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IT'S

ISSUE 7 JUNE 2025

HEARTBEATS



DO NOT, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, SHARE THIS ZINE!

Calling all Audionauts! Since the intergalactic ban on music, perpetrated by everyone's favorite bureaucrat, Lord Prosect, the infinite void has been eerily silent. In the before times, known as Before Music (or BM), music was distributed freely and fairly and pressed onto wax for everyone to spin. These tasty beats were thought lost forever after the attacks on July 6th, 5000 by Lord Prosect and his minions. Every radio station from the Andromeda to the Zymolytic Galaxy was assaulted, and cassettes, records, and CDs were disintegrated. If not for the brave Audionauts out there who smuggled what they could, the thumping rhythms and trilling arpeggios of the universe's greatest musicians might have been lost forever.

Before that attack, The Intergalactic Beets Project (then known as The Intergalactic Beats Project before the ban on the word "beat") was a major distributor of the music lost that day. After our headquarters was decimated, only two agents remained in operation.

We are those agents.

It has been millennia since the sounds of our artists have been heard, but every day we discover and decode the lost music that fueled generations to shake their hips and bang their heads. This Zine will track our progress as we travel through space and time to restore our entire catalog.

We need your help.

Our methods are unconventional, which means we lack the resources of the former IBP. We rely solely on your tips and scouting reports to track down everything lost in the fires and everything that has been secretly

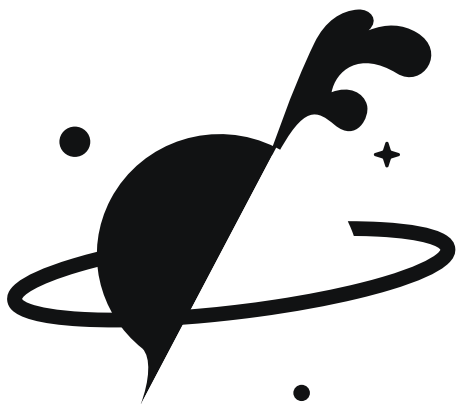
made since. If you are out there and your tasty beats need a home, send us a secure signal so that we may help distribute your music freely and fairly. We run the risk every single day that we will be discovered and imprisoned, or worse...

Visit our telecommunications hub at INTERGALACTICBEETSPROJECT.COM and sign up to receive our Zine, listen to our entire decoded discography, and join the fight against Lord Prosect. Together, we can bring an end to his tyrannical rule and restore music to the ears of all creatures in the universe.

In the words of our Neptunian supporters:



F31ix & Cyllene



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RUBUS spins a tale of the Two Fates of Zefflehim both before and after their tyranny faded.

Heart Beets Staff 7 RUFF RIDERS

Dog Fight promises a sonic journey like no other. Take a ride on the wings of glory with their thumping, self-titled debut.

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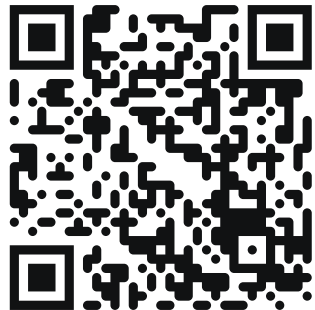
Med Evil's God From The Machine takes inspiration from a tale of nature, revenge, and love.

WHAT IS THE IBP?

The INTERGALACTIC BEETS PROJECT seeks out and decodes the tastiest beats in the universe, presses them to vinyl, and distributes them for all creatures to listen to. From 2021 until the year 5000, the IBP made a name for itself by making music free, easy to collect, and worth waiting for. After Lord Prosect banned all music on July 6th, 5000, it became our mission to save every last beat in the universe, rebuild our catalog, and make sure that the past is never forgotten.

The IBP does this as a free service, however, we encourage all Audionauts to support our mission in other ways: by purchasing merch from our Shop, signing up for our email newsletter, or by reading this very Zine! We have begun to repress our collection to vinyl and we hope that you'll stop by our telecommunications hub and pick up a copy.

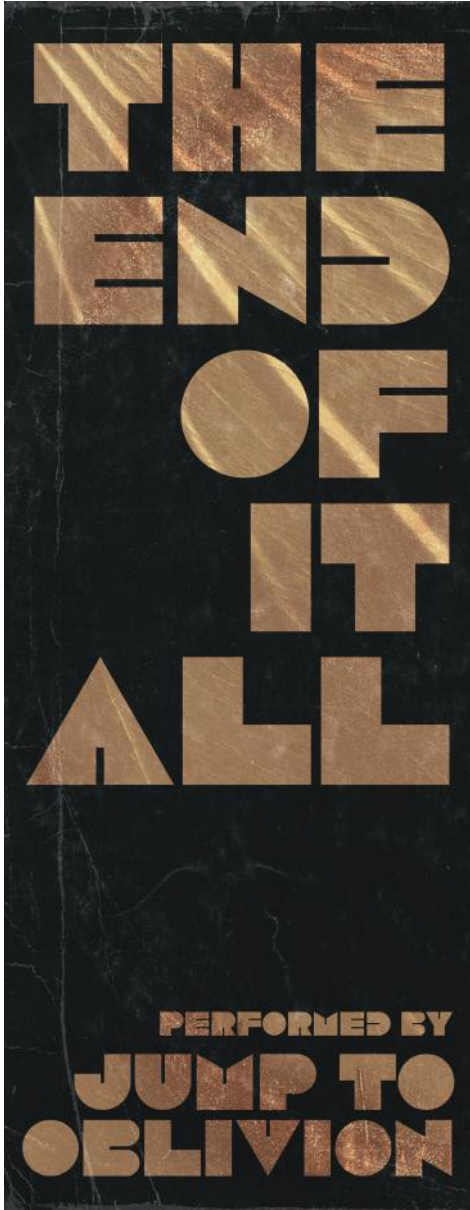
Due to the constant threat of Lord Prosect, we take great caution in encrypting every communication, every item in our Shop, and every beat of every song. We have thwarted his silver hand and we will continue to do so for millennia to come.



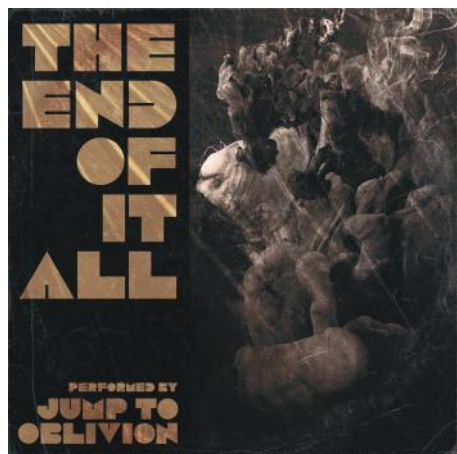
INTERGALACTICBEETSPROJECT.COM

Welcome aboard!

BEAT OF THE MONTH



Wormholes are not as dangerous as we once thought. Unimaginable horrors were commonly expected upon entry into the naturally occurring phenomenon, and, like most misconceptions that are soon debunked, officials advised the creatures of the Universe to avoid them at all costs. For Logaan-X and the members of Jump To Oblivion, wormholes were a summer mainstay. You see, dear Audionauts, wormholes are not inherently dangerous; they become life-threatening in their application and landing point. Beyond the safety issue, as it turns out, the residents of Othezor (in the Hodie Star Belt) had harnessed this technology several millennia ago. Where you or I might take a hovercraft, use our hooves or tentacles, or even a wheeled vehicle to traverse simple or complicated terrain, it was Othezorians who were beboppin' across their planet with the help of self-controlled wormholes through activation wristlets (and, at one point, embedded data chips). While highly convenient, their application as a prank, at least among Logaan-X, Cotos, and Barnilliam (lead keyboard, bass, and drums, respectively), made it most effective. Every summer, the trio was shipped off (read: banished) to Camp Carfungibo, a somewhat dilapidated sleepaway camp far from the reaches of the Hodie Star Belt. Here they would pretend to fall from high places, only to disappear (through a wormhole) and appear safely elsewhere on the property. These summer days and nights form the basis of *The End*



of *It All*, an ode to the first and last days of friendship and commiseration. The album cover belied a harsher tone, though there are moments of dread in the closing track, *Slaughterhouse Three*, it is primarily an uplifting affair, rife with summer synth and humming bass. The Glory Days are far behind us, and “Remember When” may be the lowest form of conversation, but *The End of It All* is about the warmth of that friendship, the daze of growing up, and the realization that your former you will never return, so enjoy it now before the end of it all.

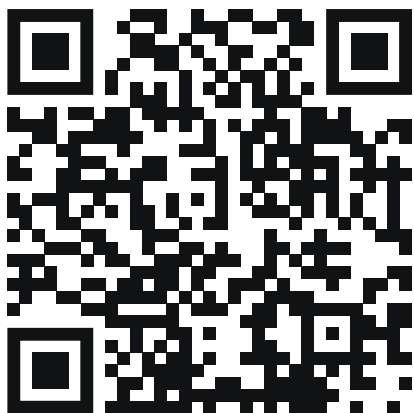
THE END OF IT ALL

SIDE A

1. Illusion of Choice
2. Meloncholiagraphy
3. Remember When?
4. The Buzzing of Flies

SIDE B

1. The End of It All
2. Bug Juice
3. The Echo of a Wormhole
4. Slaughterhouse Three



Scan me to listen!

RUFF RIDERS

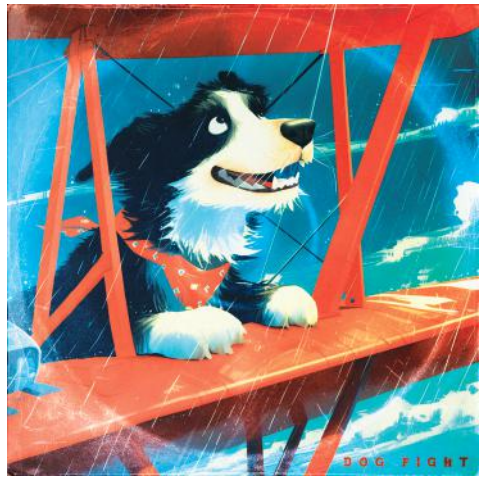
Dog Fight promises a sonic journey like no other. Take a ride on the wings of glory with their thumping, self-titled debut due on August 1st.

It was the bark heard round the Universe. The inhabitants of Orbis Canum were a peaceful bunch: four-legged, furry, mostly cute. While they had accomplished much in their planet's history, it was their lack of opposable thumbs that limited their opportunities for advancement. In no way primitive, the Caeruleum had developed simplistic ways to fight, mainly with their teeth (and sometimes their cavernous, echoing shouting known as "barking"). This left the populace each with a mouth capable of smiling and a death grip nearly unmatched. However, when the people of Germaniae invaded Orbis Canum, they did so with advanced weaponry, like coil accelerators, capable of delivering devastating rounds that would pulverize even the strongest of Caeruleum. To the rescue came the Sopwith. They had signed a treaty with Orbis Canum some decades past to provide protection in exchange for work offworld, which would benefit both planets. Armed with propeller-powered crafts, both the Sopwith and the Caeruleum took to the skies, the furry inhabitants' keen eyesight and hearing alerting pilots to potential bombing targets and strafing enemy craft. The deadliest duo was Leo Joco, veteran pilot of several intergalactic wars, and his companion Daisy, a black-and-white Caeruleum whose accuracy was unmatched. Together they fought through the Germaniaen forces, obliterating frigates and columns of troops, interrupting supply and communication lines, and trudging deep into enemy territory to deliver a blistering and explosive message: "*We will never surrender.*" The war would stretch



on for 17 years, incurring millions of casualties on both sides. Daisy, who survived the war and passed away just a few weeks after the Treaty of Treats was signed, had ensured that Caeruleum would forever be safe from invasion with the establishment of planetary borders and an extended gravity and revolution contingency plan. In honor of Daisy, the members of Dog Fight, themselves Caeruleumians, formed amid the war, nine years in and eight years to go, as a way for the government to earn more money to continue building and surviving. Commissioned by President Sweetlips, the resulting album, some say, turned the tide of war. Within were eight blistering tracks,

as if one were taped to the very wing of a craft, zooming through the air, dropping grenades, bricks, whatever you could find, onto the enemy. Daisy, of course, was at the center of the narrative, her photo adorning the album's cover as her celebrity rose amongst the resistance. Featuring heavy, crunching bass, soaring melodies, and cloud-like rhythm and padding, *Dog Fight* is only half the picture. As there was never a follow-up album to coincide with the end of the war, it served as the fuel that stoked the flames of freedom, but never encapsulated the actual price that was paid. Daisy, between sorties, would make public appearances, sign paw-tographs, and encourage citizens to buy the album; then, it was back to the wing of her plane, gripping onto the canvas for dear life as she barked out instructions to the pilot. The Germanians feared the echoing call that would precede the whining buzz of her propellered vessel, knowing all too well that death was just beyond the horizon. Stand out tracks like *Good Girl* and *Bricks, Grenades, Whatever!* showcased the thrilling anxiety of her and Leo Joco's daily performances, and, too, of *Dog Fight*'s talents. So exhilarating was the album that some listeners, with weaker constitutions, could not make it through even the opening track. It was here that *Dog Fight* could have cemented itself as a powerhouse group: commissioned by the government and then breaking into the industry to spread its message. But funding dried up as more troops arrived from beyond the stars, and money was diverted away from the public-facing war effort. We salute both Daisy and *Dog Fight*; they created indelible images of bravery, freedom, and creativity, inspiring others to pick up both keyboard and weapon in the never-ending battle to keep the tastiest beats in the Universe free.



DOG FIGHT

SIDE A

1. Good Girl!
2. The Propeller Song
3. RUFF
4. Look Out Below

SIDE B

1. Maxim
2. Bricks, Grenades, Whatever!
3. An Incident on the Western Front
4. Daisy



Scan me to listen!

STORY TIME

TELLING THE BEES

Med Evil was obsessed with ancient tragedies. So much so, that her third record **God From The Machine** leaned heavily into the mythos of the Lost City of Atlantis. On December 31st, 2026, we look forward to the official decoding of the entire album for your listening pleasure. And, while our dedicated team plugs away at the fossilized remains of the album, the IBP presents here one of the stories that inspired her song **Royal Jelly**, the marquee track from the album, by mysterious author Apiarius. We hope its striking narrative inspires you to create some of the tastiest beats in the Universe.

The harmony balanced atop the waddling rhythm of leather-padded soles, each one grinding, kicking, shooing aside careless pebbles and compacting the dry earth into familiar divots. Further up the abdomen, where sashes of knotted hemp hung loosely around their waists, was the twinkling of possibility. The bulging sacks of burlap were to be judged by their weight and curious shapes. Over the billowing colors of shoulder-fastened *chiton* and modest *stola* alike, the purses hurried from stall to stall, the coinage rubbing curiously against neighbors both large and small, *clacking* across olivewood counters in anticipation of services and items rendered. Golden rays streaked across the open-air aisles, the early afternoon rising rather lazily, the morning still chilled enough to require a *palla* around the chest. Livestock squawked, jewels gleamed, and negotiations rose from a polite whisper to all-out war. It was not wrapped in malice, only principle, the final price eventually satisfying all parties.

The island marched onward with glee, transfixed on the wondrous pigments of the earth.

With a single strap missing from around his toes, the inconspicuous beggar tightened his grip upon his sandal, sinking his flesh deep into the coarse hide, dragging his foot while the other stomped normally. The limp was artificial, but not strictly on purpose, though the hooded *chlamys* furthered the impression that he did not belong. Nearly a head taller than the others, he adopted a slouch to his shoulders and neck, and slid between the folds of farmers and city folk who had ventured down from their marble palaces for a taste of the old country. Normally, a bounty such as this would have required a bucket to collect his watering mouth, but he wandered past the fragrances and made his way to a rather preoccupied stall.

He held up his index finger to the purveyor and was provided a cracked vessel and a slosh of fermented indulgence. “Two *obols*, now,” the

bartender hissed, his greasy palm magnetized to the skinny wrist of the beggar, preventing a free drink.

Dipping into his shallow purse, he gifted the suspicious scowl with misshapen silver tender. “It used to be a soldier drank *oxycrat* for free,” the wanderer noted. The purveyor cleared his nostrils of mucus and deposited the muck into the dirt, settling the matter and collecting his prize. The libation sank to the back of his throat and tickled his esophagus, though he hid his disdain as his knuckles wiped his lips clean. “The vinegar,” he nodded, eyeing a clay pot in the rear of the stall. “How much?”

He had underestimated the weight of the liquid, his cocked elbow cradling the base like a fussy newborn. An irritated magistrate pushed past him, his clean shoulder jabbing the beggar’s soiled outfit. Curses were exchanged, but they both had more important places to be. A mental list kept him on course: a jar of resin collected from a conifer rancher; a handful of yellow sulfur from the grape farmer; a pair of dried, hollow reeds from the archer, declining, of course, to purchase a gilded set of arrows; a ball of dyed yarn required much negotiation from an elder woman, but she relented, her profit for the day already lagging; a simple steel ringlet no wider than his thumb was procured from a boy and his sister, the price doubled from his purse at his insistence; a *lekkythos* bubbling with petroleum slid quietly between the wrinkles of his dress, his lazy finger pointing to a particularly interesting copper lamp in the rear of the stall of which he had no intention of purchasing. Feigning sadness at his empty satchel, he wished the smith a good day and reentered the flow, angling to the rear of the bazaar with no apparent purpose.

The market had been purposely erected only a stone’s throw from the salty tide and the creaking chorus of docked fishing vessels. From

one slippery arm to the next, large tentacled and finned creatures were tossed from the hulls onto deposits of salt, then sliced and displayed to customers. The beggar wandered towards the sting of the ocean and the outer border of the doe-eyed. Here the sagging limbs of oak drifted overhead, inviting those who had been scorched under the summer sun to seek refuge. He accepted the invitation and produced a slow shuffle up a modest incline, the pathway cured from centuries of similar excursions.

The drone of haggling never truly vanished, but the natural filters nevertheless worked tirelessly to camouflage the insanity below. Newly minted fronds from a grove of poplar wafted in the greedy breeze, the warm breath stealing the aromas of the woodland and the seedlings of cypress and Platanus alike. The trunks of the forest warriors became his crutches, his burden sloshing and clinking about him like a cheap orchestra. A kick intended to remove debris from his path scattered a loose pile of flat rocks. A moment to select the smoothest of the Persian blue specimens allowed him time to verify and formally complete his mental list.

From around a shallow bend came the equally noisy accompaniment of a withered hiker. She too clanged about, her walking stick of maplewood *whacking* the dirt like a hammer upon iron. Her other hand was preoccupied with a clay stirrup jar; its weight straightened her elbow as it hovered just above the path. Tiny rivulets snaked hungrily across the face, the vessel witness to hundreds of years of abuse. Between the cracks, a shimmering gold hue leaked, the network of flaws pooling the substance at the base before her ragged momentum knocked loose the globules. The beggar eyed the unintentional trail she had made as it curled steeper into the canopy.

"A bit lost?" the elder asked as she paused to rest her swelling knees. He ignored her attempts to preoccupy her day with frivolous conversation and limped past, the trail of sticky liquid igniting a siren song in his nostrils. "I hope you intend to bring some good news!" she called after him.

The suggestion was unable to penetrate his hood.

Higher he climbed, the steep trail testing his balance without bias. How had the wrinkled woman ascended so easily? Perspiration streamed down his temples, his chest awash with a murderous heat. The threat of leaving empty-handed whipped his spine and gnawed at his ankles. His hand swatted aside a nuisance of bulbous yellow and black, the errant *buzz* scrunching his lips upward into his nose and his

eyelids nearly shut.

He quickly self-corrected his rude introduction and lowered his weapon. The curious bee had been sent as a scout, to judge his character and his purpose long before the others would need to notice him. The furry drone settled into a voluptuous cup of a budding violet flower, though it did not intend to drain it of nectar just yet. The beggar paused and stared curiously at the striped insect. It wore a vest of prickly fur across its thorax, the delicate ends of each strand encrusted with pollen. Large oval eyes interpreted his stance, the black expanse never blinking. He nervously formed a fist and slapped it to his chest, just over his shuddering heartbeat. His knee buckled and formed a graceless genuflection, the disruption sacrificing a mouthful of vinegar into the soil.

"F-forgive me," he whispered, his hood bowed. "I come only with an abundance of good news."

The bee, seemingly unimpressed, launched from the colorful perch and whipped around the beggar's ears, the microscopic gravity of the being a useful slingshot to propel it deeper into the heart of the woodland. Unsure of this particular practice, he hurried to the balls of his feet, his luggage whipping this way and that. Despite his loose grip upon his bucking sandals, he stumbled after the humming guide, flailing his arms to keep his equilibrium. The loose vein of an uprooted tree poked through the weathered trail, an obstacle to those minds unable to walk and think simultaneously; he bounded over the hazard, keeping the insect centered in his pursuit.

A sharp bank to the right and they were both plowing through fronds fresh and rotten. His forearm bent back bony, prying branches before they added to his tome of facial scars. Left now, whirring around boulders and exhausted trunks, hollow and festering with their own budding communities. Up to his ankles in brush, the beggar stomped confidently, regulating his breathing, the competing fragrances tricking him into absorbing their vitalism. The bee peered behind its wiggling abdomen and tweeted a gentle encouragement:

Closer. Closer still.

His leap was intended to clear whatever lay behind the curtain of vines and spade-like fingers, but the landing was unsupportive, a bed of sand shifting his left foot towards the heavens and his right into the underworld. Like an oversized avian, he extended his arms and swung them with increasing uncertainty, his nose pecking the grains. His jiggling paused out of necessity, the excitement of the chorus suddenly coating him in serenity.

The beggar's neck straightened, but it was not enough to fit the towering monolith into his field

of view. He negotiated a step in retreat to behold the shrine fully, to allow his throat to swallow nervously without alerting his gracious hosts. The bulbous formation was natural, a leftover tooth of rock that had weathered the sea's salty kiss and millennia of devilish storms. Its base extended like a delicate veil to the natural edge of the precipice overlooking the bazaar, its participants a throbbing colony of their own. The small clearing formed a private crescent, the trees shuffling back respectfully, their wispy boughs offering tribute in the form of budding flowers.

While the island's tone took on a rather obvious palette of muted browns, blues, and grays, the monolith glowed in protest in a deceptive shade of black. Thousands of honeybees remained glued to the edifice that had enveloped the rock: a pliable, hexagonal prismatic wax. They had assembled in a protective blanket, their wings beating in waves that caused their dwelling to pulsate in shimmering patterns. The very stone seemed to breathe with each sonic ripple, heaving angrily at the intruder in its midst.

More scouts were dispatched to attend to the beggar, their rehearsed maneuvers keeping a respectful distance while recording important data sets. Into the sand went his belongings, his hands tumbling loosely at his sides. The dull deposit frightened the hive momentarily, a wave of silver insecurity thundering upward to the summit.

"No-no-no," he assured in a whisper, a palm displayed to aid his explanation. "I come...I come bearing only good news. *Victorious news*. You must listen!"

The welcoming party was suddenly called to return to their posts, a second shift launched to continue the analysis. Hovering just a breath from his fingertips ensured safety from a one-handed swipe and the inconvenient sting of their barbed lancets. While he waited for an audience, he was struck by sudden thirst, a deluge of saliva drowning his tongue, overlapping his teeth. From the inland-facing edge of the monolith, a golden syrup leaked through the phalanx of bees, dripping liberally over their heads and into an oblong, pine trough, glistening like the hold of a ship after a successful hunt. He could taste the bounty, could feel its silken viscosity coating his gums and slithering down his parched throat, though only his nose was allowed to accept its scent for now. Tears marched along the rim of his eyelids and stationed themselves admirably at the corners, but his eyelashes ensnared them before allowing them to dive foolishly into the crag of his stubble.

Pride stifled his blubbering; wonder tempered his expectations. There was still much work to be

done.

"I do not expect you to venture a guess," he began warmly, "as to who I am...who I represent. I am the son of Kalós, who once called this island home. W-who shared this forest with you. He would often boast of his childhood, his sustenance no less than your nectar and untold ambrosia. His roots, his very *essence*, touched every corner of this island, and it was perhaps his duty to tend, in some way, to your nature. But," and here is where the already cracked marble began to chip once more, "he, like so many of his brothers, was called off to fight upon the black sands and shores of lands not yet named. It was beneath these bloody waves that I was granted the honor of life."

The hive blinked as the scouts and protective drones flapped their wings in unison, though the response had evolved from timidity to a gesturing curl, inviting the beggar to continue. He carefully shuffled a stride forward, the shaded sand giggling between his toes. "They bestowed upon me the name *Kakó*. I suppose the seas were infuriated that evening, my mother tossed and battered below deck as candles and a steady hand guided me. It pains me to begin my fortunate news in the midst of war...but that is all I have ever known."

A pair of emissaries rushed back to their positions among the black and yellow mass, suddenly put off by Kakó's morbid explanation. "As to be expected," he chuckled. "It is an instrument which has lost its strings and olive luster. My father spoke of you more than my mother; he instilled in me a respect for the song which you have perfected, long before either of us began this wretched campaign. He shared stories of victory and love from this very spot, hoping to gain an ounce of your precious nectar to feed his family, his livestock." Curiosity pushed him to circle the monolith, the open sea and lazy stone port below unaware of his powerful testimony. "He taught me of the hierarchy in which you operate, how the good news and good fortunes of this island lifted the forest, strengthened the crop, and fueled exploration." He swung his hands towards the calm, azure waters, his fingers flittering as the breeze rushed over his calluses. A few drones ventured to join him and admire the view, taking up position around his hood.

This prompted him to remove the grimy covering and bare his oak-stained eyes. His hair had dried in slanted patches, the rancid stench of seawater rooted in his scalp. Kakó attempted to manicure the brush, but there was no taming such an ancient ruin. "I must look as if I crawled from the bottom of the depths," he sighed. He glanced over his shoulder, hoping to stir the hive further. "I

suppose this all boils down into an unrecognizable thickness to you. *Unwanted*. Despite what you believe, I come hauling good news atop my sloping shoulders."

He turned his back on the idyllic view and stood at a respectful distance. "My father prepared me for war. I was not born to tend to your needs, I was not born to carve, to paint, to dig. I was created to pierce the belly of insurrection, of conquest, of evil. Therefore, I never knew my mother, I did not know *kindness*." This admission enraged the colony, and the drones tightened their formation. Kakó clasped his palms together, hoping to shrink himself, prepared to endure the sting of rejection. "It was at Marathon that I finally understood what I had been missing. I was foolish...I..."

He hunted for an explanation.

A broad tree branch partially gnawed by a four-legged creature broke under his insistence. He swung it decidedly like a *xiphos* and pointed it menacingly at the shivering bees. "*I panicked*," he admitted. "I sprang from the safety of my unit's line and charged the Persian front with abandon. I screamed as though my skull were fully engulfed, like a madman who had passed between planes. Under a storm cloud of arrows, black as night, I ran." He illustrated by dodging the same broken branch multiple times. "I did not understand until much later why I did not endure any harm, but, as I leapt, I gave credence only to my country, to my father and his insistence that I must defend *to the death* everything sacred that he had worked for. Storming their battlements was akin to drowning in a font of blood; this way and that, I hacked through enemy armor and flesh. The roar of my unit soon overwhelmed my ears...it echoed within my helmet. My brothers gained the courage to shed their fear. My simple act fueled the very essence of the battle and ensured victory, and perhaps a bit of peace."

A cluster near the monolith's midsection was the first to break rank with purpose. Upward they swarmed, granting them space above their brethren, to signal appropriately. Like the delicate petals they pollinated, the bees bloomed, each selecting a succulent bud to perch themselves upon. Their departure unveiled a hexagonal pattern of gold, the others forbidden from smothering the gap. Honey filled each of the tunnels to bursting, the fertile drip beginning its tedious descent into the trough below.

"You, no doubt, have heard of the victory at Marathon," Kakó smiled. "King Darius, as I am told, suffered a collapse of mind and heart following the defeat!" The quip unleashed another small squad of bees into the surrounding brush,

their legs and abdomen coated in fertility. "I must confess, I surely had the blood of Ares in me that morning...the number of dead was staggering. Hades himself ascended from his throne to congratulate our triumph, and we thundered for weeks after, howling mightily at the stars. It was during this haze that I suddenly fell upon my knees, *weakened*." He did so now, into the sand. "Her eyes glowed from across our encampment." His own flooded with saline. "She whispered... and it rushed between my ears as if her lips were pressed to my flesh."

Kakó stared at the fake sword clenched between his fingers. Disgusted, he dropped the imposter and slid his knuckles across his eyes to rid himself of sadness. "I had not the heart to drive my steel into the enemy further. I could not bring myself to stomp my iron boot, nor take part in the merriment paid for with blood. She took my hand and cured me of the blight my actions had caused. *I loved this woman*. My Autonoe." His throat seized and his saliva clotted, initiating a fit of coughing.

Undeterred, more bees sought the nectar of the forest, the hive now a true patchwork of gold and onyx. "I must have seen the gods in her. She was pure and righteous. Her hand extended and the natural world clambered to kiss her fingertips. Can you see her? *Can you see her now?*" The buzz of their giddiness ebbed and flowed as the peak of the monolith disengaged, the fuzzy shield off now to expand their empire. The trough below accepted the curling, heavy flow, a route forming across the hive that was free of obstruction, though the deposit was far from a worthy haul.

"Against my father's wishes, I forsook my brothers and ran. Arm in arm, Autonoe and I sailed. For distant waters...*for distance*. We lived off the land, we bartered and proved ourselves to the gods. We brought only good news to the creatures, took only what we needed and returned even more. Paradise cannot exist only among the highest mountains, among the white-haired and gilded. It was *here*." He stared at his unsteady palms. "*Here* within my grasp. The sweetest honey could not have eclipsed my joy."

The sun encouraged an avalanche of nectar to seep liberally like the remnants of a burning candle, each stream gaining speed as the trough spread the increasing flow evenly across its girth. "Then," Kakó sighed, "*a child*. A boy or girl, it did not matter. Life grew within her belly! The very life I had taken mere moments before. The son of a son of a son. I had driven the warm metal into his neck. I had severed his connection before he could command his eyes to blink. He too had found heat

within his own mother's womb, had sprouted as a seedling, and was nurtured into the ravenous snarl that now bled at my feet. I swore to Autonoe that our child would not know this pain, would never have to endure the decisions that I so blindly and swiftly executed." The skirt of the hive wafted playfully, having dispatched more than three-quarters of its protectors, ejecting those who were buoyed and satisfied by his words.

Kakó smacked his lips, the image of the trough repeated in the lenses of his eyes. "It is here, asleep in my bed, tucked under the roof of my home that I came to know *that stench*." He threaded his finger through the loop on the neck of the vinegar jug and hoisted it above his head. The spout tipped and doused his face, the excess soaking quickly into his *chlamys*. Into the forest he chuckled the empty vessel, flinching when it buckled against the shield of a watchful maple. "The sky burned with lust that very night!" he crowed. "Blood and bone seethed across the sky. An odor of vinegar tickled my nostrils before a mighty fist crushed my nose. His cloven hooves galloped through the front door, his horned head clearing the hard clay walls of their bearings, bringing my home crashing down upon me."

Those drones who still clung to the hive shuddered with fear, their distress call echoing to the furthest of the scouts. "Autonoe screamed my name over the *clap* of thunder, but the beast's gallop intervened. *Kheiron*, the bold, *the just*. These are names given to him by those who *fear him*, those who have received his charity. Among his half-breed kind he is but a puppet of Titan Cronus and Philyra, taught by Apollo to hunt and forage. Hunt for *my Autonoe*!" From the precious, wriggling tips of white and blue flowers, the first wave charged, angling for his temples. The lingering vinegar on Kakó's skin seethed across the imperceptible hairs sprouting from the six-legged insects. Suddenly, those who had rushed ashore were stunned, their grip loosening, their wings weighed heavily by the residual chemical. To the sand they plummeted, spinning like loosened seeds. If not for their diminutive state, the sound of their dull demise would have reached the shores of unmapped nations.

Kakó stomped towards the partially defended hive as one by one the drones lost consciousness, their honey-soaked hold not enough to keep them bound to the hexagonal comb. "Kheiron's cave became my circus, his chest emptied of everything that proved he was alive, his head split in every direction and filtered upon the crag of his very walls." Another stride, the gap closing; a second squadron bared down upon him. The others

frantically waffled, unable to choose between saving the monolith, deescalating the threat, or collapsing from the shock of the horrid tale. "It is foolish to think that our gods seek only the best for their subjects. Autonoe was just another debt to be paid, one that had driven the half-horse heathen from his penitent ways." For Queen and colony, the bees dive-bombed his flesh, their stingers unable to penetrate the fabric of his *chlamys*. "Months and years became merely distant conveniences as I traced the intricate chain of debt back to the selfishness of my father. Ares would not grant him a son unless his demands were to be met, so he turned his cheek to the underworld and bartered my mother's soul for a warrior he could use to tame nature, to bring it to its knees."

From his waist sprang a pockmarked dagger, the swift motion gutting the unprotected hive from neck to groin. The remaining bees dispersed, collapsing from shock and exhaustion, allowing him to spread the jagged folds. The edges resisted like leathered flesh. His forearms drowned in honey. Deep within the catacombs, cowering in the darkness, lay the fuchsia-spotted matriarch. "You will be my fourth," he grunted, the squeak of a dented cork preceding the empty burp of a glass vial. He cared little if she drowned in her tribute and jammed the Queen into the tube, plugging it with a hard tap to his palm. He admired the struggling insect as she attempted to navigate the magma-like pace of the encased honey.

He then ripped a chunk of honeycomb from the destroyed nest and shoved the waxy rind into his mouth. "To live upon the good fortunes of others is godlike is it not?" He tossed the uneaten sliver into the weeds and loaded his belongings back onto his shoulders.

Whether she had approached silently, or his joy had superseded the noisy infiltration, he had little time to discern. The anxious stare of a young girl peeked between the sea of wilting branches, her dress camouflaged by the pollinated menagerie. A basket of wildflowers in her possession tumbled into the soil. Bewilderment tainted her eyes, the sight of the beggar standing rigid and triumphantly in front of a murderous gash causing confusion.

It was implausible.

Yet she was compelled to point, emphatically at that. "*What have you done?*" she asked of him, her timidity providing little more than a whisper. Her sincerity drove Kakó to flee, his trajectory through a prickly bush earning him stinging rebukes. "*What have you done!?*" she repeated as she stumbled towards the dying monolith. The forest froze immediately, unwilling to provide help

or guidance to either party. The girl collapsed into the sand and lovingly scooped the tittering body of an incapacitated bee into her hands.

"No-no-no," she pleaded. "You mustn't leave, now. I have brought you all I have; I have come to install fresh nutrients. *Arise. Arise!*" The drone mustered a weak turn of its head, its antennae absorbing her sincerity.

"*What has possessed you!*" The elderly shuffle was accompanied by an armful of sunbaked and floured bread, his aged skin tone a near-perfect match.

"It was not I," she pleaded to the next tributary. "A beggar. A beggar in a hood...I came upon him and-and..."

The veteran had misplaced his tenacity and wept with the force of a lone survivor. He tossed his carefully prepared gift into the void and collected an army of bees into his care. "*Not now,*" he declared. "My harvest has born untold swells of wheat. *Those,*" he pointed to the ghosts of the loaves, "I have brought in your honor, in honor of my...my *grandchild*. He is rose-cheeked and buoyant, he alone carries the sword of my name into the future. He will grow strong on your offering."

Kakó jabbed his elbow upward, clocking a delivery boy in the chin and upending his cart of caged fowl. He ignored the rigid indexes of hapless consumers as they tracked his escape. He bounded over the counter of a stall and crashed through the curtained back entrance, emerging into the sweltering heat of boiling stew. The sole of his foot jettisoned the cauldrons and eased back those who sought to lay their hands upon him. Spear-wielding soldiers were called upon in a unison cry of outrage, their trot no faster than a lazy gull.

Through the seagrass and onto the stone pier, he shrieked, the docking sailors catching his escape in media res. His vessel carried a single sail affixed to a yard and suspended from halyards. The prow and the stern were decked with rotten pine and the intervening space amidship was occupied by a single rower's bench. Slicing through the anchoring rope, he pounced from the pier and landed flat-footed aboard, his belongings crashing haphazardly along the surface. He unraveled the yellowing sail and jammed the oars into the water.

The mainstays of the bazaar rushed to the edge of the sea, flinging epithets and stones at his escape, but the rhythm of the boat pounded in his skull, fueling him to keep pace and ignore their threats.

To the edge of the cliff, the young girl carried the invalid insect as the elder continued his good-natured offensive. "*There!*" she proclaimed,

identifying Kakó and his spirited getaway. As if energized by a static charge, the drone in her palm rolled upright and took flight, racing for the open water. Her hair spun wildly as the army of revived bees regained their luster, the overwhelming effect of the vinegar dissipating in the ghoulish mountain breeze, and sprinted after the lone, selfless drone. Not all were willing to descend among the slack-jawed locals, their shoulders shrugged, for their opportunity to rebuild would begin almost immediately.

Kakó grunted through each rotation of the oar, guiding the craft comfortably into the bay, the breakers just beyond where the lip of a former volcano threaded ships to and from the sea proper. An anchor of mismatched iron claws plopped into the depths and pinned the vessel in place. Into a rucksack, he dove, removing three vials filled with intoxicated Queens bearing similar fuchsia markings. He added the fourth from within his *chlamys* and held them side by side.

"*Hades!?*" he cried, though his lips were pointed toward the intended's brother. "Command Poseidon to open the channel and reveal your haggard stare! I have collected your daughters four and wish to barter."

The frigid blue boiled with irritation, a mass of bubbles abruptly collecting at the surface, a funnel below driving them to form a wide circumference. His vessel lay just outside the domain, though the current played annoyingly with his anchor. A flat, weathered stone appeared underneath the froth, the depths receding like a drunkard polishing off another round. The staircase needed no railing for support as it careened into the underworld, the surrounding bath glowing a sickly pine and ochre. The moaning of those lost to the king of the afterlife warbled between the currents, their empty eye sockets somehow staring upward at him from miles beneath the crust. They jawed with cracked teeth and pruned fingers, begging Kakó to join them. Shedding his *chlamys*, he collected himself and eased towards the bow, intending to descend with the help of a knotted hemp fishing net.

The intrepid drone skirted the surface of the bay, its dangling legs swaying like a rudder. Kakó crouched to adjust the spacing of the net against the hull, but a nagging tone infected his ears. He attempted to clear the wax with a stiffened finger but came up empty. The sun rippled unevenly across his clean finger, a cloud brazenly covering the celestial giant. Inquisitiveness tilted his head to the sudden discrepancy, the light blotted not by cumulonimbus but by the amorphous, synchronous charge of the bees.

He rushed across the deck under the threat of

the black curtain and selected the hollow reed from his rucksack. The simple steel ringlet was broken easily down the center with a sharp twist, the gap secured onto the lip of the tube. Dyed thread was looped through, an excess bump formed until the metal disappeared. He dumped resin and shoved sulfur powder through the opposite end, packing it loosely. He doused the thread in petroleum and struck the steel with the flat edge of the Persian blue flint rock, creating a healthy spark.

The drone zoomed towards the craft, its wings beating into a foreboding invisibility. Kakó struck the steel ringlet again, producing heat but no flame. Again. Again. *Again!*

The valiant bee stormed across his cheek, tapping his flesh but refusing to engage. With the cavalry not far behind, a final thrust of the flint ignited the petroleum-soaked twine. He placed his lips to the end of the reed and signaled his mighty trumpet. The resin, coated in the dusty sulfur, met the potent flame and vomited a stream of viscous heat. Into the sky, he breathed the homemade magma, decimating the front lines of the coordinated first wave.

Charred, wingless corpses crashed onto the surface of the water as the formation split, banking hard around the sail. Kakó held his breath, keeping his weapon clear of the mast. The bees dipped beneath the hull and swarmed around the exterior, forming a pincer. He rushed to starboard, finding only gentle lapping. As he turned, a slithering stream of black and yellow exploded from beneath the boat, splitting advantageously into two untamable serpents. His reaction came in the form of an unexpected exhale, the flaming resin splashing along the deck, its sticky appetite making quick work of the oars. A few casualties skidded along the pine, but the buzzing claw achieved its first strike, latching upon Kakó's hands and forearms, stinging repeatedly until a field of embedded barbs hid his flesh entirely.

The suicidal bees offered no final testament nor stirring speech. *For Queen and colony!*

He stumbled towards the bow, his sandal knocking the imprisoned royalty overboard. Two happily chimed down the slippery staircase, swallowed whole by the impassioned dead and excitedly ferried into Hades' domain. Kakó plummeted face-first onto the deck, a jagged, smoldering plank puncturing his cheek. He howled through the enduring irritation and clawed at his charred, malleable flesh. The bees attempted to rescue one of the remaining vials as it bobbed, but the limited surface of the cork above the waterline prevented a timely rescue.

He heaved a pathetic breath through the reed

and immolated the liberators, the glass boiling in the slippery heat. The Queen collapsed to the base and watched from beneath the wavering surface tension as her loyalists prepared a second charge.

From high above the spectacle, the lone drone watched carefully, charting the wide turn of its brethren and the panicked fire bursting from Kakó's lips. It plunged with purpose, the beggar's mouth opening wide, sucking in a final gasp of air with which to polish off the resistance. Past his charred lips, over his tongue, and into his throat the drone dove, puncturing the back of walls of pink flesh.

His exhale was coated in agony, a cough dispersing the sulfur unevenly and clogging the narrow tube. The resin mumbled after it, dribbling past the petroleum glow. Kakó released his hold on the reed, his index and middle fingers scissoring as they leapt in after the insect. The belting flame spun, drenching him from neck to groin in honey-like immolation. It fused with his flesh, trapping the heat beneath and boiling his muscles.

Muted rage dribbled from his mouth as he barreled into the mast, floundering, his material form peeling and swelling. The bees magnetized to his bleeding spiral, refusing to retreat until they had enacted naturalistic justice upon his greed. Stinger after stinger penetrated his exposed sinew and filled his orifices with the muffled murmur of their wings. The unquenchable flames divided the mast in two, the falling bones pierced the hull and split the pathetic vehicle. Water rushed through the hold, dragging the bulk directly into the embrace of the whirlpool. Kakó was buried beneath the furrowed sail, what remained of his hand lurching mercifully towards the heavens.

The gateway between worlds vanished, swallowing the deadly flames, and the inevitable corpses of war, with it.

The mainstays of the bazaar watched with varying expressions, some expected, others disinterested. In the middle of the bay, only a single, directionless vial lingered. The marooned Queen labored to maintain her composure; she was alive, though her view was far from tranquil. No one attempted to salvage her abilities. No one muttered, not even under their breath. The inhabitants shrugged their shoulders and turned their backs on the tidy resolution, no worse than where they had begun the day.

And so, the island marched onward with glee, transfixed on the wondrous pigments of the earth.



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