

Monster Hugger Freedom
By: RaddaRaem

“Absolutely not,” Brook shot down without a second thought.

“It's called the Insect Glaive not the Insect... Staff,” Jet replied. Pacing along the shoreline of the Old World's Epitaph, the roar of the receding waves echoing throughout the sun-kissed cove, the Hunter hummed when he drew near a beached galley boat. Wading into the tide, seashells crunching beneath his greaves, he brushed his a hand along its barnacle encrusted hull.

“Well it is now,” Brook brusquely declared. Never would they ever need, much less want, the towering Tobi-Kadachi to be swinging around a man-sized blade attached to what may as well be a tree trunk. Pinching at her forehead, the Huntress kneaded out the cavernous wrinkles carved into her brow. “Jet.”

Deeming the seafaring vessel structurally sound, Jet hurled his grappling hook up towards the salt caked planks lining the port side. “Yes, Brook?”

Eyes half-lidded, the heavily armored human, sans helmet, silently shook her head. “One last time. Walk me through this plan of yours.”

CRSSSSH

Lips pulled flat, Jet clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth when the railing he had latched on to came crashing down before him in a cloud of splinters. Along with some stray oars. The Hunter's eyes warily swiveled along the bottom of their sockets while he watched the sea swallow up the wreckage. “Right. Well. On the matter of training Taras...”

“Uh huh?” Reaching into her satchel, Brook tried her luck with the starboard side. Her grappling hook, sailing high into the air in a graceful arc, landed on deck with a worrying crunch.

Circling round the ship, Jet sheepishly sidled up alongside his all too unhappy accomplice. “To start we'll need a proper pole. Something stout. Something strong. Something... Tobi sized.” Laughing nervously he gestured towards the galley's sun bleached mast. Taras, while eager and enthusiastic to learn the tools of the Hunter trade, was uhhh... decidedly lacking in said tools. Jet's hope was that this outing could remedy that.

Biceps bulging, Brook tugged. Thankfully, mercifully, her grappling hook pulled taut when piles of nail pocked planks compacted together beneath the curved iron hooks. Nostrils flared, and brows arched, she wordlessly motioned for Jet to take the lead.

The Hunter gripped the knotted rope dangling over the deck murderously tight. Wrists straining, he ascended the side of the ship. Brook snorted at the infrequent yelps that slipped free from Jet's throat every time his armored soles punched through the rotted wood.

“Fine,” spat the Huntress. “Ignoring the matter of how we separate the mast from ship. Ignoring the time and effort it'll take to sand that down and refurbish it into a weapon. How again do you plan on

keeping this under wraps?”

Grunting, Jet flopped on deck with a relieved sigh. “Byyyy keeping my big mouth shut?”

“...And Taras?”

“What abouhhhhh I see where this is going.” Leaning over the railing, Jet extended a helping hand to Brook.

SHFFFFFFFFFFFF

At Brook's boarding the ship slid along the sands and into the shallows. White capped waves splashed over the stern and showered the Hunters in salt and seaweed.

“He's going to carry that Insect Glaive... errr... Staff with him everywhere he goes. Monsters and men alike are going to start asking questions. You do know that, right?” Reaching back around her head, Brook untied her ponytail and tossed back her sopping wet hair.

Popping off his helmet Jet took to fanning himself. “Would the other Monsters really even care that much?”

Teeth clenched, Brook warily shook her head side to side. “They're the ones that dictate who qualifies, who can even call themselves, a Rookie or Advanced or Master Hunter. They're the Trainers here, not us. Can you imagine the blowback if any of them catch wind of you being referred to as 'Trainer' Jet?”

“Taras...” Hand held up before him, Jet uneasily uhhed and promptly retracted his raised index finger. “Already calls me that. Oh no.”

Stepping forward, middle finger tucked against her thumb, the Huntress flicked at Jet's forehead.

Jet grumbled at the painful pinch. “...Alright, I get it. You don't think this is a good idea.”

Brook tched. “Because it isn't.”

Yet here she was, standing alongside him, helping dismantle the ship so that they could craft Taras a weapon to call his own. “...But?” Jet dared to press.

The Huntress tiredly rolled her eyes. “But...” Hands tucked beneath her armpits, Brook narrowed her gaze in frustration. “Seriously, Jet. Why am I always the last one to hear about these increasingly idiotic plans of yours?”

Popping back on his helmet, the Hunter scritchd at his fluted visor while he choked on his entourage of excuses. “I. I'm-” Arms tossed out to his sides Jet impotently shrugged. “Unno! Maybe because they really are as stupid as they sound?”

“You don't say,” Brook deadpanned.

Shoulders slouched, Jet smarted from her spoken slings and arrows. He had been expecting an explosive, and frankly deserved, diatribe upon her much awaited return to Astera. Instead, Brook saw fit to relentlessly roast him, to strip the very bark off him, at a slow simmer. Day in and day out she spared him no mercy whenever they crossed paths at the Canteen.

“You don't have to be here you know,” he limply shot back. Even though he knew this was coming, even though he knew to expect this, Jet asked for her aid all the same. Arming Taras, much less Alma, quickly and simply proved too much to manage by his lonesome.

The Huntress wordlessly thumbed at the dark bags that, weeks on from their frantic fight with the feral Tigrex, still lingered beneath her eyes. “That's a hell of a way to phrase an apology,” she bitterly sighed.

Jet wildly flailed his arms in exasperation. “What should I have done, Brook? Every day! Every day, Nell and I offered to lighten your load!”

Creaks wailed up from the hollow heart of the ship as it bobbed along the waves. Jet dipped his head and silently tugged down his visor while white foam bubbled up from the gaps in the deck. “And for the record? Alma approached me when Taras was taking care of YOU. Not the other way around.”

The tattered remains of the ship's sail, dangling from its weather-beaten mast, whipped wildly overhead as Jet curled his padded fingers against his armored palm. “If you're looking for an apology then here it is! I'm sorry! I'm sorry that I thought letting you rest was more important than waking your exhausted ass up just to tell you that Alma robbed you! I'm sorry I thought that letting you know the woman you hate brought back your Charge Blade could wait! I'm sorry that-”

“I do not hate Alma,” the Huntress snipped. Rubbing at the back of her neck, Brook's dour expression softened. “I just. It's just. That I had to hear this from her of all people, Jet!”

Arms hanging limply at his sides the Hunter idly took to fumbling with his hands. “I know.”

Slouching forward, Brook let slip a long held breath. “That she stole from me. That she hopes to study under you. A Slayer of all people, A SLAYER, is more forthcoming with me than you are!” The Huntress' eyes began to sweat. “Credit where credit is due!” Sniffing, she dragged her forearm across her face and stifled a cough. “She owned up and apologized! So, you know, I guess Alma's not the uncaring asshole I thought she'd be!”

“...Brook?”

Chest knotted, Brook violently shook her head as her voice cracked. “And now I have nobody to be angry with! Alma isn't the villain I made her out to be and, idiot that I am, I took it out on you instead! Cuz why would you need to apologize for something she confessed to?!”

Clutching at an elbow, Jet quietly accepted his friend's pent-up fears and frustrations.

“I.. I.. I thought I might lose him, Jet.” Intrusive images of the Canteen, silent and still, flooded to the forefront of Brook's thoughts. No more sassy snake arguing with the hired help. No more nosy noodle trying to sneak in extra servings. Choking back sobs, the Huntress shuddered while she struggled to force down a painful swallow. No more wumbo Wyvern keeping her company on slow

shifts. No more Taras, with that dopey smile and heavy lisp of his, reminding her just how loved she was.

Clearing her throat, Brook slapped at her chest and tried to force the much needed ugly cry out of her system. “Yeah.” Thumbing at her nose, the Huntress snorted and dried her tears along the back of her knuckles. “I-I-I know I don't have to be here. But if it's for his sake...” Lips pulled flat, she shamefully turned away from Jet.

“Oh Brook...”

Arms bunched close, the Huntress tucked her chin to her chest. “He comes back from that ordeal to no one caring, no one waiting, for him only for you to roll up and rope him into all this! Making him feel wanted, making him feel appreciated, and and and-” Tossing a look over her shoulder she painfully groaned before locking gazes with her fellow Hunter. “And maybe, you know, I'd like to be a part of that! Maybe I'd like it if one of my best friends bothered to include me!”

Sighing, Jet shuffled along the seaweed soaked deck towards her. Hand held out before him he patiently waited for Brook to take it. “I'm sorry for not letting you know sooner. For trying to keep this to myself until I couldn't.”

Blinking away fresh tears, Brook wholeheartedly accepted his apology.

Swallowing hard, the Hunter clasped his companion's hand between both of his own. “But... if you can't trust us to share your burdens then how can I trust you to do the same? Taras is our friend too you know! As are you.”

“I know, I know, sharing is caring...” the Huntress quipped with a snuffle and a snort. Smiling, Brook gingerly punched at Jet's armored shoulder with her free hand. “No more secrets?”

Flashing a toothy grin of his own, Jet nudged her right back. “No more secrets.”

Thumbing at her nose, Brook nodded along. “Oh uh... and Jet?”

“Hum?”

The Huntress awkwardly tried to cough away her cracking voice while she leaned in for a hug. “Thanks uhhh... thanks for looking after Taras when I couldn't. Thanks for looking after me.”

“Always.” Squeezing one another tight, the pair of Hunters were slow to disengage from their embrace. With an ahemhem Jet swiveled about on his heels and, with an excess of razzle AND dazzle, he gestured to the mast once more. “Sooooo! With all that said... still think this is a terrible idea?”

GLRNNNNNNNNNN

Eyes gone wide, Jet and Brook warily watched on as their ship ruptured apart. Dragged along the shoals by the receding tide torrents of water, and sand, rushed in to the keel.

“...It could use some work,” Brook mumbled as saltwater lapped at their knees and they slowly sank beneath the waves.

A few days later...

“Ready?” asked Brook.

Sitting opposite of her, hands nervously tapping at the slab of stone that served as the Canteen's counter, Jet forced a smile even as he shook his head side to side. Blinding streaks of yellow, courtesy of the morning sun, drowned the whole of Astera in its warmth.

“Understandable!” Dropping to a crouch, the Huntress retrieved a pair of wooden steins from beneath the counter. Moseying past the roaring wood-fired ovens manned by many a Palico she popped open the tap on an unmarked barrel. Liquid gold, amber in color, gushed out from it.

“Brook, I'll admit it. My idea was stupid.” Limbs quaking, he accepted the freely offered drink. Fingers clutching at the wrought iron rings wrapped around the cup, sticky foam trickling over his digits, Jet tossed his head back and forced down swallow after swallow of Ratha Whiskey.

TUNK

Slamming his stein down, head buzzing, the frazzled Hunter could do little more than stare into the stone before him. Liquid smoke danced along his taste buds and every time he exhaled his lips burned. “But this is... this... is...”

Hunched over, Jet tossed a guilty look over his shoulder. The palm trees lining the edges of the Canteen's clearing, their shadows swallowing up the tables perched beneath them, silently swayed for no one in particular. Interspersed tufts of grass, sprouting from the heavily trafficked path, had yet to broken beneath today's foot traffic. Confident that the coast was clear the Hunter rapped his empty stein against the counter as he all but begged Brook for another swig.

“I am cutting you off after this,” the Huntress warily warned him when she slid him the other stein. “Can't have you arguing this alongside me reeking of booze.”

“The Commander though, Brook! The Commander! We can't lie to him!”

“And we won't! We aren't!” she emphasized through clenched teeth.

Jet anxiously ran his hands through his long and wild mane of hair. “... We're sure, we're positive, that Nell and Taras are onboard with this?”

Fingers splayed, the Huntress clenched her eyes shut and sharply inhaled. “Jet. Buddy. Pal. You were there when we asked them. YOU were the one who ASKED them, even!”

Shaking like a leaf, Jet grimaced as he cupped the stein between his hands. “I want to practice our presentation again,” he groaned.

“Good because so do I,” Brook gasped as her own fraying nerves finally wore her down. Slinking around the counter she took a seat alongside Jet. “From the top. One last time.”

Balled fist held up to his foam covered lips, Jet cleared his throat. “Commander. Myself, and Huntress Brook, come to you today with a proposition.”

“Master Rank Huntress,” Brook quickly corrected him. “Flex every credential we have.”

The Hunter wordlessly nodded. “Myself, and Master Rank Huntress Brook, come to you today with a proposition.” At that he gestured towards the dark skinned and dark haired woman fretting beside him.

Straightening her posture, Brook spoke from her chest with a commanding confidence. “As you're well aware, in the wake of the recent... incident, tensions are high. Trainers of every rank have brought operations to a standstill until not just our safety, but their own, can be guaranteed. Astera's greatest researchers and gatherers, no strangers to danger, are hesitant to venture out into the field.” With a nod Brook turned to her erstwhile companion.

Hands clasped tight, his thumbs steepled together, Jet spoke his piece. “They are, understandably, right to think so. Having witnessed, having fought, a feral monster, we cannot help but come to the same conclusion. Caution is tantamount and well warranted. However! However. Paranoia is not.”

Index finger raised, Brook motioned for her imagined audience to let her speak. “Myself and Advanced Rank Hunter Jet have remained in contact with the Trainers that fought alongside us. Master Rank Trainer Nell and Rookie Rank Trainer Taras, both of whom were injured in their efforts to protect us, have retained their faculties, and more importantly, their affection for humans.”

Silence, awkward and heavy, hung over the duo as curious Palicos gathered round.

“Pssst. Jet!” Brook harshly whispered.

“Where was my cue?!” Jet mouthed back.

“Where was mine?!” Brook snapped.

“Mraow mrao maow meow!”

“OKAY, OKAY, OKAY.” Wiping the sweat from his brow, the Hunter composed himself. “In addition we met, and parleyed with, the monster bearing the title of Slayer, Alma. Given Trainer Nell and Trainer Taras' unremarkable recoveries, and Alma's continued cognizance, we can say with the utmost confidence that whatever madness plagues these ferals is not contagious. If it were these attacks would be an all too common an occurrence.” Jet tap tapped his palm against the counter as he passed the proverbial baton back to Brook.

“Better,” muttered the Huntress. Jaw hanging slack, Brook immediately blanked out and proceeded to uhhhhh at length.

“Mraow?”

Beads of sweat and goosebumps collected upon her arms. Reaching over towards Jet, Brook

grabbed hold of his unfinished drink and pounded it back without a second thought. Coughing, and blinking profusely, she plodded along with her portion of the presentation. “W-w-while we understand there is some hesitation, some fear, to engage with our neighbors in the wake of this near disaster... now more than ever we should be seeking to strengthen not fray our ties. We get it. We do. There's frighteningly little that separates them from their bloodthirsty brethren.” With an embarrassed groan Brook noisily slid the emptied stein back to Jet.

Lips scrunched, Jet forlornly regarded his exhausted reserves of liquid courage. Puffing into what little foam remained he turned his attention towards the rapt Palicos. “But they're in just as much danger, if not more so, than we are! Think about it. If Astera ever was visited by such an abomination it would only be after it tore through the Trainers we've come to know and trust first. Along with who knows how many other monsters.”

The gathered Palicos grimly nodded.

Elbows resting on the counter, face cupped in her hands, Brook dragged out a heavy exhale. “Which is why...”

Heart caught in his throat, Jet pivoted to the crux of their proposition. The argument that they would use to shamelessly couch arming, and training, Taras and Alma with. “Which is why we come to you today in the hopes of proposing...”

“A cultural exchange?” The Commander, his wispy white hair swishing in the breeze, curiously repeated aloud their entreaty. “Elaborate.”

Standing at attention within his open air office, Jet and Brook both stoically maintained a neutral expression. Stepping forward, her iron soles scraping against the carpeted planks, the Huntress was the first to speak. “Forgive me if I am speaking out of line, Sir, but would you or would you not consider our relations with the Trainers... warm?”

Leaning back into his chair, arms crossed about his chest, the ebony hued elder thoughtfully hummed. His cracked and heavy leather armor, tattered and stitched together, bore the scars of innumerable battles. “Indeed I would.”

Mind racing, his heart smashing away at the back of his rib cage, Jet advanced up alongside Brook. Looking out over the Commander's desk, and the myriad maps scattered across it, the humbled Hunter dared to open his mouth. “Yet we know so little about them and they of us. Outside of training, and what little trading we engage in, there is hardly any interaction between our peoples.”

The Commander steeped his fingers. “Your argument being that this gap in our understanding is at risk of filling in with hearsay, rumors, and superstition. You would seek to plug that before any misunderstandings can arise?”

Brook ahemed and raised her voice. “Yessir. If I may, Trainer Nell and Trainer Taras both have repeatedly expressed interest, and have a noted curiosity, in human culture. We believe that inviting them into Astera, with ample warning and under close supervision mind you, would do much to allay fears on our side. Our neighbors are nothing if not courteous and kind and it would do our kith and kin

good to be reminded as such.”

The Commander's office, comprised of little more than wooden walls and a floor overlooking the endless ocean, creaked in the salt-stained breeze. Devoid of any ceiling, any shelter from the elements, it was crafted atop a ridge overlooking the settlement such that he and every one of its occupants would always be reminded of their precarious place in the world. It was by the grace of the Sapphire Star, and the monsters that called this land their home, that humanity persisted from one day to the next.

Head tossed back the old man gazed up at the open sky; at the Blissbill's crooning overhead and the cotton swab clouds burning away beneath the sun's glare. “And you would build up this goodwill how? I would not waste their time, much less ours, with empty gestures.”

Drawing stuttering breaths, Jet prayed to whoever and whatever would heed him that he didn't fumble this delivery. “We would ask of them, especially now in these tense and trying times, to collect what our understandably risk-averse gatherers are reluctant to. Given the Trainers are already considered familiar, if not welcome, faces among us Hunters... we are optimistic that they will be just as well received by the general populace. In exchange for these favors we would afford them entry into the warmth of our hearth and homes. Where we can not only teach but learn from one another.”

With any luck this would ultimately prove to be a seamless segue. Taras and Nell, after indulging their love of human culture and cuisine, would of course ask about human weaponry! Why wouldn't they? They were Trainers, after all, and dealt with them day in and day out! Being the dutiful hosts that they were, Jet and Brook would happily indulge and educate the monsters by crafting them and training them to wield tools of their own. Under Astera's good graces no less!

...That was the plan anyway. To subtly seek sign off after the fact and work their way up to Alma. Trembling, Brook put her all into sealing the deal. “Our kitchens, apothecaries, and forges would be kept well stocked. The Trainers' protective presence would do wonders to soothe our people's spirits. In exchange for these services rendered we would leave these monsters without want. It is our hope, our aspiration, that these gestures will showcase to them that humanity will not cower behind them in the face of the feral threat.”

Side eyeing one another, Jet and Brook both dared to hope. This was the man who had overseen the establishment of the Trainer and Hunter system itself. This was the man who had ventured to the far reaches of the New World and lived to tell the tale. This was the man who not only spoke for Astera but whose very word the whole of it hinged upon!

The Commander rose to a stand with a grunt. “Hum. Likewise, this would demonstrate to the people of Astera that we need not fear our gracious hosts. They may look nothing like us, they may live differently than we do, but they share many of the selfsame fears and aspirations.”

Jet and Brook hastily choked down their premature celebrations. Say the magic words. Please. Pleaaaaaaaase.

“This invitation... is to be extended to Trainer Nell and Trainer Taras specifically?” the Commander inquired.

“Yessir!” both Hunters answered in unison.

The esteemed elder stroked at the salt and pepper scruff that lined his chin. “And you would be the ones to supervise them?”

“Yessir!” both Hunters promptly replied.

“You would be the ones to relay requests to them?”

“Yessir!”

“You would be the ones to guide them through Astera proper? As you have many a time before?”

“Yes... sir? W-w-wait.”

Sporting a warm yet subdued smile, the Commander motioned for them to take a seat. “Come now. They already quite clearly know their way around their Canteen.”

Lips pulled flat, Brook and Jet stared at one another wide eyed and on the verge of panic. Torrents of cold sweat poured down the back of their necks at the dread realization they had faceplanted at the finish line

“I must admit...” the old man chuckled. “Takes some gumption to march in here and ask me to formalize not only their trespasses but your own.”

Blood rushing to his head, the pounding of his heart ringing in his ears, Jet struggled to remain standing. His vision blurred as he fought valiantly not to pass out on the spot.

“Brook?” the Commander's raspy voice gently asked of her.

The Huntress could but silently nod in response as she tugged a limp and shell shocked Jet down into the chair beside her.

“You of all people should know the Palicos are a gossipy sort,” he playfully tutted. “I'm well aware that the Nargacuga and Tobi-Kadachi are frequent, albeit uninvited, guests of ours.” The Commander snorted and gestured to the walls wobbling in the wind. “As if our borders could ever hope to dissuade them.”

Hopelessly tongue tied, Brook fearfully maintained eye contact with the Commander.

Hands tucked behind his back, the old man paced back and forth behind his desk while he mulled what future, if any, they had in Astera. “Let it be said I do not doubt your claims. I do not doubt the affection those monsters hold. They would not have endangered themselves for your sake if they felt otherwise.” Flashing a toothy grin the old man guffawed. “You ought to be lauded for fostering and nurturing such warm relationships! It's reassuring, really, to think such disparate peoples could grow so close over so short a time.”

Holding his breath, Jet reached over and squeezed Brook's hand.

“...But?” The Huntress worriedly asked.

Back turned to his guests, the Commander nonchalantly shrugged. “...No buts,” said the wizened old man. “We've already been feeding those two for how long now? It's about time they took up their tab.”

Brows raised, Jet's eyes nervously bounced around his sockets. “H-h-hold on. So you're saying...?”

Chin tucked against his shoulder, the Commander smirked. “Hunter Brook, Hunter Jet... I accept your proposition! Report back here tomorrow morning for Trainer Nell and Trainer Taras' first slate of deliveries to be relayed. I expect them to be tendered post haste.”

Slack jawed, and stunned silent, the Hunters sat motionless while the Commander sidled up behind them. Letting a heavy hand come to rest upon their shoulders he shook them with a smile. “Going forward... I would appreciate if you pursued my permission as opposed to my forgiveness. Understood?”

Brook and Jet dumbly nodded.

“Very good. Until then!” Sauntering out of his office with a wave, tossing aside the tattered curtains serving as a door, the Commander left them to stew in their success. The distant roar of the waves, lapping against Astera's shores, washed over the dumbfounded duo.

Licking his parched lips, Jet slowly recalled the ins and outs of inhaling and exhaling. “We should...” Sliding down in his chair, his limbs leaden and heavy, the Hunter heavily breathed innnnn and outttttt. “We should... we should probably let him know what we're really after sooner rather than later. Right, Brook?”

WHUMPF

“Brook?”

With a wordless flop the harried Huntress, still holding tight to Jet's hand, collapsed face first into the rumpled carpet lining the floor. The stress of it all having finally caught up to her, Brook passed out from a mixture of exhilaration and exhaustion.

“...Hoo boy.”

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QUEST FAILED SUCCESSFULLY

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“Ambasssss-” Forked tongue fluttering between his lips, Taras sputtered and pbbtd.

“Ambassador,” Jet repeated back to the towering Tobi-Kadachi.

Scaly brows furrowed, Taras' new title danced upon his tongue. "Ambasssssssssthador!"

"Am. Bass. A. Dor."

"That'sss what I sssaid!" pouted the sizable snake-squirrel. Cupping a hill's worth of beehives between his hands, Cultural Ambassador Taras grumpily snarfed on a larva laden comb.

With a groan and a dismissive swat of his hand the Hunter left it at that. Bleh. It was too early for this. Rubbing at his sleep crusted eyes, Jet grumpily regarded the streaks of pink, orange, and purple bleeding across the atmosphere. Off and away on the eastern horizon, where the sea met the sky, not even the sun had yet to rise.

Growling contentedly to herself, fur fluffed and puffed out, Nell turned her attention to the knee high humans. "Just who is this Commander of yours, anyway?" she curiously chirped as aromatic herbs, freshly picked, tumbled out from between her thick fingers.

Jet wordlessly gestured to Brook with a tired grunt. Arms tucked behind her head, fingers interlocked, the helmetless Huntress hummed. Ferns and flowering beds of sun-kissed grass rustled alongside the beaten clay path as she thoughtfully chewed on her answer. "He's..."

Tapping at her beak, Nell's pointed ears flicked with every stray thought that came to mind. "Is he... your Slayer?"

In unison Jet and Brook unenthusiastically ehhd.

Perking to attention, sparks crackling along the tufts of fluff and spikes lining his scaled spine, Taras leaned in close. "Ooh ooh ooh! I know I know!" Arms crossed about his peach scaled chest, honey trickling down along his torso, the Tobi-Kadachi proudly flaunted his unmatched expertise in human happenings. "He'sss-"

Smirking to herself, Brook brushed a hand along the Fanged Wyvern's leg. Densely packed with wiry muscle, his supple scales smooth to the touch, the Huntress blushed when the bashful behemoth wiggled and giggled at her every poke and prod. "She asked me you nosy noodle!"

"Pleasse!" Taras whined. Hands bunched together, the Tobi excitedly tamped his two toed feet against the earth. Muted thooms that nearly knocked Jet and Brook prone rippled out from beneath his broad soles. "Pleasse please pleasse! "

"No," Brook teasingly tutted. "You're here to listen to folks not talk over them. Remember?"

"Aww..."

Shaking her head the Huntress bid the Nargacuga, her black fur streaked green with grass stains, come closer. "The Commander is... a lot of things. But first and foremost he's our leader. Every Hunter, every human, looks to him for guidance."

Nell chirped as she fumbled with the unwieldy pile of mushrooms, herbs, and moss balls entrusted to her. "So he's... what? The biggest and strongest and oldest human there is? That's just a Slayer by another name, isn't it?" she asked uncertainly.

Both Brook and Jet couldn't help but snort.

“Wrong on every count,” Jet yawned. Eyes closed, he tiredly shuffled forward. Every time the Hunter stumbled into the brush or stomped through flower beds Nell guided him back towards the beaten path with a bump of her tail.

“Strength is a very subjective thing for humans...” Brook conceded. “More than anything he is where he is because he's the most experienced, the most traveled, of anyone in all of Astera. In his youth, before the Trainer system even existed, he traveled the breadth of the known world. The Wildspire Wastes, the Coral Highlands, the Rotten Vale... he's seen it all!”

Disbelieving growls tumbled free from Nell's maw.

“Is it really that hard to swallow?” the Huntress smirked. “Humans have set foot in nearly every corner of the New World! Not many survive the attempt, mind you, but the Commander has! His depth, and breadth, of experience is unmatched.”

Rubbing at his eyes, Jet blearily took in the sight of Astera slowly creeping into view as they followed the shoreline. He should've still been at home, curled up comfy cozy in bed, at this hour. “He may not look it but the Commander is a wise, and tough, old bastard,” the Hunter sleepily chimed in.

“How could he not? He's been here since the beginning,” Brook mused. “Before the beginning, even. Even though he was only a child the Commander helped build Astera from the ground up. He established contact and negotiated with the first Trainers. He's overseen, and lived through, a lot of what has and hasn't worked for humanity.”

Eyes half-lidded, the Nargacuga wistfully regarded her diminutive and delicate friends. “Strength isn't what you seek from this Commander of yours, is it? It's survival...”

Brook weakly smiled back at the behemoth batcat. “He's lived through the best, and worst, of what life here can throw at us. He's survived more mistakes than most. The Commander, more than anyone else, knows what it takes to scrape by. For that reason we willingly entrust to him a lot of power. A lot of authority.”

Resting his head against Nell's knee, brushing a hand along the spike tipped tail lovingly curled around him, Jet sighed. “His word is absolute. Abide by it or begone from Astera. That's really all there is to it.”

The monsters exchanged wary glances. Tongue clicking against the roof of her beak, Nell cleared her throat with a muffled chirp. “H-h-hold on now. Wouldn't humans separated from their hive struggle to, you know, ...survive?”

“That's the point,” Brook solemnly clarified. “If you can't play by Astera's rules, or worse yet threaten them, the Commander will cast you out.”

Taras and Nell winced as the color drained from their scales and fur. “W-w-wait!” Taras spat. “S-s-ssso all thosssse timesss you brought usss to the Canteen...”

Flashes of teeth, saliva slicked and razor sharp, peeked out from Nell's gumline. "If this Commander had ever found out would... would he have?"

Nervous, and weary, laughter tumbled free from the both humans' lips. "Oh... oh he knew," Brook groaned.

Wrapping an arm around Nell's tree trunk of a leg, Jet planted an emphatic kiss on the Nargacuga's calf to calm her. "He could have, should have, taken us to task. But... on account of how well behaved the both of you are he decided to let it slide."

Sighing, Brook followed her fellow Hunter's lead and leaned into her loomy lover. "We knew what we were getting ourselves into. You always have been, and will be, worth it."

"Broooooooooook..." Taras sorrowfully hissed.

Cheeks puffed out and hackles raised, Nell bunched her shoulders and grumpily swished her barbed tail. The crimson bands of fur wrapped around her eyes flared to life at the thought of this Commander visiting such a fate upon her Jet.

"Nah nah nah nah nah none of that now!" Jet chastised the Nargacuga as he took to rubbing at the back of her knees. "No showing up to our first delivery looking like that. Alright?"

Beak scrunched, the Nargacuga weakly chirped and tensed at Jet's oh so sensitive scritchies. "But... but... but!"

Face burning bright, Jet bashfully mumble grumbled. "I-i-it's sweet that you wanna protect me from anything and everything, Nell, but..."

"It's your life to live," sighed the Flying Wyvern. "I know, I know."

In silence the enormous monsters trudged ever onwards while their bitty and beloved humans consoled them. Shoulders sagging, Taras tiredly nosed at his haul and nudged away some stray bees seeking to reclaim their half-eaten home. "...What if your Commander doesssn't like usss? What if none of the humansss do?"

"Taras, please!" Brook smirked. "If it isn't already obvious the Commander thinks very highly of you. That he extended this invitation at all speaks volumes." Racing ahead of him, Huntress turned to face her tremendous Tobi. Jogging backwards along the beaten path she motioned for him to meet her.

Dropping to a crouch, Taras leaned in close... only to wildly spark when Brook clasped his scaled snout between her hands. "And no humans liking you? Psshhhhhh! I'm human. Don't I count?"

Broad tail wildly flailing behind him, smoke and sparks erupting off of the keratin spikes that lined it, Taras stuttered. "I-I-I mean..."

Quiet, yet pronounced, smecks and smacks promptly sounded out when the Huntress buried her face into the Fanged Wyvern's scaly lips. "I like you at any rate," Brook reassured him.

“...I know you do,” Taras happily hissed. Nosing and nuzzling into her, the Tobi-Kadachi rose to a stand with a very visible blush. Pinching another honey comb between his teeth Taras sheepishly changed the subject between swallows. “S-s-ssooooo...”

“So?” Brook hummed.

“Ssssoooooo besssidesss the Canteen... where elssse ssshould we go? Now that we're proper ambasss... ambasssssss...” Taras pbbted and rolled his eyes. “We can go wherever we want within your wallsss now can't we?”

Nell's pointed ears fwipped to attention. Piercing yellow eyes pressing against the sides of her sockets, the batcat sharply chirped while her tail possessively curled about Jet.

The Huntress shrugged. “Within reason. Got some place in mind?”

“I mean if you're taking suggestions...” Nell cooed.

Arms pinched tightly together against his torso, Jet hurked at the Nargacuga's lustful if not impatient growls. She was all but inviting herself into his nest err home at this point. “Brook. Help.”

Tugging at her collar, Brook flashed a flustered smile as she longingly gazed up towards Taras. She had spent how many weeks living at his nest? It was only proper, it was only polite, to extend the same courtesy and invite him into her own for such a lengthy stay! “...I'm listening.”

“BROOK.”

FWAM

Arms crossed about his chest, the Commander cracked a wry smile at the month's worth of supplies slammed down before him. Tossing a look back over his shoulders, stubble scraping against the cracked leather pauldrons draped across them, he motioned for the guards to welcome their gargantuan guests. With a salute they descended the wooden scaffolding overlooking the palisades and disappeared behind the wooden pikes erected around the whole of Astera.

“Trainer Nell. Trainer Taras.” With a courteous nod the Commander greeted them. “Thanks to your efforts Astera will easily be without want until the waxing of the new moon. You have my gratitude for safeguarding not only my people's present but their future.”

Hands cupped to his snout, Taras wiggled excitedly at the high praise. “Dohhh it'sss nothing! Really!”

The Commander insisted otherwise. “Staring down and helping lay low a bloodthirsty beast is not nothing. It's my understanding that these Hunters of mine are still standing here today because of your bravery.”

Chest puffed out, Nell clapped her hands together and brushed away what grubs and bugs had hitched a ride along with her haul of herbs. With a haughty chirp, and a blush, she reluctantly accepted

the old man's accolades.

FWOOOOOOOOOOM

Creaks, snaps, and groans permeated the air as Astera's great gates slowly swung open.

“You'll have to forgive the pomp and circumstance,” chuckled the Commander. “But you only get one first impression.” Back turned to the gathered Trainers and Hunters he gestured for them to follow him inside. “I figured that seeing you all sauntering, rather than sneaking, in would do wonders for your reputation. Put the people at ease as it were.”

Taras, Brook, Nell, and Jet reflexively shared a pained and nervous laugh.

“...Nothing to it but to do it,” the Huntress whispered. Dutifully following in the Commander's footsteps, Jet and Brook found themselves flanked by their very significant others. Upon breaching the boundaries of Astera's walls they stepped out from its shadows and into the golden rays of the rising sun.

“Now I'm sure the novelty has long since worn off, what with your many unannounced visits prior to this, but allow me to formally welcome you to Astera,” quipped the Commander. Groaning, Jet and Brook bid their elder to dial down the backhanded well wishes.

Through the gates the party emerged into a beaten down clearing. Towards the shoreline, where the clay gave way to sand, a massive and sprawling boardwalk sprung up. Stalls, clad in tattered awnings and shuttered tight, lined its splintering surface. Myriad docks jutted out into the ocean proper and many a fishing boat, tied to the posts by fraying ropes, lazily bobbed atop the waves. Even with the advance warning the Commander had relayed to the whole of Astera, with regards to their exotic guests, few locals had yet to turn out for them.

Forked tongue blepped out, Taras curiously regarded the sentries affording them a wide berth. With a smile, and a wave, he silently introduced himself as he lumbered past. To his unbridled delight the guards, timidly at that, waved back before shuffling past the parted gates to gather the heaping helping of supplies left outside.

Nell curiously and huskily growled as she ravenously drank in the unfamiliar sights and sounds. N-no! Noooooo. She would not, could not, let herself get distracted! She had a role to play, after all! Beak turned up, the Nargacuga huffed. Even as her gaze followed the length of Astera's inner walls, marveling at how they stretched into the shallows of the sea, she grumpily chirped. She was here for one reason and one reason only. To carry and conduct herself like a consummate professional, like a tried and true Trainer, so as to convince that curmudgeonly old bastard to agree to arm herself and Taras! And... Alma. She guessed. For Jet's sake she would... she... would... wait. Wait wait wait wait wait... were those?

The monster's head cocked to the side at the sight of those strange wooden walkways leading out into the waves. Eyes dilated, the Nargacuga gasped at the sight of a stray human leisurely hopping into and out of one of those floating nests Jet had told her so much about! It was so much smaller, and so much cuter, than the ones in the Old World's Epitaph! Oh by the Sapphire Star... to see such a thing out on the open water, to hear its comforting creaks as water lapped against it, was indescribable.

Nell HAD to know more. Chirping excitedly, the utterly entranced Flying Wyvern wandered off from the guided group and towards the docks.

Pinching at his scruffy chin, the Commander hummed as he led what remained of his wards into the still sleeping markets. “Come to think of it... Trainer Taras, Trainer Nell, what haven't you seen of this place? We wouldn't want to waste your time with the same old, same old, now would we?” Donning a knowing smile the old man tossed a look back over his shoulder. Said smile strained when, back and forth, his eyes darted between Taras and the open air where Nell ought to have been.

Nostrils flared, the Commander wordlessly plopped his hands atop Jet and Brook's heads and whirled them about their heels. Blankly blinking, the Hunters took an embarrassingly long time to piece together that a monster was no longer in their midst.

“...How?!” Brook yelled in disbelief.

Panicked and slurred syllables tumbled forth from Jet's mouth. Wheezing, he started shouting half-formed curses at the sight of a familiar black blur slinking towards the sea.

“Off to a strong start I see,” the Commander snorted while Jet raced after the Nargacuga.

“I'll sssay!” the Tobi-Kadachi excitedly agreed.

“Taras don't encourage him,” Brook tiredly sighed into her cupped together hands as the Commander couldn't help but wryly laugh.

Prey in sight, Nell silently skulked the docks. Kayaks. Canoes. Rafts. She knew not the names for the selection of seafaring vessels bobbing about the harbor but they captivated her all the same. To think that they came in so many shapes and sizes! Why... why some of them were barely bigger than the humans that were meant to house them!

“No no no no no no no no no. Nooooo. No! NELL!” Hurling himself down the docks, Hammer scraping at his back, Jet struggled to match the Nargacuga's pace.

Toes splayed the Nargacuga unconsciously shifted her weight such that the boardwalk buckling beneath her feet neither creaked nor groaned. Shoulders tensed, and barbs jutting from her tail, the enormous Wyvern froze in place the instant the planks lining the docks began to noticeably sag beneath her massive gait. Without hesitation she noiselessly slipped into the shallows with barely a splash.

“NELL I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME.”

Thighs brushing against a raft the Nargacuga giddily chirped and bopped it aside with a swish of her tail. Nets and strange poles, threaded with what looked to be silk, rustled atop it. Awhhh! Silly humans! Even if it wasn't all that impressive a nest it was endearing all the same! That said... she wanted bigger. She wanted better! Eyes on the prize, manically focused on the unaware fisherwoman and her untended sailboat, Nell dropped to a crouch and shrouded herself among the rippling shadows cast upon the sea's surface.

“Why do you do the things that you dooooo,” Jet whined. Panting, he wildly waved his arms in a desperate attempt to catch the attention of suntanned woman slowly readying herself to set sail.

“Hail, Hunter!” the toned but wiry lass shouted back.

Eyes locked on the dock, her pointed ears cutting through the water like a pair of dorsal fins, ripples radiated out from Nell's beak when she noiselessly exhaled. Slicing through the water with frightening finesse the Nargacuga crept close to her quarry. Cupping her hands beneath the bow of the boat, clawed fingers dimpling against its hull, the Wyvern gingerly tugged it towards herself. Just a peek! Just a sneak! That's all she wanted!

CRKKK

To Nell's dismay the vessel snapped into place and refused to budge. Hrm.

“HEY. HI. HELLO,” Jet awkwardly introduced himself. Locking gazes with the fisherwoman, her pixie cut practically glowing in the light of the rising sun, he inconspicuously positioned himself so that her gaze faced away from the harbor.

“...Hello hello yourself,” she chuckled in bemused confusion. “Look. I know why you're here.”

Jet winced as his arms came to hang limply at his sides. “You... do?”

Furred cheeks puffed out, Nell shook her head side to side. Tugging at the boat, a bit more forcefully this time, the whole of the dock subtly shook. The vessel, firmly tethered to a wooden post and knotted ropes holding tight, refused to budge. Hrmph! Surely it wouldn't hurt to...

Hands on her hips, tattered tank top tapering off just above her waist, the fisherwoman flashed a toothy grin. “Comin' straight to the source for yer Whetfish fins, eh?” she playfully teased with a wag of her finger.

“Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...” Eyes pressing against the sides of his sockets, Jet nervously coughed while he watched a pair of scaled hands rise from the water.

“Don't play coy!” Reaching forward the fisherwoman playfully nudged at Jet's chin. “You an' every other Hunter can't get enough of the things. Now as much as I'd like to play favorites...” she cooed. “I've gotta give everyone a fair shake at my catch. Yeah?”

Clasping at the side of the boat, Nell's fur frazzled and puffed out once more when she tried pulling herself up and onto it. As the vessel tilted towards her, saltwater trickling onto the deck, the Nargacuga relaxed her grip when its threats of capsizing became too obvious to ignore. HRFFF. There had to be a way to get on this thing! There just had to be! Hrmmmmmmmmm. Maybe... maybe if she brought it closer to shore...

“Y-y-yeah.” Jet loudly stammered in an effort to distract from and drown out the Wyvern and her antics. Fidgeting, the humbled Hunter struggled to wrangle together the much needed word of warning for his newly met fisher friend. There simply was no way to delicately broach the topic of a well-meaning, albeit menacing, monster lurking just out of sight.

Arms tucked behind her head, the olive-skinned woman relished the handsome Hunter's fumbled attempts at, what she presumed to be, flirting. “What? Palico got your tongue?”

CRKKKKKKKKK

Yelping, the fisherwoman stumbled forward into Jet's embrace when the whole of the dock violently rattled beneath them. As the Hunter's arms protectively clasped around her they shared a furious blush.

“No,” Jet clarified with a sigh. “But the Nargacuga does...”

“...The hwat now?”

Paws buried deep into the sand, her palms bowing in the sides of the sailboat, a low, and determined, growl rose within the Nell's throat. With a hurf she flexed her monstrously muscled biceps. “Why... won't... you...”

CRNNNNNCH

With a pronounced and deafening crack the gnarled and sun bleached post the sailboat was tied to snapped apart. Ripped up and out of the submerged sand banks it, along with most of the dock that surrounded it, collapsed into the ocean.

“ACK!”

As did Jet and his acquaintance. Sputtering and ptoeing, the harried humans bumbled about the wreckage while they started treading water.

“Are you... are you alright, Miss?” asked the Hunter. Plumes of sand, sea shells, and frightened schools of Sushifish churned around Jet while he lazily kicked his legs back and forth. Arm wrapped around the woman's shoulder he knocked away the plethora of planks crowding them with his free hand.

Coughing, the shaken fisherwoman held close to Jet. “What... what was that?!”

SPLISHHHHHHHHHHHHH

“That...” Eyes clenched shut, Jet sighed as Nell rose from the shallows and proudly hoisted up her haul. “That would be my Trainer.”

“Muh muh... muh muh muh... MONSTER!” screeched the fisherwoman.

The Nargacuga's expression, prideful and glee filled, faltered when she bothered to survey the wreckage she wrought. Annd the familiar and not so familiar faces caught up in it.

“Nell,” Jet ahemed as he gestured to and introduced the massive monster.

A guilty chirp tumbled out from the Nargacuga's beak as her ears tucked close to her skull and she lowered the sailboat back into the water.

Turning his attention to the human huddling behind him, Jet bid her speak. “Miss... Miss...?”

“Out of all the boats in the harbor she zeroes in on mine?” Maccha grimaced.

“Again, I’m so so so so soooooo sorry,” Jet said as he tiredly prostrated himself before the fisherwoman. “You’ll have to forgive her... eagerness.”

Running a hand through her short hair, shaking free what splinters remained, Maccha bitterly sighed. Sitting on the edge of the boardwalk alongside the Hunter she turned towards the towering Trainers eagerly circling round her beached boat. “And this was yer idea, huh?” Maccha tersely trailed off.

Head flopping forward, Jet groaned. With a defeated sigh his gaze, too, drifted towards the meandering monsters.

“Look with your eyes not your hands!” Brook barked. The Huntress, chaperoning Nell and Taras both, patrolled about the sailboat’s deck. Every time they tried to board she readily tutted and slapped them away.

Tossing a look back behind him, Jet shuddered at the sight of the sizable crowd gathering by the markets. Curious merchants, yet to open their stalls, dropped everything they were doing to safely ogle the monsters from afar. Their confused customers were, in turn, drawn towards them as were many a Palico.

TATUNK

A pile of planks, and an accompanying sack of nails, flopped down besides the Hunter. Clapping his hands together, the Commander then thumbed towards the half-destroyed dock. “Your Trainer, your responsibility.”

“Yessir,” Jet dutifully replied. Rising to a stand, the Hunter lurked as he scooped up and awkwardly balanced everything needed to toss together some slapdash repairs.

THOOM

THOOOM

THOOM

“Miss Maccha! Miss Maccha!” Taras eagerly called out as he stomped up towards the boardwalk.

“Taras don’t...” Jet groaned.

Broad tail swishing behind him, sparks crackling off his back, the Tobi-Kadachi’s blood red eyes positively twinkled. “I-i-iss that really your nessesst?”

Maccha warily exchanged glances with the Commander. The old man, Light Bowgun slung

over his back, nodded. "...That's certainly one word for it. But, um, aye?" she proceeded to answer with marked uncertainty. "Why do ya ask?"

"Because it'ssss incredible!" gushed the Fanged Wyvern.

Taken aback, Maccha could do little more than fill the air with empty uhhhhhhhs. Scratching at her cheek she tilted her head to the side. "Think so?"

"I know sso!" Taras happily hissed. "T-t-to think! A traveling nest!? I never knew sssuch a thing wasss possible!"

Maccha rasped and playfully swatted at him. "Pshhhh what? That ol' thing? It ain't nothin' special."

"Y-y-yesss it is!" Taras resolutely declared.

Excusing himself, Jet rolled his eyes and trudged down the docks.

Maccha bashfully rubbed at the back of her head as a smirk creased her lips. "Well twist my arm why doncha..."

Bashfully kicking at the sand, Taras shyly tapped his clawed fingers together. "T-t-that sssaid! Ummmm Mmmisss Maccha? If it'sss-"

"Taras, did you ask her yet?" Nell impatiently shouted.

"Don't russsh me!" pouted the Tobi-Kadachi.

Brow cocked, Maccha stared down the wilting Wyvern.

Shrinking in on himself, Taras worriedly blepped. "Like I wasss sssaying... Misss Maccha? If it'sss alright would you... could you teach us?"

"Huh?" every human within earshot asked in unison.

"Pleassse! Pleassse pleassse pleassse!" Taras begged. Hands clasped together, he pleadingly shook them at the flustered fisherwoman before dropping to his knees for emphasis. "Your nsss! How doesss it float? How doesss it move? How-"

"How does it stop?" Nell loudly chimed in.

"I wasss getting to that!" Taras shouted back. Sinking into the sand, the rising tide lapping at his thighs, the Tobi-Kadachi resumed begging in earnest.

Stroking at her chin, Maccha uneasily regarded the static arcing between the tufts of fluff lining the Tobi-Kadachi's spine and tail. Eyes swiveling along the bottom of her sockets she watched as the Parexus fries schooling in the shallows, but the size of minnows, went limp and floated to the surface of the sea anytime they drew near Taras. As his excitable explosions of electricity subsided so too did the fishes' strange behavior. Huh. She could work with this. Pushing off from the boardwalk Maccha

dropped down to the sand and surf below. "...Know what? How bout I do ya one better?" she said. Head tilted back the fisherwoman gazed up at the sweet talking snake-squirrel. "Hop onboard with me and I'll show ya!"

Wiggling in place, Taras excitedly gasped. "Really?!"

"Really! ...Assumin' we don't sink on the spot that is," Maccha snorted. "C'mon. I'll show you and yer Huntress pally the ropes! Annnndd yer thieving friend over there provided she behaves herself."

"Nell!" Taras not so quietly whispered as he raced back to the sailboat. "Nelllllll! Ssshe sssaid yesss!"

Delighted growls reverberated within the Trainer's chests as Brook desperately bid them to behave themselves. Thumbing at her nose, and mindful to avoid the craterous pawprints now pocking the beach, Maccha leisurely followed after. Clambering up and onto her vessel, the fisherwoman worked alongside the Huntress to carefully coordinate Taras' boarding. Sprawled across the length of the vessel, spreading his weight from stern to bow, the Tobi-Kadachi blepped happily as his arms and legs came to dangle over the sides. Holding their breaths, and pinched between Taras' thighs and tremendous tail, Maccha and Brook then bid Nell to shove them off into the surf where, mercifully, they managed to remain afloat.

Disbelieving whispers swirled about the markets as the Astera locals watched on mystified. Eyes agog they held their breaths as the motley crew crashed through the white capped waves rolling into the harbor and spray surged past the massive cloud blue scaled monster overflowing the deck. While Maccha frantically clambered atop Taras to raise the sails a collective gasp rolled through the crowd when a surge of saltwater billowed overboard. The enraptured onlookers nervously murmured among themselves as Brook and Nell frantically started shoveling out the sea by the bucketful and handful.

They watched. They waited. And, to the crowd's triumphant relief, they cheered when Maccha's sailboat righted itself and casually cruised out to sea. Excited oohs and ahhs sounded out at the sight of Taras flicking and kicking his hands and feet so as to triumphantly paddle them ever onward. The Nargacuga eagerly swam, well technically waded, after her seafaring companions and into the crystal clear waters rife and replete with corals, sponges, and the very bounty of the sea.

Eyes half-lidded, and jaw agape, Jet found himself at a loss for words while rapturous applause carried across the harbor. Brows arched, a smorgasbord of sounds tumbled free from the Jet's lips before he wisely decided it was best if he kept his comments to himself and resumed repairs.

TUNK

TONK

Sitting cross legged at the splintered edge of the dock, planks and nails piled up beside him, Jet's eyes couldn't help but wander now and again. He chuckled at the sight of Nell, quite obviously standing on her tiptoes, curiously circling round the sailboat after Maccha dropped anchor.

FWONK

CLONK

The image of Brook, skewering balled together clumps of bait on the spines that lined Taras' tail, made Jet cackle. Seeing the Tobi-Kadachi then lower his broad and tuft lined limb into the waters, proudly swaying and sashaying and putting on a show for his undersea audience, plastered an all too infectious smile on the Hunter's visage. Shaking his head, he started pounding planks into place on what supports remained with the help of his oversized Hammer.

TUNK

TONK

CLUNK

Dragging an arm across his sweat stained brow, Jet whewed. Kneeling on the docks, his armored greaves clanking noisily against the stout and solid planks, the wild haired Hunter tossed a look over his sopping wet shoulder. "Good as new!" he boasted to no one in particular. "At this rate I'll be done in..."

Looking out towards the ocean, and the gargantuan gap between the still standing posts, Jet visibly deflated. With a pitiful whine the Hunter's head flopped forward at the unenviable amount of work that remained. As a balmy gust washed over him Jet defeatedly grabbed hold of another plank and slid it forward atop the barnacle crusted support beams.

CLONK

TONK

Arm held out to his side, Jet blindly fumbled for some more nails. A padded palm, armored much like his own, brushed against the Hunter's hand and pawned him the sought after spikes.

"...Thank you, Sir," mumbled Jet. At the Commander's prompting the Hunter shuffled to the side and afforded the old man room enough to sit beside him. In silence the two of them alternated between tossing planks forward and nailing them into place.

THWONK

THWAM

"How you holding up there, Jet?" asked the Commander.

Lips scrunched, Jet looked out to where the sea met the sky. Barely, just barely, he could make out Maccha and Brook loading up Taras with more chum. Dipping his tail into the water, enticingly swishing its baited barbs, the Tobi-Kadachi let loose a crackle of sparks when a hungry school of fish drew near. Stunned, and floating to the surface, the pink scaled Parexus soon found themselves swept up by Nell as she glided through the water, smooth as glass, towing a net behind her.

“Jet?”

“...I've been better,” the Hunter conceded as he nailed another plank into place. Switching off with the Commander he passed along the elderly Hunter some nails before shoving another piece of wood forward.

FWAM

SLAM

The Commander nudged yet another plank into place before them with a laugh. “You'll be out there making a fool of yourself soon enough! Don't you worry.”

Slouching forward, chin tucked against his chest, Jet heavily exhaled. “No it's... it's not that.”

“That so?” Reaching to his side the Commander tap tapped at Jet's wrist. In response the Hunter obediently relaxed his grip on his Hammer and the old man relieved him of it in short order. “C'mon now. What's eating ya?”

Elbow resting on his thighs, and a hand cupped against his cheek, Jet sighed. “Be honest with me, Sir. Has anyone ever taken as long as I have to earn their Master Rank?” he bluntly asked.

The Commander reluctantly side eyed Jet as the aspiring Hunter clutched his Rookie and Advanced Rank pendants within his grasp. “You're an outlier to be sure,” he raspily acknowledged.

“Like...” Jet limply shrugged. “I just... I really thought I'd be out of your hair by now.”

Grunting, the Commander affectionately ruffled the Hunter's noggin. “You don't see me complaining, do you?”

“Even so...” Jet mumbled as he half-heartedly swatted him away. “This? All of this?” Jet gestured at the escapades unfolding on the high seas. The monster manned boat could be seen violently lurching back and forth while Taras curiously, and repeatedly, lowered and raised the sails to Brook and Maccha's consternation. “I think, I hope anyway, that this is what will finally lead me there.”

“Training them so as to train yourself? You know I'm still not sold on this scheme of yours, right?” the Commander snorted.

“I'm well aware, Sir,” the Hunter conceded. Quietly, warily, Jet had approached the old curmudgeon and freely admitted to what he truly sought under the guise of this cultural exchange; the armament of his monstrous companions.

“That said... there's no point in pretending to clutch my pearls,” the Commander nonchalantly shrugged.

Swallowing hard, Jet shuddered as he recalled the Commander's frankly morbid observations following his presentation. Their discussions, admittedly, went far better than he ever dared dream! Yet while the Hunter had meant to emphasize anything but... his superior was all too enthusiastic to observe

aloud that Astera's neighbors, if they ever truly wished it, could kill them to the last with little to no effort. Whether the monsters were armed or not made no difference and so, in the grand scheme of things, what was the harm in decking them out?

Reaching around his back the elderly Hunter cupped his Light Bowgun within his lap. "At the very least I can, and will, get behind arming Alma if only out of naked self interest. We'll speak more on the matter when the time is right."

Jet nodded along in an unspoken show of thanks.

"The others though?" the Commander rhetorically asked aloud. "We'll see. Even though Taras isn't too much of an ask and Nell, from what I've gathered, is already accounted for... Alma is to be our priority. As you were so eager to argue she is our first, and only, real line of defense against ferals." Tucking the stock of his Light Bowgun against his shoulder, the grizzled old timer stared down the iron sights of his weapon of choice and aimed towards Maccha's boat. He smirked at the glimpse it afforded him of the batcat, and snakesquirrel, ecstatically helping themselves to the teeming mass of fish flopping on deck. "That said, while I'm not opposed to you oh so graciously volunteering yourself up to train Alma, how exactly do you plan to do so?"

"I've..." Biting down on his lower lip, Jet bunched forward and wrapped his hands around his ankles. "Been practicing. I-I-I've been workshopping out a curriculum even with the best Trainers out there!"

"With Nell?" teased the Commander as he let his Light Bowgun come to rest in his lap.

"...With Nell," Jet mumbled. The blush creasing his cheeks became indistinguishable from the sunburn radiating off of them.

Shaking his head side to side the ebony hued human chuckled. "From all but bowing down before the lords of these lands to practically babysitting them. What a long and winding road you've walked to get us here."

"All things considered, Sir?" Jet opined. "I'd rather it short and straight."

"Life ain't linear, Jet. So maybe the road zigged when you wanted it to zag. Doesn't mean it won't lead you where you want it to."

"Well it sure is taking its sweet time getting there," the Hunter mehed.

Humming, the Commander clicked his tongue while foam splashed up around them. The roar of the waves, crashing onto shore, crowded out the silence. "It's one thing to piss and moan about the pace of your journey but are you really that unhappy with where all its taken you?"

"...No," Jet quietly replied. "But does it really have to be so roundabout?"

Arms crossed about his chest, the Commander hummed. "I'll be cute and answer your question with a question. Square this circle for me, Jet. Your Master Rank. What would you be willing to trade for it?"

“Sir?” Brow half-cocked, Jet struggled to follow along.

The Commander's steely gray eyes bore deep into the Hunter. “Say you had earned your Master Rank in a more timely manner. What would you be willing to forfeit for it? The time you spent building up a rapport with that Slayer woman?”

Recoiling back, Jet warily blinked. “What? N-no. Sir, what does that have to do with-”

“The time you spent forging your friendship with Taras?”

“No!” Eyes gone wide, Jet found himself surprised at how quickly and how forcefully he shot down the prospect.

“The time you spent nurturing your relationship with Nell?”

“NEVER!” Jet shouted from his chest without a second thought.

FWAP

“Ow...” Rubbing at the back of his head, Jet winced at the Commander's swift slap against his noggin.

“You stupid and stubborn thing,” snarked the wizened old man. “Like it or not life is a series of trade-offs, Jet. You've had countless opportunities to double down on your training and what did you do instead?” Plapping a heavy hand upon the Hunter's shoulder the Commander took to gently rocking him back and forth. “You fostered and surrounded yourself with people that love you and care about you. Why would you bemoan that? Those aren't the kind of choices you should ever be regretting.”

“Sorry, Sir,” Jet sheepishly mumbled.

“No more of this bellyaching, alright?” Lips curled up into a smile, beaming with pride, the Commander slung an arm around Jet's shoulder. “You'll get there when you get there. I know you will.”

“...Thank you, Sir,” Jet gratefully whispered.

WHAP

“OWWWW!” Jet smarted as he clutched at his cranium following another hearty slap.

“Now lying through your teeth to yours truly? Damn well better be searching your conscience after that.” Shoving the great Hammer back into Jet's grasp the Commander slid forth another hunk of wood.

With a sigh, the Hunter dutifully lined up the proffered plank before pounding it into place.

“Seriously though,” started the Commander. “You and Brook were sneaking those two in for how many moons? Did you really think the Palicos wouldn't clue me in? That I wouldn't notice our food stores depleting faster than they had any right to?”

her neck felt more than heard, the Nargacuga viciously nuzzled into him. “To see Maccha's nest ride along the waves, its flaps catching against the wind, the fish swarming beneath its shadow was... was...”

“Psh. With the way you're talking it practically sounds like is Maccha your new best friend!” Jet teased.

The crimson bands of fur wrapped around Nell's eyes, and stretching up towards her ears, positively glowered. Cheeks puffed out, she let slip a husky chirp. “I wish...” she harrumphed.

Jet cackled as he kneaded and massaged his loomy lover's chin. Turning his head to the side, he spied Taras stomping into the markets alongside Maccha with handfuls of fish clasped close to his peach scaled chest. Relaxing his grip at the fisherwoman's signal hundreds of pounds of Parexus clapped to the ground. Merchants, waving fistfuls of Zenny, promptly swarmed the fisherwoman.

Eyes half-lidded, the Nargacuga impotently flicked her tail. The sight of Maccha circling round the Tobi-Kadachi, exaggeratedly and excitedly gesturing at him, made her beak purse. “How come she didn't let me ride on her nest...” Nell sulked.

“Why do you think?” Jet cheekily hummed.

Shoulders sagging, Nell flared her nostrils with a pronounced pout.

Drawing shallow breaths, the Nargacuga's head weighing heavily atop his torso, Jet let his hands wander. Fingers splayed, he combed through the wet fur lining her cheeks. “Nell. You tried to abscond with her livelihood.”

“I was just looking!” she whined.

“With your hands?”

“HRFFF.”

Rolling his eyes, Jet reached out to clasp at one of her black scaled fingers. “Well... there's always next time.”

Blushing profusely, the heat burning off her cheeks positively sweltering, Nell gingerly curled her digit and pinched her human's hand between it. “Next time?”

“Next time. You're a Cultural Ambassador now, remember? That means you can come and go as you please! If I had to wager...”

“BEAT IT YA REVOLTURES! HE'S MINE!” Maccha shouted. Fishing pole in hand she slapped at and drove off the competition shamelessly trying to sweet talk Taras out of her employ and into their own.

Brows arched, Jet stifled a chuckle. “...Maccha will miss you more than anyone else!”

“EXCUSE YOU?!” Brook's voice carried across the harbor as she marched up to Maccha. “I

don't recall loaning him out to you!”

“Errrrrr,” Jet stuttered.

“L-l-ladiesss pleassse!” Taras pleaded.

As Brook and Maccha readied to trade put-downs, and punches, the towering Tobi-Kadachi desperately tried to separate them. It had been all of afternoon and they already had Astera's locals fighting over the monsters they had once thought to fear.

Jet shamelessly segued the conversation elsewhere all the same. “A-a-and let's not forget we've still got a lot of work ahead of us! Deliveries. Training. Teaching. The folks here are just as eager to learn about you as you are them after all! That, and, you only have the rest of Astera to explore!”

Positively beaming, Nell happily chirped as she leaned back and let her ample rear come to rest on her scaled and supple heels. Scooping up Jet, sliding him off the dock to bury him between her biceps and breasts with a crushing hug, the monster longingly locked gazes with him. “Mmhm?”

Jet bashfully squirmed as the Nargacuga hung on his every word. “We've still got to show you the markets, the Forge, the Botanical Research station...”

Toes twiddling in the surf, Nell cupped a hand against the back of Jet's head and stroked a thumb along his cheek. “Mmmhmm?”

“The Canteen, the... the...” Rubbing his head along the side of her digit, shuddering at the faintest wrinkles in her flesh dragging along his skin, Jet proceeded to plant a kiss upon it. “Then there's the uhhh... the ummm...” Coughing fitfully, the Hunter suddenly found himself short of breath. “I mean... with how often you'll be visiting you're probably going to need a place to stay. Right?”

Nell tensed. She had teased, she had pleaded, she had hoped for this for so long but but but to think this was actually happening?!

“And honestly what kind of a host would I be if I didn't even offer to house you...”

The wings lining Nell's forearms fanned out as her tail wildly lashed behind her. Maccha's nest? PSH. Screw that Noios! Taras could have it! Not when... not when... not when...

“My hands are tied!” Jet said as he sheepishly stumbled along. “What other choice do I have but to invite you into my home?”

Growling incoherently, Nell bunched her beak against her beloved. It's happening it's happening it's happening it's happening it's happening!!!

Hurking, the Hunter found himself swallowed up by the hill sized mounds jutting from her chest. Heh. It really was as the Commander said. At every opportunity that presented itself he always chose the same thing. And... and he was okay with that.

“GRWF.” Spoken word had long since failed the Nargacuga. The only things tumbling out from her maw now were affectionate growls, chirps, and purrs.

“...You do know it's going to be a tight fit, right?” Jet wheezed as he tried to ground his girlfriend's lofty expectations. “Cramped. Confined.”

“Intimate?” Nell rumbled with a hopeful lilt.

“T-t-that too...” Jet petered off with a scathing blush.

With the sea serenading them, the hiss of the retreating waves ringing in their ears, Nell flopped back into the surf. Heart pounding in her chest, Jet bouncing between her breasts to its beat, the Nargacuga triumphantly wiggled. “This our thing now, huh?” she asked.

“It can be,” cooed the Hunter. “Wasn't training our thing though?”

Nell shooshed him with an emphatic, and face smothering, smooch. “It can be both! But if I had to choose...”

Scratching at the Nargacuga's neck, Jet dreamily sighed as he settled deep into her sternum. Nuzzling into her wet fur he dared to test the waters. “...And Alma's thing?”

Head tossed back, the tide fizzling against the back of her head, Nell playfully growled. “Anything but this,” she commanded.

“Sooooooooooooo training?” Jet weakly offered.

WHUMPF

“That's not what I said,” Nell deadpanned as she clapped Jet flat between her furred hills. “She's... allowed to train under you. Not at you.”

“Duly noted,” came Jet's muffled response. With Nell and the Commander's say-so he finally had the means, manpower, and blessing to finally follow through on Alma's inquiry. Now? Now he just had to make it happen.

As walls of furred flesh molded around him, the light of the sun retreating behind the Nargacuga's cleavage, the Hunter sighed contentedly. He'd follow up with Alma... eventually.

<<<<QUEST ACCEPTED>>>>

Wading through the undergrowth of the Ancient Forest, Jet brushed aside the fern fronds choking the beaten path. Eyes to the ground he clung stubbornly to the trail of craterous reptilian footprints left in a certain Anjanath's wake.

THOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM

Terrified Blissbills and Revoltures, squawking incoherently, fled from the canopies jostling overhead. The Hunter's legs trembled as the very ground beneath him buckled and churned. ...Could it

be? Staggering forward, struggling to keep his footing even as the tremors slowly subsided, Jet stepped out into an ivy choked clearing. The Scoutflies aiding his search, their phosphorescent thoraxes lazily flickering in and out of focus, suddenly burst to life as the Hunter eeheed at a most welcome sight. “Slayer Alma!” Jet shouted with a wave and a smile.

Whirling about in place, the hulking Anjanath's frightening visage melted away at the sight of the ankle-high human approaching her. “Ser Jet!” Dropping to a knee, Alma warmly regarded the esteemed Hunter. “Such formality ill suits you! Is aught amiss?”

Rubbing at the back of his helmet, Jet strained his neck to gaze up at Alma. Even when kneeling the pink scaled dinosaur still scraped at the very sky. “No no no! Nothing bad! It's uh... well. Do you remember, some weeks back, when you asked me if I could train you?”

The Anjanath stoically nodded as she tucked a hand scarred with bite marks close to her chest. “Why yes! I do indeed recall that request,” Alma rumbled as she curiously eyed the Hunter's Scoutflies retreating into the lantern attached to his waist. In the back of her mind the Brute Wyvern had long since come to realize how foolish and farcical an ask it was. How could Ser Jet, even if he wished it, ever hope to accommodate her?

Yet... here she was hoping against hope. With bated breath Alma asked him: “Have you your answer?”

Before Jet could answer a raspy voice, with some glee, cut him off. “I mean if he doesn't I sure do.”

A surprised growl tumbled out from between Alma's snaggleteeth at the unfamiliar and well-aged human's approach. The thick mohawk of purple fur stretching down from her skull, and trailing down her back and spiny tail, rustled as she pulled her head back.

Jet cleared his throat as he brokered introductions. “Alma, this is... my Commander. The man I report to, I look up to, and ultimately consulted for how I might train you. If I could train you.”

“That answer is 'yes' by the by,” the Commander promptly elaborated.

“Sir!” Jet whined.

“Oh quit dragging this out,” sassed the old man. “You've kept her waiting how long now?”

“SIR!”

Amber eyes gone wide, surprised licks of flame sputtered out from between the Anjanath's lips. “Pardon?”

“Your vigilance has not gone unnoticed, Slayer,” said the Commander. “It is by your duty and sacrifice that this whelp of mine still stands. As does Astera.”

Alma's tattered wings, draped over her broad back like a cloak, drooped. She was ill-practiced at parsing praise, much less this news, and it showed. “I... I know not what to say.” Surely. Surely she had misheard them.

The Commander dismissively swatted. “No words are needed. Your continued presence, your great work, safeguards my people.” Scratching at his cheek, the elderly Hunter smirked. “Were I as noble a soul as Jet here, or yourself, I might be able to say that the whole of humanity wishes to reward you for your steadfast vigil. Say it and mean it, anyway. But I’m not in the mood to bluster you with bullshit and I doubt you’re all that inclined to hear it.”

Brow half-cocked, a handful of snaggleteeth peeked past Alma’s lips. “...If not pleasantries then what are you here to exchange?” inquired the disbelieving Anjanath.

“Armaments,” answered the old timer. “After all, what good would Jet’s training be without weapons of your own?”

“...Surely you jest,” Alma laughed as her gaze came to rest heavily upon Ser Jet.

The Hunter popped off his helmet. Tucking it beneath an arm, long black hair rolling down past his pauldrons, Jet nodded. “It’s no joke. What was it you said to me, Alma? I must need find the courage to ask? To try? Well, I... asked.”

“And I would not wander into the wilds to waste your time much less my own,” retorted the Commander. “Whether you will it or no humanity perceives you as our protector. If only out of a selfish desire for our own self-preservation we would grant your request and equip you with what we can. All so that you may better face down the feral threat that we hope to never face.”

Bassy, and uncertain, growls radiated out from the Anjanath and rattled the whole of the clearing. “Humankind regards *me* with such reverence? T-t-there must be some sort of misunderstanding! Perhaps... perhaps it is out of fear that they respect me so?”

The Commander cackled. “Tell that to Jet,” he snorted as he thumbed to the Hunter fumbling to slip back on his helmet. “I’ll readily confess to being intimidated and awed by you in equal measure, Slayer. This Hunter here, however, was quite clearly compelled by something other than cowardice to advocate on your behalf.”

“Srrrrrrr.”

Hand clasped to her chest, a sincere and toothy smile spread wide across Alma’s mug. To think that someone, something, like her could inspire such confidence and earnest if not impossible acts of charity? The mere thought filled her breast with an unfamiliar and welcome warmth. “My... my deepest thanks, Ser Jet.”

“Maaaaaaaybe wait to say that until you see what we’ve whipped up for you,” the Hunter hehed. “Alright?”

“Forgive me, Ser Jet,” Alma happily hummed. “But I am afraid you will have to suffer my gratitude at length.”

“Provided we’re not interrupting anything would you care to join us?” continued the Commander. “Your Sword and Shield stand at the ready and we’d appreciate it if you gave us a gut check on how bad, or good, a job we did. We’ve never tried scaling up something like this to such sizes

before and I'm sure our inexperience will show.”

Rising to her feet with a grunt, the creak of the Anjanath's hulking frame carried across the clearing. “There is no need to debase yourself before me, Ser Commander,” she playfully growled. “I know full well the quality of humankind's crafts. That you see fit to gift me anything at all is something I shall treasure always.”

“Two, technically!” Jet ahemed. “It's uhh... they come as a pair.”

Eyes twinkling, Alma's hopes and aspirations, long since cast aside and forgotten, flared back to life. Lumbering forward with slow and measured steps, pulped leaves and branches exploding up from between her toes with every footfall regardless, the Anjanath eagerly fell in line behind the humans that enthralled her attention so. “Shall we then, Ser Jet? Or should I say, Trainer Jet?”

“Not you toooooo,” Jet groaned.