

Monster Hugger Explore
By: RaddaRaem

Backs pressed together, and mrowling when they slid down against one another, the gathered Palicos collapsed to the forest floor with pained groans. Countless carts overflowing with the transformed bounty of the Ancient Forest rolled to a halt alongside them.

“...You've done well,” Nyx softly chirred. Reaching towards the pile of plenty she retrieved a pair of barrels before flicking off the sealed shut waxen caps with her clawed thumbs. Setting them down before the exhausted felines she wordlessly watched as they weakly clambered atop them and buried themselves head first into its contents. Wibbling and wobbling to and fro the barrels-

TONK

And the cats clinging to them tumbled onto their sides with a crash.

The Nightshade Paolumu smirked. At her command they had lugged the whole of Astera's haul to the heart of the Ancient Forest. Back and forth and forth and back the behemoth bat forced them to trek until they all but collapsed at her feet. Then, and only then, did she reluctantly extend to them a much needed reprieve.

Sprawled out beneath the shade soaked clearing, the branches and boughs of the canopy melding together and choking out the sun, the frazzled Felines tiredly swatted away splintered wooden planks. Palms cupped together they lapped up what they could of the pulpy concoction of herbs and honey spilling out of the barrels. With every swallow of the spilled potions the aches and pains that wracked their fuzzy frames dulled and melted away. “Mreowwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww.”

“See, Omar?” Nyx cooed. Bunching together her bountiful breasts, the Hunter tucked between them squeezed flat, the Flying Wyvern casually anted up the pressure on her captive. “I told you I always get what I want.”

“WOMAN.”

Pinching at the nape of Omar's neck, her clawed fingers carving clean through the collar of his vest, Nyx plucked the Commander free from her bosom. Having brow beaten him into oblivion, and cowed his Felines into compliance, the Nightshade Paolumu flashed him the smuggest of smiles.

“SO HELP ME I'LL-”

Beady black eyes nearly squinted shut, Nyx flared her nostrils and scrunched her lips. “You'll what?” her bassy voice commanded of him. As she dismissively jingled the Commander side to side betwixt her fingers she leaned in close. “Answer me truthfully, Omar,” she trailed off with a growl. “Because I will not ask you again.”

“Would you just give it a re-”

Mist, violet and thick, trailed from between the Paolumu's teeth as she spoke. “Which. Trainers. Omar.”

Dangling in place the Hunter indignantly scowled. "Why do you need to know?"

"WHY DO YOU THINK?" she exploded.

The Commander grit his teeth while panicked meows sounded out from the Palicos diving for cover behind him. Brows furrowed, and eyes locked with Nyx's own, the wizened old Hunter refused to share so much as a single syllable with her.

Lips peeled back into a snarl, the Trainer of Trainer's neck sac slowly started to inflate around her head.

"Woman!" shouted the Commander as he felt them both lifting up into the air, "I'm not going to discourage the behavior I want to see! Those Trainers treat my Hunters with dignity! With respect!" Undaunted, he reached around his back for the Light Bowgun slung over his shoulder and pressed it into her purple scaled snout. "Which is more than I can say for most of them!"

The Nightshade Paolumu's expression faltered even as she continued to inflate. "I. You. Mmph." Her bass boosted voice lightened in octave while her clawed toes brushing along the ground. "That's not what your Hunters should expect, should acclimate to, Omar." Matching his implied threat with one of her own Nyx leaned forward and buried the stock of the Commander's Light Bowgun into his torso. "You of all people should know how cruel the world beyond our borders can-"

"I know that!" he interrupted her with a hiss. "I know you welcome any and all Trainers, however indifferent and callous and cruel they might be, because it's important that my Hunters know in their bones what awaits them. That doesn't mean I can't cherish, and reward, kindness and courtesy when I see it. Those Trainers love their Hunters. And my Hunters love them back." Arm held out before him, the Commander accusingly pointed an outstretched finger at the balloon bat. "And I will not have you taking them to task for that!"

With a roll of her eyes, and flare of her nostrils, Nyx dragged out an emphatic exhale. Rearing back her head she pursed her lips when the Hunter in her grip lowered his weapon in response.

"Woman! Just... just get it out of your system!" Howled the Commander as he tiredly gestured at himself. "Shout and scream me down instead! We both know you want to!"

"...I swear to Sapphire were you always this stubborn?" Nyx angrily chattered. Soft squeaks sounded out as she deflated and lowered herself back onto the forest floor. "They're insubordinate, Omar! How else am I supposed to react to that?"

"By rewarding them," he shot back without hesitation. "For daring to think, daring to imagine, what we couldn't. Look at what our disloyal whelps have accomplished not just with our supplies but your own as well!"

Dropping to her knees the Nightshade Paolumu delicately, if not tenderly, set Omar back on solid ground with a tired sigh. She couldn't deny this was the most bountiful delivery to date from Astera. "Loath as I am to admit it... I cannot say that I fault them for going behind my back. Had the selfsame opportunity fallen into my lap I know I would have taken it," she jealously demurred.

Running a hand through his hair, and patting it back down into place, the Commander tched. "Thought as much."

"Don't you start," snipped the gigantic gerbil. Biting down into her lower lip Nyx mumbled as far off creaks and crashes echoed through the Ancient Forest. Unseen Trainers, towering and terrible, slowly came to congregate upon the area. "Fine, Omar. You have my promise I will not punish them. Question and cajole and interrogate them perhaps..." she said with a shake of her wings. "But I will not discipline them for being, in your eyes, model Trainers."

Slouching forward, the old Hunter slung his Light Bowgun back over his shoulder and breathed easier at the admission. "...Thank you."

"That said!" huffed the balloon bat. Nyx's expression turned stern as reached forward to slap at his shoulder. "We still have yet to settle on a course of action following our discussion. You still have yet to tell me your answer."

The Commander clicked his tongue. "Even if the world is changing I don't think we should change along with it. Not that much. Not yet anyway," he mumbled into his chest.

"Omar," sighed the graying bat. "This... this time feels different. Surely you understand that there's never been a more dangerous time for you and yours."

"Wom..." The Commander caught himself as he dismissively took to gesturing at the sky scraping trees that surrounded them. "It always has been, and always will be, dangerous for us humans. Especially beyond the bounds of this gilded cage of ours."

With a clack of her teeth, Nyx guiltily pressed her eyes against the sides of their sockets. "That's. That's not what I..."

"Besides! What would your Trainers even do with themselves were we to call off this collaboration?" he asked before nudging at Nyx's chin with a clenched fist. "I shudder to think of what kind of trouble that many idle hands could get up to."

The Paolumu sharply inhaled. A fair point. "You do realize what this means though. Don't you? What scant few Hunters are permitted entry and access out of here will constrict even further."

Tucking his hands beneath his arms the Commander locked gazes with his colossal counterpart and shrugged. "You and I both know those who want it bad enough will somehow make it work. Where there's a will there's a way. "

"Speaking from experience now, are we?" Nyx taunted as she nosed at and nudged him.

"Don't remind me!" snorted the Commander as he shoved her snout aside. "You and I know full well we can't just tell them 'no.' They need some sort of outlet. Some sort of goal to aspire for."

"As it would only encourage them otherwise," the elderly bat mumble grumbled. "Very well. We'll proceed along as we have. The Hunter system will remain in place." Rising back to a stand, the Nightshade Paolumu leered down at the old Hunter. "Before we conclude out business and go our separate ways though..."

“Hmm?” asked the Commander as he tugged at and tched his now tattered and fraying collar.

Shoulders bunched, Nyx crossed her arms with a harrumph. “These.... 'cultural exchanges' of yours. What all do they entail?”

The Palicos flopped alongside the mountain of supplies, which had begun to jostle and jiggle in place with the rhythmic and far-off footfalls of approaching monsters, went wide eyed at the mention. Innocently whistling and mrowling among themselves they hurriedly took to sorting and stacking what they could to avoid arousing suspicion.

Coughing into a clenched fist, the Commander sheepishly sidestepped the question. “Nothing too tantalizing, I assure you. They're but glorified guided tours.”

Squinting as hard as she was able, Nyx leaned in close. “Well I expect to be invited to the next one.”

“And so you shall,” the old Hunter replied. “Until such a time though... I wish you well, Trainer of Trainers.”

“...Must you always be so formal?” the bat whined back under her breath. With an errant exhale she shooed both Omar and his Palicos aside as they scurried into the underbrush and back onto the beaten path leading back to Astera.

THOOOOOOOOOOOOM

Step by shaking step Trainers of all stripes slowly began to assemble.

Dragging her hands across her cheeks, massaging the oils slicked across her fur into the graying patches of fuzz that pocked her frame, Nyx forced a smile. With a lung straining inhale she rose into the air with a twirl.

THOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM

Hovering above the center of the moss caked clearing, her webbed wings flapping at a steady and heavy beat, the Trainer of Trainers readied herself.

THOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM

A pair of crimson, and pupil-less, eyes flickered to life among the shadows.

“Erza! What a pleasant surprise!” purred the balloon bat as she bid a warm welcome to her earliest arrival. “I do so hope you've been enjoying your sabbatical.”

Sharp cracks shot across the clearing as the owner of those eyes didn't navigate the gaps between the trees so much as they lumbered through them. Their shoulders, lined thick with scales the color of dried blood, sheared away sheets of bark and snapped apart low lying branches with ease.

THOOOOOOM

An Ebony Odogaron, lean yet densely muscled, stepped forth and flashed the Paolumu a terrifying but well meaning smile. The colossal canine-like Wyvern, eye level with Nyx even as she hovered in mid-air, thumbed at her cheek. "S' good to be back, Lady Nyx," Erza rumbled as a roiling black mist spilled out from her mangled maw every time she spoke. "My baby cousin and them other Rookies ain't giving you too much trouble is they?"

"Anything but!" Nyx reassured her with a squeak. "Orissa is, I will confess, at times overly enthusiastic. But she's putting in the effort and it shows! Why I do believe she's well on her way to graduating her first Hunter!"

The Master Rank Trainer happily hummed as her plated tail gently wig wagged behind her. "Preciate you keeping an eye on her, Lady Nyx."

"Think nothing of it," decreed the Trainer of Trainers. Bouncing through the air, Nyx lazily came to circle the veritable mountain of man-made offerings. "Come, come! Treat yourself and take a seat!"

Eyes gone wide, and pointed ears flicking to attention, a curious growl lodged itself in Erza's throat as secondary sets of claws erupted from her wrists and ankles.

THOOOOOOOOOOM

"Richter!" beamed the Nightshade Paolumu. "Punctual as always!"

A placid looking Rajang, the tips of their fur shimmering with a golden glow, thoughtfully wound their way through the undergrowth. "Lady Nyx! Salutations and-"

KAKROOOOM

Every time the Fanged Beast's massively muscled shoulders so much as nudged against a tree an explosion of soil soon followed. Their faintest touch, more than enough to uproot the surrounding flora, left a trail of unintended destruction in their wake.

With a pronounced clear of their throat, Richter swatted away the clouds of leaves and loam swirling about him. "...Salutations and jubulations," the horned ape managed between coughs. "I do hope you'll forgive my uncouth introduction!"

"Nonsense, Richter!" the bubbly bat playfully laughed off. "There's nothing to apologize for!"

"Even so..." he grunted. Clamping his jaw shut, trickles of electricity gathering upon the Rajang's pronounced fangs, Richter effortlessly hoisted back up what trees he had felled. With an explosive burst of energy, the whole of the Fanged Beast's striped body taking on a golden glow for all of an instant, he slammed the bundled balls of roots back into the earth where they belonged. "Accident or no, I cannot bear the thought of leaving this place worse off than I found it!"

Nyx could but chuckle in response. "I'm afraid we'll have to agree to disagree. For here I was hoping you could help us demolish Astera's latest and greatest delivery to date!" Wings spread out to her side, the Nightshade Paolumu gestured towards the countless barrels, bundles, and more.

“OOH!” Slouching forward, his knuckles burrowing into the very bedrock, ecstatic hoots and hollers tumbled free from the Rajang's maw as he ambled up alongside Erza and happily helped himself.

DOO DOO DOOOOOOOOOOM

The smell of soot, and the muffled rat a tat of miniaturized explosions, filled the air as a hulking Brachydios approached. The blue plated Brute Wyvern's arms and horned head, caked with a glowing green slime mold, sizzled every time stray tufts of pollen so much as brushed against him.

“Baldesion,” Nyx introduced him with a courteous bow of her head. “I trust you've been well?”

The enormous and rigid reptile noisily worked out the cricks in his neck in between rapid fire pops. “Hail, Trainer of Trainers,” he politely rumbled back. With a tired blink he struggled to maintain eye contact with the Paolumu through the cloud of heat radiating out from his conical and glowing green horn. “I've been... well enough. Dare I ask what ill tidings you have to share?”

“What? And ruin the surprise?” the Nightshare Paolumu taunted back with a pirouette. “Come now, Baldesion. It's not all doom and gloom.” Wings tossed out to her sides, Nyx guided herself above Astera's offerings. Dipping low, and clenching a pair of barrels between her clawed toes, she backflipped through the open air. Relaxing her grip as she completed her somersault, the bat gerbil sent the frost caked curios sailing into the Brachydios' waiting grasp.

Faint, but perceptible, explosions relentlessly rippled along Baldesion's forearms when his calloused palms swallowed up a barrel a piece. His blood red eyes, sunken deep into their sockets, flickered to life when his clawed fingers forced them open.

“This is-!”

“A tiding as you're content to call it. Come courtesy of our Hunters,” teased the balloon bat.

Propping open his jaw wide, and simply sliding the whole of the barrel between his jagged teeth, Baldesion gleefully crunched and compacted the container between his teeth. At the faintest application of pressure a jelly like sludge of Chillshrooms spewed forth and sluiced along his gumline. Tossing back his head, the super chilled stream sprinkled with wood shavings and mulch sliding down his throat, the Brachydios gasped in relief when a cloud of frost wafted past his lips.

“Mmmph...” Eyes clenched shut, the bags beneath them all but melting away, Baldesion suckled at his clawed fingers before popping in another barrel. With every chew, every swallow, the rat a tat pops grew all the more quiet as the slime mold coating his leaden limbs and aching head dried out. Rolling his shoulders, and splaying his fingers, the blue brute breathed an emphatic sigh of relief.

“There's plenty more where that came from,” Nyx cooed.

Flanged mace of a tail contentedly swishing behind him the Brachydios' cheeks strained as he struggled to stifle his smile. “My thanks, Lady Nyx,” he sheepishly mumbled. Lumbering up alongside Richter and Erza, and filling his hands with as many Cool Drinks as he could carry, the Brute Wyvern started schmoozing in earnest.

FWOOOOOOOOSH

From on high echoed the heavy flapping of wings echoed. The Ancient Forest's canopy rustled wildly as the trim and slim Pukei-Pukei, wings tucked close to her torso, dived through the gaps between the branches. As she spread out of her arms, the humid air catching against their webbing, traces of the sun trickled into the taut folds of flesh lining her wings. The light filtered through them cast the clearing in a kaleidoscope of warm oranges, greens, and yellows.

Neck sac bunching up against her cheeks, Nyx dragged out an inhale as she rose to meet her. “Why is that none other than-”

“Hey Nyx,” grunted the feathered chameleon while she lazily glided on past. Buzzing the other monsters, the Pukei-Pukei smirking as her knees and her talons brushed against the top of their heads, she seated herself without saying so much as a word to the other Trainers.

Brows pulled flat, and eyes half-lidded, Nyx quietly scrunched her lips. She wouldn't deny that, when it came to a select set of Trainers, Omar's low opinions perfectly aligned with her own. Nevertheless...

The Nightshade Paolumu swallowed down a sigh. Donning a strained smile once more her beady black eyes turned skyward once more as petals of ice descended from the heavens. “Lorelei!” she squeaked.

FWOOOOM

With a frigid howl of wind, her very presence banishing the horrid humidity, the Legiana drew close. The leaf lined branches that impeded her entry found themselves flash frozen before crumbling apart into flakes of ice upon her approach.

Circling round the clearing, Nyx excitedly chattered as the towering Flying Wyvern lowered herself to the forest floor.

Arms tucked close to her thin frame, the webbing of the Legiana's wings wrapping around her like a shawl, Lorelei's icy blue eyes flared to life. “Lady Nyx!” she said with a clack of her beak. Her voice, airy and echoing like a chime, whirled about the winds that enveloped her. “It's been far too long.”

“That it most certainly has,” beamed back the bat. Dropping down alongside the giant among giants, the oily sheened bat not even eye level with her navel, the Trainer of Trainers bid the ice queen the warmest of welcomes. “We have so much catching up to do!”

THOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM

“...When time permits,” Lorelei laughed as Wyverns of all shapes and sizes continued to pour in. “I shan't keep you.”

Offering up her latest and greatest guest a tired shrug, Nyx continued to personally meet and greet each and every one of her Trainers. As the clearing grew cramped, and a Everyone was accounted

for save-

“Nell and Taras,” the Nightshade cooed. Her tone took on a playful lilt when she spied the Tobi-Kadachi and Nargacuga slinking in from the shadows. Hovering high in the sky, her spherical form eclipsing the sun, Nyx swam through the air towards them.

FWOOOSH

With a squeak the Paolumu screeched to a halt before them.

“L-l-lady Nyx!” the Tobi-Kadachi spat with a surge of sparks. Sulking alongside him, the Nargacuga's eyes went wide as she jolted to attention. “W-w-what a sssurprissse! Ssseeing you here!”

“At the presentation I arranged?” laughed the Trainer of Trainers.

Taras stumbled and stammered on his words as a panicked lisp overtook every syllable tumbling between his lips.

“Fashionably late, I see,” she teased with a twirl. As her beady black eyes adjusted to the shade they had tried to shroud themselves in Nyx blinked in confusion at the Tobi-Kadachi and Nargacuga's curious attire. Her brows furrowed as her tone and expression fell flat. “Quite fashionable at that. ...Where did you get those?”

“Get what?” Nell nervously deflected as she puffed out her fur to try and swallow up her tattered armor.

With a wordless grunt, Nyx's nose wrinkled and her gaze narrowed.

“O-o-oh? Thessse? T-t-they were a gift!” Taras worriedly blepped.

“From who?” the Trainer of Trainer curtly snapped back.

“Uh duh. Duhh. F-f-from our Hunterssss!”

Nyx tiredly blinked as her purple scaled feet planted flat against the forest floor. “Which Hunters?”

“I-I-I. Well. You sssee-” Even though Nell and Taras both stood head and shoulders above their bitty boss they couldn't help but cower before the bucktooth bat.

The rainbow rings of fur lining Nyx's neck contorted into a glowering pair of false eyes as she reached up to shove a clawed finger into Taras' shoulder. “You have none last I checked,” the Flying Wyvern irritably followed up for him.

Taras visibly deflated at the call out. Jaw clamped shut, and head held low, he shamefully turned away from the Nightshade Paolumu.

Nell stumbled up to the plate in defense of the Tobi-Kadachi. “W-w-what he meant to say was my Hunter! Our Hunter!” Taking her fellow Trainer's hand into her own she gave him a reassuring

squeeze. “Taras was his Rookie Trainer and now that I'm his Master Trainer we've been keeping tabs! Keeping in touch!”

Nyx arched her brows and kept them there. “So instead of training your Hunter you've been having them rendezvous and reminisce?”

Beads of sweat formed along the Nargacuga's forehead as her beak hung agape. “It's. No. W-w-well. It's more of a 'yes and' situation rather than an 'either or' but-”

Hands on her hips the graying bat clicked her tongue. “No wonder they have yet to pass,” the Nightshade Paolumu curtly replied. “What with you distracting them so.”

Shoulders slouched, and tail gone limp, pitiful chirps tumbled free from Nell's beak.

With a swish of her wing, Nyx gestured to the stack of supplies that they had had helped surreptitiously stockpile in the first place. “Take your treats and your seats. We will speak more of this later.” Turning her back to the Nargacua and Tobi-Kadachi she rose into the air with a creak.

Teeth clenched, and lips pulled flat, Nell and Taras both exchanged nervous glances. Ears folded flat, the Nargacuga struggled to untangle the knot forming in her throat.

“...C'mon, Nell,” Taras sighed as he choked back a snuffle of his own. “Bessst do asssss she sssaysss.”

Lumbering towards the picked clean pile they scooped up what grub stuffed honey combs and Potions remained. As their colossal compeers started to seat themselves the two Wyverns plunked themselves down along the edge of the clearing. Away from any and all prying eyes.

Shoulders sunken, and eyes hanging low, Nell wordlessly stuffed her beak. The crunch of beeswax against her teeth and the squelch of grubs crushed apart between her beak did nothing for her mood.

“I know Jet and I have talked about me being more than just his Trainer. That there's more to our relationship than that,” she anxiously thought to herself. As sloughing sheets of royal jelly caught in the batcat's throat an ill guided adrenaline clutched at her chest. Just. Just what if she wasn't the right Trainer for him? What if he really would be better off with someone else? What if-

WHUMPF

Eyes half-lidded, Nell weakly growled when Taras leaned into her. Bumping shoulder to shoulder, combs pinched between his lips, the Tobi-Kadachi couldn't even muster the energy to stress eat. He had always known he was an unpopular Trainer. His stringent standards among the Rookie Trainers and aspiring fresh faced Hunters making him nigh infamous but... but to hear Nyx bluntly repeat it back to him? Ego death was too gentle a word for it.

The Nargacuga tiredly leaned back into her friend. Slinging an arm around his shoulder, and holding him close, Nell and Taras shrank in on themselves as the crowd fell silent and the Trainer of Trainers took her place at the now sunlit center of the clearing.

Neck sac inflating, Nyx wordlessly rose above the crowd. “Welcome, Trainers!” her bass boosted voice echoed far and wide. “First and foremost, I must beg your forgiveness for summoning you all here on such short notice.” Her beady black eyes swiveled towards the constellations of Scoutflies twinkling amongst the canopy. Ever at her beck and call had they scoured the every inch of the Ancient Forest for her Trainers. “But as you all have surely gathered by now... trade with Astera has since been restored.”

Approving roars and bellows sounded out as monsters of all shapes and sizes toasted to the fact.

“And with the Feral threat thwarted and contained, for the time being anyway, the training of Hunters, from Rookie to Master Rank, will resume effective immediately!”

Far more muted growls and groans sounded out in response.

“Then speaking of Ferals-”

Wings thrown out to her sides, Nyx slowly glided around the circumference of her stage. “I’m sure some of you have felt that the frequency of their incursions has only been increasing as of late.” Rounded ears swiveling to and fro, the Trainer of Trainers puffed out her cheeks and stifled a sigh. “Sadly, I am here to say that is not merely a matter of perception. It is an immutable and unfortunate fact.”

Brows furrowed she let slip a raucous screech before her Trainers could even begin to grumble. “And I would not see your ire directed towards those who not deserve it! The Slayer is not to blame.” With a frontward flip Nyx deflated and crashed down to the center of the clearing. Her broad feet slammed through the moss covered sheets of rock lining the forest floor. “Not ours anyway,” she clarified with a snarl.

The gathered Trainers suspiciously side eyed one another. Arms crossed about her chest the Nightshade Paolumu allowed them time enough to murmur amongst themselves as her sizable subordinates digested the trail of bread crumbs she was leaving for them. “Through no fault of our own the Ancient Forest finds itself at a perilous impasse. A crisis confronts us.”

“And even though we are not responsible for it...” a silky smooth voice whistled. “We must respond to it nevertheless.”

With a swish of her hands, Nyx gestured towards the depthless darkness of the Ancient Forest. The low and steady clap of footfalls, armored yet light, barely registered through the brush. “And the first step to doing so is by educating ourselves on its severity and scope.”

FWICK

Barely visible threads flickered in and out of focus. With a twitch here, and a taut tug there, they puppeteered the sprawling and serpentine branches coiling through the canopy. As if pulling back the curtains, a spotlight of sunlight came to shine upon the Silk Seer.

“My thanks, Trainer of Trainers,” he whistled with a bow of his head. Spindly and chitin covered arms tucked behind his back, the Nerscylla sauntered onto the stage. “Greetings, Trainers. I am known as the Silk Seer and long have I served a role that complements your own.”

Pointed limbs swishing at the open air, the Silk Seer forced the spotlight apart as the canopy above unfurled into a series of chlorophyll colored vistas. “Since time immemorial has the Ancient Forest bordered, and otherwise lived in harmony, with the Wildspire Wastes and Coral Highlands.”

Eyes half-lidded, all six of them, the Nerscylla hissed as the otherwise peaceful scenery above filled with ghastly visages. The shadows they cast spread wide across the forest floor before swallowing up the audience. “And I, regretfully, must report that ill tidings have befallen both those lands.”

Nell and Taras, their cheeks brushing together, exchanged nervous glances. Mayhaps it was a blessing in disguise Jet hadn't earned the right to leave just yet.

“Even now I struggle to speak it aloud. The mere notion is farcical, ridiculous enough, to utterly beggar belief. Yet...” Mandibles grinding together, the Silk Seer conjured forth the visage of a brutish looking Zinogre. “The Slayer of the Corals has been deposed.”

“...Deposed?” Richter the Rajang repeated back to him in disbelief.

“As in... he was stripped of the title of Slayer,” the Nerscylla clarified with a swish of his spear like arms.

“The hell?” the problematic Pukei-Pukei spat with brows half-cocked. “Who would even want the job? Much less fight him for it?”

“Elder Velkhana,” mumbled the Silk Seer. Worried murmurs swept through the crowd as the likeness of the Zinogre melted away into the rustling leaves. With a flourish, silver webs of thread congealing together with a twinkle, the canopy peeled back to approximate the ice crowned likeness of a regal and unapproachable Elder Dragon.

Clearing his throat, the Nerscylla came to stand directly beneath the portrait he had painted. “Having grown tired of presiding over his frozen throne in the Hoarfrost Isles, Elder Velkhana thought to return to the mainland. On a whim, as he described it, the esteemed Elder Dragon decided to claim the Coral Highlands as his new keep.”

Jaws clenched, glum growls tumbled free from the maws of every monster present. The Elders, to the last, were veritable gods in their own right that none would dare question much less argue with. No matter how ill-informed their actions or opinions were.

“A not insignificant amount of Ferals, understandably, slipped past his discerning gaze whilst he occupied himself with bringing the Slayer of the Corals to heel,” the sizable spider grunted. “Whereas in the Wildspire Wastes,” the Silk Seer grimly alluded to. “We have an altogether different calamity to contend with. One the likes of which we've never grappled with before.” Alongside the Velkhana's likeness a broad and devilishly frightening horned head, sporting sunken and shadow soaked eyes, came into focus. “There... simply is no way to overstate the gravity of the situation. The Slayer of the Sands has abandoned his post.”

Indignant growls and roars, rising into a cacophony, reverberated around the clearing as the gathered Trainers voiced their disgust at the unnamed Diabolos.

The Silk Seer continued to speak even as anxiety and panicked hearsays, filtering in past the anger, filled the air. “You're right to be angry. More than angry. Yet, loath as I am to admit, there are none among us who possess the strength to challenge him and force him to reconsider. Already has he made...” the Nerscylla shuddered as his mandibles rattled together. “Examples. Out of those who would compel him otherwise.”

“As such!” Nyx squeaked as she sidled up alongside the Nerscylla. Ears only reaching up his torso she forcefully inflated herself so as to dispel the disparity in size. “Changes, drastic ones at that, must be undertaken to safeguard the security of the Ancient Forest going forward. Prominent among them...”

The Nightshade Paolumu and Nerscylla both, in unison, looked expectantly to the thickets of ferns behind them.

“...”

“...”

“...?”

Sapphire eyes blinking in confusion, the Silk Seer loudly ahemed and gestured once more towards the unruly underbrush. It but pleasantly rustled in the breeze in response.

“Uhh...” Nyx and the Nerscylla exchanged confused glances and shrugs as did the rest of the audience. An awkward and interminable silence began to drag out.

Pointed limbs clutching at the side of his head, and tugging down his flayed hood, the Silk Seer wiggled his thorax in disgust. “I swear to Sapphire,” he quietly cursed as he impatiently took to tamping his cloven feet.

“What was I thinking?!” Hands clutched against the back of her head, scarred fingers running through her mohawk, Alma gnashed her teeth. The Silk Seer was right. She was no friend to Ser Jet. Her act of so called kindness could very well have killed him! What if a Feral really had shown up? How would she keep him, much less herself, safe?

Flames billowed out from the gaps between her lips as the Anjanath trembled with self-loathing. Not only that but she had dishonored the Silk Seer for good measure! She didn't just question him but she shouted him down! What sort of self-respecting Slayer would do such a thing?!

Shadows swallowed up Alma's amber eyes as she angrily exhaled. “A fool. That's who,” she answered for herself. A fool who...

Her expression softened and self-directed rage dulled as it found itself bleeding back outwards. Heart racing, Alma recalled the abject fear and terror that flooded her frame when Ser Jet was ripped from her care. The dread she felt when she spied her... t-t-the Hunter so carelessly flung through the

open air. The callousness with which he was cocooned and toyed about.

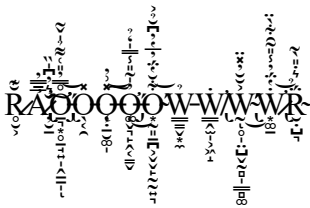
Chin tucked against her sternum, Alma blushed profusely. Even if she had erred... it was only because the Silk Seer had done so first. Ser Jet deserved far more respect than he displayed.

With a tired blink the Anjanath surveyed her surroundings. The sea of leaves whistled in the wind as upturned waves of chlorophyll whisked past. Forcing down a swallow Alma violently shook her head as she tried and failed to disperse the profuse blush carving itself into her cheeks. The ferocity with which she had responded at even the perception of danger to Ser Jet was... was...

Eyes clenched shut she slapped her clawed hands against the sides of her face. She feared for him. She cared for him. She...

“Such thoughts are unbecoming of a Slayer. Of a... Protector,” Alma bashfully mumbled to herself. The Anjanath was entrusted to protect all of the Ancient Forest and its inhabitants! Not just a select few! It was shameful behavior to fight so ferociously on a certain someone's behalf and not all others. No matter... no matter how they made her feel.

“...Oh who am I kidding,” whined the wumbo Wyvern. She cherished, she adored, she admired Ser Jet so. His kindness! His company! Simply being in his very presence made her feel like a person as opposed to a walking weapon! What she wouldn't give to cast aside her responsibilities and simply wile away the day with him. To talk herself hoarse with the kindred spirit, with the friend, she had sought for so long. To learn of everything she could about humans and share in their world. His world.



Perking to attention, Alma humphed as she slowly brandished her Sword and Shield. Until such a day came, if such a thing were possible, she would give her all to protect it. For Ser Jet.

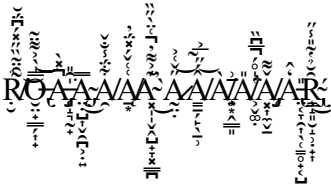
Lumbering forward, the anchors hanging along her thighs catching against and snapping branches with ease, Alma raced through the Ancient Forest. Rushing through clouds of screeching Godbugs shuffling free from the canopy she slowly advanced towards the endless expanse of mountain crags scraping at the sky. Nestled high atop their coral kissed peaks lay the Coral Highlands and buried beneath it, festering and feeding the land itself, was the Rotten Vale. Thick clouds of mist, that only parted on the sunniest and most scorching of days, enveloped its peaks and hid it from any and all.

FWOOOOSH

Along with what hid within it.

Clouds trailing past its pointed silhouette a winged Wyvern descended from the heavens at breakneck speeds. A Shrieking Legiana, its once vibrant yellows having dulled and blackened from the blood stained sheets of frostbite that enveloped its extremities, mindlessly flapped its tattered wings as

it hurtled straight towards the ground.



Jaw peeled open as far as she was able, Alma screamed for its attention. Its dull and milky eyes squelched in their sockets when it registered her presence. Wings pulled in close it drilled through the air towards her as dagger like shards of blood stained hail trailed off of it.

Snout scrunched into a snarl Alma let rip a white hot gout of flame. As boiling hot steam and vaporized blood hissed off its form, clawed and skeletal fingers only held in place by the frostbite falling away, the Feral continued to surge straight through the inferno.

Shield raised-

The sizzling Feral, its scales and webbed flesh bubbling, slammed into the Anjanath. Tumbling head over heels, tree after tree after tree cracking and splintering apart beneath her, Alma's head spun. Spear sized shards of wood and branches stabbed into her broad back and shoulders as she ragdolled across the land.

"Hnngh..." Flat on her back, and vision blurry, Alma winced when a frigid and deafening gale washed over her. Hand cupped to a scraped raw cheek, the Slayer watched as the Shrieking Legiana buzzed overhead and a flash wave of frost came to cake her and chill her to the bone. Stumbling to her feet, blood trickling down her broad back and shoulders as the pikes embedded into her snapped apart with the tensing of her muscles, the Anjanath watched the Shrieking Legiana roll onto its side as it circled her. Perpendicular to the tops of the trees, its wings tracing along the wildly whipping sea of leaves, flash frozen death followed in the Feral's wake.

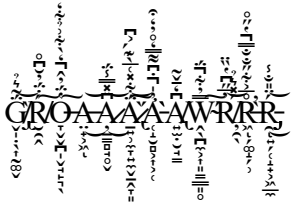
"Think," Alma muttered as she adopted her battle ready stance. "Can Ser Jet's training aid me? And if so... how?"

To draw near would be disastrous. Every flap of its wings, and its every exhale, could drain the very life from her. Shoulders rising and falling, smoke trailing from her nostrils, Alma stoked the flames within her breast as the sheets of ice layered atop her melted away. Crimson stained slicks of water washed down her back.

"Perhaps not," the Anjanath glumly acknowledged. He had duly warned her that different situations call for different tools and approaches. His training, his gifts, were but a tool to complement her own means and method after all. Hmm. She could pepper it flames from afar. Set the whole of the canopy ablaze to wreath herself in hellfire and guard against its icy touch of death. And... and...

Bags formed under her eyes at the thought of standing triumphant over the Feral in a land rendered fallow and ashen. A pyrrhic victory if there ever was one. "Dammit all!" she snarled.

Licks of flame trailed out from the sides of Alma's maw as she strafed alongside the Shrieking Legiana. It felt as if the Ferals had been flowing freely, unceasingly, as of late from the Wildspire Wastes and Coral Highlands both. Just what were the other Slayers doing?! Was she the only one who truly cared anymore?



The Feral, its head ominously snapping to attention, abruptly divebombed towards Alma. With flame filled roars she advanced to meet it even as piercing crags of ice erupted alongside her.

KADOOOOOOOM

“Nnghh!” As the moisture within the trees expanded and froze they explosively popped apart and assailed the Anjanath with shrapnel from all sides. Dammit. Dammit. DAMMIT. Eyes gone wide, what little restraint she held tight to melting away, Alma's pupils contracted into dagger like pinpricks as she could do little more than graze the Feral when it flew past. Drawing in deeply of the heavy and humid air, lungs filled to near bursting, she readied to exhale an inferno.

FWIP

Before Alma could commit to her conflagration, coiled threads of web leapt forth from the Ancient Forest and latched on to the Feral's flapping wings. The Shrieking Legiana flailed through the air, its limbs practically ripping out of its sockets, as its newfound tethers to the trees threw off its balance. Furiously did it flap, ice coming to cake the crumbling tethers, as it sought to right itself. Yet as soon as one line was shattered another snapped into place.

“Slayer!” an unfamiliar voice called out above the din. “I'd greatly appreciate you taking advantage of this opening I'm offering you!”

Flickers of life and cognizance flared back to life within Alma's eyes. With a shake of her head, she gathered herself and quickly reevaluated the ever shifting battlefield. As waves of ice radiated out from the Shrieking Legiana with every wave of its wings thickets of flash frozen trees continued to explode apart before and beneath it.

Brows furrowed, and breathing steadied, Alma clenched and throttled the muscles in her throat. She would just have to carve her own path forward. Hunched forward, and jaw propped open wide, she forced a narrow and super heated plume of flame at the Shrieking Legiana. Whittling down one wing,

D000000000000000000000000M

[illegible]

FW000000000000000000M

[illegible]

Sprinting forward, her newfound armor ominously creaking as it grew heavier within her grasp, Alma desperately tossed the slab of ice aside when she felt herself crash into the Feral. Its head knocked back, and plume of liquid death billowing into the sky, the Slayer steeled herself as her impromptu shield ruptured apart beside her.

Dipping low, the Anjanath gripped the hilt of her Sword and gathered her breath. As the Feral's neck threatened to snap back into place, and an icy mist pooled out the sides of its distended maw, a string of silk clapped against the back of its head.

“ANYTIME, SLAYER!” Alma's unseen assistant screamed as they pulled the Shrieking Legiana's head back as far as they were able.

The Feral's milky white eyes locked with the Anjanath's own as it wildly whipped in place and all but broke its own neck to get a proper bead on her. Wasting no time, Alma drew her blade and leaped forth as it readied an existential exhale.

SHWICK

Arm tucked close against her chest, Alma drew her Sword with force enough to strip the surrounding trees bare. Slicing its breath attack in half, and smashing apart the Shrieking Legiana's pointed teeth as she stomped forward, the curved bone blade briefly caught against the Feral's lips.

FWIWSH

Before splitting its jaw in twain. With a defiant roar, Alma ripped the upper half of the Feral's head clean from its body. As it sailed into the sky, its eyes blinking out of sync, spurts of blackened blood and plumes of ice billowed free from the abomination's exposed esophagus. The partially decapitated monster briefly shambled and spasmed in place before collapsing into the earth.

With a heavy sigh Alma sheathed her Sword and cupped her hands close to her maw as she breathed fire over them. Replacing the frostburns biting at her fingertips with the those of her own flames she tiredly warmed herself in between haggard and shaky breaths.

“Have to say...” the unfamiliar voice from before spoke up. “This is a nice change of pace. A Slayer that. Well. Slays? Nice to know there are still some out there that treat their responsibilities with the gravitas they deserve.”

“...As one should,” the Anjanath uneasily answered. “To whom am I speaking to?”

A click of the tongue answered her. “Did. Did Silas really not tell you?”

“Forgive me, stranger,” Alma grunted. “But I know not this Silas. Or you. Your aid is much appreciated, however-”

“...Did he really not say anything about me?” the voice dumbly replied. “The Silk Seer, I mean?”

Nothing? Nothing at all?"

The Anjanath cocked a brow as she confusedly found herself drawn into the conversation. "The Silk Seer? I'll... confess that he wished to speak of me at length of matters of great import. Yet prior commitments called him away before he could elaborate any further."

"OH FOR."

Alma startled in place at the outburst of exasperation.

"That idiot..." spat her garrulous guest. "Augh. Fine! Since he couldn't be bothered to handle introductions I'll just have to do so myself."

Snaggleteeth jutting out, and idly plucking free the spears embedded into her shoulders, Alma hummed when her mysterious helper made herself known. Carefully sidling past trees both frozen and aflame stepped forth an enormous spider.

"Hail, Slayer. As the former Silk Seer of the Wildspire Wastes... tis a pleasure to make your acquaintance!" Her legs and arms clad in orange chitin, and fiery hair the color of the setting sun trailing well past her waist, the dark blue Temnoceran made herself known with a bow and a smile.

Utterly enormous in size, the Anjanath surprised to see her stretching all the way up to her torso, stood a silk clad Shrouded Nerscylla whose extremities and umentionables were barely kept presentable by tastefully placed wads of webbing. "...Former?" Alma found herself asking.

The spider's sextet of eyes drooped as she parted the orange and razor sharp mandibles clasped around the lower half of her head like a mask. "My role was made redundant ever since the Slayer of the Wastes abdicated their own."

"...He wouldn't!" Alma gasped.

"Early warnings and hails of the Feral threat only amount to so much when no one is willing to act on them. Knowing that, my brother and I thought my time and talents were better spent elsewhere! Perhaps by aiding someone such as yourself who would be gracious enough to take advantage of them."

The Anjanath, her jaw hanging slack, struggled to process the information being relayed to her. So she hadn't been imagining it?

The Shrouded Nerscylla's sapphire eyes all went half-lidded in unison. "Did. Did my brother, I mean, did the Silk Seer not tell you such? Of the Slayer of the Wastes abandoning his post?"

"...No."

"SILAS, I swear to-" grumped the shapely spider. "Maybe I should begin at the... uh... beginning," she ehehed. "Nikita, at your service," she said with a wiggle of her spiny thorax.

The Anjanath scrunched her lips and cocked a brow. "Hail, Silk Seer of the Sands. I am known as Alma. Slayer..." she paused a moment as her amber eyes swiveled along the bottom of their sockets.

“Protector of the Ancient Forest and all who call it home.”

“Protector?” hummed Nikita as her mandibles curiously clacked together. “So. With regards to your incompetent compeers in the Wastes and the Highlands...”

Alma blinked incredulously. “Wait. What? The Highlands too?”

"...Brotherrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr," Nikita grouched to herself.

Lost in thought, and smoke trailing from between her teeth, Alma coughed and cleared her throat. “I. Um. T-t-thank thee, Seer of the Sands. For your aid and for alerting me to much and more.”

“And just like that you've already done more than you know who ever has,” sighed the spider with a shake of her head. “And please! No need to be so formal! Just call me Nikita!” Looking to the sky, sun shimmering at its apex, the Shrouded Nerscylla's many eyes widened. Wait. Oh shoot that was... that was happening now wasn't it? Was that why Silas hadn't told her yet?! Frantically flailing her many spindly arms, Nikita hurriedly bid the Anjanath farewell. “Until next time, Slayer! Which uhh. For both our sakes I hope is later than sooner.”

Skittering back beneath the canopy, the spider disappeared beneath the shade with a silky whistle.

Alma reluctantly turned her gaze to the Wildspire Wastes as she struggled to make sense of it all. “Don't tell me you've finally given up...” she sadly rumbled.

“Maybe we should just move on with the rest of the presentation,” Nyx tepidly inquired as the audience's interest, and patience, rapidly waned.

“One more, one last, try,” the Silk Seer begged of her with a whisper. “Ahemhemmmm... **PROMINENT AMONG THEM,**” shouted the spider as he cupped two spear like appendages around the side of his face and screamed himself hoarse.

"I'm here, I'm here, I'm here!" Nikita shouted back in a panic.

“About time,” Silas mumble grumbled under his breath. “As I was alluding to earlier, good Trainers, my role complements your own. And, as it turns out the Slayer's. Given how infrequently Hunters wander beyond the Ancient Forest's borders, my responsibilities to humankind are not all encompassing. As such my threads, my eyes, look for more than wayward Hunters. They spy for invading Ferals as well.”

With a dash of pinash the Nerscylla hummed as hollow pairs of eyes, wreathed with twinkling threads of silk, came into focus and could be seen strung up all around the clearing. “While the Slayer of the Forest is an ever vigilant sort her gaze cannot be cast everywhere. I fill in the gaps for her whence I can.”

The Silk Seer let his words hang for a moment before continuing apace. "As does the rest of my brood. My siblings, stationed near and far, serve much the same role across the Wildspire Wastes, the Coral Highlands, the Rotten Vale, and even the Elder's Recess."

Darting among the trees, a shapely silhouette carved across the canopy. Hurtling forward, her orange chitin greaves scraping against worn smooth stone, the Shrouded Nerscylla rose to a stand and tossed back her silken hood with a smile.

"Long has our brood, our family, proudly served alongside the Slayers. As of late however..." Silas said with a sigh as clacked his mandibles together. "They have begun ignoring our warnings. Or flouting them altogether."

Self-righteous snarls rose from the crowd as their preconceived prejudices were all but affirmed.

"I said select Slayers! Not our own!" the Nerscylla tried to couch. "While our kin in the Coral Highlands parleys with Elder Velkhana, who is at least willing to entertain a dialogue where the Slayer of the Sands would not, my dear sister has returned from the Wildspire Wastes. As her talents are being wasted and allowed to wither on the vine... we both believe that her time is better spent here. Offering aid alongside my own. Not just as the Slayer's eyes but an extra pair of claws!"

"It'll be my pleasure!" said the Shrouded Nerscylla with a clap of her spear like arms.

"Furthermore," Nyx followed up with a cough. "Seeing as how the Wildspire Wastes and Coral Highlands have become all the more unpredictable, and chaotic, it is unduly imperative that we as Trainers take our responsibilities all the more seriously. Never have there been such dangerous times in our land. For us or our Hunters."

Lips wavering, the Shrouded Nerscylla nervously ehehed while her brother enthusiastically nodded along. "Speaking of, Lady Nyx!" Silas happily hum hummed as he looked towards the Trainer of Trainers. "If you'll forgive my intrusion, and lest I overstep my bounds, I was hoping to speak to that further!"

"Oh?" Twirling in place the spherical black furred bat bounced about midair in curiosity. "By all means!"

With a swish of his arms, unseen silken strands forcefully tugging on something tucked away in the undergrowth, the Silk Seer expectantly turned his attention offstage. Head held low, and an emphatic sigh wafting up and down in pitch, a familiar and all too humbled Hunter trudged out into the open.

Eyes gone wide, and fur puffed out, Nell squawked at the sight of her boyfriend being paraded around. Taras, just as dumbfounded, gestured at the batcat beside him in confusion.

Jet seethed with embarrassment. Lifting his helmeted head his heart caught in his throat at the sight of countless eyes upon him. It was one thing to be in Nell and Taras' presence. Much less Alma! Barely reaching past their knees, or ankles, was always daunting but at least it was in a one on one setting! Now though?

The Hunter forced down a panicked swallow as his eyes bulged out of his head and sweat

poured down his back. Suffering Sapphire this was... this was nigh on every Trainer in the whole of Astera. With more giants and giantesses than he could count surrounding him, regarding him with curious if not dismissive glances, he'd never felt so small and insignificant in all his life.

The Nightshade Paolumu curiously squinted in earnest at the human hauled out before her. Wait a minute. That was one of Omar's whelps. The one from before even! What was he doing here?! But... better yet...

"Who among my Trainers..." Nyx pensively growled. Surely, surely, there was some way to tie him back to the guilty parties in the crowd.

"Ahem!" Silas spoke.

With a yelp, his nerves buckling in on themselves, Jet felt himself tugged beside the Silk Seer.

"A-a-ah! B-b-brother!" Shaking like a leaf, Nikita bunched her cloven feet together and leaned back as far as she was able from the barely shin-high human. "You didn't mention there would be a h-h-human..."

"He was a bit of a late addition," whispered Silas. "But I think he'll make the presentation all the more convincing! And cute!"

"That's... that's... that's wehhhhhhh one word for it..." the Shrouded Nerscylla whined.

As a blue blush streaked across his cheeks the Silk Seer excitedly gestured to Jet. "Just look at that armor of his! That play pretend carapace! Isn't it just the most adorable little threat display you've ever seen?" the spider practically squealed.

Teeth rattling out of his skull, and senses dulling, Jet valiantly fought back the temptation to dissociate as his eyes wandered over the crowd. Juneau the Great Jagras, reclined all the way back in her sloping seat, snorted and twiddled her fingers at him. An Ebony Odogaron, her black scales blending in with the shade, eagerly elbowed a comparatively tiny red scaled canine beside her. Perking to attention, and aroo roo rooing gently, Orissa furiously waved at the Hunter.

Jet sheepishly waved back as the understated support and encouragement soothed his spirits. A-a-anyone and everyone really was here. All of the fabled, if not outright esteemed, Rookie and Advanced and Master Rank Trainers he'd never had a shot at working under were in attendance! Slowly regaining his composure, and utterly drowning out whatever it was the Silk Seer was waxing on about at length, he straightened his posture and bothered to put names to faces. Holy hells, there was the Yvette the Yian-Garuga! And Palsha the Pink Rathian!

Tugging at the gorget wrapped around his neck, the Hunter swallowed down a nervous laugh when THE Lorelei shot him a smile. Be still his beating heart. Eyes darting to and fro, his mind managing to function as he focused on a monster at a time rather than the multitude, he eventually locked gazes with a gob smacked Nell and Taras. It... it did his heart good to see the big, and admittedly beloved, Rookie and Master Trainers who marked the beginning and end of his journey in attendance. Head swiveling about, curious to see who else he might recognize, Jet-

HURK

Practically dying of boredom but a moment earlier a certain Pukei-Pukei's frown instantly turned upside down upon catching his gaze.

Beads of cold sweat collected upon Jet's brow. Oh no. Oh no no no no no. Not her. Anyone but her.

"Hey there, Short Stuff," she pointedly mouthed out to him with a malice filled smile. The feathered chameleon's yellow eyes, gone wide with surprise, burrowed into Jet with unmistakable ill intent as she flashed him a manic grin literally dripping with poison.

GULP

Jet's nerves nigh instantly shattered apart again as he struggled to look away from his beloathed Advanced Rank Trainer.

"Lady Nyx! Sister!" Dipping low, and cupping a claw around Jet's back, the Silk Seer gingerly guided him closer. "Won't you join me in giving-"

"WEH!" shrieked Nikita.

FWAM

Heads tilted back, everyone in attendance watched as the Shrouded Nerscylla hurtled up into the air and crashed herself clean through the canopy. Bunches of branches and leaves tumbled and slammed into the ground in her wake.

"Uhh..." The Silk Seer's sextet of sapphire eyes blink blinked and swished side to side as he shielded and sheltered the thoroughly confused Hunter from the debris. "L-l-lady Nyx! Please aid me in welcoming-"

"HIIIII JETTTTT!" bellowed the Pukei-Pukei. Hands clasped around her maw, she kicked her feet and giggled manically while she watched the Hunter wilt.

"...Hey Puck," Jet limply replied.

Taras and Nell, while harsh and demanding with their rigors, always meant well and always encouraged him every step of the way. No matter how much his Rookie and ongoing Master Rank trials frustrated him he always knew they pushed him so hard because they cared about him. Because they didn't want him to come to harm.

Puck though? His Advanced Rank Trainer pushed him well beyond his breaking point explicitly because she DID.

The Pukei-Pukei narrowed her gaze as her striped orange and green tail flit behind her. "And here I was thinking this wouldn't be worth my while..." she contentedly cooed to herself.

"Ah ah ah! I understand you're eager but the audience participation portion will begin shortly," the Silk Seer ahemed.

Head cocked to the side, Nyx curiously side-eyed the Hunter she recognized from the morning prior. “Jet, was it?” she growled.

“Indeed!” the Silk Seer clarified with a happy clack of his mandibles. “If we are going to work closer together it is imperative we better understand one another! While we are all familiar with your own great work I feel it is only fair I share with you how mine intersects with it. Such joy it brings me to parlay with, and permit, those Hunters you have given your blessing to venture into lands beyond our own! And Jet here has, most graciously at that, volunteered his time to aid with explaining as such!”

Indistinct mumbles tumbled out from the Hunter's fluted visor as he tugged down his helmet as far as it would go.

“It should segue smoothly enough into my own portion to present,” Nyx chuckled. Her eyes flit across the crowd as she delighted in drinking in a select trio of Trainer's expressions. Nell and Taras' outright shock... and Puck's demented glee. That was more than enough for her to work with. “I yield the floor, Silk Seer.”

Spear like arms splayed apart, Silas commanded the canopy to part while he and Jet both were bathed in sunlight. “As Silk Seer my work is entirely dependent on your own, esteemed Trainers! Those Hunters, those humans, that meet your metrics I am duly compelled to permit passage into the realms beyond! And corral those who do not,” he elaborated as he not so subtly side eyed Jet.

Rubbing at the back of his neck, Jet awkwardly whistled while the towering spider continued to monologue at length.

“You...” Taras whispered as he worriedly nudged Nell. “You don't think Jet tried to-”

“Why would he?” Nell dejectedly shot back. “He'd never leave us behind! You know that!” She knew, she just knew, that damnable Slayer was behind this SOMEHOW.

Spindly limbs bunched together, and brows arched, the Silk Seer giddily clacked his mandibles. “Speaking of! Let us illustrate an example of such!” Circling the pointed tips of his limbs about one another he spun a wicked weave of threads along the forest floor. Trip wires, coated with dew splashing up from the trampled mosses, twinkled in the sunlight and demarcated a do not pass zone between himself and Jet. Turning to the Hunter he motioned for him to approach.

“Let us say we have a Hunter, perhaps too clever by half, thinking they can sneak out of the Ancient Forest's embrace without the needed say-so of you Trainers!”

At the Silk Seer's unspoken cue Jet groaned and proceeded to tip toe forward. Step by shaky step he deftly navigated the labyrinth of traps laid out for him.

The Silk Seer's eyes pulled flat. “...Hunter.”

“I'm sneaking aren't I?!” Jet responded in exasperation.

“Well quit doing such a good job of it!” hissed the Nerscylla.

Disarming, if not genuine, chuckles rose from the crowd and even Nyx herself. As the Trainer's waning interest flared to life Nell and Taras both quietly advanced through the crowd and drew closer to the stage.

With a roll of his eyes the Nerscylla held an upturned limb towards Jet and sank a spurt of webbing directly into his chest plate. Yoinking him forward, the Hunter acked when every trap and tripwire snapped apart against his shins. Good natured snorts sounded out at the perceived to be playful back and forth between the actors.

Clearing his throat the Silk Seer menacingly glared at Jet. "Good Hunter! What a pleasure it is to make your acquaintanceship!" Curved limbs held out alongside the human he expectantly shook them side to side. "If you'd be so kind as to present your pendants, please."

"Uhhh. W-w-well. You see-" Jet mumbled as he found himself thrust into the spotlight.

"All of them," the Silk Seer firmly but gently insisted as he sneakily slid the stolen pendants back into Jet's grasp.

Jet trembled as the spider's enormous eyes, each and every one nearly as big as he was, hung heavily upon him. With great trepidation he reached inside his armor and produced the Rookie and Advanced Rank pendants wrapped around his neck. Limbs trembling he hung them upon the edge of the spider's outstretched limb.

"Blue to blue. Red to red." With a click of his tongue, the Silk Seer quizzically regarded Jet. "Good Hunter. Where is the proof of your Master Rank?"

"YEAH JET. WHERE IS IT?" Puck heckled.

Folds of fur scrunched along her snout, and beaked lips peeled back, the crimson mask stretching from Nell's eyes to her ears positively glowered. WHO DARED-

"Nell!" Taras frantically whispered as the Nargacuga wildly veered off course and, rather than skulking through the crowd unnoticed, broke a beeline straight for the Pukei-Pukei harassing her human. Her unfocused anxiety now had a target. "Nell no!"

"A valid question indeed!" the Silk Seer concurred. "You know full well I cannot let you pass into the wilds beyond without it. I understand the temptation to slip free of Ancient Forest's embrace is an alluring one! While some of you Hunters chafe and consider yourselves trapped here..."

Jet's shoulders relaxed as the Silk Seer's gaze softened along with his tone.

"There are settlements beyond here, ever under threat, where the humans that inhabit them think much the same. And would gladly trade places with you in an instant." Limb held out before him he dangled a spear like limb alongside Jet's head and jingled his pendants gently.

"I..."

"Curiosity kills, good Hunter. And while I could, I should, relieve you of these..." The Silk Seer

tilted his spindly spear to the side just enough for the star shaped pendant to harmlessly fall into Jet's grasp. "I recognize that... it is important we give you the opportunity to learn from your mistakes. I know you meant no ill will."

Fingers curling tight around the pendants, Jet clasped them to his chest in emphatic relief. Steadying his breathing he wrapped them around his neck once more and gratefully nodded to the spider.

"Have you anything to say for yourself, good Hunter?" hummed the Silk Seer. "Having seen the error of your ways?"

"Uhhhh." Eyes swishing back and forth Jet panicked and froze on the spot as all eyes were on him. What lines the Silk Seer had fed to him prior simply dripped out of his ears. "N-no?"

"...What do you mean no?" the Nerscylla grumped. His ire only raised all the higher as the crowd bought into what they presumed to be a bit. Spear like limbs flailing at his sides he stood on his tippy toes and irritably gestured to the Hunter. "Woe am I for questioning you so! Forgive me my trespass oh sagely Silk Seer! Anything, anything at all, along those lines?"

The nerves and anxiety caught up to Jet as what few lines he had been coached on were erased in an instant. "Hunters don't talk like that!"

"Well they do in my script!" hissed the Silk Seer.

"Well they don't in mine!"

Mandibles drooping, and eyes furrowed, the Nerscylla's arms hung limply at his sides. "...Gimme those pendants back you ungrateful little so and so!"

"AHH! NO!" Rolling side to side, Jet frantically flailed about as he dodged shots of silk to continued bouts of laughter.

Grumbling to himself, Silas eventually got the bead on the unhelpful Hunter. Reeling in Jet, and strapping him to his chest once more for good measure, he grumpily harrumphed. "Lady Nyx. Trainers." Malding to himself the spider glared down at Jet for ruining his time in the limelight. "I do believe you catch the gist of-"

"Hey now!" barked Orissa. Clawed hands cupped to her cheeks her spiny tail excitedly swished behind her. "What's it look like when they do have all their pendants?"

Nyx nodded along in agreement. She did so relish seeing one of Omar's whelps put in their place. "I must say, Silk Seer, I'm quite invested now! Surely you won't leave us hanging in anticipation?"

Blink blinking to himself the Nerscylla looked out to the crowd who, by now, had given Jet and himself their full attention. They... liked this? W-w-well then! Who was he to deny them what they wanted? "V-v-very well!" he whistled.

Dragging a pointed limb along Jet's chest he surgically sliced him free from his cocoon before

lowering him to the forest floor. "Let us say we have a Hunter who, with the blessing of his terrific Trainers," he said before gesturing to the audience, "confidently strides out into lands unknown! Knowing full well he has what it takes to not just survive but thrive!"

"Pshhhhh," rasped the Pukei-Pukei. "Who? Jet?"

"None other!" hummed the Silk Seer as he, unintentionally at that, rose to the Hunter's defense.

Clapping his spindly limbs together the Silk Seer excitedly eeheeed at the energy and enthusiasm of the crowd. Turning to Jet once more he repeated his practiced lines once more. "Good Hunter! What a pleasure it is to make your acquaintanceship!" he said with an exaggerated bow. Curved limbs held out alongside the human he expectantly shook them side to side. "If you'd be so kind as to present your pendants, please."

"...Do I have to?" Jet mumbled. "We just went through-"

"YES." With a roll of his eyes the spider hooked a limb under each of Jet's arms and tried shaking them free. "We'll just /imagine/ that you have a Master Rank pendant to present!"

"HAH!" guffawed Puck.

The Nerscylla's throat locked up at seeing Jet starting to wither away within his grasp. It was just an act he hadn't meant to. To. Unf. Hrm. If... if the Hunter was willing to veer off script then so could he. "We'll treat it like a trial run," Silas confidently whistled. "So that way our good Hunter knows exactly what to do when he has the proof of his Master Rank." Setting Jet back down on his feet the Silk Seer went about weaving a star for the Hunter to present. Planting it into his palms he gingerly nudged at the human's armored shoulders. "Which I'm certain will be all too soon."

Clasping the silken star to his chest, Jet forced a smile before handing it and his remaining pendants back.

Mandibles parting, Silas smiled back with as much warmth as he could manage. "Blue to blue. Red to red. And gold to gold. Why... good Hunter!" Said the Silk Seer as he delicately slid each and every pendant back over Jet's head. "I am all too happy to recognize your marks of mastery!"

"Puhlease!" the Pukei-Pukei cackled. "We all know the closest he'll ever get to leaving this place is by playing pretend with you."

Swallowing his pride, Jet bit his tongue as he turned to face Puck. The color drained from his face when he did so. "Uhhhhhhh."

"What?" Puck snarked.

"Oh my," Silas nervously hissed as he protectively cupped Jet within his grasp.

Low growls, and the grating of teeth, answered the Bird Wyvern proper. As she curiously looked past her shoulder. Nell's ghastly visage, her yellow eyes aglow and crimsons strands of fur positively smoldering, glowered at her.

“YOU DON'T TALK ABOUT HIM THAT WAY!” the Nargacuga howled before tearing into Puck with a bloodthirsty snarl.

“Woahohoho now! Turf Warrrrrr!” the Ebony Odogaron excitedly bellowed as the Nargacuga and Pukei-Pukei tumbled through the stands. Blood and fur and feathers sprayed up around them in clouds of violence as the enormous Wyverns mauled one another.

Fat and happy on food, and the unexpected entertainment, the remaining Trainers cheered and goaded on the two women. Shamelessly, though just as likely out of habit, the sunlight spotlight followed the both of them.

Arms held out to her sides Nyx tried to placate the crowd and wrangle her unruly underlings. “Trainers-”

BLEGH

Howling in anger, Nell stumbled back from Puck's bruised and bloodied form after the Pukei-Pukei spat a purple glob of poison directly into her face. Seeping into her fur, and burning her eyes, the Nargacuga squawked helplessly when the infuriated Pukei-Pukei latched her prehensile tongue around her neck. Furiously flapping her wings, and lifting into the air, Puck proceeded to try and drag the batcat around the arena.

“I’LL TALK ABOUT YOUR FAVORITE LITTLE FUCKUP HOWEVER I PLEASE!” Puck screamed back as she strangled the Nargacuga.

“Trainers, please, I understand that-” Nyx squeaked.

Blinded, and wheezing for air, Nell impotently kicked her legs as her scaled heels scraped along the forest floor. Teeth grit, and barbed tail lashing angrily behind her, she throttled the Pukei-Pukei's thick and slimy tongue within her grasp. Biceps bulging explosively, she pulled down on Puck with everything she had.

“Trainers-”

Tears streaming out the sides of her spherical peepers Puck wildly flailed about as she tried to relax her tongue's grip too late. Eyes bulging out, the feathered chameleon cratered towards the trampled earth.

FWACK

Where she crashed down into a billowing plume of dirt. Shouts and guffaws echoed around the clearing when Puck slammed into the ground and released her stranglehold.

Frantically trying to clean her face, and gulping down air, Nell blindly stumbled about while Puck blearily staggered back to her feet. Both women were desperate to regain their bearings to reclaim the advantage. As they ambled into one another-

“ENOUGH THE BOTH OF YOU,” Nyx roared as she rose into the air with a twirl. Inflating

her lungs to near bursting, her form becoming practically circular in shape, a heavy and heady violet mist trickled past her teeth. With a screech she emptied her lungs and forced out a mist coated bullet of air. Not only were Nell and Puck both blasted aside by the displaced air, ragdolling across the forest floor in the process, both of them fell unconscious on the spot. Neither of them stirred so much as an inch as the Nightshade Paolumu's sedative screech ended the fight in an instant.

Sheepishly did the Silk Seer clear his throat and bring the spotlight back to focus on Nyx as she stared daggers at him. Tch. Of course her most problematic underlings would be all but inseparable from Omar's favorite whelp. "...As you were, Silk Seer," the Nightshade sighed as, with a swish of her hand, she motioned for the spotlight to return to him.

"B-b-but of course, Trainer of Trainers!" Jet still held firmly in hand, the shellshocked Hunter unsure how to respond to his girlfriend lying prone before him after bludgeoning his bully black and blue, the Nerseylla gently and then not so gently tried to shake him free from his stupor. "I. Ehrm. Well. I must confess it's hard to follow up on uhh... that..." whistled the Silk Seer. Swinging the sunlight back to Nyx he set Jet down beside him and winced when he caught the Nightshade Paolumu glaring at the Hunter.

Blepping and hissing in a panick, too scared to reveal himself were he to rush to Nell's aid, Taras whined as he cupped his hands around his snakey snout. Fur standing on end he nevertheless crept closer and closer to the side of the stage where Jet lay.

Arms crossed about her chest, Nyx furrowed her brows and looked out to her Trainers as narcotic mists trailed out from between her clenched teeth. Her oily black fur positively sparkled as it trailed past her chest and neck. "As I was saying earlier. Now more than ever we must take our responsibilities seriously. Never has it been as dangerous as it is now for Hunters venturing beyond the safety of our sanctum." The Nightshade Paolumu's eyes drifted towards Nell's unconscious form and her curious attire.

"And I know full well how recklessly and irresponsibly many of you carry yourselves," the bat tersely stated as her eyes wandered over the audience. "That cannot stand. Not anymore."

Hanging low to the ground, and slithering up alongside Jet, Taras lisped at him as softly as he could manage. "Jet. Jetttt!"

The Hunter's spirits soared at the sight of snake squirrel. "Taras?!" Never had he ever been so relieved to see the nerdy noodle.

Taras hissed in relief. "Jet! What are you even doing here?" the squirrel snake nervously wiggled. "Are you okay?"

Looking back and forth to the Silk Seer, and Nell, Jet defeatedly shrugged his shoulders. "It's. It's a lot to explain." Head held low he could just about kiss his Rookie Trainer's dopey snake snout. "And no."

Reaching forward, his thick blue scaled fingers tenderly sliding under Jet's arms and protectively coiling around him, Taras tucked his best friend close to his bosom. "...Let'sss change that then," Taras decisively stated. "We can't... we can't do much for Nell right now. But we can for you!"

“Taras wait! No! No no no no no!” Jet pleaded with him. Shifting in place he motioned to the stray strands of silk matted to his chest plate. Subtly did they vibrate with his every movement before-

Slinking away with Hunter in tow Taras, and likewise the Silk Seer, startled when they snapped towards each other. Silken leash tethered to Jet holding tight the Tobi-Kadachi looked on wide eyed at the just as surprised spider.

“...Hoo boy,” Jet gulped. Lips pulled flat, hands slapping nervously against the side of Taras' fingers, the Hunter defeatedly sighed as he turned to the spider. “I. Ungh. Yeah I got nothing.” He weakly gestured to the Tobi-Kadachi. “Taras, Silk Seer.” Sharply inhaling through his clenched teeth he then motioned to the Nerscylla. “Silk Seer, Taras.”

Forearms pinched tight around Jet, Taras tried to tug him free as the flustered spider scraped forward along the forest floor. Digging his carapace covered heels into the stone and silt he stood his ground and tried to reel Jet back in. Taras and the Hunter both meeped when they found themselves tugged towards him. Tail sparking, and thorax angrily vibrating, the Wyvern and Temnoceran soon found themselves in a tug-of-war as Nyx continued to rumble and ramble.

“Furthermore...” Nyx contined to elaborate. “Some select few of you are becoming far too comfortable around Astera. Treating their borders and boundaries as temptations to be trespassed. Flaunting their rules and, more importantly, MY OWN.”

Sharp inhales sounded out from a fair few Trainers as they nervously tugged at the undersized and ill fitting clothing and rags that pulled taut across their massive frames.

“Monsters are not to enter Astera and humans are not to leave the Ancient Forest,” the Paolumu said with an irritable twitch of her rounded ears. Eyes resting heavily upon Nell her gaze curiously swiveled about looking for Taras.

KRSHHHHHHHH

Who promptly rolled onto the stage behind her with the Silk Seer tumbling beside them. Propping himself up with a grunt, scowling at the Tobi-Kadachi as a hiss slipped past his mandibles, Silas curiously grunted while he took in Taras's sparking form. Wait. That clothing. Those weapons. That was just like...

The Slayer! Silas' brows furrowed as he looked to the haggard Hunter draped over his limbs. The Slayer. This Taras. That... that Nargacuga too even! This Hunter... was he the connective tissue between all of them?

Stomping forward, a purple scaled foot slamming down before Jet with seismic force, Nyx turned back to the audience and addressed them. “Whilst we have our own concerns with our own supplies we cannot solve it by unduly taxing humans of what meager amounts they possess in turn. Silk Seer, Jet the Hunter, I do believe that will be all for now-” she menacingly boomed as she not so subtly reached for the human.

She may have promised Omar she would not punish her own impudent whelps. But he never said she couldn't take his own to task...

"HURK." To Jet's surprise... the Nerscylla's lanky and lithe form scrambled to a stand as the spider protectively stood sentry.

"H-h-hold, Trainer of Trainers!" pleaded the Silk Seer. His sapphire eyes went wide as the spider managed to put two and two together. "While your Trainers ought to know better, tis true, it has come to my attention that the Hunters have been... shall we say proactive when it comes to confronting our crisis." Silas gently squeezed at Jet to prod him to attention. "Why it has come to my attention as of late that our very own Slayer has come into possession of Hunter weapons! Crafted to her scale no less!"

Disbelieving murmurs and whispers rolled across the crowd in waves.

"With mine own eyes have I seen her wield them to devastating, if not surgical, effects! Slaying Ferals where they stand with little damage done to the surrounding forests to show for it! Perhaps our... esteemed guest ought to be allowed to speak more to such?"

"Silas!" hissed the Paolumu.

"Well. I mean," Jet dumbly uhhed as the Silk Seer continued to prod him along. How did he even know about that? N-n-nevermind! "Helping Alma means we help ourselves. Right? I just, we just, thought that helping her do her job better would keep us all safer."

Thoughtful hums bubbled along the crowd.

Nyx grimaced as she lost control of the narrative. Lunging towards the Nerscylla she squeaked as he lurched himself about the stage via his strings. The silken threads tugged him and Jet about like an unmanned wire crew.

"And I see you've extended such selfsame help to some Trainers in the crowd. No?" Silas elaborated as he gestured to Taras and Nell with his many free limbs.

Jet grit his teeth. Could he really wriggle his way out of this mess by making an even bigger one? ...Time to find out. "Well. Uhh. T-t-that was more of a trade! In exchange for Nell and Taras I-I-I mean. Erm. In exchange for those esteemed Trainers aid, helping us better till and tend and cultivate the food you love, we've been treating them to Astera's fineries! Clothed them. Fed them-"

Juneau the Great Jagras, a towering mountain of a woman, perked to attention. "Fed them?" she asked.

"Yeah!" Taras excitedly clarified as he stumbled to his feet and followed Jet's lead. "It'sss great! The Felynesss there sssing and do little dancesss for you when they ssserve you! Or s-s-ssso I've heard," he bleeped.

"WHAT?!" Nyx howled. "Omar told me that-"

Gnarled hands held out before her the Great Jagras shook her head full of scaly locks. "Wait wait wait wait wait. You mean the Canteen? They treated you to THE Canteen?"

"Uh. Yes?" Jet worriedly clarified. "I... I cook for them sometimes even-"

Eyes twinkling, Taras couldn't help but run his mouth. "Ssscallop chipsss for daysss! Gassstronome Tunasss! Streams of sssaucesss the likesss of which you've never imagined!"

The Tobi-Kadachi, along with the rest of the audience, started drooling as he listed out the meals that awaited them.

"Trainers! Please!" Nyx implored of them in between lunging at Jet and the Silk Seer both.

"How come my Hunter doesn't treat me like that?" whined a Yian-Garuga. "I want in on some of that!"

"Can't say I'd be opposed to dressin' up like 'em," the Ebony Odogaron sheepishly mused as she scratched at a scaly cheek and jealously regarded the slinky Tobi-Kadachi. Slinging an arm around her runt sized cousin Orissa, a much more diminutive Odogaron, she took to noogying them as they vibrated apart at the seams. Salivating with excitement as she gnashed her teeth, Orissa nearly passed out at the thought of scampering about Astera. "Whatever it is yer wearing, Rookie, looks comfy."

"That'sss becausss it issssss!" beamed Taras.

"I WANT ONE!" howled and arooooooed the fun-sized Odogaron trying to wiggle free from her colossal cousin's vice grip.

"What about the Felines?" eeheeheed a bodacious Bazelgeuse as she cupped her hands to her face with a giggle. "Tell us more about them! They're so cute!"

"They take a pet like no problem!" hissed Taras. "They're sssso ssssoft! Sssso fuzzzy!"

"A-a-alright that's enough," Nyx pleaded. "This wasn't meant to be an open for-"

"And jussst wait until you sssee all the different kindsss of human nsssstsss! We rode on one that floated!"

"Get outttttt!" jeered Baldesion the Brachydios as he nevertheless leaned forward to listen all the more intently.

"It'sss true!" Taras implored. "We even fssshed from it! They cooked them for usss afterwardsss even!"

Stepping back from the crowd, and slinking into the shadows, the Silk Seer gently clasped Jet against his chest as his pointed limbs pinched against him. "...He really knows how to work a crowd," the Nerscylla tacitly acknowledged.

"It helps that he's speaking from experience," Jet marveled. Arms dangling over the Nerscylla's own he worriedly looked out to Nell still coated in poison and grunting painfully in her sleep. "...Speaking of help. Why did you help me? Nyx was about to end things right then and there until you stepped in."

The Nerscylla's expression softened as he lowered Jet to the ground and severed the silken

tether tied to him like a leash. "...It's a educated guess but you were with the Slayer because you were the one who armed her. Weren't you?"

"...Yeah. But that's not the only reason!"

"It's reason enough," Silas smirked. "I can... understand why she would want to associate with you. Escort you." Rubbing the back of his hooded head, the flayed skin comprising it ruffling in place, the Nerscylla scraped his limbs together. "Mine apologies, good Hunter. It is self-evident to me now that the Slayer was merely trying to return one kindness with another. I should not have threatened you so. Even though I still have my misgivings about her choosing to carry you so close to the borders of our lands."

"It's... it's fine," Jet shrugged. "You were just doing your job." With the apology in tow, and the opportunity he had afforded him saving not just his own hide but Nell and Taras' too, he supposed they were close enough to even.

"Oh please! As if I'd ever let you come to harm," sassed the spider. "Even if it were at the Trainer of Trainers hands. Especially so, even! ...Given the Slayer would tear me limb from limb otherwise if I failed to do so," he grimly noted.

Teeth clenched, Jet uneasily tossed his head side to side. Even he was surprised at how protective Alma had become.

"That said!" tutted the Silk Seer. "While I am willing to overlook your well-meaning trespass in light of your aid and assistance to the Slayer," Silas' sextet of eyes pulled flat as did his tone. "That was NOT what was in the script. None of this was!"

"Aww c'mon! They loved the improv!" Jet nervously laughed as he looked stage left and right for an exit.

"No matter how well received it was..." mumbled the Silk Seer with a blue blush. "That doesn't change the fact of the matter. Seeing as how I'm in a magnanimous mood though..." he chuckled as he dipped low and peered at the Hunter. "I would be willing to overlook this transgression in exchange for another favor."

Peering past the Silk Seer at Nell's prone form, Jet sighed as he mulled over the terms of a deal. "...What kind?" Jet worriedly mumbled as those mandibles parted to reveal a jagged smile.

"Mroaw mow!"

"Seriously? None of you have?" Brook asked.

The Felynes manning the Canteen all shook their head. No one had seen hide or hair of Jet all afternoon.

Biting down on her lower lip, the Huntress wearily groaned. “It's not like him to skip his shifts...” she worried aloud. Today was his final day of training with Alma, twas true, but he should have made it home hours ago.

“Mrow meow,” the Meowster Chef commanded of her. Swatting at her apron, the burly Felyne all but ripped it free from her waist.

“I... no. You're right.” She couldn't deny it. The Huntress would've spent all shift worrying about her partner in crime otherwise. “I purromise I'll be right back, Boss,” Brook sighed in relief. “With Jet in tow!”

“Mreow mjau!” the Felynes cheered.

Relieving herself of her uniform, tossing the balled apron onto the stone counter, Brook grabbed her Charge Blade and vaulted out of the open air kitchens. Jogging down Astera's steep and sandy slopes, the setting sun all but blinding her, she raced towards the front gates.

CREAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAK

Only to stop dead in her tracks. Of their own volition did the massive slabs of strung together pikes swing outwards. As they creaked open a familiar face greeted her.

“Jet!” Brook exclaimed in relief.

“Hey Brook,” the Hunter tiredly greeted her.

“Hi Brook!” a familiar voice happily hissed from on high.

“Taras too!” the Huntress giggled as the doors parted just enough to reveal the towering Tobi. Rushing forth she stepped atop her boyfriend's cloven feet and buried her face into his shins.

“Hello, good Huntress!” whistled the Silk Seer's silky smooth voice. Waving down at her excitedly it was such a pleasant surprise to see one of the rarefied few Master Rank Hunters to have earned her exit and his blessing. “I do so hope you've been well!”

“Hwuh. Silas?” Brook sputtered back.

Flanking Jet alongside Taras, Nell slung over his back and her legs straddling both sides of his spike lined thorax, the Temnoceran quietly beamed at her.

“Brook,” Nyx flatly grunted from the rear.

“...Jet? Taras?” the Huntress stammered when she bothered to look beyond her boyfriend at the graying bat glaring down at her.

“It's. Well. You see,” Jet grimaced as he tried to explain himself.

“Greeeeeeetings!” boomed Silas as he twirled about on his heels and the enormous spider introduced himself with a theatrical flair. “Cultural Ambassador Silk Seer...” Mandibles hanging limply

from the sides of his head the Nerscylla blehed. “Eugh. That really is a mouthful, isn't it?”

“I told you,” Jet shot back with a roll of his eyes.

With a exaggerated clear of his throat the spider introduced himself once more with a wave of his free arms. “Cultural Ambassdaor Silas reporting for duty!”

Light Bowgun drawn, the Commander regarded the commotion with a scowl. “Jettttttt,” deadpanned the wizened Hunter. Anything but enthused with the new face standing before Astera's dilapidated gates the old man thought he had been clear that the concept of Cultural Ambassador was not something to offered at their leisure.

“Omar,” the Nightshade Paolumu sternly stated as she forced her way to front of the pack.

Retaining his stone faced expression, the Commander wordlessly clasped at the gate doors cracked ajar at his sides as sweat began to bead along his brow.

“Guided tours were they, Omar?” asked the balloon bat. Eyes twitching with barely concealed rage her lips oh slowly peeled back into a snarl.

The Commander but wordlessly stepped back behind the cracking great gates and-

WHAM

Gates slammed shut in front of her, the Nightshade Paolumu quietly seethed as a high pitched squeak emanated from her inflating neck sac.

“OMAR!” screamed the Paolumu. Blasting aside the gate into splinters with a sonic screech she lumbered into Astera. Stomping in place, she malded and how at the sight of the old Hunter already booking it down the shoreline. “WHERE ARE MY CUTE CLOTHES, OMAR? WHERE'S MY DINNER DATE?!”

“WOMAN! IT'S MY VILLAGE! I HAVE MY OWN AGENCY AND MY OWN SAY ON THE MATTER!”

“WELL AT THE END OF THE DAY YOU'RE STILL MY HUNTER! MYYYYYY HUMAN!”

“IT'S BEEN HOW MANY YEARS NOW SINCE YOU LAST TRAINED ME?!”

Hair frazzled, and swatting away the clouds of sawdust blowing past her, Brook could but blink at the party gathered before her.

“I'll. I'll explain,” Jet coughed as he moseyed through the blown apart gates and slapped at Brook's shoulders. “First things first though...” Forcing a strained smile he gestured towards his battered and bruised girlfriend. “Could you help me out with something?”

“I...” Eyes gone wide, Brook's confused expression turned dour at the massive open wounds and poisons that matted Nell's fuzzy frame. “Sure thing, Jet.”

“C'mon, Silas. You too. After you drop off Nell, Taras'll... Taras will show you around,” he grumbled as he waved for the Nerscylla to follow.

“...”

“...?”

“...!”

The roar of far away waves, intermixed with indecipherable whispers, stirred the Nargacuga from her slumber.

“Unghhhhh...”

Hand cupped to the side of her head, Puck's poison having seeped into and stained her fur purple, Nell nauseously groaned as the din of conversation sent her stomach spinning.

Ears drooped, and shoulders sagging, the Nargacuga dragged a forearm across her beak and shook away the sick that came to mat it. An unfamiliar hovel greeted her as sloping planks of wood filled Nell's vision.

“Both of you. Stop it!” Jet's disgusted voice wafted from nearby.

“Jet?” she painfully rumbled as she could feel her throat cracking.

“It's quite clearly a comb!” The Silk Seer's soft and soothing voice whistled through the planks comprising the boxy enclosure Nell found herself in.

“Noooooooooooooooooooo,” Taras sassed back. Arms crossed about his chest, and tamping his cloven and scaly foot, the Tobi-Kadachi wildly gesticulated towards Jet's home. “It'sss a nessesst!”

With a roll of his many eyes, Silas' soft and chitin clad greaves gently thumped against the board walk as he bumbled right up alongside Jet's abode. Chitin covered arms held out to his sides he exaggeratedly gestured to the four walls and two slabs of wood serving as the sides and roof of the Hunter's home. “Look! Six sides!” Silas sternly stated as he tapped at the construct soaking up the light of the waxing moon. “It's. A. Comb! That said...” The Nerscylla clacked his mandibles together in thoughtful contemplation. “It is the ugliest damn comb I've ever seen.”

“HEY!”

“Oh don't be like that,” Silas playfully pshed. “Ugly it may be it's endearing all the same!” Arms resting against the sides of his pointed thorax he arched his brows at Jet and playfully nudged his armored shin against him. “It's cute!”

“It is not cute,” Jet mumble grumbled. “And it's not a comb!”

Hand held up before him, and forked tongue bleeped, Taras hrmed. “No. No no no he hasss a point,” the Tobi-Kadachi hummed.

“TARAS.”

Blinking her bloodshot eyes out of sync, crusted flakes of sleep agitating against her tear ducts, Nell tiredly thumbed them away. Rolling her head to the side she curiously chirped at the matted and kneaded down bundle of cloth and feathers brushing against her cheeks and the back of her neck. “...Where?” the Nargacuga tiredly grunted.

Nell coughed as her tongue, caked and coated with an unfamiliar and noxious film, peeled free from the roof of her beaked mouth. Forcing her eyes open, the Nargacuga's eyes dilating in the low light, the Wyvern's fur bristled to attention as she properly took in her surroundings and reclaimed her cognizance. Blinking nervously, she curiously gawked at the bruises and aches that plagued her still. Slathered goop, green and crusty and intermingled with her freshly formed scabs, pocked her forearms and shoulders. Slurping her bone dry beak she winced when the bitter but welcome taste of flakes of dried Antidote prickled at her taste buds.

“Come now, Hunter,” the Nerscylla teased. “I think I'd recognize a hive when I see one.” Silas haughtily clarified before he motioned towards bunched together homes strung along the board walks, angling up alongside the shoreline, and carved into Astera's mountainous slopes. “Just look! Your combs interlock even!”

“That's not... You're not...” Hand cupped against the side of his helmwr, Jet's head spun as he felt himself being gaslit in real time.

“Hive? The human hive? Why would...” Nell tiredly thought to herself as she pinched at her forehead with her scaly fingers. Wait. Taking in the environment around her she spied blood soaked rags, caked black with dried blood, sprawled out beside her. Barrels of Potion, and Antidote, with their tops cracked open let their contents waft through the cramped if not comforting hovel. Delightfully diminutive pieces of clothing, suspiciously human sized, hung from the walls of wood that enclosed her.

Ears perking to attention, and face burning beet red, Nell's heart pounded in her ears. This was a nest. A human nest.

Strange rectangular constructs, some squat and some tall, lined with metal knobs and knockers, lined the walls. Propping herself up on an elbow, something crunching flat beneath her forearm in the process, Nell tossed a look back over her shoulder at a suspiciously human sized bundle of bedding that had served as her pillow. Then there was-

Oh. Oh my.

Steam wafted out of her ears when she spied a Hammer, its stone head scraped with familiar scars and its handle lined with cracking paint, propped up against a wall.

This was. She was.

"I'm the one who lives here!" Jet exasperatedly shouted. "And you promised to behave yourselves!"

"I'll have you know I've been nothing but a gracious guest," Silas huffed back with feigned indignance.

"You already cocooned how many Felynes?!" snipped back the Hunter.

"Well how else am I supposed to pet them?!" the Nerscylla whined back. "They keep running!"

"Nuoh my-" Hands cupped to his face, a muffled scream filtered through Jet's fingers.

Shifting in place, her biceps and elbows bowing out the walls and crunching apart what flimsy furniture lined them, Nell continued to shift in place. Scaled feet pressed against one wall, and her back grinding into the opposite, she struggled to pull herself up into a sit in her confined quarters. "His nest. Our nest," she giddily whispered to herself with a raging blush. Arms wrapped around her legs the Nargacuga hunched forward and let her chin come to rest atop her knees.

"How did he...? When did he...?" Nell reverently whispered to herself as her cutting yellow eyes darted side to side in her sockets while she sheepishly curled her toes. The muted rustle of palm fronds, and the gentle roar of the waves, was all that filtered in from beyond the walls as she drank in every inch of his home. It was so contained. So constrained. So comforting. So calming.

Eyes drooping shut, and ears flopping flat, the batcat flared her nostrils as she steadied her breathing. It was just like... it was just like the Old World's Epitaph. Totally enclosed. Totally secure.

Head tossed back, hands running through his unkempt hair draping past his shoulders, Jet dejectedly turned to towering Tobi-Kadachi. "Tarasssss! Why didn't you stop him?!"

The Trainer let his forked tongue hang limply from between his lips as he scratched at a scaly cheek. "I meaaaaan. How wasss I sssupposssed to sssay no?" he whined. "They sssstill haven't warmed up to me! How could I turn down an opportunity to pat and pet them?!" Arms crossed about his chest he pouted as Silas eeheeheed at his side and clapped his spindly arms together. "Itsss not fair they let you and Brook hog all the hugs..."

"You can't just go petting people unprompted!" Jet lambasted them.

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Teeth grit, Jet frantically slapped and swatted away at Silas as the Nerscylla tauntingly tap tap tapped at the top of the Hunter's head. "...Clearly we can," the spider whistled with a smirk.

"STOP! THAT!"

"Growlf?" Tilting her head up, the bridge of her snout catching against some rafters, Nell curiously chirped as the whole of the roof creaked in place. Nudging her nose higher and higher she watched on curiously as the top half of the structure lifted up. The blanket of night, along with a salt stained burst of fresh air, promptly poured into Jet's nest.

As Jet felt himself on the verge of tearing out his hair the ominous creaks emanating from his home, punctuated by curious chirps, grounded him. Whirling about in place his eyes lit up at the sight of his loomy lover. “Nell!”

“Good Trainer!” Silas followed up with a wave. Brows half cocked, the Nerscylla chuckled to himself while he watched the Hunter clamber back inside his comb to greet her. “You made quite the scene at my presentation I’ll have you know.”

“I...” The Nargacuga’s fur puffed out as, within her mind’s eye, she recalled throttling Puck’s tongue in one hand and then clobbering her very punchable face with the other. “Did. Didn’t I?” she mumbled with a volatile mixture of shame and pride. Chin tucked against her chest she cupped a hand against Jet’s back as he, with great difficulty, scraped past her thighs and emphatically hugged at her side.

“I already mentioned as such to your Hunter-” Silas elaborated with a wave of his chitin clad wrists.

Nell’s ears, and face, burned hot. Her Hunter. Hers and hers alone.

“And while I would, under any other circumstances, recoil with rage at being so unduly interrupted and upstaged... I dare say thanks to you and your incredible acts of violence things turned out better than I ever dared dream!”

Eyes pressed against the sides of their sockets Nell uhhhhed at length. “You’re... welcome? Just... just say the word and I’ll kick Puck’s ass all over again!”

With a pbbt the towering Temnoceran dismissively swatted at her. “Worry not, good Trainer! That won’t be necessary.”

“Speak for yourself,” Jet mumbled into her tummy as he and Nell both melted away into mush while she stroked a finger along his back.

“Your antics and your Hunter provided an unintentional, if not inspired, segue into how to bring Trainers and Hunters closer together!” Silas proudly clarified.

Her Hunter. Oh never would she ever tire of hearing that. As a bassy purr reverberated in the bat cat’s chest she clasped a hand over her human and kneaded him into her heft.

“Awh...” Taras bashfully hissed as he cupped his hands to his cheeks.

Resisting the urge to squeal alongside Taras, the Silk Seer cleared his throat. “It is your example that your fellow Trainers are now clamoring to follow in the footsteps of! ...Myself included,” Silas bashfully ahemed. “Given we all, in our own ways, work to safeguard humankind can we really be blamed for wanting to learn more about the adorable little things we’re entrusted to stand sentinel over?”

“Silas,” Jet grumbled.

“You are and you know it,” the spider laughed. “And while it might be sacrosanct to say as

such... to the Everstream with Lady Nyx and her policies!” stated the spider. “I know she means well but humans are to be our partners! You should feel no guilt, good Trainer, for doing what is right and treating your Hunter as such!” With a happy hum he bumped at the human expert, Taras, he had come to relish arguing with. “I doubt good Jet would have gone to such lengths to save you, much less your fellow Trainer here, if he did not think otherwise.”

“Save?” Nell asked with a blush.

“At your defense did your Hunter stand resolute against the Trainer of Trainers!” Silas recounted with a flair. “Against what ought to have been his better judgment, he elaborated at length on your unsanctioned endeavors.”

“You... missed a lot,” Taras nervously laughed. “Lady Nyx knowsss uhh... everything.”

The color drained from the Nargacuga's dark furred face in response.

“As does everyone else!” the Nerscylla elaborated. “Ah but where are my manners!” Quietly thumping up to Jet's creaked open abode, his cloven and carapace clad feet barely bowing in the boardwalks, Silas lifted up the roof all the further as his sapphire eyes eagerly imbibed the interior of a human home. “Tis a pleasure to meet you, Trainer Nell. I do so look forward to working alongside you as a Cultural Ambassador!”

“L-l-like...wise?” the bat cat mumbled uncertainly. “...Taras?” she raspily whispered.

“You missed a lot a lot,” the Tobi-Kadachi uneasily hissed. “A lot hasss changed! Will change.”

“And you're at the forefront of it!” the Silk Seer stated. “You both are,” he said before reaching down to nudge at Jet and curiously poke at his wares.

Acking, Jet angrily swatted at the spider interrupting his intimacy. “SILAS.”

“Ahhhhh it's even cuter than I imagined!” the spider said with a stamp of his feet. “To think! You customize your own comb!”

Jet groaned at length. He honestly would rather the spider threaten than fawn over him. “Don't you have a village to tour?”

“So I do! ...With you as my guide,” he haughtily harrumphed. “Though the night grows long and I understand you wish to tend to your Trainer. Worry not! I can provide my own accommodations for the eve,” he said as he swiveled his pointed limbs about and threads of silk came to straddle the gap between them. Lowering the roof back down onto Nell's head, who chirped in confusion, Silas turned to Taras as his now muffled voice carried through the walls. “They confine themselves in combs. Surely, surely, if not Neopterons then they're at least close cousins.”

“No no no no no,” Taras emphatically hissed. “Nell and I have already been over thiss!”

Silas tap tapped at his chin as he idly contented himself with crafted the beginnings of a hammock as he looked over the star filled ocean. “They do like to habitate the seaside... Carapaceons

perhaps!”

“Noooooooooooo. Well. Maybe? They do craft and clad themssselvesss in armor and thossse are jussst ssshellsss by another name...”

“See!”

Brows arched, Jet sighed and sank into his girlfriend as the conversation from afar faded. “...You feeling okay?” Claspings a hand a piece against the sides of a massive scaled finger he squeezed Nell's digit tight.

Her thoughts still in a haze, and her neck aching, Nell tiredly blinked. Forcing a toothy smile, and cupping a palm against Jet's back, she brought him to bear against her breasts. “Never been better,” she said before flopping back with a thoom. The Hunter's home rattled in place as the Nargacuga nuzzled the back of her head into a pillow sized mattress.

Thumbing along her Hunter's back, the bands of crimson fur wrapped around her face like a mask slowly glowed as moonlight crept through the windows. “Sooooo.”

“So?” Jet hummed as he nuzzled into Nell's thumb.

“This is it, huh? Your nest?”

“I know, I know. Nothing to write home about,” Jet smirked.

Eyes drooping shut, Nell flared her nostrils and drank in the scent of her little lover's home. How the sea breeze wafted in through the planks stacked high. How the wood itself, smelling of the sun, wrapped around her like a shroud. How the faintest whiff of metal trailing from the nails keeping them notched in place flicked at the back of her throat. Then most of all... most of all...

How it smelled like Jet. It smelled like home.

“Nothing?” Nell sleepily rumbled. “Jet. It's... it's everything,” her voice cracked. Bunching up her legs, her feet bunched against the far wall and bowing out the wood as it conformed to the contours of her toes and soles, the Nargacuga rolled onto her side. Eyes drooped shut she bashfully purred at her human while her fingers wandered over him.

Piece by piece Jet started to pop free the clasps and buckles of his armor. “My Trainer. My partner. My guardian. My lover,” he whispered.

Forcing down a nervous swallow, Nell purred madly as Jet started undressing for her. Off came his greaves. Then his gorget. With every heavy clunk of metal cracking against the wooden floor the Nargacuga's heart pounded in her chest. “W-w-what? Guardian? You mean... you mean Puck? I-i-it's nothing. She's nothing,” she nervously laughed.

“It wasn't to me,” he said with a blush. Reaching behind his back, fumbling with one leather strap and buckle at a time, faint snaps and clicks sounded out before his chest plate fell to the floor. His toned torso, tinged with scars and pocked with bruises, lay bare for Nell.

Eyes dilating, and biting down on her lower lip, Nell's fur puffed out at the display of vulnerability. Steam wafted off of the mask of crimson fur glowing bright around her head when she spied him thumbing at his waist and sliding off his heavy leather leggings.

“What?” Jet nervously shrugged as he rubbed at the back of his neck. His arms, lean with muscle, awkwardly shrugged as Nell's tail whapped behind her. “I see you naked all the time!”

“That's different! This is different!” Nell huffed. Oh Sapphire Star this was moving so fast. She had wanted this, she thought she had wanted this, for so long that she had no idea what to do now that it was finally here.

Clad in little more than his boxer briefs, which hung loosely from his waist, Jet nevertheless traced his fingers along the wrinkles in her palms. “How is it different?”

“It just is!” the Nargacuga squawked. “It's. It's scary! Seeing you so vulnerable. So exposed!”

“...I'm scary?” Jet deadpanned.

“No! You're-” Face burning beet red as Jet laughed and giggled away the Nargacuga impotently fwapped her tail.

“I'm what?” teased the Hunter.

Beak clamped shut, and tongue pressing against the back of her teeth, Nell chirped as she reached out towards him with trembling hands. “You're...” Palms cupped against his back she rumbled at the sensation of his soft and supple flesh against her scales. “You're...” she stammered.

Jet blushed and hummed as he leaned back into Nell's grasp. Slinging an arm around a finger he tugged it close as he got his bat cat's tongue.

A giddy growl revved in Nell's throat as she stifled an excited giggle. “You're brave. You're... beautiful.”

Jet tried and failed to lift a fingertip up towards his cheek as he melted at the compliments. “And I'm yours.”

Following his lead Nell clasped him as tenderly as she was able. Cupping him close to her neck she dipped her head low and let her beak come to rest against him. Just feeling him. Just holding him. The sensation of his flesh against her fur filled her with a euphoria she had never known she could experience. “And you're mine,” she blissfully sighed.