

Monster Hugger

By: RaddaRaem

A shower of shrapnel, equal part splinters and rended tree bark, grazed the armor clad hunter. The metal plating around their knees creaked and buckled as they desperately fled.

THWACK

A barbed mace, black as night, slammed into the hunter's back. Iron and stitched together leather crumpled and deformed under the bone breaking blow. With a pained gasp the hunter collapsed upon the forest floor. Grunting as they skidded along the various mosses, detritus, and tree roots that cluttered the shaded undergrowth.

“Ungh...” the hunter wheezed. His limbs, trembling and weak, failed him. The great hammer in his grasp, crafted from quill and bone, would not save him. He had long since exhausted the strength needed to wield it.

THUMP THUMP THOOM

Fists clenched and teeth grit... the hunter grimaced as his prey turned predator approached. Its heavy footfalls, felt more than heard, came to a halt behind him.

“It's no use...” he panted as he tucked his chin against his shoulder. Gasping for air, his heart sank at the sight of that terrible black mace hoisted overhead. That, and the tail it was attached to.

Eyes shut tight the hunter silently awaited his judgment. The foul creature's tail bobbed and weaved as it mulled how to deliver the decisive blow. Purposefully dragging out its answer to the hunter's despair.

“Just do it already!” the hunter screamed.

Muscles tensed, that black furred tail snapped to attention. A crack sounded out through the forest as it that barbed appendage lashed out at the fallen human. The triumphant beast bringing its natural weapon to bear against the back of the hunter's fluted helmet for a... very gentle boop.

“Annnnd that's cart number three,” a syrupy voice called out.

“Goddammit,” the hunter groaned. Head tonked against the earth, mushrooms and crunched insect carapaces coating his visor, the fallen hunter wallowed in self pity.

“Oh don't be like that,” tutted the dread beast.

“I will be like that,” whined back the hunter.

The ferocious monster, her face a blend of bat and cat, cracked a frightening but well meaning smile. “So you padded out my perfect winning streak. It's not the end of the world, Jet.”

Indistinct mumbles and grumbles echoed inside the hunter's helmet.

“Seriously, Jet.” The hulking creature, a mass of muscle and sinew, dropped to its knees. The webbing of its wings, trailing off its bulky and bloated arms, tucked in against those selfsame massive limbs as she came to rest her toned rear atop her heels. “You really are improving! I mean, you nearly timed out this time around! You're doing a significantly better job sussing out my tells and keeping cool under pressure.”

Cheeks puffed out the hunter huffed as he was pulled up into a sitting position and propped back against the tree while the beast's gargantuan clawed hands daintily curled around his armored torso. Whereas moments earlier they aimed to batter and break him now they tended to his bruised and battered body with the utmost care.

“Nell, you don't have to sugarcoat it,” the hunter painfully chuckled as he tugged off his helmet to reveal a wild mess of hair stained through and through with sweat and grime. “You can just say I suck.”

Piercing yellow eyes half lidded, Nell snorted and tapped a clawed digit against Jet's forehead. “Even if I did think that you know that isn't how I'd phrase it. You really are starting to make me work for these wins. Honest!”

“And I wasn't before?”

“I mean...” Nell hmphed as her barbed tail flicked nervously behind her.

Jet couldn't help but laugh, stopping here and there whenever the aching in his ribs flared up, as Nell bashfully brushed away the dirt, splinters, and chunks of moss that matted his chest with the back of a finger. “Soooo... same time tomorrow then?” the hunter asked as a massive hand was extended towards him.

“Same time tomorrow,” Nell smirked as she clasped the entirety of Jet's outstretched arm, and shoulder, in her grasp. Gingerly, she tugged the hunter back onto his feet before rising to a stand herself.

Eye level with Nell's knees, Jet tilted his head back to meet the monster's gaze. The hunter's brow cocked at the smile creeping up along the Nargacuga's lips. “What?”

Nell idly scratched at the back of her neck. Her powerful legs, rivaling the surrounding trees in sheer width, shifted in place. “Iunno it's just... you're putting in the work and it shows. You'll earn that Master rank from me yet. I know you will.” Dropping down to a crouch once more, the Nargacuga playfully booped at the blue and red star pendants hanging around Jet's neck.

“Tomorrow then,” Jet confidently boasted as he slipped back on his helmet. “Is the day I finally prove you right! Tomorrow I'll earn my Master rank and see what the world has to offer!”

The Nargacuga cracked a smile. “And you've said that how many times now?”

“Does it matter?” Hoisting up his hammer with a grunt, Jet propped it against his shoulder. “I'll

say it as many times as I need to.”

Rolling her shoulders, Nell contentedly hummed to herself as she meandered through the twilight undergrowth of the Ancient Forest. The long and flowing leaves of countless species of ferns, struggling to drink in what little sunlight reached that far, brushed against her ankles. Vines, hanging from the canopy above, knocked against her pointed ears. Silken threads, dangling from forgotten spider webs, caught against her wrists when she pushed and knocked aside gnarled roots and branches.

The Nargacuga swished her tail when she felt her broad and heavy paws crunch against a familiar and well worn path. One freshly lined with the clawed and gargantuan footsteps of countless others like herself. Monsters, aye, but more importantly fellow trainers!

“Hmm?” Nell chirped at the sight, and sensation, of oncoming foot traffic. “Oy, Juneau!” she said with a wave.

“Nell,” answered the stoutly proportioned and colossal lizard with a nod. Her coarse scales, a mixture of green and yellow, seemed as if they struggled to stretch across and contain her massive frame. With her every footfall the land around her quaked and trembled.

“Off to put a fresh batch of hunters through their paces?” the Nargacuga asked as she stepped off to the side of the path. Leaning back into a tree, its form creaking in protest against her weight, Nell made herself comfortable as she afforded her coworker some berth.

Juneau ran a hand along the back of her head, scratching at the long hardened spikes that dangled along her broad back and shoulders, and chuckled. “Somebody needs to teach them the difference between a Great Jagras and the Greatest Jagras,” the reptile teased. “Jus holdin' their hands and walkin them through Rookie certification,” she shrugged. “Same as it ever was.”

Arms crossed about her chest, Nell couldn't help but grin. “Juneau when was the last time you even failed a hunter?”

“Oh lessee now...” the looming lizard hummed while she tapped at her chin for exaggerated effect. “Why... never!” she cackled.

Head cocked to the side and brow flattened, Nell grunted. “Juneau you can't just pass any and every hunter that comes your way.”

“Sure I can!” the Great Jagras responded with a jagged smile.

Point taken. Nell's ears twitched irritably all the same.

Juneau, encouraged at the reaction she received, pressed her case further. “Who am I to deny em? If they want to go out exploring parts unknown I say let em at it! Call me an enabler. Hell, call me soft,” Juneau snorted as she slapped at her tummy. “I jus' don't have the stomach to tell em they don't got what it takes. Dunno how folks like you and Taras do it day in and day out.”

“I-I mean...” Nell clenched her teeth while her shoulders slouched. “Somebody has to. Either

they're ready for the wider world or they're not.”

“With the rising standards you keep setting for em' they never will be. I swear sometimes it's almost like you don't want em' to leave.”

Nell struggled to ready a response as her tongue pressed against the roof of her mouth and a lump caught in her throat.

The Great Jagras batted lazily at the Nargacuga. “So I take it to mean Jet whiffed again?”

Cheeks puffed out, the Nargacuga's fur bristled as her hands defensively came to rest on his hips. “No! ...Yes. H-he's improving!”

“Uh huh,” the Great Jagras quipped as she moseyed past. “You've said as much how many times now?”

“I'll say it as many times as I need to!” Nell snapped. Her eyes went wide and a furious blush creased those black furred cheeks when she realized how effortlessly she had quoted a certain someone word for word.

“If that's whatcha have to tell yourself,” Juneau replied with a shake of her head. “Honestly, Nell. Why doncha just give em the go ahead? What's the worst that could happen?”

The Nargacuga curtly slapped her tail down behind her. The blast of air that billowed out from it upon impact bent and rippled across the grasses at her feet. “He could die, Juneau!” she shouted.

Juneau tut tutted pitifully. “Or, and hear me out, he might not! Y'all are so overprotective.”

“Clearly somebody has to be!” Slouching forward, Nell let out a disgusted groan.

“Jus' sayin! It's his life to lead not yours. That said, I'll catcha around, Nell!” Her footfalls, rhythmic and thooming, rattled the trees that flanked the beaten path. Stray branches, dead blooms, and more tumbled free from the canopy as the Great Jagras lumbered off.

Nell rasped in annoyance, puffing at the handful of leaves drifting down before her, and leaned back further against the tree. Its roots creaked and wailed in protest as they were slowly ripped up and out of the ground.

“What would she know?” the Nargacuga scowled to herself. O-of course it was Jet's life to live. Nell just...

With pronounced snaps and cracks the roots at Nell's feet erupted free from the earth. Plumes of soil and insects billowed up around the Nargacuga as she abruptly found herself parallel, as opposed to perpendicular, with the ground.

CRASHHHHHH

Groaning, Nell settled into the tree bark splintering and crunching apart beneath her. Eyes half-lidded, the Nargacuga not even bothering to brush aside the leafy branches resting against her face, she

let slip a growl. "Of course it's his life to live," she repeated to herself. "Doesn't mean I can't help but worry about it."

Maybe she was overly sentimental but she took her title as a trainer seriously! Nell cherished, she relished, the role! "Unlike some others," she thought to herself as she puffed at a branch only to whine when it slapped back down on her snout.

To be fair it was a still a relatively new role and its duties and responsibilities were in flux. Humans, after all, had landed on the shores of Astera but a generation ago. With morbid fascination the local monsters couldn't help but watch as those fragile, stupid, and stubborn things repeatedly threw themselves against the worst the world had to offer and fail spectacularly. Yet still they tried and somehow they carried on. Out of pity, mostly, the monsters approached them with an offer. They would teach, they would train, they would toughen up those that wished to venture out into the surrounding wilds. Out where even the monsters themselves were loathe to tread lest they be forced to interact with their nightmarish and unthinking brethren. In exchange the humans would provide them with their curious crafts, wares, and more.

The first pairings of humans, who had taken to calling themselves hunters, and monsters were purely transactional, if not cold, in nature. They quickly thawed though as hunters grew curious and eager to interact with the monsters and the monsters reciprocated. Nell scratched at her cheek shyly. Admittedly the appeal, the guilty pleasure, of slapping and bullying those hunters silly was not to be discounted.

Nell brushed the back of her hand along her fuzzy forehead and peered up through the canopy. The system they had in place was imperfect, sloppy honestly, but she loved it so. Fresh faced hunters seeking to explore the wild wider world would find themselves paired up willing monsters. Said monsters, should their standards be met would award those hunters the Rookie rank. Some monsters, like Juneau, graded against nonexistent standards. Others like Taras...

The Nargacuga whistled as she sucked in air through her clenched teeth. She still couldn't believe Jet had actually managed to wring his Rookie rank out of them. That and, more importantly, the blue star shaped pendant that had been given to the hunter to celebrate and prove as such.

A subtle smile creased Nell's lips while she continued to reminisce and a warm humid breeze whisked through the trees creaking all around her. From there, hunters who wished to press on would find themselves paired with another monster. One who would award a red star pendant and the Advanced rank that it implied provided the hunters proved themselves.

Nell chuckled as her mood, and she herself, rose from the wreckage. Leaves, vines, and bits of bark tumbled off her shoulders. For those hunters who were well and truly adamant about treading where few if any ever had before they would, one last time, find themselves paired up with yet another monster. When the lofty standards of those mightiest of monsters were met a yellow star pendant, the Master rank, and permission to leave and explore would be granted.

The thought of doling out such a pendant to Jet... it... Nell bit down on her lip as she hesitated. Why the very thought should have made her happy! Should have made her brim with pride! But... Nell shook her head as she opted to stow away not only the thought but the conflicting emotions it elicited as well. "Tomorrow then," the Nargacuga resolutely mused to herself as she stepped back onto the beaten path. She could grapple with the prospect if, or when, it came then.

Some weeks, and attempts, later...

WHUMPF

A shower of dirt exploded up around the hunter. Tumbling forward, bumping along tree roots and flattening the caps and stalks of mushrooms beneath him, he barely dodged a what would have been the decisive blow. Embedded into the forest floor, where he had been standing but a moment prior, lay that barbed mace of a tail that tormented him so.

His grip tightened upon his weapon of choice as he rose to his feet and whirled about in place. However brief, this was his chance! Hammer hoisted overhead the hunter roared and brought it down to bear upon the dread beast's appendage.

Or at least that was the plan. Eyes gone wide he watched in dread horror as the spikes that jutted out from the tip of that terrible tail retracted. The tangle of vines that the hunter had been counting on to restrain the beast, however briefly, simply fell away. He could but watch as that loathsome limb rose up into the air once more as inertia carried him forward.

“No!” Cursing under his breath the hunter felt his heart sank when his hammer barely, if even that, scraped against his prey before SLAMMING into and parting the earth. An explosion of leaves, flower petals, and flailing insects billowed up around him.

He had been baited.

THWACK

Silence, and an air of finality, settled over the forest.

“Annnnd that's cart number three. There's always tomorrow though! Right, Jet?” Nell rumbled.

The hunter remained motionless within the vine bed he had been viciously slammed face-down into.

“Come on, Jet. I didn't hit you that hard. D-did I?” Nell worriedly asked. The hulking monster dropped to her knees and timidly placed a hand upon the pancaked human.

“I forgot about the double tap...” Jet whined as he settled into the him-shaped crater.

The Nargacuga heaved a sigh of relief while she took to rubbing at the human's armored back. “None of that now. You're becoming much more consistent and it absolutely shows! The muscle memory is obviously there. Just, you know, you can't rely entirely on that. Those feral beasts out in the wilds may rely on instinct but you hunters, you humans, can and have to do more than that.”

Jet, his uncaring and defeated expression concealed beneath both a helmet and a layer of upturned earth, let Nell's critiques wash over him unheeded. He knew what to do and when to do it but... every time without fail he would choke. Somewhere and somehow he would always always

always choke.

“On your feet. I know good and goddamn well dirt naps are nowhere near as comfortable as you're making them out to be,” Nell teased.

Jet urfed when he felt the Nargacuga's massive and muscular fingers curl around his torso, the mixture of leather and armor plating dimpling at the monster's touch, before he was lifted up into the air like a doll.

Nell flashed a toothy grin as she planted Jet perpendicular, as opposed to parallel, with the ground and took to thumbing away the various grass stains and clumps of soil that matted the human's armor. “One of these days, Jet. And soon!”

“If you say so,” Jet quipped right back. The sincerity and enthusiasm behind those words were equal parts fake and forced. Yet they were convincing all the same.

The Nargacuga shook her head as she crouched down and dinged a clawed finger against Jet's helmet. “No, it's because you say so!”

Jet dismissively pushed aside the prodigious finger. “Well I say I'm done for the day.” Back turned to Nell, an unthinkable proposition all of a couple minutes prior, the hunter fished free his hammer from the tangle of vines at his feet.

Nell tensed while she shifted in place. “Jet?”

Step by step Jet advanced out of the scarred forest clearing that had played host to a countless number of their bouts. Each and every one ending reliably in Nell's favor. “Hmm?”

“Aren't you forgetting something?”

An awkward pause punctuated the air. Looking back over his shoulder, Jet was honestly at a loss. “...No?”

Nell blinked as she gestured at the departing hunter. “You... you know!”

“Uhhh. I really don't? You won, I lost. I head back to camp and lick my wounds so we can do this all over again some other time. Seems like I have all the bases covered.”

“Tomorrow then,” Nell rumbled as she rose to her feet and puffed out her chest. “Is the day I finally prove you right!” Donning a goofy grin, and a breeze catching in the webbing of her wings, the Nargacuga stroke a triumphant pose. “That not... that not ringing any bells?” she asked.

Jet answered with an unseen roll of his eyes.

Nell worriedly tapped a finger against her chin. “Oh! Ohhhhh wait wait wait wait wait you always say that with your hammer propped on your shoulder so no wonder you didn't get the reference. H-hold on I'm sure I can whip something up for that otherwise it's not the same...”

“Nell that's not. You're not. Oh forget it,” Jet groaned. “I'll see you later.” True to his word, the

hunter promptly made himself scarce as Nell occupied herself with some arts and crafts.

“By the Sapphire Star how do you hunters make this look so easy...” the Nargacuga cursed to herself as she struggled mightily with slotting one log into another in an effort to fashion together a crude hammer. Nell's attempt, however well meaning, crumbled and split apart within her anything but nimble grasp. “W-what do you think, Jet?” she laughed as streams of bark and splinters poured between her fingertips.

The lack of a response caused the Nargacuga's eyes to dart every which way across the clearing. “Jet?” Her ears twitched intently as she struggled to filter out the rustling of the leaves overhead and the song of the hoppers underfoot from what actually mattered. Footsteps. Faint and rhythmic and to the tune of Jet's careful gait.

No matter how hard she listened for them they failed to manifest. “Oh,” the monster wistfully noted. “T-tomorrow then, Jet. Like always.”

Arms hanging limply at her sides, Nell tonked her head against the base of a massive tree that served as the base of operations for she and her fellow trainers. Her eyes swiveled up in their sockets and gazed upon the carvings that had been clawed into the bark. The crude and cartoonish likeness of Jet's helmet, paired with the Nargacuga's smiling mug, greeted her. As did far too many x's to count. Sighing heavily, Nell reached up and carved in yet another.

“He ssstill hasn't given up?”

“You know he never would,” Nell sassed back. Her shoulders slumped as she heaved out another heavy sigh. “I-I don't think he will at any rate. I hope he doesn't.” Blinking, Nell ruefully regarded the crude likenesses of countless others hunters, and their paired monsters, cut into the bark. Nowhere near as many x's blotted the others. “Maybe Juneau was right,” she thought to herself. “Maybe, deep down, I really don't want Jet to succeed. To leave.”

“Nell. You know better than to feel guilty about thiss. He makesss the cut or he doesss not.”

The Nargacuga's eyes drifted towards a green shoot that had sprouted just above their own caricatures. A star shaped pendant, gold in color, hung from it. “I know, I know, I know!” Nell pouted as she slapped her tail down behind her. “I just. It's just. I'm not trying to break his spirit but with each and every passing day I can see it being ground down to nothing.”

Nell's guest, his features a blend of snake and squirrel, hissed sympathetically. “It wasss the sssame with me. He pussshhhd passst though!”

“And he hates you for it!” Pushing off from the gnarled bark with her forehead, Nell turned towards the Tobi-Kodachi utterly distraught.

The pale blue monster, his scaly form interspersed with bits of electrified fluff, shrugged. “Tonsss of hunterssss hate me. I am not going to lie to them and sssay they have what it takessss to sssurvive out there when they clearly cannot. It isss my job assa trainer!”

Nell puffed out her cheeks and crossed her arms about her chest. "Bet you'd be singing a different tune if Brook thought as much," she trailed off.

Arcs of electricity crackled off of the Tobi-Kodachi's back as his fur stood on end. "T-t-t-that isss uncalled for!" he sputtered as his blood red eyes went wide. "L-look. I am a familiar enough fassse around the human sssettlement. I can ssspeak with Jet and try to clear the air."

"You mean Brook won't tattle on you when you trespass?" Nell answered with a roll of her eyes.

"Do you want my help or not?" he bashfully hissed.

"...Yes," Nell finally acknowledged after a pronounced and painful pause.

"The usual?" asked a toned and dark skinned woman. Her hair, tied back into a ponytail, soaked up the light and the warmth of the myriad fires crackling behind her.

The dejected hunter, stripped down to a simple undershirt and leggings, sighed into the raised slab of stone that served as the Astera canteen's counter. He weakly slid a voucher forward.

"One Veggie Platter and on the double!" the woman shouted. A handful of felines, waist height and meowing and mrowling excitedly, pitter pattered about the clay ovens and open bonfires just beyond the counter. The clang of pots and pans, the sizzle and pop of oil upon their polished metal surfaces, and the hiss of meat and plant matter simmering upon them filled the sweltering air.

"Thanks, Brook," Jet mumbled. Flopped forward, his arms tossed out before him upon the counter, he twitched his fingers every time a Palico haphazardly shoved silverware into his grasp.

"Dare I ask how she slapped you down today?" Brook smirked. "Spin to Win?"

Jet rubbed his forehead side to side against the coarse stone.

Brook wiped down the counter, guiding the gathered crumbs around Jet, as she hummed aloud. "Pulverizing Pounce?"

"Did you have to remember what I named all of her attacks?" Jet grumbled.

The canteen chef tightened her apron, stained and caked with countless spices, and couldn't help but laugh. "I bet I know what it was. That damn Double Tap, wasn't it?"

"That obvious?" he asked. The tantalizing smell of roasted water chestnuts, potatoes, bok choy, and portobello mushrooms prompted Jet to peel his face off the uneven stone. A feline, adorned with a chef's hat, purroudly presented a massive plate of the promised vegetables. Every bit of it liberally seasoned and masterfully arranged.

"Only a lot," said Brook as she leaned onto the counter. "To be frank I'm surprised you're still at it."

“Asss am I,” chimed in a husky, and heavily accented, voice.

Brook pulled her lips flat at the sight of said voice's owner.

“Don't you ssstart. My vouchersss are legitimate tender!” said the towering and monstrous mass of muscle, scales, and fur that stomped towards the canteen. Their heaving footfalls rattled the plates and silverware upon the canteen's counter and prompted panicked and annoyed meows from the Palicos manning the kitchen.

Jet slouched forward and possessively pulled his plate close. Brows furrowed, he shoveled his food into his face.

“Payment isn't the problem here, Taras,” Brook grimaced as she pointed an accusatory finger at the approaching monster. “It's the portions! And besides. You ain't even supposed to be here.”

The monster shyly curled his broad scaled tail around his legs in response. Beads of static popped along his arms and fluffy back as the blood red eyes embedded into his serpentine head wavered. “Pleassse?”

The head chef scowled. “Taras no-”

“Pretty pleassse?”

“Look. I'm flattered that you love my cooking like no other but the answer is still-”

“Pleassse pleassse pleassse pleassse pleassse?”

Brook could feel her forehead sliding down over her eyes. Head cupped in her hands she breathed in deeply. “...Only if you behave yourself. And you damn well better not let slip I'm in the habit of doing this.”

“Worry not! And my thanksss, Brook!” Taras happily hissed as he plunked himself down before the counter. The impact of the Tobi-Kadachi's ample everything against the earth bounced the myriad stools, Jet, Brook, and the Palicos up into the air. Reaching a clawed hand towards his scaly chest, Taras plucked free countless vouchers from the gaps between the scutes that lined his torso. He proudly dropped their crumpled up forms onto the counter before him and wagged his tail excitedly.

“The usssual pleassse!”

“Why do I keep enabling you..,” Brook muttered under her breath. “Two dozen Fish Platters on the double...” she defeatedly called out as she trudged off towards the back of canteen. Disgusted and frustrated mrows rose up at the declaration.

Blinders on, Jet devoured his meal while paying little heed to the scaly colossus sitting beside him.

“Ssso...” Taras rumbled. Leaning in close, sniffing enviously at Jet's food, the Tobi-Kadachi clumsily and casually broke not only the ice but Jet's personal bubble for good measure.

“What do you want?” Jet sighed as he not so subtly scooted away. Even when plunked down cross-legged the hunter barely came up past the monster's thighs.

Hands cupped to his cheeks, Taras' forked tongue bled out from between his lips. “Assertain someone's cooking for one thing!” the Tobi-Kodachi answered with an excited wiggle and a blush. As the shades of pink that creased his scaled cheeks faded those blood red eyes came to focus intently upon Jet. “And a certain stubborn hunter for another.”

Jet quietly chew chew chewed at his meal as he squinted at what had once been the bane of his existence. The big bastard of a wall that stood between him and his Rookie certification for what felt like an eternity. He pinched at the blue star pendant around his neck and shook it at Taras as if it were a talisman to ward off evil.

“Must you take everything personally?” Taras hissed. “You know that certifications are grueling for good reason.” The Tobi-Kodachi snooted at the star. “You have already proven yourself capable and worthy of claiming the Rookie and Advanced titles along with the responsibility they entail. This I do not deny.”

“And soon I'll have the Master title for good measure,” Jet tersely answered as he bit down into a portobello.

Taras let slip a relieved exhale. “Yet therein lies the problem,” Taras hissed as energy crackled between the spikes that lined his tail. “Your persistence and grit are admirable! They are to be lauded and celebrated! Goodness knows how much and how long you toiled to finally defeat me for your Rookie ranking. But...” The Tobi-Kodachi slouched forward. “That just makes it all the harder to pass you.”

Still chew chew chewing, Jet cocked a brow at Taras. The Tobi-Kodachi struggled to maintain eye contact with him and the monster's expression visibly faltered.

“The more time we spend with you the... the more we grow attached to you. The more we worry and fret,” Taras sighed.

TINK

A handful of plates, packed and overflowing with breaded arowana, sauteed tuna, and fillet parexus were laid out before the serpentine monster. Taras' eyes went wide at the sight. Sniffing, snuffing, and salivating furiously he eagerly watched Brook stuff a couple of rolls on to the plates before motioning for him to dig in.

Brook hehed as the Tobi-Kodachi, still drooling, leaned down and affectionately nosed at her as thanks for the graciously provided meal. “Obsessed is more like it,” she nonchalantly clarified. Sparks erupted along Taras' back when she clapped a hand against his snout and scratched at it.

“N-n-not in front of others! Brook please!” Taras sputtered as he recoiled back from the chef with a furious blush and struggled to stifle the guttural growls rising in his throat. “A-a-anyway! We cannot help but concern ourselves about what dangers and unknowns await you should you let us pass. And we fight harder and harder in turn to deny you that.”

Jet, and Brook, proceeded to jingle their respective blue star pendants at Taras.

“Would you sssstop that?” huffed the massive and incredibly flustered monster.

“You know this just encourages me, right?” Jet laughed. Lips scrunched, he reluctantly flicked a chunk of potato up at the Tobi-Kodachi. He was rewarded with some noisy chews and a delighted rumble. “And I know all that,” he answered. Irritation, both at Taras and himself, tinged his tone. “I get why you all are such hard asses on us. You want to be absolutely certain that whoever leaves this place and ventures out into the cruel and unforgiving wider world comes back in one piece. Where the monsters are feral and ferocious and unrecognizable.”

Taras contentedly smacked his lips. “Yesss. I know you want nothing more than to earn the title of Massster. To leave thiss plasse, and our gate keeping, and explore all the world hasss to offer. All I assk iss that you not take this perssionally. For Nell'sssssake. You are not another hunter to train and put through the paces to her. Nor to me.”

In the periphery of his vision Jet spied the makings of a warm and sincere smile creeping up along the Tobi-Kodachi's face. Shaking his head, the hunter relented and smiled back as he skewered a slice of water chestnut with his fork. He lazily traced it around his plate and soaked up with sauces he could with it. “I know,” he sighed. “You're right and I hate it but... you put us through this because you care.”

A surprised hmph rose from Jet when Taras nudged a freshly delivered and completely untouched plate of fish towards him. “More than you know,” the towering monster teased. “Eat. Meet Nell tomorrow at your besst. She knowsss thiss hasss been wearing you down. She fearsss you hate her for doing what she mussst to keep you safe. For denying you your dream.”

The hunter shamefully scratched at the back of his head. He had... he had left Nell in the lurch today, hadn't he? The Nargacuga had long ago ceased to be but an obstacle to topple. Nell was his trainer. His confidant. His friend. Best friend, at that.

Brook grunted as she delivered yet another plate to Taras. “I'm sorry,” she sassed as she clapped her hands together. “But where was this pep-talk when you and I were busting each other's lips?”

“Saysss the huntresss who repeatedly challenged, and beat me down, just to flex on me after the fact,” Taras snipped as he brought a plate up to his maw and inhaled its contents.

Jet idly sampled at some sauteed tuna as he settled into a contemplative mood. “Wait. She challenged you again after snagging her certification? Couldn't you have said she was one and done?”

“I-I mean...” Taras mumbled as he brought another plate up to his maw. Empty plates hurriedly stacked up alongside him as his throat bulged with one nervous swallow after another. “Ssshe wanted to try out different weaponsss and I resssponsibly could not deny her. I-I-I had to be confident that no matter what ssshe wielded ssshe would meet my sstandardsss!”

“So you were just welcoming her to come back and slap you around in new and creative ways?” Jet asked.

“H-h-how did thiss become about me?” the Tobi-Kodachi protested as he held up a licked clean plate to his snout to hide his welling blush.

Eyes half lidded, Jet turned to Brook.

Chuckling, the chef shoed Jet off with a smile. “Go on. You've got a big day tomorrow as it is. Taras here wouldn't have gone and embarrassed himself over something like this if it wasn't important. Kiss and make up with your big bad and come back here with something to show for it. Alright?”

Jet felt his cheeks grow uncomfortably warm at Brook's particular choice of words. Mumbling, he rose to his feet. “Not quite how I'd go about phrasing it but... you got a point. No more moping. Worst comes to worst, even if I do come back here empty handed, I know better than to give a certain someone grief over it.” Reaching towards a mug, Jet tossed his head back and drank deeply of the liquid courage sloshing inside.

HRKKK

Stifling a multitude of coughs Jet proceeded to slam it back down on the counter. “Wish me luck,” he said in between even more coughs as he dragged his arm across his foam covered lips.

The next day...

A pulpy mass of upturned grasses and flowers accumulated upon the hunter's armored soles as he slid across the clearing. Strafing to and fro, the plating of his armor clanking to a defined rhythm, he effortlessly dodged the barbed mace of a tail that plagued him so.

The dread beast, its back to the hunter and its monstrous hands planted upon the earth, tensed its clawed digits and burrowed them into the very land in response.

Through his fluted visor the hunter hurriedly digested whatever information, however insignificant, that he could. Think! The foul creature was clearly anchoring itself.

Layers of muscle, densely compacted upon one another, bulged along the dread breast's wrists. Its legs subtly swung to the side as its tail curled back away from him.

With a gasp the hunter immediately threw himself to the ground. A howl of wind roared past as the beast spun about in place while its clawed hands and paws kicked up clouds of dirt all around it. The hunter felt his ears pop as that weaponized tail whipped about just inches overhead.

Rolling to his side the hunter hurriedly forced himself back on his feet and clasped his hammer tight. Rushing forward, his arms feeling as if they were about to tug free from his sockets, he swung upward with all his might as he locked eyes with his prey.

THWACK

The beast's eyes went wide as the slab of bone cracked against its chin and violently sent its head flying back. Skittering backwards, shaking free the saliva that had come to coat its cheeks when

its jaw was abruptly slammed shut, the beast seethed. Its pupils contracted into vertical slits as the bands of crimson wreathed around its piercing yellow eyes flared to life. The welling roar reverberating in its throat was felt before it was heard. Ready to pounce the dread and frightful beast... froze in place at the sight of the hunter motioning for a time out.

“Stop. Stop stop stop stop stop,” Jet said with some measure of concern.

“H-hmm?” Blinking repeatedly, Nell rose to her feet in confusion. “What's wrong? T-this is the best, the furthest even, you've ever gotten! Why would you want to stop?”

“No, Nell, it isn't,” Jet sighed as he took off his helmet. “It's like I've been fighting you in slow motion today! Your tells have been anything but subtle and you've been all but telegraphing your upcoming attacks for days. You feeling okay?”

The Nargacuga stammered as she fidgeted in place and slid one paw over the other. Her visage, still monstrous and frightening to behold, contrasted sharply with her shrinking posture. “M-maybe you're just that in the zone!”

“Nell.”

Whining, Nell bunched her shoulders close and rubbed a hand over her wrist. “...Was it really that obvious?”

Jet answered with a slow but emphatic nod.

THWUMP

Panicked squawks echoed throughout the forest as revolvers and blissbills alike scattered from the branches overhead. Nell, having let herself flop backwards onto the forest floor, shamefully struggled to look at the diminutive hunter before her.

“Nell, seriously. What's wrong?”

Groaning, the Nargacuga pulled her knees up to her chest. “By the Sapphire Star this is so embarrassing...” Cheeks puffed out, Nell alternated between growls of various pitches.

Helmet tucked under an arm, Jet ambled on over towards his towering trainer. He gently patted at a furry thigh many times thicker than he was tall before taking a seat beside Nell. “Does this have anything to do with Taras?” he asked. “He wanted to talk yesterday and I'm going to take a wild guess it wasn't entirely unprompted.”

The Nargacuga growled weakly while her ears flattened against her head at the repeated paps. “...I was scared that's where we were heading. I was scared that I've been too hard on you. That you'd come to resent me.”

Jet hummed as he pressed his hands against the earth beside him and leaned back to rest. His reprieve was short lived as he promptly resumed scritch and scratch the Nargacuga in response to a particularly pitiful growl from Nell. “Every step of the way I could have assured you that wasn't the case and I... didn't. I'm sorry,” the hunter apologized.

Nell rested her chin atop her knees as her tail slunk alongside Jet. “And if I'm being honest with myself... honest with you... it's more than that.” The Nargacuga choked back a sigh. “I... I do and I don't want you to pass.”

Lips pulled flat, Jet quietly took in the confession as his efforts to physically assuage the Nargacuga slowly tapered off.

“On the one hand, I want to see you happy! I want to see you succeed! To reach and achieve this dream that I've been able to share with you!” Nell explained. Her piercing yellow eyes nervously came to rest on the stoic and stone faced hunter. “But on the other hand... I don't want you to leave. I'll miss this. I'll miss you.”

For a time the duo sat together in silence. With every passing second Nell shrank in on herself further and further as she came to dread whatever response may come.

After what felt like an eternity, Jet exhaled. “And where exactly does throwing a fight fit into that?” he asked.

“Uhhhhhhhhh. Errrrmm. Well.” Nell blinked repeatedly at unexpected inquiry. “I-I mean. At the end of the day this is about what you want and what you aspire for. N-not me. So I...”

WHUMPF

A punch, admittedly no more painful than a pinch, whapped against Nell's thigh.

“Ow!” the Nargacuga huffed. “L-look. I just. Nnffff.” Nell fitfully struggled to translate her thoughts into anything resembling a coherent sentence. “At the end of the day I want my best friend to be happy.”

Another pinch of a punch slapped against the Nargacuga's leg.

“Jet please!” Nell sniffled.

Sighing, Jet laid back upon the upturned earth that bore the scars of their latest battle. “Nell. A hollow gimme of a victory isn't going to make me happy. At the end of the day what I want is to *earn* my Master rank. Not have it handed to me like some... some pity party participation trophy.”

The Nargacuga stammered and visibly deflated at the call out.

“...And I don't want you tying yourself up in knots over this either.” The human reached up and tussled at the monster's fur to reassure her. “Either I meet the standards you've laid out for me or I don't. I'm not going to hate you for, you know, caring about me.” Blushing, the hunter idly scratched at a cheek with his free hand while Nell continued to snuffle.

“S-so you're not mad?” the hulking monster, her eyes watering, asked.

Jet's composure nearly crumpled at the sight of the Nargacuga on the brink of tears. “Not... really? Talking with Taras yesterday it really hit home that this has been tough for you too. That and it's

not like I'm in a hurry or anything.” Jet acked as that tail, which had once tormented him so, curled around him and hugged him close into Nell's side. Rolling his eyes, Jet bashfully basked in the warmth and comfort of the Nargacuga's furry form. He hurriedly cleared his throat as he tried to keep a straight face. “And let's be real here. I'm not going to drop everything and leave this place the second I get the permission to do so. I'm not about to abandon you.”

Chin still resting on her knees, Nell wiped away her tears as she focused intently on the human at her side.

“A-a-and I mean you never know...” Jet continued. “Whenever I do set out... maybe we can do so together?”

Nell's eyes went wide at the mention.

“Most hunters, well anyone with a sense of self-preservation really, go out exploring as part of a party. I-I know it sounds weird, p-proposing this, but maybe the two of us could-”

Hurking, Jet's stomach lurched up into his throat as Nell's massive hands wrapped around his torso and swept him off his feet. The Nargacuga's forearms, monstrosly muscled, luxuriously fluffy, and tree trunk shaming in size pressed against his back and cuddled the hunter close. All but buried into Nell's bosom Jet could do little more than mumble inarticulately as the monster furiously took to nuzzling him with an overflowing amount of love and affection. “I'll take that as a hard maybe,” Jet mumbled as he embraced what he could of his best, and admittedly beloved, friend.

“At eassse, at eassse!” Taras timidly hissed as he tried to placate the hostile crowd. A number of unruly Palicos had taken to shaking their paws at him from behind the canteen counter.

“Simmer down you lot,” Brook implored. “No monsters are making, and you're not taking, any orders tonight. Alright?” Grudging meows and mrowls rose from the crowd as they tightened the aprons they had threatened to toss off and returned to their posts.

“You sssaid they would warm up to me!” the Tobi-Kodachi whined. Sitting down cross-legged before the counter he leaned in close to Brook.

Shaking her head, Brook sighed and planted a faint smooch on Taras' snout. “Think about it from their point of view. Just about every time you swing by here they're suddenly up and swamped with orders. They associate you with obscene amounts of work. Seriously, Taras, you've got to ease back on the portions.”

The Tobi-Kodachi rumbled and bled back at Brook. “I knooooooow. But it'ssssssoooo goooooood.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” the chef smirked as she took to scratching at Taras' chin. “Why did you swing by anyway? You aren't still worried about Jet are you?”

Taras closed his eyes and growled in delight at the Brook's touch. “Perhapsss. At the very leasst I want to be able to rally hisss ssspiritsss ssshould today prove no different than any other.”

Brook gently slapped a hand against the monster's cheek and snorted. "Pfff. Were you always this nosy?"

"Husssh. Not that you ever seem to mind," Taras answered with a blush as he lovingly, and cheekily, nosed at and kissed her.

"Mind what now?" Jet asked.

"AHHH!" Both Brook and Taras shouted as they lurched back from one another. The startled Tobi-Kodachi crackled with electricity as the sweet-talking chef tugged up her apron and hid her face.

"Huh! So this is the fabled canteen Taras reeks of nigh on every night. It's cute!" Nell rumbled to herself as she padded up behind Jet and playfully bumped against the hunter.

Fanning at herself, Brook stifled some nervous laughter as she desperately tried to compose herself. "Jet! Nell! Whaaaaaaaaat are you doing here?" She stared daggers at Taras while she waited for her answer.

Jet offered up a sheepish shrug. "Well... you did tell to come back here with something to show for my latest bout with Nell. She and I cleared the air and, I figured, given how highly Taras thought of your cooking it might be nice to treat Nell here to something too!"

"I've heard nothing but good things!" Nell boomed. Thrumming her fingers along her toned stomach the Nargacuga greedily licked her lips.

"Jet, this is not what I had in mind!" Brook shouted as she fearfully turned her attention back towards the kitchen.

Taras, his expression one of panic, clasped his hands around his snout and violently shook his head at Jet and Nell both.

"Mrow meow meow mroooooow maow meow meowwww!" a disgusted Palico shouted as he tossed down his chef's hat. A chorus of meows sounded out in solidarity as the other Palicos stripped off their uniforms and walked off their jobs.

Hands held out before her, Brook begged and pleaded for the Palicos to hear her out to ultimately no avail. En masse the overworked felines marched off. Dejected, she rested her elbows upon the counter and cupped her face in her hands.

In silence Taras, Jet, and Nell exchanged awkward glances and gestures with one another.

Muffled shouts and curses, interspersed with heavy sighs, spilled out from between Brook's fingers. "Know what?" she asked of no one in particular. "I'm too sober to deal with this right now. Taras."

Taras reluctantly rose to his feet and stepped over the counter. Dropping to a crouch, he gingerly placed a hand that all but enveloped Brook upon her back. "Y-you want to sstart off with some Dragonkiller Sssake or-"

“Glacial Vodka.”

“Glassshhhial Vodka it iss,” Taras dutifully agreed without so much of a whiff of resistance. “W-would you two like sssomething?” he asked of Jet and Nell as he tiptoed past the ovens. We ummm... we may ass well drink to the occasssion while we are at it?” he weakly offered.

Cheeks flushed, Nell and Taras knocked together barrels of Star Brandy as if they were shot glasses. Daintily pinching the wooden constructs between their massive fingers the two monsters, sitting side by side, tipped their heads back and glurked down their contents with a single swallow. Coughing, the Nargacuga and Tobi-Kodachi proceeded to toss the barrels into the accumulating and ever growing pile beside them. The sheer amount of alcohol contained upon their very breaths caused the surrounding ovens and bonfires tucked behind the canteen counter to violently flare to life every time they exhaled.

“Sssoooo,” Taras asked as he bounced a leg and protectively cupped a very inebriated and sleepy Brook close to his scaly stomach. “All'sss well that endsss well?”

Nell stifled yet another cough as an exhausted Jet, resting upon her thigh, leaned back into her. “Or something close enough to it,” the Nargacuga said with a smile.

“It's not like we perfectly wrapped things up all neat and tidy,” Jet chimed in as he yawned. “But... at least we know where we stand,” he said with a blush. He weakly harrumphed when Nell dipped down to plant a kiss upon his head.

“Psshhhhhhhh. About time you two hooked up,” Brook trailed off. Chuckling, she squeezed gently at the massive fingers wrapped around her. “Goddddds I can't get over how you and Taras have the same taste in women.”

The gathered monsters, and still conscious Jet, hummed curiously at her claim.

Brook snorted. “The both of you... falling hook line and sinker for women who can, and have, kicked your ass.”

“BROOOOOOK!” Taras howled in embarrassment.

Jet, beet red and burning bright, buried his face into Nell as the Nargacuga failed to hold back the laughter and the tears.

“You can't jusst call sssomone out like that!” Taras complained. “That'sss it I'm cutting you off!”