

Hornet was a wanderer in search of something. Through the dark crags of the underground kingdoms, and the glowing flora and fungus of the most verdant caves and networks. From the ruins of Hallownest to the gleaming spires of Pharloom. The search took her down many, many paths and led her to all sorts of individuals. Yet no matter how far she roamed, the search bore no fruit.

Perhaps it would help if Hornet knew what she was searching for.

Bereft of duty, with the Infection of Hallownest purged and the Radiance vanquished by her sibling. Her personal affairs were resolved after the quest in Pharloom, satisfied in knowing the bugs in the once gleaming kingdom could have a chance to rebuild a kingdom of their own. Hornet had found herself at a crossroads, where every path led to the unknown.

Such a thing was... alien to her. Hornet had been plagued by the burden of duty for so long she could scarcely remember what it was to live without its shadow looming over her.

And so she traveled, in search of answers. In search of a purpose that could fulfil her.

She traveled far and wide, through kingdoms of the underground, and saw many familiar and intriguing cultures. A constant in her journey was the appearance of villains in need of vanquishing. Bandits and would-be warlords who sought to take from the weak, feed their greed and ambition to soothe their fragile egos and cowardly spirits.

Her needle made short work of them. And the people praised her as a savior, hero. Hornet would never apply those labels to herself; she had failed too many times in the past. She had... been found wanting, in her desperation to save others, resorting to means that besmirched her honor. The smiles and laughter of simple folk, leading their ordinary lives, were a comfort. A balm to her old and tired soul.

Yet she still could not find a reason to settle. There would always be people in need. The Needle Knight would go on, questing, in search of purpose.

Perhaps that could be it? To wander through the lands dispensing justice, her needle striking through like her namesake, only to move on to the next place.

Again.

And again.

The idea was noble. But there were times Hornet wondered if one day she'd feel she had fought enough. She had already seen enough violence to last for several lifetimes. Could she truly fight forever?

Was this the curse of her seemingly immortal lifespan?

The spider-wyrm did not know, and the thought haunted her.

So she continued her travels, going beyond the insect kingdoms, far beyond the realms of Hallownest and Pharloom and such.

She traveled *up*.

Her journey had taken her to upper realms, where the insect folk would actually travel and communicate with the surface world. She had heard tales of the surface from travelers who had ventured forth, and read about so many fascinating beings and cultures in the vast libraries of her kingdom. They spoke of *mammals* coated in fur. Reptiles that crawled on scaly limbs. Of flying creatures who laid eggs like bugs, but flew on large, feathery wings instead of small, thin membranes.

It had charmed the imagination of a young Hornet, back then, before calamity and tragedy had become her entire world.

Perhaps it was time to revisit those old fantasies and see what the rest of the world was like. It was bound to give her a new perspective on things.

With her new destination in mind, she asked for directions as she passed through settlements both large and small, seeking the closest route to the surface. The road had taken her to a colony of ants, a mining city called the Gran Colonia. Or the Grand Colony in the local tongue.

A hardy people, ants. They were always a very industrial folk, driven by a sense of collective like bees. Everyone had a role, and everyone performed that role to the best of their ability. There was much to admire about the hardworking ants.

Of course, people were no monolith, even bugs. And these ants were no different. La Gran Colonia was splintered into rival factions and industries, competing for favor, territory, and influence. Such division was very rare among ant colonies; those conflicts could break down their hive. But Hornet could approve of the way disputes were settled, through martial combat in the arena.

Hornet pondered on visiting the arena eventually, to see what these ants could offer for a spectacle and fighting prowess.

But, as luck would have it, such a decision was made for her.

It all started, as things are often wont to do with her journey, with a gang of ne'er-do-wells who could not leave well enough alone.

"You got a nice cloak there, missy." One of the ants, adorned in colors of some gang she could not care less about, spoke in a type of compliment that was meant to sound intimidating. "Very fine, silk."

"It is of great quality." She spoke and kept walking through what had to be a poor district. "And I would appreciate it remains unsoiled, so keep your hands to yourself."

"Awww," He and his hooligan friends laughed. "I'm just trying to be friendly, *preciosa*. We're all friends here." He placed a lecherous claw upon her shoulder.

Hornet stood perfectly still, using her steely discipline to keep herself from doing something foolish. "You have *one chance* to remove your claw." She warned him, her voice as cold as her needle.

"We just want to give you a proper Colonia welcome. *Darte un buen rato*." He chuckled in a way that made her setae stand on end. "Maybe in my house?" He leaned in to whisper.

Hornet's masked face slowly turned.

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*What a strange justice system*, Hornet mused to herself dryly as the crowd cheered.

After dispatching those hooligans, leaving plenty of broken bones and shattered egos, apparently, they had decided to accuse her to the authorities. She pleaded her case, citing them as the instigators of unwanted advances, but apparently, this specific constabulary was in the gang's pockets and decided to throw her into the arena for 'justice' to be served.

Namely, at the hands of the gang, well, ganging up on her.

Fine, she could use the workout...

*"Welcome, welcome to tonight's match! Where the Bestias will defend their honor against the baseless claims of this foreigner!"* The announcer excitedly called into the microphone. *"This outsider will learn you cannot assault the fine people of Gran Colonia!"*

Just get it over with, Hornet thought impatiently.

*"And now she will face the great warriors of Las Bestias Rojas and-! Huh,"* He suddenly paused as he was handed a note. *"Oh? OH! Ah, eh, ahem. It seems that another fighter wishes to challenge the newcomer instead!"*

"Hmm?" Hornet tilted her head.

The ant announcer waved his free hand in an arc, dramatically introducing her so-called opponent. *"You know her! You love her! La Guerrera de la Colonia! The Iron Shell of the Underground! The Crowd Magnet herself!"*

Even among the cheers of the ground, which grew even more deafening, she felt the heavy stomps of two feet.

A figure leapt into the air, blocking out the stage lights.

Her landing made the arena *shudder*.

*"Laaaaa REINAAAAAAA!"*

The crowd went *wild*.

Hornet assessed the fighter in front of her. Tall, very bulky for an ant. Her muscles were dense and stretched her carapace to the limit. The density of her exoskeleton seemed to be very fluid, as the surface moved with the way her muscles flexed. Her outfit consisted of pink, yellow, and red. Boots and kneepads, a sort of cloth covered the area between her legs, two armbands, the same fabric wrapped tightly around a barrel-like chest.

And a mask that covered her features, except for her large mandibles and expressive white eyes.

The woman roared as she raised her arms, flexing them imperiously for the crowd. "*Mi pueblo! Aquí estoy!*" She was very invigorated by the way they called out her name. She turned around and looked down at Horney, whose eyes could only reach the middle of her chest. "*So you're the newcomer...*" She said with interest in her voice.

"Why do you seek to fight me?" Hornet asked, impatience giving way to honest curiosity. "I only defended myself against those fools."

"Oh, I know." She chuckled. "I know the local guard are in their pocket, that's why they sent you here."

Her eyes narrowed in confusion. "Then what do you want?"

"I saw what you did to those *pendejos*." She chuckled. "Nicely done! I thought to myself, 'Oh, whoever did this KNOWS how to fight!' I just couldn't miss the chance to test myself against new talent!"

"...So I'm just your entertainment tonight?"

"Hardly!" She laughed, slapping her armored belly. "I want you to be my *challenge*." She rolled her massive shoulders and took a stance that Horney recognized as a grappling fighting style. "We fight, and if you impress me, I'll declare you an honorable foe and all charges are cleared. *Then* we can crack over the heads of some dirty gangsters together. What do you say?"

Hornet thought about it for a moment. "Very well," She brandished her needle with a flourish. "You shall not find me wanting."

La Reina laughed. *“Eso es lo que me gusta oír!”*

*“Alright, challengers,”* The announcer raised his claw. *“Let it be an honorable fight. Ready... begin!”*

A clash of titans began in earnest.