

How Bees Got Their Stings

"Buzz off!" shouted the queen bee angrily as a big hairy hand broke into her hive. But the hand simply brushed the furious queen and her worker bees aside and scooped out all of their precious, golden honey. The bees buzzed and buzzed in protest, but there was nothing they could do to stop it. You see, in those days, bees were just harmless, fuzzy insects with no way at all of defending themselves.

"We can't go on like this," said the queen bee in despair. "Every time we nearly have a hive full of honey, someone breaks in and steals it all"

The worker bees murmured in agreement.

"Enough is enough," said the queen bee firmly. "Come along, all of you. We're going to see the great god Zeus.

They flew off at once, in the biggest, buzziest swarm anyone had ever seen. They blotted out the sun as they flew overhead, and people stopped to look up in wonder as they passed.

The bees flew up through the fluffy white clouds and high into the sky above. They flew right past the north wind and over a rainbow, and at last they came to Zeus' palace.

"What's all this?" said Zeus when he saw the enormous swarm.

The queen bee bustled up to the god and hovered in the air in front of his nose. "Good afternoon, Zeus," she said dancing a curtsey. "I have come to see you about a most important matter."

The great god bowed politely to the tiny queen. "In that case, he said, "please come inside and explain."

"Very well," said the queen bee, and she flew in through the open door with her entire swarm following behind.

"Do sit down," Zeus said to them. The bees settled all over the polished marble floor, looking for all the world like a large, fuzzy rug. "Your highness," Zeus said to the queen bee, and he laid a red velvet cushion on a throne for her to sit on.

"Thank you," said the queen bee. She settled on to the cushion, delicately folded her wings and cleared her throat. "All summer long," she began, "my workers slave away, gathering pollen from countless flowers and making it into honey. But people simply break into our hives whenever they feel like it and steal all of our honey. We have no way of defending against them." The queen quivered with emotion as she spoke. "I'm appealing to you, as one ruler to another, to help us."

Zeus was as fond of honey as anyone, but he didn't like to see the queen bee so upset. So he racked his brains to think of a solution. Eventually, he came up with an idea. "I think I can give you a way of defending yourselves," he said. "But it would be a shame if nobody could ever eat honey again. So if I give you a weapon that will make people respect you more, will you promise to use it sparingly, and to allow them to take a little honey now and then?"

"Of course," said the queen bee, and her subjects nodded enthusiastically.

"Very well," said Zeus, "Go back to your hives and I'll let you know when the weapon is ready."

After the bees had left, Zeus went to his workshop and began to design a weapon so tiny that it could be fitted to the tail of a bee. It was very delicate work and took him several days. When he had finally finished, he sent a message to the queen bee. She returned, bringing many of her subjects with her, and Zeus fitted each and every bee with the miniature weapon.]"This weapon," explained Zeus, "causes a painful sting. It will work as many times as you want it to, but I want you to promise that you'll only use it when it's necessary."

"We promise," chorused all the little bees. They flew away, wiggling their tails with pleasure, as pleased as punch with their new weapons.

All afternoon, they hummed as they worked, gathering nectar and making it into a fresh batch of honey.

The very next morning, just as the queen bee was eating her breakfast, a fat, groping hand pushed its way into the hive and broke off a piece of honeycomb right in front of her nose.

"Sting the hand!" shouted the queen bee, and three worker bees dived at the hand and stung it as hard as they could.

"OUCH!" came a yell, and the owner of the hand wrenched it back out of the hive.

"It worked!" exclaimed the queen, and a buzz of excitement went around the hive.

The next day, another hand reached in and tried to scoop out some honey.

This time, ten bees zoomed over, their tails ready and quivering. "What are you waiting for?" cried queen bee. "Sting the hand! Sting the hand!" So all ten bees dived gleefully onto the hand and stung it for all they were worth. Its owner yowled in agony and hauled his hand out of the hive as quickly as he could.

After that, there was no stopping the bees. Giddy with their new power, they stung people for stealing their honey; they stung people for touching their hive; before long, they even began to sting people for just looking at their hive.

Zeus knew nothing of this until one day he asked one of his servants to go and collect some honey to spread on his bread. The servant turned pale at the mention of honey, but he didn't dare disobey his master. "Right away," he gulped, and hurried off to the hive.