

Long chapter...

Chapter 154:

– Haru –

The Fox Hole's front door clicked shut behind us.

I stood there with my hands in my pockets, ten tails swaying lazily behind me, and took in the new world Ranni had found for us.

It was beautiful in the way dangerous places always were.

Endless dunes stretched ahead beneath a pale blue sky, the sand broken here and there by jagged black stone ridges jutting up. Heat shimmered in the distance, bending the horizon into molten silver. Far beyond the dunes, almost hidden behind wavering air, I could just barely make out a line of green.

Sasuke stood to my left, his duck butt black hair shifting in the hot wind, looking deeply offended by the existence of sand. He turned in a slow circle, scanning the dunes with suspicious intensity. "So," he said flatly, "where are all the supposed giant monsters?"

I glanced at him.

He kept looking around. "I was promised dangerous beasts." His mouth curled faintly. "All I see is sand."

"You've been here for twelve seconds."

"Twelve seconds too long."

I snorted.

Sasuke Uchiha was, without question, one of the snarkiest little shits I had ever met. And considering I knew Reigen, Cortana, Hela, Cersei, several devils, one blood goddess, one emotionally repressed ancient elf, and an entire guild of wizards whose response to structural integrity was "punch it harder," that was saying something.

The funniest part was that Sasuke clearly thought his attitude made him look cool.

Thor, on my right, was having the exact opposite reaction.

The giant blond god had spread his arms wide, breathing in the desert air like it was the finest mead in all the Nine Realms. Mjolnir hung loosely in one hand. His red cloak snapped behind him in the wind, and his grin grew wider with every passing second. "Ah!" Thor declared, voice booming across the dunes. "Now this is a realm worthy of warriors!"

“Sand?” Sasuke asked.

“Possibility!” Thor corrected, pointing his hammer toward the distant shimmer of green. “There is a forest yonder, across the waste. I can see the tops of trees moving against the horizon.”

I followed his line of sight and nodded. “Good eye.”

Thor’s grin turned smug. Then he tilted his head slightly. His expression changed. Thor’s grip tightened around Mjolnir. “And beneath us,” he continued, quieter now, “something moves.”

Sasuke’s eyes narrowed.

I looked down at the sand. A faint vibration passed through the ground beneath my boots. Large movement. Multiple bodies, maybe. Long. Burrowing. Far below us, but not as far as I would have liked.

A slow smile pulled at my mouth. “Well, damn,” I said, impressed despite myself. “You sensed that too?”

Thor threw his shoulders back. “I have hunted monsters on many alien worlds, good-brother,” he said proudly. “Scaled beasts beneath methane seas. Iron-horned horrors in the red valleys of Vanaheim. Serpents that burrow through moons and sing before they strike.” He spun Mjolnir once, the hammer humming with restrained thunder. “I have become quite experienced.”

I gave him a respectful nod. “Not bad.”

Sasuke scoffed.

Thor looked down at him. Which was fair, because Thor looked down at most people. The man was built like someone had taken a mountain, taught it to bench press, and given it divine trauma. “You should take care, *small brooding warrior*,” Thor said, his grin turning wicked. “These beasts may be larger than anything you have faced. Good luck bringing one down with those skinny arms.”

Sasuke’s left eye twitched. “Skinny!?”

Thor lifted Mjolnir and winked. “Worry not. If you find yourself swallowed whole, I shall avenge you in a way worthy of song.”

“I will kill you!”

“Excellent spirit!” Thor laughed. Then he spun Mjolnir overhead, faster and faster until the hammer became a blur. Wind whipped around us, kicking up sand in a violent spiral. “May the greatest hunter win!” He launched into the sky like a thunderbolt.

The shockwave slapped sand across my shirt and sent Sasuke’s hair whipping sideways.

Thor streaked toward the distant forest, red cloak trailing behind him like a banner of war. Within seconds, he was a shrinking speck against the blue sky.

I stared after him. Then I looked at Sasuke.

Sasuke stared after him too, face blank except for the tiny muscle jumping in his jaw. "He is insufferable," Sasuke said.

"He grows on you."

"Like a fungus?"

"More like a golden retriever that can level a small town."

Sasuke made a sound that might have been agreement, disgust, or an Uchiha attempting not to laugh and failing internally.

Then his hands moved. Fast. Tiger. Boar. Ox. Dog. Snake. Smoke erupted in front of him with a sharp pop, and a massive hawk appeared out of it, wings spreading wide enough to cast both of us in shadow. The bird was impressive. Huge, sharp-eyed, dark-feathered, and easily large enough to carry a grown man. Its talons dug into the sand, and it gave me one long look that suggested it was already judging me.

I judged it right back.

Sasuke leapt onto its back with practiced ease and looked down at me. "Remember our bet! I will find a beast larger than whatever you hunt," he said. "I will craft something worthy of Naruko. Then she will see I am the one for her!"

I tucked my hands back into my pockets and smiled up at him. "Good luck, Sasuke."

He narrowed his eyes, clearly suspicious of the sincerity.

Then the hawk beat its enormous wings and lifted off in a rush of sand and wind. Within moments, Sasuke was rising into the sky, banking eastward over the dunes.

I stood alone in the desert. A hot wind blew past me. Somewhere deep beneath the sand, something massive shifted.

I looked left. Empty dunes. I looked right. More empty dunes. I looked up. Thor and Sasuke had both abandoned me within two minutes of arriving. "Well," I said to absolutely no one, "this is what I get for going hunting with emotionally damaged princes." My tails swayed behind me.

The desert stretched endlessly in every direction. I let myself really think about why I had come here. Proposal gifts for Naruko and for Kushina.

I rubbed the back of my neck.

Weapons and armor made sense for them. Not because I thought love could be measured in steel or monster bone, but because they were shinobi. Mothers-to-be who would absolutely still want to punch threats in the face until someone physically stopped them.

The gifts needed to say I knew them. Not just that I loved them. That I saw them.

I can totally do that!

A shadow passed over the sun.

I blinked up at it.

At first, I thought Thor had turned around. Then I looked up. A **wooden boat** flew over the desert.

I stared because for a second I thought the heat had gotten through all my supernatural defenses somehow and I was seeing things.

Yep, that is a boat. A full wooden boat with a curved hull, mast, rigging, sail, railings, everything. It skimmed through the air above the dunes like the laws of physics had taken one look at it and decided they were on vacation.

The sail billowed despite the wind blowing the wrong direction. Ropes snapped and fluttered. The hull groaned softly as it passed overhead, casting a long shadow across the sand.

I slowly lowered my hand from my neck. "Okay," I said. "That's really cool."

Because it was. There was something uniquely delightful about a flying wooden boat crossing a monster desert.

Maybe it was the simplicity. Maybe it was the audacity. Maybe I just liked boats.

I started walking toward it, curiosity pulling me across the sand.

Then my ears twitched.

A scream carried over the wind. I sounded like it was coming from a frightened young girl.

My playful mood vanished.

I focused my eyes. The flying boat was not the only thing I saw. Far ahead of it, skimming low over the dunes, a large bird-like mount raced across the desert on powerful legs and half-spread wings. Its body was lean and swift, built for bursts of speed over uneven terrain. A little girl clung to its saddle, hair whipping behind her, posture low and desperate as she urged the creature forward.

Behind her, the sand moved. Monsters beneath the surface moved with terrifying speed, circling, angling, cutting off escape routes like predators that knew exactly how frightened prey would run.

One breached. A massive segmented body erupted from the sand, all armored plates, hooked mandibles, and grinding jaws. Sand cascaded from its hide like water from a surfacing whale. It snapped at the bird mount's tail and missed by less than a body length.

The girl screamed again.

"Found the monsters," I muttered.

The flying boat above lurched. Two figures vaulted over its rail.

One was a man in layered leather gear. The other was—*A cat? A bipedal cat in ninja armor? This world has Yokai too?*

The man and the cat fell through the air toward another bird mount that swooped up beneath them with great timing. The man landed first with his boots hitting the saddle hard. The cat landed behind him with a tiny armored clatter and immediately grabbed on.

The bird mount shrieked, banked, and shot after the little girl.

The flying ship followed as its crew scrambled along the deck.

I vanished from where I stood and reappeared on the deck of the flying ship.

No one noticed.

Which was honestly a little disappointing.

I had appeared on a flying wooden boat in the middle of a desert, with ten golden tails, fox ears, and an outfit that absolutely screamed "mysterious handsome final boss," and not a single person screamed.

Rude.

Most of the crew was too busy crowding the railings, staring down at the chaos below as the man and his armored cat chased after the little girl on those weird bird mounts. A few shouted things I didn't understand. Others pointed toward the sand monsters carving violent ridges through the dunes.

I shrugged. If no one was going to panic about me yet, I might as well inspect the boat.

Because it was still a flying boat.

And flying boats deserved attention.

The deck beneath my boots was made of some kind of dark polished wood that felt far too light for how sturdy it was. It had subtle grain patterns that shimmered faintly when the sunlight hit it at the right angle. My **Lord of the Kitchen** skill twitched in the back of my mind, identifying it as organic but altered. Reinforced. Treated. Something about it felt monster-adjacent.

Not alive, exactly. But definitely made from something that used to be.

A mast rose from the center of the ship, thick ropes securing it in place. Above that, tied to the mast by a web of cables and harnesses, floated a hot air balloon.

A very small hot air balloon. I stared at it. Then I looked down at the entire ship. Then back at the balloon. "That is not enough balloon," I muttered. It was not even close to enough balloon. That balloon should not have been able to lift this ship. Not even a little.

Maybe if the ship was made of paper and dreams. But this thing had a full hull, railings, cargo crates, crew, masts, rigging, and enough equipment scattered around the deck to stock a small expedition.

And yet here we were, gliding over the desert at what felt like car speed while the sails caught wind that absolutely should not have been pushing us in this direction.

I walked to the nearest mast support and ran my fingers over one of the metal brackets.

Not normal metal either. Contradictory in the same way the wood was. There were faint traces of energy inside it, not quite magicules, not chakra, not youki, but some native flavor of power that seemed to hum in response to the environment around us.

Monster parts. That was my guess.

This world probably built impossible things by harvesting impossible creatures. Bones for lightweight frames. Sinew for tension cables. Scales for heat resistance. Maybe the balloon membrane came from some massive floating beast. Maybe the sails were woven from fibers that caught more than just wind.

It made sense. In a world full of giant burrowing sand monsters and flying wooden ships, civilization would adapt around what the monsters provided.

"Okay," I murmured, smiling despite myself. "That's actually pretty clever."

Someone yelped behind me.

I turned.

A cute girl with large round glasses had spotted me from across the deck. She had short dark hair, practical travel clothes, and the startled expression of someone whose morning had just acquired ten more tails than expected.

For half a second, we stared at each other.

Then she pointed at me. "There's a monster on the ship!"

Every head on the deck snapped toward me. Several people reached for weapons.

A man near a crate grabbed the hilt of a sword. Someone else lifted a crossbow-looking contraption made of bone and metal. A third crewman took one look at my tails, whispered something that sounded like a prayer, and hid behind a barrel.

I put a hand over my chest. "Rude."

The girl with glasses froze.

I gave her my most wounded look. The one Kunou said made me look like someone had stolen her pudding. "Calling someone a monster out of nowhere like that?" I said. "I just got here."

Her face went bright red. "Oh!" she said, immediately lowering her hand. "I am so sorry! I didn't mean— I mean, you appeared out of nowhere, and you have—" Her eyes flicked to my ears. Then my tails. Then back to my ears. Then back to my tails. "I mean, you are clearly not— That is, I have never seen anyone like—" She stopped, took a breath, and bowed so quickly her glasses nearly slid off her nose. "I apologize. That was improper of me."

Well. Now I felt bad for making her feel bad.

She straightened, still staring at my tails with the intense focus of someone trying very hard not to stare at my tails and failing with admirable consistency. "My name is Alma," she said. "I am a representative of the Hunters Guild."

"Nice to meet you, Alma. I'm Haru."

"Haru," she repeated, like she was filing the name away for later panic. "May I ask what you are?"

She probably meant what species but I wasn't going to make it that easy for her. "I'm a chef!"

Several people blinked.

Alma blinked the hardest. "A... chef? That's not what I meant—"

Before Alma could try to process, another voice called out from nearby. "Are we not gonna ask how this fox guy got onto our ship, Alma?"

I looked over.

A blonde woman stood near the middle of the deck, one hand braced against a crate, the other hovering near a tool belt at her hip. She was gorgeous in a bright, sunlit way. Blonde hair,

confident posture, and a tight top that did absolutely nothing to hide the fact that she had a very impressive chest.

She was looking at me with wariness first. Then curiosity. Then appreciation. That last one took about two seconds.

I gave her a friendly little wave.

She arched an eyebrow.

Alma glanced between us quickly. "Gemma, this is Haru. He says he is a chef...?"

Gemma stared at me. Then at my ears. Then at my tails. Then at my face again. "Right." Her lips twitched. "And I'm guessing *chefs* where you're from just appear on airships for fun?"

I shrugged. "I hopped on because I was curious what was going on."

Gemma stared at me for another second. Then she laughed once under her breath. "Sure. Why not?"

I liked her already.

Alma, however, looked like she had fifteen questions fighting to be first and no time to ask any of them. Her attention snapped back over the railing as another scream carried up from below. "We can figure this out later," Alma said quickly. "THE HUNTER NEEDS OUR HELP FIRST!"

Gemma's expression sharpened. The appreciation vanished, replaced by focus. She turned and sprinted across the deck toward a large reinforced crate strapped down near the main mast. The thing was nearly as tall as she was and bound with metal bands. She grabbed a pry tool from her belt, wedged it beneath the lid, and forced it open with a grunt.

Inside lay a sword... A sword I was sure Rias would love.

It was a comically large *anime-style* katana, the kind of weapon that made blacksmiths either weep from admiration or quit their profession entirely. The blade was longer than Gemma was tall, broad and slightly curved, with a gleaming edge that caught the desert sun in a clean silver line. The hilt was long enough for both hands, wrapped in dark material, and the whole weapon radiated that same monster-crafted energy I had sensed in the ship.

Gemma grabbed it like it weighed nothing to her pride and probably quite a lot to her arms, dragged it free, and ran to the edge of the ship.

Below, *the hunter* and his cat companion were closing in on the little girl, but the sand monsters were faster.

One erupted from the dune beside them, jaws opening wide enough to swallow the bird mount whole.

Gemma planted one boot against the railing, lifted the enormous katana over her shoulder, and shouted, "Hunter! Catch!" Then she threw it.

I watched the blade spin end over end through the desert air.

The hunter looked up. For one heartbeat, his bird mount raced beneath the falling weapon. Then he stood in the saddle. The cat behind him grabbed the reins with both paws and yowled something that sounded both heroic and deeply concerned.

The hunter leapt. He launched himself off the bird mount, twisted midair, and caught the giant katana by the hilt with both hands.

My eyebrows rose.

That sword was heavy. Not to me, obviously, but to a regular human? Very heavy. The momentum alone should have torn his arms out of their sockets if he caught it wrong.

He caught it perfectly. Then he fell toward the breaching sand monster.

The creature's armored head rose from the dune, mandibles spread, body coiling beneath the surface like a living landslide. The hunter flipped once, used the weight of the blade to accelerate his descent, and brought the weapon down in a single clean slash.

For a fraction of a second, nothing happened.

Then the monster split. The cut began at the top of its head and carved diagonally through armored plates, muscle, and whatever passed for a spine in a giant desert worm. Sand and dark ichor exploded outward as the two halves of its upper body peeled apart. The force of the strike drove the blade into the dune beneath it, sending a shockwave through the sand.

The hunter landed in a crouch beside the corpse, one hand still on the hilt.

The monster twitched once, then collapsed.

I let out a low whistle. "Well, damn."

Alma looked at me, startled by the genuine admiration in my voice.

Gemma, still breathing hard from the throw, gave me a sideways glance. "Impressed?"

"Yeah," I said honestly. "That was pretty bad ass." Because it had been. I could sense the hunter now that I was paying attention. *Just a human. A regular human.*

Well. Regular by this world's standards, apparently.

He had strength, sure. His body had probably been tempered by training, monster meat, equipment, maybe whatever strange energy saturated this world. But he was still fundamentally human.

And he had just caught a sword the size of a fence post in midair and used it to bisect a giant armored sand worm with one well-aimed slash.

That took more than muscle.

Timing. Footwork. Nerve. Weapon familiarity. An instinctive understanding of the monster's anatomy from one glance. He had aimed for a seam in the armor, used his fall to generate force, and let the sword's absurd weight do the rest.

He was a proper **Monster Hunter**.

"Okay," I murmured to myself. "This world might be pretty fun."

...A lot happened in the next thirty seconds.

After saving the little girl, it turned out her older brother was also in danger. So the hunter and Alma hopped back on those bird mounts called Seikret and rushed back across the desert towards some caves to save him.

I watched them go. Then I looked down at the dead sand worm lying in two twitching halves about twenty feet away.

The *Balahara* was what I heard someone nearby call it.

I crouched beside the carcass and poked it with one finger.

The armored hide was tougher than it looked. Layered plates overlapped along the creature's segmented body, each one ridged and slightly flexible. Good impact resistance. Probably excellent against sand pressure. The mandibles were hooked and serrated, stained dark from whatever unfortunate things this beast had eaten recently.

I poked it again. Dark ichor oozed from the cut. My nose wrinkled. "Hmm." Could I make something tasty from it?

Of course I could. I was *me*.

Give me long enough and I could probably turn an Evil Spirit into a passable consommé, assuming I found a way to remove the corruption without poisoning everyone and violating several laws of good taste.

But did I want to cook the giant desert worm?

No. No, I did not.

Because it was still a giant worm.

There were lines. I was the greatest chef in the multiverse. I had served hot pot to Demon Lords, soul-healing fried chicken to a broken moon queen, dragon tacos that made Erina Nakiri's clothes lose a battle against flavor, and fondue good enough to make Nick Fury emotionally process a Nazi infiltration over melted cheese. I was not cooking up *worm*.

I stood and wiped my finger clean with foxfire. I glanced over my shoulder.

Gemma had climbed down from the ship while I was busy offending the culinary potential of worm flesh. She walked across the sand with confident, practiced steps, one hand resting on her hip, blonde hair shifting in the hot wind. Up close, the tool belt made more sense. She had little hammers, carving knives, measuring hooks, chalk sticks, folded diagrams, and metal tongs hanging from it. A smith, then. Or a field crafter.

She crouched beside the Balahara and rapped her knuckles against one of the plates. "Good flexibility," she said. "Decent density. Not the strongest thing in the Windward Plains, but the layering is useful. I could make some decent armor plates from this."

"You work with monster materials?"

Before she could respond, another set of footsteps approached.

He was a big man. Big by human standards. Broad shoulders, powerful build, heavy gear, stern face, and the kind of presence that made people instinctively straighten up when he entered a room. His armor had seen use. Not ceremonial scratches either. Real use. Scars in metal and leather, old impact marks polished but not hidden.

He looked at me the way experienced commanders looked at unknown variables. "Fabius," he said.

I waited for him to say more. His gaze stayed fixed on me. After a moment, I realized that was his introduction.

"Nice to meet you, Fabius. I'm Haru."

"I know. Alma told me before she took off." His eyes moved from my ears to my tails and back to my face. "I am the leader of the Hunters Guild."

I whistled. "That sounds important."

"It is."

Gemma snorted quietly.

Fabius ignored her with the ease of a man who had spent years ignoring people on purpose.

He folded his arms. "I want to know why you were on my ship."

"Mostly curiosity," I told him. Had the Hunter failed to save the little girl, then I would have stepped in, but my help wasn't needed.

His expression did not change.

"I saw a flying wooden boat crossing the desert," I explained. "That felt like something worth investigating."

Gemma's lips twitched.

Fabius stared at me for another long second, then looked again at my tails. "Are your people native to this desert?"

I laughed. I could not help it. The idea of a secret civilization of ten-tailed golden fox demon chefs living under the sand was wonderful. Terrifying for local ecosystem balance, probably, but wonderful. "No," I said. "I'm from a lot farther away than that."

"How far?"

"Depends how you measure distance... between worlds."

Fabius's eyes narrowed slightly as I mumbled that last part.

Gemma's head turned toward me a fraction faster. She caught that as well.

I shrugged and gestured vaguely toward the horizon. "I came here with two companions. We're currently hunting monsters for a competition."

Fabius went very still. "A competition?"

"Yes."

"What kind of competition?"

"The fun kind!"

His stare flattened. Apparently that answer did not satisfy the stern guild leader man.

"Fine. Thor, Sasuke, and I are each hunting monsters. Whoever finds the best monster materials wins. Thor went that way." I pointed toward the distant forest. "Sasuke went into the air on a giant hawk that was somehow moodier than he was. I have no idea where he is now."

Technically, I could have found Sasuke easily. My senses could stretch across deserts, mountains, cities, and battlefields when I wanted them to. If I really focused, I could probably

pick up Sasuke's brooding from orbit. It had a distinct emotional signature. Like wet charcoal and unresolved abandonment issues.

But that would be cheating. A hunt was a hunt. If I was going to beat Sasuke and Thor, I was going to do it properly.

Mostly. Probably. Within reason.

Fabius followed the direction I had pointed, then looked back at me. "You brought outsiders into this region without Guild authorization."

"I didn't know there was a Guild to authorize things."

He looked briefly toward the caves where the hunter, Alma, and their Seikret had disappeared. His jaw tightened, but he kept his attention on me. "What are you hunting for?" he asked. "Glory? Trophies? Coin?"

I smiled. "Proposal gifts!"

That actually made him pause.

Gemma's eyebrows shot up.

I looked out over the desert. "I'm looking for the best monster I can find so I can make weapons and armor for two women I love. Something worthy of them. Something that says I know who they are, what they value, and what kind of future I want to build with them."

The desert wind blew between us.

For the first time, Fabius looked genuinely thrown.

Gemma stared at me. Then she muttered, "Why are the handsome ones always taken already?"

Fabius turned his head and stared at her flatly.

Gemma froze. Her cheeks went pink.

I grinned.

She cleared her throat so hard it sounded painful. "I mean, from a logistical standpoint, that is a strong narrative motivation."

"Is it?" I asked, still grinning.

"Yes," she said quickly. And then she added, "...Alma is going to lose her mind when she hears a story like that. That girl spends most of her free time reading romance novels..."

I considered that. "Should I be worried?"

“Only if you dislike being asked deeply personal questions about your romantic life under the guise of cultural research.”

I thought about Alma’s huge curious eyes and the way she had stared at my tails like they contained the answers to several academic questions and possibly her future happiness.
“Noted.”

Gemma stood, dusted sand from her pants, and gestured toward the Balahara corpse. “Anyway, romance novels aside, I’m a smith with the Research Commission. Field equipment, weapon maintenance, armor crafting, expedition modifications, monster material integration. You bring me the right parts, and I can craft you the best weapons and armor you can ask for!”

My ears perked.

She noticed immediately. Her smile turned sharp and professional. “However,” she continued, holding up one finger, “you are not part of the Hunters Guild.”

“Nope.”

“Which means you do not get a Guild Hunter discount. So I would have to charge extra if you want to commission my help.”

I stared at her. An expert smith. In this world. Standing right in front of me. One who understood monster materials, local crafting methods, equipment balance, and probably every ridiculous property these creatures could provide.

I had been in this dimension for less than an hour and had somehow stumbled onto exactly the kind of person I needed!

Ranni was absolutely watching this. She set this up for me. I could feel her smugness through the bond we shared.

I smiled slowly. “How much extra?”

Gemma opened her mouth.

I lifted one hand before she could answer. “Actually, never mind.” I looked her up and down once, estimating weight without making it weird. “I’ll give you your own weight in gold for your help!”

Gemma’s mouth stayed open. No sound came out.

Fabius’s head turned toward me very, very slowly.

Gemma finally inhaled. It was not a gasp exactly. It was more like her soul had briefly left her body, checked the exchange rate, and returned with a business plan. “My... own weight,” she

said carefully. "In gold? Actual gold? Not some weird foreign mineral that looks like gold but turns into beetles at sunset?"

Was that a real thing in this world?

Fabius snorted, stepping closer and towering over me. "You told Alma you were a chef, but how can a chef have access to those kinds of funds? That's a lot of money to offer someone you've never met." He was suspicious of course, it would be weird if he wasn't considering he was in charge of all these people.

I looked up at Fabius. Then I looked back at Gemma. I reached into my storage space and pulled out a gold bar. A full gold bar. It hit the sand between us with a heavy *thunk* that made Gemma's eyes go so wide I worried they might fall out of her pretty head.

Fabius looked down at it. Then at me. Then at the bar again. "Where were you hiding that?"

Gemma slowly crouched beside it and touched the top with one finger, like she expected it to bite her. "Holy shit. It's real..." she whispered. Gemma kept touching the gold.

...An hour later, Fabius looked at me across the base camp fire with a grin on his face and grease on his fingers. "I was wrong about you, kid," he said. "Can I have another plate?"

I grinned right back.

The attitude transformation had been beautiful. Not Fabius specifically. Though, yes, watching the stern leader of the Hunters Guild go from suspicious commander to a man emotionally compromised by frog leg meat had been deeply satisfying.

No, I meant the whole camp.

When we first arrived at their temporary base camp, I had been getting nervous glances from every direction. People stared at my ears, my tails, my eyes, my clothes, the fact that I had walked in beside Fabius and Gemma like I belonged there.

The camp itself was impressive in a rugged sort of way. Tents stretched between rock formations for shade. Crates of supplies were stacked beneath canvas awnings. There were workbenches, weapon racks, maps pinned to boards, cooking gear, water barrels, and a lot of people trying very hard not to look like they were staring at me.

Then I started cooking. Everything changed.

It turned out that after rushing off to rescue the girl's older brother, the hunter had killed a giant frog monster on the way back.

Apparently the creature had tried to ambush them near the caves, because of course a world full of giant worms also had giant murder frogs.

The hunter and his people harvested what they called the valuable parts first.

But there was so much meat left. Perfectly usable meat.

It would have been a waste. And I hated waste. So I rolled up my sleeves, borrowed exactly none of their equipment because I had better gear in storage, and got to work.

The frog legs alone were the size of tree trunks. Pale meat, dense but not tough, with a faintly sweet mineral scent that reminded me of river fish crossed with chicken and something deeper from the monster's diet. Amphibian meat could go rubbery fast if handled poorly, but it rewarded patience.

I broke down the legs, trimmed the membranes, washed the meat with citrus water, salted it carefully, and let it rest.

Then came the marinade. Wild garlic I sensed nearby and picked up on the way. Black pepper from my own supplies. A little rice wine. Smoked paprika from Earth. A thin drizzle of honey from Skyrim bees that had probably fought bears for dominance. Grated ginger. A splash of Pandoran citrus juice because I still had some and because alien fruit made everything more interesting.

I grilled some over open flame until the outside blistered and charred at the edges.

I fried some in shallow oil after coating them in seasoned flour and crushed monster-root starch from their supplies.

I braised the largest pieces in a pot with onions, herbs, and a little stock I had in storage because I was not a barbarian and did not go into unknown worlds without emergency stock.

At first, the camp watched from a distance. They were suspicious and curious. Then the delicious smell hit them.

Gemma was the first to break. "So," she said, attempting casualness and failing, "is that for everyone?"

"It can be."

"How much?"

There was a massive amount of frog meat. "Gemma, I am a chef. If people are hungry in front of me, I feed them."

That answer did something strange to her face.

Then I handed her the first plate.

She took one bite and her eyes rolled back. "Fuck!"

Every head in camp snapped toward her.

Gemma covered her mouth, her cheeks pink, but kept chewing. "It's so good!"

Fabius was second. He approached like a man prepared to interrogate the food for treason. He took the plate, sniffed it once, cut a piece with his knife, and ate. The tension went out of him all at once, like someone had removed a weight he had been carrying for years and replaced it with crispy frog leg steak.

"This," he said slowly, "is monster meat?" He looked at the plate in shock. "Hm." That was all he said next. Then he finished the whole thing in silence and came back fifteen minutes later asking for more.

After that, the dam broke.

Researchers, handlers, sailors, hunters, scouts, and people whose jobs I did not know lined up with the sacred desperation of anyone who had smelled good food after a long day of nearly being eaten.

The first few took bites cautiously. Then came the moans. Not quiet ones either. A woman near the supply crates sank to her knees with her plate hugged to her chest and whispered that she had seen heaven.

One of the younger hunters took a bite of the fried frog and immediately accused me of witchcraft.

I told him I had dated witches, but no, this was all pure skill.

A crewman started crying into his braised portion and said it tasted like home, which was confusing because unless his home was inside a giant murder frog, no it did not, but I appreciated the sentiment.

Alma took one bite, froze, and then began writing so quickly in her notebook that I worried the pencil might catch fire.

The cat tried to steal a third portion and looked personally offended when I caught him with a tail.

As expected, everyone started saying it was the best thing they had ever eaten. Because it was. I accepted their praise with the humility and grace of the greatest chef in the multiverse. Which meant I smiled, fed them more, and internally preened so hard that several of my tails wagged without permission.

Once everyone at base camp had been served, I finally made a plate for myself. Grilled frog leg with charred edges, a little braised meat over camp rice, fried strips with dipping sauce, and a handful of roasted desert vegetables I had found near the water barrels.

Then I walked over and sat beside Alma, Gemma, the hunter, the hunter's armored cat, and a small tanned boy.

His name was Nata. He could not have been much older than Kunou. Maybe a little older. It was hard to tell with kids from harsh worlds. Hunger, fear, and disaster had a way of making them look older and smaller at the same time.

He sat with his plate in both hands, eating slowly. Everyone else looked like Haru-cooked monster frog had given them a religious experience. Nata looked like the food was good, but not strong enough to reach whatever part of him had gone quiet.

"So," I said, settling cross-legged beside the fire, "what's everyone's story?"

Gemma, who was halfway through her second plate, pointed her fork at me. "That is a very broad question."

"I'm a very broad fox."

The cat tilted his head at me.

I looked at him. "Do you talk?"

The cat puffed up proudly. "Of course I talk, meowster!"

I stared.

He stared back.

My ears twitched. "That was either adorable or a crime against language."

The cat placed one paw on his chest. "I am a Palico, and I will accept adorable."

"Good choice."

Gemma snorted into her food.

I looked at the hunter. "And is your name actually Hunter, or is that a title thing?"

The hunter froze.

Alma immediately developed a fascinated interest in her plate.

Gemma's grin sharpened.

The Palico made a tiny coughing sound that sounded suspiciously like laughter.

The hunter, who had bisected a giant desert worm and then went on to single handedly slay a giant frog monster not ten minutes later, actually blushed.

Alma finally took pity on him. "His parents gave him a name he considers embarrassing, so he prefers to go by his title instead."

The hunter nodded once, very firmly. "Hunter is fine..."

Damn, now I really wanted to find out what his name was. Too bad it looked like no one was gonna tell me.

Alma adjusted her glasses and sat a little straighter. "As for our story, we are part of an expedition sent to explore the Forbidden Lands."

"Forbidden Lands?" I repeated.

"That is what this region is called by the Guild," Alma explained. "For generations, almost no one returned from here with reliable accounts. The environment is unstable, the monsters are unfamiliar, and entire ecosystems seem to shift in ways we do not fully understand." Alma continued. "We came because of Nata," she said more softly.

Nata's hands tightened around his plate.

Alma glanced at the boy, giving him the chance to stop her. When he did not, she continued. "His home was attacked by a dangerous monster. One we have no official record of. Not in Guild archives, not in regional hunter reports, not in ecological surveys. He was separated from his people while fleeing and ended up far from the settlement."

My ears twitched toward Nata. The boy kept looking down at his food.

"I'm sorry," I said.

He looked up.

I made sure my voice stayed gentle. Not pitying. I hated pity when it was aimed at people who had already lost too much. "I hope your family and tribe are okay."

Nata swallowed. For a second, he looked like he might say nothing. Then he nodded once, small and stiff. "Thank you," he whispered.

I let the silence sit for a few breaths. Then I leaned back on my hands, tails shifting behind me. "Can you tell me more about the monster?"

Alma's soft eyes became harder instantly.

Gemma stopped chewing.

Fabius, a few feet away with his new plate, turned his attention toward us without pretending otherwise.

The hunter looked at me with quiet assessment.

Nata's face went pale. "It was..." He hesitated, fingers tightening around his plate until I worried it might crack. "It was not like the others." He stared into the fire. "It moved like death itself," he said. "It was almost pure white, like a vengeful wraith... Something we had never seen before."

My tails went very still hearing his description.

Nata's voice grew smaller. "It moved too fast. It struck the ground and the ground broke open. People ran. I ran too."

A dangerous monster never seen before? Fast. Strong. Terrifying enough to wipe out or scatter an entire settlement in a region already full of giant sand worms and murder frogs.

My smile came slowly. Not because Nata's story was funny. It was not. Frankly, it was pretty fucked up, and I would bet money most if not all his tribe was probably dead and eaten by that monster.

But I was pretty sure I had just found my target for the competition.

...After everyone had eaten, the camp started moving again.

The hunter finished his plate in three efficient bites, stood, checked the straps on his gear, and immediately looked like a man ready to sprint back into danger before dessert. His Palico followed him, licking sauce from one paw and somehow still looking combat-ready despite having eaten enough frog meat to make a normal cat enter a coma.

Alma was beside them with her notebook hugged to her chest, talking quickly with Fabius while glancing between Nata, the little girl, and the older boy they had pulled out of the caves.

The two siblings were exhausted. The little girl clung to her brother like she was afraid the desert would swallow him if she let go. Her brother had one arm wrapped around her shoulders and the other gripping his plate, because trauma apparently did not stop teenage boys from recognizing excellent food.

Nata stood near them, quieter than before, eyes turned toward the distant stone ridges. He was going with them.

From what I pieced together, the hunter, Alma, and Nata were taking the two rescued siblings back toward their tribe.

Or what they hoped was their tribe. There were still survivors out there somewhere, scattered by the monster that had attacked Nata's home, and the Guild wanted to regroup before chasing deeper into the Forbidden Lands.

The hunter gave me a short nod before mounting his Seikret.

I nodded back.

His Palico saluted me with one paw. "Thanks for the meal, meowster chef!"

"Stay adorable," I told him.

"I always do!"

Alma hesitated before climbing up behind the hunter. Her eyes flicked to my ears. Then my tails. Then my face. Then the cooking gear I had casually manifested out of storage space. Her fingers twitched toward her notebook.

I smiled.

She visibly forced herself not to ask twelve questions at once. "Thank you for the meal, Haru," she said instead. Then they rode off back into the desert.

I turned away from the desert and found Gemma setting up an actual forge in the middle of camp.

Because apparently this world looked at the concept of portable equipment and said, "*What if we made blacksmithing happen anywhere?*"

I respected that.

The forge was a collapsible monster-material contraption of iron, bone, treated hide, and layered heat-resistant plates. Gemma had pulled it from a series of crates with the confidence of someone unpacking a lunchbox. Bellows unfolded from one side. A firebox locked into place. Metal braces clicked together with satisfying precision. A squat anvil section slid out and latched onto reinforced legs. Within minutes, she had built a working forge under a canvas shade in the middle of a desert base camp.

I stood beside her with my tails swaying behind me as I watched.

Gemma glanced at me while tightening a bracket. A small flame caught inside the firebox. Gemma adjusted a vent, added charcoal and some strange blue-black mineral that immediately burned hotter than charcoal had any right to burn, and the air around us shimmered.

Gemma wiped the back of her wrist across her forehead, leaving a faint streak of soot near her temple. "You know," she said after a minute, not looking at me, "you were a bit insensitive toward Nata earlier." She kept working as she talked. "Asking all those questions about the monster," she continued. "The one that probably killed his whole tribe."

The words landed heavier because she was right. I looked toward the dunes again, where the hunter and Alma had already vanished. "Yeah," I said quietly. "I was."

That made her glance up. Maybe she expected a joke. Maybe a defense. Maybe some arrogant speech about needing information and doing what had to be done.

I had those in me. Plenty of them, honestly. But not here. "I'll apologize to him properly later," I said. "After I show him the corpse of that monster once I hunt it down. At least he will have closure then."

The forge hissed. Gemma snorted. "You must be pretty cocky to say something like that."

"I prefer to call it confidence."

"Hmph! Most cocky people do." She straightened, braced one hand on her hip, and gave me a look that had probably cut through dozens of rookie hunters over the years. "Monsters are terrifying, Haru. Not in stories. Not in tavern songs. Really terrifying. Every year, hundreds of rookie hunters get maimed or killed because they underestimate them. They think size is all that matters, or strength, or how sharp their weapon is." She pointed a finger at the Balahara plates being dragged over by two workers. "Then a monster changes direction faster than expected. Or burrows under them. Or spits poison they didn't know existed. Or plays dead. Or calls others as back up. Or runs instead of fighting and leads them into worse terrain." Her expression lost some of its teasing edge. "Only the best actually become true monster hunters. Everyone else gets carried home in pieces."

Different worlds had different rules, but the lesson was universal. People died when they treated danger like entertainment.

There was no arrogance in her voice.

Just facts. And grief, maybe. The kind that came from knowing names attached to those statistics.

I respected that too. "I believe you," I said.

She looked back at me.

I gave her my best harmless smile. "But don't worry about me. I'm actually pretty strong despite my harmless handsome looks."

Gemma stared at me. Then at my ten golden tails. Then back at my face. The silence stretched. Finally, she snorted. "Harmless?"

"I said harmless-looking."

"You have ten tails, fox ears, gold slitted eyes, showed up on an airship from nowhere, pulled a bar of gold out of thin air, and cooked frog legs so good I briefly considered proposing to you myself."

I pressed a hand to my chest. "Only briefly?"

“Don’t get greedy!”

“Too late.”

She shook her head, but she was smiling again.

The forge coughed, then roared properly to life. Heat rolled out in a heavy wave, turning the air around us into shimmering glass. Gemma grabbed a pair of thick gloves and began laying out tools with the same focused care I gave knives before a busy dinner rush.

“So,” she said, “tell me about the girls. If I’m going to be paid my own weight in gold, then I need details.”

I blinked. “The girls?”

“The ones you’re proposing to.” She picked up a charcoal pencil and a folded sheet of treated parchment from her bench. “I need design direction. Measurements. Combat styles. Preferred weapons. Armor philosophy. Materials you’re hoping for. Symbolism. Colors. Cultural taboos. How dramatic you want the proposal pieces to be. If I’m making armor, I need to know any unusual anatomy. Tails, wings, horns, extra arms, whatever strange things people from wherever you are from have.” Then she added, with a playful and slightly judgmental look, “And maybe explain why there’s more than one girl.”

“Ah...”

Her eyes glittered. “Because that part stood out.”

“It usually does.”

“Then again...” She leaned closer, resting both hands on the edge of the workbench. The forge heat made her skin shine, and a bead of sweat rolled down her throat, disappearing into the shadowed line of cleavage revealed by her tight top. “You are rich and handsome. So maybe I can see why multiple women might be interested in sharing.”

My brain took half a second too long to recover. My eyes dipped, just briefly. Unfortunately, briefly was enough.

Gemma’s grin turned wicked. “Caught you!”

I cleared my throat. My ears betrayed me by twitching. “You are very hot,” I said, because sometimes honesty was safer than pretending. “But I’m sorry. I have enough women in my life, and you seem very busy with your current job.”

For half a second, she stared at me. Then she laughed, loud and delighted enough that a few people around camp looked over. “I was messing with you, fox boy.”

“I figured.”

"You did not!"

"I figured eventually..."

She wiped at the corner of one eye with the back of her wrist, still chuckling. "Relax. I like flirting. I like making pretty men blush. It's a hobby. I am not trying to get added to whatever romantic disaster you have going on."

"It is not a disaster."

Gemma gave me a look.

I thought about Naruko, Kushina, Daenerys, Rias, Aela, Ranni, Milim, Hela, Frigga, Irene, Erza, Shepard, Alice, Sansa, Catelyn, Cortana, and the terrifying possibility that Serie might consider sparring a courtship ritual if I was unlucky enough. "It is a well-managed disaster," I amended.

"There we go." She picked up her pencil again. "Now. Measurements."

I waved one hand, and blue foxfire shimmered in the air between us. The flames formed two silhouettes.

Naruko first and then Kushina right next to her. I had exact measurements for both Naruko and Kushina.

Hm, would they be happy or upset if they ever found that fact out...?

Either way, this competition was mine.

I looked toward the horizon where Sasuke had flown off on his giant hawk, probably searching for the most dramatic monster he could find so he could brood at it before setting it on fire.

Even if Sasuke somehow finds a good monster himself... *What is a ninja with no crafting skills whatsoever going to do with it after he kills it?*

– Sasuke Uchiha –

Sasuke Uchiha was panting. He stood in the middle of a cavern that smelled of scorched stone, burned feathers, ozone, and blood, one hand braced against his knee while the other hung limp at his side.

His shirt was torn. His left sleeve had been almost completely burned away. Thin lines of blood ran down his cheek from where debris had cut him during the fight. One side of his hair was singed badly enough that he was going to have to cut it later, which irritated him far more than the bruised ribs or the electric burns crawling along his forearms.

He inhaled through his nose.

The air hurt.

The cavern around him looked like a battlefield after two angry gods had taken turns using it as a training ground. Stone pillars had been shattered. The floor was split by deep gouges. Sections of the ceiling had collapsed, letting harsh desert sunlight stream through cracks overhead. Fulgurite-like glass veins crawled through the ground where lightning had struck with enough force to melt sand and rock together.

The monster lay dead in the center of it all.

Huge. Winged. Magnificent. Infuriating. Sasuke stared at it and hated that he was impressed. Maybe he had underestimated the monsters of this world.

The creature had been enormous, a true apex predator of the desert. Its body was built like a wyvern. Armored ridges ran along its neck and back, and its head carried sweeping horns that still sparked faintly with residual electricity even in death.

Sasuke had found it circling above a wide stretch of cracked desert basin, where black clouds gathered despite the otherwise clear sky. At first, he had thought the storm was weather.

Then the storm moved with the monster.

His first Chidori spear had done almost nothing. The lightning wrapped around the wyvern's hide, crawled along its ridges, and vanished into its body like water into sand. The creature had not even flinched.

His fire jutsu had been more useful, but barely. Fireballs struck its scales, scattered across its armor, and left blackened patches rather than real wounds. Great Fireball. Phoenix Flower. Dragon Flame. Each technique forced it to move, but none of them hurt it enough.

The wyvern had replied by summoning a storm.

Wind had slammed into Sasuke's hawk summon hard enough to send them tumbling. Lightning had speared down from the black clouds above, striking the bird's wing with a flash of white-blue light.

The hawk screamed, its feathers smoking, its body going limp beneath Sasuke.

For one awful second, Sasuke had fallen with it. The desert rushed up beneath him.

The wyvern turned in the sky, already preparing to leave, as if Sasuke had become beneath its attention.

As he fell, Sasuke remembered he was not only shinobi anymore. He was a *devil*.

The thought still tasted wrong.

He had spent his entire life as Uchiha. As survivor. As avenger. As missing-nin. As the last son of a clan soaked in blood and secrets. Now he had wings because a red-haired devil heiress had looked at his shattered life and decided he was worth keeping.

He hated needing that. He hated being grateful for it. But when black devil wings tore from his back and caught the air, he realized he hated failing more.

Sasuke had surged upward just as the wyvern banked away, Sharingan spinning, teeth bared. The storm screamed around him. Lightning struck again and again, each blast forcing him to dodge by inches. The air itself became hostile.

The fight after that had been ugly.

The wyvern flew better than he did.

That fact alone had nearly gotten him killed.

Sasuke had wings, but the wyvern had been born to the sky. It folded around currents, cut through gusts, twisted its body at impossible angles, and used every inch of open air like terrain. It dove, climbed, vanished into storm cloud, and came screaming out with lightning gathered along its horns.

Sasuke used genjutsu once. The monster ignored it. Either its mind was too alien, its instincts too dominant, or its skull too thick for subtlety. He used shuriken wire traps next, anchoring lines between stone spires and guiding the wyvern through them. The wires snapped under its weight but not before slowing one wingbeat.

That was enough.

Sasuke hit it with Amaterasu.

The black flames caught along one wing joint. The wyvern screamed and crashed into the ground hard enough to cave in half the basin wall. But even that had not ended it. The monster rolled, slammed its burning wing into stone, and tore away charred scale and flesh to keep the black fire from spreading.

The monster charged.

He met it with Susanoo. Only a partial manifestation. Ribs, arm, and blade. His eyes burned viciously from the strain, but the spectral weapon bit deeper than fire or lightning had. The wyvern's horn cracked beneath the strike. Blood splashed across stone.

That changed the fight. After that, it stopped trying to drive him away. It tried to kill him.

The cavern had been carved out during the final phase of the battle. Sasuke lured it beneath a stone arch, collapsed the ceiling with explosive tags and fire, then drove a Susanoo blade into its throat when it reared back to summon lightning.

It had still nearly taken his head off.

The final strike had been less technique than stubbornness. He drove his hand into the wound opened by Susanoo, through burned flesh and cracked armor, and detonated raw demonic energy through his arm because chakra alone had failed him.

The wyvern died with its jaws inches from his face.

Sasuke had stood there for several seconds afterward, waiting to see if it was pretending. It was not.

Now the cavern was silent except for his breathing. He straightened slowly, wincing as bruised ribs protested.

The dead wyvern dominated the chamber. Its wings alone were larger than most houses in Konoha. Its scales were edged with gold and black where electricity had burned along natural channels in its hide. The horn he had cracked still pulsed faintly with stored lightning. Its claws were curved like blades, each one long enough to make a short sword.

Naruko would love it.

The thought rose before he could stop it.

Naruko in armor made from storm-wyvern scale. Red hair bright against pale lightning-forged plates. A weapon made from the horn, maybe. Something that could channel lightning and chakra together. Something fast, vicious, worthy of a woman who had once punched him in the face for calling ramen "just food."

She would see. She would have to see!

Haru was strong. Ridiculously strong. Sasuke was not blind. He had felt the fox man's presence. Had seen how casually Ranni, that terrifying moon goddess, stood at his side. Had watched impossible people orbit Haru like he was the center of some gravitational disaster.

But he had killed the apex predator of this desert!

Now he needed to turn it into armor and weapons so impressive Naruko would realize she had made a mistake. So impressive she would leave that bastard Haru.

He looked at the dead wyvern. Then at his hands. He knew how to kill. He knew how to track, infiltrate, interrogate, fight, survive, and destroy. He knew how to throw shuriken through blind spots, how to read muscle twitches before a strike, how to breathe through pain, how to rip open another person's illusions and force them into his own.

He knew absolutely nothing about crafting armor. Or weapons. Or processing giant wyvern parts.

A long silence filled the cavern.

"Fuck," Sasuke muttered. The word echoed off the stone.

He turned away from the corpse and dragged a hand down his face.

That bastard Haru. That smiling, golden-tailed, restaurant-owning bastard. He had absolutely known. Haru had accepted the challenge because he already understood the part Sasuke had not thought through. Killing the monster was only half the task. Less than half, maybe. The real victory was turning the monster into something meaningful.

Haru was a chef. A craftsman. A man who understood ingredients, materials, presentation, symbolism. He probably knew smiths. He probably had a girlfriend who was secretly a goddess of forging or a dragon queen who could enchant underwear into legendary armor. He probably already had some impossible multiversal artisan waiting with tea and measurements.

Sasuke had a dead wyvern and no idea how to skin it properly.

His eye twitched. "He tricked me," Sasuke said flatly. Then, annoyingly, a thought followed.

This world has people who make gear from monsters.

So what if he did not know how to craft. He just needed to find someone who did.

Sasuke looked back at the wyvern. The corpse was huge. Too large for him to carry easily while injured, even with devil strength. But he could seal parts of it into scrolls if he took the time. Or summon help. Or cut enough high-value pieces to transport first.

He had to move carefully. If he ruined the best materials because he did not know what he was cutting, Haru would never let him hear the end of it.

A sound scraped behind him. Sasuke spun. His Sharingan flared to life despite the pain it sent stabbing through his skull.

Something landed on top of the dead wyvern.

For one heartbeat, Sasuke thought it was a ghost.

The **monster** was almost pure white. Its body was lean and terrible, shaped like a predator that had been carved out of bone, moonlight, and malice. Pale armor covered it from head to tail, broken by darker seams where muscle flexed beneath. Its head lifted slowly, and cold eyes fixed on the dead wyvern beneath its claws.

Then the chains came out. White chains shot from the monster's body with a wet, snapping violence, lashing around the dead wyvern's neck, wings, torso, and tail before Sasuke could move.

Sasuke's brain took half a second to understand what was happening.

It was stealing his kill.

"Don't you dare, you fucker!" His hands moved for jutsu. Too slow.

The white monster crouched, muscles compressing. The chains tightened around the Rey Dau's corpse.

Sasuke lunged. His body failed him. Pain exploded through his ribs and burned arm. His legs nearly buckled. His devil wings flared, but the muscles along his back spasmed from the lightning burns he had ignored too long.

The white monster launched upward. The force of its takeoff shattered the stone beneath it.

Wind slammed into Sasuke and drove him back several steps. Dust and broken rock blasted across the cavern as the creature tore through the collapsed opening overhead, dragging the entire wyvern corpse after it like a hunting trophy.

Sasuke looked up.

Through the fractured ceiling, he saw the white wraith rise into the sky, the massive dead storm wyvern dangling beneath it.

Then it was gone.

Sasuke stood perfectly still. His Sharingan spun. Blood slid from the corner of one eye. He was too tired to fly after it.

Sasuke stared at the hole in the ceiling. A single piece of pale scale drifted down through the dust and landed at his feet.

Sasuke looked at it.

His face went blank.

Then Sasuke whispered, very quietly, "Haru must never know about this..."

– Thor –

Thor was not in any kind of competition.

This was an important distinction.

Haru and the brooding raven-haired boy might have called it a competition. The two of them might have spoken of wagers, trophies, proposal gifts, and whatever strange courtship rituals shinobi and fox princes believed were necessary to win the hearts of red-haired women.

Thor did not require such framing.

Thor Odinson was on a quest.

A noble quest.

A quest of strength, courage, and romance!

He would venture into a dangerous new realm filled with monstrous beasts. He would test his might against the largest and most terrible creature he could find. He would tear from it a trophy worthy of song. Then he would return to the Lady Jane Foster and present this prize as evidence of his devotion, his valor, and his improved understanding of courtship after Haru had informed him that bringing a woman only severed monster parts was apparently “hit or miss depending on the woman.”

Thor still found that confusing.

Many women of Asgard appreciated severed monster parts.

Sif had once complimented him on the skull of a frost-maw he had mounted above the training hall doors. Though, admittedly, she had then explained sixteen ways he could have killed it faster and called his footwork “wasteful.” But that was affection. Probably.

Jane, however, was a scholar of Midgard. A woman of stars, instruments, questions, and fierce intelligence. Haru had said she would likely enjoy something mysterious to study as much as something beautiful to wear.

So Thor’s quest had become twofold.

It was an excellent plan.

Perhaps his finest romantic strategy yet.

Flying toward the forest had also been an excellent plan.

The desert had been grand, yes. Vast and gold and open to the sky. But the forest beyond it was alive in a way that made Thor’s blood sing. From above, he had seen the green spread across the horizon like a kingdom of leaves. Towering trees twisted upward from stone and sand, their crowns dense enough to hide entire herds beneath them. Rivers gleamed silver between roots. Vines hung in curtains. Bright-winged creatures scattered from his passing shadow.

And monsters. So many monsters.

Thor had felt them before he reached the tree line.

Large bodies shifting beneath canopy. Claws scraping bark. The forest was full of life, danger, hunger, and strength.

For a glorious moment, Thor did not know where to begin.

There were too many choices.

A scaled brute with tusks like spears wallowed near a muddy pool, bellowing at smaller creatures that dared approach. A long-necked beast covered in plates tore bark from a tree with slow, powerful jaws. Something with wings and a hooked tail circled above the canopy, watching the ground for prey. Deeper in the forest, something truly large moved with enough force to shake leaves loose from branches.

Thor grinned broadly as he descended. "Yes," he said to the wind. "This realm shall do nicely."

He landed in a clearing with a crash that sent birds exploding from the trees in every direction. Mjolnir settled into his palm, humming happily, as if the hammer also approved of the air.

The forest went quiet.

Thor lifted his head.

Small faces peered at him from the undergrowth.

They were little creatures. Small, covered in leaves and fur and bark-like adornments, with curious eyes and tiny hands gripping spears, sticks, and sharpened bones. Several crouched on branches. Others hid behind roots. One stood atop a mushroom and shook a staff at him.

Thor stared at them.

Then the one on the mushroom made a sharp chattering noise and pointed its staff at his face. The little creature was very angry he was trespassing in their territory.

"Well met, small forest folk!" he declared. "I am Thor Odinson, prince of Asgard, son of Frigga of Vanaheim, wielder of Mjolnir, and hunter of mighty beasts!"

The little creatures chattered more loudly. Several raised their tiny weapons. One threw a seed at his face. It bounced off his forehead.

Thor blinked.

The tiny creature made another furious sound.

“Ah,” Thor said. “You are displeased by my presence.”

More chattering.

Thor nodded gravely.

“A fair concern. I have entered your territory unannounced. In Asgard, such rudeness might demand blood, mead, or both.” He placed one hand over his chest and bowed slightly. “I mean no insult. I seek not to harm your people. I have come only to hunt large monsters.”

The effect was immediate.

The chattering stopped.

The tiny forest creatures looked at one another.

Then all of them began speaking at once.

Thor caught fragments as even his Allspeak was struggling with the strange dialect these creatures spoke in. A tiny elder with a leafy crown pushed through the others, jabbed his staff toward the deeper forest, and began delivering what seemed to be an impassioned speech involving stomping feet, broken trees, stolen fruit, ruined nests, and unforgivable smells.

Thor crouched to bring himself closer to their height. “You are troubled by a great beast?”

The tiny elder nodded so hard his leaf crown nearly fell off.

“It is large?”

Many nods.

“Strong!?”

More nods.

“Rude?”

The entire group erupted into furious agreement.

Thor’s grin grew. “What color is this beast?”

The elder spat a word with great disgust.

Pink.

Thor knew enough of Midgardian women to understand the importance of that color. Young girls often wore pink. Gift shops were filled with pink things. Valentine’s decorations frequently

involved pink hearts. Lady Jane herself did not wear pink often, but perhaps that was because no one had presented her with the proper shade.

A fine pink fur coat made from a rude forest monster slain by his own hands.

Yes! Excellent!

She could wear it while studying whatever mysterious organ or crystalline gland he also recovered from the beast. Beauty and science. Romance and discovery. Jane would surely soften toward him. Perhaps she would smile that exasperated smile and say, "Thor, you idiot, this is incredible," which Thor had learned was one of her highest forms of praise.

He stood. "Lead me to this rude pink monster."

The forest creatures cheered.

At least, Thor believed they cheered. It might have been a war chant. Either way, he approved.

They called themselves something that sounded like Woodward's. Or Woodwuds. Or Wudwuds. Thor was not entirely certain. Their language had many clicks, chirps, and sounds made from deep in the throat. He decided Woodward's was close enough until someone corrected him with sufficient confidence.

The Woodward's guided him through the forest with astonishing speed. They scampered across branches, swung from vines, darted through roots, and vanished into shrubs only to reappear several paces ahead. Thor followed on foot, shouldering through vegetation, occasionally ducking beneath branches that would have struck lesser men in the face.

The deeper they went, the more signs of the rude pink monster appeared.

Broken trunks. Claw marks. Fruit skins scattered across the ground. A tree bent in half as if something large had used it to scratch its back.

Then came the smell. Thor stopped. His nose wrinkled. "By the bristling beard of Bor," he muttered.

One of the Woodward's made a mournful sound and covered its face with both tiny hands.

Yes. This monster is indeed rude.

A bellow rolled through the trees ahead. Branches shook and leaves fell.

Thor stepped into a larger clearing and saw his quarry.

The creature was a giant pink monkey. That was the simplest way to describe it. It stood twice as tall as a large man, broad-bellied and long-armed, with shaggy pink fur covering much of its body. Its face was pale and expressive, with heavy lips, small angry eyes, and a crest of fur that

made it look both ridiculous and strangely proud. Its arms were thick as tree trunks. Its claws dug into the ground. Its belly jiggled slightly when it moved. It had been eating fruit from a pile it had stolen from the Woodwards.

The creature turned as Thor entered the clearing. For a moment, god and monster stared at one another.

The pink monkey rose to its full height. Then it roared. A proper roar too. Deep, loud, wet, and full of challenge! It beat its chest with both fists, thumping so hard the sound echoed between the trees.

The Woodwards scattered to the edges of the clearing, peeking from behind trunks and roots.

Thor smiled. "At last," he said. "A worthy beast!"

The monkey roared again.

Thor lifted Mjolnir. Then stopped. He looked at the hammer. Then at the pink fur. If he struck the creature with Mjolnir at full force, there might not be much fur left worth giving Jane. If he called lightning, the fur might burn. If he threw the hammer through the beast's chest, the coat would have a hole in it.

That would not do. A proper gift required care. Thor bent and set Mjolnir gently upon a flat stone.

The monkey paused.

The Woodwards made curious sounds.

Thor rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. "I shall preserve your hide, beast," he declared. "Rejoice, for you shall become a gift worthy of Lady Jane Foster."

The monkey responded by picking up a rotting fruit and throwing it at his head.

Thor caught it. He looked at the fruit. Then at the monkey.

"That was unwise." The fight began properly after that. Thor charged.

The pink monkey charged back, knuckles tearing furrows through the forest floor as it bounded forward. They collided in the center of the clearing with a sound like two boulders embracing angrily.

Thor caught one of its arms. The monkey caught his shoulder. Both pushed.

The ground cracked beneath their feet.

The beast was strong.

Stronger than Thor expected. Its muscles bunched beneath its fur, and it shoved forward with enough force to drive Thor back several steps. Thor laughed, planted his boots, and twisted, using the creature's momentum to hurl it sideways into a tree.

The tree exploded.

Woodwards cheered from the branches.

The monkey rolled, sprang back to its feet, and lunged again. One huge fist hammered into Thor's chest, sending him sliding backward through dirt and leaves. He grinned and answered with a punch to the monster's jaw.

The beast staggered.

Thor followed with another blow to its belly, then caught both of its wrists when it tried to slam down on him from above. They strained against each other, god and beast locked chest to chest, while the forest floor cracked in a widening circle beneath them.

The monkey snapped its jaws at him.

Thor headbutted it.

The creature reeled back, blinking from the concussion it just received.

Thor blinked too. "Hah!" he said. "A sturdy skull!"

The monkey roared in his face. The smell was awful.

Thor grimaced. "And a foul mouth!"

It tackled him. They crashed through the undergrowth, rolling across the forest floor. The monkey tried to bite his arm. Thor shoved its face away. The monkey hooked one foot behind his knee and nearly flipped him. Thor caught its fur, twisted, and slammed it onto its back.

The impact shook the clearing. Birds fled. Woodward's screamed in delight.

The monkey kicked him off with both feet.

Thor flew backward, smashed through a hanging curtain of vines, and landed on his back in a patch of moss.

He stared up at the canopy. Then laughed. Not because he was losing. He was not. The beast could not truly injure him. Its blows were heavy but not divine. Its claws scratched but did not cut. Its strength was great by monster standards, but Thor had wrestled frost giants, dragons, and once, while very drunk, a living mountain that had taken offense to a song Volstagg composed about its mother.

Still, the creature had spirit. Thor appreciated spirit. He rose, brushing moss from his hair.

The monkey stood across the clearing, breathing hard. Its pink fur was ruffled. One eye was swelling. Several patches of dirt clung to its belly. It glared at him with deep, personal hatred.

Thor pointed at it. "You fight well, rude beast! But I am Thor Odinson, and I will not be defeated by an oversized pink forest ape!"

The monkey's eyes narrowed. Something changed.

The Woodwards went very still.

Thor noticed. He should have paid attention to that.

The pink monkey slowly turned around.

Thor frowned. "What are you doing?"

The creature bent forward. Its rear faced him.

Thor stared. "That is rather rude," he said.

The monkey looked back over its shoulder. Its lips curled in what could only be described as a malicious grin. Then its butt cheeks clenched.

Thor had faced many attacks in his long life. None of them prepared him for the blast that erupted from the pink monkey's backside.

A noxious greenish cloud slammed into Thor with enough force to lift him off his feet and send him tumbling backward across the clearing. He rolled through dirt, bounced off a root, crashed through a bush, and came to a stop upside down against a tree trunk.

For several seconds, he did not move. The smell arrived after the impact. Thor's eyes watered. His soul recoiled.

Somewhere nearby, several Woodwards made gagging noises and fled into the trees.

The pink monkey slapped the ground with both hands and began laughing. It threw its head back and cackled, shoulders shaking, belly bouncing, one hand pointing at Thor as if this were the funniest thing in all the realms.

Thor slid down from the tree and landed on his knees. His long hair hung in his face. The stench clung to him with supernatural hatred. For a moment, he simply knelt there, blinking through watering eyes. Then he slowly pushed himself upright.

"My good-brother, Haru, must never find out about this..."

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