

Monster Hugger Unite
By: RaddaRaem

“I'm not seeing the appeal,” Nell rumbled. Her eyes, wreathed with crimson fur, squinted at the lance pinched between her clawed fingertips.

Blissbills that had been impatiently circling the clearing cawed and squawked as they dove back into the branches of the surrounding trees. They loudly made their irritation at a certain Nargacuga and hunter's now daily bouts known.

“Indulge me, Nell,” Jet pleaded. A small sampling of weapons lay spread out before him. “Just pretend we were actually capable of crafting something more... to scale.”

Nell lazily picked at her teeth with one of the said weapons. The thick scaled fingers on her free hand twiddled in place as the Nargacuga flaunted the protrusions of keratin sheathed bone that jutted from her digits.

Jet incredulously arched his unseen brows. He wasn't going to force the topic if his audience wasn't receptive to it.

Meaty hands clasped upon her knees Nell drew in deep of the humid and cloying air before dragging out a heavy sigh. “Look, Jet. You're asking me to fix something that isn't broken. Even if I did indulge this...” The Nargacuga gestured at herself. At her hulking and imposing form that utterly dwarfed the human before her. “In terms of raw resources... I don't see this working. Besides,” Nell confidently rumbled as she leaned forward and playfully knocked down the visor of Jet's helmet. “Aren't you getting ahead of yourself? You're no Master Rank Hunter yet!”

Jet chuckled as he flipped back up his visor and let a hand come to rest against the massive finger that lingered beside him. His heart skipped a beat at the low and bassy growl of delight that emanated from Nell's bosom for it. “In due time! I just... want to be prepared is all.”

The Nargacuga's tail excitedly swished behind her at the prospect of traveling the world together with him. “And there's nothing wrong with that!” she chirped. “Just, you know, we'll get there when we get there. Alright?”

“When you're right you're right,” Jet sighed. Dropping to his knees, he carefully bundled up his makeshift arsenal and tossed it over his shoulder. “Catch you same time tomorrow then?” Trembling, Jet couldn't help but let his nerves get the best of him when the Nargacuga leaned in close and swallowed him up in her shadow. Her fingers pinched against the sides of his helmet and, with practiced restraint, plucked it clean off his skull.

“It's a date,” Nell cooed. With some awkward maneuvering, accompanied by an errant bonk and an apology, the Nargacuga guided the tip of her beak to rest against her human's forehead. There she planted a shy kiss... only to blush madly when Jet clasped his hands against the sides of her maw and enthusiastically reciprocated her affection. With an embarrassed cough, and heart caught in her throat, Nell slipped his helmet back on and bid her beloved off with a wave.

A dreamy sigh tumbled out from her beak as she watched him disappear into the underbrush.

“It'sss not my fault they don't make them assss stubborn assss they ussed to!” the Tobi-Kadachi hissed back. “If anything thiss is your fault! Tricking me into thinking that humansss by and large were assss dedicated and perssistent assss you! A-and... payssshent. And kind. And generoussss with their time,” Taras bashfully acknowledged.

The humbled hunter shyly brushed at his armored cheek. Fist clenched and held up before him, he coughed into it as he cleared his throat and the very air. “...Are you really that interested in hearing how me and Nell have been getting on?”

“Of courssse!” the Tobi-Kadachi proudly proclaimed. “E-every now and again I do ssstill find myssself thinking of you assss my Trainee. And then, much like now, I want nothing more than to sssee you sssucssseed!”

Jet shamefully rubbed at the back of his head. “Well. Mmph. By the Sapphire Star where do I start? On the one hand our relationship is better than ever...” he mumbled as steam pooled out of his slitted visor. “On the other...”

A wistful sigh tumbled out from the hunter. Wandering off the beaten path he propped himself against a gargantuan and ivy-caked tree. Leaning back, he allowed himself to slide down along its base as a pollen stained gust whistled by.

THOOM

Jet violently jostled in place, bouncing against the roots that flanked him, when Taras sat down beside him. The Tobi-Kadachi, knees bunched up against his chest, let his chin rest upon them as he turned his crimson gaze upon the hrmring human.

“Progress has been... erratic,” he admitted. “Some days I push myself. Some days I don't.”

“Oh dear. ssstruggling to ssseparate work from play?”

“No? Yes? Maybe? ...Alright, fine, yes. Very very yes,” Jet grunted. “Before, I used to obsess over the *hows* of my Master Rank. How would I train? How would I improve? How would I finally finally finally get past her? Lately though I... I find myself thinking more about what I'll do after the fact. Like it's somehow a given. That it'll just fall into my lap one day and then Nell and I will be off!” Kicking his legs, Jet petulantly flopped his arms out to his sides. “Sometimes I... even find myself thinking that maybe it's alright if I never do end up cinching my Master Rank. That what she and I have is enough.”

Taras' fur lined scales crackled with electricity as he couldn't help but giggle. “You're hopeless,” he teased as he took to nudging at the ragdolled hunter.

“I know, I know!” Jet aughed as he tossed his head back. The hunter, and his mood, continued to slip until he was all but horizontal.

“Hmm?” Head cocked to the side, Taras curiously watched as the bundle that was once slipped over Jet's shoulders popped out from under him. A number of weapons, of questionable quality, rolled out onto the sparse grass. “Thessse are not your usssual toolss of the trade,” the Tobi-Kadachi thought

aloud. “No wonder you have been struggling so!”

Jet rasped through his visor while Taras daintily pinched an Insect Glaive between his fingers. “That’s not what those are for,” he half-heartedly snapped back. “Like I said I… I keep getting ahead of myself. Just today I embarrassed myself asking Nell what weapons she might want to try her hand at when we finally do set out together.”

Taras, his forked tongue peeking out from between his lips, twirled the unimpressive iron polearm atop his twiddling digits. “And what did she say?”

“Thanks but no thanks,” Jet relayed. “She shot me down without a second thought.”

“Maybe she will reconsider? Oh, you have your Master Rank, anyway.” The Tobi-Kadachi, his thoughts drifting elsewhere, hissed out various sound effects as he played at being a hunter. His middle and ring fingers sauntered along the upturned earth as if they were legs while his index and pinky fingers, serving as makeshift arms, balanced the Insect Glaive atop them.

Rolling his head onto its side, Jet bemusedly regarded his once tormentor. “Enjoying yourself?”

“Yesss,” Taras acknowledged with a blush. He proceeded to walk his hand over towards Jet and reached down with his index finger to tap tap tap reassuringly at the humbled hunter.

TATONK

Taras oopsed when the Insect Glaive tumbled free and slapped against the prone hunter. “...Maybe what you need is a change of payssse?”

“Like what?” The human erfed when Taras slid his scaly fingers under his armpits and propped him back up against the base of the tree.

“What I mean to say is why not seek out a new Trainer? Or at least someone to tutor and train you on the side?”

Jet bit down into his lip and pondered. Someone he could train with sans daydreams and flustered feelings? Someone that could help him clear his head long enough to finally claim the Master Rank as his own? Provided Nell was alright with such a thing, of course.

In silence, Jet chewed on Taras' words. The shrill cry of Emperor Hoppers filled the air and a balmy breeze sent the branches just overhead creaking as their leaves rustled against one another. Through it all, Taras patiently waited for the hunter to find his answer.

“Who though?” Jet dared to finally ask.

Hand held up before him, his finger raised high, the Tobi-Kadachi eagerly offered up… uh. Umm. Hmm. Taras's raised finger retracted against his palm while his maw clamped shut. “Oh bother.”

The hunter rapped his knuckles against the side of his helmet as he struggled to recall the roster of Master Rank Trainers. “There's… Baldesion?”

“Hisss waiting lissst iss a tad long in the tooth thessse daysss,” Taras pitifully hissed. The Brachydios was an extremely popular Trainer who was renowned for both his eloquence and clarity. However much time a Hunter was willing to invest into learning from him he was more than happy to reciprocate. As such, competition proved fierce among his prospective students.

Jet crossed his arms about his chest while he rummaged through his memories. “Erza?”

Taras' head tossed to the side. “ssshe hasss been on sssabbatical for sssome time now. No one can sssay for sssure when ssshe will return from the Rotten Vale.” The Ebony Odagaron, while brusque and crude, had a reputation for being a harsh but very fair Trainer. She would knock you flat on your ass one moment only to reel you back on your feet to meticulously explain where, why, and how you fell short the next. Those aspiring hunters that could withstand her abrasive teaching style often spoke glowingly of the Fanged Wyvern.

Papping at the sides of his helmet Jet tried to knock more names free from the periphery of his thoughts. And so it went. Whensoever a new name was proffered Taras was always able to explain why it would not work.

Snoot scrunched, the Tobi-Kadachi apologetically pat at Jet's back. “S-sssorry. I wasssn't trying to get your hopess up jussst to dasssh them,” mumbled the subdued and dejected serpent.

“It's alright,” Jet sighed. “I always knew getting my Master Rank wasn't going to be easy. I just. It's just. I wish that I had more to show for-”

KATHOOOOM

Ripples of energy, coursing through upturned earth like it was water, spread throughout the Anciest Forest. Blissbills and Revoltures let slip panicked squawks as they fled from the canopy.

THOOOOOOOOOOOM

The gnarled roots against which Jet rested did little to dampen the incoming force. With a crash and a clatter his gathered weapons rattled in tune to the tremors as they bounced and skittered away.

KRATHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM

Jet's heart caught in his throat when he suddenly found himself airborne. Launched into the air by a rolling wave of loosened earth the armored human wildly flailed about. To his relief, the sensation of Taras' hands scrambling to clasp around him overtook him before gravity could. Thick and scaly digits, wrapped around him like a vice, mercifully muffled the intensifying quakes.

THOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM

Taras' eyes went wide and wavered at the sight. Before them, a scarred and sun-baked limb sank deep into the land that could barely support it. Clad in dulled red scales it splayed its clawed toes as fissures erupted out from underneath them at the unintended show of force.

Forked tongue catching against the roof of his mouth, the Tobi-Kadachi stepped forward in defiance of Jet's panicked slaps and protests. Wait. It had been some time but... but he recognized this

towering and terrible figure! “A-alma?”

A low and dismissive growl, reverberating within its owner's throat and tinged with and a bone-rattling bass, answered his inquiry.

Taras stepped out of the shade and directly before the curt colossus. Head tilted back, the already looming Tobi-Kadachi struggled to measure up against this Alma. Even standing on his tip-toes he barely reached their waist. “Alma! It iss you!”

“Hrm?” The brutish dinosaur, fluff and feathers and torn wings draping down her broad and muscular back like a cloak, peered down at Taras with sunken eyes that glistened like amber.

Jet, hanging limply in Taras' grasp, gazed back curiously at the imposing figure. Noticeable patches of dully colored scar tissue pocked the Brute Wyvern's toned torso. Her bulging arms. Her very visage.

Alma's expression softened as she rolled the Tobi-Kadachi's name upon her tongue. “Ah, Taras! Mine apologies. I hope I did not interrupt your...” Her ridged reptilian brows flattened when she took notice of Jet. “Training, was it?”

Taras wiggled nervously which elicited an amused chuckle from the Anjanth. “N-not at all!”

“You haven't shed any tears over this one have you?” Alma teased as she half-heartedly gestured at Jet. “I recall you telling me how the last one was anything but courteous.”

“Noooooooooo. S-sssure, Brook wasss a bit of a bully...” Taras mumbled with puffed out cheeks, “B-but we have sssince patched thingsss up!” Before his bashfulness, and a very visible blush, could get the better of him the serpentine squirrel hurriedly presented his latest and greatest trainee. “Thiss here iss Jet!” At that he proudly held the hunter aloft. Jet weakly waved back at the mountainous monster.

Alma wordlessly grunted in response.

Pride welling in his voice, Taras excitedly proceeded to gush about the frazzled human. At least until he realized Jet had started to ragdoll and go limp in his grasp. Laughing nervously, he promptly relaxed his grip before depositing Jet back onto the churned earth. The Tobi-Kadachi's scaled tail, sporting fluff that lined the faintest gaps between them, timidly curled around his legs. “W-what about you, Alma? How have you been?”

“I... have been better,” she acknowledged with a sigh. Her sunken eyes pressed against the sides of their sockets as her attention clearly lingered elsewhere. Shaking her head, the Anjanath cracked a wicked smile as she let a rough and calloused hand come to rest atop Taras' head. “I, admittedly, may not be in the best of spirits but tis reassuring to see you are.”

“Isss sssomething the matter?” he asked. Harrumphing, Taras couldn't help but blep and playfully hiss as she took to ruffling him.

Meanwhile, at ground level, the particulars of the conversation escaped Jet. He paid little heed to Taras' persistent inquiries nor Alma's guarded answers. The hunter, nearly going cross-eyed, was far

“Haven't heard that name tossed around in a while,” Brook quipped as she sauntered back up to the counter. “What about em?”

“We crossed pathsss with one earlier!” Taras excitedly announced.

The huntress hrmmed worriedly as she looked to Jet. Even as Palicos nudged his order against him he remained listless and unresponsive. “That bad of a first impression, huh? Can't say I'm surprised.”

Jet's eyes, and little else, swiveled up curiously towards Brook.

“It wasss not that bad!” insisted the Tobi-Kadachi. Licking his chops, Taras' crimson eyes focused intently on the untouched platter of food besides him. Slowly, carefully, he reached out towards it.

WHAP

“Ow!” Tears beaded along the monster's eyes as he kneaded at his freshly thwacked knuckles. “Not even a nibble?” Taras huffed.

“No,” Brook tersely replied. Her stony expression turned soft as took to slapping at Jet's shoulders. “C'mon now. Your food's gettin' cold.”

Hmphing, Jet lazily shoveled mounds of loaded baked potatoes towards himself. “My fault for getting my hopes up.”

The huntress... did not quite follow. “Hmm?”

“Jet wasss hoping to sssee about tutoring under Alma. Under a ssslayer,” Taras elaborated.

Brook winced as she inhaled through clenched teeth. “Jet you really REALLY don't want that. Just leave that lot be, alright?”

“Why's that?” he mumbled through mouthfuls of starches.

“Now how do I go about this...” Brook hummed. “Guess the only place to start is the beginnin'. Right. So in each and every territory that Monsters have a claim to you'll find yourself a Slayer. The roughest and toughest of em' all that can go toe to toe with the mindless monstrosities that lurk beyond the borders.”

Jet curiously nodded along as he supped.

“The thing to keep in mind is that they are ambivalent at best towards. Well. Us.” Brook broadly gestured at herself and Jet. The only hunters, the only humans, present. “Back when I actively indulged my wanderlust, flexin' what access my Master Rank afforded me, I wandered into a fair few of their territories. For the most part you could count yourself lucky if they out and out ignored you.”

A pitiful growl rumbled within Taras' throat as Jet pulled himself up off the counter and gave Brook his undivided attention. “And if you weren't?”

“What is that posture?!” Brook incredulously asked.

“Can't this wait until after my third and final cart?” Jet snipped back. He winced as the huntress dressed his scrapes and bruises.

“And those swings! You're not even trying to follow through!”

“W-well, I mean! I don't want to hurt her!” Jet whined while he gestured to Nell.

The Nargacuga clasped her clawed hands around her beak as she stifled a hearty laugh. “Jet. I love you, more than you could ever know, but...”

“You couldn't even if you wanted to,” Brook followed up for her. Perched atop a moss and mushroom covered log, Jet sitting right beside her, the exasperated veteran unloaded on her closest confidant with biting albeit well-meaning observations. Clad in her own armor, Charge Blade slung over her back, Brook wasn't content to just act the part of a grizzled veteran. She would damn well look it too if only to show him how a Master Rank huntress carried herself.

Nell and Taras both, bumping shoulders, snorted while their significant others bickered. The towering Trainers casually sauntered about the forest clearing that had become the Nargacuga's stomping grounds while they eagerly eavesdropped. “Thanksss again for having usss!” the Tobi-Kadachi hissed as they stepped over felled and sundered trees. “I know thiss wassssshort notissse and all.”

“I'm not complaining,” the beaked bat cat laughed. “It's nice to have a second opinion, you know?” Nell rumbled as she gently punched at the scaled squirrel. Her smile strained when she lowered her voice. “Be honest. What do you think? Am I too easy on him? Too hard?”

“Psssh. You are fine!” Taras happily punched back. “There'sss nothing wrong with your training regiment. Jet jusst...” the Tobi-Kadachi scratched at his cheek while he took to whispering. “It'sss clear that you are more important to him now than hisss Massster Rank ever will be. Hisss drive hasss faltered. He isss ssstruggling to come to termss with that iss all.”

Nell's spiked tail dragged along the forest floor behind her while flustered growls and chirps echoed within her throat. The crimson bands of fur that wrapped around her eyes positively glowed as blood rushed to the Nargacuga's face. “J-just between you and me? These daily tests and trials of ours? More and more they feel like trysts,” she mumbled.

Taras' forked tongue quietly hung from between his lips as static crackled along his back. “Isss that really sssso bad? You ssshould hear how fondly he ssspeaksss of you!”

“Oh I have,” the Nargacuga replied with a nervous but giddy laugh. “It just seems like such an abdication though. Of my responsibilities to him as his Trainer.” Nell shrunk in on herself as she and Taras slowly circled back to Jet and Brook. “I should be seeing him through to his Master Rank and not... not this. Not focusing on how every day is better for having him in it. Not on how happy I am to just be with him.” Sighing, Nell bit her tongue.

The Tobi-Kadachi nodded in bashful understanding. There was no easy answer, fumble as he might, Taras could offer them. More than anything, shameful as it was to admit, he couldn't help but

howl made the monster stop dead in her tracks.

Jet's ears rang, deafeningly so, while his body stopped responding to conscious thought. His limbs, dull and slow, struggled to cut through the heavy air.

“JET. JET, LOOK ALIVE!” Brook screamed at him. She had heard that tell tale call to violence far too many a time now to be phased by it.

Whatever stupor and morass had befallen him dissipated instantly. Heart pounding and adrenaline coursing through his veins, Jet hung on the huntress' every word for guidance.

“Wasss... w-w-wasss that what I think it wasss?” Trembling, Taras was terrified not only by the fact that had he pondered the idea but that he had tiptoed right up to speaking it aloud.

“TARAS. GROUP UP, NOW,” Brook barked.

The Tobi-Kodachi obediently obliged as his body hummed and crackled with electricity. Skittering off of the sidelines, tossing fearful glances over his shoulders with every step, he protectively took to circling round Jet and Brook. Even if he couldn't put on a brave face h-h-he would still guide and guard his friends!

“Here? Now?” Mind racing, Nell's thoughts crashed into one another as instinct and self-preservation crowded out her capacity to string together concepts much less words. Eyes gone wide, she possessively prowled about the clearing as her home, and everyone she shared it with, were placed in eminent danger. Together with Taras she would throw her body between her beloved and whatever may come.

Brook hurriedly lobbed a number of potions and powders at Jet... not that she expected them to make a difference. “If you're looking for a pep talk, well, I'm sorry to disappoint,” the huntress forlornly quipped. Blade drawn, and the axe head of her Charge Blade held up before her like a shield, she took command of the situation. “Stick together and aim to kill. Know that our feral guest certainly is...”

THOOOOOOM

Footfalls, frantic and plodding, violently rattled the thickets of flora that surrounded the clearing.

THOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM

The stomach churning crack of trees, one after another after another effortlessly being snapped and rent apart with ease, rose to a cacophonous crescendo.

RRRRRRRROOOAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRR

An unfamiliar bellow, its palpable rage honed and guided in stark contrast with its predecessor, preceded a bone rattling explosion. Clouds of pulp, splinters, and upturned earth surged out towards the quartet and pelted them with shrapnel.

THOOM THOOOM THOOOOM THOOM THOOOM

A pair of silhouettes, their forms and features barely visible through the still settling dust, came crashing towards them and whatever warning Brook shouted out went unheard. Among the chaos she simply dragged Jet out of the way along with her as Taras and Nell dove aside and scrambled to safety.

ROAAARRR
THWACK
FWACK
FOOM

A meaty series of crunches followed by a blast of heat cut the horrid howl short. Panting, blood and scales dripping from her teeth and knuckles, Alma stood tall among the clouds of dispersing dust. Tossing a look over her cloaked shoulder, the Anjanath snarled at her unwanted onlookers. “Flee this place! Now!”

Staggering to his feet, Taras worriedly called out to the Slayer. “Alma!”

KATHOOOOM

The hulking reptile doubled over when her unseen foe slammed into her torso. Even with her heels embedded into the very earth Alma was sent skidding back as crags of dirt and upturned stone accumulated around her ankles. Teeth clenched, embers dripping from her lips, the Anjanath simply willed her way through the injury and responded with a plume of hellfire that erupted up and out from her throat.

In an instant the cloudy air turned ashen and burned away. The face of the unthinking abomination that threatened their continued existence was revealed. A Tigrex, its bloodshot eyes devoid of pupils or any cognizant signs of life, twitched unnaturally as smoke trailed off its blackened scales. Packed dense with muscle, almost too much for its frame to handle, it lashed out at Alma with no regard for the grievous injuries it had already incurred.

“You heard her!” Brook shouted. She shoved Jet forward in fits and spurts, just enough for him to get his bearings and ultimately propel himself unaided, before turning her attention to Taras. Tugging at the tufts lining his tail Brook's pleas swiftly turned to out and out threats.

Snaggleteeth sinking deep into his lips, the Tobi-Kadachi shamefully turned away from Alma. He... he... he would trust in her. Any help he could think to offer would, in truth, only hinder the Slayer. Humiliating as it was to admit.

Nell, her eyes aglow, solemnly stomped besides the humans as they beat a hasty retreat. “Keep them safe. Keep them safe. Keep him safe,” the Nargacuga thought to herself ad nauseam. She furiously latched onto that single minded goal for it was all she could do to keep her nerves, bundled and fraying, from boiling over.

“Brook. Jet.” The words that tumbled out from Nell's beak, interlaced with heavy growls, were rough and brusque on the ear. “You will return to Astera,” she rumbled. “We will see you to safety. Afterwards, Taras and-”

ROAAARRRRRRR

The Tigrex, still smoldering, went utterly rabid at the faintest hints of movement. At the attempted escape.

Eyes gone wide, Alma wrapped her hulking arms around the Flying Wyvern's neck as it furiously tried to drag itself forward. Its horns and ragged scales scraped away at the Anjanath's biceps as she tried to crush its throat. Yet, even though it stood at only half the Slayer's height, its strength, fury, and desperation knew no bounds. The Tigrex's discolored stripes, stretched wide over its broad back, practically split apart at the seams when the muscles contained beneath them suddenly bulged.

Alma could feel her hold falter. "Taras!" screamed the Anjanath.

With an ear splitting roar the feral monstrosity broke free from the Anjanath's death grip. The sheer force with which the creature propelled itself forward along the earth tore the wings that lined the Tigrex's forearms to shreds. Nigh instantaneously it closed the gap between itself and the fleeing party.

Taras, having tossed a look back at Alma's cry, did what little he could with the heads up afforded to him. One moment Brook was perpendicular to the ground. The very next she found herself parallel to it. As did Jet. Scooped up and chucked aside in a single motion, the sensation of the Tobi-Kadachi's heavy palm pressing against their backs failing to even register, the hunters soon found themselves sailing into Nell's grasp.

"What are you-" Brook managed to blurt out before the Nargacuga's scaled fingers clamped around her like a vice. She blinked. Taras, forcing a nervous smile, stood before her. Again Brook blinked. A bloody mist comprised of light blue scales and fur occupied the space where her boyfriend had been.

Taras' balled up form, fraying with sparks and a morbid smelling smoke, was flung into the surrounding thicket with a horrible crash. Tree after tree after tree split and crunched apart as he tumbled through them.

The Tigrex, now running alongside them, turned its murderous gaze towards Nell.

ROAAA
WHAM

Whirling about on her heels, spikes jutting from her tail, the Nargacuga slammed her morning star of a limb against the side of the fell beast's head. A sickening and muffled pop sounded out from its neck while its lower jaw was all but smashed clean off its skull. Jagged maw hanging limply from its battered skull the Tigrex still matched Nell step for step.

"The both of you close your eyes!" Brook yelled. Arm held out before her, and steadied upon the massive Nargacuga fingers wrapped around her, the huntress slotted a bright glowing insect into the Slinger anchored onto her gauntlets. Bowstring drawn back, the huntress squeezed at the metal grip wrapped around her palm and sent its payload flying square into the abomination's eyes.

VBEWWWW

ROAAARRRRR

Shaking its head, the Tigrex wailed when the agitated Flashbug released a brilliant and blinding burst of phosphorescent light. Howling and raging its attacks grew ever more frantic as its claws and broken jaw felt nothing but air catch against them.

“We can't outrun this,” Brook said with a heavy swallow. Its sight would return soon enough as would the chase. “We're putting this thing down here and now.”

Cursing to herself, Alma gave chase with everything she had.

Jet said nothing when his armor started to buckle. To protest Nell's fingers curling ever tighter, ever more possessively, around him would be an unnecessary distraction. Not when split second decisions still decided whether they would survive one moment to the next. Not when they lacked time enough to even fret over the fate of their friend.

With great reluctance Nell released both of the hunters. She could serve as their sword or their shield but not both. “What would you have us do?” the Nargacuga bitterly rumbled.

The heavily armored huntress interlocked her short sword into her Charge Blade's axe head and sighed when it locked into place with a pronounced click. “To start...” Brook gestured to the Nargacuga. “Brain the damn thing again. Stun it if you can.”

Nell slammed her tail down behind her in unspoken acknowledgment.

“Jet.” Brook rest a hand upon his shoulder and gently shook him. “I'm counting on you to knock this thing down. Remember when I gave you grief earlier about following through?”

“...Yeah.” Trembling, Jet tightened his grip on his hammer so much so that the paint lining the handle cracked beneath his fingers.

“Stay away from its front. Hit one of its back legs, I don't care which, as hard as you can. So long as you can sweep one of them out from underneath it I can handle the rest.”

ROAAARRRRRRR

“Do or die,” Brook grimly stated as her Charge Blade hummed. The trio dispersed.

The Tigrex furiously swung its head side to side in an effort to dispel the blots and dots that still plagued its vision.

THOOM THOOM THOOM

A guttural reverb echoed within the beast's bloodied throat as it turned to face the monster hurtling herself towards it. It didn't need its sight for this. Roaring, the Tigrex catapulted itself into Nell's indistinct form to trade blows.

WHAMMMM

A trail of blood streaked the air as the Tigrex carved heaving gashes into the Nargacuga's whirling tail. Howling, Nell fought through the pain and brought her weapon of choice to bear against its skull. She could feel it crumple beneath her.

Circling around the Tigrex, affording its forearms and tattered wings a significant berth, Jet raced towards its hind legs. Head dipped low, he watched as its arms and legs buckled beneath Nell's hammer blow. Looking upon the abomination a fire flared to life within Jet's breast. All this time... this was what Nell fought so hard to keep him here for. And she had been right.

...So this was what he had to look forward to. This was what he would subject himself, and Nell, to should he dare to set out as a Master Rank hunter. Jet's arms burned as his muscles tensed with every footfall. Hammer held at his side, the hunter could feel the overwhelming surge of adrenaline break his body down from the inside out. If he lacked the strength to take care of and fend for himself... how could he in good conscience ask Nell to accompany him on his travels? To endanger herself whenever he inevitably failed to carry his weight?

The Tigrex's limbs spasmed as they slowly straightened themselves out.

He wasn't prepared to face something like this. Not as he was now. Whirling about in place, centripetal force accumulating to the point that Jet felt as if his arms were about to rip themselves out of their sockets, the hunter brought the head of his Hammer to bear against the Tigrex's back leg.

But one day he would be.

THWAMMMMMMM

A thunderous clap boomed through the Ancient Forest. The feral Wyvern's leg, with a wet crunch, found itself bent in ways it was never meant to be. Roaring defiantly the Tigrex collapsed to the grassy earth as, for the first time, its body was physically unable to meet the demands of its unbridled instincts.

Before the Tigrex could rise once more countless clicks, wheezes, and whirrs sounded out from Brook's Charge Blade. Swinging the great double bladed axe overhead, its razor sharp curves crackling with energy, the huntress sank her weapon deep into the bane's neck. It handily cleaved through the thick layer of burnt and melted scales before coming to a halt against a mass of muscle.

VRRRRRRRRRR

Energy boiled and bubbled out from the impact site as the Elemental Phials infused into the Charge Blade crackled and seethed. What were faint pops rapidly escalated in intensity before a controlled explosion rippled out along the whole of the Tigrex's neck.

Yet it refused.

“No...” Brook mouthed aloud as she backed away with halting steps.

Even with its throat torn open, even as its roars turned into disgusting gurgles, even as its body

lay battered and broken the monstrosity simply refused to die. Forcing itself up by the strength of its forearms alone its pupil less eyes came to focus intently on Brook. It raised a mangled claw and-

KATHOOOOOOOM

Catapulting herself across the clearing Alma quite literally threw herself into her quarry. Clawed feet pressing into its shoulders the Anjanath rent and tore apart the Tigrex's torso while she rode it away from those she was entrusted to protect. As the abomination skid to a halt, having been embedded into a bloody and shallow crater, Alma leapt off of it and furiously proceeded to pummel away. Her fists came to replace the very air as her calloused knuckles crushed and caved in the Tigrex's every identifiable feature.

Jet couldn't help but gawk at the strength that someone that bore the title of Slayer could wield. Shock waves, colored by displaced dirt and pebbles, rippled out from Alma with her every blow.

Still it wasn't enough. Drawing in deeply of the humid air, the Anjanath filled her lungs to near bursting before unleashing an incinerating breath upon the dread beast. The abomination's silhouette, wreathed in flame, writhed and struggled even as it was consumed by the Slayer's conflagration. Even as its scales and flesh fell away it fought. Only when its body was nothing more than ashen bone caked with charred flesh did it finally concede defeat.

Shoulders sagging, Brook panted while scales and ash rained down through the smoke that rose from the felled feral. Its body, writhing and rage filled but a blink ago, now sat silent and still.

Adrenaline fading, Jet stumbled backwards and fell onto a patch of ivy creeping along the ground. They did it. They actually did it. He followed through even! Turning his head to his side he looked to his fellow hunter. "Brook, are you-"

Paying little mind to her Charge Blade, still embedded into the Tigrex's skeletal neck, Brook bolted off as fast as her legs would carry her. The clank of her greaves carried heavily across the clearing until she disappeared into the thicket of trees that Taras had been tossed into.

Jet sighed heavily. As Nell's heavy footsteps drew close the intensifying vibrations sent him bouncing and wobbling. Dropping to a crouch the Nargacuga slid a finger behind his head and propped up his neck. In tender silence the size mismatched couple took comfort in each other's company.

Alma quietly tucked her chin against her shoulder as she ruefully took in the aftermath of her failure. This was never meant to be their fight. That said... squatting before the Tigrex's smoldering corpse the Anjanath couldn't help but acknowledge how capably they had carried themselves. With great care she plucked the curious weapon free and watched as the wrinkles that lined her palm all but swallowed it up. Such marvels these humans were capable of crafting. Even for all she inadvertently put it through this, whatever it was, remained intact.

"W-wait a minute!" Jet yelped.

Alma froze in place. Eyes pressed against the sides of their sockets she guiltily held the Charge Blade close.

"Nell! You're bleeding!" Clambering up and out of the Nargacuga's tender embrace he hurriedly

tended to her tail with what potions and powders Brook had entrusted him with previously.

The Nargacuga protested... until her own burst of adrenaline wore off. Distressed chirps filtered free from her clamped shut beak as the searing pain proved too much to ignore. Her composure, callous and calculating not all that long ago, crumbled away as she took to sniffing away the tears while Jet washed and dressed her wounds.

Rumbling bashfully, Alma rose to her feet and breathed easy. With nary a word she tucked away the spoils of battle and approached the couple. "Mine apologies," the Anjanath introduced herself with a deep and reverent bow. "I... I have only hollow words to offer as consolation."

Brows arched, Nell and Jet both regarded the Slayer with surprise when she dropped to kneel before them.

"By my weakness did I allow your injuries to come to pass. As a Slayer, as the protector of these lands, I have failed you."

Even when prostrating herself Alma still stood eye level with Nell. The soothing gels and potions that Jet had taken to kneading into the Nargacuga's now dressed wounds had taken the edge off but a dulled anger still remained.

Alma's eyes hung low as the full weight of her responsibilities bore down upon her back. She patiently awaited the duly earned and well justified invective that she had heard many a time before.

Stepping forward, Jet rubbed at an arm. "I mean... it could have been worse, right?"

The Anjanath lifted her head and quizzically regarded the human.

"So. Um. Thank you, Miss Slayer! Err Miss Alma." Nervous as could be, Jet stumbled over his words yet carried on regardless.

Alma found herself at a loss. He was... praising her? Why?

Fists clenched, the hunter forced himself to broach the topic. "Do you... do you think Taras'll be alright? Is there anything you can do for him?"

Wait. She recognized this human. Clearing her throat, Alma took to treading unfamiliar territory. "Forgive me, Ser... Ser Jet was it?" Her heart lifted at the nod of affirmation. "While I would be remiss to downplay the scars he now surely bears I am certain that Taras still draws breath."

Hand clasped against his chest, Jet exhaled a long held breath in relief as he leaned back into Nell. Grunting, the Nargacuga thumbed at her little love while she opted to keep her comments to herself.

Rising to her feet, the Anjanath could not peel her eyes away from Ser Jet no matter how hard she tried. Perhaps the Tobi-Kadachi's pride in him was well placed after all. "If you would suffer my company even now I would beg your permission to see Taras shepherded to safety and succor. I owe him that and much and more."

"I mean we're not about to say no," the Nell plainly stated. "He'll need all the help he can get." Grunting, the Nargacuga forced herself to a stand and sauntered forward with a wince.

Jet, forced to jog to keep up with his loomy lady's leisurely pace, dutifully followed after her. All while remaining blissfully unaware of how heavily Alma's gaze rested upon him in turn.

"You can just say you're impatient for your latest and greatest care package," Jet snarked.

"I will sssay no sssuch thing!" Shifting in place, the Tobi-Kadachi groaned as he propped himself up against a rocky wall and made himself comfortable. His nest, a surprisingly well furnished and tastefully decorated cave hidden beneath the gnarled roots of a great tree, exuded warmth.

"Uh huh," Jet said with a playful roll of his eyes as he set out plates of lukewarm food, smuggled straight out of the Canteen, alongside the enormous mat of stitched together skins and feathers that served as the Tobi-Kadachi's makeshift bedroll.

Hands wrapped around his snout, Taras physically struggled to restrain himself from scooping up each and every one as they were laid out.

Rubbing an oven mittened hand along the back of his head, Jet couldn't help but laugh as he motioned for the Tobi-Kadachi to dig in. "I know it's not as good as anything Brook can whip up but..."

"Ssshush," Taras snooted as he gleefully took to devouring a handful of his home cooked, and hand delivered, meals. Along with, as per usual, the ceramic plates they came on. Strained coughs wracked the Tobi-Kadachi's chest following a particularly hearty and throat straining swallow. "Ahhhhh! Delisssshiss!" the scaled squirrel said with a smile. Rumbling contentedly, he lovingly nosed at the exhausted and slumbering huntress cupped against his chest. "Thanksss again for covering for Brook at the Canteen. "

Hair tied back and clad in an apron, Jet rasped. "Ahh it's fine. I could use the practice anyway!" Lips pulled flat, the grease stained hunter grimaced. "It's my fault as it is for giving Nell a taste of human cuisine. She's been on me ever since and not so subtly wondering when she can expect me to treat her to it again."

Chuckling, Taras thumbed and gently stroked at Brook's back as his broad tail, scarred and stripped free of its many scales, curled around and came to rest on his lap. Prickly tufts of fur, and the beginnings of new keratin growths, dotted it. "How iss ssshe by the way?" he asked.

"Better! Better," Jet hehed. "She's still been on edge ever since the, you know, and has only just now been willing to let me wander off on my lonesome."

The Nargacuga had been insistent, forceful even, that she be there to accompany him any time he dared to traverse the trails of the Ancient Forest. The familiar routine of their daily bouts of training, having been put on hold in the wake of the near disaster, had given way to something new. Every morning now, Nell waited for him just outside Astera. Be it to serve as his escort through the untamed wilds or...

Blushing, the hunter scratched at a cheek as he fondly recalled the affection she showered him

with prior to his part-time shifts at the Canteen. He pounded at his chest and forced his increasingly flustered thoughts elsewhere. “Brook uhh... I see Brook is still refusing to take anyone's advice. Much less her own.”

The dark skinned human, ragged and spent, sank deeper and deeper into sleep as Taras' chest rose and fell with his every breath. Her hands and forearms bore countless scrapes and bruises.

“You know how ssshe getsss. Ssshe'll doubt and sssecond guess everything unlessss ssshe doesss it herssself,” Taras sighed. Cracking a weary smile, the Tobi-Kadachi gingerly planted a kiss atop Brook's head. No matter how many supply drops, no matter how many wellness checks, no matter how much Jet and Nell pleaded with and reassured her... Brook out and out refused to leave Taras' side. For nearly a week now she had spent sun up from sun down dressing his wounds, hand crafting medicine, cooking his meals, and cleaning his bedding. Or at least she had been until she worked herself to the brink of collapse.

“I figured as much,” Jet replied. Try as she might Brook couldn't very well take care of Taras if she neglected to take care of herself. Shaking his head he tossed down a knapsack, stuffed to the brim with clean bandages and clothes, alongside the plates of cooling food. “Anything special you'd like to request for tomorrow's drop off?”

Taras hummed as he cupped his palm against Brook's back. The huntress attempted to stir and rouse herself from her much needed rest and he would have none of it. “Mayhapsss sssome... what do you call it? Thossss thingsss you humansss use to warm your nessesstsss? Where you lie down to ressst? I fear Brook will be loathe to leave for sssome time yet and I want her to be ass comfortable ass can be until then.”

“I'll see what I can rummage up,” Jet promised.

“I appressshiate it,” Taras tiredly hissed as he slid back down along the cave walls. “O-oh! And Jet?” Taras piped up.

“Hum?”

“Ssshould you...” Taras interrupted himself with a yawn as he struggled to stay awake. “Ssshould you sssee Alma could you tell her thanksss? For everything?”

“Of course,” Jet warmly replied.

Having spent what little energy he had Taras weakly bid Jet off with a wave and a snaggletoothed smile. The hunter, recognizing he was overstaying his welcome, gladly reciprocated the gesture and departed. As Jet's foot steps faded into silence Taras cuddled Brook close and slowly peppered his little love with one heartfelt kiss after another. His breaths, deep and heavy, came to fill the chamber when he finally drifted off to sleep alongside her.

Dragging an arm along his forehead, Jet panted as he ascended the subterranean slope leading out of Taras' home. Roots, piercing through the stone and soil layered above, coiled and lined themselves along the walls. They, and the clumps of moss interspersed among them, greedily drank of

the humid air.

THOOOM

Pebbles and streams of dirt tumbled down from the curved ceiling.

THOOM

Brow cocked, Jet cautiously stepped out from the winding cave and into the fading light of the setting sun.

THOOOOOM

Clapping her hands together, Alma grunted after neatly stacking a veritable mountain of gathered herbs and honey combs alongside the entrance to Taras' nest. "Hmm?" Her gaze narrowed and her expression turned dour at the sight of something scurrying out from the Tobi-Kadachi's abode.

Jet, frozen in place, immediately wilted under her glare. "H-h-h-h-hello, Miss Alma," he stammered with a wave of his oven mittened hand.

"...Oh! Forgive me, Ser Jet." Stepping aside, the Anjanath bowed her head. "I did not recognize you without your armor. Mine apologies, I nearly mistook you for a trespasser!"

"A-a-all good," the hunter nervously mumbled as he beheld the Slayer. Her form, shrouded in shadow, swallowed up the sun and scraped at the very sky itself. "What uh... what brings you here?"

The Anjanath gestured to the sweetly scented piles of flora and wax that towered over him. "I happen to be... familiar enough with your kind's remedies and ministrations. It is not much, I confess, but I would relieve Ser Brook of what burdens I can. While I lack the knowledge to synthesize the medicines she uses to treat him I am more than capable of procuring the required reagents."

Blinking, Jet struggled to parse just how many potions the alchemists of Astera could create with such a haul. The settlement very well could be without want for the whole of a generation. "Right. By the way umm... uhh... T-taras sends his regards! He wanted to thank you for, well, t-this I'm guessing." Cheeks burning bright, the human groaned at how horribly he had fumbled that.

Alma growled happily at the thought. "Full glad am I then. He is kind to say as such as are you to relay it."

Thoroughly tongue tied, Jet blankly nodded. Her presence, the very air about her, intimidated and awed him in equal measure. "I'll uhh... ermm... y-yeah. I-i-t was nice seeing you again, Miss Alma!" Grasping desperately for something, anything, to say the hunter opted to instead beat an awkward retreat lest he embarrass himself any further.

WHUMPF

Well that was the plan anyway. Heart caught in his throat, Jet's neurons repeatedly misfired when Alma's impossible tail slapped down before him and halted his escape.

“A moment if you would, Ser Jet.” A chill wind, heralding the arrival of a cold front, whipped across the Ancient Forest when she spoke.

With great hesitation, Jet tilted his neck back to gaze up at the Anjanath. Clouds, thick and purple and heavy, gathered overhead.

“Pardon my brashness but I... have a request I would make of you,” said Alma as she scratched at the back of her neck. “You are, of course, under no obligation to grant it.”

Silence, punctuated by the pitter patter of the coming rain, hung over the Ancient Forest as Jet found himself too cowed to answer either way.

“S-sincerely, I mean as such!” Alma hurriedly clarified as she dropped to her knees to better address the ankle high hunter. Tremors rippled out from her when she did so. “While I recognize that my countenance can come across as imposing please do not mistake my inquiry as an imposition!”

Jet's frayed nerves, having been rattled and shook straight, permitted him time enough to consider her offer. Surely there was no harm in simply hearing her out was there? Clearing his throat the frazzled hunter finally found courage, that or foolishness, enough to answer. “W-what did you have in mind?” he asked.

The Slayer sighed in relief as the skies above opened up with a peal of thunder. Rising to her feet, Alma held her cloaked arm out to her side and stepped forward to shield Jet from the sudden downpour. “Come. Walk with me.”

“So that's where this went,” Jet mused aloud as he slung Brook's Charge Blade over his back.

“That I ask for your forgiveness as opposed to your permission is inexcusable all the same,” Alma shamefully muttered. Shuffling forward step by step she struggled to slow her gait enough to accommodate the human at her side.

“I mean...” Jet stopped himself before he could finish that thought. Brook could speak to the matter herself when the time was right. “Why though? Why take it?”

Nostrils flared, Alma exhaled and inhaled heavily. “Know that I seek only to explain, not excuse, myself.” Smoke trailed from her lips as the Anjanath warmed herself with deeply held breaths that stoked the fires in her chest.

In silence they tread down the muddied and rain slicked paths. Hugging close to Alma, her form crackling with heat, Jet quietly pondered. “...You saved our lives. I don't think it's too much of an ask to hear you out,” he playfully shrugged.

Alma's expression softened at the reassurance. “You're too kind, Ser Jet. ” With great care she daintily set one gargantuan foot down before the other as they slowly circled the forest. Though it taxed her she was mindful to splay and arch her toes such that her footfalls were muffled enough so as not to knock the human aside. “Yet I cannot accept that for Taras still came to harm. Those creatures have grown bold and for all my vigilance some still manage to slip past.” The Slayer's shoulders sagged as

her heart grew heavy. “I fear that soon, too soon, my every failure will be measured in lives lost.”

Jet pulled his lips taut. Once his training resumed in earnest... he would throw himself into it. He would be earn that Master Rank. Never again would his weakness and shortcomings endanger Nell or Taras or anybody else for that matter!

“Which brings me to my request... and I suppose the appropriate place to start is thus. You, and your kind, fascinate me Ser Jet.”

Head cocked to his side, Jet acked when he briefly stepped outside of the shelter provided by Alma's canopy of a cloak.

The Anjanath rolled her shoulders. “I mean no ill will, Ser Jet, but humans are...”

“Weak?”

A cloud of embers erupted from Alma's maw as she stifled a spit take. Eyes darting nervously side to side she hurriedly tried to regain her composure. “I. Well. S-surely there are more tactful ways to...”

Jet simply shrugged. “What? We know are.”

Tail dragging behind her, the Slayer shyly came around to stating the obvious. “Forgive me, Ser Jet, I am not practiced at speaking so... freely,” she rumbled in embarrassment.

The hunter hehed. “It doesn't do us any good to pretend that we're not. Honestly we're, well, nothing without our armor and weapons.”

Alma's eyes sparked alive at the mention. “Nonsense, Ser Jet! That you and yours have found a means by which to triumph over trials that would have felled you otherwise, through sheer force of will and wile, is admirable! That you walk here now alongside me, bereft of those same tools, speaks to your bravery. To your trust.” A smile, rich and sincere, spread wide across the Anjanath's mug as she spoke. “For which I am most grateful.”

Jet sheepishly wrung his hands at the high praise.

“And... which I was hoping to discuss with you at length,” Alma confessed. “I absconded with Ser Brook's weapon because I wished to understand you. How you fight. How you can... can... mmph.” The Anjanath balled a fist and turned her gaze to sky as lightning noiselessly roiled through the clouds above. “To put it plainly... I wish to know how you are able to punch so far above your weight. To reach so far beyond your limitations.”

Looking over his shoulder, Jet hummed at the interlocked sword and axe head that chafed against his apron. The skill ceiling for the Charge Blade, and the destruction it could unleash, was nigh stratospheric. Only the most physically, and mentally, adept hunters were capable of drawing out its true potential.

Alma bit at her tongue. “Yet the answer eludes me. For all my efforts, shameful and otherwise, I have nothing to show for it. Thus, Ser Jet, I find myself turning to you.”

The humbled hunter screeched to a halt.

Alma continued to lumber forward. “I cannot, I will not, allow my pride as a Slayer to steer me away from seeking your aid. If it means a brighter future for us all, one of a land free from the threat of those abominations, no cost is too high for my ego to bear. Even should I fail to find the answer I seek I must needs find the courage to ask. To try.” Chin tucked against her shoulder, the Anjanath looked back to Jet.

THOOM

Kneeling before him, Alma dipped her head low. “If nothing else, I must know if aught is to be gained from learning to wield weapons such as yours. To weave your knowledge of martial combat with mine own so that I might become something more.” The Slayer lifted her head and locked eyes with the diminutive human before her. “Ser Jet... my request is as such. Would you be willing to teach me your ways?”

Arms hanging limply at his sides, Jet's mind reeled at what was being asked of him. “You want *me* to train *you*?”