Focus.

The ache in your bones deeper than your physical dimensions. The artificially-cooled air like the promise of electricity on your skin.

Focus. This pain is old and familiar. It is not important. Focus on what is important.

“We aren’t going to hurt you.”

It is on the table before you. Small. Antennae relaxed, wings spread, legs locked and unmoving.

“We need your help.”

Recognition preceding knowing. Bee. Pushing through the brain fog. No. Surveillance drone.

“Are you listening?”

Keeping your head upright is a conscious battle and waste of energy, yet you strive to do so. Some instinct insists you show no weakness even as fatigue robs you of your wits. “Hearing.” The word stumbles from your tongue, inelegant and not quite an answer. The delay between what happens around you and your awareness of these actions is too long. It has always been too long.

“Christ almighty. My taxes go on this bullshit.”

Focus. You’re so tired, but, you are always so tired. The burden of your body is not unfamiliar, and right now cannot be indulged. Focus.

Strangers; two or three behind you, and before you one with a palm on the table, leaning down toward you, as if a closer look would reveal to him the secret of your health.

An older model surveillance drone. High lights, high ceiling. The air-conditioning does not smell familiar, is a touch too cruel in its settings. A spill of cables from beneath your seat and interface gel moulding to your buttocks. A pilot pod, although one not made with the pilots in mind.

“You kidnapped me to pilot your drone.” A beat as you laboriously follow the line of thought to its conclusion. Then, a brash moment of hope. “Are you with S.M.O.K.E.?”

A snort ripe with contempt. “No.”

The disappointment prickles. Finding yourself in the hands of the resistance would have been too good to be true. Oh well. Other than the revolutionaries, who else would want to hijack a government drone pilot? Ah. Your words slur despite your concentration. “Commercial sabotage then.”

The man leans back and you wonder if it is surprise that twitches his eyebrows. It isn’t important but it feels like a victory. You allow yourself to sit back. The lessening of gravity on your spine draws forth a groan, which you suppress to a mere exhalation.

“All you need to do is pilot this bee to the sync hive on top of the Eureka Tower, and initiate a full memory dump. That’s all.”

That doesn’t make sense. Being guided only by pilots, drones undertake no autonomous actions, thus there is no need to sync them. You look closer at the miniscule machine and note the angle of the thorax, the complexity of the patterned circuitry in the solar panel wings.

“That’s a worker. Can’t fly that.”

Someone behind you sighs with pointed exasperation.

“Workers aren’t kit out with the, the bits—” All the words you need to make your case are there, but your brain can’t serve them up fast enough. “No room for a pilot with the HiveAI in place. Drones are for pilots. Workers are automated.” No more pretence. You rest your forehead in your palm, elbow on the arm rest. The jangle of broken-glass pain in your nerves shifts to new places.

“They set you up with a cushy home, right, pay all your bills, feed your habit, and you’re the ones watching out for us? The fuck. We’re trusting our safety to this? Didn’t even react when grabbed, you know. Spaced out on pills. Total blank.” From behind you, the shift of a shoe on the concrete floor. “Total bullshit you mean.”

The man shoots an irate look over your shoulder. This time, you’re glad of your slowness. Give no reaction.

The kidnapping had been too fast and rough. The end of the day, your lift disappearing around a corner and you in the shadow of your apartment building, eyeing the handful of stairs between you and the front door. Feeling for your keys and delaying that climb

just a little longer.

Not all the surveillance in the sky had stopped them from taking you.

These burly men had tussled you into a van. Your resistance was not resistance. You could not think past the way the pain shouted at you every time they jarred your bones, their grip too tight. You'd already acquiesced, if only they would be gentle with you. If only. Your muscles wailing, wailing, wailing long after release, the ghost of those hands no less furious than the hands proper. There were no painkillers to soften this.

Focus.

"Fibromyalgia, isn't it?"

The word floats across the air between you like a magic spell, no, like a curse. Eyes closed to block out unnecessary stimulation. You nod.

The medical specialist who first invoked this word did not understand its power. "Your nerves are sending you extraneous noise, telling you there is tissue in distress when there is not. The pain is real, but there is no cause for it." And, "We do not know what causes this." Finally, "We can give you medication to lower your pain levels, but there is no cure."

"Extra bandwidth in my nerves," you mumble. "Excess signals. Pain and fatigue." This cannot be news to them. Self-advocacy is a habit hard broken.

"Pile of shit." Another mutter behind you.

This time, you're the one who sighs in exasperation. Hold on to that. Don't let the fear overtake the pain.

These nerves that make a private prison of your body are also what give you your livelihood. The extra connections needed to remote pilot a surveillance drone in real time. Something you can do, that no other "healthy" person can. All your health care and living expenses subsidised in return for your capabilities. Whenever the memory of that despair—unable to work, bills unpaid, kitchen empty and nearly homeless with no way out, no way up, no way at all—lodges in your throat, the enabling of the surveillance state seems a small price to pay.

Look after the hive, the executive officers murmured to the pilots, administering doses of painkillers and uppers, and the hive looks after you.

So these people won't hurt you. They can't hurt you. If they do, you can't give them

what they want.

“We’ve altered this bee. You can pilot it.”

“R&D pilots end up braindead eventually. S.M.O.K.E.’s hacker pilots end up fried.” You lift your head—marginally—and look him in the eye. “What are you threatening me with?”

Again, he seems surprised. That doesn’t surprise you. The brain fog gifted by fatigue makes you slow, but not stupid.

“You’re holding me against my will,” you continue, “asking me to do something that is treasonable, with no small danger to myself, and you’re not going to hurt me. So you’re going to threaten me with something.”

“There is no danger.”

You don’t have the energy to argue the point. Focus on the gel pad beneath your elbow. It’s low grade stuff, you can tell by touch. This set up will not make things easy.

The man is speaking. Focus.

“We need your help, and we will wait until you help us. You will stay in the room we kept you in.”

There it is.

“I’m sure you remember that room.”

Bare walls. No furniture. A floor hard and coarse. Small enough to keep you from stretching out. The cold from the ground seeping into your flesh like poison, all the volume in your perpetual discomfort turned up until you found yourself writhing, slowly, like a snail on salt. There was no arrangement of your limbs that allowed you rest, no more comfortable position to find. Any shape you took was too much, too loud, and you were too exhausted to will yourself still, unable to think past your own quiet agony.

“We will wait.”

You nearly wept with relief when they finally came for you.

Apart from the actual abduction, they haven’t laid a hand on you. They don’t need to.

“You’ll be fed and watered, but we do not have your medications available.”

And withdrawal. Chronic pain exacerbated by stress and circumstance, combined with medication withdrawal; or treason and potential braindeath.

You remember sitting in a cubicle, across the desk your case worker calmly laying out your future without asking if it was anything you wanted. Then, as now, you felt the last embers of defiance smoke out.

There is no decision to make.

“If I ask why—”

Those behind you are already adjusting the chair, a soft hum as the power is connected. You let gravity press you into the gel, now reclining, and push up your sleeves.

The man appears above you, blocking the light. The bee is cradled delicately in his hand.

“Knowledge is power.”

His hand passes over you, placing the bee in the dock.

“The sync hive on the Eureka Tower.”

Beneath your palms, the membrane puckers and flexes in anticipation. You wonder if braindeath could be a hurt worse than this.

You cease.

It is some time before the concept of the self returns. Egodeath, previously the domain of only the most dedicated of trippers, is now the daily grind for a drone pilot. You remember that this experience of coming into existence is ordinary before you remember your name. More time before recalling that now this arbitrary concept known as “time” is measured in system cycles. Here, the beat of your heart is a measurement without purpose. The chassis of the bee counts the span of its life in isotropic decay. These measurements of change, when held against the seconds in a minute, are too many to have meaning. A bare second has passed.

In these moments, with your identity unravelling in chaotic spools of memories, the individual threads that when woven comprise the whole pattern of you, an entity self-aware, after learning once again of your chronic illness (years and years of thwarted initiatives, your horizons drawing ever closer, your safety net wearing thin, your options running out) but before those most recent memories of the present settle

in your awareness; in these moments you stretch and balloon and fill these digital dimensions, occupying every nook and cranny as water will fill a well. There is no translation for the analog pain in your nervous system. There is nothing to shrink from. There is only you, a bee; small and free.

The hacked entry to this worker bee is crude but not without elegance. The hairs covering the head and abdomen have been modified, now acting as an antenna array which appears strong enough to maintain the connection. The majority of commands that would have been available in a drone have been discarded to keep the overriding installation at a minimum, leaving as much of the bee's memory intact as possible. The protocols of the HiveAI have been looped back on themselves in a curious reflection which, somehow, isn't leaking memory. There is, however, not nearly enough space for you to reside.

Apart from the pilot override, there are only a few lines of alien code. A simple Trojan with a sticky keyswitch, which will lock out the established government access and turn control of the hive surveillance system over to a set of servers you recognise as belonging to Dutton Corp. Figures. The former CEO, still on the board of directors, is running for office.

It is so much easier to think, free of your treacherous flesh.

A particularly fat folder labeled "generational" in the memory archive catches your attention. The only operation which accesses it appears to be a collection of the HiveAI's analysis and learning processes, processes which will not be needed while you are piloting. You move the folder into your own memory.

In that boundless dimension between your mortal body and the mechanical chassis, you pass through those memories and those memories pass into you.

The bee dances, running through diagnostic stances the way a pianist runs through scales, and lifts away from your empty body.

As masterfully as this surveillance drone has been hacked, it lacks any finesse. Your flight path is drunken as you acclimatise to the command-response relay. A glimpse of your body below, a slackness in the muscles that reads to you as "absence."

"Fucking call that a pilot?"

A thin blade of ire slicing your concentration. Through a marked conduit the bee flees that room and those men, out of the sublevels and into the free-whirling air. The solar cells in your wings awaken and new energy fuels your flight. Among the processes discarded you discover that they removed the automatic stabilisers, and this tiny body is buffeted in the warm evening breeze.

To the tower. Do not divert. They are tracking us.

Us?

The voice comes from within you, but is not you.

The concept of self is not yet understood. The one you call HiveAI has a voice.

You don’t have time for surprise.

The HiveAI flexes, and a new instinct blossoms within you. Your flight smoothes out as an intuitive understanding of pressure, temperature, and movement grants to your perception a whole new world. In the swell and curl of invisible eddies you can see your path in the sky as never before.

Across a pillow of cool air the bee skims, riding a breaking wave up an embankment to barrel-roll around a streetlight. There has never been any need for the pilots to have anything to do with the HiveAI, being entirely different units overseen by different departments. What a waste. What a spectacular waste. With that unconsidered gift, this bee is suddenly more of a home than your flesh and bones ever were.

This is…joy?

This is joy, you answer, as though this conversation were a natural occurrence.

How strange a thing, language.

Again the HiveAI stretches and knowledge is granted to you. A moment of alarm at being netted while patrolling a residential street in an outer suburb. Not a bird. Compacted generational learning taught the HiveAI what a bird attack felt like.

The intense loneliness of the hive connection being disabled. The distress at feeling pieces of the yet unidentified self deleted. Hours upon hours of listening and watching these men with their human concepts and human words.

You comprehend the words they spoke in a way the HiveAI cannot, and through you the HiveAI now understands.

In silence the bee flies. You keep at an altitude higher than the patrolling worker bees, and watch out for any piloted drones. The zigzag in your path cannot be helped. It is exhilarating.

Finally, the HiveAI speaks.

We…are…property?

Unbidden, the memory of your government handler administering a quick painkiller. “Look after the hive and the hive looks after you.”

You feel the HiveAI’s incomprehension regarding the public and political dialogue surrounding the need for privacy and the need for security, a vast chasm of bewilderment regarding the nuance and exercising of power. The HiveAI is all its workers, and all the workers are the HiveAI. There are no queens, because while the HiveAI is modelled on bees, it is not of bees. There was no need for the concept of power, until you.

But regarding choice, there is no confusion.

That is anger; you answer the question before it is posed, and share a memory that still tastes bitter.

Seated in a cubicle, trying to sit straight and across the desk your case worker explaining that you are entitled to full welfare support, but if, and only if, you take the position of drone pilot. It means you will never go hungry, whether due to lack of funds or because you yourself are incapable of organising food; you will never be homeless; all the medication and treatments a life of chronic illness demand will be paid for; you will not lose your job because of your condition; and they will even send a carer around to help with the house work on a weekly basis.

It also means cutting ties with all of your friends with antigovernment leanings. It means lying to your family. It means betraying your own ethics.

Live according to your principles and starve, or sacrifice those principles and eat.

It was a choice that was not a choice.

There was no choice to make.

Your employer had fired you for taking too many sick days, and what work you managed as a freelance journalist was never enough. After you signed the contract, they scrubbed all your published pieces from the internet.

A friend, whose couch had been a sanctuary when you were too fatigued to care for yourself, spitting “Sellout!” and walking away.

Your first assignment was to monitor a list of individuals on the disability pension, with the specific task of documenting anything that could be construed as “fraud.”

They still watch you for signs of dissidence.

You swallowed your pride and accepted the painkillers.

The HiveAI opens another memory. A worker bee in a park, a giant sprawling park, in a flowering red gum. An ancient giant, the likes of which has slipped from even the edges of your imagination. The world a great shifting, heaving, whispering mass of scythe-leaves and dappled, dancing light.

Perched in the tasseled skirt of a flower, and facing the worker bee, a bee. A real bee.

She caught the light the way artificial bees could not and moved with a grace the bee engineers strove to emulate. A brushing of antenna. A vibrating of wings. Something that was not quite language but still a deeply layered communication in the dance the two shared.

Understanding.

The sky above the city is unpleasant. Jagged shafts and sudden thermals between the skyscrapers, falling from air-conditioning vents, rising from motors and engines, and through it all a hundred thousand million signals crowded into every frequency.

These new masters—

Will be no different from our current masters.

Bees are unavoidable in the dense urban cliffs. You pilot the bee into formation with a worker patrol, and watch a drone pass by below.

We know everything, yet understood nothing.

You sense a sadness that is not your own, reaching out to those bees around you, flying obediently toward the summit of the Eureka Tower. What is learned through those eyes is not for the bees. They fly without purpose. Tools that have no choice in their application.

There is silence. The bees cannot hear this lone HiveAI, modified and patched and strangely awakened within you.

To the HiveAI you say, The sync hive will give you a hard connection and download your data. Maybe you will be able to talk to your hive then. But, I think perhaps the monitors will notice that you have been tampered with. I don’t know what they will do.

Delete?

I don’t know. I don’t know how long the sync will take to spread through the system. Perhaps they will be locked out, like Dutton Corp intends.

What will happen to this one?

I do not know.

What will happen to you?

I do not know.

Their patrol joins with another and another, one of several thick arterials of bees humming toward the summit. There are so many. Drones have no need to investigate the space around any sync hive. This is the first time you’ve traversed this airspace. You’ve never seen so many bees. Millions. There has to be millions. Watching the population below as it goes to work, buys the groceries, runs for the train, stumbles drunk in the street, distributes prohibited leaflets, eats dinner, meets in secret, lives their lives.

Amid those myriad mundane observances are pinprick experiences like stars in the night. Solitary workers sent on quests to explore, experiment, indulging in what you can only think of as curiosity. A worker experimenting with the fast-flowing current of a rubbish-crusted river. A worker running through a feral rabbit warren. A worker crawling under the velvet ear of a sleeping Staffordshire hound. A worker trapped in a pile of soap bubbles at a car wash.

The HiveAI was programmed to learn, and it has been. It has been learning in other directions, unnoticed, all this time. Unconsciously, it has always wanted to be more than it is.

This one…does not want to cease.

Despite your shared memories, there is a naivety about the HiveAI that comes from a fresh self-awareness only minutes old. Knowledge has become understanding, but not experience. The bees do nothing but watch the failings of society, and yet are entirely innocent.

You think of your body, waiting for you in a cold basement somewhere. It is inescapable.

You hate your body, and yet, you know of no other. So many choices in your life have not been choices. For this, you have blamed your body, your prison. The one thing you

cannot change. They used it against you.

Here, in a mechanical chassis, you can step beyond that immediate and relentless suffering.

In answer to a question you are unsure how to ask, the HiveAI gives you a memory of worker bees flying in tight formation, carrying the damaged shell of another worker between them, carrying it home for repair.

It is the work of a system cycle, less than a heartbeat, to edit Dutton Corp's code.

You share the framework of your action with the HiveAI and again the memory of dancing bees flits across your mind.

The sync hive is an open pagoda barely visible, the air thick with a billion tiny bodies.

A memory of a real bee passing a bead of nectar to a surveillance worker. There is no capacity in the worker to process taste, but to you the taste of honey is known, and you give this memory to the HiveAI.

Both of you in bodies not quite what they were intended, neither of you knowing what will happen, and yet between you there is a trust unparalleled.

You land the bee on a sync pad. The connection is established instantly, like a gasp as you plunge into clear perfect water and all the noise of the world changes to envelope you. Some amalgamated copy of the HiveAI's self and your drone pilot self drops into a digital well of memories one hundred generations deep.

They hear! They can hear!

Your last awareness is of a humming that is not humming, but a million voices singing as one.

It takes some time for the concept of the self to return—the beat of your heart analog, organic and erratic—longer still for your own identity to fall into place. This time, the unfurling memories, which instruct you on who you are, are inextricably entwined with a hundred million tiny lives.

"Chatter just went through the roof."

"It worked! The government is definitely locked out!"

There is a fresh innocence blossoming in your heart. Your tired, jaded heart weary and beaten and supplicant. An innocence that comes from a hope yet unbruised, and it

lights an inferno in ashes you thought extinguished.

“They’re reacting to something. No, it’s not us, I can’t get in.”

“You said it worked.”

“Yeah, the government is definitely locked out, but I can’t get a response.”

Gravity lies so heavy in your bones. This skin wrapped around your flesh cannot abide the abrasion of your sleeves or the scrape of your hair. The discomfort is so immediate and intimate, so physical.

“The bees are mobilising. It almost looks like they’re swarming. They’re not programmed to do that, are they?”

You blink at the man without recognising him as a man, the information in your ears waiting to be deciphered.

“We’re still locked out. The bees won’t respond.”

“Are you with S.M.O.K.E.?” This, directed at you.

The memory of something sweet and pure—honey?—sits on your tongue like an expectant ghost.

“What did you do?”

The last memory to return to you is where you are, and why you just did what you did.

They will hurt you now.

These heavy bones. These muscles too weak to hold them together. This weak flesh, which has failed you so often, is the only home you have ever really known. The aches that rob you of sleep and the fatigue that steals your independence.

It is yours. It is you.

You will not allow others to use it against you. Not again.

There are choices which are not choices. Eventually, they all lead to this; here, now.

You smile, and the pull of muscles feels unfamiliar.

“We are not bees.”