Life in Miniature

by astronomicalz

Summary

When a massive earthquake shakes Hallownest at the least opportune time, not even the Pale King could expect what happens next.

Denise Powell gets more than she bargained for when she receives a shipment of very unusual bugs.

Things are about to get interesting.
The Pale King stood tall and regal outside the Black Egg Temple, watching his Pure Vessel make its way inside until the Void consumed its form. The Dreamers stood just behind him, waiting for his signal, and the Crossroads were almost entirely empty by his own decree. On the periphery of his vision, he knew that several others were watching.

Herrah had brought Hornet almost all the way to the Temple before handing the child off to the Midwife and a few attendant weavers. Lurien had not brought any of his servants, but Monomon had allowed one of her students to accompany her. His Great Knights were stationed in a perimeter to keep out curious common bugs. His dear Root, the White Lady, stood a distance away, staying only to watch and lend some of her strength before leaving for her Gardens. The Mantis Lords had likely caught wind of an important event and came with some tribe members to make sure it posed no threat to their village. Queen Vespa and a few attendants watched from further away for roughly the same purpose. A few bolder bugs that the Pale King did not know gathered at the very edges of his awareness in anticipation of some unknown occasion.

The Pale King cast aside all distractions as his Pure Vessel made it to the center, a thrum in the wards and the waiting chains making its position known. This carefully constructed ritual had to be done swiftly and precisely; any faults and it would likely spell disaster for Hallownest as a whole. The Mantises and the Bees were right to be wary, but the spell’s protections would not allow them to interfere.

“I would like to once again extend my deepest gratitude for your service,” the Pale King said lowly to the three behind him. “I wish the circumstances for standing together with me were different. May you Dream in peace.”

There was no reply. All other thanks had been spent, last conversations had.

“It is time,” he intoned.

The Wyrm released some of his power to spark the beginning of the spell. His wings fanned out behind him, illuminated in a faint ethereal glow, as lines of light began to weave into the air around the Temple. The formless strands snapped to the anchors within the Temple’s outer shell, extending outwards in intricate patterns. In abstract forms, a familiar mask and wings began to appear, reflecting the nature of the woven spell.

He pulsed Soul into the chains within the Temple’s yolk, activating the complex trap woven with Soul and Dream that he had set before the Void became too thick for him to withstand comfortably. A deep rattling echoed from within the depths, and the Pale King knew that this would signal the Hollow Knight to begin to Focus.

An orange haze began to swirl in the air, trying to grasp the lines of the spell before being drawn into the deep black of the Temple.

The Radiance had arrived.

“Dreamers. The Seal.”

The three Dreamers each lifted an appendage towards the Temple, and the lines of the spell
Monomon spoke first in her lilting, foreign voice.

“For diversity. For variance. For evolution. I become bond upon the Vessel.”

There was a sound coming from within the Temple.

Then Lurien, stern yet soft.

“For this city and for King beloved, I become bond upon the Vessel.”

The sound grew louder.

Finally, Herrah, rough and low.

“For my daughter and—”

Suddenly, the ground shook violently, tossing everyone off their feet and sending deep cracks into the rock around them. The Pale King felt the spell strain as their concentration shattered. His wings shook as he struggled to stand back up, his magic flaring to keep the spell from backfiring. He felt more than heard a large rock shatter above his head, and he spared the briefest glance to acknowledge Ogrim for saving him.

He could tell through the strings of the Soul-embued weave that Monomon and Lurien were still awake and connected, but Herrah’s connection was wavering alarmingly, several of the spell lines were snapped, and the Temple had cracks to match the rocks above. A scream was echoing within.

If the Seal failed, the Hollow Knight would fail with it.

The ground shook again.

The ritual had to be stopped.

“Dreamers!” he called, voice shaking minutely. “Release yourselves from the spell! I will guide your disconnection, but we must be swift!”

Monomon and Lurien released their tethers with a nudge from the Pale King’s power, collapsing from the strain into the arms of Isma and Dryya, but Herrah still hung on.

The Pale King turned to the Beast, finding her struggling to detach herself from the unraveling spell, which had wrapped itself around her in the confusion. It was a terrible irony, getting caught in the web of spells like her kind’s prey, but the thought was ripped apart as soon as it crossed his mind. He took a step closer and quickly poured more Soul into the lines, momentarily expanding it enough for Herrah to free herself and release her hold.

The Wyrm felt Root approach and lend him strength as he took on the weight of the spell. He unwound the spell from the Temple as quickly as he dared, the orange haze growing brighter as the spell fractured more. The ground shook again, and Root steadied him as he pulled the last of the binding spell from the Black Egg’s surface.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t the only thing that was pulled out.

In a rush of blinding golden light, every bug around the Temple was knocked off their feet as a large white blur burst out with a roar, disappearing into the tunnels above just as quickly as it had appeared. In its wake, the Pure Vessel limped out from the entrance, dragging its nail behind it, its
armor cracked and cloak shredded. Infection leaked from its eyes and it collapsed as soon as it crossed the threshold.

The Pale King immediately rushed to his creation’s side, sighing in relief as he found it to be whole and not possessed, the Infection slowly leaking out and disappearing. With sinking dread, he realized what that bright white blur must have been, but he couldn’t spare it another thought as the caverns shook once again.

The Pale King turned his head to see his subjects trying to steady themselves, the Mantises and the Bees he had felt now plainly among them and held back by his Great Knights, alerted by the swelling of power and the shaking walls. Herrah had her child within her grasp, protecting her from falling rocks, while Monomon did the same with her student, and Hegemol with Lurien. Root had come to crouch beside him, speaking frantically, but the Pale King could not hear her over the intense rumbling and a frightening realization.

This was no ordinary earthquake. Something large, much larger than he himself had been, was approaching. He had to protect his kingdom.

With the last of his reserves, the Wyrm blanketed Hallowcest in a protective glamour before losing consciousness.

Chapter End Notes

Hi all! I recently got into Hollow Knight and was inspired by rukafais and take-a-bug on Tumblr, and WD_Scribbles’ Tanked, with their Bug Tank AU. I started writing a few ideas for it, which accidentally turned into a full fic outline, so here I am. If you see something familiar, it’s likely that I really liked one of the tumblr ideas and put it into the fic.
Constructive criticism is very welcomed, and I hope you all enjoy!
Pet Crawlers was a small store dedicated to selling arthropods of all types, as well as small mammals, reptiles, and some aquatic animals. Most customers came to buy a new companion, though there were those who came to buy accessories, habitats, and feeder insects. There were only two employees besides owner Denise Powell, and as closing time approached, only she remained.

Denise had just finished organizing some of the shelves in her little shop when the bell by the door rang. She hurriedly moved to the front counter to greet potential customers, but relaxed upon seeing two familiar young men standing in the entrance. “Hey there, Rich, Dav— damn, David, what happened to you?”

The man in question, the shorter of the two with messy blonde hair, ducked his head in embarrassment, not managing to hide the various scrapes visible on his arms and face.

The other man, a tall brunet, sighed. “Dave nearly gave me a heart attack by tumbling down a rocky hill on the way to the usual spot.”

“How was I supposed to know that rock was unstable?”

“I have a first aid kit if you need it?” Denise asked worriedly, but David waved her off.

“We had some stuff in the van, I can take care of the rest later.”

“On the bright side, we accidentally stumbled onto a virtual goldmine as a result and came to drop off our find,” said Rich.

Denise raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Yeah!” exclaimed David. “We were taking a different path this time when I, uh, lost my balance and took a little tumble down the hill. I stopped rolling just inside a new entrance to the nearby cave system and when Rich followed me down...”

“...it turned out that he had fallen on top of and disturbed a huge nest of different bugs. I slapped him upside the head for scaring me—”

“How was I supposed to know!”

“—and then we decided to just take advantage. There were a bunch of different kinds too, I didn’t think they would live together so close. We also went to the usual spot and got a few from there. You’re gonna have a field day cataloguing them.”

“We got them in the van if you want to come see before we bring them in.”

Denise’s curiosity was through the roof by that point. “Alright, let me just get the keys really quick —” Before she could move, a white blur came through the still-open door, squeaking angrily as it fluttered around the shop.

Rich sighed. “It got out again, huh.”

“Looks like it.”
Denise watched in bewilderment as the intruder frantically flew a few more circles around the space before landing on top of the cash register. It almost seemed to glare in their direction. “Is… is that a moth? That is the biggest, noisiest moth I’ve ever seen.” She turned back to the boys. “What do you mean ‘got out again’?”

Rich motioned for Denise to follow them to the van parked right outside. She grabbed the keys carefully from the counter, not wanting to incur the wrath of the moth, and followed the boys out, firmly closing the door behind her.

“Believe it or not,” Rich started as soon as the door was closed, “that thing came flying out of the dirt at us once we started clearing debris from Dave’s fall. We got it in a net when it started flying into our faces, then followed where it came out of to find more insects.”

“It got out of the net at some point so we put it in a container,” David continued, unlatching the back doors. “Must’ve got out again somehow.”

As soon as the doors were open and Denise got a look at their find, she immediately jumped in to examine the containers secured against the walls. “Holy— you found all these in one place!?!” she exclaimed in awe.

It was like she had stepped into a bug-themed dream. She could make out some mantises, spiders, bees, and several types of beetles, but she excitedly realized that she couldn’t immediately classify most of them. A challenge! Oh, how she loved them!

“This is amazing! I’m almost sad you removed all of these, I would’ve loved to see how they all coexisted. Did you keep most of the nest intact? Start bringing them to the back room, and please tell me you saved the coordinates of where you fou— wait.” She rushed further into the van and stared confusedly into a water-filled tank and the forms floating within. “Since when does the lake have jellyfish?”

David barked out an incredulous laugh as he picked up another container to bring into the shop. “They’re not from the lake! I have no idea how, but there were a bunch of those little things in the mess of tunnels we got the rest from.”

Casting aside her surprise, Denise quickly unhooked the tank and started bringing it into the store. She had no idea what type of creatures these were, looking like jellyfish but living underground, so she wanted to prioritize getting them into a proper habitat just in case.

By the time she had set the water tank down next to the other aquarium tanks in the storage room, Rich and David had already brought the other containers inside and arranged them on the holding shelves within. The moth had relocated to a high shelf in the room and a variety of chittering noises were emanating from the boxes.

She noticed a smaller storage box on top of the desk. Rich followed her gaze and explained, “There were a lot of weird things around the area, so we picked up a few.”

“I’d suggest checking out the tubes first, but be careful handling them.” David added. “There was a big well of the stuff within the tunnels where the jellyfish things were, but it’s acidic.” He tugged a glove off his left hand and showed a discolored patch of skin on his palm.

Denise whistled. “It really wasn’t your day, huh? Does it sting?”

David flushed and pulled his glove back on. “A bit.”

“There’s also a couple of things in there that might be good for habitats,” Rich finished. He brought
his watch up and jolted. “Ooh, we better head out, Clumsy over here’s got some work to finish back home.”

David swatted Rich’s arm as they started walking out, laughing. “Once I’m done with that paper, I am going to wreck you at Mario Kart.”

“That’s about as likely as bugs having magic powers,” Rich scoffed.

“Take the usual and some extra from the register for your find!” Denise called, trusting her long-time friends to only take what they were owed. The register dinged and then the bell signaled that they had left.

Denise checked her own watch and, seeing that the store was due to close soon, she locked up the front door and decided to start organizing the new containers. First though…

Denise squinted up at one of the shelves, seeing the fluffy white moth looking down. It almost seemed to glow against the shadows some of the boxes up there cast. She rummaged in one of the mini fridges, pulling out a small dish and a bag of slightly overripe orange slices. She separated a small piece and put it in the dish, which she placed on one of the lower shelves. Maybe putting some food out might allow her to get close enough to examine it.

Denise then walked over to the water tanks as she nibbled on another orange slice, where the jellyfish-like creatures swam. They didn’t seem to be in any distress with their conditions, but Denise resolved to keep a sharp eye on them just in case. One in particular was much larger than the rest and drifted closer to the glass as Denise approached. It shone with a greenish bioluminescence and seemed capable of self-locomotion. It almost seemed to study her in turn just as she was studying it, but that might’ve been her fatigue at a full work day showing.

Denise turned back to the desk and started pulling items out of the box. It was a very strange collection. There were several tiny sharp metal objects, something that resembled a torch or lantern, some large hollowed rocks and shells that would probably be well placed in a habitat, quite a few shiny crystals, some tubes and glass containers of a greenish liquid that bubbled ominously, and plenty more little trinkets and oddities. She didn’t have the equipment to analyze the tubes of liquid here, but maybe she could ask around her university.

Abruptly, she realized that the loud chirping noises from the new tanks had quieted down. She didn’t know when it had happened, but as she glanced into the tanks she found herself being observed by a myriad of tiny eyes. A shiver ran down her spine and she shuddered.

The moth had also quieted, and as Denise turned to the shelf, she found the moth next to the food she had set out. She carefully put aside the remaining orange pieces and slowly approached.

The moth seemed to notice and backed away from the food, but didn’t take flight. Denise very slowly reached out a hand, careful not to cup it over the insect. The moth chittered in warning, but still didn’t move, and after a few moments Denise lowered a finger into the moth’s fluffy coat, stroking gently and avoiding the wings.

To her surprise, the moth almost seemed to lean into the touch. Denise took the opportunity to examine it and make some observations. It was a fairly large moth, with pure white fur and light grayish wings. She was tempted to call it a silkmoth, or maybe one of those poodle moths, but it didn’t fit entirely. It had some strange protrusions on its head framing its antennae, and its wings were strangely patterned. Due to the size, thin antennae, and a few other details, however, Denise was fairly sure that it was a female.
Denise withdrew her finger, leaving the moth to its meal. She cast her attention to the now-silent bug tanks. Rich and David had done a good job of separating the insects by supposed species, but the bugs had to be moved to proper habitats so the containers could be returned and she could check for contaminants before moving them into tanks with their own species. She flitted around the storage room, pulling out extra half-furnished tanks until she found the proper ones, then grabbed some dividers to separate the bugs within each container. She brought the new containers closer to the shelves where the new bugs were, then added a few things from the small box as well as food, water, and more shelter.

Nodding to herself, she mumbled, “Now, who first?”

She stepped closer to each of the containers, mentally cataloguing the species. One had a few mantises, three of which were taller and slightly different than the rest. Denise noticed scratches all around the clear plastic walls and slotted in some opaque plastic dividers. It didn’t look as if the mantises had attacked each other, thankfully, just the container itself, but she wasn’t sure enough of the species to leave them together overnight. She then assembled a small tunnel so they could be transferred to the new habitat without escaping.

The mantises fought her every step of the way and she very nearly got pinched a few times. “C’mon,” she coaxed, despite knowing they had no way of understanding her intentions. “This new habitat is much nicer than that box.” She jiggled the old container a little to encourage the mantises to move, but it took several minutes to get them all in, and even more to make sure there was one per division. After the three taller mantises were placed into the new enclosure, though, the others followed in short order. She finished setting up the habitat, making sure the ventilation was clear and the mesh was secure, before putting it where the old container was.

Disobedient bugs seemed to be the theme of the evening. The spiders were aggressive and it took several tries with a net to separate one of the unknown bugs from the largest spider. It wouldn’t do to have a possibly new species get eaten before she could examine it. The bumblebees were just as aggressive as the spiders at first, but followed their queen into the new specialized container soon enough. It was almost as if the three species had designated leaders, which would be an interesting phenomenon to study.

As Denise worked to separate the other miscellaneous beetles and bugs, she saw that she recognized fewer than she had originally thought. The only ones in the largest container that she recognized were a pillbug and a dung beetle, which she quickly put into their own small enclosures. There was also a strange fungus-like organism, a completely white bug that seemed to have a long body, a large black bug with a white head, and many more species she couldn’t name. They didn’t seem to be attacking or eating each other, so she supposed these species coexisted, but she would separate them overnight all the same just in case. As an experiment, she made a path between the old and new container, gently encouraged the group to move, and waited to see which bug would go first.

At first, nothing happened. They retreated from the new enclosure, but none stood out from the rest as they clicked to each other. Then, the long white bug suddenly unsheathed hidden wings and tried to escape. Denise cursed and quickly moved the mesh around the tunnel to account for the hole she missed, but she would have been too late if it weren’t for the moth.

Said moth swooped out of nowhere, screeching angrily, and redirected the white bug’s flight path into the new enclosure just in time for Denise to cover the hole. It then perched itself on Denise’s shoulder, to the human’s absolute bewilderment. This crazy moth seemed almost *domesticated.* “Thanks?” she said uncertainly, watching as the rest of the bugs followed the long one. There were quite a few, so she had to grab another tank to house the rest. The root-like one and the large black and white bug lagged noticeably behind, so she grabbed a new container for the
former and the one with the bug from the spider tank for the latter, which looked similar if not for the red on its carapace and difference in size.

The last container had some bugs that likely came from the usual spot or further away from the discovered nest, if the little label on top that she recognized was any indicator. There was another far smaller black and white bug in there, but it seemed to be of the same species, so she moved it with the other one. There were also a couple of weevils and a few more miscellaneous ones that would take more time to catalogue which she moved into appropriate containers.

Finally, after more than an hour had gone by, all the bugs had been relocated to be examined the next day. Denise slowly raised a hand to the moth, which quickly climbed on so she could return it to the orange slice. She moved to grab a box for the moth, but it began to squeak in displeasure at the movement. Denise wasn’t sure why she hesitated, but she ended up placing the enclosure on the desk with some water and more oranges, leaving it open for the moth to get into on its own.

It was getting late and Denise had to wake up early tomorrow to open up the shop before going to class. Whatever mysteries there were behind these new creatures, they could wait for tomorrow. So, after rechecking the tanks one more time and saying a ritual goodbye to the bugs and animals in her care, she locked the storage room, dealt with the register, updated her logs, checked the alarm, turned off the lights, and locked the store proper before walking to the nearest bus station.

Chapter End Notes

And now we’ve set the scene! I’m going to try and keep this as realistic as I can in the human aspects, but I’m neither an entomologist nor a shop owner (I’m also not very creative with shop names). Some things will simply require an open mind, but if there are any glaring issues, feel free to comment on it and I will try to address it! The same goes for any questions you may have, provided it does not spoil future events.

Also, you may have noticed that I did not outright state all of the bugs that were brought. This is to give a little freedom to you all! If you have an existing character that you would like to see brought in, state in the comments and I might include them. Keep in mind that Rich and David did not get very deep into Hallownest, only about as far as Fog Canyon, the Crossroads, and Crystal Peak. I also plan to have some chapters that return to Hallownest to see what’s been happening there, so keep that in mind as well.

Thank you all for reading!
As soon as the strange being that had taken them all captive plunged the room into darkness and left, the shelves descended into chaos once more.

The Pale King could not fully hear or see the other trapped bugs through the many glass-like walls, but he could feel the frantic buzzing of the bees as Vespa tried to calm them below and to the right, the Mantis Lords renewing their attack on their prison below and to the left, and the Beast and her spiders doing the same directly below. Ogrim was trying to calm down his Knights from his own separate enclosure to the right. His Pure Vessel, Hornet, and another bug he could not make out were to the left, with Monomon’s assistant beyond them. He knew one of the boxes above contained his Root, but the other two housed unknown bugs. The Teacher floated serenely in a large, softly lit, liquid-filled container with some of her oomas and uomas, a far distance from the shelves upon which the major figures of Hallownest were placed.

The Pale King himself was focused on replenishing his reserves of Soul and stopping his hands from trembling from within his cloak. The recent events, along with the strain of the disastrous spell and the glamour he had cast, had sapped him of all energy and left his mind scattered. His last ditch effort to escape captivity and release his subjects from the outside had also failed and certainly not helped his situation.

The Wyrm had never seen such gigantic creatures before, utterly dwarfing his previous form. A part of him found them very fascinating. Their soft bodies lacked chitinous armor or any sort of natural defense, though their build showed curious similarities to a common bug’s upright stature. They were not higher beings, as they did not bear the markers of strong magic and power, but his own power still skipped across the surface of their minds like stones across a lake. They seemed intelligent, from what he had seen of their behaviors and structures so far, and had a sprawling civilization, yet he had never been aware of their kind. It was a mystery he would have liked to take the time to unravel had they not invaded his kingdom and stolen himself, his family, and his subjects at the worst moment possible.

A tapping on the clear material that surrounded him pulled the Pale King from his musings, turning around to see his faithful Watcher on the other side, who seemed to have mostly calmed down from his earlier hysterics. The King’s dim light highlighted the other bug’s mask and a small area around them both. He nodded his acknowledgement as regally as he could, betraying none of the fatigue he felt. He needed to be strong for his subjects.

“What happens now, my King?” Lurien’s voice, even raised loudly, was difficult to hear through the barrier. Luckily, the Pale King’s Light gave him a very small foothold in the minds of the bugs below him. He could raise his voice as well, but yelling was unbecoming of him.

“Inspect your conditions, ration your food, find shelter,” he said, his voice carrying partly through the connection and into Lurien’s mind. “Tell my Knights to release any lumaflies they may have brought and try to find weaknesses in this material. For now, we lie in wait and plan for an opportunity to escape.”

The Pale King would have continued, had a large figure not landed directly in front of him on the other side of his clear prison, lighting the area more thoroughly than his own pale light had been.
Despite the thickness of the barrier, the Radiance’s words had no trouble reaching his own mind, half speaking through Dream. “What a terrible irony, Wyrm. You find yourself trapped just as you would have trapped me within the Empty One.”

His Knights drew their weapons around him, despite their separation, but he waved them off. He looked up with narrowed eyes at the great moth, drawing himself taller. In being pulled into physicality by the botched spell, she now looked more like her creations, complete with antennae and forelimbs, yet only slightly smaller than she appeared in dreams. She stood tall, wings flared and a halo of light behind her crown as she looked down upon him.

“I see you find amusement in trying to doom us all,” the Pale King said with scorn. “Had you not intervened—”

“What would you have done, Pale One?” the Radiance interrupted with a scowl in her glowing eyes. “Fly off for the Tall Being to hunt you down? Challenge it and almost certainly be destroyed? Release your fellows and lead them into unknown dangers? Your attempt to Seal me away left you weak, Wyrm, you would not have succeeded. Do you think yourself the only one able to save them all?”

“And what do you intend to accomplish?” the Pale King spat, his normally stoic demeanor crumbling under the weight of his recent failures. “You have no advantage over me besides not being encased. You are also weak from being near-forgotten, I can feel it plainly.”

The Radiance took one step forward in rage at the Pale Wyrm’s challenging words, but stopped herself with great effort from going further; it would do nothing but further agitate the warriors behind him. Her anger still bubbled close to the surface, though time and physical existence had already begun to wear away its constancy.

When the Radiance had inadvertently been pulled from the Dream Realm, she had still been consumed by hatred and fury, attacking blindly when she found the space to spread her wings. Her sudden capture snapped her out of it, turning to shock in seeing gargantuan creatures pull a still Wyrm from the earth.

At first, the Radiance had felt a vindictive pleasure; with the Pale King gone, she would be able to return and gather followers once again without trouble. Even weak as she was, from struggling against death for so long, a summoned blade cut easily through the netting that confined her. When she tried to fly away and bide her time, however, she was prevented by another kind of trap. Despite the failure of the Sealing Ritual, the Radiance had still been tethered to the Empty One, the chains having already been put into motion, so she found herself unable to stay in Hallowedest after the Pale King had been taken away.

Instead, while the Wyrm had been slumbering in exhaustion, the Radiance had followed the kidnapped bugs and the Tall Beings that had taken them, observing the unknown creatures and slipping through their attempts to contain her. Though she had initially been irritated, they had soon piqued her curiosity and interest. Their minds were vast, akin to Higher Beings, and largely resisted her probing. They spoke in a foreign tongue, but without access to the meaning in their words, she could not translate it.

Despite this, however, she could tell by lightly skimming their surface thoughts that they did not mean direct harm. They projected excitement, especially the smaller one whose care they had been placed into, but it was borne out of simple curiosity, not malice. The smaller one moved with gentleness unexpected for its size, and even when the Radiance placed herself in a position where she could be harmed— though certainly prepared to retaliate if necessary— the Tall Being simply stroked her and observed. A light suggestion of her magic had also led the Being to leave her free
instead of forcing her into a container, which would not have affected such a vast mind unless it had already thought of the idea.

The Radiance had seen the long distance that separated these bugs from their homes; her Dreamgate would be much too unreliable, even if she had the strength for such a journey. In the heart of unknown territory and surrounded by untold dangers, the only way to return was to cross this language barrier and enlist the help of the Tall Beings.

It was not something she could do alone, however. No matter how much she despised the Wyrm, especially with this latest affront, his help would be invaluable. These bugs still rallied under his crest, and the Root stayed close to his side. She would be needed, if the Radiance had judged her Focus correctly.

“I plan to stay close to the Tall Being that we were delivered to,” the Radiance began. “I was not included in that glamour of yours, my traits still shine through, yet it does not seem to mind my company or freedom. I can intervene in the case of any undesirable actions.

“Root,” the Radiance called, including the White Lady in their conversation with a small strain of power, “part of your skill lies with language, if I am not mistaken.”

There was a faint affirmative, then a solid “You are correct” as the White Lady strengthened the connection from her end.

“If I send you my memories of the Tall Beings’ speech and you continue to listen as they talk, you may have a hope of translating their language. Are you willing?”

“I am,” came the answer after a small pause. “Their Voices are loud and powerful; whether that will make it easier or more difficult is yet to be seen.”

The Radiance nodded, then turned her attention back to the Pale King. “Loathe as I am to admit,” she continued, reluctance plain in her tone, “your magic is broader than mine, if less deep. Your Light is already tethered in their minds, and you share a connection with Root. You would be most able to share that knowledge among them all.

“After that, we negotiate for our freedom.”

The Pale King scoffed. “And what makes you think these ‘Tall Beings’ would be willing to listen? We are small and insignificant beside them. Should our intelligence prove any threat, what would stop them from striking us down? You are naive.”

“Then you are prideful!” the Radiance thundered, her wings and Light flaring and forcing the bugs behind the Wyrm to take a step back instinctively. “If we show no intelligence at all and escape, there is nothing to prevent—”

“These walls may be thick, but I know plans are being made between you higher beings. Would it be too much to ask that we less godly folk be included? Hallownest’s King is not the only ruler here,” a voice interrupted loudly.

The Radiance went to hover further from the shelves, noting that the other contained bugs were watching her with rapt attention. The audible part of their conversation and her Light must have alerted them. Hive Queen Vespa looked slightly annoyed and Deepnest Queen Herrah was impassive, but the Mantis Lords were seething. The Radiance ignored the latter.

“We were indeed making plans, Hive Queen Vespa,” said the Radiance, having lightly skimmed the bee’s mind for information. Vespa didn’t seem surprised that the moth knew her name.
The Radiance supposed it would be beneficial for everyone to be in on the loop, though the clear cages that held them all would make things difficult. She could probably pull everyone into a Dream, but she doubted any of these bugs would agree to it. In recent times, Dreams of her had been accompanied by madness, and the Radiance wasn’t keen on bringing so many agitated warriors into her domain, especially if they were unwilling.

All the same, she raised her voice to reach everyone through the ventilation holes in their tanks, “If we wish to speak comfortably to each other, I’m afraid these containers disallow it. If you would permit me—”

“If you would permit me,” the White Lady interrupted, speaking loudly from her container. The Radiance’s light flared again slightly in faint irritation, but the caged Queen didn’t seem to mind. “I can amplify all of your Voices to reach the rest. Nothing else will be affected. Do you all accept?”

Given that most of the bugs present had very little issue with Root compared to the Radiance, acceptance was given easily only after a few moments of thought. “Very well.”

With that, a pale light began to glow from the tips of her branches. The Pale King felt her power use his by proxy through the Kingsoul, though no one else felt any change.

“There,” said the White Lady, and nearly everyone jumped at hearing her voice as near as if she were standing beside them. “We may speak without barriers. Radiance, if you would reiterate your plan so we may deliberate upon it?”

Pure had been internally panicking for a while now, and the fact that they were panicking only exacerbated things.

They hadn’t been able to protect Father or Mother or anyone else from being captured by the giant creatures because they had been so heavily injured when the Radiance escaped. They had been separated because they were too slow and recovering from said injuries, and even after Focusing a few times their body still ached. They had failed to contain the Radiance, and now the Old Light was right in front of everyone.

The Ritual has failed. The Seal had failed. They had failed in their one and only purpose.

There was no reason for them to still be alive.

And that only made the waiting game worse.

Pure hadn’t forgotten. They knew what had happened to their siblings in the Abyss, seen their cracked shells and broken bodies, been knocked down to the bottom by them a few times. They had all failed, and then they had died.

So Pure stood in a neutral pose, using their nail to keep their knees from buckling through will they couldn’t have, trying to keep the mind they shouldn’t have clear, and grateful they wouldn’t have to worry about any winces of pain escaping through a voice they didn’t have.

_Do not think…_

_Do not speak…_
Waiting for orders. Waiting for the end. They couldn’t—shouldn’t—hope for anything else.

They were aware of their surroundings, that things were happening around them, plans being made, but it was of no consequence. An empty vessel had no place in such dealings. Hornet kept tapping at the thin barrier between them, but to acknowledge it could be seen as a weakness. There was no room for curiosity aimed at her, the unknown bug behind them, or even the beings that had taken them in the midst of the panic and guilt they couldn’t fully dispel.

“Pure Vessel.”

As a result of extensive training, they managed not to flinch as Father’s voice reached them clearly and suddenly, instead merely inclining their head in his direction.

The Pale King watched them intently through the clear barriers between them. “Watch over the Daughter of Deepnest and verify whether the unknown bug is any threat. Go into their enclosures if you must, use force if necessary.” He then turned back to the moth that Pure was studiously ignoring, leaving them to their own devices.

Pure grasped the orders with slight desperation. If they could keep their body moving, maybe it would lessen the emotions that were becoming increasingly hard to stifle.

The container they were in was split in three, with Hornet to their left and the unknown but curiously familiar-feeling hidden bug to their right. Herrah’s daughter came first, as per Father’s orders.

They called on their Soul, teleporting past the clear wall and into her area. Hornet seemed to be focusing on something, nodding her head and saying “Yes, Mother” in response to nothing. Once she snapped back to attention, though, she immediately noticed Pure and ran up to them.

“Hello, Pure,” she said, bowing her head slightly. Pure returned the gesture. It had been a long time since they had last seen each other; Father hadn’t let them interact with anyone other than himself, Mother, the Dreamers, and the Great Knights once their training had begun in earnest. She looked them up and down, even walking a circle around them, before saying, “You’re a lot bigger than the last time I saw you.” Pure nodded again, faintly amused. Hornet had grown as well since they last saw each other, but they had almost been the same size back then; theirs was a much more noticeable difference.

Hornet glanced at the other box, where the Pale King and the Radiance seemed to be holding a staring contest, before reaching up to grab Pure’s hand, tugging them towards what looked like a hollow log. Pure allowed themself to be pulled along into the tunnel, relieved that it seemed big enough for them if they minded their horns and left their nail at its mouth. As soon as they were inside, Hornet used her needle to pull an invisible string of silk and a curtain made from a large leaf fell over the entrance.

“For privacy,” Hornet explained. “The other one doesn’t want to be seen for some reason.”

Pure’s curiosity rose unbidden. Hornet had a good sense for danger, from what they recalled; if she hadn’t mentioned it by now, the other bug wasn’t likely a threat. Who were they then? And why was that feeling of familiarity getting stronger as they moved through the tunnel?

Soon enough, they came to the end, which was pressed against the wall separating them from the unknown bug. Hornet’s lumafly lantern was sitting there, illuminating part of what looked like a
hollowed mound on the other side. That would explain why Pure couldn’t see the bug from outside.

Making sure Pure was watching, Hornet walked over to the wall and tapped on it. Almost immediately, a figure darted forward from the shadows and tapped back.

Pure reared back in shock.

“They look like you,” Hornet said thoughtfully.

The little figure on the other side of the wall pressed itself against the material, its mask cocked to the side. Many of their siblings’ masks had blurred together in their memory, both whole and broken, but this one… two-pronged horns so much like theirs but thinner, body just as small as theirs had once been, a little hand reaching and a silent voice crying out—

“Sibling!”

In a flood of emotion that broke through the carefully crafted blocks they had made, Pure disappeared in a flash of shade, causing Hornet to yelp in surprise, only to reappear in the same spot with the vessel in their arms. They were so small compared to themself, and that only made them hold tighter. The little one didn’t mind, bringing their mask up to bump against Pure’s and issuing a stream of calm-joy-forgive to counter the sorry-sorry-sorry that Pure couldn’t help but whine in the Void-tongue they shared.

The last time they had seen their sibling, Pure had thought they had fallen to their death... and they had done nothing.

Pure felt Hornet sidle up next to them. “Do you know them?” she asked softly. Upon noticing her, their sibling scrambled across their lap and bumped masks with Hornet too, eliciting a giggle from the other bug. Pure nodded once she could see them, placing a hand between the little one’s horns. They leaned into the touch with a voiceless sigh.

Maybe…

Maybe things could still turn out alright.

Chapter End Notes

Hoo boy, this chapter did not want to be written. I had to rewrite it a few times, and I’m not quite happy with it, but I’ve spent enough time wrestling with it. Trying to fit everyone’s impressions of the humans and the situation was too clunky, so we’ll be getting that in pieces. There’s also some of my own headcanons in here, such as the White Lady having power over Voice (my reasoning pulls from communication over mycelium networks, plus it’s a nice parallel to the Pale King).

PV needs and deserves all the hugs and cuddles.

Let me know if you see any errors and comments are always appreciated! I’m also on tumblr as astronomicartz, where I might post art for this story in the future. You can ask me stuff there too.

Thanks for reading!
“Have you got the counter? Good. I’ll be in the back room, call me if you need me.”

Denise pulled the door closed behind her and tossed her bookbag lightly onto the floor by the desk. She pulled over a rolling chair and sat down, then proceeded to grab her laptop and a few books from her bag, placing them next to the empty moth tank she had set out the previous night.

A short glance found that some things had been shifted around and the food had been touched, so the moth had gotten in at some point. She didn’t know where it was now, but she supposed it would appear when least expected again. Her shift was over, so she could begin categorizing and identifying the new bugs and wait for the moth to show up later.

She grabbed a small notepad and pencil to write down all the characteristics she could see at a glance, so she could cross-reference them with some online databases and books to compare against her own guesses and observations. If she couldn’t match them to any known species, she would then separate and take them out carefully to look closer.

She rolled over to the shelving unit to look over the containers, wondering which one she wanted to choose first. She winced when she saw all the scratches marring the surfaces of some of them; those would definitely be staying in the back room. She would have to be careful handling the bugs within if they could do such damage.

“Good afternoon, guys,” she said brightly, her habit of talking to the bugs in her care kicking in. “Hope you had a good night and morning. Time to figure out what you all are.”

She decided to just go in order from left to right, starting with the lowest shelf. Rolling closer, she observed the meandering bees in their specialized container, flipping open to a blank page of the notebook to record her thought process as she mumbled to herself.

Based on their fuzziness and plump bodies, she had pegged them all as bumblebees, but there seemed to be slight differences between them, including a noticeable size disparity. While one of the larger bees and three of the smaller ones were very fuzzy and mostly fit the description of female bumblebees, the large bee they had been following into the container, which she assumed was the queen, seemed more like a honeybee. One of their number was somewhat in the middle in terms of size and fuzz, and since she couldn’t see a stinger it was likely a male. When she leaned in and squinted it didn’t seem to have wings either. Was that a new development or—

**BONK**

Denise stifled a high-pitched yelp and reared backwards as the largest bumblebee slammed into the tank’s wall, right where her face had been. She steadied her chair and put a hand over her chest, letting out a nervous giggle. The movement had spooked her the most but the noise had been loud as well. There had to have been some force behind it.

Suddenly, a hissing-chittering sound descended from elsewhere in the room, coming from the missing moth as it landed on her left shoulder again, adding to the mini heart attack. Denise had no idea what to make of the moth seeming to scold the bees from its perch, but maybe that was just the anthropomorphizing talking. She tended to do that with her various charges.
More bizarre was the moth’s choice of perch. Twice now it had placed itself on her shoulder, utterly unbothered by her movement or size. Denise was itching to figure out the source of its strange behavior, but it wasn’t as if she could ask it. Well… she could, but she wouldn’t get an answer.

“You are the weirdest moth I’ve ever seen,” she said, turning her head slightly to address the fluffy insect. A small squeak answered her. Maybe she should name it.

Turning her attention back to the bee tank, she saw that the attacking bee had moved further back into the container, and the queen and wingless bee had approached. They didn’t seem to be in any distress, and Denise knew that the temperature of the room was around their optimal range, but they seemed too still to be normal, as if waiting for something. “Why do I feel like I’m having a staring contest with you. You don’t blink, I’ll always lose.”

The container wasn’t meant to hold them long-term, at least not inside; there were no flowers to collect from here and the sugar solution she was currently using shouldn’t be given to them for very long. She would have to either release them or move them soon. She’d been looking into keeping a small hive on her apartment balcony, maybe she could keep them there with her potted flowers and see if they made honey or not. The landlady was pretty lax, she’d probably allow it.

She wrote down a few more notes and replenished the food supply before turning to the next container. The spiders had already begun to spin webs around their habitat, so it was a bit difficult to see them all, especially through the little areas that were especially scratched. The webs looked like slightly more organized cobwebs, maybe mesh. The three smallest spiders with their red coloration were just barely visible within the tangle, so Denise could only just make out their round… abdomens? Those looked like eyes… no, they had to be markings. Ugh, she was getting a headache trying to focus her vision hard enough. They were probably of theridiidae, or perhaps araneidae, what with the webs and body shape, but she couldn’t be sure.

There were two larger ones, this time with a strange bluish coloration. Their legs were just as thin as the little ones, but the bodies were thicker. Despite being larger and less hidden, though, Denise still had a hard time focusing on details. It was even worse for the two largest, one black and unornamented, the other a lightish gray and faded blue with pointed horns. Both were in plain sight, facing her, but for the life of her Denise could not identify either one. The one with horns had… six eyes? Was it even a spider? She swore that they had all looked more like recognizable spiders when she put them in the containers yesterday.

“Hnng, why does looking at you give me a headache?” she murmured irritably as she looked away, massaging her temple with her right hand so as not to disturb the moth that was still on her shoulder. “I’ll just… wait until the webs are more built up, check for a tapetum later to maybe narrow it down a bit.” She would have to remove them at some point to get a better look probably, but she was very hesitant to do that without having some idea of the species. She dropped in some small crickets and moved on.

Next were the mantids. Their container was much more heavily scratched than the others. It was a little concerning that they were able to do this much damage actually. She knew that mantis claws could be sharp to catch prey but not enough to mark plastic. Even as she watched, one of the larger three mantises cut a line into the side of the container facing her. Oddly enough, she swore she saw a flash of silver at the movement. “You have zero chill,” she said with a small smile, at the same time the moth let out a small hiss. “You’re feisty, and that’s cool and all, but please don’t damage my tanks anymore.” Another of the three slashed again in defiance.

They were at least easier to categorize than the spiders, even though the prickling in the back of her mind didn’t go away. They didn’t seem to have any natural camouflage, such as leaflike ornamentation, so that knocked out a few species. The size of the largest ones seemed to be around 4
inches if she was eyeballing that right, so maybe they were female Chinese mantises? Those were common in the area, though the bluish-gray coloring was perhaps more typical of a Carolina mantis. The only kink in either of those guesses were the two horn-like protrusions on their heads; the only mantid species she knew of with horns only had one. In addition, the three smaller adults and the two nymphs lacked them, so perhaps those were a different species.

She’d have to do a bit more research. At least if the other ones were either of those she might be able to get them checked out to sell in the store.

The pressure had continued to build behind her eyes, so Denise decided to take a small break. Maybe she was getting sick? She had stayed up pretty late studying for that exam a few days ago, maybe the stress was finally catching up to her. She opened up her laptop to start researching and unzipped her bag again; there might still be a Tylenol in there…

Herrah watched attentively as the Tall Being, as the Radiance had uncreatively named, turned away from the shelves and began rummaging in its pack. The Little Weavers and Devouts were already taking care of the gifted meal.

“Such an expressive face, without a mask to shield it,” said the Midwife lightly beside her after a short time. “Very foreign, yet pain is a universal experience it seems, heehee. What do you suppose caused it, my Queen?”

“The Wyrm likely has something to do with it,” Herrah murmured. “Or else that infernal moth. It did not seem much distressed when it first arrived.” She pulled on the connection that Root had provided. “Any explanations to the creature’s distress, Wyrm?”

There was a bit of silence before he replied. “It would seem that it has some sensitivity to my glamour, perhaps even a growing resistance. It is becoming harder for its eyes to reconcile the glamour’s trick on its mind with our true forms. The effect will likely intensify as time goes on, the more what it sees clashes with what it thinks it should see.”

“I do so hope that we may be able to communicate soon,” Monomon interjected brightly.

“You seem excited, Teacher,” Herrah stated.

“Indeed I am. It has the look of a scholar, see its writing implements? How it studied you? I look forward to seeing its notes, there will be much to learn in this exchange.”

“Hopefully that will be soon,” said the White Lady kindly. As her Focus was Voice, the interpretation of language came easily to her. The many words the Radiance had heard from their captors during transport gave her a decent head start, and their current caretaker spoke often.

She expanded her reach to all of her fellow captives and the moth still seated on the Being’s shoulder, who had been skimming its mind for the meanings behind its speech to help speed translation. “With the Radiance’s aid in her proximity to the Tall Being, I have made great progress in deciphering its words. We are fortunate that this creature tends to speak to itself so often.” A pang of nostalgia went through her. It was a trait her Wyrm carried, one that she had loved before those mutterings turned to Void and Vessels. She shook herself out of the melancholy, making her voice steady as she continued, “There is, however, one complication.
“While we will, perhaps by the end of this day, be able to understand it, we will not be able to speak its tongue. It is a matter of physical impossibility.” Root felt unrest well up in the web of Voices, and sent a brief pulse of reassurance to quiet them. “There is still a way to enable the Being to hear us. However, the idea will undoubtedly meet some resistance, and it will not be an easy task.”

The Pale King stiffened where he stood. “Surely you don’t mean…” he trailed off incredulously.

“I do. I must give the Tall Being our language, so that it may understand us speaking in our native tongue, but to do so it must be Dreaming. With its foreign mind, a spell will be necessary to send it to sleep, and the only one among us with the right command over Dream to accomplish the casting of the Dream afterwards would be the Radiance.”

There was an immediate outcry from the shelves below her. The Tall Being looked over curiously, said something to itself, and turned back to its strange light panel.

“You wish for the Old Light to have a foothold in its mind? Have you lost your senses?” yelled Ziria, the eldest of the Mantis Lords.

Her younger sister Sikka, just as outraged, continued, “In case you have forgotten, Dreams of her fill bugs with sickness and mindless rage! What sort of damage would she be able to do with this creature in her sway?”

“For the last time, the Infection was accidental and will not happen again,” called the Radiance, sending her Voice directly so as not to disturb the Being she was perched on. Irritation leaked strongly through. “As I’ve explained already, I’m no longer in danger of being forgotten, and it is certainly not something I wish to recreate intentionally.”

“And we are supposed to simply take your word for it?” Drosa, the youngest Lord, asked challengingly. “After what your Light did to Kasai?”

“Why not simply include the creature’s Voice, Root, as you have done with the rest of us, using your power to translate?” asked Vespa, cutting into the blooming argument. The Mantis Lords had a point, but personal grudges would get them nowhere in this situation; they could take it up at a later time. The Hive hadn’t been touched by the Infection, so she didn’t have any strong feelings towards the Radiance. With what she had heard in regards to that orange plague, however, she still wanted to know if there were any other options available.

“If only it were that simple,” the White Lady sighed. “The Being’s mind is rather heavily fortified while awake, and my power cannot reach through. Even if I could tether its Voice now, our meaning would still escape it. Its defenses should lower while asleep and a Dream is necessary to make the exchange.”

“Forgive my intrusion, your Highness, but Herrah, Monomon, and myself are also skilled in that magic,” Lurien said. “Might we be able to accomplish this task?”

“The workings of the spell, construction of the Temple, and my own Light would have supported you. In this matter, the amount of Soul necessary coupled with the strain to cast this Dream would drain you three dry.”

“The Wyrm was loath to agree with this idea, considering the key role of the Radiance, but the more he thought of it, the more it seemed necessary. If they couldn’t speak with the Being, they would either have to escape another way and brave dangerous unfamiliar lands to return to Hallownest or show their intelligence through convoluted charades, neither of which was ideal. Bidirectional
communication would be efficient and prevent misinterpretation.

He particularly hated hinging their escape on the cooperation of such a foreign creature and on the Radiance’s word concerning its emotional motives, but so far it was their best shot, despite the unknowns. He would be willing to cast aside his rivalry with the moth for the sake of his subjects. Just for now. And if his Root thought this was the best way, he would follow her. It was… the least he could do.

He would certainly not allow the Radiance into its mind unsupervised, though. He wasn’t an idiot.

“I will agree to this plan,” he began, taking a moment to enjoy the shock emanating from the Radiance, “on the stipulation that I craft the sleeping spell and join this Dream as well.”

There was a small pause as this was mulled over. “No tricks, Wyrm,” said the Radiance darkly. “If I find even a hint of treachery, I will personally ensure that you never see your kingdom again.”

He raised his hands placatingly. “No tricks.” Too much risk, unfortunately. “The spell will take me a few days to craft and tether if I work quickly, perhaps less with the help of my Dreamers. We will be able to understand the Being soon, but let us not draw too much attention to ourselves before it is complete.”

“Well?” asked the White Lady.

The Mantis Lords did not speak up, though they seemed unhappy about it. At the very least, they could trust the Pale King to act in his own self-interest and keep the Radiance in check. Everyone else seemed to agree, as no other options were forthcoming.

As the Tall Being returned to its inspection, the Pale King retreated inside the fake rock shelter that he had been provided. He didn’t have any writing implements, but carving would make do. Finally, he sighed internally, a concrete task.

Time to get to work.

Chapter End Notes

Back again with a new chapter! Had to go through finals and moving back home, so there were some delays.

Next chapter, we’ll see some of the other characters who got taken, as they’ve mostly been silent up to now (as Hallownest citizens, who are they to disagree with their King…?). Still some time to suggest any faves you want to see, though I’ve mostly got a cast figured out already.

As always, let me know if you catch any errors. Thanks for reading!
Names

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Mato had separated from his brothers and the Great Nailsage to continue building his house in the Cliffs a few days ago, he hadn’t expected to later find himself trapped and being observed by a colossal creature alongside the highest figures of Hallownest, neighboring with the Queen herself and a thoroughly panicked Stag.

The first thing he had done after capture was use his nail to try and escape, of course, but even his Nail Art left only deep scratches instead of shattering his container. Perhaps one of his brothers’ mastered Arts would have been able to do more damage, but his wasn’t as concentrated. After that—with reassurances from the White Lady, and later the Pale King and the moth they called the Radiance—the newly-named Nailmaster had resigned himself to tending his nail, searching for weak points, and trying to calm his neighbor.

The Stag had probably taken their change in location the worst. It was common knowledge that they were born, raised, and lived their entire lives in the stagways that ran across the kingdom. To be suddenly plucked from those tunnels and not only placed in an open confined space, but so far from the only home he had ever known… the Stag had been near catatonic at the shock of it all for the greater part of the journey. The other part consisted of anxious pacing that no one was keen to interrupt for fear of being trampled… or for being unconscious at the time in the case of the Pale King and the tall bug near him.

(He would never say it out loud, of course, but Mato still found it hilarious that he had managed to be in the presence of the elusive Pale King of Hallownest himself, a high honor granted to very few bugs, and his Majesty had been asleep almost the entire time.)

Mato had only been able to speak to the Stag after being transferred to the new container, the shock having passed enough for the poor thing to register the sound of him tapping against the glass-like wall between them. They had talked a bit and Mato had suggested that the Stag move some of the structures around to make a sheltered nest, a task he had applied himself to with gusto.

The Stag had shown great strength and speed in rearranging his accommodations while Mato assembled his own shelter, but he could tell from the Stag’s restless limbs afterwards that it was only a small comfort.

The Nailmaster didn’t have much experience with the beasts; he’d liked exploring on foot more than the convenience, and the Nailsage had reinforced that behavior as part of their conditioning. Nonetheless, in these strange circumstances, he could tell that the Stag needed a distraction and a friend, and Mato was happy to provide.

He settled down next to the wall closest to his neighbor’s shelter, tapping on the material to get the Stag’s attention. “Hello again. Are you feeling any better?”

The Stag stepped closer to the entrance of the small tunnel he had constructed, to better see Mato, then lay on the ground to be more on his level with a huff.

“Somewhat. I’m better than I was before, at any rate. And how do you fare, Nailmaster?”

Mato blinked. “How did you know that I am a Nailmaster?”
The Stag spoke next with a smile in his gruff voice. “We Stags are taught the various roles and titles before we leave the Nest in order to properly address our passengers. I recognize your attire from those lessons. You are wearing the traditional color, yes?”

Mato raised a hand to the band around his head. Those who had mastered the Nail through the traditional apprenticeship and training usually wore the pinkish red color he now clothed himself in. The headband was generally worn after learning all the Nail Arts and becoming a Nailmaster. He was still getting used to it.

“That’s right. You can just call me Mato, though, less syllables.” Oh, where were his manners? “I just realized I’d never asked your name.”

The beast seemed to draw into himself, and Mato feared he’d made a mistake. The Stags had names, didn’t they?

His neighbor seemed to notice and spoke up, “I apologize. Just… no one has asked for my name before. It’s usually only given if a regular or a high-ranking noble has a preferred Stag.”

“Well, I’ll be seeing you regularly, yeah? We’re a long way from Hallownest, you’re going to be everyone’s preferred Stag here.”

There was a moment of silence before the Stag said quietly, “Gale. My name is Gale.”

Mato smiled. “It’s nice to meet you, Gale.”

“May I have your attention, everyone?”

Both bugs flinched at the sudden voice in their minds, though they relaxed soon enough upon recognizing that it was the White Lady’s. It had been some time since she had last called out; enough time for the large creature to examine the rest of the tanks, return to its desk for a time, and be called out of the room just moments ago. They both leaned around the simple house Mato had constructed in order to see the Queen in the box beside theirs.

Though the White Lady was a slightly more common sight than the Pale King, she was a much more foreign figure. She sat still and patient upon a seat made of her own roots, which now snaked out from under her robes and planted firmly into the soil. The branches adorning her head had grown past the wild crown they were normally kept as, with a very pale light glowing at each tip. Her crystal blue eyes met Mato and Gale’s, and she inclined her head slightly to acknowledge them. They bowed back.

“I have translated enough of the Tall Being’s language to send it out to all of you. You may feel some slight disorientation, but it will quickly pass. Is this acceptable?” There was general agreement.

The Queen’s branches glowed slightly brighter before Mato’s senses blanked out, his vision going pure white. His sight came back within a few short moments to see Gale shaking his shaggy head and…

The Nailmaster stood up and unsheathed his greatnail in one fluid motion, pointing its tip at the strange little bug that had suddenly appeared by the transparent divider. “Who are you and how did you get in here?” he shouted, only to falter when the intruder stumbled dizzily and fell forward into the dirt.

Mato ran forward in concern, keeping his nail at his side just in case. The little bug slowly got into a sitting position, running a hand over their mask as if to check it was whole before shaking their head vigorously. They were so small! Even smaller than the Nailsage if you discounted their thin two-
pronged horns. He didn’t know what kind of bug they were, but they probably weren’t fully grown. Mato sheathed his nail and knelt in front of them as they tried to stand up again. They immediately tottered dangerously on their feet and just before they could faceplant again, Mato instinctively caught them, saying, “Careful, now, are you alright?”

The stranger’s gaze snapped up to meet Mato’s, as if just realizing he was there. He couldn’t see their eyes from within the shadows of their mask, but his unease was swept aside by his concern.

They tilted their head, glanced over themself, shook their mask once, and then raised their hands towards him in a gesture he recognized from watching children and their parents. Were they a child? What were they doing here? …had they been here the whole time and he hadn’t noticed?

Mato obligingly scooped up the little one and walked back to the Stag. They began pawing at the fur collar of his cloak and he smiled as he sat down.

“Where did they come from?” Gale sounded very confused. That made two of them.

“No clue,” said Mato, plopping the stranger down onto his lap and tugging his cloak down a little so they could continue to play with it. “They simply appeared in the flash like a ghost.” The little one’s own cloak had a clean cut on one side, as if cut off with a sharp blade. Mato lifted it up to examine it closer, only for it to be snatched by the little one when it crossed their line of sight, like they had just noticed the damage. New, then. They let out a tiny dejected whine that sounded like wind passing over pipe.

“I’m sure someone can get it fixed,” Mato soothed, patting their mask. They looked up at him. “My name is Mato, and this is Gale,” he said, gesturing to the Stag, who nodded to them. “What is yours, little ghost?” The stranger simply tilted their head and pointed at him. “Your name is Mato as well?” They shook their head and pointed again.


Mato laughed a little in embarrassment and tossed the little one lightly in the air. “Ah, yes, well met, little Ghost!” They wiggled happily and raised their arms, so Mato repeated the motion a few times. They did not laugh, but they seemed to enjoy it. “The questions remains, however,” he said, bringing them down onto his lap again. “How in the world did you get here?”

As if that were some unknown cue, Ghost perked up all of a sudden, bumped their mask against Mato’s, and scrambled off his lap to stand a short distance away, staggering slightly. They waved to both of them, and in a flash of shadow they were gone, leaving Nailmaster and Stag to stare in bewilderment at the space they had vacated.

A long moment passed.

“You… you saw that too, right?”

Gale nodded mutely.

The Queen had not.
Hornet was practicing with her needle when the Tall Being left, swinging it around in deliberate patterns and occasionally taking short leaps. It wasn’t full size, instead being just smaller than herself and not very sharp, but it served its purpose as a training weapon well enough. Mother had told her that she would be given a proper one once she could prove her skill with the one she had and the accompanying thread. The needle had quickly become an extension of herself as she crested swiftly over the learning curve, excitement at the wind whistling past her mask and determination to impress her Mother and teachers carrying her. In a way, after the terror had worn off, she was glad that the Tall Beings had found them… now she had more time to perfect her skills and earn her needle before Mother had to Dream.

She threw her needle at the tallest structure in her enclosure, a long trunk of something she hesitantly identified as wood that ran from the ground to just below the ceiling. The point sunk into the top with a thunk, the momentum pulling the thread it was attached to towards the point of impact and bringing Hornet with it.

The small bug maneuvered to land on top of her near-horizontal needle, slipping a little as she straightened and frowning at the mistake. She held her balance for a few more moments, until she was almost startled into falling when Pure abruptly appeared below her. Hornet crouched to get a better grip, watching as the Hollow Knight swept their gaze around the enclosure. They didn’t look up.

A spark of mischievousness came over Hornet. She’d never been able to startle Pure before. She quietly pulled her needle out of the wood, bracing herself against the rough surface while orienting the weapon to point towards her prey. Aiming for their pauldrons, she pushed off her perch with all her might, resisting the urge to let out a battle cry as she sailed towards them.

As she got closer and they made no indication that they had heard her, Hornet nearly cheered in victory. Just before she could change her position to land on their back instead of glancing her needle off their armor, the Hollow Knight faced her in a flash.

Time seemed to slow as Pure brought up their longnail horizontally, using their other hand to brace its flat side as it met Hornet’s needle. They pushed against it with just enough force to gently flip the red-clad bug over their horns. Hornet’s midair training with the Weavers allowed her to orient herself so that she landed on unsteady feet and stumbled backwards into a sitting position rather than face-plant into the dirt.

The two bugs stared at each other. “You knew I was there, didn’t you.” Pure glanced over to the neighboring container for a moment before nodding, huffing lightly in their version of a laugh. They knelt and held out a hand. Hornet rolled her eyes and took it, then began dragging their taller sibling over to her shelter.

She looked towards the other tank briefly as well. The Pale King was still out of view.

Hornet drew the leaf cover after Pure had ducked inside, then tapped the wall. They’d all had to go back to their respective sides of the container when the Tall Being had come back, just in case, but now that it was gone the little one could come back for a bit.

Pure readied to teleport and Hornet had just a second to tilt her head at the lack of response when the White Lady’s Voice entered their minds. Hornet added her agreement to the gift, noticing that the Hollow Knight had gone into a ramrod-straight kneeling position, despite the myriad cracks littering their shell and mask that still hadn’t healed. Nothing came from them that she could feel, but that was to be expected. No Voice, Father had said. That, at least, had not yet been proven untrue.

When Hornet’s senses abruptly left her, she stumbled to the ground with a short yelp. She blinked a
few times to clear the white from her vision as she stood back up. Pure was now sprawled on the
ground and shaking their mask vigorously. The smaller bug giggled at the undignified sight and then
found herself in a similar position when Pure swiped a leg behind her. They both laughed.

They held out a hand to help her up again, which Hornet playfully swatted away. Then they
disappeared and reappeared on the other side of the clear wall to look for the little one.

Hornet settled herself more comfortably on the ground and drew out her spool of silk thread. She
unraveled a good length of it to make sure there weren’t any knots from her earlier practice before
neatly wrapping most of it back. Leaving some out to practice with, she reattached the spool
underneath her cloak and placed all of her focus on the string.

While wielding the needle had come easily to the Princess of Deepnest, its accompanying thread had
not. Most full spiders had high levels of control over the silk they wove and built with, allowing them
to construct their sturdy hanging architecture, create intricate spells, and trap elusive prey. Hornet,
however, even with her full concentration on the thread, could barely make it float off the ground,
glimmering weakly.

She stared at the strand some more before sighing, letting it flutter back down so she could roll it
back into the spool. She hated the thought of never being able to truly wield the weapon Mother used
just because she wasn’t a full spider. Both the White Lady and Mother had told her that maybe she
needed to figure out her own way of manipulating the thread, but she still hadn’t figured anything
out.

She took out a small silk cloth and began cleaning her needle to taker her mind off those thoughts.
Maybe she could lend it to Pure later; the cloth would be better for cleaning their own nail than using
their torn-up cloak.

She nearly stabbed her needle into Pure’s eye when they suddenly materialized in front of her after a
few minutes, looming over her and making a near inaudible keening sound. “Please don’t do that
again,” Hornet sighed, lowering her weapon. She looked around their imposing figure and frowned
when she didn’t see their newest sibling. “Where are they, what happened?” she asked worriedly,
now noticing their noise and posture.

They keened again and held out a small nail Hornet recognized as belonging to their smaller sibling.
Then they leaned back, dragging one of their long fingers in the soil to scrawl a few words. She
scrambled around to sit at their side and read, ‘Cannot find. Cannot feel. Did not answer call. Gone.’

She blinked. “Gone?” she wondered aloud. “They can’t have escaped, I checked the holes. There’s
no way they could’ve squeezed through them, not even with that dull nail of theirs—”

CRACK

Hornet let out a small shriek and Pure flinched at the distinct sound of a mask breaking behind them.
They both whirled around before rushing forward with unknowingly matching shouts of
“SIBLING!” towards the small dangerously-swaying figure that had appeared.

The little one had a long crack snaking up their mask, similar to the one on Pure’s own, and a
noticeable portion of their cloak was missing. Void defied gravity and leaked up from their eyes and
body, especially from the crack and even from the cuts in their garment. Their hunched frame was
heaving up and down, hitching as they tried to stay on their feet.

Pure dashed forward to catch them when they started to list forward, Hornet following. They cradled
the little one in their lap, taking care not to exacerbate their sudden injuries. “What happened?”
Pure said urgently, projecting **concern-surprise-panic** so strongly that even Hornet felt it.

“How did you get here, appearing like a ghost and nearly as dead?” exclaimed Hornet, sounding harsh but only as a front to her own concern.

The little one finally reacted, looking at Hornet with excitement. “**Name is Ghost!**” they announced, then cuddled into Pure’s arms, seemingly unconcerned with the Void rising from their wounds beyond a faint whimper. It was nice to know they had a name now, but Pure was still immensely confused and worried.

“How happened?” Pure repeated more firmly, nudging them and trailing a finger near the thankfully thin crack in their mask pointedly. It didn’t seem like their mask would split entirely as long as nothing else hurt them, but Pure was at a loss on how to heal them. The only healing spell they knew wouldn’t work on others, and… they didn’t know how Father would react and frankly did not want to find out.


Everything made simultaneously more and less sense. It had taken Pure a long time to learn and then get the hang of that skill, to Father’s frustration. Once they could even blink out and into existence in the first place, they kept appearing further and farther down than they meant to. If they exceeded a certain range their mask and shell would crack under the strain, not to mention how many bits of clothing they had lost to phasing near walls. But again, it had taken them a long time to learn. “**How in Father’s name did you even learn to do that?**”


Pure became aware of a tugging on their cloak and turned to look at Hornet. She was faintly shivering, which made them abruptly aware of the temperature drop because of the Void in the air. Her voice had a slight tremble as she spoke, “Are you... talking to them?” Pure nodded. She seemed to brighten for a moment before frowning again. “I just can’t hear it.” Another nod, a small sigh in return. “You can explain later, I suppose. I can… probably weave a small patch or two to infuse with Soul and put on their injuries, but I don’t know how much help that would be.”

It would be faster than them healing on their own, Pure thought. Or... oh! They lifted their index finger to Hornet in a ‘wait’ gesture that came off a bit more imperious than they intended, given they learned it from the Pale King. They turned to their smallest sibling and said, “**I am going to teach you something. I will do it once, and you will copy. Okay?**”

Ghost gave a feeling of **confirmation** and Pure continued, “**This is called Focus. You concentrate on your Soul and surround yourself with it to heal.**” They closed their eyes and felt the cool white energy flow up and around them, taking care not to use the offensive version they had also been taught. A few circular runelike patterns appeared and some of their remaining scratches faded, but the hairline crack across their right eye did not. Pure picked up Ghost, ignoring their tiny whine, and sat them down upright on their lap. “**Now you try.**”

The little one lowered their mask and concentrated. The Void leaking off of them started to swirl faster at first, prompting some panic, but white Soul soon mingled with the black substance until only it was left. Their torn cloak rose in the fake breeze the Soul created as it sealed cracks in its wake. With a single flash of white, their mask had repaired itself and their cloak had lengthened into a more jagged edge. Pure could tell they would need to do it a few more times once they had recovered more Soul, and told them as much.
Ghost decided to snuggle back up to them again, radiating comfort-security-safety. It was… strange, being in such close positive contact. There had barely been any of it when they had first left the Abyss and even less as time had gone on, but it was familiar still, edged in dark and cold. They instinctively curled an arm around their sibling.

“What was that?”

Pure mentally startled from their musings, only physically turning their head to face Hornet once more. She was no longer shivering, but she looked somewhat annoyed. Pure reached out their free arm to write out ‘Sorry’ in the dirt, for ignoring her.

Hornet shook her head and patted their leg. “Don’t worry about it. We’ll have to figure out a better way to communicate if these visits are going to happen often. What was that, a spell?”

They nodded again and wrote, ‘Focus, healing spell. Uses Soul.’

Hornet thought for a moment. “Can you teach me? I’ve only learned about Weaver spells so far, and I’m not much good with them yet.” Maybe it could help with her thread control. “I can help you with your writing at the same time.”

Hornet took the gentle mask-bump as an affirmative.

Chapter End Notes

Hello again! Apologies for the long wait, writer’s block sucks.
I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to have some Dadmaster Mato, the temptation was too great, and now Ghost has a name! Hearing Hornet say it too really cemented it to them. The not-yet-Old Stag now has a name as well.
If you want to see some of my sketches for this fic, check out my tumblr, @astronomicartz. I can take questions there too, answer with drawings, or even just talk! My inbox is open.
Let me know if you spot any mistakes, and thanks for reading!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!