

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 La Gran Colina. Or the Grand Hill 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 Colina 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 Colina 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 Colina!"*

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 Colina! The Iron Shell of the Underground! The Crowd Magnet herself!"*

Even among the cheers of the crowd, 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 Hornet, 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.

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Hornet was a warrior. Trained by some of the finest masters of Hallownest. She had refined her craft for many, many lifetimes. The thrill of battle in her youth had been replaced by contemplation. There was still that part of her blood, the Pale Being in her, that resonated within fighting as a way to 'dominate' others, but it was kept in check by her ironclad discipline.

Hornet came to view battle as a way of liberating the spirit. In a fight, she went to a place where her needle and mind became one. The challenge of testing her skills against another warrior, proving her mettle, and putting her pride on the line brought a sense of honor and satisfaction. She sought out battle when it was necessary, and welcomed it gladly when it arrived.

Yet it had been a long time since she had enjoyed herself like when she was young.

*"Vamos!"* The slams of her fist upon the arena's surface made it *shake*, cracking the ground into jagged lines and uprooting rock and stone, sending pebbles flying in every direction. Hornet deftly dodged under her fierce blows, knowing a single hit from them could cause devastating damage. The warrior ant huffed and swung her huge arms with swift strikes, but Hornet was swifter still. She ducked under the thick limbs and struck with her needle against the carapace, seeking to incapacitate without hurting her too deeply.

La Reina rolled forward in a way that reminded her of pill bugs, trying to barrel her down with her sheer mass. Hornet jumped over her, propelling herself further with a swift strike of her needle over her armored chitin. She dove like her namesake, her needle straight and true, but La Reina got back to her feet and *clenched* her mandibles over the tip of her sword at the last moment.

Hornet's eyes narrowed as she was stopped mid-air. La Reina slammed her head forward while taking a hold of the ground, digging her claws into the earth, and pulling out dirt and rock in a wave as she threw Hornet down, seeking to blow her away in the tide of earth.

Hornet used her needle sword to bounce off the ground with a graceful swirl, opening her cloak to act as a parachute so she could slow her descent.

She had fought all manner of foes in her life, from the towering and ruthless to the graceful and elusive. La Reina was a totem of pure might and muscle, fought straight on, eschewing finesse in favor of pure raw might.

La Reina fought with courage and a joyful laugh in her voice. Like every moment of this battle was something to be savored, something that brought her immense joy. A warrior spirit drenched in a love for the sport rather than bloodlust. She fought not to shed blood, but out of the pure desire of testing herself against a stranger's mettle.

It was... infectious, Hornet had to admit. To fight against someone who wielded such power merely for its own sake. There was a purity of purpose to it. A libation of the soul.

It was *fun*.

Her needle scratched against the surface. It sounded like dragging the metal against stone. Piercing her body would require more power, but it would also mean reducing the capacity of non-lethal blows. But thankfully, La Reina opened herself up plenty with those boisterous moves of hers.

Reina stomped on the ground and made Hornet stumble as she stepped over a jagged piece of rock. The ant seized the moment and jumped, angling herself forward with her elbow poised to strike. "*Se viene un codazo!*" Cried out the announcer.

Hornet threw her needle and buried it in a pillar made from a piece of jagged earth that erupted from Reina's strikes. A string of silk connected the hole in the handle with her arm. She pulled herself out of the way, and Reina's elbow drop further shattered the ground.

Hornet huffed as she took out her blade with a swing. She rushed toward the ant to capitalize on the opening. But to her surprise, La Reina held up a hand and summoned a large item that came flying toward her. She grasped it with both hands and-

*Is that a chair?*

Her needle clashed against a folded steel chair of all things. She parried the heavy blows masterfully, angling away La Reina's spirited yet wild swings. La Reina heaved and raised her chair high, bringing it down upon the spider.

Hornet tapped into her mystical weaves, and a tide of razor-sharp silk erupted around her. "*Hegale!*" She let out a battle cry in the old tongue.

"*Pero qué...?!?*" La Reina's eyes widened when the glowing white silk wrapped around her chair. The metal groaned as the strands tightened even further.

Hornet pulled on the silk, and the chair came apart. The joints and bolts couldn't handle the pressure and snapped the whole thing.

The crowd gasped in shock.

"*No puede ser!*" The announcer was aghast. "Her chair!"

La Reina stood there, holding the chair's legs in her hands. Her upper body shuddered with an excited yet angry chuckle. "*Ohhhohohoh, vas a ver!*" She used the legs as a makeshift weapon, banging them upon Hornet's forms like clubs. Hornet's sword mastery let her lead the clash in her favor.

She knocked the weapons out of Reina's grasp and poised herself to strike.

...Only for her needle to fly out of *her* grasp.

"Huh?!" Her shock was momentary as Reina slammed her entire arm against Hornet's smaller body. The needle knight gasped and grunted when she collided with the ground, skipping like a stone upon a pond.



She stood up on shaky legs, watching as La Reina boasted to the crowd, flexing and patting her arm. Letting them know their champion remained in the game. "You see these muscles?! They're harder than steel!"

"Such, bravado..." She mused, looking over to where her spear had flown; it tittered on the edge of the arena. "But I suppose it is well-earned, you fight... vigorously and with talent."

"You're not half-bad yourself, stranger!" La Reina's eyes closed as she rested her claws on her hips, hinting that she was smiling under the mask. "I'm having a great time here!"

"Tell me, warrior. Have I satisfied your curiosity yet?" She asked. "Will you clear my name?"

"Heck, if you want to, we'll go knock some heads together!" La Reina laughed. "But I still haven't had my fill, oh no, I wanna see what the *real you* can do." She paced around, pointing a claw at her. "I can feel you can still do so much. Come on, *damelo!* I want to see who's under the mask!"

Hornet understood the meaning of her words. She wanted to feel everything Hornet was capable of. Her pride as a warrior demanded it.

Very well, out of respect for her skill, she would oblige.

"You face the Needle Knight, Hornet of Hallownest." She spoke up, her voice firm and strong, resounding throughout the arena. "Named so by her mentor, the Hive Queen Vespa."

She took a step forward, and La Reina's attention was solely focused on her.

"Born to the Spider Queen Herrah, raised by the White Lady"

There was silence, broken only by her powerful words.

"I have slain demons and challenged the gods. I have all manner of beast from the earth, and the horrors of the Abyss."

La Reina let out a small gasp.

"It is not you who is testing me, *young one*." Hornet arched forward, like a proper spider on the prowl. "It is I who shall test *you*."

And she dashed forward, skittering on all fours, her silk spewing everywhere around her as she moved at great speeds and with graceful jumps all around the wrestler, wrapping her in her glowing silk.

"Uck!" La Reina struggled, restrained on all sides by her silk. Caught like prey in her web.

Hornet stood in front of her, looking up at the warrior ant. "Are you still so eager to face me, La Reina?"

For a moment, her struggles ceased.

Then, her body shook with laughter.

"Are you kidding?!" She shouted with abundant joy. "*Por esto es lo que vivo!*"

Then she *flexed*.

Her body bulged out imperiously, expanding her carapace with the mighty muscles underneath. The material of her clothes seemed to shrink around her body until it was at the ripping point.

And her silk? It exploded in every direction.

La Reina charged at her like a rhinoceros beetle, a living wrecking ball that could squash everything on her path. Hornet grunted as she was caught in the warrior's deadly embrace, her powerful arms wrapped around her; she knew they could easily crush her at any moment. And with only one arm free, there was no chance of getting loose.

"*Qué te parezco, araña?!*" She shouted. "Am I worthy in your eyes?!"

Hornet remained silent for a moment.

Then she pressed her needle against La Reina's neck, right in the opening of her chitin where neck and head met.

The crowd gasped. La Reina stilled; they had not seen her throw her silk hook around her needle until it was too late.

The two were frozen in a standstill.

"I can move your sword out of the way." La Reina warned. "Metal is under my command."

"You need to swing your arms to control momentum and direction, don't you?" Hornet tilted her masked head. "Otherwise, you would have thrown my needle already."

"Tch...!" She clicked her mandibles together in irritation.

"Can you crush me before my needle pierces your neck?"

"...You're something special, aren't you?" She smiled under the mask.

"I would respond in kind, La Reina." Hornet gracefully said. "You are a magnificent warrior, and I praise your valor and your skill."

For a few seconds, the world was still once more.

Then, La Reina laughed, and she let Hornet go. The needle knight dropped to the ground gracefully and stashed her needle away. The fight was over; there was no need for it any longer.

*"Me gustas, me gustas!"* La Reina kept laughing, palming her shoulder roughly. *"Tienes mucho espíritu!"*

*“Wha-?!”* The announcer was confused, as was the rest of the arena. *“W-Wait, who won then?!”*

“Isn’t it obvious?!” La Reina grinned, keeping a large arm wrapped around Hornet as she knelt next to the spider.

“It is a tie.” Hornet firmly replied.

The crowd went wild. Cheers at the sheer spectacle they had witnessed mingled with the cries of shock that their great champion had not been victorious this day. But those smart enough understood that both women had won today.

It had been a great fight after all.

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It had been a magnificent fight. La Reina fought with the sort of spirit that Hornet could respect. She approved of the young bug, seeing great things in her future. Hornet indulged the many questions she had. They were almost too many, enough to write a journal. But she promised to answer them once she settled down. The trip had been long, and after the fight, she preferred to take some time to rest.

Although it would be difficult to pay for it. Hornet did not possess any currency used in this kingdom, but perhaps she could trade a few trinkets she had collected in her travels.

When she asked for the nearest inn, La Reina merely laughed and shook her head. “Oh no no no, I’m not letting a fighter like you stay at some three-star hotel. You get to stay in the best place in Colina!”

“I assure you, a humble accommodation is all I need.”

“You’re staying at my house!”

Hornet first refused politely.

Then she had refused more insistently.

Then she flat-out said no.

But Reina was as immovable as a mountain when she set her mind on something, it seems. Hornet would spend her stay in her home.

Which, apparently, was not just *her* home.

It seems that La Reina's family all lived in the same place. Hornet kept an impassive stare at the buzz and bustle of the large house. Relatives were aplenty. Cousins, siblings, older and younger, both, a cacophony of voices speaking over each other in a perpetual cycle of yells, laughs, and loud dialogues. Everyone was always doing something, be it household chores or leisure. The movement never ceased.

The sense of belonging these people all had with each other was endearing.

It was almost like a microcosm of a hive or colony, fascinating really. Loudness aside, it was intriguing to see how a family unit (a large one at that) functioned. Hornet's own... familial history left much to be desired, and that was an understatement if there ever was one. Even then, she grew up with all the regality of the court and knightly codes of conduct drilled into her since her youth.

She did not mind the informality of it all. She was just unfamiliar with it.

It was... nice to see people being openly loving. It was how a family should act.

*Hornet still thought of her siblings and her mothers sometimes.*

As she sat on a couch, surrounded by children who prodded her with questions (and their fingers as they poked at her cloak) in that fast-paced, excitable way filled with nigh endless energy only children could be capable of. She turned her gaze to a specific section of the house, a shrine to La Reina's victories. Filled to the brim with trophies, awards, and pictures of her multiple matches.

"Our girl is a star!" An ant woman in her middle years said, walking in with two trays of cookies. Behind her, Reina was holding an ever bigger one. The children cheered and *jumped* out of the couch and over each other to devour the cookies like a band of locusts. "We always knew she'd be a wrestler one day! She would use a towel like a cape and wrestle the farm worms until she was covered in mud."

"*Mamá*" La Reina hushed her, clearly even the towering warrior was still subject to the tribulations of a mother's embarrassing affection and praise.

"Then she'd beat up all the bullies at school. Oh, such a vigilante even in back then."

"*Mamá!*"

"We were all young once," Hornet replied, idly picking a cookie out of courtesy for the hospitality. She angled her mask enough that she could nibble on it.

"The mask doesn't come off, huh?" La Reina asked as she set the platter down and sat next to her.

Hornet swallowed. "Does your?"

"Heh," She chuckled. "Good point. I pretty much wear this for most of the day. It's a thing with wrestlers in Colina. What about yours?"

"To wear a mask in public is a cultural thing for most inhabitants of Hallownest. Particularly the knights."

La Reina looked at her, fascinated. "So that wasn't some boasting or showmanship. You *are* a knight and a princess?"

Her mother gasped. "*Cariño*, you didn't tell me we were hosting royalty!"

"It is fine. Your hospitality is... very appreciated." Hornet said. "Besides, my titles mean little in the grand scheme of things. Hallownest's kingdoms are not what they used to be."

"Oh," The older woman muttered, most likely understanding the underlying message. "I am... sorry to hear that."

"Hmm," For once, La Reina seemed at a loss for words.

"It is alright, it was a long time ago." She fell silent for a moment as Reina's mother sat next to her. "Thank you for your treats, lady..." She paused, realizing she didn't have a name for the woman.

"Oh, just call me Natalia, dear." The older ant waved it off. "We're happy to have you. Reina wouldn't stop talking about you! You gave her such a good fight, she's smitten!"

"MAMÁ!" Reina all but shouted, slamming her hands on her knees. "Don't you need to help dad and my uncles with the food?"

"Sure, sure!" The woman laughed, dusting herself off and easily sidestepping the band of children hyped up on sugar. "I'll leave you two alone!" She said with a skip to her voice, literally skipping over the room too.

"Hehehe," La Reina awkwardly rubbed the back of her head. "Moms, huh?"

"Indeed."

Queen Vespa had also teased her many times.

"So..." Reina cleared her throat, leaning back on the couch. "That's twice you called me young, are you...?"

"Much older than most of your forefathers."

"...Okay," Even the great warrior was stunned by her declaration. "That's, wow. Can't believe I fought a granny."

"Test me at your peril, La Reina." Hornet casually warned as she kept feasting on the treat. "I held back plenty in our bout."

"Heh! Well, here's a little secret." She leaned closer and whispered. "*So did I*"

"Hmph," Hornet let out a small chuckle.

La Reina paused for a moment; she could feel her gaze shifting as she mustered the courage to ask her next question. "You said you fought the Abyss. And you don't strike me as the type to exaggerate or lie."

"I did not," Hornet replied. "The Void, the Abyss, the Darkness, many names for the same destructive force. I have fought its puppets and agents, challenged its corruption."

"What was it like?" She asked with awe.

"It is everything that should not be in this world."

La Reina sighed. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

"Why are you asking?"

La Reina briefly looked at the children playing and snacking before muttering in a low voice. "There are rumors coming in from the surface. Amidst the rising tensions from the kingdoms, they say Abyss has been acting up. Some are saying they've seen effects of the corruption already out in the wilds. Twisting things and nature, *changing* people..."

Hornet stilled. "It sounds like the power of the Void." She confirmed.

"*Mierda*," La Reina hissed in frustration. "I need to keep training. I need to be stronger. If that thing reaches La Gran Colina...!" Her fists popped as she clenched them tightly. "My home is picking itself back together after decades of corruption. I'm not going to let some ungodly *thing* harm it."

Ahh, there was the spirit that had first impressed her.



“You seek training, but experience is vital to fight the Abyss,” Hornet advised. “You will need to go beyond the borders of your home if you want to protect it.”

“I know,” La Reina sighed. “I’m... afraid of leaving my family. But I know they can take care of themselves, that my home will be alright. I want to go out there, don’t get me wrong. I want to meet more fighters from the other kingdoms and test my strength against them. But the thought of the Abyss...” She paused, as though the mere idea of admitting fear hurt her.

“In my experience, only the foolish and the insane do not fear the Void, Reina,” Hornet said, then paused for a moment as she pondered. “I can help you train, I can give you the experience you need.”

Her eyes widened. “You would?!”

“In return, I only ask for your guidance in the surface world.” Hornet proposed. “I am seeking something myself.”

“Um, *sí, claro!*” The great ant grabbed her tiny hand and shook it vigorously. “Oh, this is gonna be exciting! *Vamos a tener aventuras!*”

Hornet couldn’t help but smile at the enthusiasm.

It reminded her that it was good to surround oneself by such people.

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“I don’t get how you can even fit all your luggage under that cloak of yours.”

“I manage.” Hornet cryptically answered and left it at that.

La Reina, by contrast, was carrying a backpack half a foot taller and wider than her, carrying within it ‘all the essentials’ as she put it. Though beyond the camping equipment, Hornet had seen stash away a couple of foldable steel chairs, too. Unsurprising that the wrestler would think of them as ‘essential’.

According to Reina, La Gran Colina was nestled within the Archai Mountains range. Hornet had heard of mountains before, enormous elevations of earth on the surface. She had seen similar mounds of earth in the largest cave systems, but couldn't quite say they were the equivalent.

They were en route to the surface to go visit the mountain's settlers of the Air Alliance, neighbors of La Gran Colina who, like them, chose not to involve themselves in the brewing hostilities between the Air Armada, the Flame Imperium, and the Water Trade Company. There, they could find the latest news regarding current events, and the disappearance of multiple figures of renown who had gone missing as conflict between the kingdoms began.

As well as to find anyone who could tell them more about the involvement of the Abyss. If its dark, corruptive power was at work here, then Hornet would not hesitate to involve herself. She had sworn that the Void would be allowed to spread so long as she could do something about it.

Once more, she was about to embark on a quest that would end up involving that ancient foe. How often history repeats, Hornet bitterly thought to herself. In the quest for purpose, the old enemy would still rear its ugly head.

Fortunately, she had a companion this time, one who was not afraid of making light of the situation to keep her spirit from growing too somber. "It's a nice cloak, but I bet you look nice under it too~."

Hornet merely turned her face to her.

"Ay, *maldición*," La Reina slapped a hand over her head and looked away, squaring her shoulders in embarrassment. "Was that too much? It felt too much..."

"Do not worry yourself, I am not offended."

"Oh?"

"Merely keep those thoughts to yourself."

"Oh..."

Hornet ignored the disappointment in her voice. However, she got the feeling it would not be the only time La Reina would attempt to flirt with her.

She had made a few comments ever since their match. And Hornet was not so obtuse as to miss them. La Reina was not someone to mince words, either way. She couldn't say she didn't feel any... attraction, even if it sounded base, toward the great warrior ant. Reina was formidable, in body and spirit, and in her youth, she would have contemplated her companionship in a more intimate nature.

But... Hornet sometimes thought she was too old for such frivolities. Lovers came and went, and yet here she remained.

She would always remain, whilst her partners...

The spider shook those thoughts away, feeling it was not the time to entertain such notions. There would be time to consider her future more deeply, once she found what she was looking for.

A part of her wondered if it was all too pointless, if looking for purpose at this point in her life was merely a fool's errand. Hornet was a warrior who had lived too long and seen too much. She had unraveled mysteries and contemplated ancient knowledge. What did the world have to offer that she had not seen yet?

Hornet noticed a glare at the end of the tunnel, a light so bright she could not see what lay beyond.

Brighter than even the most luminous caves. Brighter than the deepest crevices boiling with magma.

She passed the threshold and squinted, hissing with mild discomfort as she shielded her eyes from the glare. It was intense, like there was a bright, hot light bearing down upon her.

Then her eyes settled, the glare subsided, and her gaze focused once more.

She saw-

Hornet gasped.

...How could she even describe this?

What words could be used to describe a phenomenon so vast?

She had seen the deepest chasms of the underground and the tallest peaks of caverns that could house entire citadels. Artifices of such towering height that made one feel far too small before their overwhelming size.

But for the very first time in her life, Hornet truly felt insignificant.

Blue, a soft blue as far as the eye could see. Stretching from the edge of the horizon to the other, and even further beyond. An intense ball of blinding light illuminated everything from the valleys and mountains to a massive verdant forest.

Perhaps infinity was a good word to describe this.

This vastness, this all-encompassing *blue* hanging over the entire world...!

La Reina chuckled as she walked up to her. "First time seeing it?"

"What... is this?" She felt like a child again, her voice dripping with marvel and awe.

"It's the sky." Reina waved a hand. "It's *everywhere*. Pretty cool, huh?"

"It is magnificent." She replied with utmost sincerity.

To think such a wonder could exist on the surface, blanketing the entire world...

A world so vast and unknown, filled with myriad possibilities...

“Just wait till it’s nighttime, that’s a whole other bunch of awesome.” La Reina gave Hornet her hand, smiling widely at her under her mask as she offered her to show her the way. “Ready to head out?”

Hornet thought she had seen everything the world had to offer, only to discover it had only been but one stroke in a great canvas. And she was very glad to be proven wrong.

She was a squire once more, she realized, one who had much to learn still.

Happily, Hornet took La Reina’s hand and walked to the future with her.