

opportunity that presents itself,” she resolutely boomed. The tendons within the Anjanath's digits audibly creaked when her fingers curled around the polished and sanded down grip of her Sword. With her free hand, Alma reached for the uneven slab of bone that was her accompanying Shield and tentatively slid her arm through its braces. The handles, massive wrought iron chains repurposed from the beached galleons of the Old World's Epitaph, clung tightly to her scaled limb.

Head tilted back, and neck straining, Jet propped his dinky Sword against his shoulder. As Alma rose to a stand, and swallowed him in her shadow, he felt a fire burning within his breast when the massive monster proudly mimicked his movements.

The Commander puffed out his chest at how confidently his whelp of a Hunter carried himself. Leaning back against the base of a snapped apart tree, arms crossed about his chest, the grizzled old man couldn't help but smirk. “Attaboy,” he wordlessly mouthed to himself before quietly slinking off into the undergrowth of the Ancient Forest.

With a swish of his arm, the Hunter's Sword whistled as it carved through the air. “Ready, Alma?” Jet shouted.

FWOOOOOOOOOOOSH

A tornadic gust, dizzying and deafening, billowed out from the Anjanath when she proceeded to match him move for move. What flowers and mosses lined the clearing were uprooted and rent apart in an instant as clouds of pollen and petals came to whorl about the Slayer and Hunter both.

“Lead the way, Ser Jet.”

FWACK

What had once been a towering tree choked in vines and ivy, its skeletal branches entombed in greenery, exploded into sawdust and shrapnel.

THWAM

Before the still swirling debris could settle a jagged Sword, capable of splitting the very skies, roared down from the heavens and carved through the cloying mass of pulp and wood shavings.

BOOOOOOOOOOOOM

With a tectonic crash Alma brought her blade to bear upon what little remained of the tree's stump. The gnarled soil and clay, thick with balled up roots, cascaded upwards before pelting the

Anjanath with a steady rain of rocks and upturned soil.

Rolling her shoulders, Alma worked the cricks out of her neck as smoke trailed out from her nostrils. “Chop. Side slash. Shield strike. Slam,” the Slayer repeated to herself while she ambled back towards the center of the since stomped flat clearing. Shield raised, and Sword held out at her side, Alma's serpentine pupils contracted into razor thin slits as her gaze came to focus intently on her tiny tutor.

The diminutive Hunter, having afforded her a very wide berth, happily obliged the Anajanth with yet another demonstration. Stepping forward he swung his Sword, held high overhead, down in an angled chopping motion. As the singing steel neared his knees Jet preserved what momentum he could by sweeping his arm up and to the side. Limb tucked close to his chest he proceeded to follow up his vertical slash with a horizontal one. Sword held out to his side the Hunter raised his Shield... only to swing it wide and deliver a mighty blunt force bash. With his imagined foe seeing stars Jet rounded out his combo by stepping forward, with an exaggerated stomp, so as to deliver one last skull smashing strike of his Sword.

Slowly, methodically, Alma pantomimed and practiced his movements. As the sun sailed overhead, and the suffocating humidity slowly sapped them of their strength, the size-mismatched duo dutifully committed the barest of basics to muscle memory in tandem.

Laughter, rich in timbre, echoed across the Ancient Forest with the force of a sonic boom. Every chuckle, every chortle, sent thickets of trees wildly swaying to and fro. “Come now, Ser Jet!” teased Alma. “There is no need to be so hard on yourself!”

The Hunter, impotently cursing under his breath, kicked at what few Redpits remained sprinkled about the clearing. With a heavy TUNK their rock hard fruiting heads collided against his greaves. “I just knew we forgot something...” he groaned.

“Ser Jet, I implore you,” the Anjanath continued as she consciously lowered her voice. “You have already, quite selflessly, gifted me countless treasures as it is! Your teachings; Your time; Your...”

The Slayer, resting on both knees, gestured to the gargantuan weapons laid down beside her in disbelief. “Need I say more?”

“Even soooooooooooooooooooooo,” Jet grimaced while he flopped forward at the waist. “What good is a Sword without a sheath? A Shield without a strap?”

Alma sheepishly scratched at a sore and scaly cheek. She could scarce remember the last time she had smiled so much. “I admittedly know not,” she trailed off. “But I suppose I will simply have to burden you with my presence once more if I am to find out!”

Sighing, Jet straightened out his posture with a bemused snort. “...S'pose so.”

Licks of flame tumbled free from Alma's lips while her gravelly voice gave way to laughter yet again.

“So I take it you're not sick of me yet?” said the Hunter with a smirk and a shrug.

The Anjanath took to clapping at her chest. Her ribs ached from having enthusiastically expressed such unfamiliar emotions. “Nonsense, Ser Jet! Though... I fear I have imposed upon you and kept you overlong.”

Flicking up his visor, Jet squinted at the shimmering red orb that was the sun. Eyes straining, he watched it sink below the horizon as it draped the curtain of night down with it.

“Ere we depart however...” A growl, nervous and uncertain, reverberated deep within Alma's throat. “Incessant, and aggravating as it may be, I fear I must again ask you...”

Jet snorted as his visor fell back into place. “Yes, Alma.”

Shoulders bunched, the stoic Slayer fidgeted before the Hunter whose height struggled to match her fingers in length. Back and forth she shifted her weight as she felt herself sinking into the very bedrock.

“Yes! Yes! A thousand times yes! They're yours!” Sidling alongside the nigh ship-sized Sword, his armored fingers tracing along its edge, Jet approvingly slapped a hand against it. “That's why I'm so mad at myself to begin with! Without some sort of sheath, and a strap, carrying these things around will be a hassle!”

“...Forgive me, Ser Jet,” mumbled the Anjanath. “I should have known better than to doubt you.”

The humbled Hunter responded with a sputtering raspberry. “It's nothing, Alma. Really.”

“I assure you it is anything but,” she warmly replied. Balled fist held close to her chest, the Slayer bowed her head in thanks.

Rubbing an armored gauntlet along the back of his helmet, a thoroughly flummoxed Jet-

FWOOOOOOOOOM

Yelped and skittered backwards when Alma extended her hand to him. Palm upturned, the Anjanath allowed her knuckles to crash to the barren earth before her. “By your consent, Ser Jet, I would escort you back to Astera.” The beginnings of a shameful blush burned upon the monstrous woman's cheeks. “I would ask that you walk with me...” mumbled Alma as her lips wildly wavered. “But I trust not my tread.”

“I-I-I appreciate the offer, Alma. Really!” the Jet fumbled out in response. “I assure you though, I'll be...”

At the edge of the clearing, where there ought to have been a beaten down and familiar path that the Hunter had tread only hours before, was instead a yawning void. Abyssal darkness, inky and all-consuming, patiently waited for him amongst the unfamiliar undergrowth. The canopy of the Ancient Forest, so dense in its foliage, all but assured that not even the light of the fading sun, much less the

moon, could pierce through to its detritus covered floor.

“...Fine.” Clearing his throat, Jet timidly approached the wumbo Wyvern's outstretched fingers. “You're sure you don't mind?” he asked.

Alma gently shook her head side to side. “As Slayer I am entrusted, I am expected, to protect these lands and all who dwell within them. It is a responsibility that I...” The Anjanath's amber eyes hung heavily upon the human as she cracked a monstrous, if not uncertain, grin. “That I am all too happy to bear.”

Jet scrunched his lips as he straddled the gap between her massive digits. Planting his hands upon her palm, its scarred and wrinkled expanse more than capable of losing him in her grasp, the Hunter hesitated. “It... umm...” He recognized that tone, if not that look, in an instant. Jet had feigned that selfsame sincerity over the course of his Master Rank training far too many times to count. “Alma?”

“Hum?”

The Hunter dipped his head low while Alma splayed her fingers as far apart as her straining muscles would allow. He knew Brook, and more likely than not the other well traveled Master Rank Hunters, held Slayers in low esteem. But surely, surely, the monsters of the Ancient Forest regarded her with respect! ...How could they not after all she did for them?

Clearing his throat, Jet turned his gaze skyward. “This might sound weird m-m-me saying this but...” His chest plate noisily jostled as he dragged out an uneasy exhale. “It's okay if you're not.”

Alma froze. Tremors wracked her monolithic fingers as they unconsciously, and unintentionally, pinched Jet between them.

Arms tucked against his sides the Hunter sharply inhaled while his armor crumpled inward. His skyrocketing heart rate, to his immeasurable relief, promptly eased back up when the Anjanath forced her fingers apart with a panicked gasp.

“S-ser Jet! Mine apologies, I...I...”

“No no no i-it's fine! I'm fine! Uh. Erm.” Jet uneasily took to rubbing at the back of his gorget as he danced around the struck nerve. “What I mean is...” The Hunter grunted as he fumbled and listlessly grasped at the open air. “Being a Slayer is clearly a lot. A lot a lot. And... you don't have to force or fake a smile for me when I chuck yet another chore onto your shoulders.”

Wistful growls reverberated within the colossal Wyvern's throat. “I...” Alma pursed her lips as her tongue, and the words carried upon it, came to catch against the roof of her mouth.

Jet casually gestured towards the lightless depths of the Ancient Forest. “I'll be fine. Really.”

Alma forcefully shook her head. “I... confess that my duties have weighed heavily upon me as of late, Ser Jet.” At every syllable uttered a warm and smoky gust of air washed over the Hunter. “But not this. Not you.”

With a bemused, if not relieved, sigh Jet found himself bunching up against the Anjanath's calloused pink palm when she slid her fingers further forward. At her gentle insistence he clambered into her grasp. "Me? Heavy? I would certainly hope not," he hehed before lightly smacking at the wrinkled scales that refused to so much as dimple beneath his weight.

An uncharacteristic snort escaped Alma's flared nostrils. With slow and measured movements, tinged by fear and hesitation, the Anjanath protectively cupped her hands together around the diminutive human. "Your tidings; Your charity; Your company..." A truly sincere smile, one that strained her scaly cheeks, spread wide across the Wyvern's battle scarred visage. "It means more than you could ever know. It is no bother, no burden, to see you to safety. Nor will it ever be."

"Alma..."

The Slayer leaned forward so as to gingerly clasp Jet against the crook of her neck. Only after she felt him safely settle in amongst the wreath of feathers wrapped around her shoulders did she relax her grip.

TOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM

Stomach rising into his throat, the Hunter white knuckled at the plumes of purple fur and feathers draping down the back of Alma's neck.

Jaw clenched, and teeth bared, Alma took her Shield in hand and pushed off from her Sword's pommel. Ominous and rib-rattling groans rumbled out from the Brute Wyvern's limbs as she rose to her feet.

KRSHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH

The Slayer wordlessly ripped her blade from the fractured earth. As the ensuing quakes and tremors slowly subsided Alma's gaze drifted towards the harried Hunter. "Come then, Ser Jet," she playfully growled. Embers trailed from the Anjanath's lips every time she spoke. "Asteria awaits."

THOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM

Arms swinging at her sides, the imposing Brute Wyvern waded without hesitation into the Ancient Forest. Raucous cracks and snaps accompanied her every catastrophic foot fall as the trees forcefully parted before her.

THOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM

Eyes gone wide Jet watched on while Nell's stomping grounds retreated from view. In its place

a sea of treetops, waves of moonlight rolling across its surface, unfurled before him. “This is...” Jet's eyes began to burn as he found himself loathe to blink. “Alma, this is incredible.”

The Anjanath offered a curt, albeit inquisitive, grunt in response. “You truly think so?”

Jet, dumbstruck and awe inspired, could but nod.

Towering over the very trees themselves, and clad in starlight, Alma contentedly hummed to herself. “Full glad am I then, Ser Jet.”

THOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

Jostling back and forth, the clanking and shuffling of his armor drowned out by the rhythmic rustling of Ancient Forest's canopy, Jet ravenously drank in the sights and sounds of a world he'd never known like this. “This is your everyday, huh?” he breathlessly marveled.

Smoke trailed out from the sides of Alma's lips as she cracked a subdued smile. “...I suppose so. Should I continue keeping you overlong we risk it becoming your own!”

THOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

“You don't see me complaining,” teased the Hunter.

THWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

“Nor I,” whispered the Slayer.

THOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

THOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

FWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

With a deafening creak the enormous wooden gates that guarded Astera slammed shut behind Jet and Brook. Clouds of displaced dirt and pebbles rolled past their armored greaves while the pair of Hunters failed to tamp down their respective jaw splitting yawns.

“So,” Brook asked with a smack of her lips. “How are today's to-dos looking?”

Hands held out before him, Jet squinted at the crinkled piece of paper clasped between his fingers. His eyes, crusted with sleep, struggled to adjust to the morning sun. “Bwuh. Let's see...” he mumbled as the Hunter brushed aside the shoulder length locks of hair dangling over his forehead.

The spherical star's blindingly brilliant form, straddling the line between the sea and sky, painted the whole of the New World with warm streaks of pinks and yellows. As they stood shoulder to shoulder, their iron pauldrons scraping against one another, both the Hunter and Huntress thoughtfully hummed while they drank in the Commander's chicken scratch.

Brook, helmet tucked under her arm, leaned in close. “Looks like we're on the hook forrrrrrrrrr-”

Jet, his voice dry and cracking, read the list of desired deliveries aloud. “Antidote Herbs, Fire Herbs, Sleep Herbs...”

“I'm noticing a bit of a pattern,” Brook snorted.

“Hard not to,” Jet snarked back. “Any preference on how we split these up?”

Hands on her hips, Brook curiously tossed her head side to side as she scanned not only the shoreline but the thickets of trees crowding along the sand for certain sizable someones. “Let's not get ahead of ourselves now. Before we dig into divvying up deliveries how bout we figure out where our Cultural Ambassadors wandered off to? It ain't like them to be late.”

Pocketing the parchment, Jet slowly ambled down the beaten path leading out and away from Astera. The far away roar of the waves, paired with the rustling of fern fronds, was relaxing albeit... quiet. Uncomfortably so. “I'm sure it's nothing but...”

SKREAAHHHHHHH

A high-pitched and reverberating howl, the telltale roar of a Tobi-Kadachi, echoed out from the Ancient Forest.

“Better safe than sorry,” Brook concluded. Slipping on her helmet she broke out into a jog with Jet hot on her heels.

“Oh my gosssh!” Taras shrieked. “Nellllll, I'm ssoo exssstited for you!!!”

“I still can't believe it!!!” purred the Nargacuga. Hands balled together she giddily stomped her scaled feet. “He asked! Finally finally finally he asked! He really asked!”

Forked tongue fluttering between his lips, sparks danced along the snowy white mane of fur draped across the Tobi-Kadachi's lithe back. With every happy hiss, bursts of light illuminated the still slumbering Ancient Forest. “A human? Inviting you into their nessesst? It doesssn't get much more ssseriousss than thissst!”

“I-I-I know!” Nell took to fanning herself as the crimson bands of fur wrapped around her eyes,

and stretching up to her ears, positively glowered. "I... I..."

Stray Fulgurbugs, nestled amongst the knotted coils of roots and mushrooms that matted the forest floor, stirred to life. At the snake squirrel's every explosion of electricity the blue bioluminescent insects took to lazily bumbling into Taras and Nell both.

"I-I-I never thought this day would come!" she gasped. This was everything Nell had ever hoped for, ever dreamed for, in their relationship! And yet... the Nargacuga clutched at her chest as flustered and anxious chirps, interlaced with pathetic growls, tumbled out from her beak.

"Easssy, easssy!" Taras implored of her. "It'sss a lot to take in, I know!"

Nell's eyes wildly bounced around her sockets. To a monster this was... this was...

The Nargacuga forced down a nervous swallow. This wasn't just a lot. This was everything! To share one's nest was to share one's heart, one's hopes, and one's future! So why?! Why was she feeling so anxious at the prospect? Why was she feeling so scared? She should have been ecstatic! Elated, even!

Planting his hands upon the Nargacuga's shoulders, the Tobi-Kadachi gently shook the wilting Wyvern.

Increasingly intrusive what-ifs flooded to the forefront of the bat cat's thoughts. What if they couldn't make it work? What if they were simply too different? With a squawk Nell snapped to attention. "What if I mess this up?! Taras! Taras, what do I do?!"

"You won't! I promissse!"

"But-"

With a pronounced ahem Taras cleared his throat. "You won't!" he confidently declared.

Ears tucked close to her skull, and tail drooped, Nell leaned into the Tobi-Kadachi with a whine.

"You won't," Taras gently reassured her with a nuzzle and a hug. "And you want to know why?"

Head buried into the Fanged Wyvern's neck, the Nargacuga nod nodded as she sank into his embrace.

"Becaussse I'm here to help!"

With a hurf, and wimpy whap of her barbed tail, Nell squeezed back at the snake squirrel.

Snoot held high, Taras confidently blepped. "Asss luck would have it, I'm sssomething of an exssspert! A human exxxspert!"

"...Really?"

"Really!" Taras boasted as he slung an arm around the Nargacuga's shoulder. "Here! We'll

ssstart from the top!” Free hand held out before him the Tobi-Kadachi took to tracing a clawed finger, static popping along its pointed tip, through the air.

The Fulgurbugs flitting about enthusiastically followed Taras' lead. At his prompting, and playful nudging, they clustered together to form the glowing likeness of a horned Hunter helmet.

“Asss we all know humansss are a reclusssive sssort! Few, if any, ever dare to venture outssside of the sssafety of their hive! Of Assstera!” Taras, sporting a toothy smile, gingerly cupped his hand beneath the buzz buzzing Hunter. “I mean it'sss no wonder given how itsssy bitssy they are.”

Nell, her eyes half-lidded, couldn't help but smile.

Arcs of electricity skittered across Taras' palm as he beckoned the Fulgurbugs closer. “Only the bravessst of humans dare to slip into their decorated shells and try their hand at being a Hunter! Which meanss the only monsters they ever meet tend to be Trainersss!”

“Which is what makes being one so special,” Nell giggled. “Lucky us, huh?”

“Mhmmm!” Taras happily growled. With a swat of his hand he dispersed the condensed cloud of insects. Fingers splayed, wildly popping arcs of static leaping between his sky blue digits, the Tobi-Kadachi traced concentric ovals upon the air itself. The Fulgurbugs enthusiastically swarmed together in response. “Now it'sss besst to think of Huntersss, of humansss, like... Rock Fruit!”

The Nargacuga tilted her head to the side with a husky, if not perplexed, growl. True to their name those flowers of the desert, often found growing along the Ancient Forest's border with the Wildspire Waste, looked and tasted the part. Though...

Nell's ears fwipped to attention. If one was willing to break their beak upon them, and crack apart their stony exteriors, Rock Fruit yielded the sweetest and most succulent flesh in all the lands! Almost like-

“Now you get it!” Taras jubilantly wiggled. “Cracking open a Hunter'sss armor can be a tricky, if not frusstrating, processs but it'sss ssoo ssooo worth it! And you're already sso far along!” With flicks of his fingers the Tobi-Kadachi batted away the crunchy and impotently buzzing exterior of the Fulgurbug cluster.

Fur puffed out, a rumbling mess of growls, purrs, and chirps tumbled forth from the Nargacuga's beak.

“THAT SSSAID!” the Flying Wyvern boomed with a guttural hiss. Clenching his fingers the Fulgurbugs caught between his digits balled together into an impenetrable and crackling mass of chitin. “Humansss MUSSST be allowed to ssshed their armor, ssshed their sshellss, at their own passse! They will open up to you when they're ready! Never, and I mean EVER, try to forssse it!”

Brows furrowed, Nell resolutely nodded as she straightened her posture.

Taras relaxed his grip and, nigh instantaneously, the Fulgurbugs lazily fanned out and dissipated. “Now then! Onto the processs itssself! When exssploring sssomewhere new, or meeting sssomeone new, humansss will alwayss do ssoo in their armor! The unknown iss ssscary after all!”

“Poor little things...” the Nargacuga huffed as she worriedly cupped a hand to her beak.

“Ass sssuch!” Pulling away from Nell, Taras authoritatively wagged a finger as he continued to monologue aloud. “The firsst and the mossst important thing you can do for them iss to make them feel sssafe! When a human feelsss comfortable and at eassse they will ssslowly sstart coming out of their sshellsss! Piessse by piessse!”

A dreamy sigh escaped the bat cat's beaked lips. It had taken everything she had not to squeal in delight the first time Jet popped off his helmet in her presence. That simple, yet endearing, show of faith had meant the world to her.

“It'sss the mark of any good Trainer to make them feel ass sssuch! And I mean not to boasst or anything but...” Arms crossed about his chest, and forked tongue dangling from between his lips, the Tobi-Kadachi haughtily turned up his head. “The fact that not sso much ass a sssingle human ssscurried back to their nssssts, or retreated into their sshellsss, when we vissited Assstera ssshowsss ass sssuch! We're the besst of the besst!”

With a roll of her eyes, Nell playfully puffed out her cheeks as the wings lining her forearms fanned out. “...He isn't wrong,” she thought to herself with a flustered chirp as she took to sheepishly scratching at her chin.

Clearing his throat, Taras took to pacing about the gnarled undergrowth of the Ancient Forest once more. “Now the nexxt sstep, while it issn't the final one, iss the mossst important one!” As the snake squirrel twirled his fingers about the air, beads of static congealing atop his digits, the clouds of displaced Fulgurbugs dutifully followed. “And that'sss when a human feelsss ssafe not jusst around you but becausse of you!”

Fists clenched, and eyes twinkling, Nell chirped as her barbed tail wildly swished back and forth behind her.

“It'sss...” Taras' self-assured bravado faltered as he timidly took to tapping his fingers together. “It'sss a sssubtle but pronoucccdd disstinessshin! For a human to go from no longer feeling threatened by you to to... well...”

The pair of monsters hehed as they took to rubbing at the back of their necks. Cheeks burning hot they recalled, rather fondly at that, how Jet and Brook carried themselves when they were still fresh faced Hunters.

Abuzz with nerves, Brook cowered before Taras upon approach. The Huntress, desperate to punt her anxiety aside, leapt into action as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Whereas Jet-

Exchanging knowing glances, and toothy smiles, the Tobi-Kadachi and Nargacuga shared a laugh. At the Rookie, and Master, levels their first impressions of him had been anything but inspiring.

Nell puffed out her chest and peeled back her beaked lips. Regardless of their performances there was no denying the undercurrent of fear and trepidation that gripped the Hunters both. Which, truth be told, was... empowering.

Taras, his serpentine pupils contracting into a razor's edge, reciprocated Nell's menacing grin with the smuggest of scowls.

It felt good to so casually, so effortlessly, make those hapless humans cower before them. To cow them into compliance. To wrap them around their fingers and force them to hang on their every word. And yet...

The Tobi-Kadachi's pupils dilated as blood rushed to his face. "Y-y-you know! When uhhh. Umm," Taras began as he aimlessly swished his hands through the clouds of Fulgurbugs buzzing against his sparking cheeks.

"R-r-right!" Nell sheepishly affirmed. "When you... when they..."

It paled in comparison to what was to come. Flustered chirps, and half-formed hisses, tumbled free from the Wyverns maws as they tried and failed to elaborate upon and put the sensation into words. Day after day their Hunters returned to them and, with the passage of time, fear gave way to familiarity. Their disparity in size and strength became not a point of contention but of reassurance.

"When they exssitedly wave you down as they jog into your clearing," Taras stammered.

"When you just as excitedly wave back," Nell followed up with a searing blush.

As Trainers they had always had their Hunter's best interests at heart. But somewhere along the way it quit being a matter of when or even if their Hunters would succeed. The Wyverns wanted, they needed, to see their humans happy. To see them safe. Whether or not Jet and Brook earned their Ranks had become irrelevant to them... shameful as it was to admit.

With a huff, the Tob-Kadachi shyly shuffled one scaly foot over the other. "W-w-when they start thinking of you ass their friend..."

"When you start thinking of them as something more than that..." replied the Nargacuga as she took to fanning herself.

It was insidious, honestly, how subtly the once menacing monsters found themselves transformed from predators into protectors! How the Hunters they once thought of as a responsibility became anything but. They were their pride. They were their friends. They... they made each and every day better by simply being a part of it.

Taras wrung his hands together as arcs of electricity crackled off his lithe frame. "When they finally feel comfortable enough ssshowing themssselvesss, sssharing themssselvesss, with you..."

Nell's fur puffed out at the mention. S-s-suffering Sapphire. Seeing Jet without his armor for the very first time was... it was...

The Nargacuga forced down a lump in her throat. It was terrifying.

He was so delicate. So fragile. So beautiful to behold. Yet all she could think about was how any mistake, any misstep, could prove disastrous if not fatal. She was hesitant, horrified even, to approach much less interact with him.

But he wasn't. He trusted her. So effortlessly and so casually, so utterly and so completely, he trusted her. The crimson bands of fur wrapped around the Nargacuga's eyes seethed as her heart pounded in her ears. Nothing could, or ever would, compare to the feeling that simple act instilled into her.

“A-a-anyway! You get what I'm sssaying!” Taras stuttered. Forked tongue blepped out, he flicked away the Fulgurbugs trying to burrow into his wild mane of hair. “Then lassst but not leassst we have...”

Eyes gone wide, and wings fanned out, Nell leaned in close.

The Tobi-Kadachi cleared his throat before he took to pacing along the beaten path and stomping flat what stray embers his sparks had stoked. “It'sss where you're, we both, are at. The final ssstep!” Head held high, the snake squirrel straightened his posture. “While there iss nothing ssstopping usss from welcoming humansss into our nsssstsss it'sss... it'sss...”

“It's not the same,” the Nargacuga finished for him.

Taras nodded and timidly gestured to himself. “G-g-given what we are and given what they are-”

Rubbing a hand along her scaly forearm, Nell nervously clacked her beak. “You can't help but wonder if they would feel forced to accept the invitation,” she glumly stated. It's why she had always been so reluctant, scared even, to broach the topic of Jet visiting her nest before she ever saw his own.

“Whereasss if a human popsss the sselfsssame quesstion!” the Tobi-Kadachi excitedly elaborated. “You know it iss coming from a placce of trussst!”

“From a place of love,” Nell breathlessly gasped.

Taras positively crackled with energy as he hum hum hummed. “Sso I undersstand your hessitation! Your consssern! Essspossshially with the t-t-time and trussst it takesss to get here!”

Nell fervently nodded along. She and Jet had known each other for... how many seasons now? Hrufffffff. Ever since they first met the moons had simply flown by.

Scaly brows arched, and hands cupped together, Taras smirked while beads of static trickled down his fingers and pooled within his palms. Fulgurbugs wedged their way through his digits, eagerly lapping up every ion of electricity, as they clustered together once more.

“It'sss worth it though. Becausse you and I know better than anyone,” said the Tobi-Kadachi as he tenderly thumbed at the insectoid sphere. At his touch the Fulgurbugs fell away to reveal a sprite of electricity, radiant and pure, crackling at its center. “That there'sss nothing quite like when your human finally opensss themssselvesss up to you.”

Pulling apart his hands, Taras happily hummed when the Fulgurbugs dispersed. Twinkling like stars against the Ancient Forest's canopy, its leaves so thick they blotted out the very sun, the bioluminescent bugs clung to the countless branches as if they were constellations.

Back and forth Nell's eyes nervously swished along the bottom of their sockets. "What's it..." Clacking her beak together, the Nargacuga bunched her shoulders and tucked her tail between her legs. "What's it like?"

Lips wavering, Taras tucked his arms close to his chest and wiggled emphatically. "Oh it'sss... it'sss.... it'sss magical, Nell! I can't even begin to dessscribe it!"

"You can at least try!" huffed the Nargacuga.

A plaintive growl lodged itself in the Tobi-Kadachi's throat. "I. Hrf. Gosssh where do I even begin..." Taras mumbled. "I mean. I coullllld ssstart with..."

"Mmhmm?" Beak pressing in against the snake squirrel's snout, Nell impatiently chirped and growlfed.

"Easssy, eassy, easssy!" Taras snipped back. "I jussst. It'sss jussst. Oh but it'sss sssso rissssqueeeee!" he whined.

"Tell meeeeeeeeeeeee!"

Hands covering his eyes, Taras turned away with a pitiful growl. Ozone burned off his crackling spines as he threatened to spontaneously combust out of embarrassment. "F-f-fine! Jussst. J-j-jussst imagine, Nell! How it feelsss to coil around them. To feel their sssskin against your ssscalesss. To feel them sssscratching at your snout, kissing at your neck, and sssinking into your embrasse!"

"HRUFFF."

"I KNOW, RIGHT?!" Taras howled. "Human nsssstsss are ssspecial! When you're curled up insssides them, with your Hunter held close, your worriesss jussst wasssh away!" Splaying apart his fingers the Tobi-Kadachi's blood red eyes nervously locked gazes with Nell's own. "S-s-sseeing them at their mossst vulnerable changesss you, Nell. You'll never want to let them go! Never want to leave their ssside! Never let them come to harm! You'd..." Taras curled his scarred tail round his legs. "You'd do anything for them."

The Nargacuga shivered at the thought. Barbed tail swishing furiously behind her, Nell impotently tamped her massive feet. She could not, would not, be denied any longer! "Should I bring anything for the occasion? Like like like some fresh Shepherd Hare or Blissbill? Oh! Oh oh oh is there a right way, or a wrong way, to enter a human nest?" On and on Nell squawked herself blue in the face. "D-d-do I..." As she finally stopped to breathe the crimson mask of fur wrapped around her eyes threatened to envelop the whole of her head in its radiant glow. "Do I help Jet out of his armor when we're ready to-"

"No! No no no no no what did I jussst sssay?! You can't forssse it!" Taras reached forward to flick at Nell's beak. "Jet will be ready when he isss ready!"

Growls, wildly fluctuating in pinch, rumbled out from the bat cat's sternum.

"Patienssse! When we get to Assstera I'll walk you through the dosss and dont'sss. Promissse!"

Head tossed back, Nell dragged out an exasperated exhale. “But I wanna know nowwwwwww.”

Chuckling to himself, Taras slapped at the wumbo Wyvern's back. “How about thisss then? When you finally ssslink into Jet'ssss nsssst I know jussst the thing to sset the mood. Worksss on Brook every time!”

Leaning into the Tobi-Kadachi, visible plumes of steam wafting out from her ears, Nell grudgingly afforded him her attention.

Eyes half-lidded, Taras flashed a self-assured smile. “When the whole of the human hive sssettless in to ssslumber and the Emperor Hoppersss sstart to chirp and croon... you hit him with thisss!” Static danced along the snake squirrel's lips as a heady mist trailed past his pointed teeth. “Hey there, Rookie,” he said with a sensual flick of his forked tongue. “Why don't we take thisss hunt... horissstall?”

“PSH.” Cheeks puffed out, tears beaded along the edges of Nell's eyes as she stifled a raspberry.

“...What?” Taras defensively pouted.

“Nothing,” Nell managed in between snrks and snorts as she struggled to hold in her laughter.

“What?” whined the Tobi-Kadachi. “Brook likesss it!”

“Oh I'm sure she does,” the Nargacuga wheezed.

“I'm telling you it worksss!” he hissed. Snoot scrunched, Taras arched his tail and stood on his tippy toes as Nell cupped her hands to her beak and gasped for air in between guffaws.

SHFF SHFF

The towering Trainers perked to attention when, out from the underbrush, their Hunters burst forth with weapons raised.

“Brook! Jet!” Taras exclaimed. Lips pulled flat, the Fanged Wyvern recoiled not only at their unexpected entrance but their battle ready stances. “What are you doing here? Isss sssomething the matter?”

“That's...” Brook, Charge Blade held out before her, warily scanned the shadows for any and all threats. Stepping over roots and rotted logs, and stabbing every stray fern and frond for good measure, she incredulously turned to her behemoth boyfriend. “That's what we should be asking you! You never showed up for our rendezvous!”

“OH. Oh. Oh, Brook I'm...” Head held low, Taras shamefully shrank in on himself and curled his toes.

“Are you okay?” inquired the Huntress. “We heard your cry and-”

“No! Wait. Y-y-yesss! I mean...” Papping at his cheeks the Tobi-Kadachi violently shook his head. “Forgive uss, Brook! We didn't mean to make you worry!”

Beaked lips wavering, Nell's chest intermittently puffed out while she choked back bouts of laughter. When her piercing yellow eyes came to rest upon Jet...

“SNRK.” Whether she willed it or no, the Nargacuga's bird brain flooded itself with images of her lying on her side, tail tugging Jet close, all while she serenaded him with Taras' surefire script.

WHAPF

Taras irritably back handed at Nell's shoulder. “W-w-we're fine! Honessst! We jusst got so caught up in a lively dissscussion about uhh... duhhh...”

Nell's composure began to crumple when she imagined pinching Jet's gorget between her beak only to snap it clean off and expose his neck.

“Trainer... thingsss!” Taras uneasily asserted. “Right, Nell?”

WHUMPF

What failed to pass as syllables, much less consonants, tumbled free from Nell's mouth.

“RIGHT?”

Wordlessly nodding, she answered in the affirmative via a handful of husky chirps and snorts.

“...Nell? You good?” Jet worriedly asked.

Eyes watering, the Master Rank Trainer blinked away her tears with a strained smile. “Never. Better,” she valiantly managed to reply even as Taras continued to slap at her.

Exchanging quizzical glances, and slowly sheathing their respective weapons, Brook and Jet shared an uncertain shrug. “Okaaaaaaaay,” said the Hunters as they reluctantly played along.

“Right! Ssso! About those deliveriesss!” Taras followed up as he shamelessly tried to change subjects.

“About those deliveries,” Brook deadpanned.

“We didn't forget!” the Tobi-Kadachi stammered. “It'sss jusst. We jusst.... had ssso much to talk about wasss all!”

Pronounced coughs wracked Nell's chest as she dutifully shook her head up and down.

“Uh huhhhhh,” Brook replied. Sauntering up alongside her behemoth boyfriend she knocked at his calf. “Well by the sounds of it you still do. Why don't you two pick back up your Trainer talk say... at the Canteen? Once today's to-dos are all accounted for mind you.”

Sharp gasps escaped from both of the monster's maws. "You mean?" the Tobi-Kadachi excitedly cheered as Nell and Taras took to stamping their feet.

Hands held up before him in a placating manner Jet bid them to calm themselves. "A hard day's work deserves a hard day's pay doesn't it? Or... or meal. I guess," he mumbled as he took to scratching at the back of his helmet. "That and it'll be nice to not have to sneak you in there for a change of pace!"

"This could become a regular part of our routine you know," Brook added. "You two swinging by bright and early to catch some breakfast before deliveries."

"Or treating you to some lunch after the fact," Jet followed up with a wiggle of his finger.

Wings fanned out, and barbed tail clubbing apart trees behind her, the Nargacuga's eyes took on an manic glow. "WELL WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?" Nell boomed as she redirected all of her pent up energy in an instant.

"We're. We're waiting on you," Jet nervously clarified. "L-l-let's get you up to speed. Today we haAAAAUGH." Head spinning, the Hunter yelped when he was suddenly swept off his feet. Tucked beneath a thick furred arm, and hopelessly smothered between the Nargacuga's breasts and biceps, Jet's calls for help went unheeded as Nell bounded back into the underbrush with her man in tow.

Brows arched, Brook wearily looked to her behemoth boyfriend. Back and forth her eyes darted about the quiet clearing before she lovingly embraced one of his lanky legs.

Dropping to a crouch, the land itself quaking when his knee crashed into the damp and moss caked earth, Taras cupped his hands beneath his Huntress' arms. Thumbs pinching against the top of her limbs he gingerly hoisted her up into the air before cuddling her close to his chest. "Sssorry again," he hissed.

"It's... it's fine," Brook mumbled as she buried her head into the peach colored scales that lined his torso. "Just hard not to worry about you lately is all. You know?"

Chin tucked against his neck, Taras nosed at and nuzzled his bitty beloved. "I know."

In sweet silence the size-mismatched couple tenderly embraced one another. After what felt like an eternity, an enjoyable one at that, the Huntress stirred. "You sure you're okay?" she whispered.

The Fanged Wyvern's lips all but enveloped Brook's head in response as he peppered her with static laced smooches. "I'm sssure. Are you?"

Resting her head against his sternum, and enthusiastically squeezing at what little of him that she could, Brook laughed at his every reassurance. "Taras, please!" she giggled. Dreamy sighs wafted free from her helmet as she reached back to squeeze at his fingers. "And... yeah. I am now."

Eyes half-lidded, Taras let his snout linger against her visor. "Good."

Breath held, Brook's stoic steel figure deflated even further as the Tobi-Kadachi tenderly thumbed at her plated back. Yet... even were she to hope against hope the Huntress knew it was not to last. "C'mon," she reluctantly spoke up. "Let's not keep 'em waiting."

Lumbering footfalls, punctuated by the sharp crack of snapped apart branches and detritus trampled underfoot, carried across the Ancient Forest as Taras followed in Nell's wake. "...Sssay, Brook?" he asked after a time.

"Hmm?"

A longing and wistful growl rattled Brook to her very bones as the Tobi-Kadachi shyly bunched his shoulders. "Do you think... do you think the Felynesss will finally warm up to me?"

"Awh Taras." Nuzzling into her boyfriend's bosom, the Huntress squeezed him for everything she was worth. "How can they not now that you're an honored guest? You've been on your best behavior and then some for months now even! Just in case though... I'll be sure to put in an extra good word for ya!"

The shyest of smiles creased the snake squirrel's lips. "Promissse?"

"Promise!"

Even after having dropped to her knees Brook still towered head and shoulders over the frustrated Felyne standing before her. "Pleaaaaaaase?" she implored.

"Mreow mao mew meowwww?" asked the burly cat with a sigh.

Shuffling behind him, the Huntress tightened the diminutive Felyne's drawstrings and massaged their shoulders. "It's their first time here!"

"Meow mow mao mrow!"

"...As proper patrons."

THOOOOOOOOOOM

Their tails excitedly flitting to and fro behind them, Nell and Taras plopped themselves down before the Canteen. Sitting down cross legged, feet pressed together and hands clasped around their ankles, waterfalls of saliva trailed from their bat cat beak and snakey snout respectively.

"Maow meow mrppp mowwww mao mew mrow mjau?" muttered the Felyne as they dragged their paws along their cheeks.

"Ah ah ahh!" tutted the Huntress. Hand on her hip she gestured back to the kitchens overflowing with the bounty of the sea. Tucked away within the wood fired ovens, bubbling atop ash crusted racks, and boiling away within flavorful vats were fish of every flavor! Breaded fish; Grilled fish; Poached fish. "Just who do you think you have to thank for all this?" Brook inquired.

"Mrow?"

"What do you mean, Maccha?!"

“Mjau mow mew mrrp mreow!”

Brook pulled her lips flat and rolled her eyes. “I don't have to dignify that with an answer.”

The Felyne, the Canteen's very own Meowster Chef, continued to backtalk Brook in earnest.

“I don't care if it was her boat! Taras did all the work!”

“...Meaow?”

“Yes really!”

“It's true,” Jet chimed in as he sauntered back behind the counter and tied a bandanna around the frumpy feline's head. “Nell helped, even!”

“Mmhhh, mhhmm!” nodded the Fanged and Flying Wyvern.

Whiskers drooping, the Felyne defensively crossed their arms about their chest.

“This is their catch! Like it or not they provided not only their own food but nigh on everybody else's!” Brook begged. “Surely it isn't too big of an ask to have you purrsonally prepare something special for them? Just this once?”

Head tossed back, the Meowster Chef inhaled deeply of the spice stained air and held their breath. Tossing their noggin side to side they let an interminable, and awkward, silence hang over the Canteen.

SIGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH

Dragging out their exhale, the Felyne limply slapped their paws against their fuzzy thighs. “...Maoooooow.”

“Thank mew! Oh thank mew, thank mew, thank mewwww!” Brook chuckled as she hopped to her feet and hoisted up the cantankerous cat for an emphatic hug.

“Mrewwww!” Flailing their fuzzy little limbs, the Felyne wiggled free from the Huntress' embrace with a blush and a harrumph. Ears twitching in irritation, they shooed Jet and Brook both out and away from behind the counter.

“We know, we know! Leave it to the purrfessionals,” Jet snarked.

Ladle in hand, the Felyne closed their eyes and steadied their breathing. The open flames roaring behind them popped and crackled. Palm fronds rustled in the breeze. Nell and Taras' pupils dilated into saucers, and puddles of drool collected upon the stone slab of a counter, while the monsters leaned in close.

SCHWING

A blinding glint filled the Felyne's eyes.

FWOOSH

From the shadows a cavalcade of cooks somersaulted forth. Tumbling alongside their fellow Felyne, and rising to a kneel, they jazz handsed in earnest at their Meowster Chef. Said chef's fuzzy lips parted to reveal a snaggle toothed smile. Paw held out before them, their brandished ladle positively shimmering in the midday sunshine, they turned their gaze towards Nell and Taras. Clearing their throat they, and every other Felyne for good measure, proceeded to ask in unison:

“Meow mew maow mrrp morw?”

Bumping shoulders, the Nargacuga and Tobi-Kadachi giddily growled. Never before had the Canteen turned them away but they were well aware it had only been out of a grudging sense of duty. Now though? Now they were finally being treated, being welcomed, as esteemed guests!

“I'll have the Great King Marlin!” Nell boomed as her tail whapped manically behind her.

“And and and I'll have the Sscallop Chipsss!” Taras spat with glee.

With a clap clap of their paws, and the don don of drums, the gathered Felynes scattered as an appetizing assembly line roared to life! A veritable squad of sharply dressed felines darted past the counter, laying down plates and silver ware, before they-

HROMPH

Mewled and mrowed at the sight of Nell and Taras scooping up the plates as fast as they were laid out. Noisy crunches filled the air while the Nargacuga and Tobi-Kadachi treated themselves to their assumed appetizers. Cheeks puffed out, and jaws swiveling along their hinges, they ravenously inhaled every ceramic saucer laid out before them.

Paw held out before him, the Meowster Chef grumpily grabby handsed at the pair of Hunters.

“Yeah yeah,” Brook and Jet grumbled as they reached into their pockets and availed themselves of every spare Zenny in their possession.

WHUMPF

Jet could but sigh when, upon coming up short, a balled up apron papped against his face.

“Meow mreow mao.”

“I heard you,” the Hunter groaned as he slipped the Canteen's uniform on over his armor. Turning towards the Nargacuga he sheepishly scritchd at a helmeted cheek. “Nell. Taras. We've gone over this how many times now?”

“But they're the perfect palette cleansser!” whined Taras. “Have you ever even tassed them?”

“...What taste?” asked Brook as her forehead slid over her brows.

“Precisssely!” the Tobi-Kadachi hissed matter of factly.

“And the texture!” Nell chirped as she enthusiastically stuffed her face. “Can't forget that cromch!”

Fluff standing on end, and rocking back and forth, Taras eeheed. “And to think! We get to do thiss every day! Why... we'll blend right in at thiss rate!”

“As if we already don't!” Hands cupped to her beak, the Nargacuga's fur puffed out as she stifled a snicker. Fingers thrumming along her maw she playfully hip bumped Jet. “Why hello there, fellow Hunter! How do you do?”

Shoulders slouched, Jet and Brook shared a weary sigh as booming giggles rumbled out from their very significant others. Side eyeing one another they couldn't help but shrug and smile. Expensive and annoying as it was... they were worth it. They always would be.

“Is that what you are now?” Jet snorted.

“You can't deny I look the part,” the Nargacuga haughtily huffed. Clad in her tattered armor, dual Great Swords slung over her back, the towering Trainer had been all too eager to continue cosplaying as the Hunters she was entrusted to teach. “Besides! As Cultural Ambassador shouldn't I adhere to the customs of the humans that host me?”

“You just want an excuse to dress up,” raspberried her Hunter.

“It's fun!” Nell pouted.

Lips wavering, Taras longingly growled. “It sure looks it...”

“Patience, Taras,” Brook reassured him. “You'll have your time in the limelight soon enough! Right, Jet?”

Ambling back up alongside Nell, fingers sinking into the thick black fur lining her thighs, Jet scratched and scratched at the Nargacuga to her unfettered and unfiltered delight. “I did promise...” he reluctantly acknowledged.

DING A LING LING

Perking to attention, the Wyverns gasped when a parade of Felynes sauntered out from the kitchens and leading the procession was a man-sized plate held overhead like a palanquin. Hissing atop it laid a King Marlin, a shell of spices drizzled over its supple flesh, all wreathed with roasted tomatoes and a bakery's worth of toasted rolls.

Purrs, rib rattling and baritone, radiated out from Nell's generous chest while she slurped her beak. Her eyes methodically traced every drip of melted butter sluicing along the rolls. Every flake of the King Marlin's crispy skin sliding free from its frame. Every puff of aromatic steam wafting up from the ruby red sliced tomatoes.

“Mreow mowwww!” the Felynes purroudly boasted as they served the Nargacuga her mammoth meal.

Beaming from ear to pointed ear Nell's cheeks began to ache. An indecisive mixture of a chirp, a purr, and an enthusiastic growl revved within her throat as she applauded not only the service but the show!

LING RING DING

With a bow the felicitous Felynes dispersed. While they did so a rhythmic don don, and a deafening sizzle, filled the air. Fists balled together, Taras' forked tongue fluttered incessantly.

DOOM DOOOOM

DOOM DOOOM DOOOOOM

Drums boomed in sync to the rise and fall of a boulder sized saucer hoisted aloft by throngs of Felynes. The mountain of a meal, comprised of concentric rings of scallops and potatoes drizzled with crumbly cheeses and lemon butter, warily wobbled side to side.

DOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM

The slab of stone serving as the Canteen's counter sank into the very earth when the Felynes hurled the Tobi-Kadachi's meal onto it. Taras' eyes frantically bounced about their sockets as he drank in every leaf of spinach, every roasted Brussel sprout bud, and every crusted carrot slice that garnished his order.

“Mrrp mrow mao!”

Clearing their throats, the proud Felynes gathered alongside their Meowster Chef. Brows furrowed, the burly Felyne bid his culinary companions to huddle close. Teeth poking out from between his lips... he solemnly nodded in approval.

“Mreowww!” the starry eyed Felynes excitedly exclaimed! Purring in sync the crowd of cats happily bounced about. Twirling in place they dipped to their knees and tossed their arms out to their sides as they purroudly presented the fruit of their labors.

“Mrow meowwwwww!”

Slouched forward and sniffing up a storm the Tobi-Kadachi clasped his hands around his snout. They did it. They really did it. They served him, HIM, of all people! With a dance! With a cheer! And, most importantly of all, with a smile!

The gathered Felynes sheepishly rubbed at the back of their necks. “Mreow mow meow mew mrpp...”

Tears in his eyes, Taras violently wiggled in place. “Why I... I... I-”

HROMF

Showing thanks in the only way he knew how the Fanged Wyvern proceeded to bury his snout into the veritable shrine of seafood. Throat bulging with every ravenous swallow, the sky blue scales lining his neck stretching taut, Taras gasped for air between mouthfuls. "It'sss sssso sssso gooooooooood!" he mumbled, along with countless other compliments, between sobs.

More than satisfied by the sight of Taras seasoning his seafood with his own salt stained tears the gathered Felynes proudly pat themselves on the back. Smiles spreading from ear to ear they mrrped and mrowed at Jet to join them.

"Y-yeah?" asked the Hunter. Helmet jostling, Jet groaned when they thumbed back at the open air kitchens. His spirits sank at the sight of dirtied frying pans, sauce pans, saute pans, and skilletts piled precariously high. "...Alright. I'll see about making a dent in-"

"Meow mao!"

"ALL OF IT?"

"Mrrrp!"

"Nuohhhhhh my days," Jet winced. Head held low, the harried Hunter traded out his gauntlets for dish gloves before reluctantly trudging back past the countless wood fired ovens.

GROWLF

Shoulders tensed and hunched over, Nell lunged forward and clamped her beak around the neck of her King Marlin. Cleaving through the bone, relishing the sizzling sensation of nigh molten marrow caking against her teeth, the Nargacuga decapitated and tore apart her meal chew by chew. With every stomach churning crunch Nell's barbed tail excitedly slammed down behind her with seismic force.

Minding the spray of saliva and food, Brook cautiously sat herself down besides Taras. "So uhh... if you don't mind my asking," began the Huntress.

NOMPH

Brook winced when the Tobi-Kadachi's blood red eyes, their pupils narrowed into pinpricks, wordlessly swiveled towards her while he continued to grunt and gorge himself. Nell likewise side eyed the humbled human as she rent apart and devoured her man-sized meal. "About your Trainer talk from earlier-"

Cheeks puffed out, the Wyverns worriedly exchanged glances.

"Is something big in the works?" Elbow resting against the counter, and hand cupped to her cheek, Brook curiously cocked her head to the side. "Sure seems like it is what with how you forgot about our rendezvous!"

"W-w-well you sssee!" said Taras as he nervously gestured at the open air. Lips peeled back he pleadingly turned to Nell.

Thinking fast the Nargacuga stuffed her face full of bread. Headless King Marlin in hand, she aimlessly gesticulated and flopped it around as she proceeded to inarticulately choke her way through an elaborative excuse.

“Ack! Say it don't spray it!” Brook grimaced while she found herself pelted with a barrage of spittle and crumbs.

Taras, with the opportunity afforded to him, wracked his brain for an out. There had something, anything, they could feed Brook to throw her off their tracks! But what?

“W-w-wait!” hissed the Tobi-Kadachi. Fur standing on end, static arcing along the mane of white fluff trailing down his back, Taras fluttered his forked tongue. That was it!

With a gentle nudge of his elbow, Taras motioned for Nell to follow his lead. “If you sssimply mussst know!” he began. “The Trainerssss have been meaning to ressume their trialsss, and sssoon, once we convene and consssult with none other than...”

“The who now?” Jet asked dumbfounded. Soapy water dripped from the Hunter's pruned fingers as he tugged off his apron.

“The Silk Seer!” said Brook.

Balling up his suds stained uniform between his hands, Jet nodded along in feigned understanding. Smirk spreading wide from ear to ear he confidently declared: “...I have no idea who that is.”

“Snrk.”

Chucking his apron over his shoulder, Jet ambled past the thicket of palm trees ringed around the Canteen. Curled up in the shade, stuffed taut with kilo-calories and carbohydrates, Nell and Taras struggled to keep their eyes open.

“It's fine that you don't,” the Huntress clarified. Flopping back against the Tobi-Kadachi's prone form Brook yawned when he possessively coiled around her. “Not everyone needs to be in the know!”

“Should I be though?” Tossing a look back over his shoulder, Jet forced a smile at the latest rush of customers who couldn't help but curiously stare at them. Alchemists. Researchers. Fellow Hunters. Even adorably armored Felynes, practically attached to the hips of the Hunters they hounded, regarded them with rapt attention. Given the abrupt cancellation of any and all Trainer trials, and how listless folks had grown holed up inside Astera's walls, it was hardly any wonder all eyes were on them.

Jet's expression softened when he spied not just cocked brows, but a fair few stray smiles, lighting up the faces of their enraptured onlookers. Hmph. Even if this 'cultural exchange' had been cooked up under false pretenses... he and Brook both were well beyond committed to the bit at this point.

With a whistle the Huntress wordlessly gestured to Nell, softly snoring at Taras' side, and motioned for her partner in crime to take a seat.

Jet dutifully obliged. Reclining against the Nargacuga's gurgling stomach, the Hunter blushed profusely when he felt himself sinking into the beginnings of her muffintop. His eyes glazed over, and cheeks burned hot, as he settled into Nell's supple curves and looked out over the whole of Astera.

Beyond the rickety tables and benches that passed for the Canteen's patio seating lay steep and mountainous slopes overflowing with dense carpets of flowers, shrubs, and creeping vines. At their base sand slicked boardwalks stretched out into a shimmering harbor replete with crystal clear waters and a rainbow of reefs. White capped waves gently rolled into shore and, to the tune of the rising tide, the docks and anchored fishing boats alike comfortingly creaked and groaned. Jet would miss all of this, and more, once he finally earned his escape...

GRWLFF

The Hunter couldn't help but nervously cough when Nell unconsciously tucked her tail against him. Heavy purrs rolled over him as his presence, his touch, and even his very scent was enough to fluster his passed out partner. "S-s-soooooo," Jet stammered, "How bout that Silk Seer?"

"Honestly?" Brook said with a smack of her lips. "You really don't need to worry, much less care, about them until you've hit Master Rank." Nuzzling the back of her head into Taras' torso, her slow and heavy breaths came to synchronize with her boyfriend's own.

"Even so!" Curiosity piqued, Jet-

"Mrowwwwwwww!"

Jumped when a number of Palicos, fighterly Felynes that feared no meowmaster, curiously padded up to them.

"Oh! Uh! Hey! Hi! Can we help mew?" Jet sputtered.

"Mrrrrrrp?"

"Sorry but... no," Jet clarified for them. As he took to scritchng at one of Nell's ears his lips curled into a dopey smile. "Nell and Taras are here to teach not train!"

"Mraow maow mow?" they mewled in annoyance.

"He said no," Brook curtly shot back.

"Maybe another time?" the Hunter offered. These Palicos wanted a fight, a scrap, and who could blame them? It had been weeks now since the Trainers had offered one! Eyes half-lidded, Jet couldn't help but reminisce.

Once upon a time, when he was still but a wee Rookie Hunter, he had seriously considered purrtnering up with a Palico. Even now he still idly entertained thoughts of riding into battle with a Felyne friend at his beck and call! However... those thoughts always tapered off, and fast, once he recalled that Trainers graded significantly harsher against those who fought alongside Felynes as a trade off to the team up. That and he had never been able to commit given that Palicos had a reputation-

“MRAEROW!!!”

Brook and Jet startled to attention as angry shouts sounded out from behind the Canteen's counter. The Meowster Chef, angrily wielding a rolling pin, vaulted over the slab of stone and cursed up a storm at a flea bitten dine and dasher. Twas a fellow Felyne, a Palico, no less! Fire in their eyes, the Meowster Chef leapt forth and somersaulted through the air before triumphantly bringing a culinary comeuppance down upon the ne'er-do-well's noggin.

BONK

“Mraow mao mow!” shouted the Meowster Chef. With a shake of his paw he punted the Palico clean out of the Canteen to the raucous hisses and boos of his crew.

Jet tiredly shook his head while he suspiciously sized up their own party of Palicos persistently pawing at them. Their reputation for making meowschief was, admittedly, very well earned.

“Mrrrrrrrrp.”

“No means no,” Brook tersely if not forcefully stated.

“Mrreowwwwww!” Looking back over their shoulders, the Palicos nodded amongst themselves once they realized all eyes were anywhere but on them.

Leaning over Taras' coils the Huntress angrily swatted at the conniving cats to no avail. “Shoo! Go away!”

“Maeow!”

As he eyed the Felynes circling round them with unknowable intent, Jet reluctantly bid Brook continue. “...Anyway. You were saying? About the Silk Seer?”

“Tell me, Jet,” the Huntress asked in between impotent attempts to grab at their unwelcome guests skittering just out of reach. “If you wanted, if you really REALLY wanted, to be free of this place... what's stopping you? Master Rank be damned!”

Twisting about in place, the Hunter grimaced at the plotting Palicos shamelessly sizing them up. “Uhhhhhhhhh. My sense of self-preservation?” he uneasily answered.

“Besides that,” Brook grunted.

Reluctant to peel his eyes off his tabby and tortoise shell tormentors for even an instant, Jet protectively wrapped his arms around what he could of the Nargacuga's tree trunk of a neck. In his mind's eye the Hunter imagined a familiar pair of glowering yellow eyes playfully stalking him through the Ancient Forest so as to impede his exit. “Nell?”

SNRRRRRRRR

The Flying Wyvern snorted as pools of drool came to mat against her sopping wet cheek. Beak

agape, her every aspiration melted away in the warmth of the late afternoon sun. She had waited this long to finally wiggle her way into Jet's nest. What was one day more...

“Close,” the Huntress trailed off with an incredulous squint and smirk. “But not quite. Seriously, Jet, just think about it. Once you-”

“Mrrrrp!” Stumpy tails thrumming behind them, the Palicos beckoned for the Hunters attention.

“...What do mew little bastards want?” Brook snipped. “Take a hint! Beat it!”

The Palicos tamped their fuzzy little feet akin to a drum roll. Reaching into their satchels they, with a twirl and a flourish, purroudly hoisted bags of chalky white flour, purrlined straight from the Canteen, above their heads.. "Mraow mao mow meowwwwww!"

“WHAT THE,” Brook bellowed. “HEY. THAT'S PURRIVATE PROPERTY! JUST WHAT DO YOU-”

POFF

Thick white clouds of flour rose around Nell and Jet both while the duplicitous Felynes took to splashing the meowssive monster's broad and black furred backside with sheets of the stuff. Running their padded little paws through her fluff they excitedly traced out unflattering messages and crude drawings of themselves upon her.

The balled up bat cat, ignorant and unaware that she was being treated like a canvas, continued to snore in earnest even as Jet hacked and wheezed.

“OH YOU LITTLE!” Jet shouted. Desperately trying to wriggle free from his loomy lady's embrace, determined to defend her honor, the Hunter yelped when a bed sized bicep cuddled him close and pinned him in place. “Brook! Help!”

“I'm tryin'!” she pitifully called back. The Huntress' own escape attempts were proving just as fruitless. Taras' coils were simply too cuddly and constrictive!

Upon putting the finishing touches on their respective meowsterpieces the Palicos gathered before the Hunters just to add insult to injury. “Meow mao mjau maow mrow mow!” they snickered.

“Nell!” Jet pleaded as the Palicos tauntingly tiptoed up just beyond his reach. “Nell, c'mon!”

Chirping and squawking in her sleep, the Nargacuga furiously kicked her legs. As the crimson mask of fur wrapped around the her eyes positively crackled, and her hips wiggled to and fro, salacious purrs poured out from Nell's maw.

“Nelllllllllllll.”

Tongues poked out, and rears raised, the Palicos readied to beat a rude retreat by-

FWAAAAAAAACK

Gracelessly hurling themselves through the air.

Nell's mace of a tail, having furiously taken to wagging side to side, clapped the meowschievous miscreants with the force of a sonic boom.

“MREOWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW!”

The Palico's flailing forms, dwindling into unseen specks, sailed into the horizon. Heads tilted back the gobsmacked Hunters wordlessly watched as they blasted off towards the open ocean.

SPLOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOSH

Where they crashed down with an explosive splash.

Side eyeing one another, Brook and Jet made no effort to stifle their snorts when the meowing menaces washed up on shore.

“Play stupid games, win stupid prizes,” said the Huntress with a shrug. “...So! Anyway!” Brook began. “Once you have your Master Rank in hand you're free to wander wherever. Right?” Reaching into her cleavage she produced a yellow starred pendant for emphasis.

“R-r-right!” Hand held out before him, the Hunter counted off to where and what all that afforded to you. “The Wildspire Wastes, Coral Highlands, the Rotten Vale, the Elder's Recess... the whole of the New World is open to any and all who have proven themselves.”

Brook nodded along. “And somebody has to check against that. Right?”

“Well. Yeah.” Brows furrowed, Jet brushed away what flour he could before nuzzling his head into the the Nargacuga's neck. “Isn't that Nell's job though?”

Brook scrunched her lips and hummed, “I mean. Nell will be the one to determine, and ultimately award you, your Master Rank when you prove you're deserving of it. But...”

“But?”

The Huntress rubbed at the back of her head as she fidgeted with her ponytail. “It's one thing to *award* a given Rank. It's another thing entirely to vet it. Say I, for some Elders forsaken reason, wanted to mosey on over to the Wildspire Wastes. You really think I'm going to go and track down my old Master Rank Trainer first? Dangle all my pendants in front of them? Course not! I'm just going to... you know. Leave.”

“Oh.” Hands resting atop Nell's tail, the Hunter idly thrummed his fingers along her thick fluffed limb as her errant twitches tapered off. In the back of his head he had always thought, always assumed, that the Nargacuga would be the one to see him off if not escort him to lands unknown upon finally earning his Master Rank. “I. I just figured-”

“The whole point of the certification process is that, once you're cleared it, you can go wherever whenever. The only person's permission you need to leave is your own.”

“That's when you present your pendants. Truth be told it's a pretty quick and painless process,” Brook shrugged. “The Seer's a punctual if not professional sort.”

The Hunter hummed. As he shyly peppered Nell's beak with soft smecks and smooches, the Nargacuga unconsciously leaning into each and every one, his thoughts began to wander. “Say you... forget one? What then?”

Brook, her jaws clamped shut, stifled a yawn as tears beaded along her eyes. “It's not worth finding out,” she sleepily mumbled.

“Noted,” Jet acknowledged with a nervous swallow. “What about the Trainers? What do they even want with the Silk Seer?”

Fading in and out of consciousness, Brook struggled to keep up the conversation. “If anything it's more about what the Silk Seer wants with them. You'd have... to... you'd have to ask...”

“Brook?” Leaning forward, Jet called out to his companion following a pronounced pause. “Brook?”

The Huntress' soft snores, drowned out by Taras and Nell's own, answered his inquiries.

Brows arched, Jet playfully rolled his eyes and gave in to peer pressure. Sliding back along Nell's stomach, her chin and cheek weighing heavily upon him, the Hunter's chest came to rise and fall with the Nargacuga's own. Rolling onto his side he lazily took to tracing a finger through the chalky white powder sprinkled atop her.

Ideas for Alma, poorly articulated and terribly drawn at that, sprang forth from the cat bat's fur. Armor? Psh. Not at her size. Accessories? Doubtful. All she really needed now was something to holster her Sword and Shield with. Some sort of shoulder strap and sheath maybe? Or what about a belt? A girdle, even? Or what if...

Eyes slowly creaking shut, Jet tiredly forced his thoughts onto Nell's fluff. Poor imitations of chains, ripped free from the galleons beached within the Old World's Epitaph, sprang into being. Sheared clean of rust, and wrapped around the Anjanath's waist, the hilt of her sword could come to rest against the flukes of the anchor hanging from her waist! The same with her shield!

“Come to think of it,” Jet yawned. “I wonder if Alma knows anything about the Silk Seer?”

SHFFFFFFFFF

“I should...” the Hunter struggled to string together syllables as he let his cheek come to rest against the first drafts for Taras' armor and Insect Glaive errrrrr Staff. “I should ask her the next time we... we...”

The rustle of palm fronds and the far away crash of waves simply proved too much. Darkness, warm and welcoming, washed over Jet. Without want, or worry, he drifted off to sleep alongside the friends he loved and cherished above all else.

SHFFFFFFFFFFFFFF

SHFFFFFFFFFFFFFF

SHFFFFFFFFFFFFFF

Bags, heavy and aching, accumulated under Alma's amber eyes. As she sweltered and seethed beneath the setting sun the Anjanath's mind began to wander. As it was wont to do.

Her vision shifted in and out of focus while she wordlessly watched waves of upturned leaves, blown back by the whistling wind, wash over the Ancient Forest's canopy. "What is life like for you, I wonder?" she mused.

THOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

Every time Alma lumbered forward fresh scrapes and countless cuts assailed her thighs.

"It must be nice," she wistfully hummed. "To swim beneath the sea of treetops. To know the shade and its succor."

Branches, bent hopelessly backwards, cracked apart against her scab pocked flesh. Fresh sprays of splinters matted the Slayer's calloused soles every time she tread upon a gnarled ball of roots.

"To wander wheresoever one wishes... without the world itself crumbling apart beneath your feet." A weary sigh escaped the Anjanath's maw as her tattered cloak of feathers billowed behind her. Arms hanging heavily at her sides, Sword and Shield in hand, Alma's burning shoulders vainly threatened to pop her limbs free from their sockets.

THOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

The Slayer cast her gaze towards the Wildspire Wastes. Its desolate horizon, replete with twilight crags, unfurled before her. Step by step the Anjanath advanced. The densely packed foliage scratching at her legs began to spread apart and thin as she felt the rich soil and loam trampled underfoot slowly giving way to clay and sand.

"Even knowing all that, I cannot help but ask: Is it trying for you too, Ser Jet?" whispered the Slayer. "To wander a world that has no place for you?" Her eyes tiredly swiveled to and fro amongst the dunes creeping into view, their surfaces painted pinks and purples and orange.

Alma had always been fascinated with humans. Whereas she was born too big, too strong, and too much for the very world around her... they were too small, too weak, and too insignificant to do anything other than suffer its callous indifference. She could not help but think of them as her kindred counterparts.

And yet-

Alma tightened her grip on her Sword and Shield as dust devils danced atop the dunes.

Humanity persisted all the same. Through wile and guile they had crafted a home to call their own, Astera, in defiance of their size-mismatched place in this world.

With the Slayer's every seismic step the trees surrounding her threatened to uproot themselves. The flocks of Blissbills roosting within them took to the air as they squawked in terror.

Jaw agape, flames trickling past her teeth, Alma exhaled a super heated cloud of smoke. A cloying and suffocating miasma wafted up up up into the atmosphere towards the slowly swelling murmuration. Those Blissbills unfortunate to be caught within it-

HISSSSSSSSSSSSSSS

Nigh instantaneously burst into flame. Their distinctive pink plumage, contrasting gently against their pale blue beaks and scales, crackled and embered while they gracelessly tumbled towards the barren earth below.

CRRRRRRRRKKKKKK

And Alma's nearly unhinged maw. Head tilted back, and jaw stretched open achingly wide, the Anjanath compacted the already blackened corpses between her jagged rows of teeth. As wet crunches filled the air she tucked her chin against her shoulder and longingly looked back to Astera.

Oh how she envied humankind. How they could tear the environment around them down to its very foundations only to put it back together into something exciting and new. Their ministrations. Their meals. Those fragile forms of theirs afforded to them a delicate touch with which they could create sights and sensations unlike anything else.

The Anjanath's eyes swiveled along the bottoms of their sockets as she lapped up the streams of blood trickling from between her lips. Through tired blinks she shamefully regarded her thick fingers, striped with scars and bite marks, chafing against one another. Try as she might to mimic them... Alma's hands were not meant to build. No. No they bludgeoned, they beat, and they battered into oblivion nigh everything they touched.

That's what she always assumed was to be the truth. That's what she had always told herself at any rate. That the only way she could interact with the world around her was by rending it asunder whether she willed it or no.

THOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM

If, by virtue of her very presence, she was destined to bring damnation and ruination... she may as well apply it to something sanctioned. To ferals, to fellow destroyers, like herself. No one else could bear that burden. And it was all she could do to earn the grudging tolerance of her fellow Wyverns. Given that her very existence, much less her boundless appetite, threatened to bleed the land dry... it

felt a fair enough trade.

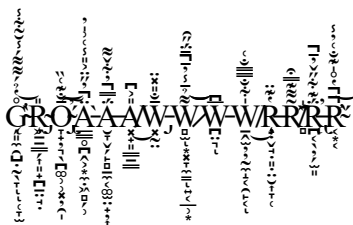
THOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM

Yet still she hoped. She pined, she prayed, for the selfsame power that humankind so casually wielded. For the chance to carve out for herself somewhere she belonged.

Arms held out before her, Alma's chest puffed out in pride while she regarded the Sword and Shield crafted to her scale. And to think! Here it was within her grasp! Freely given, no less! Along with a title and a purpose. This and so much more Ser Jet had already bestowed upon her and... and... and her heart lifted at the thought of what all else he had in store for her.

“Protector...” she spoke aloud with a happy hum. She quite liked how it felt rolling off her tongue. Clearing her throat, and shaking away her welling blush, the Anjanath turned her attention back towards the Wildspire Wastes.

Explosive plumes of sand, bathed in menacing glow of the setting sun, rose above the dunes. Alma's pace picked up to a jog.



Bulldozing clean through one dune after another... a feral approached.

Alma narrowed her gaze and sized up her quarry. The Barroth, almost her equal in size and utterly ghastly to behold, looked indistinguishable from a weather beaten corpse. Its stocky and visibly mangled arms flailed behind it as the Brute Wyvern barreled ever onward.

Lungs filling to near bursting, the Slayer let loose a blood curdling battle cry of her own. Trees simply catapulted themselves up and out of the ruptured earth as she hurtled past the solid line of sand, strung with unseen silken threads, demarcating the Ancient Forest from the Wildspire Wastes.

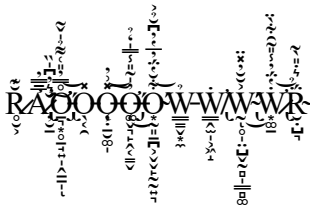
An unseen observer perked to attention. Rising to a stand atop the Ancient Forest's canopy, the flayed skin draped across their back fluttering in the breeze, their sextet of cerulean eyes darted back and forth between the rolling clouds of sand conspiring to collide into one another.

Teeth clenched, and smoke trailing from her nostrils, Alma tucked her Shield close to her chest and held her Bone Kukri out to the side. “Remember your training...”

Chop

The Barroth dipped its head low. The once proud and gently curved crown of bone that lay

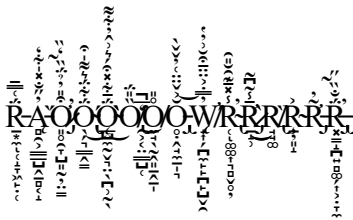
perched atop its skull hung from its head in cracked and jagged pieces. Its mangled spear like points took on an ominous red glow when the sun caught against them.



Strafing to the side, Alma grit her teeth when the malice filled feral grazed the side of her stomach and streaks of blood splashed across the sands. Arm raised high overhead the Anjanath brought her blade to bear down upon the crook of the Barroth's neck.

FWACK

The Slayer's eyes went wide when she felt the recurved blade cleave through layer after layer of bundled tendons. As it caught against a mangled mass of muscle the Barroth's shoulder explosively dislocated.



Side slash

Wincing, the Anjanath dug her heels into the sand as she struggled to rip her Sword free from the flailing feral's flesh. Its balance thrown off, and stumbling to the side, the Barroth wildly flailed its head hard enough to snap its own neck. Its jagged crown raucously scraped against Alma's raised Shield and sent the Slayer skidding back.

Hissing through clenched teeth, Alma's mind buzzed at the unfamiliar sensation of a partially deflected blow. It was... strange. Alien, even. To feel her senses extending out of herself and into the tools in hand. To feel so removed from the brawl unfolding before her. Her knuckles ought to have been scraped raw. Her forearms torn wide open.

Yet... they were not. The Slayer's battle-honed instincts, typically fueled by adrenaline flooding into her as fast as blood hemorrhaged out of her, remained at bay. In their place a rhythmic if not disciplined dance, guided along by fledgling muscle memories, stepped into the fore.

Shield strike

Ridged brows furrowed, Alma hurled her Shield out to the side just as the Barroth readied another charge.

FOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

A peal of thunder rolled across the Wildspire Wastes upon impact. Otherwise invisible shock waves, colored by sprays of saliva and teeth, cascaded out from the feral's crumpling skull.

The Barroth's clouded eyes rolled back into its sockets as it collapsed onto its side and ragdolled into the base of a sand dune. Garbled roars and gurgles tumbled free from the feral's throat every time it tried, and failed, to stagger to its feet.

Lumbering forward with an earth-splitting stomp, ripples coursing out and away from her splayed toes through the shifting sands, Alma brought her blade to bear upon her feral foe with meteoric force.

Slam

Clouds of sand filled the darkening sky as Alma's silhouette stood the dune split in twain. At her feet, scales and viscera raining down upon her like a fine mist, lay what remained of the broken and lifeless Barroth. Silence returned to Wildspire Wastes and Alma was, as always, left alone with her thoughts.

Or so she thought.

Spooling tattered threads of webbing about their chitin covered arms, and mandibles clicked shut over the lower half of their head like a mask, the Anjanath's unknown audience simply could not tear their many eyes away from her. Or her armaments.

“Good Slayer,” their voice, smooth as silk, whistled. Shadows came to shroud their face as their stitched together second skin slid over their skull like a hood. “It would seem we have much and more to talk about...” A lone eye, striking in its intensity, flared to life. “Don't we?”