning around to find...

The bear shook the memory out of his head. *I can’t even face my own mind. Don’t I deserve to feel guilt?* Beehive exhaled. “I am guilty, you know,” he said, finally turning to Icci. “I hid from it for a long, long time. Would I feel guilty if I did nothing wrong?”

Icci huffed and she skipped over to Beehive’s face. Even lying down, the bear’s muzzle dwarfed the tanager. “Beehive, can you promise me something? If the trial goes bad — like, really bad — I want you to get out of here. Whatever it takes. I’m not spending eternity in this cave.” Icci humphed and flew off. She returned and hovered

before Beehive. “I’m not leaving! I’m just going to find us something to eat!” And she zoomed straight up into the sunlight.

Beehive sighed once more. *She really shouldn't have to take care of me. I don't deserve it.*

### Episode 15: The Trial

The bear still spent his time hunched over the empty pool, fourteen lines in the dirt next to him. *Are those days? Nights? Icci's visits? I hope she brings food soon.* He'd often mistake the unmoving rocks for fish, expecting movement of any kind in the all-too-still water. *I can only eat berries for so long,* he thought. *But it's better here than out in the dark.*

Beehive never approached the dark tunnels. The alien murmuring of moles echoed sunup to sundown, or sometimes sundown to sunup. Yet mostly, Beehive napped to avoid his own intrusive thoughts. *Waste of fur... Bad bear... Selfish and old and bad bear. Waste of old fur bear fur. Selfish. Selfish.* The pool water stayed consistently cool, and Beehive drank from it gratefully. *Good clean water... don't drink it all, you bad waste of self...*

Beehive's stray thoughts sometimes drifted to the Earth Bear. *How many more months do I have to look for her? If I spend the winter in confinement, and maybe another, or more, and... after that? After That might never happen. All my fault.*

Beehive sensed movement in the darkness.

Just out of the sunlight, a large procession of moles approached, and at their head strutted the Mole Monarch himself. He motioned towards Beehive with his flamboyant claw and the guards encircled the bear. Preston paced about in the dark, careful to keep behind his guards. “The day has finally come for your trial! I trust you found your imprisonment... torturous?”

Icci, just as she'd practiced, remained still on the bear's head. “You'd have to do much more than that to break Beehive!”

“Don't encourage him, Icci,” whispered Beehive, in as much of a whisper as a bear in a cave can whisper.

Icci gave Beehive's head a tender scrunch with her foot. “Why don't you step closer into the light, Preston? I can't see your dirty face while you're cowering over there.”

“Thank you for the compliment.” Preston scratched as far onto his back as his claws could reach. “If you must know, Our Royal Body received a nasty sunburn on the day we met — yet another crime for which this lawbreaker must answer.”

*I didn't even realize I gave him a sunburn, thought Beehive. I'm a bad AND inconsiderate bear. Selfish.*

“Don't be such a wet feather! That's not Beehive's fault, and you know it!” Icci proclaimed.

“Oh, I’m confident we shall uncover every inch of truth during his trial.” Preston motioned with his claw. “Come, come! We’re about to decide your fate once and for all, large *drugi*.”

The moles marched Beehive forward in the same fashion as before, leaving him to once more step about awkwardly.

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As they marched, the moles that once stalked about in the dark began to follow the procession.

“Follow ME, wonderful subjects!” shouted Preston, his pitched voice booming across the stone tunnel. “Here, brethren, we have a most savage beast — conquered personally by my own might, a true testament to our collective powers as The One and Only People.<sup>34</sup> But this is no ordinary *drugi*, as we have let pass by above us or have taken in as decoration deep in our tunnels. No — some of us may not be cursed with vision, but all moles have heard the tales of infamous *drugi* beasts. And this bear — yes, I use *their* word to describe him — why, none other than Beehive himself!”

Whispers spread about in the tunnels and froze Beehive’s brain. *They know my name... what else could they know?*

Icci peeked over the bear’s snout. “Hey, Beehive! They’ve heard of you! That must mean you’re famous!”

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<sup>34</sup> Mivolta had a brief flirtation with Nazism before the advent of World War II. Of course, the Germanic ideals didn’t translate perfectly well in the Mivoltan tongue, and so (for reasons my non-Mivoltan self still struggles to comprehend) began the deification of moles. Mivoltans subjected themselves to serve the “superior” moles, though what the moles enforced (or *how*) remains a hole within the history books. Aurgarten and Mariena avoided this hysteria, luckily, having been lost in the woods for the entire week the One and Only People Movement transpired. Any living Mivoltans refuse to speak of what happened, yet I cannot help but wonder: what, if anything, did the moles think of their brief ascendance to godhood?

“Shush, let me keep monologuing!” Preston squeaked. “Yes, stories of the terrible and horrific Beehive spread themselves like spores among mole-kind — nightmares told to children to keep them safe, safe from the crushing and unfeeling paws of this murderous beast. But hark, my kin! Witness the unthinking oaf, conquered and subdued by our great People and by my own cunning! Now his judgement awaits, conducted by me, for his numerous and considerable crimes against our People! Let us all congregate together and witness the divine justice I shall enact on this Beehive, a most awful of *drugi*.”

The Mole Monarch’s subjects jeered and chanted, as Beehive felt all the eyes in the world bore into his skull. They descended deeper and deeper and the tunnel tightened against his whole body. Beehive kept his head down and his shoulders hunched so that Icci still had room, while his eyes pointed down at his feet. He became aware of each movement of his legs, and even his toes, as he jolted un-bearlike forward. *What would the Earth Bear think? What would she say?* Beehive wanted to breathe clean air again, but more importantly he wanted to throw up. *I don’t know if I’ll ever have another meal again — I need to save as much food as possible.*

“Beehive,” whispered Icci, “keep on flapping, champ! I’ll get us out of this. I’ve done some lawyering in my time, so getting you out of this should be a piece of grape.”

The prattling of Icci eased his shoulders somewhat. “When?”

“Oh, you know... in my post-hatch phase. You wouldn’t believe how many disputes baby tanagers get into — I resolved most of them without issue. But you should

believe it. The best argument always wins in any justial rulings so if I do that here, they'll let you go!"

"I doubt that, Icci. I'm guilty of everything they accuse me of. Probably more."

"Oh come on! Trust me for once."

*Whatever fate I face, Icci shouldn't have to either.* "No. Don't risk yourself for my sake."

"It's not a—"

A mole prodded Beehive's ankle. "You must be non-sound while we approach the Echo."

The congregation entered a long and low-ceilinged chamber. Unlike the dark stone of the rest of the mountain's tunnels, the walls here glittered with a strange, yellowish light — even Icci could now see beneath the earth's surface. The stones' colour matched Preston's coat exactly. Natural holes decorated the walls in sporadic places, though Beehive doubted that any mole could burrow into such hardy earth. *Why does everything glow down here? The rest of the cave had so little colour.* The moles spread far out within the chamber and the guards led Beehive towards a rising mound of yellowed earth, setting him at its base. Preston climbed up the stump-shaped mound, his grunts and pants bouncing across the entire chamber. The bear could not fully stand, yet he still towered over Preston on his pedestal.

"Beehive the bear," Preston's voice boomed across the room. "You stand trial in our holey ground, so called by me The Monarch's Echo, since it makes my voice echo

and I am the Mole Monarch.” True to its name, the Monarch’s voice did echo across the hall, sound bouncing across every crevice.

The other moles voices initiated a universal chant, but the constant bouncing of voices gibberished unpleasantly in Beehive’s ears. When Preston raised his menacing claw the chanting ceased and the sound evaporated.

“You, *drugi*,” enunciated Preston, his voice perfectly legible, “you have been particularly nasty, even among your kind.”

*Have I? Beehive quivered. Waste of fur, waste of fur, bad bear, bad bear...*

“Tell me, Beehive, how long have you been alive?”

“For...” the bear said and all present cringed at the deafening percussion of his voice. “For as long as I can remember,” he whispered into the floor. The sound stifled and didn’t resonate.

“How... convenient. Perhaps you may recall some of your previous crimes against mole-kind.”

*So many... but which to say?* “Once I dropped a fish on a rock. Slipped out of my paw. But the rock might’ve been a mole. I don’t remember.”

“Fish fosh! You hear that, my brethren? He doesn’t remember a single transgression against *us*! As we’re well aware, the menace known as Beehive has terrorized all of Nirgenswald for years beyond mole-counting. We have more important things to worry about than the lives of miserable *drugi* on the surface. Perhaps only list your most *recent* crimes against mole-kind, since your memory... wanes.”

“I think...”

“Ha! A *drugi*, thinking? Well, let me use simple words. All mole-kind remembers everything: our memories are collective, and when you harm one, you harm us all. Remember the time you broke a tree down and caused an earthquake? What of the numerous times you’ve relieved yourself near one of our holes? You’ve also ‘accidentally’ crushed many of our kind. Do these crimes sound familiar?”

*I don’t remember. How awful if I don’t remember any of this — and how many others have I hurt just by living my life? Selfish, selfish—*

“Objection!” squawked Icci. “You gave out examples too vague to stand in the court of Nirgenswald Law. Anyone — any-bear — could have done those things. Just because you say something doesn’t make it true!

The hall erupted with the protestations of moles, with no distinguishable sounds rising above the din. Preston snapped his claw towards Icci and the crowd shushed.

“Edict 5: When the Mole Monarch presents a fact as fact, that fact is an unarguable fact. So when I say a thing is true, that means it is true, little *drugi*. One more word out of you and you’ll be on trial as well!” Preston continued. “But we are all well aware of this *drugi*’s previous crimes against mole-kind, so let us recall his most recent. Does anyone know what crime that is?

Each mole said the same thing in unison, but their jeers once more cacophonied together.

“That’s correct!” Preston applauded in the way moles applaud. “Edict 1884: Those who step or trample upon the Mole Monarch’s lawful land will be hencely arrested

and put on trial. And is it not so that Beehive, this here *drugi*, violated one of our most sacred Edicts? And does he not deserve his punishment for breaking not only this Edict, but numerous others?”

The moles responded, clamorously, in the affirmative. *If so many people think I did something wrong, then I must have done it*, Beehive thought.

The moles quieted down once more at Preston’s gesture. “So, *vile drugi* — is all I have said untrue?”

Beehive remembered to plant his face downwards as he spoke. “I don’t remember most of what I’m accused of, but I must have done those things if you say I did.”

“You confessed! That means I won! You idiot, you fool!” The Mole Monarch danced in a bounding and hammering of claws, and his followers all imitated his movements. “So, you must be punished for these transgressions. But what to do?” Preston scratched his chin. Then he sinisterly smiled in the way that golden moles smile sinisterly. “*Beehive*. A strange name for a bear, isn’t it?”

“N-no? I don’t think so. I don’t know.”

“It refers to those strange sky beetles — all you *drugi* look the same, it’s hard to tell you apart. But I doubt there’s nary a mole in Nirgenswald who hasn’t come to loathe the name *Beehive*. You may not think it, but those stories of your menace have power over my people — they fear *you*. Specifically *you*. But why? Because names have power! A person with a name is more than just a person, they’re... an entity. So when I hear my own name, Preston du Staundigg, buried in praise while your name is inversely feared, I

ask you — why should a vile *drugi* share the same privilege as I? All moles have shed their name for my sake, so what makes a lowly *bear* like you their superior?”

“Why not just allow moles to have names?” Icci asked.

“Ridiculous! We’d have to rewrite half the Edicts to accommodate such a preposterous proposal. No, it makes no sense for an enemy of molekind to possess what they do not.” Preston made himself as big as possible while still hunched over, and the crowd awed. “For your crimes against the Mole Monarch, I hereby decree that the name ‘Beehive’ shall henceforth be discarded from the memories of all molekind and from the identity of the bear himself. He shall leave it behind, discarded and forgotten somewhere in the woods, to die and rot away.”

Beehive stomach heaved and he vomited what little food he consumed during his imprisonment. Bile and drool dripped all across his face and across every nearby surface. Beehive would have heard the chants of *drugi* and *monster* from the crowd, if his entire brain had not already burst with wildfire. Silence filled the hall and Beehive’s being burned. Only the continuous prodding of a singular word — “Eye-object” — brought him back.

The voice belonged to Icci, planted on top of Beehive’s head and shouting at Preston.

“Bear!” shouted Preston. “Enough of your feral *drugi* liquids infecting our illustrious hall!” The Mole Monarch lashed his claw in Icci’s direction. “And you, most unnatural of *drugi*, with your damned skyfeet, for your insolence and for being so *annoying*, you shall also lose your name, whatever that is!”

“Icci, Icci Icci!” The fierce tanager soared about the Mole Monarch’s golden hall, screaming every obscenity Beehive knew, and many he didn’t.<sup>35</sup>

*My name? I’ve had this name since the Earth Bear... what happens if I don’t have Beehive any more? Will this awful poison in my head melt if I’m not Beehive? Will I stop thinking? My stomach hurts, my head burns, and I want to throw up again, so... no, now that I’m not Beehive I still... I’m starving. Is it Beehive starving? If Beehive doesn’t exist, then he can’t starve. But I’M starving. And I still have Beehive’s memories — fish at dawn, arguing over the Melon, honey — so he can’t un-exist. All this burning in my head, guilt, memories, plums with Icci... those remain. They’re not evaporating with the seasons. Beehive contains all of those things. But if what the moles say is true... no, no, they’re mistaken. Do they know that Beehive still thinks, still remembers? They’re not the authority on... me. But who is? Who can I trust for such an important question... The moles? Their Monarch? The Earth Bear? Icci? Fish?*

The answer was obvious. *My stomach! My nose! They’ve never led me wrong.* And so he asked his stomach and nose, in the way that bears ask their stomach and nose. They responded without a word, but they responded.

Beehive, amid the chaos of screaming moles and a dive-bombing tanager, decided to say his Thought out loud. “I want to leave.”

Icci veered towards the bear, hovering around his face. “Well it’s about time! Only the sky knows why you wanted to go on trial!”

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<sup>35</sup> Aurgarten’s original text features these curses, which — admittedly — are written entirely out of character for Icci. The words and swears Aurgarten uses belong — if you’ll excuse the cliché — to the mouth of a sailor, and a particularly raunchy sailor at that, but not Icci. Mariena claims Aurgarten wanted to show off Icci’s frustration in way most “raw,” but it felt wrong for me to translate such obscene language for this text.

“I didn’t want to, they arrested me...”

“Well it’s time for you to make your great escape! And me too, I guess,” Icci said, surveying the dozens of moles yelling and waving their claws at the airborne bird.

“Apparently I’m under arrest too — *over* arrest, at the moment.”

“Can you see a way out?”

“Besides the way we came? Haven’t the foggiest.”

Beehive raised his head and sniffed the most powerful sniff he ever sniffed — he caught a faint trace of outside air. “Check the other side of the hall, Icci. We should make our way over there.”

“Let’s get out of this hole!” Icci zoomed across the hall and Beehive followed. The ceiling scraped into Beehive’s back with every step, but the bear pressed on. *I’m not going to waste away beneath the ground! What a relief.*

Yet the cavern never fit so many people, much less the mightiest bear in Nirgenswald. With every *thud* of the bear’s feet and *boom* of his hurried pace, the Monarch’s Echo shook with a thunderous ferocity.

Each mole scurried amongst themselves as their holey place shuddered in chaos. Preston, unflinching from his spot on the mound, waved his claws about his snout. “What are you all doing?! Stop those *drugi*! Even if you have to lose your life, they must be caught! Stop them in the name of the Mole Monarch!”

The moles couldn’t hear their Monarch’s demands over the maddening rumble. The moles could only swerve from Beehive’s timbering footfalls and frown languidly up at the flying Icci. The bravest of moles, at least from Beehive’s reckoning, tried

surrounding his legs — yet the bear continued his charge and each courageous mole darted out of his way.

Icci hovered next to Beehive’s ear. “Hey Beehive, there’s an opening up to your right, do you see it?”

Beehive had to remember which way right went,<sup>36</sup> but he did see it: a hole where sunlight leaked into the Echo. “I see it,” he said, the only voice to stick out from the cacophony. From up close, the hole seemed too small for Beehive. *Nowhere to go but forward...*

He squeezed tightly through, and got his head and right paw out into the blinding light.

“Can you make it through?” projected Icci’s voice from the outside.

“I don’t think they built this exit for bears.”

“Agh! Those lazy moles. What shoddy architecture! I guess, you’ll have to go back ar—”

“I’m not going back in. I’ll fit.” With that, Beehive shimmied himself across the rock and pushed with his back legs.

With each strained movement, the tunnel behind and around him shook and collapsed. When Beehive fit the top half of his torso through, clouds of dust exploded out from the cavern. From numerous smaller holes, the duo noticed a few moles claw their way into the sunlight. Beehive struggled more and more, the small holes expanded and

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<sup>36</sup> Well into his adulthood, Aurgarten struggled with distinguishing right and left. Even after Mariena — still a child — taught him the difference (Mivoltans don’t share the English “make an L with your hand” trick), the brilliant author never sorted out which was which.

larger masses of moles spilled out from the mountainside. The scrambling creatures flooded into the trees, and spread out in all directions except back into their former home beneath the mountain.

One final push, and Beehive squeezed his left leg out of the collapsed cave. He splayed himself out across the ground. The holes behind crumbled as the rocks gave way. Yet the earth's shaking did not cease as more crowding moles escaped from certain doom.

“Wouldn't—” Icci started, before afflicted with a fit of coughing. “Wouldn't the moles prefer their home covered by earth? Or couldn't they have just dug deeper?”

Beehive knew that this moment called for him to impart some Grand Lesson to his dear companion. But all he did was sit up and watch — with Icci, in silence — the numerous shades of browns, blacks, and yellows dissolve into the green trees below.

### Episode 16: Blueberries

Over the next few days, Beehive lolled about under the sun's beaming gaze. He thanked the Earth Bear for the warmth on his fur, and even for the mild irritation of his eyes adjusting to sunlight. *I'm alive, and I'm still me*, Beehive sighed deeply, the sensation of free air untwisting the knots in his stomach.

“You seem awfully chipper!” Icci said. “Especially considering everything that happened with those moles...”

“It’s just nice to stretch my legs and breathe,” the bear proclaimed.

Further on, something about the arrangement of the surrounding trees piqued Beehive’s attention: the weathered trees along white bark and the numerous pines dotting along the swerving hills. They eventually came across a stream occupied by algae-covered rocks — the running water sang a familiar tune, only its signature sounded worn down. A short way across the stream grew a blueberry bush; unremarkable, yet the blues and greens and whites together resembled a similar frame in Beehive’s mind. *I’ve been here before...*

Beehive felt a hunch. He couldn’t shake it, and perhaps didn’t want to shake it, so he turned back in the direction they came.

“Hey, what gives?” Icci asked. “This river’s giving me good vibes! And look at that blueberry bush, just begging for us to dine over there.”

Beehive shrugged. “I’ve travelled to many places, you know.”

“So you’ve told me!”

“Never the same place twice. Yet here I stand, once again, in this particular neck of the woods. In all my wandering, I don’t think I’ve ever set foot beyond this stream — and for good measure, my stomach tells me.”

“What’s so special about THIS spot? It’s unremarkable, if good-vibey.”

“Nothing. Whenever I’ve come across this stream before, I just... turned back the way I came.”

“But *why*?”

Beehive scratched his chin. “I suppose that’s a good argument.”

“I know! I always make good arguments!”

“But why bother crossing? If I’ve already searched this area...”

Icci glided to her place atop Beehive’s head. She leaned over just enough to meet his bark-brown eyes. “Look. As much as I want those blueberries, I’m not going to force you across. I’ll follow you anywhere you go — and I already have!”

Beehive wormed his lips together. *She did risk herself with those moles, when she didn’t have to. All for my sake.*

“Sure,” Beehive finally said. “Like you said: why not?”

“Stupendous!” Icci darted straight towards the bush. Beehive tentatively stepped over the stream with a massive stride, careful to avoid the thick green coat of algae wiggling about on the rocks.

By the time Beehive reached the blueberries, Icci had already eaten a fair share. The bear leaned into the bush and sniffed. *They smell fine, but there’s something off about this bush...* Beehive craned his head side to side, found a berry to his liking, and popped it into his mouth. It tasted no less delicious than any other blueberry he’d tasted in his long years. *I’m... not sure what I expected.* “Hmm,” he grunted.

“Huh?”

“This spot doesn’t seem much different from the rest of the forest. So what stopped me from coming here before now?”

“*You* did, ya goofus! You get in your head too much, Beehive. You need to stop thinking about things so... intensely.”

“I suppose,” he nudged a berry he thought Icci would like. She accepted the gesture and gobbled the berry whole. “But I’m too old to start thinking any other way.”

“Oh please! You just need to stop worrying. Look at me! I’m never worried! And want to know why? Because there’s nothing to worry about!”

“Maybe you should worry a bit more, Icci. Like with those moles...”

“We made it out fine! And besides, they couldn’t even reach me with their weird little claws when I soared about their weird little heads!”

*You’d have to land some time*, thought Beehive, keeping his worry to himself.

The bear, in his wistful surveying, noticed a moss-covered mound of stones against the nearby hill. Beehive wandered from the bush to investigate — Icci instantly hovered close behind him. The surrounding forest seemed smaller somehow. *What a strange trick of the mind*, thought the bear, squinting about the distorted space. *Perhaps the forest has hunched down... no, that makes no sense.*

The spot on the hill remained small. Beehive’s nose smelled the draping moss, and he remembered a wet and ticklish sensation against his nose and fur.

But its stench reminded him: *I must have wintered here. But how long ago...*

“Look Icci,” Beehive whispered. “Quite the find, Icci.”

“Moss?” she whispered back.

“No, this cave. I must have wintered here a long time ago... but I’ve never come across any of my previous wintering caves before. Isn’t that strange?”

“Maybe because you’ve only gone to new places.” Even Icci seemed small — smaller — to Beehive.

“Is everything alright?” Beehive asked.

“Yes, yes, of course,” Icci sniffled. “Must be this moss... my sinuses. Well? Are you going inside?”

“I thought I might. Will you wait outside?”

Icci tilted her head for a moment. “No. I’ll go in with you.” She sniffled once more and trilled. “I’d like to see what all the hubbub is about.”

*I don’t understand the joke, but I’m relieved she’s staying.* “Then let’s go.”

Beehive parted the moss, letting scant light into the cave. He crawled inside, remembering a large step partway inside. *I believe it’s right... here.* The bear lifted his leg high off the floor, yet only air existed where he expected the step and his foot stumbled down onto uneven stone. *There’s that smallness again.*

“Icci,” the bear said, stopping in place. “Does everything seem... smaller to you?”

“I wouldn’t know, it’s completely black in here! How do you bears see anything without sunlight? Even nighttime isn’t this dark!”

“Nothing at all, Icci?”

“Not a thing! But don’t worry, I’ll just cling tight to your fur.”

*I can't see too well either.* Beehive smelled about the cave to better understand his surroundings. *It smells... old.* Not a sound from the outside crept in, and the two could only hear the huffs of each other breathing.

*Dark walls and quiet: this is certainly a wintering cave.* Only a huddled shape stuck out. The image clarified as Beehive approached.

A skeleton, laid out on its side, nearly blended into the rock and soil. The bones were intact and unmarked, no signs of violence on the usual places. *This happens — some people never wake after their wintering.* The skeleton in front of him belonged to a bear, though the shape seemed noticeably shrunken. *Everyone appears smaller in death,* Beehive thought. He eventually met the face on the bear's skull, where the eyes and nose now faded into an invisible dark. *I wonder what you looked like before. The foods you ate, the smells you smelled. Gone.*

"Hey, Beehive," Icci whispered, "what's happening? Your nose's making a storm. What do you see? Or, uh, smell?"

"Bones, Icci."

In the bear's smelling, he recalled some semblance of memories of this cave, though clouded by the musk of age. The curves and jagged grooves of the cave walls reminded Beehive of the utter boredom of wintering while young. "I remember," he said out loud, "sleeping and half-sleeping a whole winter when all I wanted..."

"Wanted what?"

"I don't recall. Something to do?"

“Well what about now? What do you do to pass the time when you’re cooped up for winter?”

“Thinking,” he said. *Yes, thinking about...*

“Thinking about what?”

“Hmm... fish, mostly.”

“Yeah, I can’t imagine how hungry you’d get. I’d starve!”

“It’s not so terrible.”

“But it must get scary too. Not being able to do anything and just... lying there with your thoughts. Sounds lonely.”

“I’ve gotten by,” Beehive sighed. “But I do wonder lately how many winters I have left.”

“Really? That sounds depressing.”

“I... suppose. But what else can I look forward to at my age? When I go into sleep it’s... deeper than before. And it’s comfortable, almost impossibly so. I imagine one winter, I’ll sleep too comfortably to wake again, and... that’s an oddly peaceful thought. But I worry. I worry that I won’t eat another first fish of spring. I worry that I’ll inconvenience someone, like you — I don’t know who else. And above all, I worry that I won’t find the Earth Bear.”

In this moment of clarity, his legs slipped out. Everything in the world disappeared except for the blank eye socket of the old bear skull.

“Beehive? What happened?”

“I’m a terrible person, Icci. I don’t remember a thing. I don’t want to.”

Beehive expected some stinging remark from Icci, but she remained silent.

Beehive couldn’t escape those hollowed-out eyes.

“Sometimes I remember small details from my childhood. Lessons about bearhood, the day I earned the name Beehive... yet after all this time, I don’t know *why* I look for the Earth Bear. It never crossed my mind that the Earth Bear could also...”

Beehive trailed off. He wanted — needed — a nap, yet when he felt a slight shuffle from Icci, he inhaled a deep breath, all the way down to his stomach. “I never even knew her name.”

“Then... you think this...?”

“I think so. But I don’t know for certain. If it’s not this cave, it’s another just like it.”

Icci hummed and cooed. “She looks peaceful.”

Beehive smirked in the way that bears smirk. *It’s still too dark for her to see anything. But it’s a nice thought.* A surprising sound broke the moment: Beehive’s stomach rumbled.

### Episode 17: Marcus Barkus Continues the Ballad of Eshishos

Beehive searched for a fish within the rushing stream. One fish after the other, some in schools, whisked by the bear’s static paws. *There goes another. And another.*

*And another.* The white and rushing water repeatedly crashed against Beehive's fur. Each fish whooshing by appeared smaller and smaller. *I should have grabbed one before now,* he thought, still scoping the water. *But perhaps a larger one will come along. Yes, a perfect fish to occupy my afternoon, larger than any before it. I just need to wait.*

Icci hesitantly glided onto Beehive. "Hey big fella," she said, "looks like there's quite a lot of fish coming your way."

"Yes."

"You... going to grab one?"

The tail of a bass slapped against Beehive's foot and swiftly charged away.

"Yes," the bear responded.

For a few minutes, Icci sat atop Beehive's head, unmoving. "Well, umm..." she coughed. "I guess I'm... worried?"

"I will find a fish, Icci."

"Not about that. I'm worried about... I mean, after everything in that cave, with the Earth Bear... well, I guess I'm concerned. About you."

"It was my life-long calling. To find her."

"Yeah, I know."

"I never thought about what would happen if I found her. Maybe I wanted to become a cub again... wandering the forest beneath her shadow, learning how to spot the right fish... I must confess... every time I try to remember my age, or whenever you ask, I honestly don't know what to answer. It may be thirty, fifty, one hundred — I only know

I'm old. And all these seasons — spring after summer after fall, over and over — only searching. But now my search... it's over... I thought that the Earth Bear might explain everything after all this time, but now there's... nothing. Who knows how many winters I have left? And what do I do if I'm not searching...<sup>37</sup> *The Earth Bear might know*, he thought instinctively, but the idea made his face scrunch.

“I don't think that's an excuse, Beehive,” Icci said. “Sure, you're old... older than the moon, my Uncle Jibb would say. You just need to join another flock!”

“Another... flock?”

“Yeah! Whenever one of my family members got really, REALLY old, they'd fly off and join another flock of birds! Ma used to tell me how other flocks needed their ancient wisdom, so they spread what they know to other eager and studious birds.”

“That sounds like a story.”

“Everything's a story!”

“It sounds like your relatives got eaten.” Beehive furrowed his brow. “Or they just died.”

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<sup>37</sup> It is natural for an author to project their own personal traits and beliefs onto their characters, and here I believe Aurgarten is guilty of this in regards to Beehive's existentialism. In addition to his adoption of Mariena, another significant event shares significant impact on Aurgarten's worldview. For a number of years during his mid-20s, Aurgarten spent much of his time cultivating the growth of a very rare vegetable (now extinct) known only as Gilpen's Carrot. The breed apparently requires significant investment and care in order to grow, and Aurgarten took it upon himself to accomplish the feat only a few botanists have achieved. After five years of tending to the plant every day, it had finally grown to an edible size. The young Aurgarten ate the carrot and, unexpectedly, suffered so severe an allergic reaction that he remained bedridden an entire month afterwards.

Icci tisked. “What a morose thought! Sure, family members got eaten every once in a while, but it’s not the same thing! We even had a few older birds leave their flock to join ours — it’s a universal tradition!”

“Hmm.” Beehive glumly drank from the rushing water. *I suppose some truths wrap themselves in a sweet layer, like a peach, the bear thought. But a lie will always fall through, in the end. Peaches have pits.*

Icci sprang from Beehive’s head, a small, whooshing gale from her liftoff fluffing his fur. “Let’s go upstream! There’s probably more fish further ahead, and you could use a change of scenery!”

Beehive heavily nodded, his weighted stride crashing through the rapids.

Farther ahead, the two companions reached a swift waterfall, its height not much taller than Beehive. Something about the constant crashing noise of water on rock irritated Beehive’s sensitive ears. *There’s far too much sound here, they seemed to say.*

Beneath the white, crushing falls slumped a figure which Beehive nearly mistook for a shrivelled stump — then he remembered the sprig-like limbs and sunken shape of...

“MARCUS BARKUS!” Icci screamed out, diving towards the elderly figure.  
“How was your summer? Eat anything particularly tasty lately?”

No response.

Icci perched on a nearby branch sticking out of the rock. “Do you think he’s doing his ‘play dead’ trick again? It’s really getting old... no offense.”

Beehive sniffed Marcus Barkus. “I think he’s dead.” *Didn’t this trick happen the last time we met?* Beehive thought. *But my nose never lies.* Beehive shrugged. Marcus Barkus’s body looked just as thin and fragile as before — Beehive avoided touching him in fear that he’d break the sage’s bones. Beehive scrunched his face once more and noticed his own feet sinking beneath the rushing water. *How does he stay still under that waterfall? The current would carry a person his size down, like a leaf.*

“Marcus Barkus,” Beehive grunted. “Someone of your constitution might hurt themselves under this much moving water.”

The kindly and shrunken face of Marcus Barkus appeared to smile in the way that a Marcus Barkus would smile. “That’s a big word, Beehive, even for you.” Marcus Barkus croaked as he brought his upraised arms down to his folded-up legs. “I’m merely trying to become a part of the waterfall. You, little Iccipiani, might think it a strange vocation, but I think Beehive might know my meaning. I’ve always revelled in the freedom of water — always moving, never knowing where you’ll end up — utter whimsy!”

Beehive snuffled. *Always speaking in riddles.* “Let me carry you out of there. We both know you can’t become a waterfall.”

Marcus Barkus hummed and wheezed. “Oh, very well. I suppose there’s no shame in becoming a rock. I’d hate to be a boulder, though. Perhaps I’ll turn into many smaller rocks, and I’ll spread out across Nirgenswald, or perhaps get thrown into a river where I’ll be ground into sand over millennia. Now that would make for quite the story, if

a little boring!”<sup>38</sup> The sage reached his shriveled arms out, shaking but otherwise unfazed by the cascading falls.

Beehive pivoted and let the limbs grip his fur. He felt the gentlest of pats and carried Marcus Barkus out from the waterfall. *He’s nearly as light as Icci*, Beehive thought. *Maybe lighter.*

On shore, Marcus Barkus let go of Beehive and splayed himself upon a nearby boulder. His twig-like limbs spread out upon the rock, and he sighed an extravagant breath. “My, it’s nice to feel the sun’s warmth again! I never realized just how *cold* that water ran until just now.” The thin figure shivered; Beehive noticed an upward crease on the ancient sage’s mouth.

Icci gingerly hopped up next to Marcus Barkus’s face. “I hate to intrude on your, uh, sun-bathing, Marcus Barkus...”

“Oh Iccipiani, we both know you well enough that you don’t care about intruding. What do you need, young one?”

“Well... would you mind finishing that story from before. I gotta find out why everyone keeps it from me!”

“Hmm... remind me now what story? The Chronicles of the Willidiggan Hugger? The Sisters Asha, Matta, and Patta? Or perhaps The Charming Adventures of Billiam

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<sup>38</sup> Marcus Barkus’s dialogue here loses much in translation from the Milvoltan original, since it relies on the language’s complex history and pronunciation of the letter “w”. Nearly every word features the letter and each pronunciation produces an entirely different meaning. My translation of the passage merely captures one of several interpretations of the passage, but it is merely worth noting the sheer mastery over the Mivoltan language Aurgarten uses here.

Bean the Unwavering?”<sup>39</sup> Marcus Barkus sat up and once more bent his legs into themselves. “Oh, I’m only pulling your wing! I remember exactly which story: The Ballad of Eshishos!”

“Oh yes!” said Icci.

*Oh no*, thought Beehive.

“Now where were we... ah yes! I even recall the exact moment we left off...”

Marcus Barkus coughed and continued without delay. “And so Yolk, gathering all his belongings, set out on his noble quest, skipping with glee.

“You see, our heroic Yolk would not be considered a brawny monkey, or so it’s said. Yet in order to understand Yolk’s place in all this, we must recognize two of his most precious qualities. First, none of the peoples of Eshishos could match his speed, for they say that even the sun and moon could not outpace him. And secondly, none matched Yolk’s countenance and character, for he was a monkey of generous kindness and unbreakable loyalty.”

“Hold on!” Icci shouted, thrashing her wings about. “That’s totally wrong! Last time, you described him as a trickster, always pulling off pranks and stuff! He can’t be both a trickster AND benevolent — he has to be *one* or the *other*! That’s just how stories work! Is this even the same story?!”

“Yes Iccipiani, this is still the same Ballad of Eshishos. If you recall my telling all those months ago, I said Yolk was ‘thought’ to be a trickster figure — but in truth, he was a bastion of goodness and sweetness recognized only by his dearest friends. We are not

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<sup>39</sup> Apparently, these stories were an inside joke intended for Mariena. She claims they were fantasy stories Aurgarten told her before bed as a child, now somewhat immortalized within the text of *Beehive and Icci*.

always what our reputations say we are.” Marcus Barkus prickled at the fur on his face. “And besides, anyone can be both tricky and kind. People are more complicated than they appear in stories.”

Icci huffed. “Alright, alright, enough with the moralizing! Let’s get this story started!”

“Very well. As I was saying, Yolk’s good-heartedness and unparalleled speed made him the perfect candidate to retrieve the Star from Mount Eshishos’s peak. Very few have made it up to the top, for they say the mountain’s peak loomed high above the clouds!”

“That’s not THAT high…” Icci whispered to Beehive.

“Yet none on Mount Eshishos had the speed nor the heart of our noble Yolk. He set off before dawn and started his climb at a steady pace. ‘I bet I can make it to the summit before midday!’ Yolk said to himself. ‘I’ll be back before my dear friend Princess Ronna and her Luffstein even realize I’m gone!’

“And so he marched onward — up, up, up! Before long, Yolk came across an imposing figure: a toucan, larger than any toucan in Nirgenwald today, whose beak grew so large it resembled a multi-coloured tree trunk. ‘Halt!’ the toucan boomed in an authoritative voice. ‘What is your purpose for climbing the divine Mount Eshishos, my little Yolk.’

“Yolk knew better than to be frightened by the gargantuan bird — for if you’ll recall, all people on Eshishos shared in harmonious community. ‘O Mighty Toucan,’ Yolk exclaimed. ‘I seek the summit of our wondrous home, Mount Eshishos, so that I

might bring back a Star for my dear friends Princess Ronna and Her Luffstein to share in commemoration of their union’.

“‘Ho ho!’ the toucan replied, his laugh bursting forth like crushing rocks from his beak. ‘Your quest is noble and your intentions pure. But! You must abide by a singular Divine Rule in order to complete your quest, noble Yolk’.

“‘And what might that Divine Rule be?’ Yolk asked.

“‘During your climb up to the peak of Mount Eshishos, you must abstain from any food or sustenance.’ the toucan proclaimed. At this moment, a dramatic gale of wind *whooshed* by, as though it were a stark reminder of Yolk’s ordeal.

“‘That’, said Yolk, ‘is a silly Divine Rule’.

“The toucan nodded his massive head. ‘I agree, the Rule is quite nonsensical. But! Such are the Rules of the Divine, ones we mere mortals can do nothing but obey’.

“Noble Yolk nodded his head and gave his signature salute. ‘Worry not, my fine feathered friend, I shall follow this Divine Rule regardless of how little sense it makes! I shall do so in the names of my dear friends, Princess Ronna and her Luffstein, and on my honour as a monkey’.

‘And with that, Yolk resumed his swift ascent up the mountain. No other monkey, much less any other Eshishosan, could climb as fast as our swift, young Yolk. And yet, when the scorching midday sun scaled across Yolk’s back, he was nowhere close to Mount Eshishos’s summit. Tired, exhausted, and nearly delirious from the sun’s heat, Yolk lay down for a rest. He noticed an uprooted carrot nearby, nearly black and rotted, shrugged his shoulders and popped it into his mouth.’”

“WHAT!?” Icci shouted. “How could you be so stupid!? The ONE rule, and you already broke it, you DUNCE!”

Marcus Barkus gave out an airy sigh. “Tell me, Iccipiani. If the sun shone extremely hot and you’d flown without rest for hours, would you not do the same thing?”

“No!” humphed Icci.

Beehive felt a percussive flow of air escape his lungs, and the sound involuntarily boomed outward from his mouth. *What’s the word for this sound? I’ve forgotten*, the bear thought. *Oh, ah yes: a chuckle*. And so the bear continued to chuckle at the ridiculousness of Icci’s statement.

“I didn’t know you could laugh!” Icci proclaimed. “But hey! I would totally not eat if I’d made a promise not to!” Icci sat in thought for a moment. “Unless if I was *really* hungry...”

“There are many reasons why we eat, Iccipiani,” Marcus Barkus said. “Our friend Yolk, whose story I’ll now continue, justified his choice by claiming that the carrot would have otherwise gone to waste. For on Eshishos, food should never be wasted, and so Yolk felt it his duty to consume the carrot no one else would.

“I’ll just take a short break, then I’ll make it to the summit by dusk!” the hopeful monkey proclaimed to the open air.

“Yet when dusk arrived and the sky started to shut its all-encompassing eye, the summit seemed no closer to Yolk’s tired eyes. The monkey staggered awake, almost surrendering to the call of sleep, when he noticed a solitary cabbage minding its own business.

“I won’t fulfill my quest in time if I don’t get my energy back!’ Yolk justified to himself, and so he ate the lonely cabbage. ‘I’ll certainly reach the summit before the twin moons meet their highest peak!’”

“Hold on!” said Icci. “*Twin* moons? But there’s only one moon! That makes no sense!”

“Right you are, Iccipiani,” Marcus Barkus said. “But back then, in those ancient days when all peoples were friendly, there existed two moons. Even moons get lonely, I suppose.”

The old sage coughed. “So. As you might have guessed, Yolk did not reach Mount Eshishos’s summit by the time the twin moons climbed their highest. In fact, at the very moment they reached their peak, Yolk collapsed in exhaustion, unable to move. By mere chance a mango lay within reach of the dying monkey’s grasp. ‘O Princess Ronna and her Luffstein,’ moaned our hero, ‘please forgive me for breaking my vow — if I don’t, I’ll die long before I reach the summit.’ And so Yolk ate the fruit. Before he could even mention the word *dawn*, Yolk fell right asleep.

“Any other monkey might have slept an entire week after climbing as high as Yolk — yet this is Yolk we speak of, the swiftest and most dutiful of all monkeys, and so he arose from his slumber just as dawn crept up into view. Well rested, Yolk continued his climb, rejuvenated by both his sleep and the mango.

Just as the sun reached its peak at midday, Yolk finally arrived at Eshishos’s summit. ‘In record time!’ sang Yolk, dancing in jubilation. ‘I knew I’d make to the summit before midday!’”

“Psh, figures,” Icci said.

Marcus Barkus continued. “From its peak, Yolk could see the entirety of the world he knew, and even places as yet undiscovered. No other person, to his knowledge, had even been as high, and so he marvelled at his own accomplishment.

“Yet majestic views and personal feats were not the reason he climbed the tallest mountain in the world. Yolk raised his voice to the skies and said, ‘O All-Encompassing Divinity, hear my plea! I, the trustworthy Yolk, have journeyed far up to the summit of the greatest of mountains, Mount Eshishos, at the behest of my dear friends Princess Ronna and her Luffstein. They wish to eat the fabled Star as one so that they might spend eternity in the bliss of each other’s company! Never have they quarreled and it is said that one would die without the other — is there no cause so worthy as theirs?’”

“As Yolk finished his speech, a mighty Cloud rushed towards him. This Cloud swirled and curled about in the air, blocking out the sun. It was only then that Yolk, no longer directly beneath the sun’s loving gaze, felt all warmth in the world evaporate, and a bludgeoning chill struck his lanky limbs. The figure looming over Yolk contorted in black and grey and white and always swirling.

“‘Little Yolk’, thrummed the Cloud’s booming yet tender voice, as stern and forgiving as a mother’s. ‘You have come far on your quest, and at an unparalleled pace. Yet I must be honest with you — and I ask that you share what I’m about to tell you to with your people. A Star’s place is up in the sky, and no earthbound mortal can ever eat one, much less become immortal from the act. I am sorry to tell you this, after you’ve come such a long way, but myth can never change what simply is.’

“And with that, the Cloud dissipated as quickly as it first appeared, and was gone.

“Yolk shouted back up at the sky. ‘Wait! I don’t understand! What did I do wrong!?’”

“Duh!” shouted Icci. “You broke the fasting rule, you silly monkey! Not once, but THREE times! You completely RUINED the story, now Princess Ronna and her Luffstein will never get to eat their Star!”

Beehive cleared his throat. “I think it’s just a part of the story, Icci. And besides, what he did doesn’t change the fact that people can’t eat Stars.”

“But it’s a story, Beehive! Anything can happen — look, the whole premise is that a sheep and a wolf are in love or whatever. And a *cloud* talks! If Yolk could *never* retrieve the Star from the summit, why bother going on the quest at all?”

Marcus Barkus made a soothing gesture with his hand. “Shall I continue? Regardless of whether or not Yolk’s failure was his fault or simply cold, hard reality, the peoples of Mount Eshishos were a suspicious bunch. Rumours began to spread once Yolk returned home empty-handed — perhaps he was cursed, or the divine do not like monkeys, or perhaps Princess Ronna and her Luffstein weren’t meant to live forever together. Yolk couldn’t even bring himself to tell the duo of his failure, and so he hid shamefully in his home.

“After a few days, Princess Ronna grew concerned for her friend. ‘I hope he’s alright’, she said to Luffstein. ‘He’s our friend. Let us go and ask him ourselves what happened at Mount Eshishos’s peak’.

“Yet for the first time in her life, Luffstein didn’t respond to her words. He lay in dead silence, curled into himself, perhaps out of mourning or trying to process the whole event — Princess Ronna could only guess, for Luffstein refused to answer her. Princess Ronna tried to communicate with him for hours, but she was met only with silence.

“‘Alright, my Luffstein’, Princess Ronna said mournfully. ‘I’m going to ask Yolk what happened... you’re welcome to join me when you feel it best’.

“On her walk to Yolk’s home, Princess Ronna tried to reason out Luffstein’s behaviour — but she couldn’t think of its purpose, unless he somehow kept something from her. Such a thought was unfathomable to Princess Ronna: she and Luffstein shared everything with each other, he couldn’t possibly hide something from her. But on the off chance he was, what could it be?

“When she finally reached Yolk’s house, she found him moping around and dangerously thin. After some prodding, Yolk finally ate. And while he ate, Yolk told Princess Ronna the honest truth about what happened on the summit of Eshishos, even of his rule-breaking.

“‘I have failed you both’, cried Yolk. “‘Because of me, you won’t be able to spend all eternity with your love, Luffstein’.

“When Yolk said this, Princess Ronna only thought of the wolf curled up and quiet as death. ‘It’s quite alright, my dear friend Yolk’, she said in her gentle voice. ‘Everyone needs to need — you’re only animal, after all’.

“Princess Ronna left not long after, content that she finally learned the truth. Yet her thoughts gravitated towards Luffstein. ‘What could he be hiding,’ she thought. ‘And why didn’t he want to talk to Yolk — we love Yolk!’

“As she made her way home, Princess Ronna thought more and more about her love, Luffstein. ‘Why would he hide something from Yolk, much less me?’ she began to say aloud. ‘Why avoid seeing Yolk? Why curl himself up? Why ignore me when I speak? It’s so obvious to me now! He must have somehow stolen the Star before Yolk arrived! He didn’t want to see Yolk because it would expose his shame! He curled himself up to hide that he already retrieved the Star! And he didn’t speak to me to avoid stating the truth!’ And yet despite her foregone conclusion, Princess Ronna proclaimed one last damning statement: ‘He ate the Star, all for himself!’

“No sooner did the words leave her lips did the cliff below Princess Ronna’s feet give way — a whole chunk of mountain slipped down, down, and Princess Ronna with it!”

“That’s dumb!” Icci interjected. “Why do the sheep in stories *always* die!”

“Well, Iccipiani, you must understand that the peoples of Mount Eshishos never realized such a calamity could happen.” Marcus Barkus scratched his chin and scrunched his face up. “I suppose I should also mention that Princess Ronna survived the fall. For the sheep of Mount Eshishos bore the most durable and bouncy of coats, and so her hard landing upon the ground below was far from fatal. Yet now, with no possible way back up the mountain, Princess Ronna was indeed now doomed to walk the rest of her days in the forest far below Mount Eshishos.”

“Well, that’s good to know! I like when stories avoid clichéd death scenes like that. Keep going! I want to find out how Luffstein responds to all this.”

“I was about to get to that...” Markus Barkus began.

Beehive grunted and stood back up. “I believe we’ve heard enough today.”

“Aww, Beehive! You know how much hearing the rest of the Ballad means to me!”

*I don’t think she’ll be so chipper when she finds out what happens next*, the bear thought. “I told you — it’s not a good ending. You have higher standards.” Marcus Barkus seemed to give Beehive the slightest of nods and sighed.

Marcus Barkus sighed. “Worry not, Iccipiani, we can finish the story the next time I see you two!”

“Marcus Barkus! Don’t tell me I have to wait a whole other *season* just to hear the ending!” Icci huffed, but she eventually hopped on over to Marcus Barkus’s root-coloured feet. “Do you promise you’ll finish it next time?”

“I do,” Marcus Barkus said. “Though so much talking has made me quite hungry. Would the two of you care to join me for a meal?”

Icci sprang up into the air. “I’d love that! Here, let me get something for you, as payment for reciting the Ballad! I never got to repay you before, so tell me what you want and I’ll get it!”

“You wouldn’t happen to know where you can find a Star?” Marcus Barkus laughed, wheezing. “A joke. A branch of raspberries would be most wonderful, if you don’t mind.”

Icci nodded. “I’m on it,” she said while already flying off into the woods.

Beehive plonked himself back down, awaiting whatever food Icci brought back. *Why don’t I ever fetch food when we eat with others*, he thought. *I can certainly carry much more*. He yawned loudly and stretched his whole body.

Marcus Barkus sighed. “Well, Beehive, it’s just us old farts here now. Come, let us speak on more adult matters.”

“Uh... alright.”

“Tell me, why stop me before the Ballad’s ending? I have a good guess why, but I suppose I want to hear your own thoughts.”

Beehive scratched his ear quickly with his front paw. “I suppose... I don’t want Icci to know how that story ends. We both know it’s not the most... pleasant ending.”

“No, Beehive, it certainly isn’t. And I do understand your point. I’ve met many people — some of them wonderful storytellers — who fear telling their children the Ballad of Eshishos. Yet it’s an important story to hear, especially for someone young like Icci. Tell me, who told you the Ballad of Eshishos?”

Beehive flicked a stone into the water.

“Ah, of course,” Marcus Barkus said, nodding ceaselessly. “The ‘Earth Bear’, as you call her. Couldn’t be anyone else.”

“I have heard others tell the story, in passing. Details change, but the telling always ends the same way.”

“And in what way is that?”

“The child always cries.”

“Hmm. But you cannot hide the truth forever.” Marcus Barkus wheezed.

“Especially from Icci. She’ll dig the truth out of you like a rabbit digs a hole.”

“Icci deserves some time to enjoy her younger years. I think. She’s... well, she’s Icci. I don’t want to see her become someone else. Not in the way I became someone else.”

“Ah yes — the hurt of change. I’d call them growing pains, but it doesn’t really stop once you’ve grown — or shrunk in my case. I’m quite a bit older than you, my stalwart friend, so I know a great deal about The Pains, as I call them. Perhaps too much, for one lifetime. Having something to take your mind off The Pains helps. Gives your hurt meaning.”

“I... used to have a purpose. Finding the Earth Bear.”

“So, you finally found her after all? Did finding her live up to your expectations?”

“No. I feel worse. There’s... nowhere to go any more.”

“You know... I collect purposes, like a... beach collects sand. Oh, I should remember that one! Now — not a moment ago — I discovered two new purposes. First, to share a meal with my friends Beehive and Iccipiani Wingelli Marceleau — and that’ll happen soon! And secondly, to finish the Ballad of Eshishos for our young tanager friend,

if fate and time allow it.” The old sage ran his hand across the top of his head. “Ah, unless I become a waterfall first. I imagine storytelling’s harder without a voice. Well, more accurately, a worded voice.”

      Icci darted back, with a surprising amount of food stored within her feet and beak. “Phew! That’s all I could carry!”

      “More than enough, Iccipiani. Thank you.”

      “Yes, thank you Icci,” Beehive said, eyeing a somewhat dented apricot among the pile.

      The trio ate, each too busy with their meal to converse. Beehive noticed Marcus Barkus’s strange way of eating: he’d pick apart a raspberry one tiny lump at a time, admire it at different angles, then chew on it with his eyes closed and his head almost nodding in sleep. During the hour, the old storyteller only consumed three raspberries.

      Marcus Barkus burped. “Oh my, I think I ate too much.”

      “You’re not eating enough!” exclaimed Icci. “Look at you, you’re way too skinny! You need to start eating better, Marcus Barkus, or you’re gonna starve to death!”

      Marcus Barkus laughed and lay back down on his flat boulder. “Iccipiani, you disappoint me. You’re too obsessed with food!”

      The elderly creature fell asleep. Beehive’s nose once more thought he died.

      As the duo waited until dusk for the storyteller to get up, they resigned to walk away and find shelter for the night. Yet as they did, a familiar voice shouted out behind

them, to no person in particular: “In all my years, I’ve never heard a story worth hiding away!”

### Episode 18: Forgetfulness

Another adventure did not meet Beehive and Icci for some time. Already the forest began to change; for Beehive, the sun grew more pale and glowed less vibrantly. *Already, change*, he thought. *Winter arrives earlier with each year... or perhaps time walks faster now that I found the Earth Bear.*

“Sorry to interrupt your thinking time,”<sup>40</sup> said Icci, “you seemed really deep in it.

“The season changes — did you notice?”

“No, but... maybe? I can’t put my beak on it.”

Just ahead, a small congregation of animals conversed: a well-postured rabbit, a jittery tarsier, and a fat-cheeked chipmunk. The chipmunk, flailing her arms: “And then, with a mighty roar, he sprang into battle. Claws and teeth dashed and slew, while the feisty tanager dived at foes much larger than she. Even the noble hippopotamus, his name too long to pronounce, joined in the fray. The three of them slew fifty, no, *one hundred*

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<sup>40</sup> Just as Icci interrupts Beehive’s meditation here, so too did Mariena intrude on Aurgarten’s writing periods to ensure he ate. As she tells it, Aurgarten’s writing process was not regular in the slightest. Most often, Mariena found the author at his desk staring catatonically at the pages he’d written, seeking some “nugget of inspiration” as she put it. Yet when Aurgarten wrote, he’d often spend days or weeks in a fey mood doing nothing else but write. Mariena humorously claims that — because of Aurgarten’s irregular, border-line non-existent writing schedule — his life-long magnum opus had been written “within the approximate time of three *good* years.” It’s impossible to gauge the validity of her statement, since Aurgarten began the project long before she entered his life, but it cannot be denied that her influence shaped the narrative greatly.

bandits. When more sprang out from the woods, ready to ambush our heroes, the legendary bear bellowed a roar so vast, the noise shattered earth — you see, that’s why he’s called the Earth Bear. And so the dastardly curs ran away, tails no longer a’wagging, and the battle won.<sup>41</sup> But then...”

Beehive walked beyond hearing the small bard finish her tale. *Too much violence for my taste.*

“Let’s go back, Beehive,” Icci cooed. “I wanna hear what happens next!”

“I’d rather find some turnips to eat.”

“Oh, fine.”

Down the way, a cat<sup>42</sup> darted out from among the trees. She breathed in heavy gasps and her eyes darted from Beehive to Icci and back and forth.

“Pardon me,” she panted, “but have you seen a child nearby? She’s a cat, with my same colour of fur, but smaller and her underside is whiter than mine. She has a pink nose with a little black smudge — you’d think it’s dirt, but it’s not. Her name is Rosie and she—”

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<sup>41</sup> This piece of dialogue remains unaffected in any way from Aurgarten’s original text, for he wrote this section in English. It is perhaps some of the only text remaining in my translation that remains untouched and exactly as Aurgarten himself published. There is a certain sadness, then, knowing that any other translation of *Beehive and Icci* in another language would lose out on perhaps the only “true” fragment in the story written unchanged by the author. Aurgarten himself truthfully knew English quite well, and worried that this fuddled speech would reflect poorly on his comprehension of the language.

<sup>42</sup> Mivoltans often joke that their island is more populated by felines than humans. Because of this, strays are treated with a well-founded tradition of respect. Local myths claim that the cats of Mivolta live twice as long as any other felines around the world — hence, the Mivoltan word for cats translating into English as “persons of eighteen lives”. Due to the surging feline population, many Mivoltans kept cats as household pets. Aurgarten himself owned a singular cat, Uvo, for the majority of his childhood and well into his twenties. After Uvo passed, the man never owned another cat — yet he continued to allow strays to wander around (but never inside) his house. Mariena recalls that whenever she asked her uncle to take her to the mainland, his response was always the same: “who would feed the strays?”

“We’ll save her!” Icci interjected, bouncing in place on Beehive. “Just slow down a touch. Let’s start with your name.”

The mother soothed. “My name is Bythia. Rosie and I drank at a nearby pond, not so far from here. Clear refreshing water — as all good water should taste. We’d gone a while without drink, since we noticed some crocodile stalking around our home by the lake, so we both relished the taste. But when I raised my head from drinking — gone! I don’t know what to do…”

Icci drifted down from Beehive’s head and stood in front of Bythia. “If you’d like, I could fly up above and see if she’s nearby. I’m really good at spotting stuff, trust me!”

The feline’s gaze lingered on Icci just a touch too long, but she nodded. “Alright.” Bythia turned to Beehive, her neck stretching upwards. “And what would you suggest, bear? You must also be a skilled finder. What with your bear nose.”

“I think you should reapproach where you lost her. If there, she’ll want to find you — but if she can’t find you, she’ll go where she last saw you.”

“I’ll try that, thank you.”

“Alright!” Icci shouted. “Then I’m off!”

“Icci, caution,” Beehive warned. “If something did get the cub, it might try to get you too.”

“Psh, yeah, yeah.” Icci launched off the ground. “Beehive, I’ll meet back up with you at... which pond?”

“Beyond that sycamore there,” Bythia pointed. “There’s... well, a rhino died there a while back, and its bones still rest there. Can’t miss it.”

And with that, Icci soared up high, well out of Beehive’s sight.

“We should go,” Beehive said to Bythia. “I’ll accompany you to that pond.”

“What a gentleman.” Bythia said. “I thought bears didn’t like company.”

“It’s where Icci will fly to, so that’s where I’ll go too.”

As the cat and the bear walked along, her paws pattering beside his, Beehive realized: *I’ve never travelled with someone else since Icci and I met.*

Bythia eventually spoke. “We never considered that you might frighten my Rosie.”

Beehive tried to avoid tripping on his own feet. *This paranoia’s ridiculous... I know how to walk. But talk? Hmm... what would Icci say?* “Was... hmm... has your cub met a bear before?”

“My Rosie? I can’t say. But then, how can I know?”

“How can you not know? She’s your cub.”

“We prefer *kitten* over *cub* for our young.”

“My mistake.”

“While my Rosie’s clung to me since birth, that doesn’t mean we’ve seen the same things. Rosie could spot a three-tusked elephant, and if she never chose to tell me, I’d never know.”

“But you lost her. You put yourself first.”

“I know. How odd. I never really cared for others, honestly. Friends, partners, children... it’s so easy to lose someone in these woods — but now I can’t help but worry for my Rosie. Does caring too little for my daughter make me a bad mother, or am I a good person for letting her roam on her own? I decided to let Rosie go wherever her feet take her — but if Rosie’s feet lead her to her doom, then what’s the point?”

“You’re her mother. You have a duty to preserve your child.” Beehive paused. “I think.”

Bythia smiled in the way that felines smile. “Nothing lasts forever. But you already knew that.”

They reached the pond. As Bythia said, the rhino skeleton stood out along the water side. And there, tapping the still water with her playful paws—

“Rosie!” Bythia shouted, prancing over to her young.

*So easy, Beehive thought. She couldn’t just sniff out her own young?*

The mother licked Rosie’s face with violent force, and the kitten could only close her eyes and hunch her shoulders at the whole performance.

“Stop, my fur feels fine!” Rosie protested. “Where were you? I’ve waited for forever, and I’m bored.”

“Where were *you*?” scolded Bythia, but she instantly returned to licking the kitten’s face and ears.

“Mom, stoooooop! You’re too clingy!”

“You’ll understand when you’re older. Now answer my question: where did you run off to?”

“A mushroom! Looked at me funny. I investigated it, because it might’ve started walking away, because the design reminded me of a snail, so I kept poking it to get it moving, but of course mushrooms don’t walk, just jiggle and shimmy — so I came back.”

“That’s it?”

“Yup.”

“Well don’t chase mushrooms without telling me! We worried sick about you, right mister...?”

“Beehive.”

Rosie leaned just a little bit closer into her mother.

“Rosie, meet Beehive. He helped me find you,” Bythia purred.

Rosie stretched out her paws in front of her.

A whirl of red and yellow whooshed about in the air and landed on Beehive’s head. “I heard all the commotion, so I figured you found your daughter. I’m glad I could help!” Icci shook her feathers about, then scrunched Beehive’s fur. “Hey, big guy.”

“Hey. How did we get here before you?”

“*Hello?* Finding missing persons in the sky takes way more work than you’d think — plus, I wanted to search thoroughly.”

“Look, Rosie, it’s Icci and Beehive! Just like in the stories, eh?”

But Rosie only hunkered lower, and the darks of her eyes widened. “Hey Mom,” Rosie whispered to Bythia, though not so quietly or subtly. “Can we eat the bird?”

“Rosie!” Bythia exclaimed. “What a suggestion.”

“Rosie?” Icci tilted her head. “I’m just curious, but why would you want to eat me? Especially after saving your life.”

Rosie shrugged. “You’re a bird! We eat all kinds of bird — momma says the bones help me grow up strong!”

“We don’t eat *friends*, Rosie,” Bythia said. “I’m sorry you two. Ignore my little Rosie, she’s a little over-eager. You see, we’re omnivores. That’s when—”

“I know!” Icci blurted out. “You eat plants and meat, like Beehive here. But it’s — if you’ll forgive the phrase — absolutely lopsided<sup>43</sup> for you to CHOOSE to eat people! Beehive, I get it: he’s big, he’s gotta eat fish and stuff to stay alive. But you! You’re itty-bitty cats! You don’t need much to maintain those dainty bodies! You could live just as well on berries and leaves without having to *murder* people. It’s... it’s moral deficiency!”

“Silly bird,” Rosie piped in. “Don’t you know that a diverse diet keeps kittens healthy?”

“Diverse diet?! You want to talk to me about a diverse diet? I’ve got the most diverse, multicultural diet of anyone in Nirgenwald!”

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<sup>43</sup> Mariena once used the word “lopsided” — in English — as a swear word in front of Aurgarten. Mariena recalls fondly the moment when her uncle laughed at the improper usage, then proceeded to teach her all of the *actual* English swear words.

“Yeah, like what?”

“I like apples — *and* their seeds.”

“So what? I had like fifteen apples yesterday.”

“Yeah right, if you had that many you’d be the size of Beehive here. And I bet you’ve never had the best food of all: melons.”

“They’re alright. Have you ever had a mouse? They’re WAY better. The way they *crunch* and are somehow *juicy*—”

“Please! I don’t need to corrupt my innocent ears and palate.”

“Well some people taste too good. So there!”

Beehive took a sip from the pond. *The mother cat had the right of it. Clear and refreshing.*

“You’re despicable!” Icci’s feathers fumed wildly across her torso. “How could you live so callously! So many other foods don’t require murder. Apricots, limes, roots, worms, raspberries, strawberries, grapes, turnips—”

“Your taste stinks like goose! All those things taste gross, especially worms! And besides, worms count as people.”

Beehive stopped drinking, and droplets of water fell back into the pond.

The kitten’s words struck Icci so fiercely, she jerked back. “What a lie! And what would you know, little puss-puss? I’ve eaten enough worms to know that they’re not... that it’s okay to eat... that they’re worms!”

“You’re the lying one! Worms are alive! Worms are people! Whenever you snap a worm up from the ground, don’t you hear it scream?”

“Enough!” Bythia pounced between Rosie and Icci. “Thank you,” she whispered up to the bear, then grabbed Rosie up by her scruff.

And just like that, the cats left.

Icci hopped about on the forest floor, her head cast down. “Worms, worms, where’d you go worms? I wanna eat you! It’s fine, though, you can’t feel it, you’re not people! That cat, Rosie, what does she know?”

*Didn’t I tell Icci about worms? Beehive thought. I figured she knew... or maybe I ended up believing her ideas about worms, too.*

Icci flew a ways off and plucked a worm, now dangling from her beak. Yet her normal eagerness to gobble up her prize made way for a disturbing stillness. The worm wriggled and writhed in its captor’s beak. She remained still until the worm plopped back down to its home on the ground.

As tenderly as his large stride could, Beehive made his way over to Icci — taking mark of the now-free worm’s position — and sat close to the frozen bird.

“I don’t even know how many I’ve...,” a soft whisper escaped from Icci’s mouth. “After all this time, all my travels, all my studies... how could I not realize?” She gave a shallow sigh. “For all the people I’ve consumed, all the lives I’ve ruined... does it make me evil? Even if I didn’t know? Does the distinction matter?”

*How can I answer that?* Beehive asked himself. The bear sat just as frozen as his friend, his companion, his partner. His mouth opened, then closed. He raised a paw, set it back down. Beehive said nothing.

And in the silence, Icci wept.

***Fall.***

Episode 19: “Beehive” and “Icci”

“Are you telling me you’ve *never* seen a coconut before? Not once in your whole life!?”

“No, never.”

“How? You’ve eaten guanabana, betel — even *dioscorea rotundata!*”

“Not coconuts.”

“You sure? Maybe you ate one and didn’t realize it.”

“I’d remember. What do these ‘coconuts’ look like?”

“So. you know walnuts? How they have that really tough shell, and the good stuff all inside?”

“Walnut shells aren’t tough.”

“Of course not, for *you!* But coconuts have a REALLY tough shell.”

“That makes sense.”

“Exactly! But I’m just getting started! The nut’s about, oh, twice my height. And the shell, it’s got... well, the best way to describe it... it’s got fur.”

“The shell has fur?”

“Yes! Well, the ripe ones anyway.”

“How did you open the shell if it’s furred? Your beak can’t reach through my fur, much less open up a shell.”

“Very funny. But no, I didn’t break the shell myself, obviously. Sometimes they’ll fall and break on their own.”

“And then you can eat the nut inside.”

“That’s the weird part — there’s no nut inside! Well not a normal one — more like a melon, but harder. And! There’s also water inside.”

“Now you’re just making things up. Like the time you told me about the giant flower that eats people.”

“But it’s true! Ok, not the thing about the people-eating flower, but I’m not lying about coconuts!”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“Well if we ever find one, we’ll have to eat it. You’ll break the shell no problem! And they usually come in bunches, so we could make a feast of it! I know you’ll love them.”

“Alright. If we ever find one — if they exist.”

“When will you ever trust me, Beehive?”

~

The forest of Nirgenwald once more changed<sup>44</sup> its character. Nirgenwald would never purely quiet itself, what with all its peoples wandering about, yet the beginning of the season reminded Beehive of finishing a meal. With his nose, he traced the falling of each leaf, swaying gracefully down to the earth. His nose noticed the potent smell permeating across the forest floor — he never knew exactly what to call it, but for whatever reason “rot” came to mind. *Yes, the leaves rot*, Beehive thought, his feet crunching down on the leaves with each step.

“Hey Beehive, why step about with so much gusto?”

“It’s the leaves.” Beehive stomped down with a loud *crr-ssh*. “Do you hear that?”

“Yeah, it’s the sound of leaves. So what?”

“It’s... satisfying. Pleasant.” He continued to plod on, stomping his front paw on a particularly crunchy looking maple leaf pile.

“You’re silly, Beehive. Easily entertained by the most mundane things.” Yet as she spoke, Icci flew down upon the leaf-covered ground and landed with the full force of a tanager. The leaves responded with the sound of ruffling — but no crunch.

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<sup>44</sup> The “transition of seasons” paragraphs, as Mariena calls them, apparently took Aurgarten literal years to write. Not to get them perfect, she recalls, but to write somewhat descriptive writing. Admittedly, Aurgarten’s prose is absent of significantly moving pastoral descriptions, but the author constantly berated himself for not knowing how to write them “well.”

Again and again she raged upon the leaf, flying up to the tree tops and landing full-force, screaming, “GIVE ME THE CRUNCH,” yet nothing more dramatic than a scratchy *plop* plopped from the leaves.

Beehive picked up a particularly large maple leaf. “Icci,” he said. “Watch.” And with his claws, he tore the leaf apart and made a satisfying *scritch*. “Now you try.”

“No!” Icci barked, huffing. “I want to figure out how to do it my own way!”

Beehive heard the strange clopping and crunching of what he thought resembled hooves. *Why did I think hooves?* he asked himself. *They sound nothing like hooves.*

The trotting creature came into view: a lanky ostrich, her head raised up high. A small grey shape clung to the ostrich’s puffy plumage. Beehive felt Icci’s feet land on top of his head.

As the tall bird passed, Icci harrumphed. “Hail, traveller! Clinging so tightly to feathers is not an easy task. I’m curious how you manage to perform such a harrowing feat.”

The ostrich stopped and the thing bounced on its back. The passenger — a koala, Beehive distinguished — roused itself from sleep, blinking. “I’ve learned. Adjusted. Managed from there.” The koala yawned and hazily blinked.

“If you’re impressed by my friend here,” piped in the ostrich, her voice a drawling melody, “then that’s some high praise, coming from you little cousin! I must say, you’ve got the balance of a hundred and twelve cats, you do, to maintain such a delicate act upon the crown of your ursine companion. I’ve always been ever so tall and uncoordinated — like a falling tree, my mother used to say, no doubt because trees wobble when on their

last roots and then fall right down to the ground. And there's no stopping that, no way and no how! All that prattlin's to say that I'm jealous of those abilities you show off with such aplomb and tenacity. How *did* you put it? 'Such a harrowing feat'? And I do believe your feat harrows ever so impressively, indeed."

"Thanks," Icci said. "I've practiced since — oh, only since spring."

"What a dire<sup>45</sup> coincidence!" chimed the ostrich. "My dear companion and I, quite around the same time, also met during that most sweet and succulent spring season. What a dire coincidence indeed, that we'd have so many extraordinary qualities in common." The ostrich contorted her neck to her companion. "What do you say to that, Beehive?"

Beehive didn't know how to respond. *How does she do that with her neck? And how does she know my name? And why is she addressing me while facing the wrong way? Probably an ostrich thing.* "Stranger things happen all the time," Beehive responded. "Once, I watched a whole colony of—"

"Oh, I do apologize," the ostrich interrupted. "I'm sure you have quite the lovely story but I just asked my friend here a most thought-provoking question."

"But you said my name," Beehive said. "And when you say someone's name and ask a question — or is it the other way around? — then that means you're addressing that person. *The Earth Bear taught me that much*, he remembered.

"But how can I refer to you by name when we just met?" asked the ostrich, tilting her head. "I directed my question — quite pointedly, I might add — at my dear friend

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<sup>45</sup> I use the word "dire" here to represent the character's use of the Mivoltan term, which translates (coincidentally) into a common North American brand name. For the sake of avoiding a lawsuit (should this translation ever achieve publication), I avoid using the untranslated word. Meaning is lost, I realize, but many things do get lost in translation, as the saying goes.

here, Beehive.” She gestured towards the koala, clung tightly to her back and asleep again.

“No way!” Icci squeaked, bouncing in place. “Two people named Beehive? In the same neck of the woods? I have dozens of siblings and hundreds of dozens of cousins, and not a single name overlap! Sure, we choose our own names, but we gotta *research* beforehand. Oh! I suppose I should introduce myself.” Icci propped herself up. “My name, in full, is Iccipiani Wingelli Marceleau. I realize that’s a mouthful — and not the good kind — for most, so normally I just go by Icc—”

“ICCI!” shouted the ostrich, and she plumed out her feathers and swayed in a joyful dance. “That name I share with my own very person! For I, too, go by the name Icci.”

“Hold on...” Original Icci said.

New Icci cleared her throat. “You may have heard of us, in actuality. Tales of our exploits have spread like baby seeds throughout Nirgenswald. Some might consider Beehive and I as — dare I say it — legends!”

Icci’s grip on Beehive’s fur tightened.

“This one time, a harrowing time at that,” Icci the ostrich continued, “where we got arrested by the darndest of creatures — muskrats, of all the things on this lush, green earth! Here’s the dunk — and, oh, *do* stop me if you’re heard this one before — I got arrested for trespassing on their land. My sweet, sweet Beehive stuck with me the whole time, even climbing his darndest all across those dams the monsters built. Isn’t that right, Beehive?”

“That’s right,” the koala responded. “Every word.”

“Such a good sport, Beehive!” the ostrich continued. “Why, you should have seen him during my trial. While they tried to steal my name — a name that, as you well know, holds precious value — Beehive flung curses and obscenities I won’t repeat for your young ears.”

“My young ears?” Icci exclaimed. “My young *ears*? My young *mouth* spouted all those curses and obscenities, you bathless waste of feathers! You think Beehive and I don’t know what’s happening here? We see right through you!”

*They must not understand the metaphor — Icci really needs to simplify them for other folks.* Beehive coughed. “She means that you’re lying,” Beehive said proudly. Then he craned his nose up to Icci. “But lying about what?”

“Everything, Beehive!” Icci said. “Their names, the stories they’re trying to pass off as theirs... that they’re nearly *exactly* the same people as us.”

“It’s just one of those once-in-a-tortoise-lifetime things!” the ostrich said. “It’s like my friend Beehive always says, stranger things happen all the time. My Auntie Maeve always says we need to accept the arrangement of our plumage.”

“My aunt’s Maeve!” Icci honked.

“Heard of her? Sweet thing, my Auntie Maeve! I’ve known her since this big ol’ neck of mine reached about, say, your itty-bitty height. Probably even earlier, or so I hear, cause my Auntie Maeve — that darling lady — told me all kinds of stories while I still dreamed soundly in my egg. Once...”

Beehive spaced out. He didn't even know what to space out about... he came back in the middle of Icci (his Icci) telling a story.

“— and that's when Beehive basically saved King the lion's life, and then we shared some avocados and peaches. You can't tell me that also happened to you!”

“I remember meeting this King of whom you speak, such a gracious lion. Though King, the dear, identified as female, if I'm not mistaken...”

“Ha! You can't even get your story straight!” Icci scrunched Beehive's fur. “What do you think about all this identity theft, Beehive? Honestly.”

“I'm not bothered.”

“And? I can tell you have something else to say.”

“And... I'm jealous of Beehive. I wish I could fall asleep so quickly.”

“Truly remarkable, that's our Precious Little Beehive!” the ostrich crooned. “He gets to sleep whenever he so desires — when he's eaten his fill, or if I'm talking about something he doesn't particularly care all too much about... You and I, mister other Beehive, we don't have that luxury. Without us to carry our companions, where would we go? I tell you, we'd end up nowhere, stagnating in one place, right stuck. And we have so many quests — and I do emphasize the plurality — that need accomplishing. Foods left untasted, new friends left unmet!”

Beehive the koala snorted. “We need quests. No quests, no story, no Beehive and Icci.”

Icci sneered. “You can’t just swallow all these stories up. They’re mine and Beehive’s!”

“Our stories, my darling, just as much as your stories trail after you.”

Beehive butted in. “I think memories make stories real.”

“Now *what* could that pointless interjection possibly contribute, bear?” snapped Icci the ostrich. “Memories? Stories? You say the most inane things that make sense only in your own rock-filled head — but nowhere else.”

For the first time since (the original) Beehive and Icci started traveling together, Icci’s talons dug hard enough into the bear’s skin to make him yelp.

“I can add to this argument,” said the koala. “Stories spread memories, spread memories to other people. A memory, by itself, rings selfish. A story benefits others.”

“And now you!” the ostrich squawked. “I do declare, how in the name of all things under the sky have I tolerated you these last few months! I’m the one who actually *does* all the heavy lifting on our adventures!”

Icci, about to strike with storm-like fury, calmly exhaled her stress in one breath. “Beehive,” she half-whispered. “Say the line. You haven’t said it in forever, but now’s the perfect time. Say it.”

“What?” he asked in his normal volume.

“Come on! Say it! You used to say it all the time!”

Beehive took a deep breath, just like Icci. “*What would the Earth Bear think?*” he pronounced with confidence.

“...What?” Icci asked. “You’ve never said that.”

“But I say it all the time.”

“In your head, maybe, but... look,” Icci sighed to the other Beehive and Icci.

Then, in the lowest timbre Icci could muster, she said: “We’ll be on our way now.”

*I do say that often*, Beehive thought, and walked away from their doppelgängers.

As they wandered to the closest stream, long out of the other Beehive and Icci’s earshot, Beehive asked, “Why didn’t you try winning that argument?”

“Trust me, I won. They probably don’t even realize I won, the frauds.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Remember the last thing fake-Beehive said?”

“Something about stories and memories that become stories or... I missed something.”

“You’re close enough, and easily more articulate! He said that stories spread memories and share them for the betterment of other people.”

“Right. That makes sense.”

“It does — but if he really wanted — wanted to call himself ‘Beehive’ — he would have argued the exact opposite point.”

“And what point is that?”

“You don’t care about stories or how other people remember you. You just want to be you.” Icci chirruped. “And that’s when I knew! They’re not the ‘Beehive and Icci’ I

remember or care about. And did you notice how mean that ostrich got with you and the other Beehive? At least I apologize whenever I say something mean to you — or at least I try, usually. I'll get better. But fake-Icci doesn't know I feel bad — she just knows what she's heard, that I get mean sometimes. Now I'm wondering... is she mean because that's just her, or because she's imitating me? Either way... I pity her.”

Beehive sighed, but a question kept tugging at him. “Hey Icci, do I get enough sleep?”

Icci laughed. “What a perfect question — that's the Beehive I know! And to answer you, I haven't noticed anything unusual. And trust me, I'd know.”

“How?”

“We've been together for so long, I can read you like the wind at this point — how could I not notice?”

A vast yawn strained Beehive's whole body. As he plodded on, leaves still crunching beneath his feet, a thought nudged at Beehive. *I'm already groggy, so soon into autumn. Winter wants to come early this year.*

## Episode 20: A Paradise for Birds

As the duo strolled alongside a river during sunset, the colours of autumn glowed vibrantly. Icci's plumage started to blend in with the setting, but Beehive distinguished her from the rest of the reds and yellows of the forest by her familiar flutters.

“It’s strange,” Beehive said. “Your colours match with the forest around this time of year.”

“Gracious thanks! Never mind that compliment — I didn’t know bears could see in colour!”

“How else could I see fish in running water or poisonous plants?”

“So do you see all kinds of colours? Ochre? Fuschia? Blue?”

“I... don’t know those names. I see the colours that I see, so... all of them?”

“Hmm... well I should’ve known better than to ask those specifics.” Icci landed on Beehive. “Here’s an easier, and vastly more important, question! What’s your favourite colour?”

“Favourite colour? But they’re all so similar.”

“It’s like having a favourite nut, or a favourite story! Here, let me tell you *my* favourite colour...” Icci hummed to herself.

The moment dragged. “How can you expect me to choose one colour when you can’t?”

“Oh hush! See, here’s my problem. I want to say some shade of yellow or red, but not because of, you know, *me*. So here’s what I’ve decided. My favourite colour is... azure! No, wait, lavender! By the sky, I like them both so much. But if I had to choose only one — the colour to rule over all other colours — it’d have to be... tangerine!” Icci gave out an exhausted sigh. “Now your turn, Beehive! What’s *your* favourite colour?”

“Brown.”

“What!? Not fair, *you’re* brown. Do you mean a more specific shade of brown?”

“No. I like brown.”

“But *why* just bro—”

Something darted about in the trees and, in a flash, Icci flew off. Gone.

Beehive followed without hope of catching up. *What if she gets too far? She might get lost and never come back. What would I do th—*

And just as suddenly, Icci rushed back in front of Beehive’s face.

“Beehive!” Icci carrolled. “You need to see this!”

Before the bear saw anything, he heard it: hundreds of voices, carried out in the open air. *Not a very subtle sound*, Beehive thought. *They must not fear... anything.*

Then Beehive saw it: a massive tree, as tall as any mountain in Nirgenswald, decorated with the lively colonies of nearly-infinite birds. Each grouping distinct from one another, each one of every colour Beehive could possibly recognize — and some he didn’t. Icci floated up in front of Beehive, darting her head back and forth between him and the tree.

One of the birds — a starling of varying blues — approached the duo, each wingstroke a dramatic tableau. The graceful starling landed with aplomb and Icci joined her on the ground.

“Beehive, I’d like to introduce you to Kitt,<sup>46</sup> she’s... well, you saw her fly in, she’s utterly radiant!” Icci wiggled with excitement, in a way Beehive had never seen her wiggle before. “Kitt’s travelled all over Nirgenswald! Oh, and in case you were wondering, *her* favourite colour is sage!”

“How do you know so much about her? Didn’t you just meet?”

“Oh, we birds have our ways,” Kitt crooned, winking at Icci in the way that starlings wink. “And of course, I know all about your adventures!”

“That’s not a surprise!” Icci said. “Everyone’s talking about us, all over Nirgenswald! I’ll give you some first-hand accounts — the full gust!”

“That would absolutely delight me, my darling Icci. But first, would you like a closer look at our home?”

“Of course! But I gotta ask, how do you manage so many wingéd folk together?”

“Wouldn’t you know?” Beehive asked. “Aren’t you a bird?”

“*Bird* is a broad, unspecific term,” Kitt snapped. “Like me, for instance, referring to you as simply *bear*. Tell me, do you know the eating habits of your cousin, the panda bear?”

“I’ve never heard of a panda bear.”

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<sup>46</sup> Jermock’s biography — perhaps more than any other subject in his text — well-documents Aurgarten’s obsession with the singer, Eartha Kitt. The author nearly left Mivolta (the first time in his life) just to go see her perform live. Of course, he fell deathly ill and required nearly three months to recover. More of these anecdotes are shared within Jermock’s text, if you wish to learn more about this one-sided love affair.

“Many wingéd folk groupings nest here — gaggles, sedges, musters, parties, charms — each with their own various culinary diets and customs.” Kitt leaned in towards Icci. “A real *valiant turnip*.”<sup>47</sup>

Icci laughed and bounced, ecstatically, at the word.

“What makes it a valiant turnip?” asked Beehive.

“Oh,” gasped Icci, still laughing, “you wouldn’t get it.”

“Jokes aside,” Kitt continued, “we congregate around this magnificent tree for social reasons. We catch up on the latest gossip — I’m sure you’ve heard all about Gemma and Erroll — share stories, worldly knowledge... it’s everything you could ever want, Icci, all in one place.”

“It sounds — and looks — amazing!”

“Of course, the tree serves a function outside of mental stimulation. I’m sure you’ve noticed winter’s coming much earlier this year. Nature, as we all know, remains fickle.”

Icci turned her head, then she chirruped and bounced. “Beehive! It’s almost winter! Let me tell you, migration’s the BEST time of the year. My family clan, we always sing a bunch of migration songs!” With no pause, Icci sang out:

*O! Fiore, Fiore, my flower*

*You sprang from the sea and learned to speak*

*Your wind carried hushings*

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<sup>47</sup> Jermock tries to explain this reference in his book, calling upon Aurgarten’s gardening know-how and over-analyzing the Mivoltan word for valiant — try as he might, no solid conclusion ever confirms the significance of this phrase. I cannot theorize its meaning, but perhaps its study will expand beyond the views of simply myself, Jermock, and Mariena.

*Of your fevered heart thumps  
And the earth looked like fur 'neath your wing  
O! Fiore, Fiore, my flower  
Now you float t'wards the hazy horizon  
Though it carries you down  
You'll stay warm and keep tune  
And that's when you'll nest 'neath the trees<sup>48</sup>*

ICCI warbled the last syllable for as long as she could, then bowed. “That’s just one of our songs. But I’m sure you’ve heard that one thousands of times, Kitt.”

“I have, but I’ve never heard it sung by you!” The starling plucked out a stray fluff in ICCI’s feathers. “Will you join your clan this winter? Or have you joined another flock?”

“Hmm... now that I think about it... the Marceleaus have probably already headed off. They always like to get a beak-start on migration! Aunt Maeve’s bones get all cracky — Beehive knows what I mean. All just to enjoy warm weather for even longer!”

Beehive snorted. “Why didn’t you say anything about migration sooner? You must have known that winter loomed?”

“I had a feeling, but — it’s only my third winter, after all. So I ignored the tummy wriggle. Figured I ate too many pumpkin seeds.”

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<sup>48</sup> Again, I butcher the translation of Aurgarten’s poetry. I’m not a poet, by trade, and so my understanding of the rhyme may be off by a large margin. I tried to maintain the inherent meaning of the original, to varying results throughout.

“That’s perfectly normal, Icci, for someone of your age,” said Kitt. “I’m sure you’ll rejoin your clan down south. Why not travel with us? We have many among us separated from their own families. They’d welcome you with open wings and beaks.”

*So it all ends, Beehive thought. She’s a bird. She migrates in winter. I’m not, and I don’t. She should have gone with her own family. But she’ll do fine. A thought stabbed Beehive. But what about me? What do I do without Icci? I’ll hibernate, winter alone, but after? How do I stroll through the forest without tiny talons clutched between my ears?*

Icci’s voice interrupted Beehive’s thoughts. “Thank you Kitt, for the generous offer. I admit, I’m tempted...” Icci flew up and landed in her spot on Beehive’s head. “But Beehive and I should move on.”

Beehive felt the heat smother his brain again. Kitt experienced a similar reaction.

“Then what’s your supposed plan, Icci?” Kitt asked. “It’s dangerous to migrate alone — there’s all sorts of dangers and hazards when travelling without one’s group.”

“Of course! But I’m not alone. I have Beehive! We haven’t discussed it yet, but... I want to try out this hibernation thing. See what it’s like!”

“Impossible. Tanagers don’t hibernate — no *bird* hibernates. You should spend the winter with your own kind. Eat fresh fruits, berries, worms, and *socialize*...”

“I know, I know... It’s just that I can’t picture leaving Beehive.”

“That’s unheard of. You’re betraying your species, your culture! What will the Marceleaus think? You won’t last the winter.”

Icci huffed and hovered back down to Kitt's level. "Thank you again, truly. If I had nowhere else to go, this place would make me happier than... well, happier than the happiest bird in the sky. But I'm doing what I've always wanted: I'm living out my adventures instead of talking about someone else's." Icci darted off past Beehive into the forest behind them.

Kitt stood her ground and huffed. "Please, Beehive, make her reconsider. She doesn't know what she wants, she's a child!"

"It's what she wants. You can't teach her to fly, then expect her to stay put — it's Icci, after all. And isn't leaving the nest the most *bird* thing she could do?"

Kitt crowed, a sound Beehive never suspected could come from such a colourful creature. "What do you know about us? Not just *birds*, but tanagers like Icci? Do you even know what *kind* of tanager she is? Don't pretend to know what's best for her — we both know you..." Kitt stopped herself. "Please. Just think about Icci's needs, not what you want. Your desire to befriend her will kill Icci."

Beehive simply said: "We'll be on our way now." Even as he marched away, Beehive knew that his words didn't give him the usual satisfaction. *I know I'm selfish. Why do I keep putting my needs over...?*

Beehive caught up to Icci, who waited perched on a branch. Beehive's mind cleared itself. *If I don't want stay selfish, then I need to at least ask — it's her choice, after all.*

"Icc—"

“I know what you’re going to ask: if I’m sure. About spending the winter away from my people... my family. And yes, I’m sure. I can’t imagine spending a whole winter with all those... familiar strangers. I can’t imagine spending it without you. It’s total sap, but true.”

“If it’s what you want, Icci. But... what if you change your mind?”

“Change my mind? You sure you know me at all?” Icci chirruped and landed back on Beehive’s head. “And besides, there’s no way I can go back to those birds now. Imagine — me, telling off the most beautiful stellar starling in all Nirgenswald, proclaiming myself the first bird in history to hibernate — only to come fluttering back, and just migrating like every other bird? Talk about besmirching my reputation!”

### Episode 21: A Brief Jaunt Up the Mountain

Over the next few days, Beehive and Icci came to a compromise: they settled on hibernating in a cave somewhere up high. Beehive argued that a cave hibernation’s the only acceptable way to spend a winter; Icci wanted to spend the winter somewhere “close to the sky.”

Beehive noticed smoke rising up from a low peak. Yet when he sniffed the air, he didn’t notice any choking fume. *It smells like... nothing. It doesn’t smell at all!*

“That’s a strange happening,” Beehive said to Icci. “The smoke over there has no scent.”

“That’s not smoke! It’s steam!” Icci plucked up a worm for her lunch. “Mountains sometimes have hot spots. There’s a bunch of ’em out east — well, all over. Something in the mountains turns the water hot — so hot, it stops being water and rises up, turning into steam. Then the steam turns to clouds! At least, that’s what my great-aunt Lili says.”

“You sure she didn’t make that up?”

“Positive! Lili wouldn’t lie about something like steam becoming clouds — platypuses,<sup>49</sup> sure, but not steam. Want to check it out? You’ll love it! The heat will relax your muscles!”

“I won’t say no to warmth before the winter. Let’s go see this ‘hot spot’.”

~

When they got to the groups of small, deep-set puddles, groups of people already occupied most of the space. Beehive spotted many species through the thick steam, but several dozen macaques squatted directly within the warm water. The heat clung to Beehive like a second fur coat.

“Can we find another spot like this? One with... less people?”

“Oh, Beehive! People are just part of the fun!”

“I wouldn’t have come if I knew it’d entail... people.”

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<sup>49</sup> Aurgarten firmly dismissed the existence of the platypus, claiming it a fictional creation right alongside the unicorn and bugbear. Marieana, too, inherited this denial, which apparently caused a wave of extreme embarrassment during her studies at Oxford.

“I know — that’s why I didn’t say.” Icci fluttered up in front of Beehive, though her movements weighed heavier in the humidity. “Come on! You should go in one of the pools — relax for a bit!”

“Would you join me? I don’t want to... socialize by myself.”

“The water’s way too hot for my feathers! This steam works *just* right for me. My feathers’ll feel so buoyant and flexible after this!”

“Well, if it makes you happy...”

Beehive hobbled towards the least populated pool, yet even there four of the pink-faced macaques bobbed in place. *Does the water turn their skin that colour?* he thought. *My fur would cover most of it, but my paws... will they turn pink too?*

The macaques made room for Beehive. *Well, now I’m obligated to go in.* And as he did, without testing the water first, the entire pool overflowed, carrying the macaques off with a dramatic *fwssh* of heat and steam.

“Sorry! So sorry!” Beehive whined, shocked at the sudden burning heat all over his body. *I ruined their relaxing. The things they must think about me...*

The macaques simply bowed, pink fingers splayed out, to Beehive and proceeded to settle in another pool.

The scorching pain subsided as Beehive settled into the water. Soon, his body felt like it both floated and sank. He noticed Icci off chatting to a large group, before he nearly fell asleep. Off a ways, there limped a swine, hitching its back leg off the ground. *I almost thought I recognized another bear,* Beehive thought. *Now that’s a memory I*

*haven't thought of in a long time. That limping bear... what was his name again?*

*Sometime before—*

“No.” Beehive snapped out loud to himself. “Icci told me to relax. I’ll avoid remembering *that*.”

Beehive half floated in the water — his feet could touch the base of the pool, but he still enjoyed letting the water hold him in place. The world melted away, until only the heat remained.

“Excuse me,” a voice sneaked into Beehive’s ear. “You wouldn’t happen to call yourself Beehive, would you?”

Beehive turned towards the voice and spotted two large cats.

*How would they know my name?* “Yes, I’m Beehive. Do you, too, call yourself Icci and Beehive?”

“Ah, we’d never dare,” said the male cat, which Beehive now recognized as a lion. “I could only see your head above the water, but I know you. You may not remember me, but you helped me out of a... troubled time in my life.”

Beehive remembered the lion’s identity — aside from the weight gain and the fluffier mane, Beehive recognized the King he met months ago. “Didn’t I try to kill you?” Beehive asked.

“Yes, you most certainly did!” King laughed. He turned to the other lion, whose face contorted in horror. “It’s not as bad as it sounds! Utterly terrifying at the time, but

just the scare I needed. If Beehive and Icci hadn't fed me avocados and peaches that day, I wouldn't be here at all."

Beehive's next words shocked him. "It's good to see you're well, King. Would you two like to join me?"

King's companion nodded.

"We'd love to!" said King. "Tell me, where's Icci? No doubt she's left for her migration."

Just as King spoke, Icci rushed onto the scene with dizzying speed. "King! What a coincidence. You look so much healthier than the last time I saw you!"

"Yes, it's quite the miracle." King said, turning towards the other lion. "Don't you think?"

"Mhm," mumbled the lion.

Beehive noted her stance: shrinking, yet ready to move.

"Oh, where has my mind gone!" King said. "Beehive, Icci — let me introduce you to someone very special to me. Her name is King. She's my..."

"Your what?" asked the other King, her voice soft.

"Well, I don't rightly know. Friend? Companion? Partner?"

"Do we need to put a name on things, King?"

"I know, I know. You're right, King — you're always right."

"Except when I'm wrong."

“It’s only lion na— no, it’s the way of nature, King, to make mistakes.”

“You were going to say lion nature.”

“I’m sorry. It’s hard to shake out old habits.”

“You’d know as well as I do that ‘lion nature’ doesn’t allow us to make mistakes.”

“Partially why I corrected myself, King.”

“What’s the thing you always say?”

“You must know it off by heart by now.”

“I do. I just like when you say it.”

“We’re both lions, we’re both Kings, but we don’t need to compare ourselves to other lions named King.”

King purred, a sound Beehive didn’t expect.

“Aww, King and King — easy to remember and *cute!*” Icci cooed. “How did you guys meet?”

“After my run-in with you two, I had a change of heart,” King sighed. “It took some time for me to get back on my paws again... honestly I don’t think I would’ve kept standing on my own if I hadn’t met King soon after. We’d gone through the exact same crisis, if you’d believe it. The same self-imposed famine, the same... suicidal thoughts. But somehow, we supported each other through the ordeal and made something for ourselves. I think we finally feel comfortable in our own pelts — and in our names, too. Would you agree?”

“I would,” said the other King. “Though at the risk of sounding like I agree with you about everything.”

“We’re passing through here on our way south before the chill. What plans do you two have for the winter?”

“We’re going to find a place to hibernate,” said Beehive.

King cleared her throat. “Sounds wonderful. I hope you two have a nice winter together. King, I think we should go now...”

“What’s wrong?” King asked. “We just got here.”

“I know, I know. It’s just... those macaques keep glaring at us.”

The numerous conversations around Beehive had ceased. Now the two lions, the bear, and the tanager drew the attention of every person at the hot spots, the hiss of steam swirling in the background.

One of the macaques approached, puffing out her chest, and spoke: “Hail! I am Lady Groom, representing all persons here enjoying the hot spots. We ask the People Eaters to send their emissary over — without trickery — so that we may discuss terms.”

“We don’t want trouble,” said King, bowing his mane downward. “Who would you most comfortably speak to?”

Lady Groom scoffed. “Icci the Tanager. The only non-murderer among you.”

Icci flew up to Lady Groom and bowed. “That bit about me not being a murderer... it’s not entirely accurate. I eat worms, you see.”

“No matter,” Lady Groom stated. “My kind eat the lice and other creatures living on our backs — it’s my designated title with our group. But such murder serves for the betterment of my people.” She pointed towards both Kings, individually, then Beehive. “They, however, eat others for sustenance, sport, and baseless *savagery*.”

“What if they promised not to eat anyone here?” asked Icci. “They just want to enjoy the hot spots, like anyone else.”

“Even if I believed you, Icci, it’s only a temporary solution. People Eaters have eaten members of our family in the past. And what about after they descend the mountain? Perhaps not today, not tomorrow, but some day they will, as they always have, kill more of our own.”

Beehive, with no inclination why, found himself rising out of the pool. The act caused a gale of steam as the water around him crashed and hissed. *There’s no hiding now*. Beehive approached Lady Groom and he imitated Icci’s bow. “Will you speak with me?”

“Frankly,” Lady groom intoned, “I’m surprised that a bear would want to speak at all.”

“I’m surprised, too,” Beehive said. “But I guess I want to?”

Lady Groom nodded. “Ah, this gathering of misfits makes sense — you’re Beehive and Icci. From what I’ve heard you’re always fighting. I’m surprised you haven’t torn each other apart yet.” The macaque righted her posture. “Very well. If you two vouch for them, I’ll speak to your lion friends.”

Icci waved over to the Kings, and the two lions approached, their paws gingerly clopping against the damp ground.

“Please” said King in a hushed voice. “We’re scared — you have us all surrounded. As I said before, we don’t want trouble.”

“*Your* kind started the trouble.”

“We cannot deny that,” King said, bowing her head. “We — speaking for myself and King — would change our ways if we could. The guilt of eating another person... it’s maddening.”

“*Guilt* — a lesser punishment for the butchery and trauma you’ve inflicted to countless so-called ‘prey’ in Nirgenwald. What you do — and you too, Beehive, you’re not entirely innocent — we cannot forgive.”

“We know,” Beehive said.

“Still, we’re talking about it,” Lady Groom scratched her nose. “That’s no small thing. Even I must admit, my role within my community... I’ve always wondered about the insects I pick from our fur. If they speak their language. If they mourn the dead we ate.”

“We understand,” King said. “King and I might share a name with every other lion, but that name, that... idea for what *King* stands for...” King clenched her paws, unsure how to continue.

“Are there any other Lady Grooms among your community?” Icci asked.

“No, I’m the only one. But every group has their own Lady Groom. Every name’s a title.”

“Truly?” King asked, swishing her tail. “What other names?”

“Lady, Lord, Count, Chamberlain...” The names spouted out from the surrounding macaques like rain.

Beehive couldn’t follow it all — he stepped away from the hubbub, just to hear his own thoughts. *That’s better.*

ICCI flew up out of the noisy crowd and landed next to Beehive. “So what do you think, Beehive? Did we save the day, once again?”

“No. Lady Groom’s point still stands: people need to eat other people. Me, with my fish; you, with worms.”

“Yeah... but hear all that chatter, back and forth to each other.” She sighed. “I wish I could talk to worms.”

“Hmm.” Beehive tried to listen in. “All these voices... a bit too loud for my ears. You made these hot spots sound much more relaxing.” For a time, Beehive and ICCI listened to the cacophonous voices, while the steam rose and evaporated in the same heavy flow.

Episode 22: The First Snow

For the last few days, Beehive sniffed along the mountain side for “the right cave,” as he put it. This winter’s cave, unlike any of his wintering caves before, needed to lie somewhat close to the forest floor. *I’m not the only one that needs to eat.*

He found the perfect spot on the mountain base, with no skeletons decorating the dark interior — and not fifty steps from the nearly-bare trees. *Just in time*, he thought. *We don’t have much left.*

Every night, Icci slept in the tree next to the cave opening while Beehive tried each spot within its dark interior. “Icci, why don’t you sleep inside?” asked Beehive, poking his head out into the air.

“You know why — it’s a cave!”

“You’ve entered caves before.”

“Yeah, but I’ve never *slept* in one. Sleeping’s the only time when I’m not at the peak of vigilance. Even my sharp tanager eyes need rest. But sleeping under the sky, with the stars out...” she gave out a deep sigh. “Gives me somewhere to go, just in case.”

Icci landed on Beehive’s paws, hopping from toe to toe. “I guess I don’t need to worry so much anymore with you around to protect me.”

“You’ve never needed protection before — too fast, you always say.”

“Well sure, in any other season. But this winter’s my first *hibernating* winter — I have no idea what to expect! Does snow make noise? Is it safe to eat in large quantities? For the first time in our partnership, I gotta follow your lead.”

~

The wild and vibrant fall sky vanished the next morning, replaced by a bundled grey cloud. Beehive went off to eat on his own, and returned to the cave with a stomach more full than usual.<sup>50</sup> Icci tapped her feet, waiting for his arrival.

“You’re back,” she intoned. “Want to go for a walk?”

*Something’s different*, Beehive noticed. “Hmm. Let’s go.”

“Good. I need to get used to this weather. Have you ever seen the sky loom so... depressingly?” She flew up into Beehive’s fur, burrowing herself deeply.

“Do you mean grey? The sky does that when it rains, too.”

“I know. They’re just clouds. It’s really no different, but it *feels* different.”

Beehive knew what the change meant, and before long he felt the near-invisible movements.

The snow drifted down, and the snowflakes got bigger and visible. Icci sprang into flight, investigating each snowflake. “They’re all different!” she zipped into action, whirring about in a red-yellow flash, dodging each white speck with complicated aerial maneuvers. Icci had never moved so fast in her life, by Beehive’s reckoning. The old bear’s eyes could barely follow the bright blurring colour zoom against the faded grey and white shades of Nirgenwald.

Then Icci landed back atop his head. “I seem to find myself out of breath,” Icci stated plainly.

*She doesn’t seem that tired. But she’s the one breathing her lungs.*

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<sup>50</sup> Aurgarten skims over what Beehive specifically ate, though I believe the implication remains.

“Hold on,” said Icci, and she rushed back into the air towards a passing tree. She propped herself in front of a hole in the wood and whistled at Beehive. “There’s a whole bunch of food here! You said I needed to stockpile my own stash, but look! We just happened upon one! How unlikely!”

The sudden horrible heat chilled Beehive’s brain. “No, Icci! Leave it! Who knows who it belongs to. If you take it, awful things could happen!”

“Beehive, what’s wrong? I’ve never heard you sound so scared before—”

Whatever Icci said next, Beehive didn’t catch it. His ears only heard the familiar scuffle in the trees above them. *They’re already here...* he thought. *We’re too late.* Beehive, terrified to look, peeked his head upwards.

Just as he dreaded, the horrible presence of three squirrels darkened the grey sky.

*I need to run,* the bear thought, but his instincts knew he couldn’t leave Icci behind. *I’m not abandoning someone I care about. Not again.*

“Howdy!” Icci shouted up in greeting. “How goes it in your neck of the woods?”

One of the squirrels skittered down to a lower branch, twitching her nose at Icci. Beehive flinched back. *You’re scared, Beehive, but don’t you dare let them lay a claw on Icci.*

The squirrel tilted her head. “Hello! I’m Lif!” she exclaimed. “What a pretty tanager!” she gestured to the two squirrels behind her. “Come closer you two, they’re friendly!”

The smallest whispered something to the one called Lif. *No doubt they're plotting something nefarious*, Beehive thought.

“Oh posh,” Lif responded, “that’s silly! If anything, it’s probably the other way around.” She scratched the top of the little one’s head. “Come on, both of you.”

The three squirrels descended together to the close branch. “We’re well overdue with our introductions,” said the female squirrel. “This here,” she gestured to a male squirrel, “is my husband<sup>51</sup> Hodd. He doesn’t speak. Lifelong condition, you see. Bless him!” Lif nuzzled Hodd’s cheek with her nose.

“Pleasure to meet you!” said Icci. “What’s your son’s name?”

*That’s their son?* Beehive thought. *He looks nothing like them.*

“Oh...” Lif said. “Well, Hodd and I haven’t picked out a name for him yet. We squirrels, we’re picky about names. Gotta make sure it’s right!”

“Tell me about it!” Icci proclaimed. “It took me *months* to choose my name. I had to make sure it sounded perfect — and I succeeded!”

“Oh?” Lif’s voice piqued. “And how may that perfect name sound?”

“Mom!” whined the unnamed squirrel. “Can’t you tell? She’s Iccipiani Wingelli Marceleau! And that guy’s Beehive.”

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<sup>51</sup> Aurgarten’s depiction of marriage between animals remains ambiguous, at best. Mariena recalls forest walks with her uncle discussing the concept, which animals did or didn’t partake, and Mariena’s own views on marriage. It is never clear if Aurgarten ever met Mariena’s husband (whom I myself met briefly at a convention for, of all things, table-top role-playing games), since their marriage took place in Venice, but Mariena recalls her uncle being unconditionally happy for her, even though it meant moving away from Mivolta.

“Dearest me! I don’t doubt you’re right, my child. Apologies, you two. We’ve come across so many imposters, it’s quite a wonder to come across the real thing!”

“How do you know we’re not imposters?” Icci asked. “I mean, we’re the real thing, no doubt about it. But I’m curious.”

“It’s obvious,” the child answered. “Most people lie bad.”

“Not to mention, our family loves to hear about your adventures!” Lif said.

Icci kicked her feet. “We try not to let the fame get to our heads.”

Hodd tapped on Lif’s shoulder and contorted his paws in a way Beehive found disturbing.

“My husband asks if you’re out foraging for the winter.”

Icci, noticing she still stood in front of the hole, flew back onto Beehive. “Of course! Plus, I’ve never seen snow fall before, so it’s quite exciting!” She clutched tightly to Beehive’s fur.

The boy, with a swift spring, dove into the tree hole. He popped out moments later with a collection of seeds to share, spreading them on the ground. “Here, something to get you started.”

“Are you sure?” Icci asked Lif.

“Of course! It’s your first winter, you’ll want to eat as much as you can before the weather turns.”

*Why would they just give us their food?* Beehive thought, kept his eye on the swift child. *Could they have tampered with it, somehow? Who knows what these squirrels can do.* Yet Icci'd already flown down and stuffed her cheeks with the pile of seeds.

The boy sniffed up to Beehive's nose, squatting on his hind legs. "Why are you scared? Because we're squirrels?"

"Yes," Beehive shivered. "Unpleasant experiences."

"But why?" Icci asked, her mouth full of seeds. "Of all things, squirrels?"

"I understand," said Lif. "Our cousins can act... unpleasantly. It's normal around this time of year for us to worry about food. There's never a guarantee we'll make it past the winter."

Hodd once more twisted his paw together, and Lif nodded. Hodd swiftly sprang into the hole and came back out with an apple three times the size of the squirrel's body. He placed it down on the ground in front of Beehive and returned to his wife's side.

"It's the largest piece of food we have," Lif translated. "but we want you to have it. Consider it a sign of good faith."

"I don't know what to say," Beehive muttered to Hodd, trying to think of words to express his complicated feelings.

"Manners, Beehive!" whisper-shouted Icci. "You say 'thank you'!"

"You don't need to say or do anything," said Lif. "It's just good knowing that we have a friendly bear in our neck of the woods. Just your presence will scare off any predators, and make the land... more fertile, we'll say."

*What does that mean?* the bear thought. “Your deeds do kindness to Icci and me. Beehive.” Beehive remembered Icci’s words. “*Thank you* for being kind.”

The squirrel child chirruped “Before you go, can you... can you say the line?”

Icci landed back in her spot — this time, Beehive proudly offered the phrase: “We’ll be on our way now.”

The group — Beehive’s sensitive ears could hear the snowflakes land. *Did I say it wrong? Sounded right to me.*

“You’re supposed to walk away when you say that!” the boy whispered.

“Oh. I forgot.”

“That’s alright!” said Lif. “You two should go, though this has been lovely. We’ve all got a lot of preparing to do for the coming winter — it’ll be a nasty one, according to Hodd, and he’s never wrong. Farewell!”

With that, Beehive knew to walk away. They didn’t make it far before Icci cooed to herself.

“You handled yourself well back there, Beehive!” Icci said. “I’d never seen you like that before. I can tell they really scared you. But I have to ask, why squirrels, specifically?”

“Perhaps the Earth Bear taught me that.” *But why would she teach me to fear squirrels — she feared nothing except winter, like any bear.* “Actually, I don’t think that’s true. I think it’s just me.”

“Well those squirrels seemed really friendly!”

“I’m sorry. I can’t explain it well. I don’t fully understand it myself.”

“Don’t fret! We have all winter to figure it out. Besides, we’ll have the family right around the corner — we can visit them, they can visit us... Winter’ll go by in a breeze! Maybe we’ll even help to name their kid! I vote Josif. Hmm, Josepe? What do you think, Beehive?”

“I doubt we’ll see them again during winter, Icci — they’re hibernating, and so are we.”

“Not a bother! I’ll just fly out and meet them whenever I get the chance.”

To emphasize her point she soared up into the air for a dramatic aerial flourish. Yet as she did, a forceful wind thwomped Icci with the violence of a solid collision. It took all her strength and flying know-how to navigate back to Beehive’s fur, which she clung to with a painful pinch.

That’s when the snow truly began.

#### Episode 24: Beehive Finishes the Ballad of Eshishos

Only the howling of young winter winds penetrated the cave. *Already started*, Beehive thought, *and it only gets colder*.

“Aren’t you glad to avoid such nasty weather, Icci?”

“Yesh, eh ish vewwy neish,” Icci answered, her beak full of seeds.

“How much food do you have left?”

Icci gobbled up more from her pile before she answered. “Almost done!”

“Icci, you’re supposed to save that food for the rest of winter.”

“Well you ate way more than I did before setting up in here — gaining all that weight and girth — so shouldn’t I do the same?”

Beehive, so used to Icci’s presence over the last few months, did notice a pudgier, rounder Icci than before. Icci fluttered up to Beehive, seemingly struggling to fly. “Look! I can barely fly now, I’ve stored so many nutrients! By the time I finish this stash, I’ll be nearly as big as you! I’m almost ready for the big nap!”

*What happens when she gets hungry again?* Beehive wondered as he drifted to sleep.

~

Beehive reckoned two days passed while he lay half-asleep, Icci jittering and talking to herself. Her food stores gone, Beehive fetched some snow from the cave entrance for Icci to munch on, and each time he did, she asked him to retrieve more berries or seeds. Beehive always responded the same way: “The time for seeds and berries passed, Icci.”

Two days in, Icci’s shivering grew so violent that Beehive felt its constant presence even while asleep. *That little nest she made won’t keep her warm all winter. Winter’s barely begun.*

“Icci,” Beehive whispered, but the sound carried within the tight cave, nowhere else to go. “You’re shivering.”

“Y-yes, B-b-beehive, it’s cold!” Then she shook with such force, Beehive thought her bones would break.

“Are you staying awake?”

“Sure, I can’t get a wink of sleep with all this... shaking. From all the food I ate! I’m probably still adjusting to all this body weight. Don’t worry.”

“You’re cold, Icci. That’s what cold feels like.” Beehive remembered what the Earth Bear would do. *Did she doubt, like I doubt now?* Beehive patted the ground next to him with a soft tap. “Come sit next to me, small friend.”

“You’re the expert.” Icci hobbled over, but finally sidled up to the bear’s torso. “I’m so, so tired Beehive. I’ve never wanted anything more — not even the Monstrous Melon, if it meant I could sleep. Why can’t I sleep? I thought hibernation meant sleep?” Icci’s voice piped, muffled into the bear’s thick coat.

“No, you’re freezing.” Beehive sighed. “If you fall asleep, you’ll never wake up.” *Cold winters make smaller bears. Even you, Earth Bear.*

“Oh... Just a wink, then.” Icci started to shrink, but a sudden twitch of her foot thrust the bird back awake. “I’m sorry. I believe you. Keep me awake, ok Beehive?”

Beehive remembered the Earth Bear. *She asked me the same thing, that final winter. Even she couldn’t escape the cold. Does that mean Icci... too?* Beehive remained silent, not sure what else he could do. He wanted to envelop Icci into him, bury her in his

fur, cover every inch of her body from the cold — only the knowledge that he would crush her tiny body held him back.

“Beehive,” said Icci, finally. “Am I dying?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” Beehive’s breath fumed out as he sighed, then just as quickly vanished. “Probably.”

“What a... weird thought. I don’t know how I expected Iccipiani Wingelly Marcelau to end. In the jaws of some terrifying meat-eater, or reenacting the surrounded by loved ones trope, but... it’s just falling asleep! So much worry for nothing. Seems as easy a way to go as any.”

Her body relaxed once more and Beehive felt the tensivity of her shivering loosen. *The last time this happened...* Beehive physically shook the thought from his head. *No, Beehive. Face it, if only this once. The Earth Bear — she froze, and napped, and never woke up. And what did I do? She lay behind me, freezing, and I couldn’t even turn myself towards her, even as she kept me warm in her last moments. Could I have saved her? No. But I could have done something. Talked about spring. Carrots. Anything.*

“Icci!”

Icci let out an involuntary squawk. “Wha-What? I’m trying to sleep, Beehive.”

“I know. But you asked me to keep you awake.” *How can I keep her awake? And if not, what can I do?* An idea struck him. “I think it’s time you heard the ending to the Ballad of Eshishos.”

“That’s... wow.”

“But on one condition,” Beehive stated. “You can’t fall asleep.”

“I won’t fall asleep.” Icci gave out a sound between a laugh and a sigh. “I’m not a promise breaker like that monkey. Do you remember his name?”

“Yogg. No, Yolk! I’m sorry, I’m forgetful with names.”

“You sure you want to tell this story?”

“I know I’m no storyteller. I’m barely a teller. I don’t have Marcus Barkus’s natural talent, much less experience.” Beehive took a breath, disappearing into the air.

“But I’ll try.”

Icci rustled up deeper into Beehive’s fur. “I imagine you’re the next best thing. And I’ll help out when I can. Though I’ve never heard this story before.”

“Thank you. So to carry on from last time... Yolk descended from the mountain peak. From the top of Mount Eshishos. He climbed down, with his monkey hands. Or are they paws?”

“We already heard that part! The last thing that happened was Princess Ronna fell off the mountain after she mistrusted Luffstein.”

Icci already seemed more animated, though her heartbeat against his chest still felt weak. *It’s something.*

“Alright, so last time Ronna—”

“PRINCESS Ronna,” Icci butted in.

“*Princess* Ronna fell off the mountain, and now she’s stuck below the mountain. Oh, and she can’t get back up the mountain.”

“What happened to her? In the forest, I mean.”

“I don’t know. She’s not a part of the story anymore.”

“Puh! Of course the only female in the story gets cut out halfway through! I bet she’s the only person who gets divine punishment too — and for what, thinking that Luffstein betrayed her? That’s so typical. ”

“I agree, the ending would be much less depressing if she stayed on Mount Eshishos.”

Icci stiffened, but not from the cold. “The ending is depressing?”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“It’s fine. I didn’t think the story would end with sunshine and berries. The *Ballad* of Eshishos? That’s not exactly a feel-good and moralizing title.”

“That’s why I didn’t want you to hear the ending before now. It’s not pleasant.”

“Maybe... but it’s just a story. Why be scared of it? Keep going, you’re not as terrible as I thought you’d be. And maybe use more details!”

“Well, alright. At this point, after Princess Ronna falls, then the story switches back to Yolk. Yolk — he’s the monkey — feels more relieved after speaking with his friend, and he doesn’t know that she fell off the mountain. So he has a pleasant day afterwards. He decides to stay in and eat some strawberries and lemons. Apparently, and I don’t know if this is true, but apparently monkeys and some other animals eat the skin of the lemon on its own, or they put it on other foods to mix the flavours together. Seems like more work than it’s worth to me. Oh, but Yolk also takes a bath! Because apparently

Eshishos has the same warm water like the kind we saw, remember? So Yolk cleans himself off, since he's especially dirty from his hike up the mountain, so he cleans between his weary toes and goes through his fur and even his face — he cleans himself everywhere. Yet he doesn't leave the bath once he's clean, as strange as it sounds — Yolk stays in the water to relax! I assume the warm water would feel good after working so hard, which Yolk did when he climbed to the peak of Mount Eshishos, so you can only imagine—”

“Beehive!” Icci interrupted. “As happy as I am that you're fulfilling a life-long dream of mine... this is too much detail. Hurry it along before I die of boredom instead of the cold.”

“Fine, fine. At this point, now... we've covered Princess Ronna's fall, Yolk's bath... so next we get to Luffstein.”

“Oh yeah! Marcus Barkus was way too ambiguous during that part where he didn't say anything to Princess Ronna, even though she's the love of his eternity or whatever. That must be because Luffstein WAS plotting against Princess Ronna! Of course he did, he's a wolf and she's a sheep! It's classic conflict!”

“I don't believe that's the case. Luffstein wasn't plotting, he'd actually been meditating on what to do. I believe I'm supposed to mention how wolves on Eshishos were especially philosophical and thought about all kinds of stuff. He'd apparently been plagued with... oh, what was the phrase... a cloud of doubt! Yes, he'd been surrounded by a cloud of doubt since Yolk's return, to the point that the cloud affected each of his

senses. That's why he didn't hear Princess Ronna before, because of the whole cloud of doubt."

"Beehive... if there was a cloud around Luffstein, why didn't Princess Ronna notice it?"

"I... don't know. It made no sense to me either. But there's a cloud of doubt around him. I assumed it was just another mystical feature of Eshishos."

"It could have been a metaphor? Like, he was in his own head so much that he didn't even notice his companion's needs?"

"No, that can't be it. Regardless, after the cloud evaporates after I assume the weather got warmer, Luffstein finally notices she's gone."

"Who?"

"Princess Ronna. So he says out loud that Yolk and Princess Ronna must be sharing the Star with each other, since he, Luffstein, didn't climb the mountain and was a failure in his love's eyes."

"Beehive, why don't you do the voices like Marcus Barkus does whenever a character talks? I always liked that."

"I don't even know what a wolf sounds like."

"That doesn't matter! Just... scratchy up your voice a bit so that I know when Luffstein's talking."

"What about Yolk? He also talks."

"Just do the voice Marcus Barkus does!"

“The next time someone talks, I’ll remember. Eventually, Luffstein somehow senses when Princess Ronna falls off the mountain and he instantly knows that she is gone forever.”

“How’s that even possible?”

“It’s just a part of the story.”

“I mean, crazier things have happened in the story... shucks, crazier things have happened in real life! Do you think that everyone can have that intangible connection to loved ones?”

“I don’t think so. How could I? I spent my whole life searching for the Earth Bear without realizing she was dead.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so either. I’ve got such a huge family — if I could feel every death, I would’ve by now, even if it was as distant as a fifth cousin.” Icci huffed. “It’s a pleasant idea though.”

“Do you want me to continue?”

“Yeah, yeah, keep going.”

“So Luffstein is overcome with grief, his ears leak with dew.”

“What a cliché!”

“With his love gone, never to return to their home, Luffstein ravaged the place with his powerful claws and teeth. When his rage soothed, Luffstein believed that Yolk did retrieve the Star from the summit and ate it himself, getting rid of Princess Luffstein—”

“Princess Ronna!”

“Yes, getting rid of her to hide the truth.” Beehive paused. “I’ll try his voice now. ‘I will confront Yolk and he will answer for his betrayal’. How was that?”

“A bit stiff, and it kinda sounds like you’re choking, but it’s passable!”

Beehive furiously coughed. “Thank you. So the wolf hunches down, nose to the ground, and follows his lost love’s scent to Yolk’s home. There, he finds...” Beehive stopped, noticing Icci’s heart rate speed up. *Is that a good thing?*

“Why’d you stop! Keep going!”

“Icci. Are you certain you want me to continue?”

“Yes! I’m invested now. I need to know how they resolve everything and it all goes back to normal. Or what you meant by ‘it’s not pleasant’.”

Beehive, comically, gulped. “Luffstein notices Yolk, having just left his bath. Remember, he took a bath? It was a thorough bath, like I told you, so Yolk looked especially calm and serene. Luffstein saw Yolk’s demeanour and thought his air of peace signaled Yolk eating the Star.

“Luffstein then thinks to himself, which I’ll portray in his voice: ‘Because of this monkey, I cannot ever see my Princess Ronna ever again, much less spend eternity in her wonderful company. I lived in an unbreakable paradise, but no longer. Yolk, your selfishness has perverted everything good about life on Mount Eshishos’. Remember, Luffstein thought all this, he didn’t say it out loud. Thinking all this, he approached Yolk without a word, more silent than the night.

“Yolk greets his old friend, not recognizing the dark look in the wolf’s eyes. The wolf himself, Luffstein, thinks once more to only himself. ‘Look at his peaceful glow! He certainly ate the Star — my Star. With my Princess Ronna gone, life has no meaning... but she may stay alive if only in memory. And what better way to preserve her memory than for all time? But the only way to live forever is to eat a Star... and that Star, ignoble Yolk, sits in your belly!’” After speaking so hoarsely for so long, Beehive coughed even more violently.

“Wow, that Luffstein is scary — he seemed like such a nice chap before. I can’t wait to find out how Yolk gets out of this one!”

Heavy air pushed from Beehive’s nostril. “He doesn’t. Luffstein eats Yolk.”

Beehive waited for a response. Nothing. The wind outside subsided somewhat, but it was the only sound to be heard within the cave.

Beehive still felt Icci’s small body cuddled up against his. “Icci? Are you still awake?”

“I am,” Icci squeaked. “Just... keep going. And don’t leave out the details.”

“Well... Luffstein starts with Yolk’s legs and arms. Luffstein thinks to himself that these were the limbs that carried the Star and pushed Princess Ronna from his life; meanwhile, Yolk pleads ‘Please, Luffstein, what did I do to deserve such a punishment! I’ve never felt such pain in my life! Please, please stop!’

“Then, Luffstein ate Yolk’s stomach, which the wolf assumed contained the Star he so desperately desired; meanwhile, with some foreign liquid spewing from his mouth,

Yolk screams, “Oww! Luffstein, you’re hurting me! Why am I in so much pain?! Make it stop Luffstein! We’re friends! I’ve been nothing but good to you!”

“Finally, Luffstein ate the rest of his monkey friend — not because he expected the Star to be elsewhere on his body, but because the wolf had simply enjoyed the taste. There was no meanwhile, for Yolk died from the pain and shock at being eaten. No person, before or since, has ever felt as much pain as Yolk — even those whose fate is to be eaten, for they never knew as painful a betrayal as Yolk felt.

“Even after Luffstein consumed his friend — more food than he’d ever eaten in his life — the wolf still felt empty. Killing Yolk did not bring Princess Ronna back, and it didn’t make Luffstein immortal, since we know that Yolk never retrieved the Star to begin with.

“Along with this realization, the earth shook. Trees burst from the ground, streams melted into scalding mist, and even the roots of the mountain itself crumbled down like deafening rain. All of the peoples of Mount Eshishos scattered in the only direction that seemed safe: downwards. Then the peoples of Mount Eshishos were no longer the peoples of Mount Eshishos, since the mountain no longer existed except in broken boulders. So now all of the former residents of the mountain’s paradise were doomed to walk the forest floor below, with only the memory of their paradise preserved in stories and, eventually, myths.

“Luffstein, formerly accompanied by Princess Ronna, Yolk, and many other dear friends, now only traveled alongside a singular partner: the emptiness. Yet nothing filled that new-found void, even the living flesh of others that he so desperately craved.

“Such did all the former peoples of Mount Eshishos live within the forest. Sure, there was life and food, but now the world lacked some absolutely essential part of itself — like a living thing without lungs to breathe. And so the people were left lost, alone and empty, only capable of wandering towards the same meaningless destination: *nowhere*.”

When Beehive stopped, the silence present rivalled that of sleep. Even the gale outside ceased momentarily in dramatic solidarity.

Beehive cleared his throat. “That’s the end of the story.” The bear could tell Icci lay awake. Her breathing rose and fell regularly, her shivering somewhat lighter.

“That ending,” Icci said, “...meh.”

“It’s how the story ends.”

“You sure? And are you certain that’s how Marcus Barkus would end the story? No offense, but I just need to know that you didn’t ruin the ending by telling it poorly.”

“It’s possible I told it poorly. Probable, actually. The Earth Bear said each person telling the story changes things — the order of events, sometimes the species of each character — but they always end it the same way.”

“It’s just... so dour. Life has no meaning and we’re destined to mistrust and destroy each other? Why didn’t they just talk their problems through!” Icci burst into a coughing fit. “Can I ask you something... odd?”

“Always.”

“How— Hmm, it’s a hard question to phrase. What does... flesh taste like?”

“It’s... not as good as you think.” *Why lie? Why bother now, of all times?* “That’s not true. Meat can taste... good. Very good.”

“That’s what I thought. I thought, ‘well, it must be pretty tasty if you’re willing to *kill* another person just to eat’. But it’s more than that. Like me, with... worms. Finding out they’re people too. I promised myself, I said, ‘Iccipiani Wingelli Marceleau: you will never eat another worm for as long as you live’. And I didn’t, but... well, you know, I started eating worms not long after. I gotta admit, worms still taste delicious, even knowing now. I needed them to keep me alive, but... at the cost of theirs. So I decided: treat worms like a treat, not a privilege to squander. And, now that I’m here with you, you know what I realized? If I’d eaten more worms before now, I might have survived the winter.” Icci sighed. “The Ballad’s true: we’re awful.”

“You know, Icci,” Beehive said, “If I had never eaten fish, and if you had never eaten worms, well... we’d both be dead right now. And we never would have met.”

“I suppose. But even so... after all my happy and good memories with my family, you — all leading to this moment... it’s not really worth it if I just die in this cave.”

“Did I ever tell you I once had a brother? I don’t think I ever did. I don’t even tell myself, even though I remember it. My earliest memory, just my brother, me, and the Earth Bear. My brother got attacked by... dogs, hyenas, foxes, could’ve been anything — and they wounded his leg. That was when the Earth Bear named him... Limper, or Falter, I forget. And later that night, whoever wounded him caught him. Why? Because he couldn’t keep up with the Earth Bear and me. The same day the Earth Bear named him —

he died. Then during some later cold winter, the Earth Bear saved me from freezing to death, and for that she died. And now I'm old, and I've survived far longer than the rest of my kin — yet I, too, will die. My death may come violently, like my brother, or peacefully in my sleep, like the Earth Bear — like my mother.

“That’s what I did for most of my life. I thought of my mother as a deity wandering all across Nirgenswald, waiting for me to find her and continue living as parent and child, and I let myself forget everything else — even my brother. So easy to forget. And if I died? The world would move on.

“But there’s something I realized during our travels together, Icci — it took me far too long to realize it. Everything that happened to me — all the fish and all the fear — led to me stomping on your worm that day. So yes. My brother got eaten, my mother froze to death, and I will die someday too. I hid those painful things from myself, but I won’t hide them from you. I want you to recognize that, yes, you may die in this cave, we both might die in this cave, or any one of us can die any day, any time. Don’t tell me it wasn’t worth it. Even if it’s awful, I wouldn’t change anything if it meant I never got to know you, Iccipiani.”

Icci shivered. “But... It’s...” Icci paused. “Ok.”

“Ok, what?”

“Ok... I’m not sure. I think I get it, but I don’t know yet.”

“You have nothing but time.”

“I know, it’s... liberating. And for what it’s worth, I’m sorry about your family. I would’ve liked to meet them.”

“What about you? Does the cold still bite?”

Icci nestled in deeper towards Beehive’s chest, the strange sensation of her feathers poking against his skin. “Your heart,” she said, “it’s so loud.”

*She won’t last the winter.* As Beehive fell asleep, he tried to sense Icci’s heartbeat — yet he only felt her shaking.

#### Episode 24: “Everything Comes and Goes”<sup>52</sup>

When a stray beam of light shone on Beehive’s face, the bear thought he’d slept right up until spring. The quiet of the cave emphasized the *drip drip* against the rock. *The snow melting, the sun... but where’s Icci?* The bear stood and stretched out, not feeling the stiffness of a normal winter nap. *Not asleep for long then — not spring.* He searched every miniscule corner of the cave, even his fur, for any trace of Icci. *She can’t be gone, not without leaving anything behind...*

At the sudden rustle of wings, Beehive’s breath involuntarily spewed out.

“You’re finally awake!” that familiar voice sang. “You slept for five days straight!”

*Does her voice always sound like music?* “When did the snow melt?”

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<sup>52</sup> Mariena recalls saying these words to Aurgarten during an especially terrible bout of seasonal depression. She does not cite her exact age, though places the timing around when she was 5 or 6 years old. Aurgarten, in one of the only non-*Beehive and Icci* pieces of writing still with us, stated that the phrase saved him from throwing the entire novel away. If the timing is correct, this event may have occurred when Aurgarten named the novel *The Collected Tales of Beehive*, which starred Beehive as its sole character. It’s possible the shift to *Beehive and Icci* occurred following Mariena’s influential phrase, now immortalized as the final episode of Beehive and Icci’s adventures.

“Only yesterday. But can you believe it? It’s already spring! I know we worried for a while, but winter turned out much easier than we thought!”

Beehive poked his head out of the cave, still groggy. The sky featured the occasional splotches of blue breaking in through the light grey. “It’s still winter, Icci. But it looks like the weather’s cleared up for a few days.”

“Oh... Icci shook her feathers. “At least we can find something to eat.”

The two set off into the woods. Beehive always appreciated the forest’s absent business at the start of winter — *but that means food’s harder to find.*

Beehive followed the trail set by his nose to the carrion of some poor buck, or elk, or some other creature with antlers. Nearby a raspberry bush shivered teasingly, the berries wobbling along with the slight breeze.

“It’s alright, Beehive,” said Icci. “You go ahead and eat meat — its owner might not be with us, but you’re still here!”

Beehive realized: besides fish, he’d never eaten meat in front of Icci before. *Did I do that intentionally?* “Get started on those berries — just save me a few.”

Beehive began his meal. *Not as pleasant as fruits or berries, but there’s... that helpful warmth. I needed this.* He admired the aged antlers, numerous bumps and dents decorating the whole surface. *Each mark tells its own story,* Beehive said in his head to the creature. *I’ll never know how those marks got there, but at least I know that they did.* Beehive thought of what message he’d want the antler’s owner to hear. *I’m sorry, but also thank you.*

Icci, fluttering and hopping about the raspberries, reminded Beehive how slowly the old storyteller, Marcus Barkus, ate the same berry — but Icci tore and pecked with keen ferocity. *She's starving.*

To digest, Beehive sat back into the snow. “How about this weather?”

“Yeah, way too close to spring.”

“I got fooled too.”

“If it's summer, don't give me a cold day, it's *summer* — and vice versa, you know?”

“It's frustrating, certainly.”

“We'll never get a nice day like this again for *months*. And what about...” Icci broke off suddenly.

“Icci. Are we sharing the same thoughts?”

“No, not at all. If you don't say them, I won't either. Except... I'm thinking those thoughts too.”

“You won't get another chance like this.”

“But there might...”

“You won't. You know that, right?”

“Yes, I know. I just don't want to know.”

“But you do. *We* do. There's no ignoring it now.”

“You’re right — but I’m right too. It’s the only chance I’ll have to... I don’t want to say it.”

“Because saying so makes it too real?”

“Yes. But I’ll say it, so you don’t have to. I want to stay, but I have to go south for the winter. Without you. And I have to go today.”

“It’s... the only choice. And we’re lucky you got even this one chance.”

“Lucky... so this will be our last meal together?”

“I’m not disappointed, but... this meal should’ve tasted better.”

“So which meal would you say has been our best?”

“No single one sticks out to me.”

“Well... drat. I wanted to say ‘every meal’s the best one’, but that’s not true. Some tasted better than others.”

“Hmm... what about the time we found honey? That tasted yummy.”

“That doesn’t count, Beehive — I didn’t have any!”

~

Beehive and Icci talked in this way for most of the morning. They walked among the bare trees, the red-yellow feathers nestled atop the coarse brown fur, as they had always done.

They entered a clearing with no trace of footsteps plotted in the snow, though twigs of grass poked upward. Only a few boulders decorated the clear area, their tops still

damp from the recently melted snow. Icci flew across to the nearest boulder to stand up at Beehive's height.

"Where will you go?" Beehive asked.

"South. It's always south. I can settle down just about anywhere, you know that. As long I can come back. But..."

"Don't end your sentences prematurely, Icci."

"What if we don't see each other again?"

"Then we can't change that."

"I know... no matter how everything ends, it was all worth it. Right?"

"Worth it... I don't think there's another word more appropriate."

"That's two— oh well, I agree." Icci shook her feathers and cracked her neck with little clicks. "I guess now's as good a time as any. I mean, there's no *good* time, but..."

"I understand."

"Right. I really don't know how to say goodbye."

"Goodbye."

"You make it sound easy! Well... Goodbye. Farewell. Until we meet again — all that sap." Icci looked ready to leave — knees bent, wings tucked in — but she didn't move. "*All that sap!*? I spent a year with you, and *that's* what I came up with?"

"I thought you were the words expert. The best in Nirgenwald."

"And I still can't say the right words, Beehive."

“Then don’t. Words don’t say everything, Icci.”

## CRITICAL ESSAY

### Constructing Identity Through Animal and Adolescent Literature in *Beehive and Icci*

This essay begins, as so many folk and fairy tales do, in the woods; specifically, a small pocket of literary woods in an even smaller quarter-chapter in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*. In "Chapter 3: Looking-Glass Insects," the titular Alice travels through a magical forest where all things lose their names. Not only does Alice forget the names of the woods, the trees, and other animals, she even forgets her own name. In these woods, Alice interacts with an innocent Fawn, which has forgotten its name in the exact same fashion. Their identities a blank slate, they accompany each other through the fey woods. This fleeting cooperation ends when they exit the forest's perimeter – the spell breaks, the Fawn remembers its fear of humans, and it dashes away.

This minor subsection of a majorly influential work offers a brief yet insightful microcosm of humanity's relationship – both on and off the page – with non-human animals: a classic "us" versus "them" narrative. Carroll establishes Alice and the archetypal Fawn's individual conception for their respective "other." Alice acknowledges her presence should frighten a regular fawn, whereas for the Fawn, human beings trigger a fear not unlike that inspired by a predator. Yet neither character remembers these defining qualities of the respective other while under the forest's memory-altering spell. It's no coincidence that both Alice and the Fawn are considered "young" on their

respective sides of animality, implying that these social norms and conceptions of both self- and other-identity are taught – or, perhaps more fittingly, learned – at a young age. For a brief moment, Alice and the Fawn become free from the shackles of identity, no longer viewing themselves as a Self and an Other.

Naturally, we – the readers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – do not have the privilege of enchanted forests through which to resolve conflict both internal and external. And so, we must make do by wandering through the “woods” of literature in order to approach any approximation of prelapsarian reconciliation.

Analyzing literature through the lens of identity is by no means an untapped concept. This concept rings especially true within the realm of adolescent and children’s literature:

The ideological frames within which identities are formed are inextricably bound up with ideas about subjectivity—that sense of a personal identity an individual has of her/his self as distinct from other selves, as occupying a position within society and in relation to other selves, and as being capable of deliberate thought and action. Concepts of personal identity and selfhood are formed in dialogue with society, with language, and with other people, and while this dialogue is ongoing, modern adolescence—that transition stage between childhood and adulthood—is usually thought of as a period during which notions of selfhood undergo rapid and radical transformation. (McCallum 3)

My own manuscript, the novel *Beehive and Icci*, offers numerous approaches to self- and other-definition through the adventures of its titular protagonists, Beehive the bear and Icci the bird. *Beehive and Icci* features a similar framing device to William Goldman’s

*The Princess Bride*, where a fictionalized author has constructed the novel read by its audience. In the case of *Beehive and Icci*, the author is Wilhelm of Aurgarten. Aurgarten writes *Beehive and Icci* in his native language of Mivolta, a fictional European country, during the mid-twentieth century. Decades later, a translator simply identifying as “NC” translates Aurgarten’s novel into English, supplementing the original work with opinionated ideas and interpretations of the text through interjectory footnotes. Thus, the reader experiences Aurgarten’s “original” text framed via this singular translation.

For reference, the fictional manuscript that I (Nicolas Charlton) wrote is a novel translated by a fictional translator (NC) of a novel written by a fictional author (Wilhelm of Aurgarten) about anthropomorphized animal characters.

To include so many layers of authorship certainly complicates how readers view each individual layer of the novel’s fiction. Each of these creators – of which I include *Beehive and Icci*, who both eventually express their own spoken narratives – further conflates the liminal space between an individual who actually exists and the constructed notion of the Other. This Other refers, as the broadest term possible, to fictionalized characters, humanity-imposed animals, and even the demographic of younger audiences toward which this manuscript may appeal. Put simply, *Beehive and Icci*’s presentation of identity – both through the stories of its titular characters and the framing device of authorship – provides commentary on how animal literature, particularly the kind marketed towards young audiences, can help define both ourselves and our perception of others.

To start, I lay the foundation for the role of anthropomorphism and its affect on how *Beehive and Icci* represents and contextualizes human identity. Human beings

continue to view non-human entities through this anthropomorphized lens, appearing in various cultural guises from innocuous figures such as “Old Man Winter” to represent an entire season, or traditional songs such as “Mr. Sun” referring to a non-sentient ball of gas. Frans de Waal’s use of the anthropomorphism term provides the most context to its broad cultural application, suggesting that anthropomorphism is a “misattribution of human qualities to nonhumans, or at least overestimation of the similarities between humans and nonhumans” (256). This *overestimation* is where I trace the human characteristics of most anthropomorphized characters in literature.

In the famed *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter, rabbits appear as skittish, foraging non-human animals, and *simultaneously* as middle-class, quasi-humanoids who wear clothes, cook with pots and pans, and drink chamomile tea. For the sake of the reader, an explicitly non-rabbit audience, the images Potter evokes (both artistic and conceptual) appeal to a distinctly human sensibility of the family home and its comfortable, safe luxury. This prioritization of the knowable human imagery further defines the scope of anthropomorphism: “the unknown must be similar to the known if thought or actions are to be understood, expressed, or made bearable. Furthermore, for actions or thoughts to be understood, the unknown must be related to life as humans know it” (Blanchard 587). In this way, the reality of rabbit life must bend itself into a sympathetic yet not-quite-human shape.

Conflating the identity of human and non-human in this way recalls the theories of post-human thinking. Jaques defines post-human thinking as “not just about the blurring of boundaries betwixt-and-between humans and animals, but of recognizing and valuing heterogeneous beings outside of debilitating hierarchies” (13). The cumulative

image of post-humanist thought is Fern from *Charlotte's Web*, out of solidarity for an other, clutching the axe wielded by her father – to reject the commonplace authority in favour of empathy towards the other. It's the work of post-human literature to operate within a world still very much clinging onto past boundaries and divisions. Yet, for every rebel adolescent raging against these structures, those barriers appear more and more passable. In this way, adolescent and post-human literature go hand-in-hand as a vehicle for studying adolescent narratives.

The spectrum of anthropomorphized qualities in non-human characters varies widely from author to author. While Potter's rabbits dress in rabbit-sized human garb, Richard Adams's *Watership Down* depicts his version of rabbits with an endeavour to signify realism. For Adams's rabbits, all things associated with humanity are alien and incomprehensible – they fear humans and steal from their gardens, and they do not wear clothes at all. Yet the characters populating *Watership Down* are identifiably “people” and allegorically “human.” Adams depicts the destruction of the protagonists' home, Sandleford Warren, with catastrophic imagery through visions of blood, destroyed earth, and the claustrophobic slaughter through poisonous fumes, evoking Auschwitz's gas chambers. Such harrowing events – on top of all the other misadventures the rabbit protagonists overcome – invoke empathy, simultaneously, for non-human rabbits as victims of industrialization as well as for the genocide of rabbits-as-people. For Gruen, having younger audiences experience “storied empathy” (27) through fiction can assist developing empathy as they grow older; empathy, in contrast with sympathy, “involves the empathizer more directly and thus is motivating” (30). So while the events that occur throughout *Watership Down* fit within mundane practices (the aforementioned slaughter

is part of a housing development project), they evoke mythic significance and apocalyptic dread within both rabbit protagonists and the reading audience. While a child will likely never experience the destruction of their home at the mechanical hands of industrial equipment themselves, the experience of empathizing with the similar other may fundamentally shape their worldview.

The realm of children/adolescent literature acts as the common strain between the works of Potter and Adams (aside from rabbit protagonists.) Most often, adults perform the evil or catastrophic events within these books; meanwhile, young children become the saviours of animals who cannot speak for themselves. Towards the end of *Watership Down*, Hazel, the chief protagonist throughout the novel, is at the mercy of the rural Polyphemus, Mr. Cane, who threatens to kill the creature he sees as vermin. Lucy, the farmer's daughter, saves Hazel in an act of compassion. This chapter of the novel remains the only fragment from the perspective of a human character – fittingly entitled “Dea Ex Machina” (or “Goddess in the Machine”) – in which the empathetic female child is contrasted with the “cruel” male adult.

The natural contrast of strong powerful male and kind loving female is evoked – in a remarkably similar scene – within the first pages of White's *Charlotte's Web*. Fern stops her father from killing the runt of a pig litter, proclaiming, “If I had been very small at birth, would you have killed *me*?” (White 3). Fern's empathy changes her father's mind, an event that sets the rest of the novel's animal-centric events in motion.

Thus do readers associate the archetypal adolescent – who is not always female, as seen in Joe Green's caring (if at first misguided) nature in *Black Beauty* – with the wellbeing and care for animals. Like Alice in Carroll's novel, the protagonists of animal

literature targeted towards children and adolescents are often young, or become a figure through which “the established power structures are interrogated without necessarily being overthrown” (Nikolajeva 9). If adolescent literature’s aim, as Nikolajeva suggests, is to challenge power structures, then most of this literature featuring animals must challenge contemporary “normal” views on the animal other. All this to say that animal literature – or at least the animal literature that tries to reconcile human and non-human animals – often places two individuals together in order to enforce its themes of difference, sameness, and – ideally – acceptance.

I used this dynamic within my manuscript and applied it to the characters Beehive and Icci. While the protagonists of *Beehive and Icci* both exist as animal Others to the human reader, they are also Others to each other within their own space of an animal-centric environment. Beehive and Icci contrast each other in multiple ways, most notably age, gender, size, and sociability. This contrast – and the conflict that inevitably ensues – is theorized by Stegmaier to represent “the objectives both wanted, the perceptions each had of the other, and the patterned behaviour that resulted from the differing objectives and differing perceptions” (928). Stegmaier speaks within the context of child-parent character conflict, yet his point remains relevant to most interpersonal conflicts in adolescent literature. In order to emphasize the importance of the conflict between Self and Other, the protagonists of *Beehive and Icci* needed to also be in conflict, and eventual reconciliation, with each other.

In *Beehive and Icci*, despite Beehive and Icci’s presentation as non-human animals, the titular protagonists follow the anthropomorphic literary tradition. For example, the two travelling companions speak aloud, as do the rest of the non-human

characters in the novel. Speech itself remains one of the defining features of anthropomorphized non-human characters, yet this “human” voice each character possesses is never directly associated with human speakers. Indeed, no human characters appear within the Aurgarten-written narrative. The animal characters thus entirely exist divorced from any awareness of their human-like behaviour. Rather, they live to their own species’ ideals and in doing so define themselves through their respective social lens.

For example, the characters King and King (male and female, respectively) both suffer a crisis of the self; as lions, they share the name “King” with every other member of their species, despite proclaiming an individual identity outside uniform lionhood. The idea of every member of a species sharing the same name is, on its own merit, absurd. Even the name itself – “King” – emerges from the uniquely human concept of lions as the “King of the Jungle,” which is further complicated by how the gendered term applies universally to both male and female lions. In this way, these characters struggle to live up to an ideal not only upheld by a fictionalized version of their species, but also by the stereotype through which human animals anthropomorphize them.

Beehive, whose perspective dominates the text, tries to live up to a partially self-defined code. This “bear-hood” is inspired by the natural inclination for bears to live solitary lives, which Beehive accomplishes until he meets Icci. Much of Beehive’s personality and behaviour is defined by his childhood trauma of losing family and being forced to live alone. Beehive, of course, exists exclusively as a fictional (yet humanized) bear, suffering from a form of social anxiety verging on post-traumatic stress disorder. In

the chapter “Episode 7: The Monstrous Melon,” Beehive suffers a panic attack when “abandoned” by the Melon:

*Not again*, the bear thought. An image of the Earth Bear rose in front of his paws and his heartbeat rose up into his throat. His paws and legs and even his nose no longer felt like his own and he wanted to curl up into himself and stretch out like a leaf. His breath became conscious but the function collapsed as soon as he realized it existed. He found a tree – the closest one. He clawed at it, scraped his fur across it, smacked his whole body against it until something broke. A loud crackle and thud finally snapped him back into his mind. (37)

Nearly all the symptoms Beehive experiences during his panic attack are ones experienced by humans. Ironically – though not without acknowledgement on my part – Beehive’s “bear nature” is defined exclusively through the lens of human experience. Beehive may walk, act, and eat as a bear would, but his outlook and behaviour – who he is as a non-human *person* – conjures the previously mentioned dual-sided empathy targeted on the page towards human and non-human animals.

The prioritization of human psychology as a defining feature of a uniquely constructed bear/animal identity, while entirely fictional, remains a steadfast literary tradition within recent decades. David Sedaris’s *Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk* features numerous tales surrounding animal characters contextualized within human narratives. One story, “The Parenting Storks,” begins with a newly-hatched stork asking its mother the age-old question of *where babies come from* (51). The story deals with the awkwardness the stork parent faces when asked the question, followed by an avoidance of the truth. This ironic inversion of reality relies on the pre-existing awareness of two

concepts: the cultural myth that children are “born” when delivered by storks, and the commonplace avoidance of telling children about sex.

Sedaris’s use of relatable human-animals provides a common context for postmodern animal literature, which deals largely with blurring the lines between human and animal characters. Discourse reflects this shift through a linguistic schism, where “animals” become “non-human animals” and “humans” – so long divorced from conjecture on the natural world – become “human animals.” Thinkers such as Derrida and Heidegger helped mould this conversation, though my view on the subject aligns more with Guichet:

Humanity consists in fact not in a set of personal and positive characteristics but essentially in a de-animalization, so that it is fundamentally the fruit of a negative process. To this extent, by losing animals – and their diversity – man loses himself too, thus demonstrating the profound truth that *identity consists primarily in being different from others, which also means being the same as them in some sense.* (83 – emphasis mine)

Defining humanity and animality in separate terms, it seems, does not end the conversation – where do we find the animality in humans, or the humanity in animals? I find this gelatinous concept corresponds conveniently with Gubar’s thoughts on (not) defining children’s literature:

The fact that something is very difficult to define – even “impossible to define exactly” – does not mean that it does not exist or cannot be talked about. In such cases, we simply have to accept that the concept under consideration is complex and capacious; it may also be unstable (its meaning shifts over time and across

different cultures) and fuzzy at the edges (its boundaries are not fixed and exact).

(212)

As definitions of identity and genre become more and more liquid, defining specific literary works – not to mention each individual character within each work – becomes subject to near-limitless individual interpretation.

In *Beehive and Icci*, the reader's perception of the titular characters is heavily influenced by their human counterparts: the author Aurgarten and his adopted niece Mariena. *Beehive and Icci* offers many parallels between the "real" events surrounding the Aurgartens and the novel's animal protagonists. The author's own anti-social behaviour – largely hyperbolic and in no way representative of agoraphobia's seriousness – bears a resemblance to *Beehive*'s own private nature. Author and bear become unintentionally invested in the well being of a newly orphaned niece and a wayward tanager (respectively). The characters, so set in their ways, must now face the other in order to experience the Hegelian reconciliation of the other. It's worth mentioning this particular case of anthropomorphism in *Beehive and Icci*, because the writing and publication of this "Mivoltan" novel is framed as Aurgarten's meditation on his own personhood. As the author of "his" story, Aurgarten constructs *Beehive and Icci* to retain his own agency:

We like to feel we are in control of the shape of our lives and are living towards something we have personally endorsed. [...] If we are the protagonists in our own stories, then we are essential to its development; the world does indeed revolve around us, even if our story is a little one and soon ended. (Vice 98)

Aurgarten's identity – or at the very least a hazy reinterpretation of it – shapes and informs the narrative and its animal characters. The author imposes himself onto the natural world, anthropomorphizing his own self-image onto a bear.

Despite Aurgarten's need for control, the ideology he communicates throughout *Beehive and Icci* – in the same vein as other animal works – is one of bridging the gaps between Self and Other. Within his own personal life, Aurgarten's original concept for the novel featured only Beehive as its sole protagonist (187). Only after adopting Mariena did Aurgarten conceive of a companion for his bear protagonist; Icci enters as an outside force entirely alien to Beehive, as just as Mariena does to Aurgarten himself. In the end, Beehive and Icci must part for the winter; despite their bond, they ultimately abide by the rules of nature. Their bittersweet departure mirrors Mariena's eventual departure from Mivolta, leaving Aurgarten alone once more. Aurgarten and Beehive's acceptance, then, acts as a true reconciliation of the Other.

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