Epilogue, or, Beyond the Pale

by Brackets_002

Summary

The Radiance has been killed; the infection destroyed. The Hollow Knight and the Little Ghost have died and returned to their darkness. All that remains is to rebuild. The next age of Hallownest begins.
As Hornet slipped through the Crossroads, she was careful not to drop the two halves of the mask. The crack that had divided them was jagged and splintered into smaller crevices; numerous smaller breaks, filled by the pale white of Soul, crisscrossed its face. She worried that if the pieces were to break further, no amount of talent would put them back together again.

The Crossroads had changed. Once forgotten, then infected, the old paths had now begun healing. The orange boils that grew from its walls like tumors had already begun to shrink, sagging, their skin wrinkling, and the radiant light that seemed to illuminate them from the inside had gone out. She passed a husk as her feet clicked across the stone ground; her grip tightened on her needle, but even as she approached it did not notice her. Instead it sat against a wall, groaning in what sounded like relief as the light in its eyes faded. Would it regain sentience? Would it simply perish, and join the bodies that already littered these caverns? She was inclined to believe the latter, but decided to wait awhile before cutting it down. She had more urgent business for now.

The halls she strode through darkened the further down she went. Hornet paused in her strides and carefully sat on a rock, the halves of the pale mask staring up from her lap. From her crimson cloak Hornet took a lumafly lantern; she slipped its hook onto two tiny loops of thread from her needle and tied it there. When she stood back up, she held her needle like a walking stick and the lantern lit the way. The halves of the mask under her arm as she walked were small, but they carried an immense weight beyond the physical. Several times she had to stop and catch her breath. She hadn’t anticipated the little ghost’s strength, or its will. Nor had she expected the horrible sense of grief that had fallen over her upon seeing the shattered mask, lying in the temple’s chamber amidst a pool of black like ink. Perhaps she had come to care for the Vessel. Perhaps she had realized how truly alive it was as she had watched it bounce from mushroom to mushroom in the fungal wastes—a reckless stunt, a feat of athletics performed with glee. Perhaps she had seen how it had stared at the memorial in the city, how it had stared at the Vessel’s body in the room where she had confronted it. The ghost had been, as far as she could tell, incapable of expression—but that wasn’t the same as saying it hadn’t had emotion. Otherwise it would have been the Hollow Knight chosen to contain the plague. She had felt its anger, its curiosity, its deep loneliness and grief for its fallen siblings, and from that maybe she had found some affection for it.

If so, that was why she carried what was left of it down, down to nearly the bottom of the crossroads. With unusual care she dropped through a hole in the floor and sauntered to the edge of a derelict settlement until she knocked on a door with the tip of her needle. For a moment she thought that no one would answer, but then the door cracked open and the Menderbug peeked out.

Their exchange was brief. The Menderbug was pleased to be of help with a repair, but warned Hornet that the mend was unlikely to be seamless. She understood, and now sat waiting outside while they worked. A thought struck her; drawing out a length of thread she wound it thrice around her needletip and its own strand. She repeated the process, working quickly. She might have been raised among spiders, but the ability to Weave did not come naturally to her; she had begun over the years to imitate her fellows with the equipment she used in its stead. Within the next few minutes a loosely woven, intricately patterned cloth took shape. She didn’t have enough to make a large burial shroud, but it would cover a mask and nothing more. It didn’t need to be large.

The Menderbug’s door opened only a few minutes after she completed the lace-like, web-like pattern of the shroud to her satisfaction. It was as he had said. The mask had a large crack down its middle, sealed with glue but still quite visible. Perhaps Hornet looked disappointed on seeing it, for
the Menderbug said brightly, “It’s a wonderful mask! Such delicate shaping to the horns, such sturdy construction! Clearly quite old. I doubt there’s a bug in Hallownest that could truly mend it.”

“There is one who could,” Hornet said without looking away from the mask. “The one who made the mask in the first place. But the one who wore this no longer belongs to him or his. It is free.” As she delicately took the mask from the Menderbug, she added, “Besides, I despise the Mask Maker. Thank you for your help in his stead.”

“Masks are outside my usual work,” the Menderbug replied. “I was so excited to tackle such a new job! Thank you for the opportunity, miss!”

Hornet gave the best friendly goodbye she could—she was unused to interactions that weren’t meant to intimidate—and set off again. Still gently, she held the mask in one arm and slung her needle with the other, burying the tip in the roof and darting up, up, up. She considered entering the Stag Station she passed by, but she had never trusted such things and was about to venture into an unfamiliar area as it was. She hardly needed the additional paranoia.

She almost missed the well, but the soft light it cast into the crossroads gave her pause and cause to look above. Her needle shot almost straight up, embedding itself in the bricks lining the top of the hole, and she pulled herself up what remained of her silken line easily, scaling the wall with her feet. The air above, as she crawled out of the well and stepped into the open space of the world above, was slightly too warm, or perhaps too cold. The breeze was an irritating change from the still, comfortably motionless air of the caverns and tunnels she preferred, but it wasn’t strong enough to be used theatrically or for strategy, like the howling wind of the Kingdom’s edge. It unsettled her. The cliffs beyond were bad enough, but here she was in full view of the sad little town above the kingdom’s corpse. This did not suit her at all. She turned away at once and strode towards the graveyard, through the worn wrought-iron gates standing alone on its threshold.

A short, raised platform with fencing on all sides stood in the middle of the graveyard. She stepped onto it and carefully laid the mask down in the center, face up, horns toward the crystal peak above. Gently she drew from her cloak the burial shroud she had made and laid it atop the mask. It wasn’t an elaborate memorial—and she knew full well that the ghost deserved more even than the fountain in the city—but it was all she had to give. She reached back into her red cloak and pulled out, one at a time,

A dark blue cloak made of mothwing, glistening with something inky-black.

A mantis claw, carved from bone. She recognized it from her own use of one.

A small badge of sorts. When she looked at it right, she thought she could see wings.

A collection of charms, their use beyond her.

A map, the roll of scroll concealing its true size.

A journal written with a wild, sharp hand, dipping with something clear.

A Soul vessel.

A tram pass.

A lumafly lantern.

The most beautiful, intricate nail she had ever seen.
A single black egg, ancient in appearance, with curious carvings.

A talisman with a handle, gleaming in the dark. When the ghost had used it, it had had a blade.

It was with a deliberate, thoughtful slowness that Hornet began to set these around the mask. The cloak fanned out behind it, the mantis claw to its left and the nail to its right. She set the badge with its wings on top of the cloak, and the rest of the ghost’s possessions she neatly laid out in front of it. It wasn’t until the last charm had been set down that she gave herself pause, staring at the shrine she had made. Pretense was abandoned. Hornet lowered herself to her knees in front of it, her needle across her lap, and bowed her head in mourning.

“Oh!”

Her head snapped up again, alarm seizing at every nerve she had. She whirled and stood in one motion, needle sliding into her grip as she slipped into a defensive stance, ready to lunge, to strike. The bug that had been behind her leaned back in alarm, and though her stance relaxed at his appearance, she did not completely drop her guard. The bug stood as tall as she did, and that with a hunch in its back. Two curved horns like the ghost’s drew her eye, but its mouth (?) was open in dismay and grief.

“Are you from below our well?” He asked, his voice low and slow and sad. “Our town so rarely sees visitors from the cliffs behind us, let alone from beneath. I don’t think I missed you coming through town; that red coat of yours wouldn’t be easy to miss.” A forced laugh, which Hornet didn’t share in. “I myself just came out here to visit the grave of an old friend of mine, but...it seems you come to drop off another.” His gaze fell to below and behind her; Hornet’s head turned briefly as she realized he was staring at her improvised shrine. “...So they are dead, then?”

Hornet at last decided that this bug was no threat and rose fully from her stance, standing tall and with her needle hanging conspicuously. Ordinarily she would have revelled in the nervousness he exuded, but now all she felt was, ironically enough, empty. “Yes,” she said softly, “it is dead. It sacrificed its physical form and returned to the Abyss from which it was born. And in so doing, it has destroyed the infection at its source. The plague has, at last, been eradicated.”

The bug hadn’t quite stepped back with every word, but he was definitely standing farther away than it had been when she had began speaking. She sighed as she realized this, stepping off the platform and striding towards him. Spooked, he stepped backwards again, but she was quicker and the two were staring each other in the eyes in an instant.

“I have paid all the respects I know how in completing this shrine,” she said to him. “If you would wish to do the same, I shall leave you here to do so alone.” So saying, she stepped around the bug and towards the well again.

Rather than descend, though, she stood for a minute staring at the squalid town on the other side. This, ultimately, was what she had worked for so long to guard, what the ghost had died to save. Yet she had never actually approached the fading town, preferring to keep her distance and remain an effective and intimidating sentry. The martial art she had learned in her youth had encouraged theatrical posturing and distance to keep an opponent off-balance and on defense; without that, she was just a bug raised by spiders and brandishing a needle and thread because she couldn’t hope to emulate them. Hardly useful for anything beyond fighting.

But the fight, for the most part, was over. Her chosen and appointed task was done, every riddle that had plagued her answered save one. Some part of her knew that she would never find the answer to the final question if she continued to stay away, continued to travel alone. Now, at long last, she needed to be one of the citizens of Hallownest. She stepped around the well as though in a
trance and towards the little town of Dirtmouth.

A round, feminine beetle reacted with surprise as she sauntered past, giving off something of a squeak and stepping back. The door of a small building was open, a sign resembling glasses hanging above. The light of another Stag Station cast a warm glow, as did the shop across from it, and between them a streetlamp cast a pale light on a lonely wrought-iron bench. It invited her. She accepted, and sat.

The bench was comfortable; sitting on it suddenly made it clear to Hornet how sore she was from her days without rest, and especially from her encounter with the Hollow Knight, the empty black void that had flooded the room and left the Radiance gone from her mind and both Vessels dead. She leaned forward, her hands wrapped around the base of her needle as its point pushed into the ground at her feet. Her eyes closed and she sat silently, listening to her own breathing as some kind of peace washed over her.

There was no sound outside that for a time, and then a hesitant footstep a few feet away from the bench. Hornet opened her eyes and turned her head towards the sound, to find that the beetle was standing just to the side of the bench. Her front legs clasped in front of her and fidgeting, she looked just as ready to turn and run as to sit down. Hornet shifted to the side politely, allowing room for her, and the beetle took the invitation and sat down.

Hornet had no problem with continuing to sit in silence, but she sensed the beetle’s anxious nature and deep loneliness. There was no reason not to speak. “The infection is no more,” she said to her; “can you feel it? I feel that the blinding light that burned in my dreams has been snuffed out.”

“O...oh,” said the beetle. “I, uh, I felt something. I mean, I don’t feel any different, but...I’m not sure what that means...”

“Did you know the ghost?” asked Hornet suddenly. “I understand it came up here often...I judged it more single-minded at first than it was. It recognized the chance and choice it had been given, and it showed greater will to accomplish its altered goal than I had thought possible from its kind. I had always thought to pity the Vessels, created for one purpose and discarded by the hundreds, but the ghost proved itself stronger than even me.”

“W-what?”

“You’re right. I should explain.” Hornet straightened up on the bench and said, “The ghost was one of billions, creatures created by the King to contain the plague all those years ago. It was not the one picked for the task, but when the one chosen as the Hollow Knight began to grow weak, the ghost came to replace it...”

She explained everything she could. The ghost’s incredible resilience, the destruction of the Dreamers, the look in its empty eyes when she had met it climbing out of the Abyss again. The old bug she had met in the graveyard came back and stood beneath the lamp as she summarized the battle against the possessed Hollow Knight, the blade of light that the ghost had produced and the void that had filled the room mere minutes later. When it had gone, it had taken the infection with it, and the lives of both vessels.

“My savior...” the beetle whispered after Hornet had finished. “A true hero after all...even after—” she sniffed. “Even after their love turned against him...”

Hornet tilted her head slightly. “What?”

“So they came to end the sickness,” the elder said to himself. “I had wondered about their purpose
in the caverns below, but it wasn’t my business to ask. I’m...glad they accomplished their goal. But I would have liked to hear the tale told by them, if they had wanted to tell it.” He stared into the distance for a moment, as was his custom, before adding, “So of all the dangers below, now the worst of them is gone. I suppose that means that travelers who come through descend below will more often come back up. It’s a fortunate turn mind you, but I suspect it means the quiet of our town is nearing its end.”

“It’s an eerie quiet,” Hornet replied, “not at all like the calm of the tunnels below. It lacks the echo of my footsteps and these houses are empty shells. I don't trust this quiet at all, old bug. You should be glad to see it go.” She stood, ignoring the beetle’s sniffling on the bench and pulling her needle’s point from the ground. “But the travelers won't be coming for this town, but for the ruins of Hallownest. With the infection gone the old kingdom will rise again. The only way forward is by helping in that renewal.”

“Renewal indeed!” the elder protested. Evidently still irritated by the address of “old bug,” he said, “Travelers are welcome here, even if it means our town will become busy again. Even if they'll come to explore those dusty old roads, eventually they'll come back up if they aren't killed first. You too are welcome to stay, miss.”

“I will for a while,” Hornet admitted. “I no longer have a reason to keep my distance, as the only progression will be through cooperation. But I’m native to the caverns beneath us, and as the King’s child, my place is at the center of Hallownest’s rebirth.”

Surprised, the elder and the beetle both looked at Hornet, who returned neither stare right away. She looked away, towards the well, and let the breeze stir her cloak as much as it would. She cut quite the impressive figure, statue-still from her long, pale horns to her void-black feet, her needle angled to end an inch off the ground. Then she slowly turned her head to examine her audience, careful to keep her regal air. Reading the unspoken question on their faces, she spoke again.

“To some I am the Gendered Child,” she said; “the spawn of Wyrm and Beast. A gift to Herrah, my allegiance has always been to my mother, who gave everything for me. But there are no others with a claim to the King’s Brand.” She parted her cloak, just enough to show them the mark burned onto her shell—the four-pronged shape for all intents and purposes forming a crown. “The responsibility falls to me, as it always has.”

“You’re a princess?” the beetle asked, quiet but suddenly very interested.

“No.” Nevertheless, Hornet’s train of thought had been slightly derailed by the question, and she paused, considering. “...I suppose I was, once, but that title had no meaning in a kingdom so devastated. Now, in its rebirth, I am a Queen.” She closed her cloak again and turned away.

“Queen of a ruin, perhaps, but within it I see the beginning of a future.”

“And how does that future grow?” asked the elder, perhaps a little bit belligerently. “Will travelers and settlers want to be ruled? What authority can be found in a kingdom of so few bugs, spread over so far?”

“You think those questions have never occurred to me?” Hornet asked, but she did so with an air of almost meditative calm. “I will require the aid of all who are willing to give it. Including you, if I haven't bothered you too terribly. I'll have to speak again with the Mantis Lords, and all the spiders of Deepnest. I must find all the bugs beneath who survived the infection. One especially. But for now...is there a place I might rest a few hours?”

The house she was directed to had been empty for weeks at least. Dust coated every surface in a thick layer, and the place reeked of age and animals. She had slept in far worse abodes over her
life; if anything she would have been uncomfortable with somewhere more inhabited. Hornet pushed the door closed, burying her needle’s point in the floor just behind it to prevent it from being opened from the outside. Experimentally she pulled it back out and swung it into a combat stance, testing how quick or how easily she could make the transition. It caught on the inside of the door. She set the needle down and instead took hold of a nearby bookshelf, pushing it awkwardly in front of the door, the screech against the floor grinding, aching in her horns, until it fully blocked the door and the knob was stuck on a shelf. She reached past and rattled the door slightly before stepping back, not quite satisfied.

It would do, she decided reluctantly. Hornet turned away from the door and set her needle just to the side, where she could grab it and be ready at an instant’s notice, before she sat on the bed against the wall of the one-room cottage. She sank into the soft mattress and instantly jerked up again, fearing that she was about to sink straight through the bed. The mattress was soft like a cloud. She couldn't imagine how a bug could sleep on such a surface.

She would do what she always did, then. Hornet lowered herself to the floor, draping her cloak over herself to double as a thin blanket. She sat not quite upright against the bookshelf that barred the door, her needle across her lap and held in one hand. Years of travel and guarding had sharpened her reflexes to the point that if the bookshelf rattled at all she could be awake, standing and ready to strike in under a second. Her head drooped—it had to anyway, so her horns wouldn’t catch on the shelf, but now she hung it low, closing her eyes. As she wrapped one arm around herself and took slow breaths, she gradually allowed sadness to cover her the way she never could have below.

Tomorrow and beyond there was much to be done. She had to search the Crossroads at least and find any bugs who may have been left alive once the infection had come and gone. There was a particular bug who needed to be tracked down: the student of Monomon, who had come bearing her mask. She would need to return home and speak with the Midwife, and all the spiders who she had thought of as family. She would need to tell them of her responsibility, and she had no doubt that many of them would see it as betrayal. But she owed this debt to her mother, and to the Ghost, and there was no other way to pay it.

Well, there was one, a small way. Tonight, resting, she would silently mourn and remember the Ghost of Hallownest. Tomorrow, there was work to do.
“I must say, my friend, this alcove offers a lovely respite from the falling ash, and a wonderful view as well. You couldn’t have chosen a better spot for shelter.”

Bardoon offered a low, solitary hum of agreement, and Quirrel smiled up at him from where he sat. “High up, spitting beasts don’t bother as much. Would go higher, but corpses fall from above. Is rather uncomfortable. Quite sad.” Quirrel nodded, having seen the gladiator bodies himself. “They come seeking glory, but what glory to be found on a nail’s point?”

“I don’t think it’s something bugs like us would understand,” Quirrel mused, tugging on the bandanna tied over his head. When Bardoon “blinked,” a single sickly green lid closed over his entire mask before opening again. “Glory means different things to different bugs. If one can find it on the point of a nail, I wish them the best—and I don’t think I’ll forget those bodies in a hurry. Only I hope,” he added, with what may have been regret or irony, “that they don’t mind that their names are gone to us.”

He stirred the pot in front of him with a stick. The upturned, fossilized shell sat atop a few glowing embers, and inside it was a stew of sorts that Quirrel had cobbled together out of what he could find. The meat of a dead Boofly, some honey he had taken from a nearby hive, a vengefly he had chanced across in a tower bordering this place and killed with a shard of broken glass. Taken together it didn’t promise to be very good, but if Quirrel had ever been picky he had left it behind with the rest of his old life.

There was no real way to determine of the food was “ready,” so Quirrel chose then to tip some of the mixture into a smaller shell. Taking the improvised bowl into his hands, he looked up at Bardoon and offered wordlessly.

“No, thank you,” said Bardoon after a moment’s pause. “Offer is appreciated, but not fond of cooked food.”

“If you change your mind, don’t hesitate to ask,” Quirrel said, lowering the bowl. “I made far more than I need.” He lifted it to his own mouth and took a long, deep sip of the broth. It was far too sweet, and the shredded bits of cooked flesh were stringy and tough, but it was food and his stomach appreciated it. When he set the shell down again, the lower portion of his mask was tinged honey-yellow. “Could you tell me more about the shell you described?” he asked, wiping his mouth on his arm. “I’ve heard of the Wyrm in my travels, but to see its remains would be an experience like no other.”

“Its remains surround us,” Bardoon replied. “Seek you then knowledge, like Vessel before? Wyrm came to die once. Ohrm...be reborn. This ash one day will stop, when the shell is no more. Decay. But what is this kingdom, if not crumbling grave or Wyrm? As much remnant as falling ash.”

Quirrel sat silently, turning these words over and over in his head. He took another drink of his stew as he thought, formed his questions, selected his first. “The Wyrm came to die here deliberately?” he asked slowly. “Do we know what killed it? I can hardly imagine creatures like that perishing of old age.”

“Ohrm...Ohrrmmm,” Bardoon grunted. “Impossible to say...That old light, perhaps? Or battle with
another Wyrm.”

“Perhaps nothing killed it,” said a voice. “Perhaps it merely saw the world shrinking, and deemed it time to move on.”

Both looked to the edge of the cliff. Standing on the tip of the stone, barely inside the alcove, a pale, slender being stared back. Two horns she had, coming to points high above her head, and she wore a crimson cloak that billowed in the wind skimming across the stone. A silver needle in her right hand gleamed in the light of the embers and the outside world; shimmering thread rippled in the wind among her cloak. She stepped forward on feet as black as the darkest cave. “I have been searching for you, student of Monomon.”

Quirrel leaned back a little as she walked into the alcove, standing just outside the dying fire’s circle of light. “Hello again,” he said uncertainly; “it seems your search is over.” He glanced to his left and right, then raised his arms slightly to show his lack of weapons. “But I’m afraid you find me without the nail and mask that aided me last time. You’ll have a much easier time killing me.”

“I come not to fight, traveler. Since we last met much has changed.” She turned to the enormous, green worm and gave it a short bow. “Bardoon.”

“Ohrm…” Bardoon began. “Crimson blade. Pale child of Beast. Far you come in search of just one bug. Perhaps change in world and change in you both?” He seemed to scrutinize her. “Mmm, yes. Carry yourself sadder. Heavier. But also with much purpose. Stand you then to take Wyrm’s place?”

She hesitated to answer. When she did, it was to Quirrel. “It is for that reason that I’ve sought you out,” she said to him. “Student of Monomon, this old kingdom stands to rise again. The Teacher’s knowledge must be put to use if Hallownest hopes to have any order. The contents of her archive are far beyond my understanding, but you. You would be able to share it with the kingdom.”

“Have a seat,” Quirrel offered, gesturing at the floor opposite the bubbling pot. She seemed almost to freeze as the invitation hung in midair, and Quirrel added after a moment, “I see no reason for you to stand so stiffly while we talk. Please, don’t remain uncomfortable for the sake of appearances.”

She looked down at the spot on the floor, at the opposite side of the fire and stew. In rapid succession she glanced at Quirrel again, at the ceiling, Bardoon, and the entrance to the small cavern. Then she seemed to slide, almost seamlessly, from her regal stance to a sitting position, one foot barely poking out from beneath her cloak and the other tucked under her. The needle didn’t leave her grasp.

“And titles such as that are wasted on me,” Quirrel added, after taking another sip of his stew. “My time as the Madam’s student ended long ago, and though I know it must have happened, my memory of that life is almost completely erased. If you like you can call me Quirrel. And by what name, if you feel like telling, are you known?”

“Hornet,” she answered stiffly. “Your efforts towards civility are appreciated, ‘Quirrel,’ but my own efforts are needed elsewhere. I beseech you for an answer.”

Quirrel set his bowl down on his knees. “I would love to make sense of those ancient records,” he said, “but I fear I’ll be of little help in restoring anything of worth to a newborn kingdom. As I said, much of my memory is blank. I remember ancient knowledge of these ruins, but I doubt much else will reveal itself to me.” A second small shell sat by the fire; he had gathered two assuming Bardoon would accept his offer. Now Quirrel’s gaze fell across the empty bowl, and he looked up
at Hornet as he reached for it. “Would you like some of this stew?”

“I do not require much food.”

“Neither do I, but you don’t see that stopping me, do you?” he joked, tapping his own meal. He poured a serving into the empty bowl as he said, “I insist. Bardoon here has already refused, and there’s easily enough for two. I’d hate to see a cooked meal go to waste.”

Hornet stared at the shell as it was pushed towards her, scraping across the rough stone ground. Something in her cloak rumbled. It was true that she needed barely any food to survive, but it had been a week at least since she had last eaten. She couldn’t remember her last hot meal at all. With a hesitant hand she pulled it closer to herself, and she hesitated still further to set down her needle and pick it up.

When she finally raised it to her mouth, though, and tasted the warm, sweet broth, a hushed gasp reached Quirrel’s ears and she tipped it further, drinking as though she expected it to vanish. A piece of Boofly meat passed her lips and she lowered the bowl slightly to chew on it, relishing the sweetened, tender morsel. Then she swallowed and continued to drink like her life depended on it. Quirrel watched, amused and slightly fascinated, until she lowered the bowl and her lower face was stained yellow with honey.

She didn’t seem to notice at first, staring back without visible expression. She was rather like his short friend in that regard, Quirrel decided. He broke their stare to have another mouthful of his own stew, and when he lowered the bowl again she was picking at the pieces of meat at the bottom of the shell, the ones too large to drink with the broth. She took the largest piece of dead vengefly in one hand and bit it practically in half, but even through all this she seemed to attempt to keep her stern, dignified air.

On a whim she said to Quirrel, “The ghost is dead.”

Quirrel nodded. “Yes,” he replied, “I’m told that’s generally a prerequisite of ghosts.”

“No,” Hornet snapped, “the ghost.” When Quirrel’s only reaction was a blank look, she tried a different name. “The Ghost of Hallownest. The shadow. The Vessel, the Hollow Knight. The white wanderer, stronger than its size. You knew it.”

She added this last sentence in response to Quirrel’s face. From the uncomprehending look he had worn when she began speaking, his expression had slowly filled with understanding and horror with each name. Slowly he set his bowl down and lifted a shaking hand to either side of his head, where he traced the shape of two curved horns in the air. Hornet nodded. A small cry of shock escaped Quirrel’s mouth.

“I don’t believe you,” he said finally, with a trembling voice. “They’re stronger than that. More enduring. There is nothing in this land like them, they couldn’t just die...”

Hornet slowly set her bowl aside. Perhaps only now noticing, she wiped her face on the edge of her cloak. As Quirrel had trailed off, seeing the weariness on her face, she internally struggled to find the words to explain. It wasn’t like in Dirtmouth, where she had a broken mask to prove herself and she could simply summarize what she knew. It was clear that Quirrel placed more value in the ghost than she had even thought to expect; this was as much a funeral speech as it was an explanation. Slowly she began,

“The Ghost—the Vessel—it was created to contain the infection; it came here to replace the weakening previous Vessel. But it chose a different path. It endured many obstacles to reach the
plague at its source. It gathered the means and the will to unite the void, and the power to enter the chosen Knight’s dream. It sacrificed its being to merge with the void and suffocate the Old Light in it. It gave itself to kill the infection.”

The words sank into Quirrel and he sat back on his knees, his face a mask of shock. Slowly he lowered his eyes until he stared at the dying embers. Hornet tilted her head. The sadness Quirrel exuded filled the cavern and made her set aside her stew, appetite briefly gone. It was with visible effort that he pushed himself to his feet. “I need a few moments alone,” he murmured, and stepped around the fire, around Hornet, and to the edge of the alcove. He hopped out of sight so fast that for a second she thought he had vanished.

A few moments alone? Hornet would grant him that, and she took the time to peer into the bottom of her bowl and eat the last pieces of vengefly from the bottom. “Came it did to see me once,” said Bardoon as she ate. “Fussed with my tail. Woke me, but not unpleasant, methinks. Very curious, it was.”

“One so large as you must have stunned one of its size,” Hornet said as she pushed her empty bowl away.

“Mmm. Small, yes. But brave. Smallest creatures are always brave. Transcended even Wyrm’s greatest dream, did what no bug or Wyrm could.”

“I know,” said Hornet. “Its strength grew beyond mine so quickly. It cut down every enemy in its path.”

“You define strength as power to kill,” Bardoon noted. “No great skill is that. Ability to choose harder path, to continue through pain or sadness, is true strength. Little bug endured much.”

“That distinction,” Hornet said, standing, “is nearly meaningless in a world such as this.” Picking up her needle, she added, “I feel I’ve left him to himself long enough. Goodbye, Bardoon.”

“Safe travels, heir of Wyrm. Find you the answers you seek.” The green lid closed over Bardoon’s mask as Hornet brushed a pile of ashen moult over the dying embers, snuffing them. She stared into the nearly-empty pot before turning and leaving the cave.

Quirrel stood still on a ledge several meters below. Ash swirled through the air around him, and a breeze fluttered his bandanna, but he didn’t seem to notice. He stared into space, stared out over the yawning chasm below, and yet saw nothing. His arms hung limply by his sides, but then he clasped them in front of himself and broke his stare with nothing to look down at them. Stiffly though he stood, he seemed almost to teeter, threatening to fall off the ledge into the gorge below.

The muffled sound of landing feet rapped behind him. He didn’t look back at her; it could only have been Hornet.

“I think I knew something of their goal,” he muttered. “When I found the Madam’s archives, they were there. I helped them destroy her guardian. I undid Monomon’s protection, I told them not to hesitate in killing her…” His shoulders shuddered once. “I don’t think I would have done so...if I had known that their path would lead them to die.”

“It was created to fight the infection.”

“They were my friend.” Quirrel turned to face her at this, and she was surprised to see the tears running down his face.
She hadn’t expected this. In all her years as a sentry of the kingdom’s ruin, she had never had to comfort. Words that might have jumped to the tongue of another bug were tellingly absent from Hornet’s mind. She stood watching the other bug cry, her silence stretching on conspicuously until she realized how damning it must have seemed. Awkwardly a hand lifted and patted Quirrel’s shoulder in an attempt to console. While Quirrel didn’t exactly embrace the gesture, he didn’t brush it off either, so she took it as a good sign.

“Forgive me,” he choked out, wiping his eyes on his arm.

“I have nothing to forgive,” she replied. “I felt a similar pain when its sacrifice came to pass.” She took her hand away, looking away from Quirrel. “...I don’t think it...they hesitated to make it, though. Every time I saw them, they moved with purpose. When I restrained the Hollow Knight, gave them a chance to enter its mind, they didn’t pause for a moment. They died with dignity, and if they had regrets, it didn’t change their action.”

A small, singular laugh. “How very like them,” Quirrel whispered.

“They did what they did for Hallownest,” Hornet continued, an idea striking her. “For the sake of all the bugs who will come here from now on, so that the future would be free from the plague. It is as much in their name as anything that I’m trying to rebuild this old kingdom. Why they were born, why they died, will be meaningless without my action, but…” She said no more. She didn't need to.

“I will aid you as much as I can,” Quirrel said at last. “I warn you that may not be much.”

“All you can,” Hornet said, “is all I ask.”

Chapter End Notes

These characters are hard to write when they're not just monologuing. Also, Quirrel and Hornet met in the prequel comic, which you can read here.
Of Clashing Steel and Solitude

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The mantis warrior stood tall and proud on the outskirts of her village. Behind her, there was a youth perched on the ceiling, watching her studiously so that he might know the role of sentry once he grew. Once she had perched in nearly the same place. It was an important job she was tasked with, one he would be lucky to have once he lost the gift of flight, for she was the first defense of their proud village from outsiders hailing from the world above.

They were rare, to be sure. The Hallowed Nest in the grand caverns had long fallen to ruin, destroyed by the light they had supplanted yet foolishly forgot to beware, and before its downfall she suspected that it had sent far more like the elder, the one who had brought death and madness to their sacred tribe and then had the gall to declare them the mad ones. But their tribe had seen only a handful of foreigners in the time following the foolish kingdom's death. Travellers, warriors, merchants, all bringing some kind of poison to the noble culture, and all but a few finding only death waiting for them.

It was for that reason that she stood at attention, overlooking the hole in the wall leading into this fungus-filled cavern, and for that reason that the youth clung to the ceiling above, but what was there to learn that he hadn't already? He knew how to stand, how to guard, how to wait patiently and strike with blinding speed. As important and coveted this post was, it wasn't difficult. What was it she could teach him still?

It may as well have been in answer that an outsider appeared at the cavern’s entrance at precisely that moment. Amidst the yellows and greens and browns of the fungi around them, her blood-colored cloak and Soul-colored mask stood out like a lumafly in a dark cave. The mantis stared, and the outsider stared back, and as the former tensed the latter hopped into the air and threw a needle that stuck in the ceiling above. Her cloak rippled as she shot through the air and landed in front of the sentry, pulling her needle from the roof by a strand of gossamer thread. She didn't need to look to catch it.

Nor did the mantis need to look to know that her young apprentice was watching, waiting to launch off the wall and prove his worth in dispatching an intruder. She herself felt her claws tingle, eager to cut, but restrained herself. As the intruder drew closer she could see the charm at her neck. A coal-black, ridged circle, rimmed on either side with bronze claws. The Mark of Pride, a badge given only to those who had won the Lords’ respect.

At last, something to teach. The mantis sentry raised one claw and dipped into a bow.

From the corner of her eye she could see the outsider return the courtesy, and satisfaction went through her. A traveler, clearly a warrior, who respected the tribe as they deserved. Then the warrior rose from her bow and spoke. “I seek an audience with your lords,” she said.

They'd met before. When Hornet had set out from the Den at what she (at the time) had considered the end of her childhood, her head spinning with questions, armed with only the needle and thread she had used to imitate her fellows, she had begun by setting out to find the Mantis Village, which had been spoken of in hissing, acidic tones when she had asked the Midwife. She had found a mountain of bodies of Little Weavers and Dirtcarvers just outside the great door, but that was as far as she had gotten before being attacked. Tall, thin, fast bugs with nail lances that could slice
individual fibers of the young Hornet’s cloak had driven her back, back into the darkness. She had considered herself skilled with a needle at the time, painstakingly trained by Herrah in the short time they had had together, but the Mantis Lords had proven her a foolish novice. She had been too ashamed even to return to the spiders.

So she had found another way out. In a nearly-forgotten corner of the Deepnest, around the failed tramway and past the chittering, humming Mask Maker she had feared as an infant, barren rock and spiderwebs gave way to lush green, pristine and almost unsettlingly beautiful. Architecture had dotted what she had come to know as the Queen’s Gardens, mostly in the form of creaky, hinged platforms and enclosures from which to enjoy the greenery. The structures had been perhaps her first unfiltered, unbiased look at the shadow of the ruined kingdom she walked in, and she still remembered that first feeling of awe washing over her with an intensity she missed of her younger self.

She had spent months after that wandering the gardens, the greenpath, the fog canyon and the fungal wastes. Every waking second was spent in some way practicing, honing her skill with the needle and thread she had brought as companion. How to leap and land with pinpoint accuracy. How to create storms of silk around herself. How to cut a bug down from thirty yards. And at last she had cut her way through the sentries and warriors of the Mantis Village until she stood beneath the thrones of their lords, and she had brandished her needle in challenge.

The fight had nearly killed her, but it had nearly killed her enemies too. They had all been younger then, lacking the experience and strength the years had given them. At last she had collapsed to one knee under the impact of clashing blades and blindly, desperately struck at the last Lord’s feet, only to start with surprise when Lord Caria had all but screamed in pain and darted back to her throne, almost falling into it. The Lords had stood as one and bowed. The cage walls had lifted away, the spike pits covered again. The great gate that barred the way to Deepnest had slid open. And the young Hornet had stared up at the Mantis Lords and almost begged to be taught to fight.

Later on she would find the Hive on the opposite side of the City and train under Queen Vespa, but it was from the Mantis Lords that Hornet had learned—really learned—the value of intimidation. A scared enemy, they had showed her, was an off-balance enemy, reacting with panicked jolts and doing half her work for her. The nail lance she had used while training under them had suited her poorly, so she had adapted their martial art to serve her needle. Under the Lords she had begun to develop her Needle Dive and refined her mother’s String Shot attack to suit herself. She had taken their teachings with her when she had left their care, built upon the lessons they had given her with Vespa’s tutelage, grown beyond what she had ever believed herself capable of. She stood before them now, older and stronger than she had ever been, and when they bowed in respect she returned the gesture as she would to a peer.

“Lord Caria,” she said to each in turn. “Lord Vatina. Lord Giosa. Too long it’s been since our last meeting.”

“Not long enough,” contradicted Lord Vatina, who sat between her sisters. “You think us more affectionate than we are. We taught you our art because you needed us; you are our equal, not our friend.”

“But to speak with an equal is a privilege rarely afforded us,” the Lord to Hornet’s right, Giosa, added, and Hornet relaxed almost invisibly. “We must be grateful for the company at least.”

“Must we be?” asked Caria, looking across at her sister. “Company brings empty promises and talk of ‘civilizing’. Child of Deepnest,” she continued, turning to Hornet, “what business brings you to our door? What fresh disturbance do you bring with you?”
“None, I hope,” Hornet replied. She unconsciously adjusted her needle. “In fact, part of what I bring is good news, though I suspect you know already. Surely you have felt the disappearance of the affliction, and the death of that radiant light at its source.”

“We have,” Lord Giosa agreed. “It no longer burns at our dreams. It no longer fills the air and invites a strength we must resist.”

“But without it,” Caria said, “We suspect we are to encounter far more outsiders seeking to domesticate our great people.” She narrowed her eyes and leaned forward. “Is that why you’re here, spider?”

“My name is not spider,” she said calmly. “I am here on their behalf, not as their first. When outsiders come and find this village, I ask that you turn them away rather than strike them down. Cast them out if you like, bar the way of their passing, but don’t kill them.”

“And in return?”

“In return, I will do what I can to discourage them from wandering this way. Bugs may act selfishly and against your wishes, but that is born from short-sightedness, not malice, and they can be educated otherwise. I will teach them that you are to be respected.”

Lord Vatina leaned back on her throne, staring at Hornet through suspiciously narrowed eyes. Lords Caria and Giosa looked at each other, skeptical, and the nearest one glanced at the shattered throne next to her own. “We know strangely little about you, Hornet of Deepnest,” Lord Vatina said eventually. “You told us almost nothing. Your name has little connection to your bearing. Your home in the Deep has produced no one like you. Your weapon is unusual. But the shape of your form...your pallor...these tell us more than enough.”

“So the Pale King had a child,” said Lord Caria. “And now that child aspires to become a monarch. You know we cannot allow you to rebuild your beloved empire.”

“It will rise again whether I lead it or not,” Hornet said flatly. “With no infection to draw bugs to the light, travelers will stay in these ruins, and from them the old kingdom will return. But it needs a leader if it is to have any order. Without me or one like me, Hallownest will collapse under the interests of its founders.”

“And how convenient,” Vatina said, “that taking that role serves your interests as well.”

“My dreams have nothing to do with Hallownest. It is simply my responsibility.”

“Don’t lie to us,” Giosa said, leaning towards Hornet. “You have everything to gain in taking the throne. Respect, wealth, the command of any bug willing to bow.”

Caria nodded. “To seize the role of Queen as you propose to is an act of desperate ambition. Like the King before you, you would be revered as a deity. You ask us to stand aside as you rebuild a ruin with yourself as its shining figurehead. No.”

“You do not have our aid,” Vatina declared. Hornet’s shoulders dropped as Vatina sat back in her throne. “As long as you seek to take your father’s place and act in his name, we will have no respect for you or any of your ‘subjects’.”

Hornet didn’t consider herself easily insulted, but this final statement burned her and ignited a livid offense. She swept her cloak back and took a single, aggressive step closer, her needle held tightly, as she almost snarled, “I do not. Do this. In his name.” Each Lord stiffened as they glanced over her posture, claws tensing instinctively on their armrests. “The Pale King—my father if you must—
was a loathsome bug, and one whom I was raised to hate. He cared nothing for his subjects except as followers. He created billions of children out of the Void, and cast them all away to die. The one he deemed ‘worthy’ he brought up solely to seal away the Radiance, sacrificing it like butchered meat! He made me as a bargaining chip! I abhor that spiny Wyrm, and the self-deifying ways he stood for! How dare you suggest I act in his interests. How dare you declare that I accept his legacy."

At this outburst the Lords glanced between each other again. They knew genuine anger when they saw it; that Hornet was honest in her protests was difficult to doubt. But her rejection of her father raised more concerns than it put to rest. They hated the King at least as much as she did, but without that motive her ambitions seemed directionless and ultimately doomed. “Then why,” said Giosa at last. “Why attempt to breathe life into a dead empire? Why rebuild the achievement of the bug you so hate? You claim not to accept his legacy, but you seek to recreate his greatest achievement. We did not consider you one for hypocrisy.”

“And I am not.” But Hornet had to take a moment to consider her answer. She looked down, away from the Lords, as she tried to assemble a response from her scattered thoughts and revelations. “I would attempt to restore Hallownest...because bugs deserve a place where they don’t need a nail. Because the old kingdom stood for more than the King’s hubris, and some of that is worth being brought back. Because the kingdom’s rebirth would be the final, definite victory over the plague that destroyed it. Because with my mother dead, the burden of the future falls to me, but there is no future to be found in my home. And…” Here she hesitated. The relation had occurred to her more than once before, but even while it drove her to action, she had never said it aloud. “…And because the Abyss is littered with the bodies of my siblings. It seems unacceptable to me that they died for an ash heap.”

She stared at Giosa more than anyone as she said this. Slowly, the Lord leaned back in her seat and looked down again at the broken remains of a throne to her left. In her youth Hornet had asked about this seat, and received no answer save for harsh glares and a sharp warning; but she had seen and fought the infected mantises in the Queen’s Gardens, and she had put the pieces together herself. If nothing else the Mantis Lords would understand the grief of losing siblings, and the desperation to make something of the loss. Giosa looked away from the broken throne and at her sister, Vatina. She leaned closer until she could whisper something to Vatina, and Hornet stepped back as Caria joined them and they conversed among themselves. Twice a Lord glanced out at her as she waited for an answer. Lord Vatina was shaking her head, but then Giosa gestured towards the crumbing throne and said something harsh—and apparently very convincing, for Vatina looked pensive and fiddled with her claws. Caria glanced upwards, at the towering ceiling as though she could see right through it. At last each Lord returned to her own seat and they stared down at Hornet with their typical regal air. She stood calmly, patiently, trying not to show how anxious she was.

“We understand the desire to give your people a sanctuary,” said Vatina. “And we empathize with your grief. But we cannot allow you to rebuild the home of our people’s greatest enemy without the knowledge that you can control its citizens.”

“Are you telling me I’m too weak to lead?” Hornet asked, incredulous.

“Perhaps,” replied Giosa, and Hornet was certain she heard a teasing tone in her voice. “It has been years since we last battled you. We were barely adults then, and we have gone through many trials and failures in the time since. I doubt you are strong enough to beat us now, Hornet, not now that we are proper Lords. Very few are.” A claw casually, effortlessly, but meaningfully shaved a sliver off of her throne’s armrest.
The other two, Hornet noticed suddenly, had tensed slightly, like coiled springs ready to launch themselves. She looked from face to stoic face as she tightened her grip on her own weapon. “I’ve already proven myself to you,” she said.

“As a warrior, equal to warriors,” Vatina said. “Not as a ruler equal to rulers. You represent the strength of the bugs you stand to rule. Prove your honor on their behalf, and we will give them the respect you ask for.”

“I don’t have time for this,” Hornet tried again. “There is much I have to do, as quickly as I can.”

“If you lose,” said Caria, “you won’t have to do anything at all.”

Hornet took another step back, into the center of the throne room she knew doubled as an arena. The carved floor poorly disguised the covers that would be pulled away to reveal spiked pits; above her, the cage walls creaked in anticipation to descend. She knew the Lords well enough to see through their pretense. They talked of honor and strength, and indeed they meant it, but that wasn’t why they wanted to battle her. There was a bloodthirst to them, and a need for a challenge. Their strength had made them capable of easily killing almost any challenger, and while they were right to be proud of that, Hornet could see that they were simply eager for a difficult fight.

Fortunately, so was she. Hornet brought herself to her full height and brandished her needle, pointing it straight out to the right declaratively. “Very well. Lords Caria, Vatina, and Giosa of the Mantis Tribe, I challenge you in the name of Hallownest.”

She couldn't miss their smiles as the Mantis Lords sharply, as one, stood from their thrones. A moment later the cage walls dropped until they smashed into the ground, trapping her in the arena with her foes; the covers pulled away to reveal the spike pits that flanked either side. Hiding her satisfaction, Hornet pulled her needle back and dropped into a ready stance, swiping her needle straight down in front of her, legs tensed and thread whipping behind her. “Ca’ra vah!” she shouted —calling her energy forth, snapping her into the mentality of battle. In response, Lord Vatina vanished into a blur, and when she reappeared in midair she had her nail lance with her.

Hornet neatly dodged the dive, but when she went to strike she was surprised when Vatina parried the move without rising from her landing crouch. Before she could strike again, the mantis had darted away, only to alight on the cage wall behind her and throw a spinning blade. Hornet jumped over it with room to spare. Before she hit the ground she angled her needle towards Vatina and dove straight for her head. Vatina was gone before she reached the wall, and Hornet hung off of the bars herself for a second before dropping back to the floor.

When Vatina next materialized it was right in front of Hornet, lance at the ready and already lunging forward. Hornet parried by crossing her blade across her mask, and couldn’t keep herself from giggling as the lance glanced off of it and to the side. She swept her needle out in a wide arc and just missed the mantis with the attack; Vatina was already darting away by then, and Hornet took a few steps forward before she had even realized that the mantis was just behind her.

She dodged, almost sloppily—the Lord’s blade was mere inches away before Hornet was overhead. She chided herself for her carelessness before she hit the ground; each and every one of the Lords had seen her mistake, and she felt certain she had lost a measure of respect. No time to worry about that now, though: she landed and immediately hopped back a step. Vatina hadn’t yet vanished to begin a new attack. She had a slim window of time, and with luck, it was all she needed. “SHAH!” she cried, hurling her needle forward like a spear.

Vatina bolted, vanishing into a blur, but Hornet couldn’t mistake the vibration down her thread, couldn't miss the streak of blood that had flashed across the air. The silk gleamed as she
concentrated on it and her needle stopped in midair. She pulled, caught the needle as it came back to her, and then promptly jerked forward as Vatina drove her lance into the ground where she had been. Vatina struck out from her stance, Hornet parried and attempted a riposte, but the mantis batted the blade aside and slashed at the smaller warrior. The lance wasn’t a slashing weapon, but its tip tore a shoulder of her cloak and she felt searing pain across her shoulder beneath as her shell cracked; she pulled away, hissing. Blood for blood. Hornet took a breath, refocusing as she stepped away, and when Vatina perched on the cage wall and hurled a blade, Hornet dashed under it and launched herself needle-first at her target.

Vatina dodged. Of course she did. That was a transparent attack; Hornet couldn’t have telegraphed it more blatantly if she had been waving a banner. But Hornet hung onto her needle as it stuck through a gap in the bars, hooking her feet on the lower section, and for a brief moment she and Vatina were within arm’s length of each other and neither had their blade handy. Hornet wasn’t fond of punching, but she seized her opportunity and slammed a fist into Vatina’s face, knocking her loose from the perch. The mantis caught herself before she landed in spikes, but as she regained her balance on the arena floor Hornet hopped off the wall and executed a beautiful Needle Dive, drawing blood from the Lord’s leg.

Another laugh escaped her as Vatina darted away, rematerializing on the opposite cage wall and throwing another blade, but as Hornet dodged the projectile her foe climbed to nearly the top of the cage before throwing herself off and diving point-first at the airborne Hornet. Taken by surprise, Hornet only twisted to the side just past the nick of time and felt the lance cut the shell of her side as the mantis passed her. She bit back a scream as she landed kneeling on the opposite side of the ring, one hand cradling the injury beneath her cloak, the other limply holding her needle.

Vatina had landed on the edge of the ring and swung around, aligning her bloodied nail again. Hornet pushed herself upright as the Mantis Lord charged yet again and grunted as she leaped above Vatina’s head and slashed downwards. The Lord hissed as the needlepoint cut the shell of her left shoulder. She darted out of sight again, reappearing in midair above Hornet, but—"ADI NA!"—was caught in a wild flurry of razor-sharp thread and steel before she hit the ground. Hornet sidestepped her as she fell, and before Vatina could get away again Hornet was on her back and loops of silk had tightened around her dominant arm and anchored it to the ground. She felt the needle rake across her back.

A snarling scream of pain ripped itself from Vatina’s throat. She cut the silk with her other claw and leaped straight up, not quite too fast to see, and landed hunched and bleeding in her throne. Hornet caught her breath in the second of leeway she had and experimentally took a deep inhale, focusing on the pain of her injured side. She pushed past it and raised her needle as Lords Caria and Giosa vanished from their thrones simultaneously. In an instant, one of them was on the cage walls, throwing a blade, and the other was charging her lance-first from behind.

She dodged the second and parried the first. The Mantis Lords moved quickly enough that it was difficult to tell them apart, but Caria was left-clawed. Hornet glanced between the Lords in midair to determine who favored which claw, surmising that it was Giosa on the wall and Caria on the floor, before she landed and hurled the needle up at the perched mantis.

Lord Giosa was gone before the tip reached her, but Hornet had to pull it back on the move, for Caria had reappeared just above her and impaled downward. Hornet’s handle reached her hand just in time to let her parry a short thrust her quarry had attempted from her landing crouch. She swept her needle in a diagonal arc aiming at Giosa’s head, but the Lord dodged backwards so that the point barely grazed her forehead. She vanished into a blur as Hornet heard Caria appear behind her. Dodging Caria’s lunge, Hornet leaped into the air and with another shout of “SHAH!” sent her needle and thread whirling around her—a crude move by Herrah’s standards, but an effective one
nonetheless. The nearer Lord was caught by the Thread Flurry and hissed in pain. The weapon found itself back in her grip as she landed and ran towards the arena’s edge, but she stopped short as Giosa appeared right in front of her and lunged.

Hornet leaped when she should have parried; a slicing pain across one leg made her mistake clear. She landed badly as Giosa reached the other end of the arena and vanished again. Turning, she threw a few tiny spikes trailing transparent lines of thread—they hit a few spots in the ceiling and snapped taut, revealing the bundle of spikes tied into the center of each strand. Then she sidestepped Caria’s dropping stab and retaliated with a swipe that she saw draw blood from the warrior’s chest. Her next hop was slightly crooked, but she had fought on injuries before and compensated well. She dove at Giosa where she perched again on the cage wall after dodging the whirling blade that had been thrown. Her needle pricked some part of Giosa’s shell, but she darted away too fast to see where exactly. Hornet landed against the wall herself and hopped from there to the floor again, where she saw Caria preparing to lunge at her. She leaped over the attack and swung upwards in midair: Giosa was exactly where Hornet had expected her to be, and her needle knocked aside her nail and allowed Hornet to take another swipe at her, nicking one claw.

Giosa bolted out of sight again, but as Hornet dodged another of Caria’s projectiles she heard the vibration of something huge tripping a spike traps behind her. She turned just in time to see the youngest sister hit the ground awkwardly, one of the silken lines tangled around her arm and body, the spike bundle leaving deep gashes across the back of her shell as she struggled and it moved, and she fell onto one knee and her free claw. Hornet couldn’t stop herself from laughing, gleeful in how well the trap had worked. Then she seized her chance and threw her needle with a shout of “HEG’AARAE!”

Giosa shouted in pain as the needlepoint lodged in her free arm and sent her crashing face-first to the ground. She gathered her legs under her and leaped up and into her throne, breathing hard, blood seeping down her shell. As Hornet glanced up at her, Lord Vatina, similarly hunched, turned her head and reached out a claw in unspoken question. Hornet saw Lord Giosa nod, but that was all she managed to see before Caria appeared on the cage wall barely five feet away and threw a blade into her face.

Hornet jerked backwards, screaming in shock and pain, her mask cracked and her needle falling from her grip. She found herself on her back; perceiving anything more was like looking through a thick veil of agony, but she saw Caria above her stabbing down and rolled out of the way. Her hand found a strand of thread and she focused on it until she felt the eye of her needle. Snatching it up as she scrambled to her feet, she swung it behind her blindly at where Lord Caria had been. She was there no longer: instead the remaining mantis was on the opposite side of the arena, slicing away the lines that suspended Hornet’s spike traps in midair.

Hornet couldn’t see out of her left eye—it burned and itched, one of the cracks right above it dripping fluids. With her free hand she tried to wipe some of it away, and it came away from her mask dripping blood and something black but didn’t solve the problem. She opted to dodge Caria’s lunge rather than wipe at it with her cloak, slashing at Caria’s left arm on her way past. Half-blindness would just have to suffice until the end of their battle. As for the pain, she focused on her thread, on Lord Caria, and pushed through it.

Caria’s shoulder, and now her dominant claw, were already injured. Hornet watched her as she landed on the opposite wall, wrapping her elbow rather than her claw around the bars, and she rather easily knocked aside the spinning projectile the mantis had thrown. She took a few sprinting steps towards her before Caria vanished.

When the mantis reappeared, she was in midair far above and to the left of Hornet. The smaller
fighter was confused for half an instant before Caria dove diagonally towards her, faster than she had moved in the whole fight.

She threw her needle to anchor in the floor opposite her and yanked herself aside with millimeters to spare. She leaned back as she pulled her needle back to her, avoiding the worst of Caria’s slash, and parried the next strike before retaliating with a wide slash of her own. Caria was gone before she could see its effect, but she had felt her needle rake across something. When the mantis reappeared and executed the same maneuver, she managed to deflect the lance into the ground next to her, but a grunt of indignation escaped her as she aimed a thrust and was parried. Caria had stolen her Needle Dive. She swung her needle straight down in a vertical strike and was rewarded with a bleeding line down the side of the Lord’s head.

Caria vanished again, but she reappeared directly behind Hornet, her lance already pulled back for a short thrust. This was a break from the Mantis Lords’ usual methods, so Hornet was caught off-guard and dodged an instant too late, feeling the lance’s point rip open her already injured side. She cried out in pain, but trapped the lance under that arm and slashed out behind her with the other. Caria gave a short, sharp yell and pulled her lance free from Hornet’s grip, sending her to one knee as the mantis vanished. She appeared above and ahead of Hornet, already diving. Hornet drew her needle up. The Needle Dive was her move. Caria had mastered it effortlessly, but Hornet had invented it, and she knew every vulnerability it offered. She forced herself to her feet and hurled her needle in one motion with a scream. The needle streaked past Caria’s lance, grazed her claw, and cracked the chest of her shell almost wide open.

Lord Caria screamed. Her momentum cancelled by the needle’s impact, she fell backwards until she hit the ground, whereupon she took a few deep, wheezing breaths and bolted out of sight, her lance rolling across the floor where she left it behind. She landed in a heap in her throne, coughing hard and cradling her chest. Hornet stared up at her worriedly as she pulled back her needle in a flash of silk and metal; Vatina, too, stared at her sister until, with clear effort, Caria’s breathing settled and her posture relaxed. Slowly, Hornet’s tensed weapon hand loosened its grip until the tip of her needle tinked against the floor.

As they had done before, each Mantis Lord rose from her throne; they stood as one staring down at Hornet. She had to turn her head to look at each of them, one eye still obscured by blood. When each Lord raised a claw and bowed, she returned it and almost fell over from the injuries to her side and leg. Still, she was glad to return the courtesy they granted her, and as the cage walls rose she lifted her head and looked up at them.

"Again we have fought,” she said, “and again I have bested you. As you demanded, I have proven myself on behalf of that reborn kingdom, and now I ask that you stay your claws against those who will come to reside there.”

“You’re stronger than we’ve ever seen you.” Vatina commented.

“A capable and powerful warrior,” Giosa agreed, almost gleefully, “easily fit to rule over those you plan to.”

“We will not spare those who bring cruelty against us,” Caria said; “only death awaits them here. But those who mean our people no harm...no harm will come to them.”

They bowed a second time, deeper than they ever had before. Hornet stood shocked, glancing from Lord to Lord as they paid her this unprecedented respect. Then, changing her grip on her needle and planting it on the ground as support, she lowered herself as far as she could and ignored the screaming of her side. “You honor me, Mantis Lords,” she said.
“And you us, Queen of Hallownest.”

Hornet stood from her bow. The Lords did not; she knew they wouldn’t rise until she had left them. With an atypical lack of ceremony she turned away and walked towards the gate to Deepnest, using her needle as a walking stick. She managed to avoid limping until she was out of sight.

The water of the hot spring looked translucent white from the Soul that filled it; the soft white light it emanated as a result illuminated the steam that filled the room. The resulting glow over the scene made the whole room feel slightly unreal, as though she had sank into a dream and had nothing to fear of what might lurk there too. In reality Hornet sank beneath the surface of the heated pool up to her chin, her cloak already hanging on the bench nearby, and sighed in relief as she leaned back against the stone edge and felt the pain of her injuries begin to fade. As she relaxed she tilted her head lazily and examined the statues that were carved into the stone several feet away. A collection of huge, dome-like heads with curving horns resembling the Ghost’s and mouths from which poured the water that filled the spring. She silently offered the faces, and whoever had carved them, her thanks. Each slow breath she took hurt a little less.

The energy filled her with a warmth beyond the physical. Hornet had always been at least dimly aware of the presence of Soul, from the hot springs to the ancient statues she had noticed among the ruins to the slight surge of vitality she had felt when she had first struck out at an enemy. Now she looked down into the water and watched the cracks in her shell close as the pale, living light danced around their edges. She had heard of higher beings like her father who could focus the Soul they carried with themselves and heal wounds at will; she had never quite believed it until seeing the Ghost do so when she had first confronted them.

The wounds of her side and leg were almost fully healed already; all that was left of her shoulder’s injury was a fading line. Hornet shifted her position to sit further upright and leaned forward, submerging her face into the hot water. It was a curious, but not unpleasant, sensation to feel the cracks of her mask shrinking to nothing, the break warm where the Soul did its work, and at the same time she felt the sticky feeling of blood begin to leave its surface. When she deemed the wound sufficiently healed she raised a hand to it, still underwater, and rubbed the remaining blood away. Hornet lifted her face out of the spring and opened both eyes—it was a relief to see properly again—to watch the dark stain of blood and black drift across the rippling surface in ribbons. Absently she lifted a leg and kicked out, scattering and diluting the stain.

Why she bled Void was no mystery to her. Neither her mother or the Midwife had ever attempted to conceal her origins; perhaps they had felt that hiding the truth would lead to confrontation and misery when she inevitably learned, or perhaps they had simply believed that she deserved to know. A pseudo-Vessel, born like a bug, imbued with Void summoned by the King, the flesh and blood of her mother, and a bit of the soul of both. Rather than wholly flesh or wholly Void, she was some of each, uncertain of her place among either. She had come to regard the Little Ghost, the shades and broken masks in the Abyss, and even grudgingly the Hollow Knight as her siblings, but if she had truly been one of them she would have faded back into the Void with them. Similarly, she had spent much of her childhood watching the spiders she had also called siblings weave and climb by instinct in ways totally beyond her. A body shaped like hers was created to fight. She had no silk glands; she couldn’t scale walls without her needle or a mantis claw; she couldn’t Weave beyond the most simple tricks of thread. It hadn’t been just curiosity to draw her away from home. Going back, she confessed to herself an uncertainty that she could appeal to familial love.

There were other times and places to worry about things like this. Deepnest had long ago decided that the hot spring was a spot of neutrality, a place that violence and turmoil would never touch, and that included this fretting. She pushed the questions out of her mind for now, lying back in the
spring and enjoying the heat and the vitality of the water around her.

She eventually pulled herself out of the spring and dried herself off, though, before turning her attention to her crimson cloak. It had gained several long tears from her battle with the Lords, and now she took her needle and thread and set to work repairing it. The needle’s size was unsuited for this purpose but she managed. Carefully she sewed the holes in the back and shoulder shut, leaving white lines of stitching that gleamed in the light and were surrounded by dark stains. Half-satisfied with this she pulled the cloak over her shoulders and tied it at her neck, letting its collar come up to her chin and its skirt close around the rest of her. Picking up her needle again, she hopped over the spring and set off for the Nest beyond.

She was running low on thread, she noticed as she traveled. Ordinarily she would have refilled her spool with her stockpile in a hidden Stag Station, but now she turned before reaching the massive cavern containing the Den and made her way to her old chambers. The corpse of a Devout lay outside. She stopped and stooped to examine the several, nonlethal nail slashes across its face, and the orange slime of infection that had dried at its eyes and wounds. Even infected beyond recovery it had guarded her room. Hornet sighed, patted its cold side, and closed its shielded foreclaws in front of its face.

She found two Deephunters inside her chambers in much the same situation, although in both cases it seemed that the nail strikes had killed them, and a still-living Deepling that crawled along the ceiling. From the shadows she watched it scurry, wondering if she should make her presence known, but decided against it. Infants shouldn’t be troubled with such things as her business here, and anyway Hornet preferred not to be seen until she had decided on what to say. She instead discarded what was left of her thread and pulled fresh silk from a large spool on the wall, wrapping it tightly onto the far smaller spool that she carried under her cloak. She threaded its end through the eye of her needle as she walked away and came back to the pit. The knot she typically used to tie her thread off was a complicated one that took a few seconds and both hands to tie, so she planted her needle in the ground and secured her thread where it was. Then she dropped the remaining thread down the chasm and dove after it herself, head-first.

She remembered doing this often as a child. Upon first being gifted her needle—at the time much too large for her—she had attempted many times to slowly descend like spiders did before coming to understand that the attempt at imitation was fruitless. She had taken to pushing her needle into the floor where it wouldn't come loose and lowering herself down the thread; after awhile she had begun to do so without holding onto the line.

It was fun to fall, diving through the dark, seeing how close to the ground she could come and still stop herself with her line. Hornet remembered the gasp of horror she had heard the first time the Midwife saw her leap off the edge. The moment she had been big enough to wield the needle effectively Hornet had begun teaching herself how to throw it right; later, in the gardens, she had learned how to throw it in midair and swing. Even now, after having done it so many times both here and in the kingdom beyond, Hornet felt her heart racing in elation as the ground came rushing up to meet her. Maybe ten feet away from it at most she shot a hand out and grabbed onto her thread and felt momentum flip her. The silken line was smooth enough to slide down, but she held it tight and felt herself slow dramatically, now with her feet pointing towards the ground. She landed on the edge above the lake, not even needing to bend her knees.

She left the thread hanging where it was as she entered the tunnel in front of her. The shadows of Weavers above skittered as she hopped over pits of writhing, spiny worms; she thought she heard scattered chittering and hisses of surprise. As she went deeper into the tunnels she took out her lantern, holding it in front of her to see, the lumafly buzzing merrily inside. Eventually she came to an alcove of sorts, the floor lined with bloody corpses, and after hesitation touched a corner of the
silk webs on the walls. Something moved in a hole in front of her.

She didn't flinch; it was exactly who she was looking for. With a rattling sound a creature almost as dark as the shadows around them emerged from that little tunnel, with a head and body that were almost the same massive, misshapen segment and short, spindly legs that hung in the air below the body. The creature’s face was covered by a white mask divided down the middle, with four eye holes and a wide, friendly smile painted across it. Hornet knew of the face beneath, but she didn’t mind. “Hello, Midwife,” she said, “some time it’s been since we last saw each other. It gives me joy to return to the Nest again.”

“Oh,” said the Midwife, in her curiously high, melodic voice. “Child, dear Child. I was just thinking of you, of how long it’s been since you returned to visit us. I’m so very, very glad to see you again, but I’m afraid there isn’t very much here to give you welcome.”

Something was wrong. Hornet was used to the Midwife’s voice, but not the way even her words seemed to skitter through the tunnels and loop back on themselves. Even as calm as she spoke, she seemed almost unaware of herself, as though her thoughts couldn’t quite connect to each other. The Midwife herself seemed unaware of anything off, but perhaps that was even more worrying. She just kept talking without even trying to straighten her thoughts and occasionally giggling at nothing.

“Many of our fellows were lost to the infection, but don’t worry, I remain.” Midwife used two of her back legs to pull herself a few inches closer; Hornet didn’t step back, but she wanted to. “I and a few more, we’re quite fine, quite fine down here. It would do our Weavers good to see you back, dearie. So soon after Herrah’s passing, for her daughter to visit home again would grant our grieving spirits some closure.”

Hornet nodded. “It caused me some sadness to...to know of her passing. I do not come to bring closure, but her death is what prompted me to come home again. I must address the Nest at large, but know that what brings me here is my devotion to her memory and her burden.” She paused, hesitating for a second too long, before she added, “it would be more fitting, I think, if we were to speak in the Den above. Gather all those who still remain and I will address them as a whole.”

They exchanged a few more words before Midwife pulled herself back into her narrow tunnel and Hornet turned and left the cave. She couldn’t keep concern out of her mind as she reached her thread and leaped before grabbing and almost flying up it. It took a lot to truly upset the Midwife; that she had helped to raise Hornet and kept more-or-less sane was evidence enough. Had it been the slow fall of their village into infection and ruin? But then, Hornet had seen the beginning of that descent before she had deemed it time to leave, and she had seen hundreds of bugs overcome by plague. Had Midwife herself been overcome for a brief time before the death of the Radiance? That, too, seemed unlikely. Hornet couldn’t imagine such a creature of the darkness being lost to the light, even briefly. If Hornet had another moment alone with her, she resolved, she would try to glean what afflicted her and learn if she could help. In the meantime, she made her way to the entrance of the den—the old, ornate room, scattered with discarded masks and a webbed-over bench.

She wasn’t quite sure when she decided to, but she found herself climbing beyond that, through the hole in the ceiling, until she came to what was once a bedchamber. Ancient, dusty cobwebs draped over the room like curtains, and a set of tattered banners marked with Herrah’s six black eyes hung over an empty stone plinth. Between them, lumafly light filtered through woven silk and shone down onto the stone—candles were plentiful about the room, but they had been extinguished. Hornet wiped away the thin layer of dust that had accumulated on the smooth stone and used her needle to cut a small patch of cloth off the hem of her cloak. Then her needle flashed across the
surface of the plinth, the glancing blow scattering a few sparks that she touched the cloth to and fanned into a small flame.

One by one she lit the candles, carefully but quickly making her way around the chamber as the flame climbed up the scrap of material. The glow of the room grew brighter as the flames danced on their wicks; the breeze of their updrafts stirred the cobwebs slightly. Halfway through the flame reached her hand and she dropped the cloth, extinguishing the fire beneath a foot. She grabbed a candle she had already lit and used it to set aflame the remaining few. Setting it back in place, she leaned her needle against the plinth and bowed her head.

...Give me strength, Mother... she thought. I was born from union between yourself and the Wyrm...Only through that continued union can our village survive...

For she had seen what remained of Deepnest. Once she had realized that the ghost was about to destroy the Beast, she had hurried halfway across the Kingdom to pay her last respects while her mother still lived. When she had left all those years ago only one or two had begun to succumb to infection, but as she had ran through the caverns every Weaver or Deepling or Devout she had encountered attacked—their movements slow and lacking their old grace, that infernal light shining from within their husks. Even the eggs had burst to reveal infected infants. She had stuck to the edges, dodging the husks and avoiding them entirely where she could—which was why she had arrived in Herrah’s bedchamber seconds too late to do anything but see her mother vanish—but of what she had seen since the affliction’s demise, survivors of that light were few. Those bugs who had awoken from the plague had found themselves crippled and sick, and she had only found a scattered few in the city. There wouldn’t be enough left of the spiders to carry on without joining with Hallownest.

The trouble, of course, would be in getting them to see it.

She had delayed long enough. Hornet took up her needle again and left the chamber, descending through the tunnels until she stood directly above the entrance room that had served as a trap to so many. The slight rustle of movement from below told her that she had an audience; with that in mind, she glanced down at herself, smoothing out her cloak and adjusting her grip on her needle. She would command their respect as the daughter of Herrah and one of the greatest warriors alive. Stepping off the ledge above, she dropped into the room and landed knees bent and head bowed, her cloak draped to the floor, her needlepoint singing as it hit the ground.

She rose, and looked up at the congregation. Two Devouts stared back at her, their foreclaws parted to let them see her properly between the shields, and three or four Little Weavers among the webs and perched on the stools perked up with their odd, spherical masks. A Deepling crawled down one of the Devouts’ shields. She could see a few more in the webs with the Little Weavers, clumsily scurrying without paying any attention to her. In the middle of all this the shadowy form of the Midwife looked at her through that grinning mask. It was to her specifically that Hornet spoke first.

“So these are all of them?” she said. “Of our beautiful village, these few are all that remain. I don’t claim to have been optimistic, but I fear I underestimated the scope of this blight, even after all this time. It saddens me to see us reduced so.”

“Optimism was never your strong suit, little one,” the Midwife said with a giggle. “There are enough here to carry on, more than enough. All eager to serve their queen.”

“You and I both know that that isn’t true.” Hornet looked up now, addressing the entire room. “Spiders of Deepnest! Worshipers of Herrah. You may not remember me, but I am certain you have heard Midwife speak of me. I am Hornet, the daughter of the old queen. But I do not come to
rule you in her place.”

A high, grinding noise of confusion sounded from one of the Devouts. Midwife’s body language had suddenly changed; her legs had tensed and her gracious air had frozen.

“That you are here, and can listen to me, means you know that the infection is no more. Without it, Hallownest will inevitably rise again; the wandering travellers will eventually find that place and stay. Hallownest even now has resources that would give our people the chance to persist. Yet without a leader that kingdom shall fail, and this one with it. To that end I have stepped forth to become the Queen of Hallownest.” The room was silent; the sort of silent in which you could hear the poison filling the air. “Now I reach out to you, and ask that you join me in the reconstruction of both worlds.”

“You ask us to defile the legacy of Herrah.” It was the high-pitched growling voice of a Devout.

“He’s right, I’m afraid, child,” said the melodious voice of Midwife. “Your dearest mother worked so hard, so hard, to resist the Wyrm’s imperialism. And why wouldn’t she? The horrors he committed would make any of us cower. I fear you’ve strayed from your home too long. You’ve forgotten all I told you. You’ve forgotten the evils we lived under when we had to beat the Wyrm back from our doors.”

“I’ve been away long enough,” said Hornet, “to learn which stories you told were the truth and which were falsehood. I have seen the Wyrm’s greatest sins, Midwife, and their magnitude dwarfs any story you could conceive. But that old kingdom may exist separate from the Wyrm’s conception. I come not to destroy my mother’s name, I come because it is in danger of being lost forever. I could not bear to see this village wiped out, but you lack the means to rebuild what the affliction has taken.”

“There is so much you don’t know,” Midwife said, but she didn’t elaborate.

Hornet turned back to the Devout who had spoken. “Nor do I seek to defile it, as you say. As the infection grew in strength all those years ago, she helped the King and joined him in union to stop it. That dalliance created me, and is why our Queen descended into eternal sleep. Those of the drowning city wrote on paper woven from our silk in the final years before its fall. That empire and ours have been linked in the past; to forge that link again is no great sacrilege. Particularly if it is to save our kind.”

“Our kind has never needed saving by them,” the Midwife snarled—actually snarled, her usual melody fringed by teeth. “Their first ambassadors said the same, that we needed saving from our barbaric ways. Do you remember them? Those poor, tasty bodies in the nest below? Have you forgotten in your idealism, child, why it is that we have no kinship with those bugs? Why they came to fear us, why they tried in vain to control us? Why they would not try again to tame this land,” Hornet replied, “because it is I, not the old King, who rules them. Any who defy me will bow to my law or fall to my needle. Midwife. Surely you see that I come here to defend my old home; not from a plague I could not stop, not from a conquering force, but from starvation and disarray. There are vengeflies and tiktiks by the thousands in the crossroads; I can provide as much food as you need if you're merely willing to join with me in Hallownest.” Her former caretaker said nothing, merely staring. Desperate now, but hiding it behind her practiced stoicism, Hornet said, “I am more than willing to take my mother's place, Midwife, but I cannot truly help this nest with so little. Nor can I ignore the bugs who will need guidance in a reborn Hallownest.”
The Midwife was silent for a time, looking at her without moving. For a moment Hornet thought that she was considering her words; for another moment she thought that she was about to be thrown out. She searched her last statement for things she shouldn't have said, things she should amend. Then the Midwife hummed, and Hornet focused all her attention on her.

“Perhaps you're right,” the Midwife said at last, her voice suddenly returning to her soothing singsong. Hornet stared blankly and a murmur went through the spiders around them. “I’m very sorry, child, perhaps I shouldn’t have raised my voice. You know how I get, don’t you? You know...how my temper gets the best of me...when I haven’t eaten in awhile...”

Cold, sick shock washed over Hornet. She shifted one foot back, ready, and her hand trembled as it tightened around her rising needle.

“...And I’m so, so HU U NG R Y Y Y...”

Her arm tensed, waiting.

When the Midwife’s mask parted down the middle, it revealed a dark blue face with four beady, lidless eyes and a mouth like a tear in the skin. It had no lips, just uneven, razor-sharp teeth coated in dried blood and half-rotted away. The teeth gnashed together with a horrible noise, and she lunged towards Hornet with a snarl. Hornet hopped back sharply and dodged the first lunge, and then her needle slashed outwards as Midwife tried again. The mask closed again before the blade came into contact, but her needlepoint left a deep, thin line diagonally across its surface.

“Me?” Hornet hissed, stepping—almost stumbling—forward, her needle held defensively in front of her. “You attack me? After you helped my mother give birth? After all the years you brought me up, after comforting me when she began to Dream, you...like I’m just another morsel to devour?” Some part of her rebelled; she had never seen the Midwife attack a bug with a mind; even those in the alcove below she had assumed to have been out of desperation. She had seen the look in her eyes as she had tried to bite her. But all the rationalization in the world wouldn’t silence the revelation that her old caretaker had tried to eat her, and angry tears that threatened to escape. “Am I no longer one of you?” she whispered; and while she could hold back her tears, she couldn’t stop the cracking in her voice as she spoke. When Midwife said nothing, she tried again. “...Was I ever...?”

She couldn’t finish the sentence, and Midwife still refused to answer. It was more than answer enough to the nervous insecurities that had plagued the back of Hornet’s mind for so long, and she struggled to bite back a cry. An explosion of horror and grief and rage racked her form; she focused on the rage, fanning it, letting it fill her chest and head and color her vision blood-red. She lifted her needle, almost watching her own actions from afar. With a harsh, grating voice she hissed, “If I cannot convince you to my plan by words or kinship—”

Scurrying distracted her. Lowering her needle half an inch she looked at the assembled spiders, who stared back at her with wariness and newfound hostility. Imperceptibly she looked from Devouts to Little Weavers to Deeplings—who still explored their threads without listening to or understanding the conflict taking place in front of them. If she struck Midwife down now, she would be at war with the Devouts, and from there—but then all she would have done was exterminate her own home. Slowly she looked back at Midwife and lowered her needle.

“...Then there is no reason for my being here,” she finished. Turning away, she started for the door with drooped head and folded posture. The energy for her usual dramatics had deserted her. “I understand that you no longer see me as a daughter of Deepnest. You will not see me again. Goodbye.”
“Child…”

“Goodbye, Midwife.” The room lacked a door, so she turned the corner to vanish from their sight. She ground her teeth together as she launched herself off of the platform—for half a second she was tempted to let herself fall—and threw her needle at the wall above the entrance into the cavern.

She would not look back. She zipped to the platform and wrenched her needle free and took off at nearly a run through the tunnels of Deepnest. She would not look back. At some point a path opened upwards and she leaped through it, driving her mantis claw into the crumbling walls and leaping off to land on the floor above. _She would not look back._ She climbed as fast as she could, desperate not to slow down, and tore through old silk carelessly. Her anger had abated, leaving her with a cavernous, monstrous _pain_ that no hot spring could fix. She could feel tears starting down her face and almost screamed through her teeth as she rubbed them away. Throwing her needle upwards again without looking up, she hauled herself up hand over hand until her shoulder brushed a chain stretching across the pit and she realized where she was.

She hung from her line by one hand, examining the chains and rafters that crisscrossed the cave and the thorny vines high above that her needle had stuck into. The Queen’s Gardens were only a few meters away, and there she would be out and away. Still she didn’t dare look back, worried—not _scared_, she wasn’t an infant—that she’d slip back and be eaten alive by her own torn heart. Her feet lifted and hooked on the chain next to her, and she balanced on it as she pulled her needle back. She stood breathing for a moment before she heard in a side tunnel the chittering, clicking, humming she remembered so well.

At once she found her rage again. It bubbled up as seething, searing fire; she felt painful and wonderful _hatred_ surge through every vein and seep into her needle. It consumed and overwhelmed her, as she dropped down into the tunnel she almost stumbled, so desperate she was for blood. This _thing_ had filled her nightmares as a child; later she had found its role the birth of her doomed siblings and a coal of detestation had made its home in her. Now that coal had been dropped in the oil of her grief and erupted in tongues of savage loathing.

When she stormed out of the tunnel and into the Mask Maker’s chamber, though, she was confronted by the visage of a creature in a white mask, a cloth that was more shawl than cloak, long arms busily carving and painting masks—and nothing else. It glanced up at her without pausing from its work, a grunt of interest punctuating its mutters. Perhaps it recognized one of its old designs. In any case it returned to the masks it was working on, muttering to itself or perhaps to her, “Does she seek a new mask or face? A way to leave behind her old self, or her origins? How strange to have such a visitor here. She can find a mask that fits her I think. These are for the faceless, but they’re happy to serve all who need them.”

It wasn’t nearly as large as Hornet remembered. Oh, it was large, but not the towering monstrosity she had seen it as when she had been half her height. Nor did it look as threatening; had it changed its mask? She glanced around at the piles upon piles of false faces that littered the cave. Was this all it did? Why had she ever feared it? She had seen far more frightening things in her travels; indeed, she had _become_ far more frightening. Her anger was ebbing away, leaving a slightly nauseous sensation behind, but she still looked back at the Mask Maker with lingering fury. It wouldn’t do to kill it, she decided. Eventually she, as Queen, would need to provide masks for bugs, but that rage still lifted her needle. She needed to see.

Her needle caught the lip of its mask and tore it away, sending it clattering to the floor in two pieces. The blank grey face beneath it had two swirling, watery eyes that leaked something black, but it didn't bother to look up at her. Feeling rather embarrassed, Hornet said, “I am fine with the
one I have, Mask Maker,” and turned on her heel to leave with a semblance of dignity.

She stood on the lip of the tunnel overlooking the larger room, staring down. The surge of anger had done nothing to alleviate her sadness, and now she had a sickly feeling of shame to accompany it. Absently she decided that she wanted to be long gone by the time the Weavers returned to this spot and hurled her needle upwards, back into the roof. Zipping up, she tore the needle free before weaving through the winding gaps in the stone ceiling, periodically tugging out a few vines to bar the way for followers. She didn't trust the village not to send someone to try and kill her. They would be no match, mind you, but Hornet had no interest in another fight today. At last the gaps widened into the deep greens she loved so much, light filled her vision, and she took a welcome breath of the clean air of the Queen’s Gardens.

Immediately to the side was a small enclosure of intricately decorated iron and glass that allowed view of some of the eight-winged Alubas that drifted about in the open air. A toll machine had once stood there, but it was gone and replaced with a bench rooted to the ground. Hornet stood on the edge of the enclosure, staring at the bench with trepidation. Somebody, somebody with more interest in collecting Geo than she, must have paid the toll. Hornet recalled the enormous collection of fossilized shells scattered around the temple floor where the Ghost had died and, despite her mood, couldn’t help but giggle. She offered another silent thanks to her sibling’s memory as she rested on the iron seat.

A pipe with the horn of a gramophone hung from the ceiling and piped in a tinny recording of some peaceful tune. Hornet looked at it curiously as she pulled her feet up onto the bench with her —music, something she rarely had a chance to hear, was one of the few surprises she found not to be unpleasant. On the other side of the window was a grove of deep green flowers with white pollen, still as a painting, only the drifting Alubas revealing that they weren’t. Hornet sat watching the scene for a while, letting the ache of sadness subside a bit and holding back her tears as best she could. Then she turned away from the window and slid across the bench a bit, lying down on its seat.

She was tired. She wanted nothing more to do with today. While she didn’t usually sleep on the benches, it was a good deal more even than the dusty or rocky ground she usually used without being disconcertingly soft like the beds in Dirtmouth. Hornet rolled onto one side and drew her knees and cloak tighter. Her needle, lying on the floor beneath her, was close enough to grab at an instant’s notice and its thread leading back into her coil. So assured, she forced away her tears, closed her eyes, and managed to sleep.

It was difficult to stop on wet ground; the Old Stag slid a few feet when he came to a halt and took a second to steady himself as his passenger hopped off of the seats on his back. The rain from high above had already started to soak into his fur, but he waited a minute to exchange a few words with his passenger before retreatting back into the Stagway tunnels.

“Well, that was something!” cried the bug who had called himself Quirrel, looking back at the Stag. “Such a quick, exciting trip—halfway across the kingdom! I regret never having made use of your services before. Thank you, my friend.”

“I’m glad to be at your aid,” the Stag replied, his voice hoarse and deep. “If you wish to travel the Stagways again, just ring the station bell up there and I’ll find you. Only one other bug has used these stations in years, you know. A little one, with a nail and a pale mask. Have you met them?”

“Ahh,” said Quirrel softly. He was quiet for a minute, and the Stag peered down at him, worried he had offended somehow. Quirrel, seeing this, swallowed the lump in his throat and wiped his eyes. “Yes, I’ve met them. I’m honored to have called them a dear friend of mine. I’m afraid, though,
that neither of us will be seeing them again.” When the Stag looked confused, Quirrel looked down at the stone tablets he had tied into a bundle and secured to his waist with a length of cord. He looked back at the Stag once he could get his face under control and explained, “They’ve...passed on, you see. There was some sort of battle. I’ve been told that they came to Hallownest on a mission for something, and died to carry it out. They succeeded, mind you. We-we ought to take comfort in that.”

The Stag stared at him, visibly horrified. Slowly he nodded. “I...Yes. I will take comfort in that. Forgive me,” he added, his voice growing rougher. “I did not realize...that is, I too held some affection towards the little one. It didn’t occur to me that one day I may have ferried them for the last time. Well...thank you...for telling me, my friend. It’s better that I learned from one who was close to them.” The Stag raised himself up and said, half to himself, “I will carry their memory with me as I travel. They were a good friend, and an eager traveler.” As Quirrel nodded, the Stag continued, “But I fear I have no time to mourn; my duty calls. There is another on that bench.”

Quirrel looked over. Indeed, a cockroach sat on the bench of King’s station and was looking back at them, although it seemed more in surprise than anything. He had to make this assumption on body language alone; the red mask, or perhaps helmet, she wore allowed for no visible facial expression. Even her eyes were obscured, as instead of a single large hole for each there were four small ones for added protection. Her antennae drooped forwards and her arms were pulled up to her chest in slight alarm.

“Hello there,” he called, climbing onto the platform and stepping closer to the bench. “My name’s Quirrel! I apologize for delaying your travel. I needed to...let him know of the passing of a mutual friend. He's ready to take you on your way if—”

“I wasn't waiting for it,” the cockroach said hesitantly. “I was just...sitting. Collecting myself. Don't—don't wait up for me,” she leaned over to tell the Stag, who grunted in response. Looking back up at Quirrel, she mumbled in amendment, “m Perip.”

“Pleased to meet you, Perip. Yes, it’s a wonderful place to collect oneself.” Quirrel looked up at the station around them, but something had already occurred to him. “If I may ask,” he said after a while, “the design of your helm looks familiar. Do you come from the same place as those bodies in the Kingdom’s edge, the ones that fall from the ceiling and lie buried in ash?”

Perip stiffened at the question, but she nodded. “Yes,” she said with palpable hesitance. “Not originally, though. I sought the Colosseum just like those fallen warriors, searching for glory in battle. Me and my mount.”

Quirrel was intrigued. After pointing next to the cockroach in wordless question, he sat next to her, leaning his arms on his knees to listen.

“Have you ever seen the beasts beyond the howling cliffs with feelers surrounding their mouths, the ones that can curl into spiny balls and hurl themselves through the air?” Quirrel shook his head, but Perip didn’t seem to notice, too engrossed in her memories. “I found the beast soon after I left the place I was born, and I managed to train it, to find a companion and friend in it. I...can’t quite remember everything after that, there was so much light...I think I...found that arena, and it and I fought together, and we triumphed. I seem to remember the Colosseum becoming...like a home...and we became revered.” A note of pride crept into her voice as she added, “They called me the God Tamer.”

Quirrel had leaned closer to her while listening, eager to hear, but now he returned to his previous position with a grunt. He still couldn’t claim to understand her desire for glory any more than he had when he had spoken to Bardoon, but that bothered him little. The tale of her mount had
interested him; he remembered his battle alongside the Ghost in Monomon’s archive against Uumuu, and reflected on the connection he had felt with them through that fight. “That sounds...moving...” he said slowly, and looked around. “But I don’t see your creature here. Is it outside, or...?”

Perip looked back at him, her pride palpably fading, and he trailed off slowly. After a moment’s pause she shook her head. “It died,” her voice cracked. “The last battle we were in—the Trial of the Fool—I was careless. I could barely think through the light, the pain, the hate... I’d never felt more hate than in that battle...and I...I let the challenger attack my beast without attempting to draw them towards me. They killed it.” Her breath hitched as the words began to fall like the rain. “And then the light went out and the pain was gone, and the challenger was there in front of me but—but my companion w-was a smear of flesh across the ground and the crowd was cheering for them, for the challenger and they should’ve killed me too but they just left ...and then I was thrown out of the Colosseum, because what’s the use of the God Tamer without the God? And...and now I’m here.”

Quirrel lifted a hand and, after a second’s hesitation, laid it on her shoulder. “I may understand something of your grief. I’m very sorry to hear what happened, though you should know that it was not your fault. A bug I met recently, and our new Queen Hornet, told me that the vanquished infection had its roots in a being of light. What you describe sounds like the way those poor husks acted before they were given their peace. You shouldn’t hold yourself responsible for what sickness compelled you to do; instead mourn your companion without the added weight of guilt.”

Perip didn’t give a response to this, continuing to stare at the floor. Her hands curled and uncurled in her lap as she sniffled. “I never should have sought the Colosseum,” she cried. “No glory was worth this. It and I were happy together! Now it’s dead, and I...I don’t know what to do.”

“You don’t have to do anything,” said Quirrel. “That’s one of the wonderful things about living in a kingdom’s ruins, although they may not be ruins much longer. Nothing is expected of you here. You’re under no obligation to act as though its death doesn’t change you. You can sit in this empty city as long as you want and come to terms with your loss. Who’s going to judge you, the walls?” He took his hands off of her shoulder and pushed himself to his feet. “If, however, you find that grieving without action suits you poorly, as it does me, you may consider exploring the once and future kingdom around us. I’d recommend you begin in Dirtmouth. That old town is a bit gloomy for my tastes, but its residents are friendly enough. Which reminds me.” He glanced down at the tablets, lifting one briefly away from his waist to read what he had written. “My old teacher’s archives contained references to some sort of laboratory in this city, devoted to the study of Soul. Whatever questions they were trying to answer, an error in their final experiment seems to have severely damaged much of this city’s infrastructure and technology. I’m off to learn of the precise cause of the accident, and whether its effects can be reversed. You’re welcome to join me if that sort of thing interests you.” She shook her head silently. Shrugging, Quirrel said, “Well, I’ll see you later perhaps. Stay safe, Perip,” and left the former God Tamer to her thoughts.

But she only stayed on that bench for a few minutes more, staring down at her wringing hands. Then she pushed herself to her feet with a bit of effort and took from behind the bench a barbed nail lance longer than she was tall. Laying it across one shoulder, she tentatively walked up to the platform overlooking the Stag and the beginning of the Stagway tunnel. He looked up at her, patiently waiting, until she said, “To Dirtmouth, please.”

Chapter End Notes
Bleh. Take it. I never want to look at these freaking words again.
I decided that both Hornet and the Mantis Lords would add a few more moves to their respective repertoires after Ghost beat them. And also, their styles would naturally vary anyway because this isn't a video game and contact damage isn't a thing.

Also, those names for the Mantis Lords are pure fanon. So is the God Tamer's real name, but this is the first fic where that's shown up, so whatever. If you want to use any of them, by all means please do.
Judgement of Ancient Sins

He kept to the corners, careful not to draw attention to himself as he moved through the poorly-lit chambers of the laboratory. Around him, a few shellless, shapeless bugs oozed across the ground, making a noise that if their vocals worked right may have been screaming. A few of the former bugs noticed him and hurried forwards, waving what were likely their arms in an attempt to grab him, but he hadn’t survived Hallownest up to now by making himself conspicuous and for the most part he was able to slip by unnoticed.

But Quirrel wasn’t there to slip by unnoticed. The very first room of the sanctum had been filled with scattered piles of tablets of recorded experiments, alchemical symbols and the ravings of madmen the likes of which it would have taken months to completely sort through. He had picked through a few of them, but then he had noticed the corpse lying beneath the exit in the roof, the one with a tattered cloak and wide eyes and the stab wounds of a well-aimed nail. He had cautiously examined the body, but all that had revealed was burn scars and a set of milky stones set into its forehead. After turning it over, he had wiped his hands on its cloak before hastily leaving the room.

It had been much the same in the rest of the lab above. Quirrel had seen a table of equipment here, a journal there, and a few animated puddles that had been bugs before finally arriving at something he recognized. Even within that description it was foreign; the only part of the wide, cold metal machine he could call familiar was the writing on the front surface that had faded into existence as he had approached it.

“Record Aba,” he read aloud. He looked through the notes he had brought with him until he found the name among them. Monomon, or someone working under her, had used this record as an academic source in the kingdom’s final years. Quirrel could only make out bits and pieces of the coded jargon of the Archives—once, long, ago, he had been fluent in it, and now that knowledge was slowly returning the more he attempted to make it out—but he had worked out the name of this source, and had come here in the hopes that this record would help him understand the rest.

The mind still limits us so. How to break past its constraints? To attain a pure focus, is it even possible?

Quirrel hummed to himself. To the left of the words was a recessed bump with what looked like a button in the center; experimentally he first tried turning the shape like a dial to no avail, then pushed the button.

With a scraping like stone or unoiled machinery, the writing faded out and revealed something behind them that resembled a pair of eyes, before more light began to fill the grey surface. It had barely begun to form letters, though, when there was a grinding sound from within the machine and the writing came to an abrupt stop. Quirrel frowned, thumped the side of the machine, and then sat back on his knees as it completely failed to continue writing. He hummed again, folding his arms. Taking it apart didn’t seem like an option; he saw seams, but not bolts or rivets along them. He stood. Perhaps he could find a hard copy somewhere. Quirrel left the space the machine took up and stepped around the dead bodies in the larger room as he made his way to a nearby elevator.

When he emerged from it, it was to find still another corpse in the large, mostly-empty chamber, this one bearing long, deep slashes across its chest and head. A refined pinblade lay on the floor next to it, rolling slightly as Quirrel prodded it with a foot. He stepped over the body and into the tall, multi-leveled room through the doorway across from the elevator.
This room, though, was occupied by more than corpses. Quirrel had stepped inside and just
dropped to a lower level when a being appeared in a burst of light, floating before and above him.

It was identical to one of the corpses he had seen previously, but this one was unscathed and alive,
and as Quirrel flinched back the stones in its forehead lit up brightly and expelled an orange sphere
of light. He jumped forward again, out of its way, but the spell’s path curved and drew a smoking
line down his back before it dissipated into the ground.

Quirrel screamed in pain. He didn't fall—he had taken terrible hits before; he knew how to push
through pain and keep moving regardless—but he stumbled, and in that moment the cloaked
cicada, if that was what it was, appeared in his path in a flash of light and the stones flared again.

Quirrel jumped. Uumuu had unlocked memories of technique and training he hadn’t known he had,
and that knowledge hadn’t left him when he and Ghost had killed it. His leap carried him back up
to the previous floor too fast to see. Another sharp flash behind him as he landed told him of the
cicada’s new location; he bolted forward as fast as he could and dodged another spell as he made it
back through the door. The pinblade was exactly where he had found it and he scooped it up as he
skidded to a stop. It was larger and heavier than his old nail, but noticeably whippy, and he hefted
it experimentally and switched it to a reverse grip.

It wasn’t for such a grip. The large, curved guard lay against his wrist, and the blade was
long enough that he could feel gravity dragging it down. But these could be ignored and
compensated for; he ducked out of sight of the door and tried a few practice swings to get a feel for
it. He took a deep breath as he stepped back into the next room and cast his gaze around quickly,
searching for the bug. It had vanished. He stepped to the edge of the floor and crouched down,
briefly searching for it with his arm at the ready. His fingers wrapped around the pin’s hilt so
tightly it shook.

He hopped down and the being materialized before he hit the ground. The pattern on its forehead
lit up, but Quirrel landed already ducking; the spell screamed over his head and dissipated into the
ground behind him. He lifted himself from his crouch only an inch, enough for some leverage, and
in the blink of an eye had launched himself past the mage. “Kha’sal!” he cried, and his weapon’s
point drew a deep line across the sorcerer’s shoulder.

There wasn’t a response in its mannerisms; yet he breathed a sigh of relief as its arm dropped
beneath the cloak and lay limp. It had turned sharply to face him even as he had streaked past, and
now sent another spell at him. He darted away, dodging the spell, and aimed a downward strike at
the bug’s head. It teleported away before the blade ever reached it, reappearing above him, and
drifted aimlessly for a moment before casting again.

Quirrel bolted under the floor between himself and the mage. He heard the spell’s impact rattle the
platform above him; it was his intent to lure the sorcerer within striking distance, but instead it
teleported just out of reach and cast another spell at him. Quirrel dodged to the left, but he had
nothing with which to block the spell as it curved around to hit him hard in the shoulder, burning it
and knocking him off his feet. He rolled a few feet and came to a stop with pale energy still
seeping from the impact like steam.

He dragged himself to his feet as fast as he could, groaning all the way. The pinblade was heavier
than before and the arm that held it was reluctant to obey his commands, but he forced himself to
heft it anyway and jumped past the wizard too fast to see. He leaped up and up, finally stopping
when he alighted on a platform maybe two-thirds of the way up. The mage teleported behind him,
which was what he was waiting for. “Kha’saa!” he shouted again, as the blade cut deep into the
sorcerer’s chest.
The mage teleported downward again, but through the sound of Soul being warped to achieve this, Quirrel was sure he heard a scream. He peered over the edge of the platform he now alighted on to examine the creature, seeing the blood ooze from its wound.

“I’d like not to continue this,” he called down to it, “and I’d imagine you find it similarly unpleasant. My business isn’t with you, sir. If you’d like to let me pass, I’ll be glad to leave you alone...no?” he finished as it teleported above him again. “Very well. Hahp! ”

This last part was a grunt as he leaped as high as he could, over a spell that dissipated into the platform and above the level the mage floated at. He raised the pinblade despite his shrieking shoulder and slashed at it as he jumped, but the sorcerer vanished in another flash of light before the blade connected. Quirrel had been paying attention, though, and he had noticed the trail of light that stretched between where the mage vanished and where it reappeared. He tracked it now to behind and below him, and he whirled in midair and kicked off the approaching wall. It was a clumsy maneuver, but he came back down with speed and force and with a final cry of “Kha’sa!” had sent the blade through the mage’s midsection. It fell with him and hit the entry floor already dying. Quirrel himself landed on his feet and collapsed from the momentum onto one knee and his hands. He kneeled like that for a minute, panting.

With a grunt of effort and a numb leg, he pushed himself to his feet. His knee ached where it had hit the ground, and he leaned all his weight on his other leg as he moved the pinblade to his other hand. Gingerly he nudged the corpse off the platform and turned away before he heard the thump. Killing mindless predators was one thing, but this was quite another, and Quirrel shuddered at the sound and tried not to think much about it. Instead he looked up, at the entrance to an elevator he had noticed while fighting, and made his way to it with the blade in one hand. He might have preferred not to use it again, but he doubted this place would care what he preferred.

Three of those poor shapeless creatures and another mage confirmed his suspicions in short order, but at last Quirrel found something of what he was looking for. A stone tablet lay on a desk he happened to pass by, and he scooped it up gratefully and leaned against the table, next to the nearest lumafly light, to read.

The experiment the tablet documented seemed a minor one, focusing on how Soul might be used to artificially conceive, but as he read Quirrel lost interest in the main concept as he slowly realized that the procedure implied that acquiring Soul was a simple matter. It wasn’t like it sprang freely from every tap. Perhaps if they had access to one of those totems he had seen around the kingdom, but he couldn’t imagine even one of those holding enough Soul to make much use of. It only deepened the confusion that had risen to the forefront of his mind since fighting the mage; he understood that spells were fueled by Soul, but where had it gotten so much? Now, it appeared that the entire laboratory used it. He carried the tablet under his arm for later archiving, and continued through the hallways nail-first.

He had gone through two more chambers and collected a few more tablets before finding even a semblance of an answer. In a cranny in the corner of the lab was a large jar of sorts, slightly taller than he was. It gave off a glow that far outshone the lanterns, one that seemed to move and ripple constantly, and when Quirrel knelt to peer through the glass he saw swirling globules of light that danced around each other. He touched a finger to the glass and was surprised when a point of light pressed against the spot he touched, as though anxious to meet him. He could feel its warmth, and with it a kind of...not strength, but vitality, ease of life. This was Soul. A wave of shock rolled through Quirrel like a boulder dropped into a lake, and he instantly took his hand from the glass. The speck of light drifted back to dance with its siblings as he put a hand to his chin.

*How does the jar contain it? He wondered. Is it the metal that traps it, or some trick of the glass?*
He tapped each experimentally. The glass seemed to hiss from the action, while the dark metal had an icy chill. *Or is there some spell these mages have crafted to hold it?* He pulled it away from the corner, wincing as it scraped along the ground, and left the jar there to return later.

But he had barely stepped into the wider chamber that room branched off of when another mage apparated in front of him. By reflex alone, he dove to the right and over a hole in the ground that looked to have once been a skylight for the room below. The mage cast another of the spherical spells at him, and as it curved towards him he darted closer in the hopes that he could maneuver the spell into hitting its caster. No luck; the spell dissipated before it reached them and the sorcerer teleported into a new position and cast again.

Quirrel dodged, but just barely. This room offered quite a lot of terrain he could exploit, but that was terrain the mage could exploit too, and he was finding it difficult to get a straight shot at them past one ledge or another. He cast a glance about the room and noticed, behind crumbling rubble that had once been a wall, the gleam of light through glass. Darting to ground level, he bolted past the rubble to find himself standing on an intact skylight, light shining through from below, and surrounded by broken glass. Below him was nothing but white; above was two separate broken skylights, one above the other. He had been hoping for an easy escape route, and, as the mage teleported to ground level, he believed he may have found one—or if not, at least a way to end this pointless attack.

He leaped upwards, dodging a spell that dissipated into the wall behind him, and managed to grab the ledge high above. Below him the sorcerer teleported into the shaft and looked up at him, a single spell orbiting them as a shield. Quirrel watched it orbit nervously, trying to time the spell’s rotation, as the mage’s forehead began to glow. If he dropped now—now—now—he’d be slammed into the wall, the Soul burning his frame and cutting off however many years he still had in him. If he had still had Monomon’s mask, he would’ve been able to block the spell, but the days when he could rely on that were over. The sorcerer cast a ball of Soul at him. Quirrel hastily gathered his legs and leaped off of the wall, beginning to fall backwards, headed right into the path of the orbiting spell—

The two broken skylights had left frames of metal and broken glass, sharp ledges dividing the shaft into thirds. Quirrel twisted in midair and managed to catch himself on the corner of the second one, free arm pinwheeling as the spell zipped by just below and he threatened to overbalance, then, the instant he was at all confident he wouldn’t fall, he swiped the pinblade downwards across the mage’s forehead. A streak of blood splattered across the wall and one of the three stones set into its forehead came loose, falling to the ground below.

The wizard seemed to flicker out of existence for a moment. Spotty particles of white light started to pollute the air like the spores of the fungal wastes as the Soul of the orbiting spell warped and twisted momentarily into crackling static. Quirrel leaned back against the wall, catching his breath, as he watched it teleport barely an inch downwards and then vanish entirely into a flash of light. Two streaks of Soul characteristic of these beings’ teleportation jumped towards the ceiling above, but only on the second attempt did it even form the shape of the bug attempting to move through it. Quirrel watched this in horror, waiting for a full teleportation, the pinblade held so tightly in one hand that he felt his fingers might break. Then he saw the flash of light that signaled the mage had appeared, and before it had even faded he lunged upwards with the blade angled to slash at it and a shout of “*Kha’saa!* ”

He found himself on the other side of the mage, a smear of blood across his chest and nail arm. The mage began to fall with a gurgling, choking sound as Quirrel caught himself by one arm on the highest ledge of the shaft. He dangled there and watched as the mage fell, collided with a lower ledge, and hit the ground with a crunching sound. The spell circling it had fizzled and vanished.
Quirrel winced and looked away as the corpse beneath him slowly rolled from leftover momentum, instead focusing on pulling himself up. The fight had left him drained.

He reached up with his occupied hand and released the pinblade onto the floor above so as to grab the ledge with both hands. He bent one knee and pushed his foot against the wall to grant himself a boost as he hauled himself up and over the ledge. He rolled onto his back once he had reached it, his legs dangling over the edge as he took slow breaths, recovering and feeling his heart slow. Then he sat up with a grunt of effort, turned away from the edge, and came almost face-to-face with a shriveled corpse.

“AH!” He jumped back, almost falling over the side as he took in the pile of bodies. They lay crumpled and decaying, the heap almost as tall as he was and sprawling out on all sides. Bodies filled almost the entirety of the room he found himself in, and as he looked to the left he could see more filling the halls beyond. Quirrel was no stranger to the dead, but the magnitude, and what they implied, staggered him. Slowly, dreading what he'd see, he crept to the other side of the room and looked out over the sight of corpses heaped together in piles taller than him as far as the eye could see. Dragging the pinblade with him, he stepped through the halls and through the victims that had been hidden away there.

If he had counted them, Quirrel suspected he would have run out of numbers. He walked in silence instead, focusing on the next door, then the next. The bodies at his feet and in the corner of his vision seemed never to end. Within himself, pulsing like a heartbeat, he was aware of an urgent, screaming need to get out of these labs, but somewhere along the way he had gotten turned around and lost, and now there was nothing for it but to walk on until he found an exit. His pace was interrupted as one of the formless bugs slithered out of the floor, groaning. Quirrel stood stiff as he watched it approach; he knew what it was now, knew what it had done. He looked down at his own grip on the pinblade’s handle. Looking up at the mistake crawling towards him, he raised the blade with only a little hesitation and slashed.

Hornet awoke by rolling over on the bench and inadvertently falling off. She landed on the ground in an undignified heap, sleepily wondering how long she had actually rested. It was unlikely she had slept more than an hour or two, judging by the stiffness of her muscles and the sluggishness of her mind. Hornet scraped her needle and herself off the stone floor, rubbing slumber out of her eyes as the gramophone’s music played on the edge of her growing awareness. She pushed herself to her feet with one hand on the bench and stared past the tarnished brass horn, out the window at the greenery and alubas beyond. While the sight brought her some focus and peace, it didn’t take her mind off of either her task or the events that had transpired before she had slept. She turned her back on the calming view and left the enclosure, breaking into a jog after only a few steps.

The grief over her experiences and renewed self-exile from Deepnest had subsided, but not faded, and she found herself struggling to stay focused on her plans and the path ahead. The tribe of mantis traitors in these gardens, once a dangerous and prominent nuisance, were all but gone in the wake of the infection’s demise; she only noticed two as she passed by, and they both had looked shriveled and weak and had barely made a move towards her. Hornet didn’t know whether to be pleased or disappointed: it would have been a blessing to distract herself with a fight, to feel that rush of danger and excitement and a pounding heart, but it looked as though she would have to find her thrill some other way. She relaxed her form as she dashed through the thorny caverns and over creaking, hinged platforms, leaping from one to the next without breaking stride like the skipping of a stone. For the thrill of it, she allowed herself a few careless stunts, tossing her needle in mid-air and swinging from it so near to the spikes that she felt one tug at her cloak’s hem. As she slid to a stop in the next room and threw the blade again to climb, she felt one foot slip half a millimeter off the edge of the floor above the twisting, thorny vines. Her mother would have been mortified, the
Mantis Lords impressed at the audacity, and Vespa likely exasperated at her carelessness. She didn’t care, charging through the gardens with her needle in one hand and her mantis claw in the other, hearing the hinges of platforms squeaking and collapsing already far, far behind her, long after she had moved on. Hornet had practiced along this route for years. She could afford to have her fun.

Her path became vertical and she had to slow down slightly, knocking aside an errant mossfly with the flat of her blade. She hurled her needle into the ceiling high above and climbed halfway to it in seconds. As she went up her thread, she could reach out a foot to catch onto and push off of the stone platforms dotting the way, letting her use both her arms and her legs to ascend. She practically flew to the point where her needle was anchored, grabbing it by the eye and pulling it free even as she darted through the hole in the wall beside it.

But only a few seconds after this she stopped, staring down a corridor with confusion. Her path wasn’t down that route. It had never been. In fact, it couldn’t have been because the path had always been blocked by a gate of rushing black, one that had held her back and rebounded every attempt she had ever made to pass through it. The spiny constructs at the gate’s base and top were reminiscent of the civilization before Hallownest, but they were far younger than that; the only conclusion she had been able to reach was that it was the King’s creation, and so she had decided to leave it as it was and ignore it. Now it was gone.

The structures that had supported it remained, shining black and resembling toothy mouths, but the barrier that had spanned between them was gone as if it had never existed. Hornet stepped a bit closer, wary of a possible trap, but even when she had almost reached the structures there was no sign that the gate would rematerialize. With hesitance she took from her cloak a length of thread ending in a spike—the anchor of a pre-prepared spike trap, infinitely more expendable than her needle—and tossed it like a dart. The thread shimmered in the air as she guided it to fly straight and it hit the inside of the construct set into the ground. The spike completely failed to anchor in the metal and there was no reaction from the structure itself, and when she tossed it at the one embedded in the floor she was met with the same result. Tilting her head as she tucked the anchor back into her cloak, Hornet swiped her needle through the open air between the structures as though checking for a tripwire. Then, with caution still tugging at her mind, she skipped between them herself, crossing the space the barrier had filled as easily as she would cross any other open air.

When the gate still failed to reappear, she was surprised to find herself more than a little irritated. Not just at being wrong; that something such as this, with every sign pointing to it being some sort of trap, should prove to be apparently harmless was her main source of ire. Every survival instinct she possessed was proved wrong for once; they’d be a little less sharp now. Frustrated, she straightened and turned away, trying to work out exactly where this path would take her relative to what she knew. She was some ways above the grave in thorns, while far above her was the enclosure that separated the gardens from the Greenpath, which had been her destination. There was a path below her that would carry her past the fossilized remains of some great, six-eyed beast and through a room full of accursed leaping creatures. At the end of that path was a narrow passage upward, ending with glowing pale branches—

Hornet’s heart skipped a beat. Those branches, growing through the wall at the top of the alcove, had been a riddle she had never answered. She had scoured the gardens for another way into the chamber the branches grew from, but had never found one. Now, she believed herself to be just below the top of that passageway; if down this path there was a way up...she sprinted down the stone walkway until it ended at a small cavern lined all around with green vines and red thorns; looking up, she could see directly above her a gap in the vines and in the ceiling alike, with open space just above it ending in a metal roof.
She tossed her needle skywards, underhanded. It stabbed into a visible edge of the stone above and held firm; Hornet pulled tight the thread it trailed and the silk seemed almost to shimmer as she felt its tension and the breeze on it as she concentrated. The Weavers had taught her as a child how to feel along and manipulate the gossamer thread as though it were a part of her. Now, she used that knowledge to feel for heartbeats in the room above, and when she found none, she pulled hard and the line seemed to pull back. She zipped upwards through the gap in the floor and landed in a crouch.

She stood, surveying the room as the needle was pulled back into her grip. It was another of the metal-and-glass enclosures that dotted the gardens, this one larger than most, and it was littered with the corpses of six mantis traitors—and one corpse in particular, bigger than all the others and lying away from her. As she warily paced around it she saw the two blue, serrated horns that curved like a Seal of Binding and were interrupted by a white mask, which had been shattered and now barely clung to the body. This must have been Kieza, the Mantis Lord turned traitor. Hornet had just begun to wonder what had dealt him the fatal blow that had broken his mask so badly when one foot landed on something sticky.

The sight of blood smeared across the floor wasn’t an unfamiliar one, nor was it wholly unexpected given the sheer number of bodies within the enclosure—though she did lift her foot sharply in slight surprise. She had only confusion as to its source. The nearest corpse was Kieza’s, but the pool of blood began several feet away. It didn’t end there, instead beginning a trail that led through an opening in the chamber and into the foliage of the garden. A wide trail of ruined and bloodied greenery confirmed Hornet’s suspicions that a corpse had been dragged through them. It was a trail that ended after only a few meters, interrupted by a large mound of dirt. Someone had buried a body.

It wasn’t with the intent to hide it, Hornet could tell that much with barely a thought. If it had been, more care would have been taken to hide the trail that the process had left. Had it been her, she would have gone so far as to hide the bodies of the mantis traitors that the buried bug had no doubt died fighting—from the burial’s shape alone she could tell it wasn’t another mantis. Coming closer, Hornet realized that a large wooden club had been laid over the buried corpse with almost reverent care. Its gray, worn surface was pockmarked with scratches and chips from battle, but most obviously a nail’s point had etched the word “CLOTH” into its side, angled to face an observer.

Her curiosity satisfied, Hornet stepped away and back onto the cobbled path. There wasn't likely to be much point in pillaging the grave; if the warrior had carried anything useful whoever buried them wouldn't have let sentiment prevent them from taking it. The main path led through a tunnel, and she could see the pale glowing of the roots on the other side. Much, much more important questions awaited than the origins of a trail of blood. Hornet practically ran through the tunnel, stepping over dozens of dead mantises, until she reached an alcove that contained a great black dwelling resembling a cocoon of roots, dozens of white branches pushing through the surface near the top. A regal figure lay slumped against it, a refined, bloodied nail clutched in one hand, but Hornet barely glanced at the armored corpse as she stared up at the burrow it seemed to have guarded. A circular entrance just beside the body seemed almost to beckon her. Hornet stood just outside it, peering in, and saw to her surprise the ghost of a light from deeper within shining off of the nearest corner. She took a second to check for traps, and then she slipped inside and through a narrow, winding tunnel until she pushed aside a few dangling roots and was momentarily blinded.

A large being sat on the other side of the room, white and glowing and bound in coils of grey. Roots as white and as brilliantly luminescent as the rest of her protruded from the bottom of the bindings and snaked into the floor; high above Hornet, the being’s head became pale branches that disappeared into the ceiling. It, or she, wasn’t dead, for as Hornet took an awestruck step closer a pair of milky, blind eyes opened halfway. Surprise filled Hornet, but, to her slight puzzlement, no
alarm; the peace the White Lady exuded seemed almost contagious. She stood in silence as the White Lady opened her eyes fully and stared directly at her, confident that those eyes couldn’t see her.

“Oh,” the White Lady’s voice said, soft and low. “Gendered Child. You arrive at last. I had begun to believe that we would not again meet while I lived. You’ve grown strong over these years, and that part of you that was my beloved Wyrm has grown as well. I could almost imagine he has come to see me through you.”

The shock that had gone through Hornet at her address had immediately gained the company of outrage and indignation; she barely gave a thought to the implications of the White Lady's speech before beginning her reply. “The Wyrm is dead,” she snapped. “The part of my soul inherited from him is all that’s left of him. If that means he lives on in me, then so does Herrah, who was his superior in every way that matters. To suggest I act as an agent of his will is an insult to me and my mother alike.” Silence was the White Lady’s only response to this rant, and in that silence Hornet had time to give a second’s thought to the tree’s phrasing. “My Wyrm…?” she repeated under her breath. “...You, then, are the old Queen of Hallownest. The fabled Pale Root and wife to the King. I assumed you were long dead.”

“Yes,” said the White Lady. “I was once called Queen. Within my roots I sense that affliction has come and gone...the Radiance is no more...who now remains to call me that again…?”

“A few bugs have survived the plague,” Hornet said, though her eyes remained narrowed. “When the light left them it left those few weak and in pain, but they will recover with time and with help. But you are a fool if you believe you still hold your title after failing them like you have. I am Queen of this empire, White Lady. You, and the beings like you, were its downfall.”

“My beloved created the Vessels, with my aid,” the bound Root protested softly. “We succeeded in holding back the Radiance for a time. And was it not a Vessel that finally extinguished her? That her presence left those bugs at all is through my doing.”

This stung Hornet in a way she didn’t quite understand. Her first impulse was to drive her needle between the Root’s blind eyes. Her second was to scream words of hatred and obscenity until her voice broke from the abuse. She restrained herself; her voice hot and sharp, she instead said, “No. It is the doing of your child. You did not gather the means to enter the Hollow Knight’s dreams, you did not attain the strength to destroy whatever form the infection’s heart took, and, when the time came to act, you did not choose to strike at the infection itself rather than destroy and replace the one you first chose to sacrifice. In destroying the heart of the infection, the Ghost became more powerful than either of us can conceive, and chose to be kinder than I believe you can understand.” She drew herself to her full height and looked the White Lady directly in the eyes, though she knew it meant little. “You, who helped to create hundreds upon thousands of Vessels, only to discard them for the crime of being capable of emotion. You who, if nothing else, stood by idly while the Wyrm locked the Abyss and left your children to die. You stooped to unimaginable cruelty to contain the plague, and when the Vessel you chose weakened and it began to creep back into the minds of bugs, you vanished to—what? Hide here, guarded by a Great Knight and a wall of shadows? Take shelter from the infection while your citizens turned mad and died? Not a single bug was saved by your actions, Root. Nor can I think of a single reason to forgive you for your failure.”

“If I failed,” the tree replied, “I was doomed to from the start. What would you have done in the same place?”

“I would not have run like a coward!” Hornet shouted. “I would not have allowed my children to be
slaughtered in the search for one to sacrifice! If I had known all I know now about the Void, and what the Wyrm must have known, I would not have opted merely to seal the infection back! And if my efforts to kill it failed, I would at least have remained to aid the bugs who called me Queen. The position of royalty implies a responsibility to your citizens—” she echoed, almost verbatim, the words of her mother in her youth “—the trust they place in you must be rewarded, and to act otherwise is nothing short of treason. Nothing you have done befits one any bug should call Queen.”

The White Lady was silent for a time. She blinked once, slowly, and said, “I have acted towards the restoration of Hallownest, Gendered Child. I gave the Vessel part of what granted it that power you speak of. In that way, I helped it—”

“Enough!” The strength of the reply shocked the White Lady into silence, Pointing at her, Hornet said, “Even now, as I condemn your apathy to the Vessels and to Hallownest, you refuse to acknowledge the agency of your spawn! ‘It?! ’ How dare you! How dare you refer to them as an object, and in the same breath explain how your action was an aid to them! Who are you to speak so callously about Ghost, when they died to undo the mistakes of you and your husband. Your own defense condemns you further, and I have had enough of you.” Without another word, she turned to leave the way she came, and was almost to the exit when the Root spoke again.

“You are young,” she said. “You speak from a place of righteous anger. You have no consideration for the fears of myself and my beloved. I hope, young Queen, that you never are forced to measure your anger at our actions against desperation such as that which drove us to them.” She paused, and Hornet was about to leave without granting her the dignity of a response when she suddenly spoke again. “The Radiance is dead. For all this to end so decisively lays bare the horrors of what she did, what we did; why, then, am I torn?” Hornet waited, listening, as she pondered aloud. “She was the source of the infection. It was her who brought about the downfall of our kingdom...yet did my Wyrm not overthrow hers? Kindness between higher beings is a precious rarity. And...she was one of us. She was like us. Now, our number grows ever smaller.”

Hornet’s horns drifted to the right as her head tilted, processing the While Lady’s words and baffled at what she had suggested. “The infection…” she said slowly, “...was a higher being?”

“Gendered Child,” the White Lady said rather than answer. “You carry a great burden in taking the mantle of Queen like I did. Like your mother did. When you face the trials and struggle that title bestows, I hope you think more kindly of me and what I was part of. When you leave here, please tell Dryya that she is released from her service to me. With the affliction gone and the mantises crippled as they are, there is little need for a Great Knight to guard this place.”

“Your guard,” Hornet replied, turning halfway, “is long dead. Her body lies crumpled and blood-soaked just outside.” Without waiting for a reply, she turned back to the tunnel and stepped into its darkness. She didn’t see the Pale Root stiffen in her bonds, her sightless gaze shocked and staring. Nor did she see the first tears begin to fall.

No, Hornet had turned her attention inward as she paced through the tunnel towards the light of the outside. Her outrage at the White Lady’s use of the word “it” had surprised herself as much as it had her target. When had she began to care about what Ghost was called? Hadn’t she herself called them “it” until quite recently? She had only begun referring to them as “them” when she had heard Quirrel speaking that way, and even then it had been more an attempt to win his favor than anything genuine. That was what she had thought, at least. As she strode out of the black dwelling and back the way she had come, she absently wondered how it was that she had come to mean everything that simple pronoun implied.
Her pondering was interrupted as she stepped past the structure that had held the wall of shadow and noticed two threads of silk stuck to the ground. They stretched upwards, out of sight, and Hornet shifted her grip on her needle to prepare for a fight. She couldn’t have been speaking to the White Lady long, but between that and the time she had spent sleeping it was more than conceivable that the spiders of Deepnest had managed to find a way around the thorns. How many, she wondered, had been sent to kill her? She hopped onto the platform above and began to follow the trail of silk that her fellows had left in their wake.

She would not engage unless they struck first, she decided. Even the way she had to proceed with caution broke her heart a bit. The spiders may have disagreed with her direction, but she was still a child of that place, and it was still far too soon for her to cut out its presence in her heart and leave it behind. She had to see them, even if they had nothing for her but violence and pain. Slowing down as she heard around the next corner the skittering of legs, she tried in vain to get her heart under control. She was unbalanced, distressed; she would never be able to fight properly like this. The assassins would not hesitate, so she wouldn’t survive doing so.

Concentrate, she told herself, as she had been told as a child. Make the needle and silk a part of you.

An inhale. She slid a length of her thread through her unarmed hand, focusing on the smooth texture of the silk. A slow exhale, and she closed her hand around the strand, concentrating and feeling the edge of her awareness extend through the material, through the spool of silk she carried and end at her needle. Her other hand tightened on its handle, its perfectly balanced weight familiar in her grip. Hornet stepped forward, around the corner, her mind sharpened and ready for whatever the Midwife had sent after her.

“Princess?”

It was a Weaver—not a Little Weaver, the small ones that crawled along the webs crisscrossing caverns and appeared to hang in midair; the ones who had stared at her with the Devouts and said nothing when the Midwife had tried to eat her—a real Weaver, crouched almost to the floor to walk and yet still nearly as tall as Hornet; black legs reaching out from under the dusty purple cloak; its spherical head marked by six white eyes that stared at her with a loneliness that Hornet knew personally. Her breath caught in her throat for just a moment as she stared back at the Weaver, but then she controlled herself. “Weaver,” she said cautiously. She extended her needle in front of her with the tip pointed between the Weaver’s middle set of eyes, a silent warning not to approach. “I...I believed all of you to be dead.”

The images of the identical bodies in the Den, eyes blank and legs curled lifelessly inward, flickered through her mind. They might have gone through the Weaver’s, too, for they hesitated before speaking. “I believe that the Midwife thinks the same,” they said; “if she knows I live, she has not yet attempted to find me. I know your suspicions, Princess, but I do not come here on her behalf.”

“I am no longer the princess of anything,” Hornet corrected. “I am Hallownest’s Queen. To Deepnest, I no longer hold any status at all. If you are truly independent of the Midwife’s influence, you know not of the confrontation between myself and her, but I attempted to convince her to join our village with Hallownest in my attempt at its revival. She...” Hornet trailed off, reluctant to share the details of their conflict. “...I can never go back. I am nothing to that place.”

“You are Herrah’s daughter,” the Weaver insisted. “You are still our Princess. And you will always be, until you return and claim the throne that is your right.” She paused a moment before continuing, “I heard whisperings from the little ones, voices calling you traitor. Stories claiming
you had left in shame. When you slipped away as a child, those of us who were alive regretted that we could not offer you this.” She reached under her cloak with one leg and produced a small, shining badge. “Take it now. It is for those of us who are alone, those of us who deserve companions, and so it belongs to you more than anyone. May you wear it and be reminded of your home.”

The first thing Hornet noticed when she took the bauble from the Weaver was its shockingly smooth texture. She turned it over in her hand to see a shining white circle, divided in two by a black crevice and marked with the six eyes of a Weaver. Threads of silk trailed off of its edges. “Weaversong?” she whispered, her heart in her throat. Slowly, one hand rose to her mouth as she stared down at the charm in her other. “I can’t...I can’t take this. It isn’t meant for exiles, Weaver. And it isn’t yours to give away.”

“Then whose is it?” the Weaver asked. “Who is alive to claim it as theirs? The Midwife? I doubt she remembers the charm exists. It is for Weavers, Princess, and for those who care for our teachings. Take it, and remember that there is one who is still loyal to you.”

“Come with me,” Hornet said, her voice only a second away from cracking. She looked up at the Weaver, fighting to keep tears from her eyes. “You cannot go back to Deepnest. If the Midwife learns you did this for me there is no one down there who will protect you from her. You can aid my efforts to rebuild this kingdom—”

But the Weaver was already shaking their head. “Something has awoken in Deepnest,” they said. “The infection’s demise left a vacancy in its wake. That’s all I know now; I have to search our history and learn all I can. Besides, there is no place for me in a kingdom that once was the Wyrm’s, no matter what it may become. Hallownest does not need another Weaver; it has you.”

Her first word hitched in her throat. “You—the Weavers taught me all they could,” she choked, clasping the end of the Weaver’s raised leg in her hands. Her voice was rising in pitch as she tried to keep from crying. “But I know so little. I’m not a spider! I don’t have the talent of Weaving like even the least capable of you. Your aid would be a tremendous boon...”

For a moment the Weaver was silent, staring at her with sad eyes. They seemed in that time to be searching for words that would placate her, and eventually they settled for, “I actually believe we failed you.” When Hornet looked surprised at this, they raised themselves a little higher on their legs to look her in the eyes more easily. “After Herrah slipped away we tried to teach you Weaving as though you were simply another spider, with no other blood in your veins and no grief on your heart. We pretended to understand your pains, and that you could simply discard the Wyrm’s inheritance. That you learned so little from us is a testament to our faults. But since leaving our care you've grown strong and sharp; without our words to misguide you, you've learned to focus through the thread and begin to manipulate it. In the coming days I believe you will arrive at the rest...but I would be no help to you.”

They skittered past Hornet, beginning back the way they had come. “I’ve already been away for too long, I fear. Our Den needs me, and you and I both require the knowledge it contains. I wish I had more to offer, but with my age, all I am good for anymore is preserving our history. No other spiders seem to care about such things, so the task falls to me, just as Hallownest has fallen to you.” They paused at the corner, just before vanishing from sight. “I will always remain loyal to you, Princess. The spiders may reject you; Hallownest, fickle as it is, may close itself to you even as you attempt to aid it; but I will believe in you still. You will always be a daughter of Deepnest. Remember that, as I remember you.”

Without another word, they were gone.
Beneath her cloak, Hornet’s shoulders hitched once in a sob. She brought the Weaversong charm to her chest as a few tears collected in her eyes and began to slide down her mask; she shut her eyes and let them fall, slow breathing interrupted by silent gasps. They weren’t the same tears as those she had shed before, fleeing Deepnest in an attempt to outrun her heart; they weren’t the agonized, choked-back sobs of one who had lost her home. This was the crying of one who had gained a piece of it back, who had discovered one remaining tie to the legacy of her mother and all she had cared for, and she allowed herself that relief. As a piece of her sadness evaporated and her tears slowed slightly she opened her eyes and stared down at the charm in her hand. Hornet had never used charms before; her Mark of Pride had never seen use as anything but a badge of honor. She had never had the patience to learn what sort of charms would compliment her, but if she had been gifted this silken charm of farewell, this spell to give companionship to the solitary, this proof of connection to the Weavers and Herrah, she would wear it with pride.

But first, the Weaver’s departure had left Hornet with the same unusual feeling she had had before speaking to them: for a few hours at least, the prospect of being alone felt intolerable to her. She slipped the charm into a pocket inside her crimson cloak and turned sharply, headed down the paths she had memorized long ago.
The Citizens, and to the Absent

Their paths met in the Crossroads. Quirrel, rising from the large, vertical chamber of suspended platforms, caught sight of a flash of red emerging from the tunnel to Greenpath and zipping out of sight. He called out to her, relieved when Hornet paused on a platform some ways above him, and hurried to catch up to her. As they continued together, up to the doorway near the room’s ceiling and towards the well, Quirrel told her of his encounters in the Soul Sanctum, and Hornet explained her meetings with the Mantis Lords and the Midwife—though the more personal details she did not recount. Quirrel didn’t need to know everything. Some memories, happy or otherwise, were hers and hers alone.

“So the Mantis Village has agreed to spare those who may stumble into it,” Quirrel summarized, “but neither they nor the village of Deepnest wish anything to do with Hallownest. The spiders have rejected any help we may offer in return.” He stopped walking just outside of the field of light cast from the well above, and Hornet turned back to look at him once she stood beneath it.

“Hornet...” he said slowly, “...are we certain they’re not right to?”

The Queen’s only reply was a slight tilt to her head.

“Well, I mean,” he amended. “What I just saw in that laboratory...the horrors committed by those who would have kept the kingdom standing. Would it... condone their actions to revive it? Were they here today, would they approve of what we aim to do? I would rather let their attempt at a legacy die.”

Hornet stared at him a few seconds more, wondering how much he knew about Ghost’s origins. What would he do, she wondered, were he to know what the Pale King had done in his own efforts to preserve his dominion? She chose not to find out. “We cannot care about such things,” she said instead. “Let the opinions of the dead rest with them; what right have they over those who still live? And as for the scientists you mentioned who still roam that Sanctum...” she raised her needle. “I will deal with them. Our conversation would be better continued on the surface.” Quirrel nodded, but Hornet had already hurled her needle towards the top of the well and zipped out of sight.

A few seconds later he had joined her, and was surprised to find that she had stopped short immediately after climbing out. She hadn’t been waiting for him; she didn’t even glance his way as he vaulted over the short bricks lining the well and joined her in looking at the little hamlet. Instead, her gaze was fixed on the bench in the center of town, and the elderly bug who stood across from it. Around him stood three other bugs with whom he was conversing, and though he remained visibly gloomy a kind of almost joyful satisfaction seemed to shine from him. The way he had lifted a hand out of the folds of his cloak and was gesturing with it as he spoke to his audience told of a far greater enthusiasm than she had seen from him before, only spurred on by the rapt attention the other three bugs paid his words.

He might have been cheerful, but the presence of a small gathering of bugs had caused Hornet to hesitate. She was their Queen, yes, and more than that she was one who would shortly need to address a group far larger than this. What she had believed upon entering Dirtmouth before--that she would never be able to make the ruins rise again without joining with and walking among whatever bugs they found--still held true, perhaps even more so. Between practicality and pride, she had every reason to join the small crowd and begin to address her subjects.

Why, then, she wondered, did she pause? To call her reservations fear seemed false. Her heart had been torn at by her experiences below; her rage and tears had been unbefitting of a Queen, and as
she considered them now they embarrassed her. Hornet stood under the black, invisible sky, an uncomfortable breeze brushing her cloak and her eyes fixed on the town and its new residents, and felt exposed, as vulnerable as an open wound. She found herself reluctant to take another step closer to Dirtmouth; turning halfway, then fully around, she instead set her gaze on her sibling’s grave. A large figure was hunched there, head bowed out of sight. Pleased with the chance to delay a minute more, she murmured to Quirrel, “Wait here.”

He turned around too, watching her step over the well and saunter towards an enormous bug in a fur-lined cloak. For a moment he intended to follow her order and wait, but then he saw the shape that the bug was crouched just in front of and a slight, sharp gasp left his mouth. He may have accepted her as Queen, but he would not be kept from the grave of his friend. He started after her, closing the gap in seconds.

Hornet’s head turned slightly as the tapping of his footsteps drew close, but she said nothing as they approached the hulking figure. Perhaps she understood the hurry in his pace, and decided not to ask him to delay his grief. In any case the two of them walked together until they drew close enough to hear the bug speaking in a low, growling whisper. His shoulders hitched occasionally as he said, “They were a more noble warrior than I. To attain the Nailmaster's Glory so quickly...that honor could not have found a more worthy bug to bear it.”

“No others will have that charm,” said a higher, scratcher voice from a source obscured by the large bug’s position. “It is a great pity, isn't it. Sometimes young promise dies, and whatever it could have become is lost before it could be found. It never gets easier to see. And I will miss seeing them in my shop. I don't think I've ever had a better customer.”

“This isn’t right,” the large bug began again, and from the way his shoulders began to shake and didn’t stop they could tell he had started crying. “They should have outlived me. To have their life taken like this...so small...so soon after I met them...it’s not right…”

“Mato.” The source of that smaller voice strode into sight, already looking past his larger companion and at Hornet and Quirrel. “Our conversation is no longer private. Pull yourself together and dry your eyes, there is nothing more you can do for them.”

“Yes, there is,” the larger bug, evidently named Mato, replied, but he lifted an arm to wipe at his eyes before turning halfway to look at the approaching bugs. Three horns he had, a red headband beneath them seeming to separate them from the rest of his face. Quirrel caught a glimpse of red armor beneath his cloak as the large bug stared at him, but then Mato turned his gaze to Hornet and paused. “...You resemble them,” he said to her after a moment.

Hornet nodded once, remaining otherwise still to let her cloak ripple in the slight breeze. “We share a relation,” she replied, her voice low, and just behind her she heard Quirrel gasp softly. “Their father was mine. As much as I despise our respective sire, I wish I had found pride in our bond sooner. You knew Ghost as well, then?”

Mato said nothing at first. A few tears took the place of those he had wiped away. Turning away from Hornet, he stared at the grave again and trembled. “I didn’t,” he said at last, “I didn’t know them as well as I should have. Five times they came to see me. They sat with me, trained with me, learned my Cyclone Slash. Yet I...I never learned anything from them at all. I didn’t even know their name.”

A single step. Then a second, equally hesitant. Even when Quirrel gathered himself his pace was slow until he drew level to the large bug, staring at the grave in front of the two of them. “I didn’t know it either,” he whispered. “I still don’t; Ghost is a moniker she gave them. If they had a name at all they never attempted to make it known.” One hand reached up and took his hood from his
head; the antennae that it had held down rose slightly without it, but he didn’t bother to straighten them further. “They never said a word, in fact, in all—in all the time I knew them. I don’t believe they could.” Hornet interjected something, but neither were listening. “So I don’t feel it’s right to regret what we had no way to know. They wouldn’t begrudge our ignorance of what they couldn’t tell us.” He knelt in front of the grave and put his hand on the edge of the woven burial shroud, his thumb just below the empty eye holes of the mask beneath. “But they sought your company five times. Sat with you, trained with you. That means something in itself, don’t you think? Ghost and I—we happened across each other by chance more often than not, but every time they listened to me.” He paused, thinking of how they had watched the rain with him on that bench in the City, how they had embraced him in that hot spring in the depths of Deepnest, trembling, and how long they had sat beside him on the shore of the Blue Lake. His voice choked as he said, “I know—I know they valued my presence. And I’m...h-happy that I could be that for them.”

His vision blurred. He rubbed his eyes and his hand came away wet. As he sat back on his heels Hornet stepped slightly closer and the fly who had been conversing with Mato retreated a little, allowing the mourners their space. As the wind stirred the burial shroud ever so slightly, Mato reached forward and laid his hand on Quirrel’s shoulder. He said nothing; his gratitude came through clearly without a word.

When he finally did speak, though, it was to Hornet. “I can’t help but notice your weapon and your garb, warrior,” he said. “I assume this shroud was your work?” When she nodded silently, he said, “Then you were with them in the end—or at least, you learned of their passing before many others. You must know who is responsible.” The Nailmaster's voice had gone cold and rough, like half-broken ice. "Tell me. Tell me the name of the bug I'm sworn to kill."

"Radiance," replied Hornet after a minute's pause. "But it already lies slain. The Ghost sacrificed themselves to destroy it." She hesitated again before saying, “They entered the mind of the Hollow Knight, the one who had sealed the infection when Hallownest still lived, and destroyed the heart of that plague. I've since come to understand that that took the form of a higher being. The Ghost seized control of the Void from whence they came and dragged the Radiance into the dark. That we are here—she looked away from Mato and towards the mask again—that we can mourn them, is testament to their success."

She had meant these to be words of comfort, but she could see in his face that she had deprived him of a small consolation. Denied even the chance for revenge, Mato lowered his gaze and his shoulders shook with a restrained sob, his cloak rippling from the motion. “Leave me,” he murmured, so softly Hornet wasn’t sure at first that he had spoken. “Please.”

She nodded, stepping back and turning towards Dirtmouth again. Sly followed her, allowing his old student a moment to grieve alone, but Quirrel made no move to rise or take his eyes from the empty, broken mask. Mato began to repeat his request, but when Quirrel turned around and Mato saw the tears in his eyes the words died in his mouth and he simply nodded, letting him remain where he was. Quirrel gave him a sad smile before turning back to the shrine and bowing his head as though praying.

“I am glad I could be a source of comfort to them,” Mato said after a while. “I am grateful they seemed to care for me, as I cared for them. They were a good student, and a mighty warrior, with the promise to become even greater. I admire them for that, and that despite what they could have become they instead did what they saw needed done. A-and…” Tears had started to run down his face again. His voice hitching, he said, “And I am proud,” and lowered his head in the hopes that he wouldn’t be seen crying. “I am s-so very proud of them.”
The Elderbug gave a slight gasp of surprise when he saw the crimson cloak in the corner of his eye, his own story trailing off into nothing as Hornet approached. She came to a stop just outside of the loose circle of bugs who had been listening to him—two ordinary shelled bugs and a cockroach adorned in Colosseum armor—and glanced down at Sly, who had been following just behind her and now cut through the circle to return to his shop. When she looked back up, she first looked at each of the new bugs in turn, as though sizing them up, before returning her focus to the aged bug.

“Were your meetings successful, then?” the Elderbug asked, trying and failing to break the tension. “I’ve heard that mantis tribe is one of fierce warriors, and the stench of the place where they live! It’s not a trek I would’ve liked to make in your place. Even if I had skill with a weapon like yours.”

The other, assembled bugs glanced down at the needle she held, its point just off the ground and the arm that held it hidden by the edge of the barely-billowing cloak. “...Uh...everyone, this is...” the Elderbug paused awkwardly as he realized that he himself had never asked. “...What is your name?”

“Queen Hornet,” she replied. “The Mantis Lords listened to reason, yes. But I do not expect them to tolerate intrusion with intentions of greed or malice, and so did not ask that of them. You would all do well to mind their borders. Elder, are there any others who have returned from the depths beneath your well? Who else has come to fill this town?”

The Elderbug opened his mouth helplessly, taken off-guard by her blunt warning and her question. He glanced at the other bugs before responding. “A few others are here,” he said. “They’ve gone to find rest in the empty houses, as you did. Of course, some of them were here already. Our shopkeeper, the lass you met before, the young couple running the map shop behind you.” This seemed to get her attention, but she didn’t turn around to look at it, her stare remaining focused on him. “...Um, there was another recently...a warrior sort, dressed all in blue with a shield. He went below a little while after our mutual friend. I wouldn’t expect him to return, but since it was so recent, and others have...”

On the bench, the roach—Perip, of course—looked up at him upon hearing this. Something about his description stirred recollection in her. There was a blur of blue on the very edge of what she couldn’t fully remember. A shield that had been hurled through the air, rebounding off the walls and striking her in the chest...a limp body, hanging from the end of her nail lance...

“If he returns, I trust you’ll inform me,” Hornet’s voice pulled her from her concentration, but the cloaked warrior had barely even noticed her, continuing to address the Elderbug. “But this kingdom’s future does not rest on his back. I care little for what befell him, and if he still lives he is just another citizen to me. As are all of you.” She glanced again at each of the gathered bugs. “This ruin no longer crumbles beneath the weight of sickness. Your presence here places you under my protection from the beasts below; in return, I will have your respect. You were all citizens of Hallownest once, and today you are again.”

When her words ended, they left behind a silence that those citizens seemed hesitant to try and fill. The authority and certainty in her voice offered little room for reply or dissent; her claimed title had granted her a legitimacy that most of the bugs hesitated to question. At last, though, one of them did exactly that: “And who are you to claim that?” asked a round bug sitting beside Perip. “I thought Hallownest was without a monarch. Had been when I went down the well and lost my way. When the infection came back the King vanished. We haven’t had a ruler since, so I don’t care if you call yourself Queen.”

On another day Hornet might have impaled him for such brash impropriety; in the earliest days of
her rule, such a demonstration of her authority would have been indispensable. But her encounter
with the Midwife still soured her taste for blood for the time, and besides, to so harshly punish a
questioning bug would not end doubts, merely silence them.

Instead of raising her needle, she said, “I am not the Pale King, commoner. I do not disappear at
the first sign of a plan gone awry. Yet your assumption that he is the rightful ruler is the very
notion that founds my claim. I am the King’s child; in his absence, his throne is my right.” She was
privately glad that he didn’t recognize that right away; she would rather have resembled Herrah
than the Wyrm. She instead opened her cloak again to show him the King’s Brand which she had
burned into her shell so long ago, after seeing Hallownest for herself, but before she had found the
Abyss. “If my parentage means nothing to you, know that it was the work of my siblings which
ended that plague at the cost of their lives, and that they could not have done so without my aid. If
that fails to convince, than consider my duties. For years now, I have guarded the remains of this
kingdom from those who would seek to defile it. In all the time that you were mindless and
shambling, I guarded you and your homes.” This was a slight exaggeration, but her audience
lacked the memory to dispute it. “And, even if you still doubt my claim, you understand that
Hallownest, as weakened as it is, must have a ruler. Who will challenge me for that position?
You?” She stared at the bug, silently waiting for his response, and he shrank back slightly. She
turned her head to examine the armored cockroach seated on the bench. Though she had never
bothered to visit the Colosseum, she recognized the make of the armor from the corpses of the
fools which had been dumped into the ashen wastes beneath. “You?” she repeated, addressing the
warrior.

Perip leaned back, surprised. “I didn’t challenge you…um, Your Highness. I have no problems
with your claim to rule.”

Hornet nodded at her. “You do me a great favor, warrior. I would rather have you as an ally than a
foe. If nobody else wishes to challenge me, I will take that as agreement. I remain Queen
Hornet, then. And I will require all your assistance in the coming days.”

The protest to that was near-universal. Immediately and all at once, the bugs around her rose,
declaring that she had no right to ask such a thing, or that they had just emerged from the
Crossroads and were not ready to assist in anything, or that the only reason she had declared herself
Queen at all was to make such orders. She stood silently, hearing each of these without actually
listening to them. After a moment she began to draw thread from inside her cloak and coil it in her
hand. When she decided she had enough she focused on its texture in her grip, and as it began to
glow faintly she felt the gentle breeze through every inch of its length. The collected bugs stopped
short as they suddenly found themselves standing inside a whirling, glowing circle of silken line,
stinging them slightly wherever it touched them.

“Did you fools believe that Hallownest would go back to how it was without the effort of its
citizens?” Hornet demanded, her voice suddenly loud, harsh, and carried by the wind. “Did you
think, perchance, that you could sit back and let those monarchs whom you didn’t believe in take
care of everything? None of you have food. Dozens of survivors may still be below in need of aid.
And that protection my rule offers is not given for free. If any of you believes that you can survive
without the aid of others, then you are free not to provide your own aid in return, and I promise
that you will die alone. For the rest of you, do as I ask. You will find that to rebuild Hallownest is
in your interests as well.”

At her thought, the whirlwind of silk rose above their heads and shrank rapidly, and Hornet raised a
hand and caught it with ease. She tuck the coil back into her cloak as the bugs around her
nervously waited for her word.
“More survivors will be found in the city than anywhere else,” she thought aloud. “Most of you shall search there. But I have seen infected bugs all throughout the fungal wastes and the green lands, and though I have never entered the old mines I’m certain at least a few bugs have found themselves there. The bugs that search those places will be under my guard...mine and that of that warrior there. Cockroach, you will be rewarded for your assistance in that.”

Perip, who had sharply stood with all the others only to be put to shame by the cloaked bug’s words, was taken slightly off-guard by her sudden turn to address her. “My name is Perip,” she said. “Don’t call me ‘cockroach’ again. Queen Hornet, what kind of reward can you give me? I accept your rule and I accept the position you've asked of me, but I don't think you have much of anything I want, or know how to get it with the kingdom as ruined as this.”

Hornet winced. Something told her she couldn't just keep threatening people to make them obey her commands. It was not through fear that her mother had amassed the respect she had commanded, a respect that lasted even after her death and informed the decisions made by Deepnest now. Hornet could not hope to gain the same obedience and reverence by intimidating bugs into following her orders, even if she wanted to, but without that her bluff had been called. What was she to say Perip would gain now?

But before she had produced an answer, a voice on the edge of the gathering provided one for her. “Geo, of course,” said Quirrel, who had just then wandered back from the graveyard. As the collection of bugs turned to see him and Hornet gave him a puzzled look, he wiped at his face with his arm before speaking again. “Hello, Perip. Yes, the merchants still t-take it. If you assist in the position she asks if you'll be granted a hefty supply. Oh.” He looked at the rest of his impromptu audience. “Everyone, my name is Quirrel.” He gave them a short bow. “I am an assistant to our Queen Hornet.”

“Thank you, Quirrel,” said Hornet at once. “Yes, warrior. It’s an unusual task I ask of you, but in return you will be paid handsomely. Now, all of you, I suggest you take a few hours to yourselves to rest. Then I will assign each of you an area to search below. If you all cooperate, I wouldn’t expect our collective efforts to take more than a day. Until then, you may all go your separate ways.” She leapt with ease over the heads of the bugs between her and Quirrel, and only turned her head to call back to them as she walked away. “Use these hours well.” She beckoned for Quirrel to walk with her as she passed him.

“I heard your speech while I was with Mato,” Quirrel said as he caught up to her. “Well said, your reasons on why pitching in is a benefit to them. Ah, Hornet…” he hesitated. “Why didn't you tell me that you were Ghost’s sister?”

“Did it matter? You agreed to help me anyway.”

“It…” he stopped walking just beyond the door of the map shop, looking at her incredulously. “Of course it did. Hornet, you’re all that’s left of them. You comforted me in the Kingdom’s edge when it was you who needed comfort. That you wish to revive the Kingdom in their name means so much more knowing--”

“They didn't grow up with me,” Hornet interrupted loudly. “I had no affection for them in life, and they did not learn who I was until shortly before they died. We even clashed blades on occasion. We were siblings in blood, Quirrel; little else. I did not tell you because all we share is a father...when I found you with Bardoon, I barely saw them as a person.” A tone of shame began to creep into her voice. “Do you remember? I called them ‘it.’”

Quirrel was silent for a few moments, gazing at her with sad eyes. Hornet wondered what was going through his head--would he no longer want to work with her?--until he said softly, “Thank
you for your honesty, Hornet. I don't think you're right, though, at least about sharing nothing but relation. I see them in you now.”

There was no response to this. Whatever Hornet had expected from the scholar, it wasn’t this steady, certain faith in her and the memory she carried of her sibling. Nodding her head at him slightly as thanks, she wondered what he had meant by that, and why she found herself touched. When she eventually did speak, though, it was to change the subject. “We have no money,” she whispered. “I never bothered to collect any, and you obviously don’t have pockets. Why did you tell the cockroach that she would be paid? You must have known that we don’t have the resources to fulfill that promise.”

“One of us had to say something,” Quirrel shrugged. “I’m just glad Perip accepted that--she doesn’t seem in a position where she has much use for Geo. I met her earlier,” he added as explanation. “She’s a veteran of the Colosseum. Says she was called the God Tamer before being defeated.”

Hornet’s only response was an apathetic stare.

“...Heh, see? You act just like them. Well, anyway, she lost her pet to that place and doesn't have much idea what to do now. I wonder, in fact, if she accepted her role simply for a purpose. We might not have needed to offer pay at all.”

“Yes, but we did, and so my question remains unanswered. As it was your idea, I suppose you have some suggestion as to where we can get a large amount of Geo quickly?” Quirrel began to shake his head, but then a thought struck Hornet and she held up a hand. “Wait,” she said, thinking back to the bench in the Queen's Gardens.

“...Yes? What is it?”

“Ghost…” Hornet muttered, “…had a rather large sum of money when they died. I didn't bother to collect it, but…it is beyond their use, and we need it now. Are you going to mind terribly that I’ve taken what was theirs?”

Quirrel blinked. “I--” he hesitated. “I’ve never had much problem with relieving corpses of what you need from them. It is of no use to them, after all, and I don’t believe the dead should be burdened with weapons. They have gone somewhere where they don’t need them. But this...is different.” He turned away from her to look back towards the graveyard. In that distance, Mato was rising to his feet, his back to them and his posture stiff. “Is every token they left behind a memorial to them? Would they want us to have what they could not? We have no right to say. I don’t know if I can do that to the bug I l--” he caught himself, biting off the last word.

“Your answer, then?” asked Hornet, nervous as to where he was going.

“...If it is necessary, then I won’t stop you. If it were a bug I hadn’t known, I know I wouldn’t think twice about it; it’d be hypocritical if I did so now. In fact,” he added as she started to stride away, back to the well, “as long as you’re going to, I’d suggest you take their charm notches. There is no sense in letting such useful items go to waste. Whether they would want us to have them or not, I think they’d understand our taking them. And even if not...well, as you said. ‘Let the opinions of the dead rest with them.’ You could undoubtedly benefit from the notches.”

Hornet nodded. Beneath her crimson cloak, she rolled her fingers over the Weaversong charm again. “Yes,” she agreed thoughtfully. “I suppose I could.” But without another word on the subject she hopped back into the well, heading for the Temple of the Black Egg.
Chapter Notes

Ahahahahahahaaaaaa, seven months. I am so sorry everyone. College ate my soul, but then Team Cherry announced the Hornet DLC’s release in two days. Was I inspired, or just decided I had a deadline to beat?

Yes.

So yeah. I've Frankensteined together some of the snippets of chapter that I'd managed to draft over the past months into hopefully some kind of coherent chapter. I'll come up with the chapter title later.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Within the Greenpath, two bugs were found huddled inside the outpost filled with carriages, trembling with undernourishment and still vomiting orange. A member of the search party had slipped off of a platform and been narrowly saved from an acidic death by his partner.

When Hornet had sent Perip here, she had explained the Greenpath’s previous independence from Hallownest, and its inhabitants’ worship of a very different higher being. Perip had been instructed to invite citizenship freely, and what to say if her listeners refused. She hadn’t, however, been told what to say if she encountered a large gathering of the mosskin on the artificial platform overlooking the Lake of Unn, utterly confident that the being that that lake was named after would provide for them.

“The Radiance,” Perip began, pausing only when a shudder of half-remembered pain ran through her body and into her skull. She began again. “The higher being once worshiped by the moths in the Resting Grounds inflicted a plague on the bugs of Hallownest—including you. All of you. And the Pale King who provoked that... he abandoned his citizens in their time of need. Why would Unn be any different? Isn’t the guarantee of Queen Hornet better than the gamble you’re making now?” She stared up at the Moss Knight she was speaking to, trying in vain to read his face past his beard of moss, and adjusted her nail lance’s position so as not to mirror him. The one thing she wasn’t trying to suggest was aggression. She wasn’t sure she could fight in her recovering state, or without her beast to fight beside her.

She had taken the Moss Knight aside to avoid the attention of the other mosskin; the surprisingly numerous congregation aimlessly drifted and talked among themselves behind him, and she could see those of her own party beginning to strike up conversation with them as well. A fight was the last thing she needed. But, she realized as the Moss Knight’s nail came up and its hilt scratched the side of his head, she had little to worry about.

“The greater mind was never like those other gods,” he said, in a low, mellow voice that suggested a faith so strong it was a given. “They sleep as they always have. They dreamed the leaves and moss into these caverns, and called us from that same dream. We don’t ask Unn to come to our aid as Hallownest asked the White One; we were not betrayed. We will not abandon our independence simply for the promise of safety.”

Perip, her thoughts betraying her, glanced away again, at the temple that had been erected on the
dock. The vast majority of the mosskin were in there, she knew, offering their prayers to their higher being or being nursed back to health. The pustules that protruded from the moss of some had lost their hue as though bleached and began sagging with the infection’s death. Even now she knew they were a source of agony to those who had them. “Suppose nothing comes from them,” she murmured, sounding almost scared to raise the question. “Suppose your faith isn’t rewarded.”

“Rewarded?” the Moss Knight repeated, and when she looked back at him he was smiling. “Veteran, our faith is rewarded in every leaf, every stalk or patch of moss that grows anew. Our faith is rewarded in the numbers of our survivors, and the speed at which they recover already.” He began to move and Perip flinched, but he merely laid a hand on her shoulder. “These things do not come to pass through luck, or through some trick of the air or soil. They occur because Unn is here in us, and cares for us. I hope, in the future, you find something that does the same for you.”

An ache filled Perip’s chest. Whether it was longing or some lingering effect of the infection she couldn’t say. “As do I,” she said. “Thank you, sir. I’ll tell Queen Hornet what you’ve decided.”

As she and the bugs under her watch left the mosskin, she considered the territory that had been her assignment and fretted about the news she now had to pass along. Hornet hadn’t told Perip the extent of her plans by any means; in fact, Perip barely knew more than the common bugs did. But such a development as the complete independence of the mosskin seemed like a dangerous imminence, and she wasn’t looking forward to being the one to give the Queen the news.

In absolute honestly, her apparent position as some kind of direct agent of the Queen gave her nothing but a feeling of apprehension when she thought about it. She hadn’t asked for the role. She hadn’t been consulted before it had been given to her. After demanding the loyalty of Dirtmouth’s populace Hornet had spontaneously made her an assistant, adding only a token offer of reward. Why had she agreed? Perip wondered. She doubted the merchants had anything she wanted, so she had little use for the offered Geo. She knew, of course, that Hornet had chosen her because of her armor and the curved lance she held, so why hadn’t Perip told her that she had been exiled from the Colosseum? That her muscles, weakened by infection, strained to lift her nail from her shoulder? What if she had told Hornet that she wanted no part in the kingdom?

Hornet had made good points about why they needed to cooperate, but that was the truth. As much as she could see the practicality of these machinations, she still felt halved, a part of her suddenly and gruesomely torn away and the rest of her damaged beyond any kind of repair. She wanted to be alone with her grief, not carrying out the will of a monarch.

The bugs under her “protection” began to make their way to the Stag Station below, and Perip lingered behind slightly to appreciate the Greenpath. On every side of her leafy plants climbed up the stone walls contentedly. The air here was cleaner than it had been anywhere else, to the point that she was sure she felt her head clearing a bit with every breath. The warmth and rich color of her surroundings had been a shock when she had entered this place; she could have sat at the bench in the crying city or in Dirtmouth for her entire life without even conceiving that such a place could exist.

There was a squeaking from a ledge beneath her. Leaning over to see, she saw what appeared to be an animate shrub scurrying across the stone ground and trying in vain to reach the leaves of an overhanging plant. Hopping down, she winced as the mosscreep squealed and ran away from her to the edge of the stone. As it clicked back and forth along the edge, looking for an escape, she cut a limb off of the plant and kneeled down, making herself look as harmless as possible.

She made a quiet cooing noise on her tongue as she extended her arm and offered the leafy branch to the mosscreep. For a few seconds it didn’t notice at all, and for a few more it took a quick, sharp
bite before pulling away as though cringing, but all she did was rustle the leaves patiently until the bug’s little black head stretched out again, beginning to nervously nibble at the offered food. As Perip watched, the mosscreep grew braver and stepped closer to the branch to eat more comfortably, its legs losing their nervous scurry and the moss growing from its back relaxing, seeming almost to shrink; when she had startled it the moss had puffed up in an attempt to make the mosscreep look bigger. It was no longer afraid. She slowly began pulling her arm back, gently guiding it towards herself until it was close enough to reach out and begin to pet. Which she did.

The little bug froze as she laid a hand on its moss, likely expecting an attack. But she kept audibly soothing it and gently stroked its back until it resumed chewing on the branch. As she continued to pet it the mosscreep began to make quiet, contented squeaks around mouthfuls of food, and Perip smiled as she settled from a crouch into a sitting position. It was nice, she reflected as she guided the mosscreep into her lap, to do something that didn’t involve the weapon she had left on the ground outside the Stag Station. Something that wasn’t at the behest of anyone but herself, and something she enjoyed doing. In a few minutes she would of course have to head back up and meet with her party, but for now she simply sat with the mossy critter in her lap and petted it as though she had known it for years.

“Yes, it’s nice to meet you,” she said to it as it squeaked up at her. “My name’s Perip.”

When the Stag arrived at the station between crumbling walls and pale greenery, it was to find one bug leaking blood onto the platform as though she had been waiting for them, her shell overgrown with a thorned, leafy plant. She had been the only one of Hallownest’s old citizens to survive that particular affliction. As their medic hurriedly helped her to the bench nearby and began examining where the roots emerged from her body, Hornet gave the other members of their search party brief but strict instructions as to which sections each bug was to scour. Above all, she told them to stay well away from the camp of the traitorous mantises. Those bugs would attack on sight if they could; she would see to them personally.

She regretted, as she approached the collection of tents, having rushed through here so hastily in her flight from the Deepnest a few days before. She hadn’t bothered to check for any survivors, desperate to avoid slowing down for even a second, and so now had no idea what to expect coming back here. She could see as she advanced a few telltale signs of occupation, hear rustling and what sounded like labored breathing, and so she came to a halt just before reaching the first tent of bound-together leaves and tapped her needle hard against the ground, the noise announcing her presence.

At once there was a commotion. A single mantis emerged from the town of tents at a loping, staggered pace; their legs shook with the effort to keep themselves upright and an erratic twitch seized them occasionally. They set their eyes on her; the glow had faded, of course, but there were still traces of dead orange infection at their edges. Hornet watched as the mantis traitor approached her, murder in their gaze, but when they made to slash at her with a clawed forelimb she raised her needle and parried it easily. The claw bounced off and the mantis stumbled.

“Stand down, mantis,” she said, her voice steely and stern. “I am Hornet, Queen of Hallownest, and I do not come to attack your people. I bring promises of help.”

The mantis regained their footing and glared back at her. They tried to speak, but their own voice hadn’t been used in longer than either cared to speculate, and all that emerged was a hissing, rasping growl of barely-conscious rage. As they charged again, Hornet dashed to the side and flanked around them; her needle swiped out as they passed each other and grazed their arm. A
warning strike. They ignored the message and rounded on her again.

Hornet steered the fight into the cluster of tents, surreptitiously looking around the camp between parries and dodges to take stock of the tribe. Here she saw a petra lying on a mat of woven grasses, its breathing labored and the ground beside them stained with vomit; there she saw a mantis tending to the burst cysts of another, administering crude medicine with claws that shook at the menial labor. Two other warriors had lurched into the fray to join in the attempt to kill her, but they were no stronger than the first, and she kept them all at bay with barely an effort.

Hornet dodged the clumsy, weakened swipe of a claw with ease. “What point is there to this hostility?” she demanded, hopping over the heads of the other two mantis traitors; a precise loop of glowing silk wrapped around one of their claws, and as she landed behind them she pulled hard on it and sent them toppling over. “Do you expect to live as a people with Lord Kieza dead? Do you expect to survive at all, now that the sickness you embraced for strength has been destroyed?” She paused only to parry another attack from a charging mantis, then reversed the grip on her needle and bashed its eye into her enemy’s face. A resounding crack of chitin echoed off the overgrown walls of the chamber. “You seek to kill the only hope you have left. And I did not need to offer the aid that I have.”

“Our people,” the first limping, bloated mantis snarled, “are strong. We do not need or want your aid.” She and the other two mantises began attempting to circle her, but the placement of the tents around them made that strategy difficult. Hornet glanced around at each of them with only slight caution as the mantis continued, “Just because Lord Kieza lies fallen does not mean we are directionless, disciple of the hated Sisters. And the light...the light...” She had to catch her breath, her claws trembling with the strain to even stay raised. “…the light...is gone, yes. But we did not need it to be strong, any more than we need you. To mingle with Hallownest would invite nothing, nothing but weakness! No, we will cut you in twain to even suggest it.”

She attempted what was clearly meant to be the slicing dash common to the mantis traitors, but she could barely lift one leg and so the move was an awkward, galloping limp. Hornet intercepted the attack by swatting the mantis off her feet with the flat of her needle.

“To mingle with us?” Hornet repeated. “You are already weak, mantis. That light you speak of has filled your body and mind for so long that it used you, not you it. Without it, you are as strong as a puppet with cut strings. That goes for all of you!” She pivoted on her heel and slashed a shallow wound across the chest of the mantis who had been attempting to attack her silently; he gasped, staggered backwards, and collapsed into a sitting position, cradling the wound. Hornet turned her needle on her one remaining adversary but raised her voice to address the whole of the mantis camp. “None of you can even stand anymore; you need medical care that cannot be provided here. Tell me, what honor is there in allowing yourselves to die like this, writhing pathetically in the dirt and your own shit when help is readily available? Have you no desire to live?”

The mantis who Hornet held at needlepoint slowly lowered his claws, the tense expression on his face softening as the seconds passed. “Can...” he whispered. “...can you truly help us?”

“I can. I and several of my citizens have medical knowledge, and we know where to find Lifeblood cocoons. Once enough of you are well, we will require your people's knowledge of these gardens to provide enough food for our population. And you will answer to me, and be my responsibility.”

A deathly silence filled the room, broken only by the harsh breathing of the grounded mantises. All eyes were on the warrior who stood facing Hornet, the needle's tip barely brushing his thorax. “Yes,” he said at last. “We will join with you.”

Hornet smiled at him, lowering her needle.
“Traitor,” said a rasping whisper from behind her: the voice of the first mantis was weak, but determined and filled with rage. “Lord Kieza would be sickened by you, Havaria. To not see the honor in dying rather than staining your name with your enemies...means you had none to begin with.” The mantis could stare over Hornet’s head at the one addressing him, and she turned partway, expecting to see her rising to her feet and preparing to attack again. Instead the mantis was across the room, beginning to bear down on a Hallownest bug—who must have entered while Hornet was fighting, ignorant of her instructions; she didn’t recognize them as one of her search party. They were cornered against a stone, and the mantis only paused in her advance on them to turn her head and finish her condemnation. “We will defend our groves against all who would violate them, from without or within. And perhaps you will see how little they have to offer when you see their insides—”

“SHAH!!”

A flash of silver across the chamber; a whistle of wind as though the air itself was cut. The mantis’ head jerked back around again as cold steel shot by under her chin, slicing most of her cloak away before the line of silk attached to it gleamed and the needle stopped in midair just beyond her. As it reversed direction its eye knocked against her shoulder and she stumbled backwards, and as the weapon was pulled back into Hornet’s hand she became aware of the warm fluid pouring down her front, the thin line of agony across her throat. An involuntary gurgling noise bubbled up her windpipe as she put first one claw, then both to her neck.

Hornet turned away, ignoring the sound of a bug beginning to drown in her own blood. “Your name is Havaria, then?” she asked the mantis she had been speaking to, drawing his attention back to herself; while there was a fair measure of horror in his eyes as he stared at her, it only fed a clear newfound respect. In a single move she had proven beyond a doubt her skill as a warrior. To any mantis, even those of this splinter tribe, her authority as a Queen was no longer in question. “Begin to move your people onto slings and stretchers; we will need to move them somewhere else to properly treat them. I must speak to my citizen and regroup the search party; we should return within the hour.”

The thud of a body collapsing to the ground sounded behind her, and Havaria nodded. Hornet gave him a short, respectful bow before she started for the exit, beckoning the lone citizen to follow her. They quivered on the opposite side of a fallen heap of mantis, which was still making soft choking noises and uselessly trying to stop the bleeding; their back to the wall, they carefully stepped around the growing pool of blood and followed her at a quick pace.

“You came from elsewhere, so I forgive your error,” she said as they caught up to her, “but I gave the bugs that accompanied me here directions not to approach the tribe you just saw. Had I not been there, talking them down, it would be your dying body on the floor back there, do you understand?” She paused to watch them nod out of the corner of her eye. “Be careful going forth, bug. Just because the infection is gone does not mean the world is free of danger. What brought you to seek me out?”

It took the bug a few seconds to collect their speech. “My Queen,” they stammered eventually, “I have a summons for you.”

Hornet paused mid-step, processing this, and turned to the bug with a look of utter confusion. “Who in the world,” she asked, “issues a summons for a Queen?”

The rain pattering against rooftops and sidewalks outside filled the room with an ambient, rolling
noise even when its occupants were silent. Pink flowers filled the chamber with a soft light which
didn’t quite reach the ceiling, but made an attempt at a pleasant ambience over the loveseat and tea
table in the middle of the room. Behind the seat a lot of furniture had been piled haphazardly, as
though the room’s main occupant had, once upon a time, been forced to relocate here in a hurry.

If that was the case, that occupant was obviously making the best of it. She sat on the loveseat with
a teapot and single cup on the table in front of her; the ceramic cup, half-full of a steaming camesis
tea, had a slight chipping at its far edge, and the black material revealed by those cracks was
reminiscent of the shell of some smaller bug. Emilitia sipped from its opposite edge with a slow,
carefully crafted air of elegance. She was slightly taller than average even sitting down, dressed in
the colored robes of the upper caste of Hallownest, and her alabaster head was topped with four
horns like points of a compass. As she took a drink she didn’t break eye contact; setting down the
cup, she lifted her chin and smiled with her eyes. It was a smile of superiority, of clear disdain.

Hornet couldn’t remember ever having so completely disliked a bug so quickly.

The messenger who had brought her here had been prevented from going further than the
Watcher’s Spire by the elderly Hallownest guard who had been waiting just inside. He wore the
blue armor and nail of the city guards and walked with the form they all had when enthralled, but
as he marched just ahead of her the grunts of pain he made were more pronounced than she had
ever seen in one before. His march had eventually led her to a cluster of apartments which she had,
during the ages of the plague, passed by a thousand times without looking twice at.

Outside of one particular door stood two more guards, looking similarly exhausted but far younger.
Her escort had murmured to them that she was a guest invited by one Lady Emilitia, and she had
been ushered into the apartment just in time to watch a red-shelled bug pour tea for the one sitting
down before bowing and vanishing into the curtains that surrounded the room. The infection had
been gone for just over a week at the most and this bug already had servants. As Emilitia set down
her cup and began to speak, Hornet stared at her in revolted fascination.

“Well!” Emilitia said, with her contemptuous smirk of a smile. “When that filthy little bug told me
she was following the direction of my beloved King’s child I didn’t know what to expect. I thought
she had been deceiving us, or that she was deceived herself. But you...there is a quality about you,
somewhere under all that dirt. Perhaps I could believe it.” She tittered out a high, mirthful,
practiced laugh. Hornet continued to stare; the bug was digging. “So you lead an effort to rebuild
the kingdom. Well, so do I. My restored fellows and I have already searched this city far and wide
for less....prestigious surviving bugs and gathered them together under our banner. Under my rule, I
believe that Hallownest is well on its way to becoming again a kingdom of high culture and art.”
Leaning forward, she eyed Hornet up and down for a moment, as she had already several times.
“But enough about me. How have your own efforts fared, my dear? Coming along slowly, if your
little scout is to be believed.”

As attempts to rile her up went, this was as obvious as it was unsuccessful. Hornet decided for the
moment to be polite, at least until she had divined Emilitia’s goals, and so relaxed her stance
slightly—only to find that it was an alien sensation, and she had to physically force herself not to
wince.

“Slow, perhaps,” she agreed, with all the joviality she could muster in her voice, “but it yields
results. I’ve managed to erect a sort of peace treaty with the Mantis Lords, and recruited an old
scholar from Monomon’s archives.” Her smile became a little more genuine as the other bug stilled
at this news, but for reasons that were far from kind. “It took some time to have a population of
sufficient size to form search parties, but now that we have our progress is increasing. Of course,
even then we shall have some trouble re-establishing agriculture. How are you doing it? Here, in
this city?” she added suddenly, raising a brow. She had brought it up to put Emilitia on the
defensive, but as she had been speaking Hornet had realized that the tea had to have come from
somewhere. A worry crept into her mind like roots through soil: that Emilitia may not have been
overconfident. If they actually did have a reliable food source...

“Oh, we have no trouble with that,” the rich bug said, singsong in tone. “The kitchens and pantries
of vacant apartments have plenty for those who are willing to look, and so much of it is preserved.
Honey keeps practically forever, did you know that?”

“Yes, I did,” replied Hornet, but her eyes widened almost imperceptibly as she remembered who
had taught her. She silently reminded herself to return to the Hive as soon as she could.

Emilitia, meanwhile, raised her teacup to eye level. “There are dozens of jars of the stuff in this
city. With so many of our fellows happily deceased there’s plenty to go around. Rest assured,
whatever your name was, food is of no concern for the time being.”

“And when ‘the time being’ ends?”

“Hmm?”

Hornet was on the offensive now. She took a sharp step forward, the footfall loud in the room even
as the curtains absorbed any potential echo. “What happens when those pantries run out of food,
Emilitia? When you’ve picked them clean like so many carcasses?” She adjusted the grip of her
needle, hastily reminding herself not to reveal too much at once. “Surely you have a plan for the
eventuality. How long can those kitchens really last you, after all? Weeks?”

“A few months at least,” said Emilitia. She said it airily and maintained her smile, but something in
her manner had chilled and sharpened. The atmosphere of the room had shifted subtly, though an
observer would have been unable to name a physical change in their surroundings. It was as though
blades clashed invisibly, inaudibly, in the spaces between words. The sparks of grating metal
certainly filled Hornet’s eyes; she realized, without the thought precisely occurring to her, that this
was a battle as much as any duel of nails she had been a part of, and with weapons she had only a
passing familiarity with. Subtlety, double-speak, multiple meanings; political tools that she
instantly understood her opponent had far more skill with than she did.

“If I may ask,” Emilitia added, steepling her fingers in front of her mouth, “why take such an
interest in the machinations of my little kingdom? I appreciate your concern, of course, but it seems
to me as though you ought to focus on issues closer to home, as it were. Of course, if you’d like,
we’d be more than willing to step in with our own aid…” A quiet, cheerful, but utterly
infuriating laugh interrupted her.

Emilitia wiped away an imaginary, mithful tear as she reached for her cup again. Hornet was
beginning to despise that teacup. “Why, my dear!” cried the rich bug as she set down the ceramic
container. “By your own admission, you won’t be able to get the agriculture industry back to useful
conditions without issue. The bugs you rule over are commoners, yes? Well, between the two of
us, I think you’ll find a tough time getting them to behave under your command.” Hornet cursed
herself for mentioning her prediction even as she narrowed her eyes, suspicious of Emilitia’s
undertone. Perhaps the bug realized Hornet’s wariness, for she giggled again and added, “No
motivation. That’s the problem with them, to a bug. It’s not their fault, simply the way they were
born. They haven’t the patience to use what they have to get where we are, you must dangle rewards in front of them like a treat on a string. Look, this forming enmity is pointless. Why don’t we join in our efforts, and unite Hallownest as the King intended? My people and I have experience with managing the less elevated bugs of the populace.”

The room was silent save for the drumming of rain on the roof. But that steady, chaotic noise began to fill the space and crowd out the air; it became hard to breathe under the weight of the stare Hornet was giving Emilitia. Her attempt at a polite facade was gone entirely, her posture ramrod stiff and tense, her features hardened into the same visage that she had worn through every fight and every kill. Her eyes were, of course, black as the Void, and when she looked at the lady as she did now Emilitia had the sudden horrible feeling that she was a hair’s breadth away from sinking into that endless shadow and never returning. The weapon in Hornet’s hand sang for blood. Emilitia leaned backwards slightly: she was determined not to reveal how terrifying her guest had suddenly become without a word, but some part of her was utterly certain that she was about to die.

Hornet took a deep, restraining breath. Her expression relaxed ever so slightly, though it retained its edge and her eyes kept their glare. Emilitia immediately felt silly for having been afraid, but the silent message of Hornet’s change in demeanor was clear. The only reason you still live, it said, is because I have decided to be merciful. I may change my mind.

“Your wealth,” Hornet began, but she paused as though choking back rage. “Your wealth was not some earned product from an imagined superiority, my lady. I know Hallownest. I know the tales of a thousand bugs toiling half their lives away for a pittance as one bug takes the fruits of those labors for their own. I know how much the bugs of this city consumed, and how little it gave in return. You call yourselves more elevated than the bugs of labor? The bugs your caste dominated and controlled through those guards you have outside? Your kind and those toy soldiers fell to the infection just like those ‘commoners’ you look down on. There is no difference at all, except that you sit here drinking tea as others create.”

Emilitia’s face, composed but nervous through Hornet’s speech, had suddenly broken into a wide, smug smile. Her posture relaxed and she drained what was left in her cup, haughtiness in every motion. Hornet ignored this.

“Hallownest will be whole again,” she continued instead, “but it will not become so with your caste in a position above the farmers and craftsbugs. They lost all right to ‘manage’ anyone, if they had it at all, when they sealed this city’s gate to bar bugs in need of the medicine here. The greed and self-centeredness they carried to their graves makes them unfit to rule over the bugs they failed before. When you come under my rule, you shall not be idle, and you shall have as much power as they do. No more.”

And Emilitia laughed. It started almost inaudibly, as a slight tremor in her breathing, and gradually rose in volume as she closed her eyes in mirth. Before long her chuckle was loud, undignified, and genuine, and she leaned forward and had to gasp for breath between gales of laughter. She looked up at Hornet before throwing her head back and shrieking in hysterics, a few tears escaping her squeezed-shut eyes. “And you call yourself the King’s daughter!” she cried. “You’re nothing like him. I knew the King, girl; that system you hate so much was his design. If he was your father he would disown you to hear you speak like that.”

“He would do far worse than that,” Hornet muttered.

The lady waved the interjection aside and said, “It’s very simple, my dear. If you are uninterested in meeting us halfway we won’t accept your rule. We have already more than earned respect from the likes of you, and since you obviously won’t give it to us we won’t return any. I’ve been more
than reasonable, but it seems you’re just too attached to the power that your little lie has. If you won’t give up a bit of it to bugs who were born for such authority, my little kingdom here is closed to you.”

Despite herself, despite the circumstance, the Queen couldn’t help but be amused at this dismissal. Emilitia’s impertinence had annoyed her through the entire visit; that frustration was nothing new, but this was absurd. “Your little kingdom,” she repeated. “Your kingdom of...of dandies and cowards, raiding pantries and calling that plenty. Your kingdom of social parasites who, with supplies inevitably dwindling and no experience with labor, prioritize art and ‘high culture’ over a plan for the future.” She glanced to the side, at the curtains that lined the walls and concealed possible alternate entrances. “Your kingdom of bugs who employ servants rather than lift a finger on their own behalf. I don’t want what you have to offer, Emilitia, because what you have is less than nothing. My offer was to aid you, and I’m retracting it. I shall leave you and your kind to waste away by yourselves, until you come to accept my rule on my terms.”

“Do,” Emilitia replied cheerfully. “Wait for as long as you like, while your attempt at civilization falls apart from the laziness of your subjects. While we live in splendor and reconstruct the values of culture and expression that give society its meaning, feel free to succumb to barbarism and chaos. Tell me, would-be Queen: when the bugs you rule cease to be impressed by your claimed heritage, what will you do to keep them in line? Do you intend to threaten them with that weapon of yours? Do you intend to threaten me, for refusing you?”

“You make it very tempting, Emilitia.”

“Well it wouldn’t work if you did!” This was a hurried half-shout; Emilitia’s airy tone and smug smile had given way to a momentary look of utter panic at Hornet’s deadpan reply. “That is, um. If you kill me, do you honestly expect my fellows to genuinely respect you? After me you’d have to kill every other bug of my caste, and what would be the point of that? You would be exactly where you are now, but with a food supply you think is worthless. All that senseless murder is hardly befitting of a Queen. Isn’t it?”

Fear, which Emilitia had been trying to bury, had nonetheless crept into her voice as she had spoken, but Hornet hadn’t been listening at all. She was looking at the needle in her hand, studying its gleam in the peach-colored light, contemplating its use through her own logic, not that of the spoiled socialite worried about being stabbed. She had been honest: it was a seductive thought to simply impale Emilitia and be done with her. It was becoming more and more obvious that some display of strength, some proof of her conviction to her vision, was a persuasive tool like no other; she anticipated a time, soon, that the direction of the future would hinge on such a display.

Yet would the slaughter of a wealthy, cruel, yet physically pathetic bug make such a demonstration? Of course not. Emilitia was gleefully condescending, lazy, narcissistic and morally bankrupt, but so far the worst thing she had made herself into was an annoyance. Killing her would incite no more respect than killing an especially ugly tiktok, no matter how satisfying it would be.

She adjusted the needle’s position and Emilitia’s nervous reflection flashed across its surface, and Hornet thought of the one who had given her the weapon.

Herrah would have played a subtler game. The Lord of the Deepnest had been the apotheosis of warrior queens in her prime; the Weavers had told with hushed reverence the stories of the battle against the spider-wasps and her single-handed defeat of an entire army sent by the Wyrm. Some of the stories woven into the silk spools told of battles even more ancient. Battles that none alive save Herrah herself could remember.

Battles that included, she had confided in Hornet once, a few against her own kind. Before the era
of the Weavers had come a frenzied war for control of the Deepnest, wherein she had duelled dozens of her more vicious siblings to the death and driven her own mother away. The history of the spiders was a brutal one. But her victories, the means by which she had become the Queen of Deepnest, hadn’t come through bloodshed but through management of her own faction. All who tried to challenge her claim to her territory within the Deep had been summarily killed, but the spiders that her rivals had commanded were invited to join with her. Through her strategies, not an inch of her land went undefended, and those who answered to her never felt looming starvation. Her bloodthirsty brothers and sisters had wasted away under their own shortsightedness, and she had made sure everyone had known it. The idea hadn’t been to kill what was in her way, Herrah had explained to the young princess; it had been to prove that her rule was needed.

Emilitia, for all her many, many, many, many faults, was right: killing her would accomplish almost nothing. The sycophants of her empire would be unswayed by the action; perhaps they would be openly cowed into bowing to Hornet, but behind her back would plot and conspire. She would never get anything done, too busy putting down revolts without end. Besides, Hallownest had seen enough of its citizens die.

No, instead Hornet would prove her reign was necessary, as her mother had. She would withdraw and let their own hedonism destroy them.

“Fine,” she said aloud, lowering her needle. “Then we have an understanding, I suppose. Our territories will have no correlation, no connection. I will have no control of the city, and your caste will have no power outside it. I regret that it has to be this way, Emilitia,” she added, lying.

“Yes, it is a shame,” Emilitia agreed, with no sincerity in her voice. “I hope that someday you’ll be able to overcome that stubbornness of yours. You’ll find I’m a very accommodating partner if you ever do. In the meantime, you’re free to leave this city unmolested, but afterwards you and your little...minions won’t be allowed here uninvited. I’m sorry, but since you’re committed to opposing me I can’t be too careful.”

Hornet had already turned away and started for the door. “I understand completely. And in turn, if any of your citizens enter what I have made my domain, you should not expect them to return.” She deliberately didn’t say why not; the threat was obvious, but if bugs defected from Emilitia’s rule Hornet’s territory would welcome them with open arms.

She paused before reaching the exit, turning her head to examine the curtains that lined the walls. She raised her needle again; the thread dropping from it to disappear under her cloak began to glow. When she threw her hand to the side and released the needle, it sang through the air trailing the light of its silk in a wide curve, rising above the heads of both bugs and circling the room once. It didn’t fly point-first, as it did when she meant to impale a bug, but pointed perpendicular to its path like some kind of metal wing. The razor-sharp blade vanished halfway into the velvet cloth, which failed to even slow it, and before Emilitia had time even to blink in surprise Hornet had caught it by its handle in her other hand. The silk tied to it still hung in the air several feet above their heads, its line of light haloing the room; then Hornet lowered the needle again and the glowing circle shrank quickly to vanish back beneath her crimson cloak.

“Farewell, Emilitia,” she said, as the velvet cloth lining the walls suddenly fell all at once and kicked up a cloud of dust. She kept her back turned and left hastily; the grin on her face would have ruined the act.

Emilitia sat silently, blinking at her open door and the blue shadows beyond, as her guest vanished through it. With wide, disbelieving eyes, she looked around at the bare stone walls suddenly revealed; colorless and harsh, the pink light of her flowers absolutely failed to give them a warm
atmosphere. A few water stains and cracks dotted the rock. Discarded scraps and broken furniture sat revealed without the curtains to hide them, as did the dilapidated entrance to her concealed restroom. Off to the side, her servant sat in a chair that had been behind the curtain, frozen halfway through the action of scratching his face and looking at her awkwardly.

Hornet strode away from the apartments and towards the base of the Watcher’s Spire, head bowed against the pouring rain and contemplating her plans. She had initially intended to regroup her search parties in the City, but with this new development that was far from ideal. Another large meeting place was needed now, and the only one that came readily to mind was the large chamber near the center of the Crossroads. She would need to send messengers to tell the parties of the development, but between that and the bugs she had already gathering Lifeblood her own operations were undermanned for the moment.

There was also the issue of medical supplies. The hospitals of Hallownest had long since been razed beyond all possible repair or use: as Hallownest had fallen, infected bugs admitted to the infirmaries had turned violent. Their rampages had ripped apart their rooms and spread toxins through the buildings, but of the medicines and bandages that had been stocked there Hornet was certain that some was still salvageable. But without occupation of the city they had no access to those; she had little idea of how to resolve this.

Until, of course, she passed through the tower beneath the Spire, out the other side, and looked up at the raining city around her. How many times had she thrown her needle skyward in these streets and traversed the walls and rooftops as easily as the ground? How often had she practiced stealth until she could melt into shadow as though she was purely Void after all? Any amount of supplies would be better than none. If she hurried, she could reach the nearest hospital and take all that she could carry without the spoiled bugs occupying the city realizing anything was amiss at all.

“Um, Queen Hornet?”

She looked down at her addresser; the bug who had sent for her to tell of Emilitia’s summons in the first place. The bug had waited outside the tower in Hornet’s absence, prevented from going further by the guards; she knew nothing of what had just transpired. Hornet beckoned her to follow and began to walk towards the middle of the city square they were in now, and the large statue there that used the ever-falling rain to fill its basin and create a fountain. As succinctly as she could, she explained her conversation with Emilitia and issued the bug with instructions: she was to find Quirrel, tell him about the change in plans, then help him to pass the word along. Their new rendezvous was in the Crossroads.

The bug listened intently through all this, staring up at Hornet and occasionally nodding. “And what are you planning to do? Are you spying on these other bugs?”

Hornet shook her head and looked away, back towards the tower and the guards within. “They pose no real threat to us,” she said. “Most have never held a nail in their lives. No, I intend to relieve our rivals of medicine and begin preparing the chamber in the Crossroads. But first…” she added, glancing upwards, at the statue above them. “There are respects I need to pay. Respects long overdue, I think. Leave me, but don’t walk too quickly. Don’t give them reason to think you’re hurrying.”

As the bug walked away, Hornet took a deep breath before looking up properly at the fountain and the statue atop it. Her sibling’s stone visage stared back.

The rain dripped off of her mask and soaked her cloak as she stood motionless, studying the carved representation of the Hollow Knight. She couldn't tell if the artist had meant to flatter them; there was a presence and an air of grace to them in this statue. Hornet hoped that at their strongest they
had been like that. The broken, failing body that she had restrained in the Black Egg was all she had ever seen of them in person; if she was to imagine them before their imprisonment, Hornet wanted to believe they were someone who could command respect like this.

She leaned on her needle and lowered her gaze, lost in thought. It had been here where she had spoken to the Ghost and told them to seek their father’s grave; it had been here, she suspected, where they had first learned what had become of their surviving sibling. Hornet had spent some time watching them from her perch above after zipping away; the Ghost had read the plaque at the statue’s base before slowly lifting their head to stare up at the Hollow Knight, and they had stood there for so long that Hornet had grown worried. Rain had poured down their face like tears, and then all at once they had shook themselves, turned, and sprinted back the way they had come. Now, Hornet could feel some small measure of their horror and sadness, as though an echo of it had remained here long after Ghost's death.

“I hope your shade found its way home,” she whispered to the statue. “I hope that in death, you found some peace.” And though she had planned only to say a few words, she looked down to reread the plaque and unexpected fury crawled up her spine. “...'It’ again,” she hissed. “They refused every chance to see you as a person, didn't they? This talks of your ‘sacrifice,’ too...as though they ever gave you a choice. As though you hadn't been raised as livestock for the slaughter...!”

A split-second impulse: Hornet's needle rose in her hand and was stabbed into the miniscule gap between the metal of the plaque and he stone it was anchored to. With both hands she pushed it down further, gaining leverage, before she pulled straight outwards and the rusted iron plate began to shriek and bend. Hornet gritted her teeth, put one foot up on the fountain, and pulled harder, feeling metal start to tear. Her hands slipped slightly on her needle, but then the plaque gave way completely and fell to the stone beneath with a splash.

Picking up the warped metal, she glanced again at the face of the Hollow Knight as though embarrassed. “I'll have a better one made,” she muttered as she began to walk away. “More honest.” She thought about saying something else, thought better of it, and dropped the ruined plaque into a canal as she threw her needle towards the bridge above and zipped out of sight.

Chapter End Notes

We're now halfway through the fic and its entire plot changed dramatically the second Emilitia wanted to make herself known. I don't think I'm steering this, I think I'm just holding on for dear life.

EDIT: I hope you guys are okay with the second half of this fic being considerably shorter, but in light of recent events i need to finish this thing immediately
Towards Cohesion, and a Sense of Self

Chapter Notes

I didn't proofread this. So if you notice any typos or major self-contradictions, let me know in a comment.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Quirrel’s search party arrived first, bearing six bugs in miner’s caps and crystal dust. Waiting for them, Hornet had already cleared the floor of most of its debris and traces of gore. She had set out the pilfered bandages and bottles, sorted by label, and retrieved bowls from Dirtmouth and water from the hot spring nearby. Quirrel stopped a few steps into the room, surprised and confused, but Hornet had already begun directing the searches and helping rescued miners to spots on the ground. He stared for a second more at the armor which dominated the center of the room. Then her voice called him to her aid and they set to work.

It was enormous, this suit of armor, and almost perfectly round, its shape only interrupted by the limbs that dotted it. The gray wrought iron was expertly forged and shaped, segments fitting together so perfectly that the cracks between them looked from a distance like superficial lines drawn onto a solid surface. Yet a history of battle was evident in the scores and scratches that tapestried its form. The hole a head may have emerged from faced towards the room’s entrance, a hinged faceplate above it. Though it was raised slightly to prove the suit empty, the iron face was still quite visible to the room at large: Mighty Hegemol’s visage stared them all down.

He kept hoping to ask about it. But as Perip’s search party filed into the room several minutes later, both of them and the medics they worked with grew too busy for much conversation. The few bottles of anesthetic nearly ran dry from demand until Hornet was forced to confiscate that which remained to conserve it. Cloths and bowls from still-empty Dirtmouth homes were put to use now cleaning wounds and quenching parched throats. When Hornet’s own group appeared bearing mantises on slings, they also carried two blue spheres of flesh with squirming legs. Hornet immediately crushed the Lifeseeds into bowls of water, diluting the Lifeblood but allowing the healers to spread it further.

By now the floor was so booked with patients that there was little room for the healthy to step between them. Many of the tasks of the medics and their assistants pressed them right up against the colossal armor. The suit was fast growing into a source of universal consternation, with medics becoming frustrated at the space it robbed them of. The sick and weak pressed together as they were invited disaster.

In a moment when they were helping tend to adjacent patients, Quirrel cleared his throat and spoke to Hornet. “That suit...” he said. “...Its helmet has the face of Mighty Hegemol, one of the Five Great Knights of Hallownest. They say that he was the strongest of the King’s knights, but also one of the most soft-spoken.” The trivia, as was its wont, emerged into his consciousness as though from fog.

Since his first visit to the Teacher’s Archives, images from before the wilds outside the kingdom seemed to scratch their way back into his mind. A few did so now. They were bleary, unfocused; details vanished as quickly as they congealed. But he could begin to make out a memory of a figure
towering above him, a hushed conversation whose content he couldn’t recall, the larger bug turning and beginning to march away. He couldn’t wrap his head around the visuals, but a fact made itself clear.

“...I believe he was the only knight to leave the King’s service voluntarily, sometime during the Kingdom’s decline. Strange to see his armor abandoned here.”

“It is,” Hornet agreed without looking up. She was bent over the prone form of a miner, carefully cutting away the crystals that had begun to grow from their shell; a healer crouched on the miner’s other side, removing the extracted shards and wiping blood away. “The suit was here on my arrival. A trail of blood began there, and I followed it above. All that I found was the corpse of a maggot. With that said, I know no more than you.” She pulled away a large growth of crystalline magenta. “If I could move it, it would already be in a corner somewhere and out of our way. But we lack both the might to lift it and the size to crawl inside.” As she spoke, Hornet sat back on her knees and wiped her blade clean, and the medic began to bind the remaining wounds; she took the nearest bowl of clean, faintly glowing water and tipped its contents into the miner’s mouth. “...We need more water. Medic, have you further need of me here?”

The healer shook their head. “Thank you for your help with the blade, Queen Hornet,” they said, and Hornet smiled at the title as she stood with the bowl. “But,” they added before she could walk away, “what we really require is food. These bugs’ll only grow weaker without it. I don’t think most of them have eaten since the infection left them.”

Hornet tried and failed to conceal her exasperation. “There’s so much,” she murmured to herself as she looked around for bugs strong enough to stand. “There’s so much to be done at once. You. You. You.” With her needle she pointed at three bugs who still carried nails and lances from the search efforts, or from their time infected. “The weaker among us require sustenance. Go out and hunt vengeflies and aspids and any other pest in the Crossroads, as many as you can carry. Quirrel,” she added, softer, turning towards the bug as he rose from a kneeling position. “I’ve seen you cook before, and we have need for you to do it again. There’s space enough up there—“ she pointed towards a ledge several feet above their heads; the path to the chambers above. “If you have need, I can help you make a fire, and if you require water I intend to replenish our supply now.”

“Thank you, Hornet,” he replied. “I think I can manage a fire on my own, but the water will be useful.” As he started towards the ledge Quirrel joked over his shoulder, “Although I hope the stew I shared with you in the kingdom’s edge didn’t convince you I had any skill in this art. Heh, I shall be very surprised if my attempt here is even palatable.”

“These bugs will settle for edible. We have not the luxury of culture; sterilize the meat without burning it, and I shall consider your attempt a success.”

She hopped over the heads of patients and medics, crossing the room in seconds and collecting empty bowls as she went. More hands were needed than her own, even carrying bowls nested together, and so by the time she set out for the hot spring, she practically couldn’t see past the stacks of dishware she carried and Perip, leaving her nail behind, followed her in much the same situation.

They walked in silence as they passed from corridor to a multi-leveled chamber. Hornet made the leap to the lower floor easily, avoiding the spikes with barely a rattle of her cargo, but Perip stumbled on the landing and would have fallen had Hornet not caught her. It wasn’t until they reached the hot spring after another several rooms that one of them spoke.

“Thank you for the catch, Hornet,” Perip said as she set her stack of bowls down at the spring’s
edge. “I don’t think I’m as capable as I was before the infection.” She hesitated before adding, “If we’re heading towards some kind of war against this...Lady Emilitia, I don’t know if I’ll be any use as a warrior.”

Hornet shook her head as she unburdened herself in turn and began dipping dishes beneath the water’s pale surface. “Our rivalry with her confederacy won’t escalate to that,” she replied. “I intend to let them run their resources dry until they concede to our plans. Not a warrior. Was that nail lance you carried for show, then?” There was no rudeness in her tone, save for her typical intensity. The light dramatically faded within each bowl as their contents became isolated, but neither the glow or the water level of the spring itself showed any sign of diminishing as they continued to refill their supplies. “Quirrel told me that you were a champion of that foolish Colosseum. Are the warriors there even more pathetic than I’ve imagined?”

Perip said nothing. A glance showed her to be holding a single bowl under the water without moving. Her breathing, which had verged on labored at moments, was settling. Hornet knew that the Soul of springs did not heal most as readily or as totally as it did her, partially Pale as she was and with Void in her veins, otherwise she would have brought every bug to this pool. But nor was it completely lost on them—as steam collected on the roach’s helm and armor as dripping beads, some portion of the ache in her muscles and the burning in her head faded in its intensity. Hornet saw Perip’s shoulders relax a bit. She faked a cough, summoning Perip’s attention to her question, but didn’t ask her to resume their task.

She did anyway, finally transferring the bowl of water to the stone beside her and taking hold of an empty one. “It’s not that,” Perip replied at last. “At least I don’t think so. I don’t—it’s frustrating—I don’t remember much of my time there. Not in detail, at least. It’s all blurs and broad strokes and this wall of blinding...”

She shook her head, grabbing another dish. Hornet said nothing.

“Well, I was infected. I realize that much now. I don’t remember receiving that lance. It felt right in my hands, but I’m so much weaker now than I was before I entered that place. I struggle to even lift it...” (She had left it in the chamber that had become an infirmary.) “I no longer have the strength of a fighter, is my point. Without my beast’s support...”

Hornet remained silent even after Perip trailed off. They worked at refilling their water supply without speaking for several minutes. The Queen turned over the Colosseum bug’s words, parsing them. At length, as she filled the last bowl, Hornet said, “When we have nursed these bugs back to health, when Hallownest has a firm footing again, and when you have gained back the strength the infection stole. I will try to find you a purpose with no need for a nail.”

“I don’t know if I want you to,” Perip replied. “I think I’d rather find one myself, I mean. The first time I spoke to Quirrel he suggested I take time to grieve, either in one place or in traveling, but that isn’t time I’ve been given. I barely started when you recruited me in Dirtmouth.” She stood with some effort, her knees trembling in the moment it took them to straighten. “I...I spoke to a moss knight in the Greenpath, tried to convince him to join with us and bring his kin to us. The faith he showed in his god, in his people...I want that. I’d like to find a role to play without your help, Queen Hornet. To figure out what I am now besides cockroach, God Tamer, and fool.”

The Queen’s stare was unimpressed, but she didn’t rebuke the decision or speak a word to contradict it. With a slight dip of her head she accepted Perip’s words, but, as she stood and picked up a bowl of clean water, she said, “Mind yourself, Perip. Self-discovery is well and good, but not at the expense of higher goals.” She turned towards the exit and silently bid Perip take a bowl and follow. As they set off she added, “The mosskin endure, then. Yet none of them accepted your
“No. I’m sorry. They wouldn’t leave the temple.”

This was disappointing, but she wasn’t surprised. Long ago Hornet had met and spoken to a few uninfected mosskin; the same faith that Perip spoke of with such envy had given her no end of frustration as they had told her with absolute conviction of yet another higher being. She had barely spared them a thought after the affliction’s demise, but what consideration she had given had been hope that, coming out of the blinding light, they would be willing to see reason.

That they reportedly didn’t wasn’t wholly unfortunate. Hornet didn’t enjoy the thought of trying to spread what medicines she had found across even more of those in need, not when they were running so low with the numbers they had. But it also meant that the grounds they could forage on in the future were limited to the Queen’s Gardens and parts of the fungal wastes—any land that they could take food from they needed, and she had never found food more abundant than in those lush caverns and beside the waterfalls of acid. More than that, Hornet simply adored the Greenpath. Warm without discomfort, full of life without being stifling. The undergrowth rustling pleasantly as she walked by, telegraphing any potential danger or enemy without any effort on her part. The vines and thorned limbs hanging from cracks in the ceiling, from each other, forming verdant tapestries to decorate every surface the eye set upon. She had hoped for a reason to visit and explore that place at her leisure, if leisure was a luxury she ever had. Now she could only hope to retain use of the Pilgrim’s Way.

She considered this, both to herself and out loud, as she and Perip brought the water back to the sick, two bowls at a time. Perip suggested she ask them for permission to forage in parts of the Greenpath, but Hornet found herself reluctant to place her kingdom in another’s debt so quickly. Some form of trade with the mosskin would be useful, they decided, but first they needed to grow strong enough to produce anything worth trading—and that did nothing to immediately alleviate the problem. Hornet decided to speak to them herself as soon as possible. When that would be she didn’t know—her tasks seemed to accumulate faster than she could put them to rest, another and another and another without end. But she decided to prioritize visiting the Hive over the mosskin; with no news at all of how recovery proceeded there…

She stopped short as she entered the tunnel leading back to the makeshift infirmary; the fourth bowl of water in her hands sloshed slightly as she went rigid and tensed. Shifting her grip, she held out a hand to stop Perip behind her. Hornet’s eyes narrowed on the stone walls and a collapsed portion of the ceiling, which she had ignored until now. Now, when a slight change in the air hijacked her attention. When she had just barely heard the edge of a fading echo.

“Someone’s here,” she breathed to Perip.

The faintest squeak of armor replied as the cockroach looked around, searching for what had raised Hornet’s suspicions. Hornet slowly, silently passed her the bowl that she held, and her other hand tightened into a battle-ready grip on her needle. She crept towards the hole in the ceiling without a sound, reaching under her cloak and pulling several feet of silk off of its spool and into its own coil, and as she focused on it that coil began to gleam. She tensed just before the hole, hurled her needle at the roof of the tunnel it opened into, and zipped to it so fast that she seemed to an observer not to occupy the intervening space. The coil of silk snapped outwards, wrapping messily around a snail who had been standing just out of sight, and Hornet pulled them close as her feet landed on a path made from the shells of long-dead bugs.

If she hadn’t already known what a snail was, she would have at first mistaken the one before her now for a Void construct. The snail in her grip was dark in color, but the torchlight by which they
saw each other didn’t sink into them and vanish as it did for her eyes or for a Vessel’s body. The shell their head emerged from left no ambiguity, and the staff pressed against their side by her thread informed her further. The face of some dead bug adorned the top of the stack, rattling slightly as she pulled them towards her. She scrutinized them and they scrutinized her back, an amusement in their eyes that was untouched by her sudden move.

“Why were you skulking up here?” she demanded with cold steel in her voice. “Were you waiting for my companion and myself to pass by again? Choose your words quickly, snail; those who have tried to kill me through such subterfuge before met my needle as surely as any other enemy.” The shining silk binding the snail tightened subtly as her eyes narrowed.

The snail continued to look unconcerned. They laughed, in fact.

“Ohohoho, yes, I’m sure you’re quite dangerous with that weapon of yours,” they said. Their voice, lilted and oddly muffled, seemed almost to wander away from them as they spoke. “But you have no need for that; I don’t mean you or your friend any harm. I felt the movement of Soul somewhere below my mound, over and over, and decided to learn the source. And now I have,” they added, and Hornet felt those mirthful white eyes flicker up and down her body for a moment.

“What’s going on up there?” asked Perip from below. She had approached when she had heard the second, new voice echo from out of her sight, and now stood atop the small pile of collapsed roof.

“Queen Hornet, who did you find?”

Hornet didn’t take her eyes off of her quarry. “A snail shaman,” she called back. “Who decided it was best to lurk around in the dark instead of revealing themselves.”

“I apologize for unnerving you, my friend,” the snail interrupted lightly. “If I’d known you would be so bothered I would have stood in plainer sight, ohoho!” They leaned to one side, as far as Hornet allowed, and peered down at the cockroach beneath. “Ah, I see; drawing Soul from the spring, are you? Resourceful of you. I do the same myself. But this...” They looked straight down, at the silk crudely binding them, with an expression of curiosity. “This is quite a trick you have here. Channeling Soul through a physical medium to manipulate it, what a remarkable idea. Did you learn to do this yourself?”

The snail’s query hung in the air for a minute as Hornet stared at them. Her thoughts had screeched to a halt as the connection they had made jammed their workings like a spanner. Words failed her for a moment, and even when she recovered her shock filled her head and stopped her hands; the silk binding the snail ceased its glow and its tension relaxed. The snail slid their arms out of the coil easily and touched the material with curious interest.

“Perip,” Hornet said, with a slight tilt of her head, “please continue bringing the medics that water. Once I’ve spoken properly to this snail I’ll rejoin you. Until that time, I must converse in private with them.”

“Can you trust them?” Perip asked. “What if they mean you harm? Should I tell the others?”

“If you like. But I have no need for a rescue. If they mean me harm I will return their intent tenfold.” The thread shone again; as Hornet pulled it from where it was wrapped around the snail, her needle was taken from where it was stabbed into the ceiling and she swept it forward, holding it angled towards the snail in clear threat.

Perip’s footsteps gradually, hesitantly receded down the hall. Hornet’s needle lowered as the snail looked at its point with no sign of fear. “You are confused,” she said in low tones. “The spiders of my homeland have been Weaving for untold generations, since even before they settled there.
Their methods were untouched by the Wyrm’s influence. I do what they do, snail—no more, and considerably less.”

“Oh, you don’t need to bother with epithets,” the shaman replied, gesturing with their staff as if brushing it away. They smiled at her. “Call me Nelsha. And I wasn’t suggesting that you took any influence from that old King. No doubt your people worked it out for themselves, as mine did, ohohoh. They must be a clever tribe indeed. But no, I know what I saw.” They stepped closer and Hornet brought her needle up between them in warning—but there was no hostility in their body language, and when they leaned forward they did so conspiratorially, as if sharing a secret. “I know what I felt when it touched me. That was Soul, my friend, with or without his hand upon it. Ohohoh! Yes, looking at you...I haven’t seen such a potential for magic since my little friend stopped by.”

The glow of her thread as it whirled around her in a flurry.

The Ghost’s spells; the flecks of light that had swirled around them to seal a slash wound.

Those same beads of living light dancing across her shell in hot spring—the vitality she had felt herself absorb from the water just minutes ago.

The lessons that the Weavers had tried to impart on her in her childhood.

The tremors that she felt through a strand of silk as she focused through it. Made it a part of herself.

Hornet looked down, away from the Snail’s eyes, as she contemplated the images filling her mind. Had she refused to see the similarities that Weaving bore to the manipulation of Soul? What was that small surge of life she had felt climb up her arm every time she had struck a bug with her needle, if not Soul? Where was that energy in her now? An inhale; she slid a length of thread through her hand, extending her awareness into it. An exhale; she gripped it loosely and tried to chase down the memory of that vitality. Something moved in her consciousness, something that felt eager to work with her, as the Weavers had said the thread should be; she felt it stir as she took another deep, balancing breath. The thread pulled taut between her hand and her needle’s eye glowed brighter than she had ever seen it; as bright as it had at the command of the Weavers long ago.

She could see them in her mind’s eye now, surrounded by intricate whirlwinds of silk and light, scarcely needing the looms they used to form stories and spells; could see how the silk had reached out without being thrown, or even touched, whispered words traveling down them—words that no voice had ever said, but words regardless—and into the structures created, forming wonders that she had considered beyond her until now; could see them dance and craft with spools that never seemed to deplete, but remained full to capacity as though the Weavers called silk from the air and merely stored it there for a moment; could see how a single Weaver with a single spool and needle did the work that twenty bugs could not—the power of the Weavers, the power that she had tried in vain to learn from them, but which she had only managed to touch the very edge of in the Queen’s Gardens and which she had long believed she would never know anything of but that taste, was suddenly here, in her hands, and delighted to be found at last.

Hornet laughed. The warmth filling her, as comfortable as though it had been there all along, had left her giddy. She focused on the thread in her hands; Soul flowed into it instantly and easily. Under her cloak she felt her entire spool begin to glow with that same intensity and slacken, lifting from the wooden core. She began to step back from Nelsha before deciding otherwise—she would do this, and the thread would never touch them.

This was no Thread Flurry: she spent no time pulling silk from its roll and feeding her senses into
it. The thread wasn’t thrown and steered in flight, as it had always been before; there was no need to recall it at once or lose control: it lifted of its own accord and spiraled about her, neatly, deliberately, avoiding the shaman at every pass. Hornet didn’t make it like a part of her; it simply was her. She laughed again, almost hysterical with glee.

Weaving! The power of silk and spiders! Hornet almost felt a hatchling again, watching her mother at work, but finally the power was hers. Hers, not a talent she had toiled to learn anything of, drawing on the incomplete lessons of Weavers who had failed to understand her isolation. What she would have given for them to see her now. What she would have given to see Weaving then as she had learned to, to see it as—

And her smile faded, as did her joy. All at once the controlled whirlwind of thread shrank inward and wrapped tightly about her spool, its light fading to nothing as she pulled herself back into herself. The posture she had adopted in her elation straightened and stiffened into her tense, icy stature; Nelsha’s head tilted curiously as she stared at the floor and her grip trembled on her needle’s hilt. An unpleasant mixture of irritation and shame tingled in her abdomen as she considered what she knew of Soul.

...to see it as her father would have seen it.

“That’s an odd response to such an impressive display,” Nelsha said when Hornet growled in frustration and turned. “Come on—Queen Hornet, wasn’t it? There’s no need to be ashamed or angry. Think of the possibilities open to you now. Perhaps I could even craft a spell for you like I did for—“

“No. No more.” Hornet stepped away. “I’ve corrupted my people’s art. Perverted what was my mother’s. There will be no more of it; there’s work to be done, and I’ve wasted too much time already.” She hopped down, back into the corridor below, and began to walk back towards the infirmary.

“The true waste would be ignoring such a talent,” Nelsha called after her, and when she didn’t respond they shrugged to themselves and added, “When you change your mind, you know where I shall be.”

She ignored them. As she entered back into the sickroom and hurried to continue assisting the medics, she tried to put it out of her mind entirely.

Yet as Hornet threw herself back into the work, the forked brand on her chest tingled as though constantly reminding her it was there, mocking her. She had been quick to accept his heritage before she had learned the magnitude of his atrocities; now she couldn’t seem to shed his shadow as he had once shed a body. Blind to her own people’s magic until considering it under his terms! Hornet felt like a fool. The thread-lined walls of the Weaver’s Den seemed to rise up around her within the confines of the sickroom, lit by luminescent silk as the spiders scuttled about her. Their work was marvelous, effortless.

She recalled her failures to even begin to Weave in her youth. She recalled the first time her needle had begun to obey her thoughts, a shine flashing through silk, surrounded by the decaying majesty of the Queen’s Gardens and the plants touched by pallor. She recalled how easily her will had been channeled through the thread the moment she had realized how Hallownest would have known it.

It was hours later, after the hunters had returned with skewered gruzzers and tiktiks, after the sick had been given cooked food and the healthy had eaten some of the leftovers, and after the medics had declared that there was nothing more to be done but allow the patients to rest, that Hornet sat against the wall on the ledge above, winding a piece of thread around her fingers absently. Most of
the healers and the bugs who had assisted them had retired to Dirtmouth above; she remained ostensibly to serve as sentry over her recovering subjects. She paid little attention to the bugs below, however, as she silently wrestled with her introspection and shame.

The sound of feet on the landing announced the presence of Quirrel. Her eyes flickered towards him as he stood on the edge of the platform, staring at her with something like concern in his eyes. She didn’t react as he walked towards her, and when he asked to sit beside her her reply was noncommittal. As he slid down the wall on her left side he offered her a piece of seared tiktik.

“I noticed you didn’t eat earlier,” he explained as she gave the meat a stare. “I’m not one to tell you what you should or shouldn’t do, but I’d imagine you want to keep your strength up.”

Hornet sighed. Reluctantly she wound her loose silk around its spool and took the meat from Quirrel’s hand, biting into it at first without enthusiasm. When its taste and juices reached her tongue she tried not to gasp like she had last time, but Quirrel hid his amusement with a hand as he watched her start to devour it.

“Something’s bothering you, I can tell that much,” he said as she finished. “You’ve been distracted since you returned from the spring. You need not share the problem with me, of course, but if you’d like to talk about it my ears are open.”

Hornet was surprised to find herself inclined to confide in him. In the time they had known each other Quirrel had demonstrated nothing but benevolence and empathy, and the camaraderie she had noticed developing between them was something she was coming to enjoy. In the past she hadn’t shared her distress or vulnerabilities with anyone but the Weavers—how well that had gone—but then, since leaving the Nest, there hadn’t been many bugs to share with. Moreover, she had never had such feelings of shame and frustration before; in her current duty, such feelings needed dealt with before they began to impede her more than they might have already.

Quirrel, she suspected, would offer a far less biased perspective than her own. And why else ask for such an assistant if not to give assistance?

She considered her thoughts and formed her explanation slowly. “I have never been a prolific practitioner of the magic I was meant to inherit. The manipulation of my thread, the extension of my senses through it...these barely scratch the surface of the power that the Weavers tried to teach me. My growth in that art was stunted by my isolation, and by the misery of my mother’s passing.”

She bobbed her head at Quirrel without looking in his direction. “My mother was Herrah, you see.”

“No. That’s a title the Pale King used to describe her to Hallownest, even as she bargained with him and agreed to his terms. Great Weaver Herrah, Lord of the Deepnest, Queen of the Spiders and Caretaker of their History. That was her proper title, in the days before she became a Dreamer.”

Irritation had slipped into her tone as she had heard the epithet that the King had bestowed on her, but she paused again to bite it back; how would Quirrel have known? “I was very young when she entered that long sleep, but it broke my heart regardless. In the time between then and the day I ran away, I confess myself a very poor student; the little I have now I only came to grasp as I practiced alone in the Queen’s Gardens, attempting to gain the respect of the Mantis Lords.”

“She was very young...as in, the Beast?”

“I don’t think that makes you a poor student,” Quirrel interrupted again. “If these Weavers couldn’t teach you what you learned on your own, I’d lay the fault on them. All children learn differently. And it isn’t the responsibility of the child to impart on their teachers how they ought to be taught.”

The words sprang fully formed from the same unknown source as countless pieces of trivia had before. Quirrel paused to wonder just how much he had gained from Monomon in time
immemorial, what kind of relation he had had with her that he held such opinions without his own knowledge.

In halting words, Hornet began to describe her interaction with Nelsha. She vaguely related the revelation they had given her and the parts of her skill that seemed to assure its accuracy. She told Quirrel of the power she had felt singing within her the moment she had searched herself for Soul; as she described it, that feeling returned within her chest and she found herself caught for a moment in its thrall. Feeling magic fill her limbs and flow easily to her fingertips, ready to be fed into silk, gave pause to her explanation and she stared at them, not sure what to expect. A Pale glow seeping from her claws? No; that energy was warm within her, but didn’t escape even in a trickle. It awaited her command, as it must have awaited the Wyrm’s. She felt sick at the thought.

Quirrel, swept up by the news of her accomplishment, didn’t notice her trepidation at all. “Hornet, that’s wonderful!” he said, leaning towards her with a grin. “You see? Those Weavers should have searched for a way to allow you to do that eons ago. How exciting,” he added, “to imagine the kind of feats you can teach yourself now—”

“It isn’t exciting,” Hornet interrupted, and with that dread behind it her voice had gone harsh. Again she took a moment to restrain herself, but it was harder now. The corruption she had inflicted on Weaving as an art was an insult to her culture, a stain on the practices that had endured for eons before her birth. Her guilt and her fury at herself wanted to strike out at Quirrel’s congratulations, but she explained to him as calmly as she could. “Herrah and all her subjects detested the Wyrm; those who survive still do. I detest him. Our artistry and heritage were unconnected to any influence of his until a few hours ago. The King who would have absorbed our village into his rule, who fostered a system of few reaping the labors of many, who did—that—to his—” She stopped for a moment to collect herself. “Weaving cannot, should not be thought of through the lens he would have held it beneath. It is...sacrilege. I was exiled from Deepnest among accusations that I attempted to defile my mother’s legacy with my father’s. With this, in interpreting Weaving this way...that is exactly what I’ve done.”

They sat silently for a few minutes as Hornet pointedly busied herself cleaning her needle, and Quirrel stared at her almost without blinking in that time. That he didn’t know how to help her concerned him almost as much as her fears themselves. Her desperation to hold her mother’s culture as sacred was obviously a labor of love and a self-imposed duty; what right had Quirrel to suggest she try something else? What reason had he, knowing as little of it as he did? For all he knew she was right about the necessity of its separation from Pale teachings. But even if she was right, that belief took the form of a fury and homesickness that seemed ready to teeter into self-loathing.

It complicated matters that there was clearly something she was reluctant to tell him about the King. It wasn’t like her to trip over her words as she had when touching on her hatred; her use of the word “that” told him that the incident visited her often, yet before explaining she had choked off her own words and moved on to her next point. It would be untrue to say that Quirrel was unbothered by her refusal to elaborate; in hiding whatever she hid, Hornet was lying to him. Yet the passion that she had worked herself up to at the very thought of it told him that the facts, whatever form they took, were deeply personal to her, and he couldn’t find any spite in himself for it.

He couldn’t help but wonder, though, what fact of the Pale King was so personal to her, but a secret to him.

Something to do with the Ghost?

And all at once Quirrel found himself sitting on the edge of a precipice, a memory from before the
wastes lurking in the haze just beyond the cliff’s edge, just out of reach. *Created to fight the infection*, said the memory of Hornet’s voice, and within the fog of his past he could begin to make out the interior of the Archives, a schematic, a Pale light visiting Monomon. He had always welcomed fragments of memory as they had come, but as this one began to grow clearer he regarded it with a creeping dread. As he had at the top of the drowning city before, he hesitated to push on; it wasn’t time to examine his own anxieties anyway. He returned again to Hornet’s.

“...May I speculate?”

Her horns tilted with her head as her attention abandoned her needle and rested again on him. Quirrel had, while thinking, reclined slightly until his back had rested against the wall. He said nothing as Hornet hesitated, her eyes momentarily losing focus in thought. He wasn’t going to turn over stones she hadn’t allowed him to, but at least she lifted a hand and gestured towards him in silent invitation to speak.

“Perhaps Weaving isn’t the same thing as Soul after all,” he began, with the care he would’ve had navigating a room of belflies. “You’ve never made an attempt to explore Soul before, have you?” When she shook her head he continued, “But as far as I understand, the King was more or less a being of Soul. I strongly doubt you inherited nothing from him; perhaps this is how you have to Weave.”

“Then I must be a heretic to Deepnest?” Hornet interrupted to retort. Her posture had stiffened until she could have been carved from stone. “I must defile my mother’s art with my father’s blood? Quirrel, you understand that this is no comfort to me.”

“It isn’t supposed to be,” Quirrel said, then thought better. “And in any case, it may not even be true. Like I said, all I have is conjecture, but at the very least I can’t imagine that ignoring what he passed down to you is helpful to your growth.”

They lapsed into silence again for a minute. Hornet stared across the room at Hegemol’s armor, which stared back resolute, ancient. As her posture relaxed again her cloak parted slightly and Quirrel, glancing back her way, glimpsed the edge of the King’s Brand on her chest.

“It’s silly to me that you would reject his powers but sit upon his throne.”

She started, surprised at the sudden remark, and as he continued she glanced down at the Brand and closed her cloak over it.

“One you can choose to inherit, one you cannot. You didn’t have to take on the mantle of the Pale King, but truly rejecting the blood in your veins is impossible.” He said this with the air of one making an observation that they hadn’t realized was rude. Then he realized himself, made an apologetic face, and added in a gentler tone, “Are you more enraged by his Pallor than his title? Why do you choose to distinguish them?”

“I don’t,” Hornet said. “It is a convenient means of persuasion, but I haven’t taken the title of Queen because of some birthright, Quirrel. All things being equal I would have ignored it entirely. But look at these bugs.” She gestured out with an arm at the patients below them. One coughed in their sleep; a few tossed or turned, but most, healing and exhausted, had sank soundly into a sleep long overdue. “Would these bugs have been recovered alive without our work? Without my command that those of Dirtmouth fall in line and seek them out? If I had not taken the throne, those bugs would have settled into their small, doomed sect—or come under the rule of one like Emilitia. Do you see?” she added abruptly, turning back to look at him. Returning her gaze, Quirrel noticed the way she had begun to lean towards him, even seated against the wall, the ardence in her expression and the way her clasped hands twisted. This sincerity, this vulnerability, he understood
at once to be a rare sight indeed. “Damn my father. Damn the throne he left behind. I do this because it must be done—because just because the infection is gone does not mean we have endured it. Because without this, my mother and my siblings died for nothing. I was **complicit**, for **nothing**. I cannot live in a world so pointless. I cannot.”

“Then why do you have your father’s brand?”

She stopped as if struck, then sighed. “I was...young when I marked myself so,” she murmured. “On my own after leaving Deepnest, I beheld the ruins of Hallownest and was captivated by what remained of its beauty. I had been taught to hate my father and his work by my midwife and the Weavers, but seeing what he had created in the Queen’s Gardens and the City washed all those teachings away for a time. I was...proud. I was proud to be his daughter.” Shame had crept into her voice as she spoke. “And in my exuberance, when I found the Wyrm’s corpse and the brand within, I burned its mark upon my shell and claimed myself as his heir. As I went on in my travels, though, I learned about who he was, and what he had done to have and to keep Hallownest. What he had **hurt**, what he had **taken**...”

And there she stopped. Quirrel felt a twinge of annoyance again that whatever Hornet was so ashamed of was being kept from him, but then he felt that precipice upon him again and withdrew. Instead, to bury it, he thought about her words and eventually said, “This...pride in your father. Was it at the same time as your progress in the teachings of the Weavers? When you were teaching yourself to challenge the Mantis Lords?”

She nodded, and then made the connection an instant before Quirrel said it aloud.

“It sounds to me like you have only ever made progress as a Weaver in moments when you were comfortable being his daughter.”

Hornet made a noise somewhere between groan and growl. She lowered her face into her hands and rested her elbows on her knees as Quirrel lowered his own hands into his lap, concerned at her reaction.

“You suggested that we ought to let the opinions of the dead rest with them. I think the same is true now. Intentions, beliefs, crimes—part with them all, but don’t consider them as in your blood. Don’t ignore the magic you’re capable of simply because of who passed it down to you. It’s unfair to yourself,” said Quirrel. As Hornet dragged her face out of her hands with the reluctance of one pulling vengefly teeth from their own wound, he scooted slightly closer to her and attempted a smile. “Why not treat the powers as you treat the throne? Damn the man you inherit them from, it isn’t for him that you act.” She snorted at his flat disregard for the Pale King, and his smile became genuine. “What he passed down isn’t his anymore. It’s yours.”

The silence that lapsed wasn’t the same as the one that had spanned between them before. Hornet’s head dropped as she considered; Quirrel, hopeful, watched as she pulled a length of silk from her spool and wrapped it around her finger. All at once, at her slightest whim, those few inches of thread glowed like a lumafly and the space between her and Quirrel was filled with pale light. He gasped—she commanded Soul so easily, only hours after learning she could do it at all—but as she lifted her hand to stare at the illuminating strand, he realized that her expression had saddened. “It would still make me a heretic to Deepnest.”

“Well...damn them too,” Quirrel said gently. This time Hornet’s expression lacked any trace of amusement, so he hurried to explain himself. “Er. From what you’ve told me I expect they’ll see you as a heretic regardless. They turned away your attempt to save what was left of them; such zealotry is of no salvation to them, just as it isn’t any help to you. Miss them and love their
memory, but do not let it inhibit you. It has for too long already.” He leaned towards her, as if sharing a secret. “Weaving is yours too.”

“Weaving is mine too,” Hornet echoed. The silk coiled around her finger began to loosen of its own accord and lift away. It drifted aimlessly in the air between them, hesitating, as she pulled her hand away from it. She and Quirrel both stared at it, and for a second the pale light dimmed. Then Hornet whispered again, almost in prayer, “Weaving is mine too.”

The loops of silk changed shape abruptly. They tightened into a single, braided line just long enough for Quirrel to recognize it, but just as soon they had become a piece of woven cloth, then a spike stiff as a nail’s blade. In another moment it had become a pair of circles, one inside the other, and gradually silk began weaving between them in intricate patterns. When the silk collapsed, lost its shape and retreated back into its spool, Quirrel had to catch himself from falling on his face, as he had leaned far enough forward at the sight that he overbalanced. As he recovered, he looked up at Hornet, unsure why she had stopped her experiment.

Hornet’s face wore a look of such elation that tears had come to her eyes. Breathless, she grinned at Quirrel—he wasn’t sure he liked that; for a moment he caught sight of the sharpest teeth he had ever seen—as her hands shook and drops of pale light beaded at each fingertip. She grabbed his hands as she leaned forward, inhaling as though preparing to speak but saying nothing. Instead she gave him a quick, ecstatic, meaningless nod. He nodded back, returning a smile, but when she stood suddenly and picked up her needle confusion marred his excitement. He opened his mouth to ask what she was up to, but she whirled towards Hegemol’s armor with steel in her stare.

As she jumped thread extended from her spool, glowing so brightly it seemed three times as thick as it really was, and before she had landed on the suit those strands had begun to bind it. They slipped under its bulk, encircled its limbs, pressed against its surface and adhered where it touched like the spiderweb it was. More thoroughly than the Hollow Knight had been restrained, more intricately than Vatina’s arm had been tied, the silk formed a glowing network around the armor and tightened at her command. Through she stood only on the very top of the armor, she could feel every inch of the cold steel and every scuff and score that marked it. Extending from her to the armor and from the armor to her, the silk quivered like the string of a bow, eager.

She lifted her gaze, and the ends of the silk rose with it, snaking upwards and adhering to the edges of the hole in the ceiling. Loops and bindings formed, reinforcing the grip, but Hornet frowned as this control rapidly grew more difficult. The silken hoist began to pull, but she could feel the rush of that joyous warmth beginning to fade, and the light of the furthermost strands faded too. She focused, tried to pour more Soul into the silk, but when she did she found the Soul simply wouldn’t come.

Soul was finite, of course. In her elation and experimentation Hornet had forgotten this—that the Weavers hadn’t been able to produce silk without end, that the Ghost had clearly drawn on a limited resource in the moments that she had watched them heal. And in that elation (like a fool, some part of Hornet’s mind reflected), she’d expended her entirety of the power, or very nearly—she had poured it all into a single trick that she hadn’t even completed.

Yet. “Ca’ra vah!”

As it always had, the cry sharpened her mind for the task she had taken her needle to. It called her energy forth: the description that Vespa had once used in metaphor had now become literal. The last sparks of Soul flared into use behind black eyes, and at her focused command the nearest strands of silk wrapped around her needle’s hilt just below the blade. She narrowed her eyes as she jumped straight up, glaring at the armor beneath her. The threads surrounding her drew ever
Quirrel watched as Hornet, airborne in the middle of this improvised hoist, seemed almost to hover for a moment before the whole of the silken structure contracted sharply. The armor leaped from its resting place like a giant hopper. Hornet dashed forward, turned a graceful flip as it hurtled through the air behind her, and the shrinking lines of silk went limp with a snapping noise before they vanished entirely.

A bit of dust fell from the ceiling as Hegemol’s armor landed on some stabler section of ground in the chamber above them; it drifted in clouds as Hornet landed in a crouch and turned around to see the results of her work. Where the massive suit had been was now a cracked, circular patch of bare stone floor. Quirrel started to his feet at the sight, his hands coming together in astonished applause, and a bit of embarrassment crept up her neck at the thought of her undignified stance. But she was far too satisfied to truly care.

The noise had woken up a few of the sleeping patients; as Hornet turned she saw those bugs sit up or roll over, baffled by their Queen’s spectacle. She ignored them as she focused on the clapping Quirrel, waiting patiently for him to stop; as he did she settled back into her more typical stoic idiom. It felt different to how it had before, both to herself and to the bugs that looked upon her. Some tension had lifted, though she was stern as ever; a certain harshness had relaxed, though her typical intensity had not. A kind of serenity, perhaps, had found her. Quirrel beamed to notice the change, however subtle it was.

“Watch the patients for a few moments, Quirrel,” she commanded him, and her voice, too, had become almost unnoticeably softer. “I’ll return soon. I’ve put something off for too long; it is time to address it at last.” She didn’t wait for his assurance before hurrying out of the chamber.

As she began her climb towards Dirtmouth Hornet realized that she was out of thread. Her spool’s contents had been expended on her feat, and when it had been drawn to its limit it had snapped and vanished into a burst of pale light. Now an empty wooden dowel hung under her cloak, and she climbed upwards by hand and by leap alone. A few crawldids in her path were skewered almost without a second glance; a trickle of vitality seeped up her arm as she struck them, and she paused at the feeling. For a moment she recalled how the Weavers had pulled silk from the air, and then she focused on the warmth that she had absorbed from her prey. She shaped it in her mind, moved it within her body, and as it left her a few turns of silk shimmered into existence on her spool. The process had been as effortless as the Weavers had once insisted it was.

She killed a few more pests as she finished her trek to the well, spun Soul into silk just as easily, and used that line to pull herself into the open air of Dirtmouth. To her left, though the town stood empty at first glance, a few lights in windows revealed the life that dwelled within, bugs settling into bed. The town was fading no longer. She smiled at the sight but turned away.

Ghost’s charm notches sat where they had been since her first arrangement of their grave. She had hesitated taking them before, even at Quirrel’s suggestion—not for the Ghost’s sake, but for her own. The Weaver may have given it to her, but to don the Weaversong had felt disingenuous, like she was taking something that should not have been given. The sight of other charms had tied a knot of dread in her stomach for reasons she couldn’t name. Now, though, the mantra turned echoed in her head over and over, and she steeled herself as she knelt in front of the grave as she had before returning to Deepnest.

Weaving is mine too.

One by one, she plucked the ten charm notches from where they lay and fixed them around her neck over her cloak. Ghost’s empty mask stared up at her without any sign of anger or betrayal; on
a silly whim, Hornet found herself giving it a bow of thanks.

Her hand passed over the charms resting between the mantis claw and that strange, handled talisman. Among them she recognized the Mark of Pride, several charms bearing the blue of Lifeblood, and one which resembled the crest of Nailmaster Mato, but she passed over them all—others had more use for Lifeblood than her, and she had her own Mark to equip. Ghost could keep that badge of honor. She stilled when examining a golden honeycomb before taking it into her hand; a token of the Hive and its dead Queen she would wear proudly. She examined one more charm, a knot of tiny vines covered in thorns. The memory of thorny vines bursting from Ghost’s body in their second battle flickered through her mind and she took that badge too. A second to recover after taking a hit would likely save her life one day.

She sat upon the bench in the center of Dirtmouth as she tried to affix these charms. It was a tricky process, and she had to lean her needle against the bench to work with both hands, but eventually the green charm snapped into a single notch. At once a strange sensation ran through her, as though for a moment her body had become gnarled and spiny; it verged on pain and she had almost torn the charm off again when the feeling faded and disappeared. She relaxed and set to work attaching her Mark of Pride to three of the notches.

No strange feeling accompanied this token; no discomfort flooded her body, no moment of horror at the spell it contained. The moment the charm snapped into place, though, her fingers twitched as though around the handle of her weapon, and a sense of bloodthirsty confidence flickered across her mind. She knew what this charm did. When next she swung her needle, she would find that the cut it made through the air extended a little ways beyond its point. She turned her attention to the hardened honeycomb, and as it attached to four notches she felt a curious warmth begin to seep into her chest starting from where it rested. This, too, faded quickly, and she paused to lick the honey off of the fingers that had held the charm.

Only Weaversong remained in her hand, and Hornet could feel herself hesitating again. Before the voice of doubt could speak a word she was fumbling with it and the final two notches, barring herself from the question of whether she deserved this memento of home, whether it was hers to have despite her heresy against Deepnest. She was a Weaver—a Pale one if she had to be, but she couldn’t help that any more than she could choose to be born. The power was hers regardless, and so was the art. When the charm clicked into place she almost gasped in relief.

She didn’t notice a change at once, though, and sat in silence on the iron bench as the gentle breeze fluttered the edges of her cloak. Despite no immediate effect her rush of satisfaction hadn’t faded, and she felt uncharacteristically serene as she relaxed against the backrest. A note like a bell turned her head a fraction. Gradually, the notes almost snatched away by even this shadow of a wind, Hornet discerned the sound of a whispered song, reverent and familiar.

Had she heard this song before, in the chambers of the Weaver’s Den?

Had Herrah hummed this to her as she had slept in her doomed mother’s arms?

If she had, the memory was even fainter than the song itself, and the details were gone a second later. She pulled a leg up to rest on the bench and wrapped her arms around her knee as she emptied her mind as much as she could and closed her eyes to listen. Her eyes dampened at the sound of distant bells; she wiped the traces of tears on the edge of her cloak as a voice sang words too quiet to make out. Strings hummed somewhere within the charm in a melody that made her want to sob. Instead, remaining as quiet as she could, Hornet sat perfectly still and allowed herself to be carried back home on the Weaver’s Song.

A scuttling over the music broke her reverie. Her eyes squeezed more tightly shut, trying in vain to
ignore it, but then she felt something small land on the bench beside her and she opened one eye in irritation. Then both eyes opened wide and her arms released her leg at what she saw.

Crawling around her were three constructs of silk, which had leaped from the charm without her notice when her eyes had closed. They resembled Weavers, all spherical body and thin but strong legs, but were smaller than any spiders she had ever seen outside of newborns. The woven thread that constituted them shifted slightly but constantly, as though singing to itself. After a moment all three weaverlings settled down, tucking their legs under themselves to rest. The nearest one stared up at Hornet with six false eyes.

Her movements slow, Hornet slipped a hand under this nearest companion and placed her other hand at its side. She lifted it up to the level of her eyes to examine it closer, and it examined her back even as she turned it this way and that. Hornet was abruptly aware of tears sliding down her face; she set the weaverling in her lap as she wiped her face again. One of its tiny legs extended and set itself on her arm as though comforting her, assuring her it was there. She laughed at the motion, brushed her hand gently against the side of the construct, and felt the notes of the song within it vibrate against her fingertips.

"Hello there," she whispered, smiling through her tears. "Thank you, oh, thank you, Weaver."

Emilitia hadn't moved. her kettle had since been refilled twice, and she patiently sweetened her tea with a spoonful of honey as she listened to the guard's report. "Where exactly did you find this silk?" she interrupted, lifting the cup to her mouth to blow on it. "At the bottom of the elevator shaft, or near the Tram Station?"

The room surrounding them was a little more drab than it had been before Hornet's visit. A team of Menderbugs had been called to deal with the cut curtain, and their sewing job had been dreadful; it now draped crookedly, held aloft by shoddy needlework and pins still visible in places. The flowers around the room had begun to wilt and their glow was fading. In the middle of this spectacle stood a winged guard, a lance in her hand as she made her report. Remarkably she managed to keep her composure, but then again the disappearance of civilians was a serious enough matter that she had no trouble focusing on it.

"The Tram Station, my lady," she said. "But there were signs of a struggle at the bottom of the elevator shaft. We think that, if indeed the missing bug was taken or killed, it likely happened there. The Tram is how the bug or bugs responsible escaped."

"Hmm," said Emilitia.

"The identity of the perpetrator is still a mystery to us. Have we your permission to investigate?"

Emilitia tutted and set down her tea. "Oh, I know exactly who did this," she said, her voice as airy and carefree as ever. "That silk of hers really is a calling card, isn't it? I knew that little harlot never intended to keep her word. And there's no point in looking for that missing bug; they're likely already being prepared as a lovely one-course meal as we speak. Or worse." She described this visual in a tone which suggested that she took absolutely no issue with it, except possibly that she couldn't be there to sample the meal. The guard was beginning to grow visibly uncomfortable with more than just the subject matter.

She stood silently, waiting for orders, until Emilitia had taken another sip of her tea and looked up at her in contemplation. Eventually she asked, "Are we at war, then, my lady? should I spread the
"Oh, no, no," said the lady, waving the possibility away. "War's such a dreadful thought, it won't come to that. Put everyone on guard, though. We'll see if we can catch her in the act. And begin some reconnaissance into the crossroads and fungal wastes. Nothing that the pretend princess and her fellows would catch. We'll play her game, for now." She paused to titter at the thought. The job of a monarch, she decided, became her quite well. "What of our efforts in dismantling the Colosseum?" she asked.

"Most spectators were already of the higher class," the guard reported. "Those we've spoken to seem amicable to rejoining Hallownest high society. But the warriors resist our attempt to negotiate."

"Well then play their game as well, if that's all they understand. And the Hive?"

"Still no sign of organizing. With so many dead and without a living Queen to serve, I don't expect they'll notice our thefts anytime soon."

She nodded, but frowned as she did. "Don't call it 'theft,'" Emilitia said, as she leaned forward and took another spoonful of honey from the jar there. "Look at this. Mountains of this wonderful food are going to waste in that Hive now, and heaven knows we deserve it more than they do." She popped the spoon into her mouth, and the guard stared awkwardly as she savored the mouthful of honey. When Emilitia was finished, though she kept her eyes closed, she continued, "The way I see it, unless they shape up and start trying to defend it, any honey we take is ours by right. Long after our supplies run dry in the city, those bees will still have plenty more to share."

"...Yes, Ma'am."

Emilitia gave the guard a cheerful smile. "Now, back to work. I'll want reports on what those expeditions turn up, of course, and any progress made on the Colosseum. If any more bugs disappear, you let me know right away. Any other reason I trust you can work out for yourself."

The guard nodded and left quickly; as she took to the air outside Emilitia heard the buzzing of wings. Then she was alone with her tea and the sound of the rain, and she leaned backwards and closed her eyes in bliss.

Chapter End Notes

While I'm taking some level of influence from what we've seen of Silksong, I don't plan to try to conform this story to it in any way. Silksong's going to render this fic moot in terms of both lore--it's going to annihilate all of my Hornet and Deepnest headcanons--and the story itself--there is no more need for an Epilogue. The only real way to stave off the anxiety I've been feeling about that is to just ignore Silksong's existence and let this be an AU. As canon to Hollow Knight 1 as I can get it, but for the most part disregarding Silksong.

Oh, and also, the name "Nelsha" for the Snail Shaman was coined by QueenEgg. I'm using it with permission.

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