



Saint?
No!



Author
Inumajin
Illustrator
Falmaro

I'm Just a Passing
**BEAST
TAMER!**

The
Invincible Saint
and the Quest
for **Fluff**

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CHARACTERS



Zaggy

The first magic beast tamed by Kanata. His true form is that of the Demon King Zag'giel. In his fluff form, he is weaker than a slime.



Kanata

Former Japanese person reincarnated into a world of fantasy. She's a brilliant young woman worthy of being a Saint, but as her one and only desire is to fluff fluffy-fluff, she chose the failure Profession of Beast Tamer instead. Unreasonably powerful even with the debuff.



Marianne

Saint of the Holy Church. She changed her ways upon having her life saved by Kanata, and founded the religion of Fluffism. Does not know what Kanata means by "fluff."



Fen-fen

The second beast tamed by Kanata, a white furball. His true form is the Spirit Wolf Fenrir, who saved the world along with the First Saint a thousand years ago.



Lily

Blacksmith of great skill. In addition to being a first-class weapon smith, she now makes fluff items as well. She was once burdened with debt, but Kanata paid it off in full.



Melissa

Employee of the Adventurers' Guild and former adventurer who prefers working in the field to sitting behind a desk. Worried about her ever-increasing workload and busy educating her juniors, she longs to return to her freewheeling days as an adventurer even as she keeps moving up in the office world.

The **STORY** So Far

Kanata, the young girl revered as the second coming of the Saint, chose her Profession, only for it to be...**Beast Tamer?! In her previous life, Kanata lived and died alone in a hospital room. But this time, she's determined to befriend and adore fluff from around the world!** The first fluff she met was Zaggy, a magic beast so weak a slime could defeat him in a single punch. But his true form is **the Demon King Zag'giel?! When he'd realized that the gods had created the system of the world in order to set magic beasts and humans at odds with each other, he confronted the Goddess, only for her to curse him with the form of a furball cat.**



While searching high and low for adorable fluffy magic beasts, Kanata has been unintentionally foiling the **Goddess's schemes** one after another. The people she's helped on her way even began to venerate her as a Saint!



Sensing danger, the Goddess made an attempt on Zaggy's life. It almost seemed like it was going to work until Kanata brought him back with her overwhelming **love for the fluff!** She easily destroyed the brand new demon army the Goddess had been depending on and released the curse on Zaggy, turning him back into the handsome and youthful Demon King Zag'giel...but Kanata's one and only desire was for the fluff! To please Kanata, Zag'giel swore to become stronger in his fluffy furball form as Zaggy.



Zaggy and Kanata set out in search of fluff, only to meet an equally furball-like dog in danger of becoming goblin food. Kanata named him Fen-fen, but in fact he was the legendary **Spirit Wolf Fenrir**, who helped save the world a long, long time ago. Or a piece of him, anyway. He had lost his power, and his main body was being kept imprisoned by a woman who called herself a Saint.

Kanata, ever a fluff maniac, was excited to meet Fenrir's fluffier half, and made her way into the High Cathedral of the Holy Church—the stronghold of the Goddess in the mortal world. She helped the people of the Holy City, who had been suffering under the predatory rule of the Holy Church, scattered the Temple Knights blocking her way to the four winds, and when the Goddess turned Saint Marianne into a monster in a desperate last-ditch attack, she easily was able to turn her back. Marianne had a change of heart, and soon the head of the Holy Church was a devout follower of a brand new religion—**Fluffism.**

And now, with Fenrir's main body rescued from the clutches of the Church, Kanata and friends set out again on their **Quest for Fluff!**

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Characters](#)

[The Story So Far](#)

[Chapter 1: Hero? No! I Reject Your Offer!](#)

[Chapter 2: Vampire? No! I Sense the Fluff!](#)

[Chapter 3: Inescapable Pursuit? No! We'll Just Visit Home!](#)

[Chapter 4: Enemies of the Gods? No! This Is Our Family!](#)

[Side Story: Won't Accept a Promotion? No! You'll Stop the Drug Trade and
Move Up in the World!](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Chapter 1: Hero? No! I Reject Your Offer!

In a world of pure white, the Goddess sat enshrined upon a white throne. It was so white that it was hard to even discern the contours of her august stone seat. This white realm was the Goddess's idealized world, where now, much to her chagrin, she waited.

The Goddess's face was perfectly composed and her legs were elegantly crossed. She betrayed nothing of the thoughts behind her peaceful smile. Something, however, was making a ghastly grating sound, like steel tearing itself apart—the grinding of the Goddess's teeth.

The Goddess's placid smile concealed a storm of rage and hatred that was anything but serene. One hardly needed to venture far to guess at the reason. The fault lay with a young human girl who had upturned the Goddess's plans now, not once but twice, forcing her into an ignominious retreat. And that was only the start of it.

This girl had stolen the faith of the Goddess's worshippers, the very source of her divine power! Even now, the Goddess could feel more and more of her faithful slipping away. Then there was the Demon King Zag'giel, who had learned too much of the truth about how the world operated, and the Spirit Wolf Fenrir, whom she'd intended to be the servant of her Saint. The two of them were among the strongest fighters on the planet, and now they obeyed this fifteen-year-old girl. Even as the Goddess sat brooding, the three of them continued along their leisurely way.

Who else could have been the source of the Goddess's indignation?

This was not the first time a reincarnated soul had found its way into this world, but this girl was absurd even by their standard. She was one of the entities known as 'heavy souls,' meaning her existence itself had more *weight* to it than that of most beings. She stood outside the laws laid down by the gods of this world. That alone, however, would not have been enough to make her a threat to the Goddess, a transcendent being. This girl had been born into this

world with incredible talent and had focused all of it with singular intent, training and honing herself with positively abnormal fervor until she became a being capable of challenging the gods themselves.

What could have driven this girl to obtain such unimaginable power? Even the Goddess herself, for all her absolute power, didn't have the slightest clue. In fact, she feared the girl, whose actions she found herself unable to comprehend. Yes, the Goddess was afraid of a mere human. Could there be any greater disgrace?

The storm raging inside the Goddess's heart would be enough to char the pure-white world deepest black, but she took care not to allow any of it to show on the surface. The person she was waiting for must not be allowed to sense the fury inside her. And so, she refocused her efforts on maintaining her mask of calm, and awaited her visitor.

At last, the appointed hour arrived. A low voice filled the room—not the voice of the Goddess.

"How long has it been since last we met?" the voice said, as a divine light descended to the spot behind the Goddess's throne.

The light took form and assumed the shape of an enormous man. He was even more imposing than one of the giants of old, which had long since died out in this world. Then the light began to dim, revealing the features of an old man with white hair and a white beard. It was impossible to tell how near or far away anything was in the pure-white space, but with the old man's enormous stature, it looked almost as if he were standing right beside the Goddess.

"One thousand years, I believe," said the voice of another newcomer, this one enchanting and feminine. "Since we first laid out our scheme to harvest souls..."

The floor of the white space writhed and welled up, taking the form of the feminine voice's owner. She spoke with the sultry tones of a seductress, but her body was quite small. She wasn't an inch taller than a typical five-year-old child. The white surface of the floor that had formed her body peeled away, revealing childish features to match her stature. She had pink hair cropped at her shoulders and eyes that never showed where she was looking. In her hands, she clutched a plush angel doll.

“You know why we came all this way, right?” said a third voice, coming from a boy flying above the Goddess’s head. He had appeared without warning in the white sky like an optical illusion. He had short blue hair, and he glared down at the Goddess with eyes as cold as ice.

These were the Goddess’s coconspirators, each with no less claim to divinity than the Goddess herself. Each of them had their gaze fixed on her, dressed as she was in a flawless heavenly robe. It didn’t seem like they were in a particularly amicable mood.

In principle the four gods were of equal rank, but the other three were currently glaring at the Goddess with a medley of different emotions. The old man seemed enraged, the young girl seemed scornful, and the boy seemed to be regarding her with sheer disgust.

The Goddess made no response. She repositioned herself on her throne, crossing her legs haughtily and resting her folded hands in her lap as she bore the gazes of the trio of gods.

The boy circled gracefully around the Goddess as he began the accusations against her.

“There’s no use hiding it, you know. We already know what’s up.”

“It’s obvious to everyone that the harvest of souls is late,” said the old man in his deep, resonant voice.

“I mean, we’ve been waiting on the next harvest for three hundred years!” the girl added.

“Nobody said anything out of respect for your conduct,” said the boy.

“Honestly,” the girl snickered. “Us gods are just a bit *too* merciful sometimes, aren’t we?” Her indecent behavior really didn’t match her appearance in the slightest. “But lately,” she went on, “it seems like the humans’ faith has been flagging as well. That’s a problem for all of us. Even *you’ve* been losing power, right?”

Finally, the girl’s words spurred the Goddess to look up. *That* had been the precise cause of her bad temper.

The Goddess recalled a certain foolish Demon King, who'd once had the nerve to tell her that he had no intentions of attacking the human realm whatsoever. She had taken her time in disposing of him, amusing herself with his torment. After all, they still held a great supply of harvested souls, and this Demon King had not only declared himself to be her enemy, but had even come to understand the true structure of the world. Rather than grant him a quick end, she'd intended to first drag him as low as she could, to make him lament his utter helplessness before finally bringing him to an end. At the time, she hadn't had any compunctions about putting off the harvest of souls a little toward that end.

"Sheer incompetence," said the boy, floating above her head. The Goddess's face twisted into a scowl of rage. "What are *you* scowling about?" the boy asked. "*We're* the ones who have a reason to be angry here."

"The cause of all this lies in your failure to transfer the Demon King's title to a new successor, does it not?" said the old man.

"I know, I know, *we can't interfere directly with the mortal plane,*" said the girl. "But you should have no problem manipulating humans and demons alike with divine revelation and holy trial!"

The Goddess ground her teeth at the unneeded reminder. "*I sent* the Demon King a trial," she said. "One that should have been impossible."

For the trial, she had stolen all of the Demon King's immense power and reduced him to the very lowest tier of magic beast, with the condition that his body would not die so long as his heart held on to life. She trapped him in the shameful body of a frail animal so that nobody could tell who he was. He was supposed to endure hardship after hardship until his heart finally gave in. Only then would he at last die. It was meant to be an excruciatingly painful end.

"Except..."

Kanata Aldezia. If it hadn't been for that girl, things would have never come to this.

Kanata was a visitor from another world—a girl with an abnormally heavy soul, reincarnated in this world with promises of immense strength. These things happened from time to time. In order to prevent the multiverse from

collapsing in on itself, it was sometimes necessary for souls to move from one world to another. All the gods of every world understood that when worlds became too heavy, souls would be transferred from them to worlds that had become too light in order to bring balance to the cosmic scales.

In this world in particular, the gods maintained a custom of devouring human souls, leading to a trend where the total mass of souls in the world declined in comparison to other universes. Some gods from other worlds had noticed this trend and came to suspect that something was up, but gods shared a fundamental policy not to interfere with one another's worlds. Even if the gods of other worlds realized what the four of them were up to, it was unlikely that they would do something so foolish as challenge them. And so they were safe, free to enjoy their banquet of souls unto eternity.

Or so it should have been, if not for that girl! Even among souls reincarnated from other worlds, she was exceedingly strange. It was common for gods sending souls to other worlds to grant them a share of power. However, most people reincarnated like this regarded it as a kind of cheat code, and came to rely solely on the power they had been given rather than exerting any actual effort. That was why, even with their extraordinary strength, none of them had ever reached a level of power high enough to lay even a single finger on one of the four gods. This girl, however, had never let up for a minute. She'd trained herself with abnormal dedication, until her abilities put her on a footing to be a threat to the gods themselves.

Was there some great passion that drove her to such ends? Or had the extreme suffering she'd faced in her previous life given her some equally great purpose in this one? Or perhaps it was both? She could never have reached her current level if there were any uncertainty to her intentions.

"If only that girl had never come here!" the Goddess spat, clutching at her throne's armrest.

"We didn't come here to listen to your excuses," said the little girl with a mocking sneer.

"You should have foreseen that someone from another world might upset the laws of this one," the old man snapped. "Just like how we sealed away the

native gods and took their place! You can't have forgotten that, can you?"

"The only reason we trusted you with this was because your divinity came closest to that of the native gods," said the boy, full of condescension. "If you won't do your job, I don't see any reason to give you your allotment of souls. In fact, why don't I just take over your position for you?"

The four of them, including the Goddess, were not this world's original gods. They were invaders from another world who had set their sights on this one among all the countless universes in existence. They had taken the native goddess who watched over this world by surprise and cast her into the deepest part of the Freezing Hell, sealing her away. They'd assumed her place, tampering with the world's systems to make it easier for them to dominate the world.

One of those systems was the Selection Ceremony, in which the people of this world chose their Profession. Originally created as a means of helping humanity survive in a world full of living beings stronger than themselves, the various Professions were meant to aid humanity in any number of different ways. These gods from another world, however, saw human souls as little more than food, and they twisted the system to their own advantage.

First, they did what they could to eliminate one Profession in particular, which could prevent magic beasts from attacking humans—the Beast Tamer. In the modern age, Beast Tamer was known as a failure Profession, the weakest of them all, but in the past that was not the case. At the time, there was even a land where their power allowed humans and magic beasts to live side by side as partners. To the gods, this was nothing but a nuisance. Magic beasts hunting humans was an effective means of harvesting souls, and the ability of Beast Tamers to understand a magic beast's heart would only interfere with their plans.

As the gods were not from this world originally, however, they were unable to interfere with the mortal plane as freely as the native gods. They were unable to entirely erase the Profession from existence. Instead, they altered the blessing that came with it. Those who chose the Profession of Beast Tamer would find everything from Magic to Vitality—indeed, every one of their stats—had suffered a precipitous rank down. Professions that specialized in *fighting*

magic beasts, by contrast, received a favorable boost to their abilities, as well as Professions like Monk, Priest, or Sister, which served as the appendages of the gods in gathering faith from the masses.

The Profession the new gods favored most of all was Saint, which received bonuses in all fields in exchange for a powerful limitation in the form of a so-called blessing—a new Saint would awaken to a tremendously powerful faith. In practice, it amounted to little more than brainwashing. This faith served to bind the gods, who were originally outsiders, more tightly to the fabric of this world. It was an essential component in enabling them to use their divine power to affect the mortal plane. They took over one of the religions that existed before they invaded and transformed it into the Holy Church, venerating the so-called First Saint and uniting the whole world under its teachings with alarming speed.

And as they developed human culture to their liking, all the while they prepared the beings that would hunt them. They raised the abilities of the Demon King Profession, the Profession that belonged to the ruler among magic beasts, and gave it a blessing that increased the recipient's bloodlust considerably. They even attached a strong hatred for the Demon King specifically to its human counterpart—the Hero.

With this, the new gods' arrangements for the operation of the world were complete. Humanity would increase in number under the watchful eye of the Holy Church and the guidance of the gods, only to be decimated by the Demon King. Not only would the gods reap a rich bounty of souls, but humanity, hard pressed, would entreat the gods for salvation all the more, until at last, the Hero would strike down the Demon King, increasing their faith still further and solidifying the domination of the Holy Church.

And so, for a thousand years, the world had found itself ruled in secret by hostile, foreign gods.

"But now," the boy said, "our ironclad system is on the verge of falling apart!"

"We've been keeping an eye on things too, you know," said the girl. "You can't just keep giving that girl free rein."

Kanata Aldezia, all by herself, had created a crack in their perfect system. She had chosen the Beast Tamer Profession freely—the Profession the gods had

expressly made the weakest of all—and yet she still boasted power beyond any other being in the world.

“I know our power is not as great now as when we manifested in the mortal plane, but is she really so terrible that you had to run away?” the girl asked.

“Gh...”

Run away. The Goddess had done exactly that. A vein popped in irritation on her forehead. For a being who claimed the title of god, it was an unspeakable humiliation. There was no doubt that the sneering girl’s insults had struck home. Behind the Goddess’s doll-like composure, her head was full of dark thoughts. She wanted to tear that impudent girl limb from limb, but the girl had as much claim to divinity as the Goddess did. Besides, there were two more gods here, blaming her for the state of affairs. If she chose her actions poorly, she might simply find herself destroyed.

“For another thing, it seems like that Saint broke free of your vaunted brainwashing,” the girl went on. “Whatever do you intend to do about *that*?”

“If you can’t figure out a plan, we’ll have no choice but to give your role to one of us,” said the old man.

The Goddess could only interfere in the mortal plane in localized ways. Saint Marianne Ishfalke had served as her hands and feet when she couldn’t act directly. As the highest authority in the Holy Church, the Saint’s blind obedience to the Goddess made her a useful pawn. But after a string of sinful failures, the Goddess became fed up and transformed her into the nucleus for an angel. She fought with Kanata Aldezia in this twisted form, but was utterly defeated by Kanata’s overwhelming power.

Kanata, however, rescued Marianne from inside the angel intact. It was a feat that turned Marianne’s faith from the Goddess toward Kanata herself. The brainwashing she had received from her Profession vanished without a trace. Perhaps Kanata had simply excluded the Goddess’s influence when she extracted Marianne from the angel. It had been a perfect fusion, after all. Kanata had done nothing less than extract and reform Marianne, and Marianne alone, from within the amalgamation.

In her present state, with the status boost from the Saint Profession, but not

under the Goddess's domination, Marianne was a significant threat to the gods.

"From what I've seen, she's gone on to create a whole new religion," said the boy. "Fluffism, I believe it's called?"

"An absurd name," said the old man. "But there's no denying that she's gathered a considerable amount of strong faith."

"The harvest is late, people's faith is declining..." said the girl. "Now what do you intend to do about it?"

This meeting between the four gods had been nothing short of an interrogation.

"I still have a plan in mind," the Goddess finally said, bitter at being made to take the blame. She was clutching the throne's armrest so tight that cracks had started to form in the stone. None of the other three gods had ever before seen the serene Goddess so plainly vexed. "I would ask you to wait until after I have tried it to strip me of my position."

"Very well," said the old man. "We'll hold you to those words."

"Just don't go forgetting your position, would you?" said the girl. "Right now, you don't have a single ally in the whole world."

"If you fail, we're stripping you of your divinity in exchange," said the boy.

And with their respective indignation, mocking laughter, and contempt, the three vanished from the white space.

"Damn them all to hell!" the Goddess spat as she rose from her throne, with markedly un-Goddess-like invective. "If this plan of mine fails, I'm done for..." she muttered. "No! I am an omniscient and omnipotent goddess! I've left my former world behind!" She forced her shoulders to stop trembling. "I mustn't lose my head. That girl is like a bug in this world. If I send someone unprepared after her, they will only be defeated in turn, and converted to her side like the Demon King and the Saint. Fortunately, it happens that the Demon King is presently in the human realm. That means that the conditions for selecting a Hero are fulfilled. If I find some absolute powerhouse and make them a Hero, the bonuses from the Profession might just be enough to let them defeat that girl..."

The Goddess turned her attention toward the mortal plane, wasting no time in putting her plan into action.

† † †

The Royal Capital of the Kingdom of Falkas was the most prosperous city on the continent. Its unparalleled population boasted craftsmen of every imaginable industry, leading to ever-greater development. The city was devoted to the education of its people as well, and had made a name for itself as a great center of learning. Nobles from all over sent their sons to study at one of the various academies in Hightown, depending on their affiliated cliques, so that they might gain the knowledge they would need to one day govern their family's domain. And among all the many schools, the one famous for having the most demanding curriculum of all was the Academy of the Holy Word, where boys pursued martial and literary arts alike. But most of all, the focus of the academy was on swordsmanship, taught in imitation of the style of the first Divine Sword.

Right now, the school's expansive yard was full of shouting voices as the students practiced their swordplay against one another.

"Come on!"

"Raaaaaah!!!"

The Academy of the Holy World was a men's school, with no women allowed on the premises. The young boys of the student body were still somewhat small, but they were training their bodies for all they were worth. Their musculature was hidden underneath layers of protective gear, however, as they clashed with each other with dull-bladed swords. It was quite the workout.

Thanks to their intense training, these boys were already strong enough to handily defeat a city guard, but their instructors had no problem giving such formidable youths the runaround. The teachers were all former adventurers and knights, hand selected for their prowess and offered a high salary to lure them to the Academy, boasting advanced Professions like Sword Saint and Dragon Knight. None of the students could cross swords with them.

None, that is, except for one.

In the middle of the yard, an imposing, burly swordsman faced off against a much smaller opponent. At first glance, it seemed the larger swordsman had the advantage, but appearances could be deceiving...

“Gh! Nice one, Aldezia!” the Sword Saint instructor said, praising his student. He moved much faster than one might assume from his large stature, swinging his sword so quickly that the students watching couldn’t even count how many strikes he had made in the span of a single breath.

“On the contrary, I have a lot to learn,” the boy replied, seemingly unperturbed by the fierce attack. He readied his sword, his mind a placid mirror, and parried each and every one of the flurry of blows coming his way. His sword arm was stronger than seemed possible with a body as small as his, and his speed was far beyond the instructor’s.

“You’ve got a lot to learn, huh?” the instructor echoed back. “Honestly, I’m not sure I’m cut out to teach you...” He dropped his sword and held his hands up in surrender.

The match had been settled in a split second. The instructor had barely seen a flash in the boy’s hands before he found the boy’s sword point quivering an inch away from his throat, bypassing all his protective gear. There was no room for doubt—everyone had seen the boy score an overwhelming victory.

“H-Holy crap!” a student exclaimed. “He took out an instructor!”

“Alus really is built different, huh!”

The students, who had already abandoned their own training to watch Alus Aldezia’s match, raised their voices in celebration as they mobbed their victorious classmate.

“That’s enough, you sorry lot!” another instructor bellowed, as if he, too, hadn’t left his duties as instructor in order to watch the match. “Back to training!” The noisy voices of the schoolyard took a slightly different tenor than usual after what they’d witnessed.

“Ahh...” Alus sighed, taking off the mask he had been wearing as part of his defensive gear, revealing his gorgeous features and rosy cheeks.

He shook his light blond hair, filling the air with droplets of perspiration. If

there had been any girls present, they would surely have shrieked with excitement at the sight, but alas, this was a school for active young men. The only gazes turned his way were the intense stares of his male peers. Or, to be precise, one of the gazes fixed on Alus in particular was intense in a whole different way from the rest.

“Teacher,” Alus said, “I thank you for your instruction. With your help, I have surpassed another of my former limits.” He bowed with utmost politeness.

The instructor picked up the sword he had dropped in their bout and gave a self-deprecating laugh.

“Hah. You’re saying I taught you something by getting my ass handed to me like that? If you’re *too* obsequious, it sounds more like sarcasm. But y’know what? I’m glad to hear that. Say,” he paused, “any interest in joining me for a drink after class?”

“As I am a minor and still in school, I am afraid I must decline. Also, we are both men...”

“Th-That’s right, I forgot how young you were! But still...!”

Alus left the schoolyard, leaving the rejected instructor behind. Class was still in progress, but nobody was about to stop the boy who had just defeated the strongest instructor in the whole school. He could hear excited chatter behind him. That was no surprise. His opponent had been nearly twice his age, and a holder of the Sword Saint Profession. Alus, a young boy who had yet to go through his Selection Ceremony, had defeated him without taking a single hit. It was nothing short of a miraculous feat, but Alus didn’t seem happy about it at all.

“Teacher,” he said to himself. “The truth is, I really do have a lot to learn...”

After all, Alus was intimately familiar with two sword fighters whose prowess far outstripped his own. The first was his magnificent father. The second was his outrageous older sister. Compared to the likes of them, his own swordsmanship was like an infant child playing with a stick. His father, moreover, had wanted to be a Magician when he was Alus’s age for some strange reason, and had practiced his magic—not swordsmanship—every day, while his sister had won the last three National Fencing Tournaments in a row despite continuing to

insist that swordplay was not one of her strong suits.

“I respect them a great deal,” Alus said, “but having such extraordinary people in one’s family can give one quite the sense of inferiority,” he trailed off. “I suppose I should be grateful that they never tried to lord it over me.”

Alus went back to the dressing room alone and took off his heavy protective gear piece by piece with stiff solemnity. The swords they used for training were blunt, but they were still made out of iron and every bit as hefty as the real thing, hence the need for protection.

The sky was a clear blue outside the window, and far in the distance Alus could hear the commotion of the class resuming their training. A pleasant breeze blew in through the window. Alus took a deep breath and spoke, addressing the empty space behind him.

“How long do you intend to watch me, may I ask?” he said. He had recognized that he was being observed.

“Magnificent...” a divine voice said in his mind in response. A beam of light illuminated the room, and suddenly, over his shoulder Alus could see a beautiful woman floating in the air right behind him. *“I came here because I sensed the presence of a powerful soul, but to think I would discover one so outstanding as you...”* The floating woman’s voice trembled with emotion. *“Never before has a mortal addressed me so, before I even descended from the heavens.”*

“Then...” Alus said, “are you a goddess?”

He, like most of humanity, had been baptized by the Holy Church. It was the Holy Church that performed the Selection Ceremony, and so nearly every human alive numbered among their adherents. In terms of faith, Alus had only a middling amount of light piety, but if this woman was a goddess, it seemed rude to keep his back turned. He turned to face her and kneeled down.

“What business does Your Divinity have with one such as me?”

“A goddess only appears before mortals to perform miracles or deliver a divine oracle.”

“So you say, and yet I am no Saint.”

Only Saints had the ability to receive oracles from the gods. Alus, who knew full well that his faith in the gods was by no means deep, couldn't imagine why the Goddess would appear before *him*.

"By my authority as Goddess," the Goddess said, *"I would grant you the Profession of Hero."*

"Oh. I...see?" Alus reacted to the sudden declaration with perfect confusion. He might as well have had a question mark floating above his head.

The Goddess, who had expected the boy to begin immediately shedding tears of joy, cocked her head, mystified.

"Is that all?" she asked. *"You do know that Hero is the strongest of all Professions, granted only to one person in the world at a time, do you not?"*

"Well, that *is* quite something..." said Alus. Despite his words, he didn't actually seem impressed in the slightest. "However, I am but fourteen years of age. I am not old enough for my Selection Ceremony."

"That is of no concern," boasted the Goddess. *"I will grant you permission personally, as the Goddess who oversees the ceremony. None would have grounds to object."*

The Profession system worked automatically, granting humans suitable Professions when they were of the appropriate age. With the Goddess granting a Profession directly, however, she could skip right over the age requirement and assign whatever Profession struck her fancy.

"Becoming a Hero will increase all of your abilities twofold, and grant you the unique Dimension Cutter skill, available only to the Hero. The Dimension Cutter will ignore any defense your opponent happens to possess. It is an irresistible sword technique. As Hero, there will be no foe who can stand against you."

"I don't know..." Alus muttered. "I can't imagine something like that would be enough to defeat my sister..."

"What was that?"

"Never mind, I was just thinking out loud. Please, continue."

"Very well. I have told you the miracle I will perform. Now I will give you my

oracle.”

“What is it you would ask of me, Divinity?”

“The only thing I would ask of a Hero—the death of the Demon King. I would have you slay the Demon King Zag’giel.”

“Oh? The Demon King Zag’giel, you say...” For the first time in the conversation, Alus’s voice betrayed some actual interest.

The Goddess felt relieved.

“How splendid, the glint in your eye at the idea of slaying the Demon King,” the Goddess said. *“You truly are my chosen Hero!”*

“I wouldn’t say my interest has anything to do with *slaying...*” muttered Alus, too softly for the Goddess to hear.

“However, there is yet more that must be said.”

“Oh, is there?”

“This world is currently facing an unprecedented threat,” the Goddess said.

“Goodness,” responded Alus.

“The Demon King has become the servant of a wicked seductress. Even now this woman is traveling the world, gathering followers. Soon she will assemble an army of the strongest magic beasts in existence, and set out to destroy humanity.”

“How terrible!”

“Indeed. This woman’s name is Kanata Aldezia.”

Alus skipped a beat. “Kanata Aldezia, you say?”

“Verily. She will be a powerful foe—one strong and wicked enough to bring the Demon King Zag’giel himself to heel. Even as a Hero, you will be hard pressed to triumph alone against this embodiment of evil.”

“Yes, I suppose I would.” Alus nodded, as calm as ever. The Goddess smiled, confident that the person she had chosen was a truly extraordinary individual.

“But take heart!” the Goddess said. *“There are mighty souls who might vie*

with her all over the land. I shall grant them divine oracles as well, and they will become your companions. You will set out on your journey to slay Kanata Aldezia in good company!"

"I see," Alus said. "That makes perfect sense."

"Then you are resolved. Good. Now, I shall grant unto you the Profession of Hero..."

"No, that won't be necessary."

The Goddess balked. *"What do you mean by that? After everything you have heard, do you have some objection to becoming the Hero?"*

"You could say that..." Alus mused. "Forgive me for answering a question with a question, but do you happen to know my name?"

"I do not..."

Now that the boy mentioned it, the Goddess had been searching for individuals based on the strength of their souls. She hadn't taken a moment to look at his name. As far as the Goddess was concerned, the names of the humans she chose to use as tools were of little consequence. This time, however, that approach was about to come back to bite her.

"My name is Alus Aldezia."

"I see. Your name is Alus Aldezia. A wonderful name, befitting a Hero of your — Wait. Did you say Aldezia?"

"Indeed I did," said Alus. "Your embodiment of evil is my older sister!"

"Gehhh...?!" The Goddess made a strange noise, as if something was caught in her throat. *"You-You're her younger brother?! I-Impossible! Of all the absurd coincidences!"*

"My sister may be a little bit odd," Alus said. "Or rather, she may be so odd as to be utterly incomprehensible. But I know she is a kindhearted person. In all my life I have never known anyone to be kinder than her. I do not believe for a second that she would destroy the world."

"Aha... That is... I..."

“Moreover, the Demon King Zag’giel you speak of is the man to whom I entrusted the care of my sister. I have never met anyone like him before. He is more kingly than the king of this land.”

“W-Wait!” the Goddess implored. *“I believe there has been a misunderstanding. Calm yourself, and perhaps we can...talk about it?”*

The Goddess thought she might still be able to alter Alus’s thoughts, but Alus was in no mood to entertain any further questions.

“I find it peculiar,” Alus said, rising to his feet from where he had been kneeling on the floor. “The Kanata and Zag’giel I know seem completely unlike the people you describe.” He glared at the Goddess head-on, as if to say he knew a liar when he saw one. “You are nothing but a suspicious woman calling herself a Goddess. I do not pretend to know the details, but you clearly intend to harm my sister and my friend!”



“Eeek!”

Alus’s bright blue eyes fixed her with a glare full of cold wrath. It was enough to make the supernal Goddess herself shriek like a little girl. He lashed out with his sword, striking to sever her neck from her body, but just before the blade made contact her form vanished into thin air.

“She got away...” Alus muttered.

The dull training sword was an object of the mortal world. In theory it should have no effect on the Goddess. But in that moment, Alus’s sword was full of his own sheer lethality and love for his sister. It had been enough to make the Goddess flee in defeat.

“So, some troublemaker has set her eyes on my sister, has she? What on earth did she do to earn the ire of a *goddess*, I wonder...” Alus said to himself, sighing as he sheathed his blade. “We’ve heard rumors about her journey in the Royal Capital, so I suppose she must be well, though I can’t help but worry. She said she would visit home for summer vacation, I believe. Perhaps I should pay the family a visit as well, to see how she’s doing...”

The bell sounded, declaring an end to the class period. Alus had already begun devising plans for the upcoming summer vacation.

† † †

“*Damn it, damn it, damn it all to hell!*” the Goddess raged, cursing and sputtering and really sounding nothing like a goddess at all. “*That human! How could I allow a human to rattle me like this, not once but twice?!*”

The first time the Goddess had run away, she had fled from Kanata Aldezia. This time it was from her younger brother Alus. What in the world was with that pair of siblings?! The younger brother, Alus, didn’t seem to be a heavy soul at all—he was an ordinary human of this world. What, then, explained his strength? That slash should have had no effect on her, even if it had hit. But as the Goddess touched a finger to her neck, she could still feel a slight pain and a trickle of blood. As ashamed as she was for running in fear, perhaps it had not been an incorrect judgment.

“*Was that...D-Dimension Cutter?*”

The irresistible cutting skill that nullified all resistances. The boy had not even been made a Hero yet. There was no reasonable way he could have used that technique. And yet, the attack he had unleashed against her seemed to have been an incomplete version of just that ability. Once again, she had come upon a being capable of defying the laws set by the gods.

The Goddess looked at the bit of blood on her fingertip and trembled. “*Wh-What is going on?*” she asked. “*Another monster...*”

She didn’t have a moment to lose. She needed to select the next Hero immediately and begin giving her oracles to people all over the land. She would assemble a party of mighty warriors with high-ranking Professions to kill Kanata and her brother.

Hoping that the next Hero she found would be easier to manipulate, the Goddess set out again on her search.

Chapter 2: Vampire? No! I Sense the Fluff!

As Alus was violently rebuffing the Goddess's attempt to court him as her champion against his own sister, Kanata continued cheerfully along her way, blissfully ignorant of both the Goddess's schemes and her brother's worries.

"Go, boy!" she cried, lightly tossing a ball. It landed a short distance ahead of her and gently rolled along the ground.

A pure white furball came bounding past her, running for all he was worth to catch up to the ball just a few feet ahead.

"Raaahhh! Just leave it to me, Lady Kanata!"

Despite all appearances, this ball of fur was none other than the legendary Spirit Wolf Fenrir, who had accompanied the girl known as the First Saint on her quest to save the world a thousand years ago.

"Raaahhh! Grahaaaa! Soon! Soon, the ball will be in my grasp!"

As short as the distance Kanata had thrown the ball was, the furball's stubby little legs were so short that traversing the distance was a feat of effort. He really looked nothing at all like his former self—a divine spirit who protected humanity from disasters of all sorts, with the power to strike down legions of foes. In this form he was so weak it would move anyone's heart to pity, but the young girl watching him run wore an expression of pure joy.

"Haahh... Haahh... I can't take it!" she cried. The sight of Fenrir running so desperately was just about the most precious thing Kanata could imagine. "Fen-fen's legs are going pitter-patter! It's just too muuuuuch!"

"Yes!" Fenrir said. *"I got it! Knave of a ball! Did you think you could get away from me?! Now, to take you back to Lady Kanata!"* Carrying the ball in his mouth, he set out once again on his stubby little legs, returning to the one who had thrown it. *"Pant...pant... Drat! How can one ball be so heavy? Is this thing made of iron?!"*

It was, of course, an utterly unremarkable rubber ball. It was a toy even a

toddler could toss around without much effort. But with Fenrir's shocking degree of feebleness, he needed several breaks on his journey before he finally managed to make it all the way to Kanata.

"Wow!" Kanata cheered. "You did so good, Fen-fen! Who's a good boy?!"

"C-Could it perhaps be me?! Oh, what a tremendous honor!" Panting with fatigue, his tongue lolling out of his mouth, Fenrir gazed blissfully up at his master's happy face.

"Hah," Zag'giel laughed scornfully, watching Fenrir's dopey expression as Kanata patted him on the head. *"Frolicking like a baseborn dog, we see. To think that the legendary Spirit Wolf Fenrir would be reduced to such a state. How pathetic."*

Having said that, he returned to his somber business of trying to catch the bit of bristly grass Kanata was waving with her other hand, jabbing with his kitty paws as she pulled it away.

"Ahhh!" Kanata sighed. "Zaggy playing with the bristle grass...cute cute cute cute *cute!*"

Fenrir jolted to his feet and marched over to the erstwhile monarch, incensed by his hypocrisy.

"What of it, Demon King?" he demanded. *"You seem to be playing around yourself!"*

"What about this looks like playing around to you?" Zag'giel demanded imperiously. Needless to say, it didn't look like Zag'giel was doing anything *but* playing around. *"This is a new training regimen Kanata has devised for us! She ordered us to visualize the bristle grass as our opponent, that we may learn to increase the swiftness of our attacks!"*

Kanata had said no such thing, but Zag'giel excused all of his playing around with Kanata as *training*.

"I-It's the same for me!" Fenrir said. *"Lady Kanata herself is teaching me to follow the quick movements of my prey!"*

This, too, was false. Kanata had merely wanted to play fetch.

“Good boys!” Kanata said, showering the two with praise. “You’re both doing so good! You’re the best!”

Kanata’s praise was meant for the two beasts’ *cuteness*, not their strength, but of course the pair misunderstood. They threw themselves back into their training with gusto.

“Hisssss! Mreowr!” Zag’giel cried as he hopped on his stubby back legs, trying to reach the bristle grass. *“Bwa ha ha! Yes! The day we can defeat a slime is drawing near, we feel it!”*

“Wh-What?!” Fenrir reeled in awe. *“I can’t let him beat me! I will be the first one to defeat a slime!”*

The other day, Zag’giel and Fenrir had boldly challenged a slime they encountered on the road, only to find the tables turned on them by their would-be prey. The two were deeply upset by their pitiful state, but Kanata was enjoying herself just fine praising them and fluffing them and saving a recording of the cute movements the pair called “training” in the album in her brain.

“No!” countered Zag’giel. *“It will be we, the first to defeat the slime!”*

“No, me!”

“No, we!”

“No, me!”

The two drew closer to each other with every exchange, until their foreheads were pressed right up against their adversary in a menacing glare.

“Grrrrr!” both cat and dog growled, neither backing down.

“Oh gosh oh wow!” Kanata gushed as she watched the fierce battle taking place in front of her. “Their little foreheads are stuck together! Soooo cute!”

Just when it was starting to seem like the world’s two weakest magic beasts were going to be facing off like that for all eternity, the pair’s limited stamina ran out and they called an end to the day’s training session. Despite all their efforts, neither Zag’giel nor Fenrir showed the least bit of growth. Their chance of victory against a slime remained as dismal as always.

“Pant...pant...” sputtered Zag’giel. *“P-Perhaps we had best call it there for*

today...”

“Huff...huff...” Fenrir gasped for air. “*Th-That’s my line...*”

The two flopped to the ground, exhausted, even though all they had managed to do was nudge and jostle each other slightly.

“You two both did great!” said Kanata, hugging the two exhausted critters close. She returned Zag’giel to his perch atop her head and held Fenrir in her arms. “What a lovely lunch break! Ready to get back to the road?”

Just a little farther and they would be able to see the next village. The road they were on received a great deal of carriage traffic, and most of the villages offered inns to stay the night. Kanata didn’t want to force her two adorable fluffballs to spend the night camping outside if she could help it.

The covered wagon they were riding in had once belonged to Kanata’s mentor figure, Albert Molmo—Grandpa Monster himself. It had been repaired and upgraded by the master smith, Lily, to be a splendid vehicle indeed. However, pulling the wagon was not a horse, but an enormous wolf with brilliant silver fur. This was Fenrir’s main body, although the Spirit Wolf’s soul currently resided in the furball squeezed tight in Kanata’s arms. While his soul was there, he could move his larger wolf body remotely.

“All right, Fen-fen!” said Kanata. “Ready?”

“*By your command, Lady Kanata!*” the large and small Fenrirs replied in perfect harmony.

“*We told you not to speak with both bodies at once!*” Zag’giel protested, his ears flattening back on his head in distress. “*It is disconcerting!*”

“Let’s gooo!” Kanata cheered.

The wagon rolled smoothly down the road. If Fenrir had been going full speed, it would have taken them no time at all to reach their destination. However, there were other travelers on the road, both in vehicles and on foot, and he was trying to be considerate of their surroundings. Kanata had told him that it was fine to take it slow, so he did his best to keep to a reasonable speed and not cause trouble for anyone else.

Nonetheless, an enormous silver wolf pulling a wagon stood out like a sore thumb. Kanata's party was getting all kinds of stares from the people around them. Not that they themselves seemed to particularly notice.

They picked up a number of passengers along the way as well—a family whose crying child was tired of walking, an old woman with bad legs—who thanked Kanata politely as they settled in for the ride to the next village.

"Did you know," the old woman said as she sat down next to Kanata, "the village you're heading to now is the birthplace of the First Saint herself!"

She pointed up ahead, across the field. Following her finger, they could see the houses up ahead. They were still no larger on the horizon than grains of rice, but it was good to be in sight of the night's lodgings.

Kanata and company had only known the village to be another town along the road. They'd had no idea it boasted such a considerable claim to fame.

"Oh?" said Zag'giel, looking over at Fenrir. The two of them had been playing with the child Kanata had picked up in the back of the wagon—or rather, the child was taking turns squeezing the two furballs and rolling them around. *"In that case, you would know something of this place, would you not?"*

"I'm afraid not..." Fenrir answered. *"I only began following Her Holiness after her visit to the Forest of Spirits. But she did tell me she came from this part of the world. I have no reason to doubt that this village was her hometown."*

It was a good thing they were speaking telepathically. Otherwise they would have never been able to hear each other's words over the child playing. Until today, Zag'giel and Fenrir had both had no idea that playing with children could be this exhausting.

It was a good day for travel, and the wagon reached the village right as the sun was beginning to set.

"Thank you ever so much," said the old lady. "My son is coming to meet me, so please let me off here."

"Okay!" Kanata cried. "Fen-fen, stop!"

"Understood!" Fenrir put the brakes on his main body, bringing the wagon to

a gradual halt in front of the village gates. The other passengers decided that this was a good place for them to get off as well and disembarked, thanking Kanata as they exited the wagon and made their way into the village. Kanata offered the old lady a hand to help her down from the passenger's seat, and turned around to catch the child jumping off the platform.

"Thank you, miss! Thank you, kitty! Thank you, doggy!" the child said.

"We are no cat!" Zag'giel snapped.

"I'm not a dog!" barked Fenrir.

Their protests didn't stop the kid from petting the pair's grumpy faces. The young child hadn't held back from playing with them the slightest bit while they were in the wagon, and Zag'giel and Fenrir had borne the attention with excellent patience, all to give their exhausted parents a moment to rest.

"Hee hee!" Kanata laughed. "Good work, Zaggy, Fen-fen. You were such good boys today!"

"Hah," Zag'giel said as he puffed out his chest. *"A follower of Kanata must be proficient in childcare as well as battle. We did only as was expected of us."*

"Lady Kanata," declared Fenrir, *"being useful to you is my greatest joy!"*

Kanata petted the two on the head. It seemed like they had somewhat recovered their spirits. Not counting her endless appetite for fluff, this was the first time the two had actually been of any particular help to Kanata. But it seemed like that thought had not occurred to the two cheerful critters.

"Thank you very much." The child's parents bowed their heads. It seemed like they lived in this village. "We really appreciate the help."

When the old lady's son showed up, he offered to let Kanata stay at his house for the night, but his humble abode didn't have the space to park the wagon, so she politely refused and made her way to the village inn.

As the wagon made its way through the village, Zag'giel called out to stop from atop Kanata's head.

"Kanata, let us have a look at that bronze statue..."

Ahead of them was an ancient, weathered bronze statue. It must have been

many years since it was erected, but it still looked far too splendid for a humble rest stop. There was no sign of moss or vines covering the statue either. The villagers must clean it regularly.

“Wow!” said Kanata. “A fluff-fluff! It looks like you, Fen-fen!”

The statue, it turned out, was of a large wolf who seemed to stand guard to protect a young maiden.

“Her Holiness...” muttered the Fenrir on Kanata’s lap.

“No doubt the presence of this statue is the reason it is said that this is the hometown of the First Saint, as the crone told us earlier,” Zag’giel mused.

“So this is the First Saint...” Kanata said.

“She does bear a certain resemblance to you, after all...” said Zag’giel.

“Oh, you think so?” said Kanata. “You’re gonna make me blush!”

Kanata was a gorgeous young lady with splendidly refined features, if she ever kept quiet about the fluff. Zag’giel wasn’t wrong that she resembled the statue.

“Sob...” Tears came to Fenrir’s eyes as he looked up at the bronze maiden.

“Your Holiness...”

The statue must have reminded him of his time traveling with the First Saint. If the depiction of Fenrir was so close to reality, it seemed plausible that the Saint was a decent likeness as well.

Fenrir seemed halfway poised to leap from the carriage onto the statue itself as Kanata gently petted him on the head. He looked up at her, and shook the tears from his eyes.

“Your Holiness...” he prayed. *“Please watch over Lady Kanata on her journey.”*

Past the statue, the inn was a grander building than the surrounding village. Kanata parked the wagon at the end of the road and went inside to check if they had an available room.

“Oho!” said Zag’giel, impressed as they stepped inside. *“The interior furnishings are of high quality as well!”*

“This will be the perfect place for Lady Kanata to get some rest!” agreed

Fenrir.

There were inns like this one all along the kingdom's highways, but this one seemed especially well frequented. The dining hall was full of boisterous travelers eating with gusto. Zag'giel jumped down from Kanata's head and struck the bell on the reception counter with his little paws.

"Excuse me!" Kanata called.

The innkeeper poked her head out from the back room.

"Of course, of course! You'll be staying the night?" She was a robust woman who seemed well at home in her role managing such a large inn. There was a friendly smile on her sunburned face as she picked up a ledger and pen. "Is it just the one of you?"

"No, no," said Kanata, plopping Fenrir on the counter next to Zag'giel. "I'm traveling with these babies!"

"Hm?" the innkeeper asked. "I've never seen animals like these before. Missy, are these your pets?"

"We are not pets!" declared Zag'giel.

"We are the guardians and servants of Lady Kanata!" seconded Fenrir.

"Th-They talk!" the innkeeper exclaimed.

That was usually how people reacted upon encountering the pair for the first time. Zag'giel and Fenrir had come to expect it at this point and were getting rather fed up.

Kanata, however, just smiled and explained that she was a Beast Tamer, and that the two beasts were her companions, as well as a third who was currently pulling her wagon. On that note, she also asked where she should put the wagon to park.

"I see!" the innkeeper said. "Well, if they're registered with the Adventurers' Guild, we don't have a problem with it. But I never thought I'd meet a flesh-and-blood Beast Tamer..."



Apart from Kanata herself, the only other Beast Tamer they had met on their journey was old man Molmo. More than being merely a rarity, it seemed like the two of them might be the only Beast Tamers in existence. One reason for this was the debuff—it was severe enough that it might impact a person's ability to lead an ordinary life. And there were also the teachings of the Holy Church, which had cast the Beast Tamer Profession in a bad light for generations. It was no wonder so few people wanted to take the Profession on. Even people who might want to choose the Profession would be given pause at the prospect of making such a foolish choice at their Selection Ceremony.

It was almost as if someone was trying to intentionally reduce the number of Beast Tamers. The only one who had arrived at that conclusion, however, was Zag'giel, who knew how the gods' system of harvesting souls operated. He didn't think it was necessary to share this knowledge, though. Hardly anyone would believe it, and even if he did try to spread the truth, he knew just how despicable the Goddess could be. Who knew what she might do? It didn't seem out of the question to think that she might erase all life in the world and start over from scratch if it seemed like humanity might learn the truth and lose their faith in her. Gods were supernal beings, and had correspondingly great power. Even a party of great champions from the mortal realm could never defeat a god in their true form.

Zag'giel, however, was not without hope. The more Kanata continued her journey, the more people's faith in the Goddess seemed to fall. Kanata seemed completely unaware of it herself, but everywhere she went she left salvation in her wake, foiling the Goddess's plans and robbing her of her much-needed faith. And someday soon, Zag'giel felt, it would mean the end of the gods' atrocious system. It might even be the next time Kanata and the Goddess came face-to-face...

"We must become stronger..." Zag'giel told himself. *"So when that day comes, we will be ready!"*

That was the reason he spent most of his time in his furball form—if he could become strong in this feeble body as well, when he returned to his original form he would surely obtain greater power than ever before! It certainly wasn't because Kanata would hardly look at him in his original form. It wasn't that at

all!

“H-Hm?” said Fenrir. *“You seem fired up all of a sudden, Demon King! But I’m not about to lose to you!”* He seemed to be getting fired up himself by his rival’s fighting spirit.

On that note, Kanata finished checking in and scooped the two furballs back into her arms.

† † †

Kanata had wanted Fenrir’s main body to stay with them in the inn, but Fenrir himself vetoed the proposition. Even knowing that he was the companion of a Beast Tamer, the other patrons of the inn would no doubt have trouble relaxing with such a ferocious beast in the room. Fenrir’s main body was exceptionally sturdy, and he didn’t at all mind simply finding a tree to sleep under until Kanata returned. If anything, he was more comfortable sleeping outdoors.

“Well, okay...” said Kanata. *“If you say so, Fen-fen.”*

They discussed it with the innkeeper, who agreed to let the larger Fenrir spend the night with the horses in the stables behind the inn. He curled up, resting his head on his tail, and drifted off to sleep to Kanata petting his head and whispering, *“Good boy...good boy...”* She returned to the inn with the smaller Fenrir fragment held snug in her arms.

The two Fenrirs shared a single soul. Aside from the difference in form and power, they were in fact the same being. Whichever body Fenrir transferred his consciousness to, the other would stop moving, seeming for all the world as if it were merely asleep. Simple actions equivalent to sleepwalking, like pulling the wagon, were the most the empty vessel could manage. For that matter, it made no difference which of the two bodies ate food. They would both receive sustenance from the meal. All this was possible due to Fenrir’s nature as an incarnate spirit.

“Okay, Fen-fen!” Kanata said. *“Make sure you eat up!”*

“I’m truly sorry for making you spend so much of our budget on keeping me fed, Lady Kanata...” Fenrir lamented.

“Don’t worry about it!” Kanata rebuffed him. *“Let’s both eat lots and lots!”*

"L-Lady Kanata!" the Spirit Wolf cried. *"What splendid compassion!"*

"W-We will eat lots and lots as well!" said Zag'giel.

"Of course!" said Kanata. "You eat up too, Zaggy!"

Kanata liked her fluffballs well fed, after all. She had sat them down to dinner as soon as they received their room number.

As they were eating their meal, Kanata waved over the innkeeper and asked her a question. The innkeeper was confused.

"Fluffy magic beasts?" she repeated. "You don't see many magic beasts 'round these parts, you know, but...what do you mean by *fluffy*?" She wasn't sure what to make of the young girl asking if she had seen any *fluffy magic beasts* in the area.

"I've heard of this!" volunteered a man sitting a table over from Kanata's party. "That's that new religion everyone's been talking about!" he said, lifting his fork for emphasis.

"Oh yes!" said another patron sitting across from the man. "The new religion from the holy land. Fluffism, wasn't it? It's got a weird name, I guess, but who would've thought we'd see a new religion born right in the headquarters of the Holy Church!"

"From what I've heard, the Saint of the Holy Church herself had some kind of religious awakening," the man said.

"Goodness gracious!" the innkeeper exclaimed. "Is that true? The Saint is pretty much the symbol of the Holy Church, isn't she? You're telling me Her Holiness abandoned her faith and founded some new religion?!"

"Something huge must have happened to make her upturn her whole value system like that..."

"Fluffism, is it? What on earth does the word *fluff* mean, do you think?"

"It must have some kind of divine significance!"

The inn patrons were all abuzz, gossiping about the new religion that seemed to have suddenly burst onto the scene. Kanata, however, jumped to her feet, bringing all eyes to herself.

“No, no, no!” she said. “That isn’t what fluff means!” She placed the white and black furballs she had been hand-feeding up on the table. “I’m looking for fluffy magic beasts, like these two!”

“Indeed!” said Zag’giel. *“We seek magic beasts with fluff like ours!”*

Zag’giel and Fenrir, unfortunately, did not have any better of an idea what Kanata meant by *fluff* than the adherents of Fluffism, and had taken to using the word as a synonym for *ultimate power*.

“Although you’d be hard pressed to find anyone as fluffy as me!” Fenrir declared.

The inn patrons gave the white and black furballs who were currently puffing themselves up on the table haughtily a long, dubious look. The pair looked far too weak to claim the title of ‘magic beast,’ but the innkeeper had told everyone that Kanata was a Beast Tamer, and they had no reason to doubt it.

“Those are magic beasts?”

“I’ve never heard of an *animal* that could talk inside someone’s head. They *must* be magic beasts...”

It was all the stranger in light of the enormous wolf sleeping in the stables. The people who happened to see Fenrir there were astonished to find that the horses didn’t seem frightened of him at all. He seemed to radiate divinity. One of Kanata’s magic beasts looked outrageously powerful, while the other two looked outrageously weak. Nobody in the inn had ever seen anything like it. In that case, they supposed, the word *fluff* must mean *extraordinarily weak*.

“No kidding...” someone said. “I’ve never seen such a fluffy magic beast in my life!”

“Me neither! I never thought I’d see something fluffier than a slime, but here we are!”

“Hah!” laughed Zag’giel. *“That is no surprise! We do not suppose that fluff such as ours will be easy to find!”*

“It’s only to be expected,” agreed Fenrir. *“Few possess fluff worthy of Lady Kanata!”*

The two nodded proudly, not realizing at all that the inn patrons thought they were calling themselves the weakest of all magic beasts. Nobody ever seemed to realize that they were using the word *fluff* to mean entirely different things. One way or another, though, it didn't sound like anyone knew of any promising fluff.

"Speaking of magic beasts," said the innkeeper as she brought Kanata another helping of stew, "there was one in the old castle nearby, wasn't there?"

"That castle's been around since my grandmother's grandmother's day..." another patron chimed in.

"Oh?" Kanata sensed fluff. She turned to listen to the innkeeper's story with great interest.

"Well," the innkeeper went on, "I call it a castle, but it's halfway crumbled to dust. Nobody lives there. I couldn't tell you when it was built or whose castle it was, but folks in our village keep away from there after dark."

"Oh ho!" said Kanata, leaning in close. "And why is that, may I ask?"

"Because that's when it comes out..." the innkeeper whispered dramatically.

"What does?" Kanata asked.

"Nobody lives in that castle..." the innkeeper began, affecting a low, spooky voice. "But after dark, you can see lights, and a young lady roaming the hallways. They say that if she spots you, she'll suck the soul straight out of your body and make you a ghost like her!"

"Hey!" a patron pitched in. "My grandpa told me that story when I was a kid! He used to go on and on about stuff like that. But in the version I heard, the lady sucks out your blood, not your soul..."

"But if the story's true, that would make it a ghost, right? Not a magic beast! It's magic beasts you're looking for, right, missy?"

"Ghosts and magic beasts aren't so different, you know! But that was quite a tale from the innkeeper, huh?!"

"I suppose you don't believe it, then. Wanna head out tonight and see if there's any truth to it?"

"I-I think I'll pass..."

The dining hall erupted with boisterous laughter.

"Hmm..." Kanata mused. "I see!"

"What is it, Kanata?" asked Zag'giel. "Did something in that story interest you? The ghost of a young woman does not strike us as the kind of companion you are seeking..."

"I think I'll go check it out!" Kanata said, taking to her feet with one furball in each arm. "Let's go, Zaggy, Fen-fen!"

"Let's go?" Fenrir asked. "To the old castle from the story?"

"The sun has already set," Zag'giel protested. "Should we not leave it for the morrow?"

The innkeeper had told them that strong magic beasts didn't appear in this part of the world, but it was still dangerous for a girl to go for a walk alone at night. For any girl other than Kanata, at least. In Kanata's case, the risk was practically zero.

"We believe it would be wise to sleep and recover your strength before it gets much later..." said Zag'giel.

The suggestion had merit, but Kanata was too worked up to listen. If there was even the slightest chance that this would lead to the fluff, she wasn't about to pass it up.

"There's no way I could sleep now!" Kanata said. "I'm way too interested in this castle! Oh, but Zaggy, you can sleep if you want to. I'll carry you nice and safe!"

"We should have known better..." said Zag'giel. *"You are not the type to listen to others once you have made up your mind. Very well. If you will not hear otherwise, Kanata, then we—"*

"I'll go wherever you say, Lady Kanata!" Fenrir interrupted. *"I, your number one servant, will follow you to the ends of the earth, and protect you from any danger!"*

"Upstart mutt!" Zag'giel shot back. "A newcomer like you should know his

place and not cut ahead of us—we served Kanata first! Kanata! We, too, are prepared to risk our very life at your command!”

“Thank you, Zaggy! Thank you, Fen-fen! I don’t have anything to worry about as long as I’ve got you!”

Kanata meant that the furballs were an invaluable source of psychological healing, but Zag’giel and Fenrir had deluded themselves into thinking she was relying on their strength in battle. They held their heads high from their positions stowed under Kanata’s armpits, cutting a truly comical image. The other inn patrons mercifully said nothing to puncture the pair’s bubble.

“Do you think that girl’s going to check if the story’s true?” the innkeeper asked. She’d looked up from a conversation with some of her regulars when she noticed that Kanata had taken to her feet. “Well... She does have that powerful wolf with her in the stables. I suppose she can probably take care of herself...”

Beast Tamers were known as the weakest Profession, but with such a powerful magic beast following her, this girl must be a different story. The two furballs didn’t seem like they’d be of much use to anyone, but the giant wolf seemed like a dependable companion. It reminded her of the wolf accompanying the bronze statue of the First Saint.

“Y’know, come to think of it,” said one of the patrons, “that girl’s kinda like the First Saint, isn’t she...?”

“Now that you mention it, I can see it,” another agreed. “She looks a bit like the statue too. Hey, missy!” he hollered, getting Kanata’s attention. “Are you the reincarnation of the First Saint or something?”

“No!” Kanata replied. “I’m a Beast Tamer!”

Kanata stayed just long enough to ask the innkeeper for directions to the old castle, and then quickly ran out the door.

“Have a safe trip!” the innkeeper shouted after her. “Make sure to be back by checkout!”

“Wow, Fen-fen! You’re going *fast!*”

“Indeed!” Fenrir declared proudly as he dashed along the dark nighttime road, Kanata on his back. *“To the eyes of the Spirit Wolf, even the dead of night is as bright as midday!”*

He had fused his two bodies back together, becoming his complete self once more. With his muscles, Kanata’s heavy wagon was a light load. Kanata herself riding on his back was scarcely an encumbrance.

“Hmph.” Zag’giel glowered. *“If only we could use our magic, we could carry her through the sky, holding Kanata tight in our arms...”*

Kanata’s mood soured noticeably whenever Zag’giel returned to his original form, so the King of Demons had resigned himself to remaining in his furball form except for extraordinary circumstances.

“Unfortunately for you, Demon King, right now it is my back that Lady Kanata is riding on! You can stay where you are and keep her head warm! You make a good hot-water bottle, after all!”

“Gh! Kh...” Zag’giel sputtered, unable to do more than grind his teeth at Fenrir’s victorious glee.

Their master Kanata, for her part, was over the moon at the sensation of the two distinct fluffs rubbing against both sides of her body.

“Hee hee hee!” she giggled. “Fluff above and fluff below! This is the best!”

Thanks to their combined warmth, the cold night wind didn’t feel chilly at all.

Of course, the fastest way to move would have been neither Fenrir running along the ground nor Zag’giel flying through the skies—Kanata’s running speed far surpassed them both. But if they did that, Fenrir and Zag’giel wouldn’t have been able to carry on their little competition.

“Ahem!” Zag’giel cleared his throat. *“Well, let us put that cur to the side. Kanata, there is something we should discuss.”*

“Hm? What is it, Zaggy?” Kanata said, looking at the furball she had been petting.

“We overheard something while the inn patrons were discussing the old castle

that struck us as worthy of interest..."

Zag'giel explained that he had heard one of the inn patrons say that another group had departed for the castle that very morning, ahead of Kanata—knights in white armor who told anyone who asked that they had been sent here by the Holy Church. The Holy Church was the religious organization who had captured Fenrir, led by the false Saint Marianne. Marianne had eventually had a change of heart after Kanata saved her from her own Goddess's attempt to take her life. She'd subsequently changed the Holy Church to the Church of Fluffism, but this was only a recent development. It would take time for word to reach every branch of such an enormous organization. Not only that, but there were sure to be those who resisted such a sudden change of direction, even if it came directly from the top.

Before her conversion, Marianne's orders from the Goddess had been to sow seeds of evil throughout the land, then send the Church's own knights to resolve the problems they caused, thereby gathering faith from the masses. Zag'giel wondered if this might also be such a case.

"I see!" said Kanata. "Thanks, Zaggy! You're so smart!"

"Hah. That is the difference between us and a mongrel whose only talent is for running fast. It is our tactical acumen that earned us the title of Demon King!"

"Gh! Kh..." This time, it was Fenrir's turn to sputter and grind his teeth.

"We won't know what is happening until we see the castle for ourselves," said Zag'giel, "but proceed with caution. Discretion is the better part of valor, Kanata."

"Okey dokey artichokey!"

"Excellent! A spirited response!"

They rode like the wind until, in no time at all, they had reached their destination. They could see the old castle, which rumors said was haunted by a ghost. But what they saw made them stare in dumbfounded surprise.

"It's on fire!"

"It's aflame!"

"It's burning up!"

Indeed, the old castle was consumed by a great inferno. It must have been doused in something like oil, otherwise there was no way the stone walls of the castle would have caught fire to such a degree. A conflagration like that could have never happened on its own.

The burning castle looked like it might crumble any second.

"Did the knights from the Holy Church set this fire?" Fenrir wondered, lowering his head to let Kanata down off his back.

"Ah!" Kanata gasped quietly.

A second later, the building did what it had been threatening to do, and it collapsed with such an intensity that it looked like a bomb had gone off. A ball of fire came flying from the wreckage, trailing black smoke as it sailed up and then down in a long arc, and then thudded to the ground a short distance from the party.

"Lady Kanata! Stand back!"

"Hsss! What is this?!"

Fenrir stepped in front of Kanata, protecting her, as Zag'giel puffed out his tail menacingly from his perch atop Kanata's head.

The ball of fire filled the air with the sound of sizzling flesh as the flames gradually went out, revealing a woman's body, badly charred. Her once-beautiful blonde hair was frizzled and singed, and her luxuriant dress had been reduced to scant rags, barely covering her body. She was injured badly enough that it should have been impossible for her to be alive.

"Nghhh..."

And yet, alive she was. The woman roused herself, propping her arms on the ground and managing to lift her upper body. As she lifted her head, her eyes met Kanata's. She balked, reeling back with somewhat excessive shock.

"A-A human girl?!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here?!" Her throat had been burned as well, making her voice sound like an old woman's. "Run if you want to live!"

“There she is!” came a voice from behind her, as a squadron of knights in armor came clattering up from the direction of the castle. “We have you now, bloodsucking fiend!”

These must have been the men who’d set the castle on fire and attacked the woman.

“Tch!” The woman clicked her tongue in anger and stood up, turning to face the knights. “How dare you! Not only do you fools set fire to my castle, but you would ruin my beautiful skin! I hope you are prepared—the punishment for disturbing my slumber is steep indeed!”

She was speaking in a rather exaggerated manner. It almost seemed that she was trying to draw the knights’ attention to herself and away from Kanata.

“Silence, vampire! Why should we leave you to your rest when we could turn you to ash here and now?!”

The knights readied their spears, pointing them toward the woman.

“Wait!” said a knight. “There are others here!”

They had finally noticed Kanata—or rather, Fenrir.

“A-A magic beast! Some kind of wolf! And it’s huge! Take caution!”

“So, you had companions after all! But the Temple Knights will not yield so easily! You will die alongside her!” The knights were regarding not just the woman, but also Kanata’s party as the enemy.

“W-Wait!” the woman protested. “You have it wrong! These aren’t my companions!”

“I said, silence!” repeated the first knight.

It seemed like the knights were unusually worked up. Setting the fire must have gotten their blood pumping. It didn’t look like they were about to listen to anything Kanata had to say.

“No! This child has nothing to do with me!” said the woman, rushing to interpose herself between Kanata and the knights’ spears.

“*Lady Kanata!*” shouted Fenrir.

“Kanata!” echoed Zag’giel.

But Kanata, in the midst of all the excitement, was simply standing there pressing a finger to her cheek in thought. This woman was clearly not human. The fact that she was still alive with her body in such a state testified to as much, even if the knights hadn’t called her a vampire. Most people would be happy to classify the vampire as evil, and the knights coming to exterminate her as good. However, the woman had tried to get Kanata to flee even though she had never met her before in her life, and was even now doing her best to protect her from the knights’ spears.

And most importantly of all...

Kanata turned her gaze to the woman’s tragically burnt hair.

“That frizzy hair looks like it had a pretty good fluff score before it got burned...” she said to herself. “My sensors are telling me that her latent fluff score is off the charts! Maybe even a thousand!”

Even in situations like these, Kanata’s priorities remained unchanged.

The woman stood with her arms held wide, shielding Kanata from the spears. Kanata stepped up and hugged her from behind.

“I’ve decided to believe in your fluff!”



“I-In what?” The woman looked back at Kanata, startled.

Kanata just smiled back and cast a defensive spell. The knights found the blessed silver spears they’d brought to fight the vampire blocked by a magic wall.

“And one over there!” Kanata said, pointing her finger at the sky above the burning castle. A vortex of cold air began to form as dark clouds appeared right where she was pointing. “Rain rain, rainy rain!” Kanata sang, and rain began to fall in response to her words of power, though she kept it isolated to the space immediately around the castle. It came down like a waterfall, dousing the intense flames before they could spread to the nearby forest. Soon the inferno had been reduced to smoldering embers. If the rain kept falling, it wouldn’t be long before it went out entirely.

The knights were astonished. “Wh-What was that?!”

“A spell?! I’ve never seen magic on a scale like that!”

Not only had Kanata effortlessly thwarted their deadly spears, but she had conjured a torrential downpour with a single gesture of one of her hands—a great feat of magic. Fearful of her overwhelming power, the knights began to back away.

“Insolent fools, listen when people speak to you!” said Zag’giel, holding his head high with pride despite not having contributed a single thing to the defense. *“Try as you might, your spears will never reach Kanata!”*

“Drat!” said Fenrir. *“I wasn’t able to serve as Lady Kanata’s shield...”* His tail drooped with disappointment even though there really had been no need for him to rush to Kanata’s defense.

Kanata noticed that Fenrir and Zag’giel were getting sprayed with water from her rainstorm, carried their way by the wind. Their fur was getting quite wet.

“Oh no! You’ll catch a cold! We should move somewhere else!”

The sight of their fluff all drenched and waterlogged *did* stir Kanata’s heart a little, but she decided it was more important to get them somewhere dry. After all, the rain was still coming down hard.

“H-Halt, witch!” shouted a knight. “You won’t get away!”

“We won’t let you take the vampire!” added another. “You will die here, heretic!”

For them to continue challenging Kanata after her display of power, these knights must have had either a strong sense of duty or else too little intelligence to realize the difference in their power. Or perhaps they were being driven by something they feared even more than her. They moved to surround her, pointing their spears in her direction.

“No, thank you!” Kanata said, as a magic circle appeared at her feet and floated upward to envelop her and her companions.

“She’s making her move!” a knight bellowed. “Charge her!”

They rushed forward as one, but before they could come within range, Kanata and the others simply vanished from the spot.

† † †

“And they got away?!” A man wearing somewhat more stylish armor than the rest of the knights listened to his subordinates’ report with disbelief. He was a tall man who loomed over his subordinates, and he had removed his helmet, revealing flowing locks of blond hair and a handsome face.

The lower-ranking knights could do nothing but cower.

“A-A thousand apologies, Sir Theodoric!”

These knights were a special brigade within the Holy Church formed for the purpose of weeding out heretics. They were the elite of the elite, and they underwent training far beyond that of the knights in service to the kingdom. The Holy Church gave them license to act independently according to their own judgment, without the need for oracles from the Saint. Before today they had never failed in their mission, bringing a swift end to heretics of all stripes in the name of absolute justice.

Today’s operation had looked like it would be another success. The plan had been to set fire to the old castle, draw out the vampire, and surround her with knights armed with silver weapons. Then they would drive her back to where

the handsome Sir Theodoric was waiting, allowing him to deliver the finishing blow. It all went perfectly. They succeeded in engaging the ancient vampire—a heretic among heretics—in melee combat, and they dealt her a heavy wound. It did seem a little strange that the vampire didn't even once make an attempt to attack, but perhaps she simply understood that even a vampire had no recourse but to flee in the face of knights in heavy silver armor. All they needed to do was force her to Theodoric's position, where he would pierce her heart with his holy lance.

However, it was just then that someone got in the way—an unidentified girl dressed in a school uniform and accompanied by magic beasts. With an oddly laid-back attitude for the middle of a battle, she brought their plans to ruin, extinguishing the fire and escaping with the vampire. Worse, she had vanished using some kind of spell, leaving no trail for the knights to follow. They had no clue where the girl could possibly be.

“Well, no matter,” said Theodoric, showing a bit of leniency for his cowering knights. “Without her castle, the vampire is bound to become starved for blood and cause some sort of commotion. Send word to the local churches to keep an eye out for an incident. Tell them to overlook nothing, no matter how small!”

“Yes, sir!”

Theodoric tossed back his hair, wet from the rain. His men couldn't help staring for a moment in admiration of his beauty before saluting and rushing away to execute his orders without delay. None of them heard the words their handsome captain muttered to himself as they left.

“Yes, it's for the best. A dismal place like this would be terrible for a first meeting between lovers.” He gazed dreamily off into the distance, his cheeks flushing as images of the vampire ran through his mind. “Just you wait, my star-crossed love! Even if romance between a Temple Knight and a vampire is certain to end in doom, nonetheless I will make you mine!”

† † †

“B-Brr!” The vampire woman shivered, covering her shoulders with her hands. “What is this chill all of a sudden?!”

Kanata had escaped using her teleportation spell and taken the party back to

where she had parked the wagon. The ability to visualize a space was the essential component of teleportation—Kanata could only teleport somewhere she had not only been before but could clearly picture in her head. As she'd cast the spell, she held in her mind the image of the wagon parked in the village, bringing them back to where they had come from.

It was the middle of the night, but the village was full of people who had come outdoors to gawk at the plume of smoke rising from the old castle. It seemed the inferno had been visible as far away as the village. The flames had been extinguished by Kanata's rainstorm, though, and the smoke cloud looked as though it was going to shortly follow suit. The villagers were too busy discussing whether they should go to the old castle and see what was going on to notice Kanata and her party appearing out of nowhere behind the inn, or to wonder about the injured woman she had brought with her.

The woman, for her part, was astonished. The spell Kanata had used to escape required an extraordinary degree of magical technique. She had been feeling a strange premonition of doom for a while now, and suddenly it came over her like a chill breeze, making the hair on her skin stand on end.

"Are you cold?" Kanata asked, peering at the woman. She was still holding her from behind, like she had been when the woman protected her from the knights' spears.

"E-Eek!" Startled, the woman leapt out of Kanata's arms. Despite herself, she was blushing. "H-Hrm!" She cleared her throat in an attempt to cover up her awkward behavior, and sat down on the back of the wagon. Her body was in shambles, and the dress she had been wearing was reduced to tattered rags, but sitting above them with her legs crossed and her arms artfully arranged to emphasize her chest, she looked as if she could have been some kind of queen.

"Human child," she intoned. "Tremble with joy, for a great treasure—myself—has not been lost to the world this night! In my magnanimity, I will permit you to give thanks for my allowing you to save me."

She spoke like she had done Kanata a favor. It was just about the haughtiest thing she could have chosen to say.

"What an arrogant woman! The nerve!" Fenrir gawked, skipping right past

anger to arrive at disbelief.

Zag'giel sighed from atop Kanata's head. *"It is hard to take her completely seriously with a bleeding wound on her head..."*

The woman's injuries were severe. Her whole body—not just her head—was slick with fresh blood.

"I guess we'd better heal her before we dry her off, huh..." said Kanata.

A warm light appeared in her right hand as she prepared to cast a healing spell.

The woman, however, tumbled down from the wagon in shock at the sight of the light.

"S-S-S-S-Stop that at once! Healing magic is like poison to me!" It seemed like the knights had not been confused when they called this woman a vampire.

"I see," said Kanata. "Well then, how about this: I'll buy you a potion from the Royal Capital!"

"We doubt whether human potions would work on the likes of her..." said Zag'giel. *"Vampires are beings with a powerful undead nature. Ordinarily their wounds should heal in but a second's time, but it seems those knights were carrying some manner of special weapon."*

The woman's injuries from the fire were already healed, but the wounds she had suffered from the silver spears were even now oozing blood. She was doing her best to act like nothing was wrong, but it was obvious she was in incredible pain.

"I wonder whether it would help if I licked her!" Fenrir suggested.

Zag'giel balked, but Kanata beamed with delight at the idea. Of course, Kanata's approval had nothing to do with whatever healing properties Fenrir's saliva might have.

"Fen-fen's lickies!" she cheered. "Do me, Fen-fen! Do me!"

Getting licked by a fluffy critter was one of Kanata's dreams from her previous life. She wanted to get icky saliva all over her face and exclaim "ewww!" giggling like a schoolgirl.

“N-No! I would never subject my Lady Kanata to something so unseemly!”

“Awww...” Kanata pouted, slumping her shoulders in disappointment.

Zag’giel, meanwhile, was aghast at the Spirit Wolf’s wild instincts.

“This is why you are nothing more than a beast,” he said. *“As if you could treat such a deep wound by licking it.”* In fact, Fenrir’s saliva was a powerful antibiotic. It was far more effective at treating wounds than your average medicine, but it was doubtful whether it would have any effect on a vampire one way or the other. *“This woman is no longer among the living. Vampires maintain their undead nature by consuming the blood of the living. In other words, the only way to heal the wounds of a vampire is—”*

“Kee hee hee!” The vampire laughed. “That’s simple enough! Child, give me your blood. If you wish to heal my wounds, that is how you may be of assistance.” She lifted her upper lip, showing off the long fangs she used for drinking blood.

“Don’t be ridiculous, vampire!” spat Fenrir, leaping protectively between her and Kanata. *“Lady Kanata will never give her blood to the likes of you!”*

“We are the King of Demons, whose law is might,” declared Zag’giel, jumping up on Fenrir’s back and puffing out his tail. *“We will not censure those who subsist by taking the life of others. But Kanata, you will not touch!”*

“Hm,” the vampire observed. “Your minions are quite loyal to you, I see. Beast Tamers are common enough, but bonds like yours are truly rare.”

It was a strange thing to say, considering that in the modern age Beast Tamers hardly existed at all. The vampire must have been shut up in her castle for so long that she had failed to note the changes in the world with the passage of time. After all, the villagers had said that nobody went near the old castle. But then, whose blood had she been drinking to stay alive all these years?

“Kee hee hee!” she continued. “Are you afraid? Having your blood drained is a terrible way to die, after all! But I am merciful. Vanish from this place at once, and I will leave your blood alone! But if you stay here, I will drain you until not a single drop remains...”

Her words were tinged with clear murderous intent. It was as if she was trying

to frighten Kanata away. Zag'giel and Fenrir bristled even further, protective of their master.

"Mm-hm!" said Kanata. "I see!"

"What's wrong?" the vampire asked, grinning like a wicked devil. "Are your legs paralyzed with fear? Very well, then! You shall be my supper!"

"Go right ahead!" Kanata chirped, undoing the ribbon on her vest to expose her pale neck. She didn't seem even the least bit frightened.

"Kanata?!"

"Lady Kanata?!"

Zag'giel and Fenrir turned around in shock to face her, missing the shocked and upset expression on the vampire's face.

"A-Are you quite serious right now?" the vampire said. "How much do I have to threaten you before you run away?!"

Kanata just smiled and took a step forward.

"S-Stay back! I'm warning you! I'll suck your blood! I'll really do it! I'm a vampire, feared by all!" She averted her eyes from Kanata's neck. "If I suck your blood, you'll become one of my minions! You don't want to become a magic beast, do you?! So get away from me! I'm serious!"

"I said it's all right," said Kanata, sounding for all the world like a mother talking to an unruly child. "You can suck my blood."

"Why?!" The vampire didn't know what to make of Kanata's selfless offer. She seemed totally at a loss. "Why do you keep trusting me?! Aren't you afraid of getting your blood sucked?!"

"I'm not afraid," Kanata said, taking the vampire in her arms and guiding her desperately averted head toward her neck. "After all, I haven't seen you try to hurt anyone even once. You would have had no problem with those knights if you were fighting for real, would you?"

"Th-That's..." the vampire muttered.

"Hm. We had been wondering on that point as well," Zag'giel mused.

“You’re right,” agreed Fenrir. *“I didn’t notice at first because she was in such a bad state, but she seems like a pretty powerful vampire, doesn’t she...?”*

The vampire had made all kinds of verbal threats, but she had never actually launched a single attack, not just against Kanata, but against the knights who had been attacking her as well.

“You’re actually a very kind vampire, aren’t you?” said Kanata.

“N-No! I’m not!”

“We see!” said Zag’giel. *“She only plays the part of an evil fiend...”*

“That sounds lonely,” Fenrir added, *“not showing your true feelings to anyone...”*

The vampire’s face was turning bright red at the things the three were saying. “Y-You...!”

“I can tell you won’t actually suck me dry,” Kanata reassured her.

“Nhh...” Her bravado shattered, the vampire timidly brought her lips to Kanata’s neck with an air of resignation.

The truth was, she was at her limit. The damage done by the blessed holy spears was even worse than it looked from the outside—even now the wounds were burning at her flesh. She hadn’t drunk blood for a long time, and her body lacked the regenerative power necessary to dispel the blessing’s lingering effect. Her plan had been to drive Kanata away and face the sunrise alone, letting herself turn to ash.

“I-Is this...really okay?” she asked.

“I’ll be all right!” Kanata said. “I make sure to get plenty of iron in my diet!”

“Th-That isn’t exactly the issue here...”

“It’s okay, really! Go ahead!”

“I-I’ll just take a bit...” the vampire finally said. “A single mouthful should be enough. It won’t hurt or sting. The mark will go away in just a moment. And I won’t turn you into a vampire or a ghoul...”

“I know,” said Kanata, cutting off the vampire’s string of apologies. Kanata

cradled the vampire's head gently in her arms, pressing her lips up against her neck. The vampire felt oddly safe in Kanata's motherly embrace.

"You really aren't afraid of me...?"

"Not at all."

"I'm sorry..." the vampire sobbed, overcome by emotion. "I'm so sorry..."

"It's all right," Kanata repeated. "Now, go ahead."

At Kanata's urging, the vampire took a small bite at the girl's neck.

"Mm..."

Kanata's benevolence in saving even a vampire—an enemy of humanity—and offering her succor with her own body and blood seemed like nothing less than the deeds of a Saint. It was enough to move the vampire to tears, even as she sucked her blood.

Mwa ha ha! Kanata thought, unbeknownst to the vampire, as she idly petted her fluffy hair. *This is some good fluff!*

"Pwah..." the vampire sighed as she removed her mouth from Kanata's neck.

"Well?" asked Zag'giel.

"Lady Kanata has given you her blood!" said Fenrir. *"That had better cure you, or else...!"*

Kanata, Zag'giel, and Fenrir all watched the vampire with great interest.

"Nhhngh..." the vampire moaned, her head facing down. Zag'giel and Fenrir had a pang of worry that feeding had reawakened her vampiric instincts, but then she cast her head back and cried out, "That was sooooo goooooood!!!"

A vortex of magic energy, strong enough to cause a whirlwind, formed around her body, forcing Zag'giel to cling tight to Fenrir's back to avoid being blown away.

"N-Nwhooooa!" he cried. *"H-How much power does this vampire have?!"*

"W-With this power, she could be a match for you or me!" exclaimed Fenrir.

The vampire laughed at the center of the storm. "Kee hee hee hee hee! That

full-bodied aroma! That flavor! Even fine wine a century old would never compare to this! The power! The power is flowing into me!” She flexed her arms, relishing the feeling of strength.

Zag’giel and Fenrir, Kanata’s two faithful servants, watched on in fear of her heightening power as Kanata smiled brightly.

But that scene only lasted for a moment. Just as the vampire had begun to celebrate, magic energy began to burst out of her body here and there like holes in a balloon. With a loud hissing sound, her body began to shrink before their eyes until all that was left of her was her tattered dress.

“Did she...perish?” Zag’giel said, jumping down off Fenrir’s back and prodding at the dress with his paw.

“What a way to die...” Fenrir said, sniffing at the spot.

For some reason, drinking Kanata’s blood had caused the vampire to vanish!

Or so they thought.

“I am not dead!” came the vampire’s voice. The dress swelled up, and something came bursting out from inside.

“Whoa?!” Zag’giel started, falling back. Fenrir caught him in his forepaws like a ball.

“What’s that?!” Fenrir asked.

They looked up to see something flying in the air.

“I have been reborn most gloriously!” the vampire declared, spreading her wings.

Or rather, the creature that was once a vampire.

Her body had become a ball covered in reddish-pink fur, with only her tiny wings and her pointy ears breaking her round silhouette. She looked somewhat like a bat, although her form was much more spherical. It was the birth of a third fluffball.

“W-Wait!” the former vampire said, clearly confused. *“What’s this?! Where is my beautiful skin?! My legs?! Why is my entire body covered in fuuuuurrrrrrrrr?!”*

She fluttered slowly to the ground, her tiny wings unable to keep her airborne any longer.

“Oh my *goooosh!*” Kanata gushed, her eyes going heart-shaped as she caught the bat creature. “C-C-C-C-Cuuuuuuute!!!”

“*Wh-What did you do to me?!*” the pink furball gasped, quivering in fear as Kanata regarded her like a hungry predator.

“New fluff-fluff, acquired!” Kanata cheered.

Chapter 3: Inescapable Pursuit? No! We'll Just Visit Home!

The vortex of magical energy released when Kanata's blood revived the vampire woman was big enough that some of the villagers must have taken note. Kanata, Fenrir, and Zag'giel knew that the vampire was not some evil magic beast here to destroy the village, but Zag'giel wanted to avoid any unnecessary commotion, so under his advice, Kanata took the others back to the inn. The innkeeper had been waiting for them to come back, and was overjoyed to see Kanata back safe. Kanata offered to pay for the additional magic beast she had brought back with her, but the innkeeper refused.

"Never mind that, just get some rest," she said, urging Kanata and her party on to their room. Privately, however, she was a bit surprised to see the pink furball accompanying her. It didn't look anything like the ghost or vampire that rumors said had occupied the old castle.

The former vampire and present furball hopped out of Kanata's hands the moment they reached the room. She flew around the room once, flapping with her tiny little wings, before landing on the headboard of the bed.

"Hahhh..." she sighed. *"Indoors at last. I feel much calmer already."*

Kanata, for her part, found herself completely smitten by the tiny little movements the bat critter was making with her claws as she settled down on her perch. But before she could fulfill her heart's desire and leap on the pink fluff to rub it against her cheeks, there was an important matter that needed to be settled.

"How about we introduce ourselves, then?" Kanata proposed as she finished using her magic to dry off the furballs.

"E-Excuse me?! Y-You want me to introduce myself?!" The furry little vampire seemed strangely taken aback by the suggestion.

"And what is so surprising about self-introductions?" Zag'giel snapped.

“Such disrespect!” agreed Fenrir. *“Lady Kanata saved your life! The least you can do is tell us your name.”*

Zag’giel and Fenrir still hadn’t let down their guard toward the vampire. They were still concerned for Kanata’s safety.

“Sh-Sh-Shut up!” the newcomer shot back. *“Shut up shut up shut up! I’ll have you know it’s been a thousand years since I’ve talked to anyone! Give me a break!”*

Neither Zag’giel nor Fenrir were about to make fun of someone for having been alone for a thousand years. After all, both of them had spent about that long on their own themselves. If anything, the pair felt a pang of sympathy for this new lonesome ball of fluff who had shown up in their lives.

“Then you are a vampire over a millennium in age...” Zag’giel mused. *“We suppose that accounts for your power.”*

“Do you know something about vampires, Demon King?” asked Fenrir.

“Like dragons, a vampire grows stronger the longer they live,” Zag’giel explained. *“In the case of dragons it is a simple matter of size, but vampires gain in strength the more they bathe in the light of the moon.”*

“I see!” said Kanata, petting him adoringly on the head. *“You’re always so full of useful facts, Zaggy!”*

“Hah,” Zag’giel laughed proudly. *“It is only to be expected.”*

Kanata was kind enough not to tell Zag’giel that she already knew that bit of information. She had read a near-identical explanation in her favorite book, *The Bestiary of Albert Molmo, Tamer of Legends (Complete Edition)*.

“E...liza...vett...” the former vampire muttered under her breath.

“Huh?” asked Fenrir, looking up from his jealous sulk due to Zag’giel being praised. *“Did the pink furball say something?”*

“M-My name!” she yelled, hopping up and down on the headboard. *“I am the Corpse Princess Elizavett! I am not a pink furball!”*

She was a pink furball no matter how you looked at it, but at least she had finally told them her name—the Corpse Princess Elizavett. If she was called a

princess, it stood to reason that she must come from some sort of noble stock among vampires.

"I have told you my name! Now tell me yours! Surely you must have names," she continued, doing her best to hide her embarrassment behind a mask of indignation.

"We are the rightful ruler of the Dark Continent, the Demon King Zag'giel!" Zag'giel declared with a supremely smug grin on his face.

"I am the Spirit Wolf Fenrir, who accompanied the Saint on her quest to save the world!" announced Fenrir, equally self-assured.

Elizavett balked in surprise. *"D-Did I hear you right?! The Demon King and the Spirit Wolf?! That's—"*

"Bwa ha ha!" Zag'giel laughed. *"You seem surprised, Elizavett!"*

"Ah ha ha!" laughed Fenrir. *"Perhaps she's just in awe of our majesty!"*

"That's ridiculous!" Elizavett finished. *"There's no way a pair of black and white furballs like you would be beings of such import! You must be lying! Pitiful furballs!"*

"You're the furball here!!!" shouted Zag'giel and Fenrir in unison.

The three furballs leapt at each other in a rage, collided, and fell together to the ground as a single ball of fur, yipping and mewling and screeching as they fought.

"Haah... Haah..." Kanata's breath turned heavy. She had tried to hold herself back, but the sight of the three of them rolling around on the floor was quickly pushing her past her limit. "I-I can't..." she said. "Y-You're just too cuuuute!" A dark shadow fell over her face. Only her eyes were visible, shining with a dim light as she advanced toward the three furballs, making grabby motions with both hands. "Y-You're all... You're all so naughty..." she said.

"No!" exclaimed Zag'giel. *"We went too far!"*

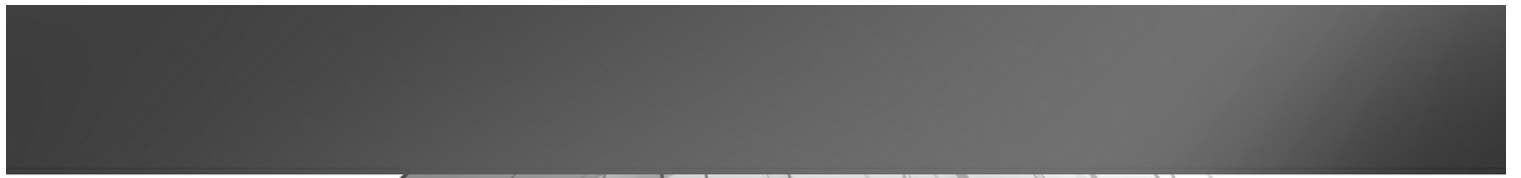
"L-Lady Kanata!" pleaded Fenrir. *"Please! Calm yourself!"*

"Huh...?" Elizavett said. She had no idea why the other two suddenly seemed so panicked. *"What's happening? What's going on?"*

Kanata scooped all three furballs into her arms at once.

“You’re so naughty for tempting me with those cuuuute boooodies of yours!!!” she wailed.

And so, once again, it was time for Kanata’s familiar welcome. Her suction power was as impressive as always, and the sound of her practically inhaling the fluff echoed throughout the sleepy village.



"You'd best take responsibility for this!" Elizavett said as she finally roused her limp body. Her fur coat was slick all over with Kanata's drool.

"Responsibility?" Kanata asked, innocently cocking her head.

"Responsibility for...for touching me so intensely! Why are you acting so puzzled?! I won't allow you to have your way with me for just the one evening after trapping me in this unmarriageable body! Take responsibility!" Kanata had slurped and sniffed every last inch of Elizavett's body, leaving the vampire clearly humiliated. It was hard to tell because of her pink fur, but it seemed that she was blushing. Her eyes were certainly misty with confused emotion. *"I absolutely, absolutely will not let you get away! I'll chase you to the ends of the earth!"*

"So does that mean...that you wanna be my companion?!" Kanata asked.

"Your...companion?"

"Yes, my companion!"

"Ah, hm..." Elizavett lowered her head in slight disappointment. *"Companions, then, not lovers... Oh well. I suppose that will do for starting out."* She looked up, her mind apparently settled. *"Very well. In that case, I look forward to our partnership. How should I address you...? Kanata, was it?"*

Kanata had forgotten that they were in the middle of self-introductions before the furballs got into their fight. "That's right! My name's Kanata! It's nice to meet you, Elizabat!" Kanata hugged the pink furball tight, beaming happily.

"The pleasure is— Wait, what did you call me? Elizabat?!"

"That's right!" said Kanata. "Elizabat! Any Beast Tamer worth their salt knows you gotta give nicknames to your companions! It's a rule!"

"I...I see," said Elizavett. *"I had no idea that such a rule existed..."* Of course, that rule was entirely an invention of Kanata's. But since the only people strange enough to become Beast Tamers in the modern age seemed to be Albert Molmo and Kanata herself, and since both of them shared the same policy of giving nicknames to their magic beasts, it might as well be the rule.

“Well, I suppose if it is what you wish to call me, Mistress, then I have no objections.”

“Mistress?” Kanata echoed.

“If you’re going to call me what you like, then I’ll do the same for you! Besides, you’re a girl, so I can’t exactly call you ‘husband.’”

“Hm?” Kanata asked. “I’m not sure I get it, but it’s all good with me!” She felt like there must be some sort of misunderstanding, but Kanata didn’t especially see the need to worry about such things. The fluff was more important. She hugged Elizavett tight, the fanfare that sounded in her head whenever she got a new companion playing merrily.

“By the way...” Elizavett ventured, looking over her tiny round body with its pink fur and little wings. There was no trace at all of the gorgeous blonde-haired, red-eyed vampire she had been before. *“What happened to my body, anyway? My wounds are healed, and I’m in much better condition than I was before, but I can’t use my magic at all. And I can’t turn into any of my old forms—not human, not mist, not even a cloud of bats...”*

“Perhaps it is the result of drinking Kanata’s blood?” Zag’giel said, pulling himself up on faltering legs. Kanata had given him the same treatment as Elizavett, and until now he had been lying limp and drained in the aftermath. *“Kanata’s blood is overflowing with magic power. The moment you tasted it, the wounds on your body disappeared instantaneously.”*

The problem, however, was what had happened next...

“Lady Kanata’s divine presence is great enough that I, the Spirit Wolf, am certain that she is none other than the Saint I accompanied,” volunteered Fenrir, finally recovering enough from Kanata’s slobbery ordeal to join the conversation. *“As a vampire, Corpse Princess, your unnatural life comes from the curse of the moon. It doesn’t seem strange that you might suffer some kind of harm from drinking such holy blood.”*

Elizavett was starting to wonder whether she was going to be stuck in this form for the rest of her life. As a noble vampire princess, the prospect of living as such a hideous ball of fur filled her with dread.

"I see..." she said. "So it is your fault I'm in this form after all, Mistress. You had better take responsibility for that as well, you know!"

"Of course, of course!" Kanata sang cheerfully, without much of a sense of gravity about the whole incident at all. "I'll take full responsibility!"

"Hmm... You'll look after me for as long as you live?" Elizavett pressed. "Even though I will be of no use to you whatsoever in this form?"

"Yeah!" Kanata chirped.

"A good response, and no hesitation. You truly are the woman I chose as Mistress." Elizavett didn't seem terribly surprised by Kanata's response. Kanata, after all, was someone who had offered a suspicious and frightful vampire her own blood to save the vampire's life. Kanata was surely not the type to abandon her once she lost her beauty and vampiric might.

"A promise to take care of me for her whole life," Elizavett said, smiling to herself. "That's as good as a marriage proposal, is it not?"

"It absolutely is not, you imbecile!" said Zag'giel. "Kanata may have acknowledged you as a companion, but we have not!"

"I will never allow you to be Lady Kanata's wife!" Fenrir protested. "In the first place, you're another female!"

Elizavett sighed in exasperation at the pair's continuing outbursts. "Love knows no species and no gender. You have a narrow mind and a small heart. This is precisely why I can't stand men!"

"Bold words, newcomer!" said Zag'giel, the fur on his back sticking up like an angry cat.

"You had better rethink that attitude of yours!" Fenrir growled, showing his teeth.

"Kee hee hee!" laughed Elizavett. "You furballs think you can stand in the way of my marriage? I'll teach you to know your place!"

"That's our line!" Zag'giel and Fenrir leapt at the offending furball, but Elizavett took to the air, easily dancing out of their reach.

"Kee hee hee! You'll never catch me! Never! How do you expect to reach me

with such short legs, when I can fly in the air? Hmmm?!"

"No!" exclaimed Zag'giel.

"Coward! Get down here!" barked Fenrir.

"Kee hee! Kee hee hee hee hee! I'm too high up to hear you! You'll have to fly up here if you want to talk to me!"

Elizavett fluttered around the room shouting provocations as the two below did the best little hops they could on their stubby legs in a frantic effort to knock her out of the air. Needless to say, however, their jump strength was completely lacking. They had no chance of reaching Elizavett, except for one thing the vampire had overlooked—her own body was just as weak as theirs. Her tiny wings allowed her to fly, but with her stamina she couldn't keep it up for long. Soon, an exhausted pink furball was drifting to the ground like a deflated balloon.

Elizavett gasped for air. *"Hah... Hahh... Th-This body... It's just far too weak..."*

As she lay on the floor, the other two furballs leered down at her imperiously.

"Bwa ha ha!" Zag'giel laughed mockingly. *"We'll never catch you, hmm?"*

"I hope you're ready, newcomer!" said Fenrir. *"I won't hold back on your education, female or not!"*

"Noooo!" Elizavett cried as the two prepared to pounce—but then, suddenly, Zag'giel noticed a presence behind him. He stopped.

"W-Wait!" Zag'giel cautioned Fenrir. *"Let us end this here for tonight. It has already gotten late."*

"What's the matter, Demon King?" asked the wolf. *"Are you scared of her?"*

"You fool!" Zag'giel snapped. *"Look behind you!"*

Fenrir turned around to see...

"C-Can we go for another round of fluffy-snuffy? Can we? Please?" Kanata's eyes were shining bright. Her fingertips were already beginning to twitch with desire.

"N-No, Lady Kanata!" Fenrir exclaimed, desperately searching for an excuse.

“W-We’ll cause trouble for the other guests if we make too much of a commotion, you know! We should end it here and get to sleep before there’s some sort of trouble in the morning...”

“Aww,” Kanata pouted. “No round two...?”

The three furballs shook their heads vigorously.

The four got into bed. Kanata, dressed in her nightclothes, reached out to turn off the room’s lantern. “Okay, I’m turning off the lights!” she announced.

“Very well. Good night, Kanata,” said Zag’giel.

“Rest well, Lady Kanata,” said Fenrir.

“I’m a princess of the night, myself...” said Elizavett. *“But I suppose I’ll be keeping the same hours as my Mistress from now on.”*

Kanata lay in the middle of the bed with Zag’giel and Fenrir on both sides of her pillow. Elizavett settled down on top of Kanata’s stomach and closed her eyes to sleep. And, surrounded by her three adorable fluff-fluffs, Kanata settled into the best sleep of her life so far.

† † †

I have been alone for a very long time.

For nearly as long as I can remember, I have abided in solitude within that crumbling ancient castle, only waiting for the day that the light of the sun would reach me and end my life. And yet, there was a time when it was not so. Before the castle fell to ruin, I lived a luxurious life surrounded by loyal ghouls who would attend to my every need. I even had a friend—a human girl, barely five years of age.

I had ventured outside the castle one evening, hoping to divert myself from my boredom with a moonlight stroll, when I happened upon, of all things, a human child. I was incensed. What were her parents thinking, letting a small girl wander around at night? But when I spoke to the girl, she told me that both of her parents were no longer among the living. Her relatives, who had taken her in after her parents’ death, weren’t feeding her enough. They treated her with cold indifference and none of the kindness a parent would have for their

daughter. The one silver lining, perhaps, was that they were too indifferent to actually hit the girl. Instead, they acted as if she didn't exist at all.

Nonetheless, the girl seemed to be growing up splendidly. She had gone out into the forest to pick wild herbs in order to be of some help to her relatives, but being a young child, she was not very good at finding them. Instead, she had become lost on the forest roads and ended up traveling all the way to the territory around my castle.

My castle was known well enough to the humans at the time, but few would dare to draw close. After all, it was common knowledge that the castle was the domain of a fearsome vampire. The only human guests I had were adventurers seeking to defeat me and make a name for themselves. They all fell to me, of course. In the end I would feed on their blood and add them to the ranks of my ghouls. Back then, I thought of humans as nothing more than a source of sustenance. I was not so uncouth as to feed indiscriminately, of course, but I saw no reason to keep from devouring anyone who dared trespass in my castle. Increasing my number of servants was just an added bonus—two birds with one stone, as it were.

But somehow, I couldn't bring myself to feed on this girl's blood. I felt pity for her, living with relatives who wouldn't even spare her a glance. And her eagerness to be useful to them regardless of their indifference struck my heart. She was different from me in every way, from environment to age to species, and yet I felt a strange sense of kinship with the girl. Instead of drinking her blood, I offered her a pact of fellowship.

She looked up with mud and tears caked to her face, clearly not understanding. "A pact of fellowship," perhaps, was difficult for a girl of five to understand.

So I corrected myself, and asked whether she would like to be friends.

Before that moment, I had never asked anyone to be my friend. Or rather, I had never succeeded in making a friend before in my life. Everyone in the castle was under my control—I had never even seen one of my fellow vampires.

She looked up at me with big eyes, and gradually her expression of confusion broke into a smile so bright she was practically glowing. I felt something warm

spreading inside my chest—something I couldn't understand. She took my offered hand, and it struck me that if I put my strength into the grip I could easily crush her. It troubled me the entire time I was holding her soft hand in mine.

In the end, I was just lonely. Perhaps that was the source of the strange kinship I felt with the girl—we were both alone. The two of us found succor in each other, licking the wounds of our mutual loneliness. At the time, it felt like the best idea I'd ever had. And from that day forward, the girl and I were friends.

We agreed to play together on cloudy days or nights when the moon was bright. The only games a five-year-old child can conceive of are on the level of "house" or "hide-and-go-seek," but I had fun regardless. Even such artless diversions were great fun with her. I remember smiling from my heart, and wondering if I had ever felt this way before in my life. Even today, the time I spent with that girl remains my priceless treasure.

Our relationship carried on for some time, and yet her relatives seemed to take no note of the girl's habit of sneaking out after dark. Or perhaps, rather than not noticing, they simply didn't care. They didn't seem any more concerned for how slender the girl was becoming on the paltry diet they were feeding her, after all. Perhaps they would simply consider it a boon if she were to perish in some roadside ditch.

I made up my mind one day to have my ghouls prepare her a banquet whenever she came to visit. Human food was a mere luxury item for one such as me, but that also meant I was very particular about the quality and flavor of the food I stocked. It was a luxury, after all. I had hardly expected that I would be using the ingredients I acquired for my own personal pleasure in such a way, of course, but it served just the same. I would set the table with dishes of all varieties. They were feasts beyond anything the young girl had seen before in her life.

She ate a great deal herself, but the girl would always ask for food to take back to her relatives as well—the same relatives who had not been giving her enough to eat. I was moved by her kindness, but if she returned home with luxuriant dishes, her relatives would surely find it suspicious. Instead, I sent my

ghouls to gather herbs and nuts from the forest for the girl to take back with her to the village. Her relatives, of course, snatched them up without a single word of thanks.

It pained me to see the sad smile on the girl's face when she spoke of her family. I wanted so badly to ask her to forget her coldhearted relatives and come live with me in my castle, but I knew full well that my wish could never come true. She and I were beings of different worlds. The only time we could even meet was when the sun had hidden its face.

I understood that in my head, at least. But in a deeper sense, I didn't understand it at all. I became careless.

One day a group of visitors came to the castle, the first other than the girl in a long while. They were a party of adventurers. Really, they were little more than petty thieves. Their faces were smeared with filth—it seemed they hadn't been washing their bodies—and they wore perverted, leering smiles. They were frightened of me, to be sure, but it was clear that they saw me and my castle alike as nothing more than a bounty to be plundered.

The ghouls would have been more than enough to handle a group of baseborn scum like them, but as it happened, I was famished for blood. I hadn't fed in a matter of years. My meals with the girl had filled my heart, but they had done nothing to slake my hunger.

The adventurers certainly didn't seem like upstanding humans. I told myself I needed to exterminate them before they became a menace to the village where the girl lived. Of course, all I really wanted was to drink them dry and fill myself up on their blood.

A man from the adventuring party put his hands on my shoulders, trying to push me to the ground. Instead I bit him on the neck and began to drink. It was sickly, vile, disgusting blood, but hunger truly is the greatest of all spices. The warmth of blood filling my stomach sent me into the throes of ecstasy. The adventurers laughed, mistaking my reaction for something erotic, but their expressions changed quickly when they saw their companion shrivel up before their eyes. It was as if they only then remembered that they had come here to assault a vampire's castle.

They wielded their weapons for all they were worth, but they had nothing that would prevail against a true vampire princess. I simply drained their blood, starting with whomever I could get my hands on. I was more energized than I had been in years, gleefully and loudly gulping down their life fluids. And when the last adventurer had been drained dry, I heard the sound of a branch snapping in the forest.

I raised my head, wondering if another adventurer had come to be my meal, but standing there was none other than the girl I had befriended. Her face was pale with horror. I knew it was no trick of the light, for her eyes were overflowing with tears as well. It was an expression of betrayal—of despair.

How frightful it must have been for her, to see my face dripping with red blood, redder even than my crimson lips. Even as I sucked some remains of blood through my long fangs, I searched my mind for some excuse or explanation I could give the girl. But it was no use. There was nothing I could say.

She and I were beings of different worlds. I thought I understood that, but in truth I hadn't grasped it at all. The wretches whose blood I was drinking before her eyes were her fellow humans, and I was a monster, a scourge upon her kind. No matter what I might say to explain the situation, nothing could change the fact of what I had done.

How could I have been so utterly, utterly ignorant?

I understood at that moment that whatever friendship I'd had with that girl was gone. Every second I beheld that fearful face of hers, I felt a new wound rending my heart. I yelled at the trembling girl, telling her to never come to my castle again.

One after another, the adventurers rose again as ghouls—puppets under my control, with no will of their own. I should have never left the company of my puppets, I thought. That would have been suitable for one such as me. For a monster who devours humans to befriend those same creatures was the height of foolishness. I turned my back to the girl and returned to my abode, vowing never again to step foot outside.

The girl came back to my castle time and time and time again, but never did I

go to meet her. I did not wish to see her look at me again with that fear in her eyes. If only I had mustered my courage and apologized to her instead, perhaps I could have mended our relationship, as strange as it was. Alas, I would not go out from my castle. I was afraid. Whenever I closed my eyes I would see the look she had given me that night, when I had made that bright, kind girl tense up with terror.

So I hid in my castle, and in time the girl ceased to visit. I thought she must have finally lost whatever lingering affection she had for me. It came as both a sadness and a relief at once. And yet, telling myself I merely worried for her well-being, I ordered my ghouls to investigate whether those relatives of hers were feeding her properly.

The girl, they told me, was no longer at her relatives' house. It seemed that she had been discovered to possess some mysterious power. I do not know what miracle the girl performed, but it was enough to earn her the attention of some church or other. The clergy had taken her into their care. As far as her relatives were concerned, it was a cause of great celebration. They were rid of their nuisance and came out of the affair with a good sum of money. Nonetheless, it was to the girl's benefit as well to be away from that house. At the very least, the church was bound to feed her properly.

She was in better hands now than a man-eating fiend and her castle full of ghouls. This was a good thing. Or so I told myself.

Thereafter, the only visitors I had to entertain were humans who came to destroy me. I no longer wished to leave my room, so I left them to my ghouls. I ordered them to drive intruders off without eating them or taking their lives, and I locked myself away. The humans, however, must have taken this as a sign of weakness, for the attacks I faced only increased. The most dangerous ones wore heavy armor and called themselves Temple Knights. Thanks to their efforts, my ghouls declined precipitously in number.

And then, one day, the attacks simply stopped. I do not know why. Perhaps I had merely been forgotten. In truth, I did not care. After all, I no longer set foot outside my room in the old castle. I passed the time in silence, and years turned into decades, and then centuries. The girl's human life span would have been long since exhausted. I wished time and time again that I could see her once

more and finally apologize. But of course, she never came. I remained a coward until the very end.

I should have left my castle long ago, in search of the girl. I had been afraid, yes, but my heart longed to see her again. She could call me a monster if she wished. I just wanted so badly to apologize. I wished to tell her I was fond of her, even if she was a human and I was a vampire. A wish that could never be granted.

Every night I wept tears of bitter regret, not knowing why I continued to live. I fell asleep turning over my memories in my mind, and woke up to visions of the girl's terrified face.

How long did I spend repeating that cycle, night after night? I could not say.

The ghouls, who did not have a vampire's long life, turned to dust and vanished, and without anyone to look after it, the castle began to crumble from neglect. I could have created new ghouls, of course, but I feared drinking human blood ever again. Whenever I felt my cravings for blood, I saw that face in my mind. I had grown quite weak. When my castle finally crumbled to ruin, I would simply pass away in the warm rays of the sun. The thought didn't bother me at all. If anything, I welcomed it.

And then, one night, my castle was burned down. As decrepit as it was, it was nonetheless a building of stone. For flames to burn so hot, someone must have soaked the area thoroughly with oil beforehand. It was astonishing that anyone should put so much thought into an attempt to slay me. It had been a long, long time since I had faced an attack as serious as this.

Men in silver armor kicked down my door brandishing spears, but I did not have the heart to try to elude them. The blessed silver burned like hot brands as their spear tips pierced my flesh, and as my body caught flame, I fled. My body leapt from the window without any input from my mind. It seemed my body was determined to live, even as my heart had given up on life.

What stirred my heart to beat once more, however, was what I saw when I plummeted from the sky. It was a girl, black of hair and black of eye. She bore only a passing resemblance to the girl I had known before, and yet, for a fleeting second, I thought she had returned to me.

I could hear the footsteps of the knights catching up to me. I worried they might take the girl for one of my companions. I tried to provoke her to flee, but my thoughts were hazy and muddled. And instead of taking my advice and saving her own life, she protected me. She saved me from the knights and offered me her blood freely to save me from the brink of death. She held me gently in her arms and comforted me.

I know that this girl is not the same girl as before. And yet, when she told me that I did not frighten her, it felt as though I had been granted salvation. She listened to my apologies. She made my ancient regret feel like a small, insignificant thing.

And so, I made up my mind. I would stay by this girl's side. I would stop hiding within myself, only spending my life lamenting the past.

This time, I would not make the same mistake.

† † †

"And that...is the tale of my sin," Elizavett said, bringing her soliloquy to a close.

"Sniff... Sob!" Fenrir cried, tears welling up in his eyes as he listened to the tale. He himself had left on a journey without a clear destination, searching for his Saint. Part of him must have sympathized with Elizavett's loss.

"We see..." said Zag'giel, nodding mysteriously to himself. *"We brought order to the Dark Continent and put an end to the invasions of the land where humans live, and yet so great is the barrier between our peoples that we never considered that we might intermingle with humanity."*

"I live by sucking human blood," Elizavett muttered to herself. *"If it had not been for that girl, I would most likely still think of humans as nothing more than sustenance. I am a wicked abomination who sows chaos among humankind. And yet..."* She lifted her head. *"'Tis my wish to stay by my Mistress's side. That is why I wanted you to know my history. Now...you have heard my story. Will you still have me?"*

Kanata must not have been thinking things through when she made her bold declaration the night before, Elizavett thought. After sleeping off the

excitement of the night's events, by the sober light of day, she was bound to realize her foolishness. Kanata acted as if she had no regard for the opinion of others, but surely she would be afraid to keep the company of one such as Elizavett. Elizavett looked up at Kanata with big, worried eyes.

"Of course!" said Kanata, hugging Elizavett tight in her arms. "It doesn't bother me at all! You're my precious companion, Elizabat. I'm never letting you go! Kissy kissy smooch smooch smooch!"

Elizavett wept happy tears as Kanata planted kiss after kiss on her fluffy head.

"M-Mistress...!" she wailed.

"Besides," Kanata went on, "I bet you anything that girl you liked wanted to see you again too."

"Mayhap..." Elizavett conceded, but she still felt tense with anxiety. What if she only ever remembered her as a frightening monster? She couldn't stomach the thought.

"Sniffle..." Fenrir wiped the tears from his eyes. *"By the by,"* he asked, *"how long ago did this tale of yours happen?"*

"H-Hm..." Elizavett faltered. *"What matters it to you?"*

"Never mind that, just answer the question. How long ago was it?"

"I was not attending to the passage of time, if you will recall. Mayhap it was a thousand years?"

"I knew it..." Fenrir said.

"What is this, now?" Elizavett asked him. *"Why are you acting like you've understood something?"*

"Something Her Holiness the Saint told me shortly before she passed away," Fenrir said.

"The Saint?" Elizavett cocked her head. *"And what does that woman have to do with the likes of me?"*

"Her Holiness told me she once had a precious friend who helped her when she was a young girl. She said they became close despite being different species, but

that they were separated because of some misunderstanding. Afterward she became too busy with her duties to see her friend again. Her Holiness told me that she had always wanted to see her again, and apologize properly, but after she had saved the world time and time again and become the head of the Holy Church, she no longer had the freedom to walk around on her own."

Fenrir's story certainly did have some commonalities with Elizavett's tale of woe.

"Hold a moment..." Elizavett said. *"Do you mean to say...?"*

"Her Holiness removed her friend's name from the list of threats in need of extermination so that at the very least she could spend her life in peace, without having to worry about anyone coming for her head," Fenrir explained.

With everything he had said, it seemed evident that the Saint of Fenrir's acquaintance and the girl Elizavett had known were one and the same.

"I...see," Elizavett said. *"Then she wanted to see me again after all, that whole time. What a fine lady she grew up to become. And to think it was her doing that the attacks on my castle came to an end... Kee hee hee..."* she laughed mirthlessly. *"What a fool I was. And now it is far too late."*

"On the contrary," said Fenrir, *"it isn't too late at all! You've made it just in time."*

"And what do you mean by that?" Elizavett asked.

Fenrir glanced furtively in Kanata's direction. Kanata herself denied it, but Fenrir was certain that she was none other than a reincarnation of his Saint. One sniff of the unique scent of her soul was all it took for him to be sure. She had been granted a new life, with no memories of her previous existence, but it was her nonetheless—the Saint Fenrir had followed, as well as the girl Elizavett had once known. Elizavett could still apologize to her, and she would certainly be forgiven.

"Hmm..." Fenrir said, hesitating. *"Well, why don't I tell you later?"*

"Excuse me? You're going to clam up after making that whole show of knowing something? Useless furball!" Elizavett snapped.

"Excuse you!" said Fenrir. *"The only thing you're good for is flapping around in the air!"*

"At the very least I can fly, unlike you!"

"Making a ruckus at the crack of dawn, we see..." Zag'giel stared with bored indifference as Elizavett took flight and Fenrir once again began bouncing up to try and catch her.

Kanata, for her part, was simply ecstatic to be surrounded by so many balls of fluff. As far as she was concerned, her mission to acquire a new party member had been a great success.

† † †

"So, Mistress," Elizavett ventured, *"you are journeying in search of this 'fluff'?"*

"That's right!" Kanata chirped. *"I'm on a quest to make friends with fluffy creatures the world over!"*

It was a few hours since they had left the village, and the sun had nearly reached the very top of the sky. The wagon rolled along at a leisurely pace, pulled by Fenrir's main body. Zag'giel was sitting atop Kanata's head, while the smaller Fenrir fragment rested on her lap. Elizavett, meanwhile, sat on her right shoulder, where Kanata could easily nuzzle her cheek against her.

"Then...what do you mean by fluff?" Elizavett asked.

"Fluff is fluff!" Kanata answered cheerfully. *"Zaggy and Fen-fen and you each have lots and lots of it!"*

"Hmm..." Elizavett pondered. *"Then fluff is something we three have in common? I must admit, I am rather at a loss..."*

"Do not tell us you do not know, newcomer!" taunted Zag'giel.

"Try thinking for yourself for a change, newcomer!" agreed Fenrir. Kanata's two established pets were doing their best to assert some kind of dominance.

"Fluff..." bellowed Zag'giel, striking a pose.

"...is power!" Fenrir finished, posing as well.

“Power?” Elizavett asked. “Fluff is power, then?”

“That’s right!” said Kanata. “Fluff is the greatest and strongest power of all! And you three have some amazing fluff!”

“I can’t help but think you mean something different from these two when you speak of power, Mistress...” Elizavett pondered. Something about this situation struck her as decidedly off. *“Neither of them have any power at all! They’re even weaker than a pair of slimes!”*

“Hah...” said Zag’giel. *“You truly understand nothing.”*

“We’ll show you our true forms!” said Fenrir.

Zag’giel hopped down from Kanata’s head, undoing his transformation in midair, while Fenrir jumped on the back of his main body, fusing the two parts’ consciousness and power.

“Nghwah?!” Elizavett exclaimed in shock. *“What is this power?! You’re both equal to the height of my strength! Mayhap even greater!”*

“Bwa ha ha!” laughed Zag’giel.

“Ah ha ha!” laughed Fenrir.

But as fun as it had been to show up Elizavett, the return to their height of power was always going to be short lived.

“K-Kanata, wait!” Zag’giel pleaded. *“We will turn back soon! Don’t look at us like that!”*

“I know, I know,” Fenrir muttered. *“If we stay in these forms for long, all our training will be wasted...”*

The two withered before Kanata’s disapproving gaze and quickly turned back into pitiful little furballs.

“Does Mistress prefer those forms for you two?” Elizavett asked.

“Of course not, you imbecile!” pontificated Zag’giel. *“This is merely a task appointed to us by our master Kanata!”*

“If we can gain true strength in these forms designed to restrict our power, we’ll be able to surpass our former limits!” Fenrir explained. *“That is Lady*

Kanata's desire for us."

They had misunderstood everything completely, of course, but the two spoke as if they were simply stating facts.

"Methinks I had best stay in this form as well..." mused Elizavett. *"My power returned to me when I imbibed my Mistress's blood. I believe I could return to my original form if I wished, but..."*

"No, Elizabet!" said Kanata with surprising urgency. "You mustn't!"

"For some reason, this form seems perfectly all right in the light of the sun," Elizavett continued, just slightly miffed from the interruption. *"Tis inconvenient to have such short legs, but if it is my Mistress's will for me to remain in this form, then it will serve well enough."*

"Yeah! That's right!" said Kanata, nuzzling her cheek happily against Elizavett's fur. "This form will serve *great!*"

"However, Kanata," said Zag'giel. *"The incident from last night is still unresolved, is it not?"*

"Those knights are bound to come looking for us!" chimed in Fenrir. *"After all, we helped the vampire they were hunting get away!"*

The knights had seen Kanata's face that evening. Moreover, the enormous holy wolf stuck out like a sore thumb. It was entirely possible that they had asked questions of someone who had seen Fenrir pulling the wagon.

No sooner had the thought crossed their minds, however, than they heard the sound of horses galloping up from behind them.

"Halt! Stop the wagon!" someone shouted.

"I knew it! It's the witch who came to the vampire's rescue!"

It was two of the knights from yesterday. They must have split up to search for Elizavett, leaving these two to chase after the wagon. They rode past the wagon, blocking off the road ahead with their stout horses.

"Where are you hiding the vampire?! Speak!"

"Is she in the wagon?!"

"Here I am!" answered a defiant Elizavett, fluttering out of the wagon toward the knights on her tiny wings. *"If you fools think you can slay the likes of the Corpse Princess Elizavett, you had best think again!"*

The knights, however, flatly ignored Elizavett's heroic declaration. Instead, they repeated themselves verbatim.

"Where are you hiding the vampire?! Speak!"

"Is she in the wagon?!"

"I-I'm right here..." Elizavett said, tears in her eyes as she landed on the ground.

"They cannot tell it is you in that furball form..." said Zag'giel.

"Not that it would change things whether they noticed or not!" declared Fenrir.

These knights plainly meant Kanata harm. In which case, there was only one thing for her companions to do.

"The Demon King Zag'giel!" began Zag'giel.

"And the Spirit Wolf Fenrir!" Fenrir continued.

"Together, we will defeat you!" they finished in unison. The two started strong, leaping off the wagon and grabbing hold of the knights' horses, but as they tried desperately to clamber up the animals' flanks, they soon found their strength wanting and fell, landing ungracefully on their backs. All they could do was flail their stubby little feet as they lay helpless on the ground.

"Face us!" challenged Zag'giel. *"If you have the guts!"*

"Here we are!" said Fenrir. *"Get down here and fight!"*

The knights stared silently at the two furballs, looking extremely perturbed. After a beat, they spoke once again.

"...Where are you hiding the vampire?! Speak!"

"Is she in the wagon?!"

It was the third time they had delivered the exact same lines. The knights were doing a heroic job of pretending the strange furballs didn't exist.

"Curses," lamented Zag'giel. "They won't even acknowledge us as foes..."

"L-Lady Kanata..." sobbed Fenrir. *"Please, forgive my failure!"*

Kanata stepped down from the wagon and gave the despondent furballs a big tight hug.

"Don't cry," she said. *"You're the best fluff in the universe. I guarantee it."*

"M-Mistress..."

"Kanata..."

"Lady Kanata..."

As the three furballs were overcome with emotion, Kanata looked up at the knights with menace in her eyes.

"How dare you make these precious babies cry?!" she demanded. *"I won't forgive you!"*

"Huh?" said one of the knights.

"But...we didn't do anything..." said the other.

"Bottomless pit, go!" Kanata said.

An instant later, the knights found themselves falling through a pair of holes that had appeared without warning underneath their feet. When they landed, they found themselves back at the inn they had stayed at the previous night. Kanata had used her magic to simply remove them from the scene. Even if they set out once again on horseback, they were now several hours behind the wagon.

"We see..." mused Zag'giel. *"Our opponents are Temple Knights of the Holy Church. If you cause them injury, it might complicate the situation."*

"Lady Kanata's mercy is deep and pure!" Fenrir marveled. *"She even takes care not to harm insolent knaves like them..."*

The two nodded in understanding, apparently proud of themselves despite having done nothing to help resolve the situation.

"Mistress... You don't actually need those two at all, do you?" said Elizavett, eliding the fact that she hadn't been any more useful than Zag'giel and Fenrir.

“Of course I do!” said Kanata. “I need Zaggy and Fen-fen...and you too, Elizabat! I’d never hand you over to those men!”

The knights hadn’t really wanted the furballs in the first place, of course, but the three of them were just overjoyed that Kanata had said she needed them.

“Kanata...” said Zag’giel. “Your faith in us moves our heart. We will meet your expectations.”

“Just you wait, Lady Kanata!” said Fenrir. “I’ll show you how strong I can be!”

“Mistress said she would never hand me over to those men...” Elizavett muttered to herself. “’Tis as good as a confession of love! Oh, be still my heart...”

Of course, it was neither as a fighter nor as a lover that Kanata needed the three fluffballs. But alas, nobody there had the wherewithal to point that out.

† † †

“Nonetheless, we must consider this a problem,” said Zag’giel. “Weak as they are, those knights from before will interfere with our quest if they continue to pursue us. They will be trouble for Kanata every time they appear.”

“That newcomer really did bring a whole lot of unwanted trouble along with her, didn’t she?” Fenrir remarked.

“That, I cannot deny,” Elizavett sighed. *“But why have they come to attack me again, after being content to leave well enough alone for so long?”*

“Do you not know?” Zag’giel asked.

“How would I? I cloistered myself away in my castle for a thousand years!”

“A true shut-in, then...”

“Oh, spare me,” said Elizavett. *“And you,”* she added, turning to Fenrir. *“You said the girl arranged things such that I wouldn’t have to deal with would-be vampire hunters, did you not?”*

“It has been a thousand years...” Zag’giel mused. *“Even the orders of a Saint would be forgotten after so long a time, we suppose.”*

“Forgetting Her Holiness’s sacred will after a mere thousand years!” Fenrir

huffed. *“The nerve!”*

The three of them were sitting in the body of the wagon, seriously discussing the situation, while Kanata watched her beloved furballs fidget and squirm, despite their best efforts to maintain a dignified bearing, with rapt attention.

“Kanata,” said Zag’giel. *“A thought occurs.”*

“Hm?” Kanata asked, not bothering to wipe the drool from her chin. “What is it?”

“The three of us are servants of the Beast Tamer Kanata, no?”

“That’s right! You’re my precious companions!”

“In that case, are we not to be considered your property?” Although Beast Tamer was considered a failure Profession—the weakest and most undesirable of all—the Adventurers’ Guild saw to it that a Beast Tamer’s personal information was in the kingdom’s records. As long as a Beast Tamer took full responsibility for the actions of their magic beasts, it was not against the law for them to walk around with their companions in broad daylight. Zag’giel suspected that the reason for this was that a Beast Tamer’s companions were conceived of as their own property. *“If we were to think of things in that light, in attacking Elizavett, those men are acting as bandits, come to pillage Kanata’s belongings. Should we bring suit, the law may even see fit to punish them.”*

“Whoa! Zaggy, you’re smart!” Kanata said, patting the fluffy Demon King on the head.

“Hah,” he said, with a distinct note of pride. *“It is nothing.”*

“Drat!” said Fenrir. *“Once again, the Demon King has me outmatched for cunning...”*

“To think I became my Mistress’s property without even realizing...” Elizavett said. *“My heart is all aflutter...”*

“Maybe we should go ask the guild!” Kanata suggested.

“A wise course,” Zag’giel concurred. *“If luck would have it, perhaps we can put a stop to those knights.”*

“All righty then!” Kanata sang. “We’re off to see Miss Melissa!”

There would most likely be an Adventurers' Guild in the next city they visited as well, but Kanata thought it would be best to speak directly with Melissa, the guild worker in charge of her case. She cast a spell, and immediately the three of them were transported to the front of the Adventurers' Guild, wagon and all. The people passing by were shocked to see a wagon appear out of thin air with no warning whatsoever, but when they noticed it was Kanata driving the thing, they seemed to understand. *Oh. This again...* their faces seemed to say as they went on with their business. Kanata had magically teleported to the guild plenty of times before. The people of the Royal Capital were starting to get used to her peculiarities.

Besides, Kanata was the savior of the Royal Capital. Nobody was about to complain.

"Hello, Miss Melissa!"

"E-Eeek!!!" Melissa, the woman at the reception desk, shrieked when she saw who it was.

"Eeek...?" echoed Kanata.

"I-I'm sorry," Melissa said. "That was rude of me." Every time Kanata appeared, it meant more work for the beleaguered guild worker. By this point she had developed a fair bit of trauma. Melissa cleared her throat and sat up straight, smiling brightly, like a professional receptionist. "Hello, Miss Kanata. What brings you here today?"

"Well, you see..." Kanata began, launching into explaining the situation. Soon she was registering both Fenrir and Elizavett with the guild as new companions, while answering Melissa's questions about the details of what was going on.

When they were finished, Melissa made a sympathetic but glum face. "You are correct," she said. "A Beast Tamer's magic beasts are treated as their personal property, and as long as they don't harm anybody it is against the law for someone else to attack them. If they didn't belong to the guild, they would be liable to receive criminal punishment from the kingdom itself. However..."

"However?" Kanata asked.

"I'm afraid the guild's authority doesn't extend to the Holy Church. Without

them, we'd have no way of giving people their Professions. They're an organization with a tremendous amount of power."

Professions were an enormous blessing. Even if everything else about a person was exactly the same, they would be many times stronger with a simple Profession like Fighter than they would with no Profession whatsoever. As the overseer of the Selection Ceremony, where children obtained their all-important Profession, the Holy Church was halfway above the rule of law.

"I'll apply whatever pressure I can, of course," Melissa said, "but frankly, the Temple Knights of the Holy Church can do whatever they want if they say it's for the sake of *hunting undead*..." Suddenly she realized she might have said too much. "Excuse me. What I mean to say is that their faith is far too deep to expect them to stop what they're doing because of pressure from the Adventurers' Guild."

"Oh..." said Kanata.

"I'm very sorry there's so little I can do," Melissa continued. "But at the very least, Miss Kanata, you can rest assured that the Adventurers' Guild will testify that you acted in self-defense if those men end up hurt." In other words, as long as the knights attacked first, Kanata and her companions had full license to send them flying. It didn't quite resolve the issue, but at least they shouldn't have to worry too much about being attacked on the road, given Kanata's enormous strength.

"I dunno..." said Kanata. "What if something happens to Elizabat?"

"You would worry for the likes of me?" Elizavett asked.

"Of course I would!" said Kanata. "I'll never let those men defile your fluff!"

"M-Mistress!" Elizavett cried. *"It means the world that you regard me so fondly! Are we to be married?"*

"We said we won't let you!" interrupted Zag'giel and Fenrir in unison.

"If you had a high-ranking member of the Holy Church helping you, there might be something you could do," Melissa thought aloud. "The Temple Knights can't ignore an order from their own institution."

“I see!” said Kanata.

“But I’m afraid I don’t know anyone like that,” Melissa finished.

“Oh!” said Kanata. “I do!”

“You do?!” As Melissa reeled in shock, her mind turned to the still-unprocessed report she was reading about a major incident in the Holy City of Lordentia, the headquarters of the Holy Church. Apparently the High Cathedral had suddenly collapsed, and from it had emerged some kind of white monster. The monster was defeated by a girl who happened to be at the scene, and she rescued Saint Marianne Ishfalke, who had apparently been under the monster’s power. The Saint was moved by the experience, and even seemed to have created a new sect that praised this mysterious girl and her teachings.

The guild had no authority in the Holy City, so everything Melissa had heard amounted to little more than rumors. However, the rumors were big enough to have spread all the way to the Royal Capital. The Adventurers’ Guild had already sent someone to investigate the details of the situation.

Melissa hesitated to even think it, but it suddenly occurred to her that the mysterious girl who had faced off against the white monster might just be...

“Miss Kanata,” she asked. “It wasn’t *you*, was it?”

She smiled jovially, but internally she had a bad feeling about the answer.

“It was me!” Kanata confirmed, smiling back cheerfully.

“I see...” The news made Melissa collapse on her desk, planting the side of her head against her work area and sobbing quietly. As the person responsible for handling Kanata, it would be her responsibility to write a report summarizing the events. In other words, her workload had increased once again.

The better an adventurer performs, the better it reflects on the evaluation of the guild worker handling them. Thanks to Kanata, Melissa was poised to climb the Adventurers’ Guild’s organizational ladder—the last thing in the world she wanted. Melissa’s plan was to quit the life of a bureaucrat and return to adventuring just as soon as her junior in the guild was ready to take her place. As long as she was responsible for Kanata, however, that day felt as if it was only getting further away.

Melissa wasn't about to let herself lie despondent forever, though. She rallied her spirits and turned back to face Kanata. "If you have the standing to appeal to the Saint of the Holy Church herself, I can't think of any better support. Perhaps you should talk to her."

The Saint's authority as the head of the Holy Church was absolute. She had the same level of power as a pope, one whose decrees may not be questioned. Even fanatical extremists like the Temple Knights would have no choice but to obey if the Saint herself gave them a direct order.

"Thank you for all your help, Miss Melissa!" said Kanata. "I'll pay her a visit at once!"

"There's no need to thank me. Supporting adventurers is my job."

They shook hands and Kanata left the guildhall. Melissa waved politely as Kanata and her wagon vanished once again, wishing the day had ended without the additional work.

Her junior Bella watched from behind her. It looked like another busy day, she thought.

† † †

"Ooooh! Your Fluffiness! How I have longed to stand in your presence!" The Saint hugged Kanata tight, fawning over her with stupendous fervor despite the stony look of indifference Kanata was giving her.

When Kanata had arrived at the High Cathedral, the knights on guard had saluted her with grave respect and taken her immediately to see Saint Marianne. Everyone here had witnessed Kanata's miracles firsthand and repented of their corrupt ways. Now they were working hard every day to improve the Holy Church, and studying the teachings of Fluffism promulgated by Saint Marianne. Gone was the archvillainess using the power of the Holy Church to control the world from behind the scenes.

The furballs, however, were no more keen on her new attitude toward Kanata.

"Unhand Kanata at once! How dare you touch her so lightly!" snapped Zag'giel, sitting atop Kanata's head.

"Ghh! You're smothering me with that chest of yours! Get off!" protested Fenrir, whom Kanata had been holding in her arms. He was now being sandwiched tight between her and Saint Marianne.

"Only I am permitted to embrace my Mistress like that!" objected Elizavett from her perch on Kanata's right shoulder.

"Goodness!" Saint Marianne exclaimed, bringing her face up close to inspect the new ball of fluff. "If it isn't a new Sacred Beast!" Between the Demon King, the Spirit Wolf, and the Corpse Princess, the only one who could be properly referred to as a Sacred Beast was Fenrir, but perhaps to a dedicated follower of Fluffism, any magic beast who accompanied Kanata could be considered sacred.

"Kyah!" cried Elizavett, striking Marianne in the face with her tiny wings.

There was no possible way the attack actually could have hurt, but nonetheless Marianne fell to the floor with an exaggerated "Ahhh!"

"Now!" Elizavett declared. *"Seize the opening!"*

"Hiss!"

"Grr!"

The three magic beasts leapt at the fallen Saint, wasting no time in striking the finishing blow against her evil.

"Ah!" Marianne cried as the furballs bounced up and down on her side. "Forgive me, O Sacred Beasts!"

The three were doing their best to attack her, but as one might expect, they weren't actually doing any damage. If anything, Marianne seemed to be enjoying it. To a fanatical believer in Fluffism like herself, an opportunity to be punished by the Sacred Beasts was in fact a great reward.

"Have you repented for your wicked ways?" asked Zag'giel.

"I see you know your place!" gloated Fenrir.

"Only I am permitted to embrace my Mistress like that!" repeated Elizavett.

"Y-Yes!" cried Marianne, clearly in the throes of rapturous passion. "I am nothing but a lowly pig! Ohhh!"

“Wow, lucky...” Kanata said, biting her finger as she watched on with envy.



“But what brings Your Fluffiness here today?” Marianne asked. “Ah! Could it be my prayers have reached you? I have only just begun to spread the teachings of Fluffism, but truly your fluff-ful blessings rain down on all of the Holy City Lordentia...”

Marianne had gone and established her new religion without any knowledge or involvement from Kanata. Kanata, for her part, didn’t care one way or another, but the religion had spread in the blink of an eye among the people she had saved. The Saint herself preaching Fluffism in the Holy City—the very heart of the Holy Church—was an enormous development that shook the pillars of the entire organization. It was enough to make the Goddess, whom the Holy Church worshipped, tremble in fear.

The Goddess’s ability to meddle in the material world was dependent on the faith of her worshippers, and Fluffism seemed poised to steal that very faith right out from under her nose. There was the option of deeming it a wicked heresy, but Fluffism was being spread by the Saint—the very symbol of the Holy Church itself. Even the high-ranking members of the Holy Church had their hands tied, given the situation. And worse, it had all been caused by the Goddess’s own error in casting Marianne away as useless, when she’d fused her with the angel statues to turn her into a monster. Even though Marianne’s body had been utterly dissolved and remade, Kanata extracted her from the amalgamation and reconstituted her human form, a miracle that caused Marianne to abandon her faith in the Goddess and become instead Kanata’s most fanatical disciple. Now, nobody hated the Goddess more than her former Saint.

“I was such a fool back then...” Marianne said. “I remember feeling the evil of the Goddess’s thoughts when I was being absorbed into the angel...and the warm light of Your Fluffiness’s benevolent love when you saved me! In that moment, my eyes were opened to the true faith.”

“We suspect the Goddess may have cursed the Profession of Saint with some sort of mind control to make its bearer her loyal minion, similar to the curse placed on the Profession of Demon King,” said Zag’giel. *“Although we are sure the Goddess herself would call them ‘blessings.’”* Zag’giel had been able to suppress the urge to slaughter humanity thanks to his strong rationality and

pure psychological resilience, but your average person would have had no chance. Marianne's personality and thoughts would have been subject to the Goddess's corruption for a long time indeed.

"So she wasn't evil from the beginning, you mean?" asked Fenrir. *"Well...in that case, I suppose there's no use bearing a grudge..."* Marianne had once imprisoned Fenrir in a dismal cell beneath the High Cathedral, something which he had not forgotten. But with Marianne's new change of heart, he saw no reason to bring up her old sins.

"Master Zaggy... Master Fen-fen... You would forgive me for all the evil I've done?"

"Perhaps," said Zag'giel. *"But we won't forgive you for touching Kanata without need!"*

"I've got my eyes on you!" concurred Fenrir.

"Ahhh!" Marianne cried, writhing in an imitation of agony as the furballs resumed their bouncing. "Please understaaand! I was just trying to worship Her Fluffiness!"

"I told you!" said Elizavett. *"Mistress doesn't need such attention from any females but myself! Isn't that right, Mistress?"*

"That's right! 'Cause you're fluffy!" Kanata chirped, scritching the fuzzy bat on her shoulder with a great big smile on her face. "But, Miss Marianne, about the reason I came here..."

"Yes! I am ready to receive your holy words!" Marianne took to her knees, folding her hands in front of her chest as she listened with rapt attention.

But as she heard what Kanata had to say, her face gradually went pale. When she heard that her own Temple Knights had pointed their spears at Kanata herself, she keeled over backward, foaming at the mouth.

"F-F-F-F..."

"F?" Kanata asked. "F for fluff?"

"F-Forgiive meeeeeeee!" Marianne groveled shamefully, pressing her head to the ground in prostration. "I will have those miscreants punished immediately!"

How dare they take up arms against Your Fluffiness, the very object of our faith!”

Of course, Kanata was only an object of faith to the believers in Marianne’s Fluffism, which was by no means all of the Holy Church. Marianne, it seemed, really was deliberately trying to take faith from the Goddess and redirect it toward Kanata instead. Perhaps it was her intense faith in Kanata herself that had freed her from the Goddess’s brainwashing.

“You don’t need to punish them or anything,” said Kanata. “I just want them to leave Elizabat alone.”

“S-Such compassion...” marveled Marianne. “I will certainly include your merciful words in our new scripture!”

“More to the point, are the actions of the Temple Knights within your control?” Zag’giel asked.

“Of course, Master Zaggy! Leave it to me!” Marianne touched her hand to the mirror hanging on her office wall. “This mirror is connected to every church affiliated with the Holy Church. With this, they can see and hear us, and we can see and hear them!”

“Well! That is indeed convenient! With this, you could deliver orders nigh immediately in times of war!” Zag’giel had led armies on the Dark Continent, and considered himself a strategist. Naturally, he took a deep interest in the artifact.

“Can anyone use it other than you, Miss Marianne?” Kanata asked.

“Yes, anyone who follows our teachings,” Marianne said. “They’re not to be used recklessly, but in times of emergency, churches can use the mirrors to communicate with each other directly as well.”

“I seeee...” Kanata nodded slowly.

“Is something troubling you, Lady Kanata?” Fenrir asked, tilting his head with adorable curiosity and sending Kanata’s heart rate through the roof.

“No, no, it’s just a silly thought I had. I’ll tell you about it later!” Kanata said, and she turned her attention back to Marianne.

“Very well,” said Marianne. “I’ll connect us to the church in charge of the Temple Knights, then.” She spoke a short ritual prayer, and the image in the mirror wavered as if it were underwater before slowly transforming to a vision of the other office. “This is the High Cathedral of the Holy Church, in the Holy City of Lordentia,” she said.

“Well, well, well,” said the gorgeous man with wavy blond hair who appeared on the other side of the mirror. “If it isn’t Her Holiness, Saint Marianne Ishfalke herself...” He leaned forward in his chair and folded his hands artfully on his desk. “For such an illustrious personage to contact me directly, I can only imagine there must have been some sort of terrible emergency.”

“Just so, Temple Knight Captain Sir Theodoric Grey. I have heard that you are currently in pursuit of a certain individual?”

“Oh? News travels quickly, I see. You are correct. I am in pursuit of a loathsome vampire, the enemy of the gods.”

“You are to stop your activities at once,” Marianne ordered.

“Excuse me?” Theodoric raised a single well-groomed eyebrow at Marianne’s declaration.

“Perhaps you haven’t heard?” Marianne said. “The vampire you are pursuing is registered with the Adventurers’ Guild as the companion of a Beast Tamer. There is no need to exterminate it.”

Marianne’s explanation was reasonable enough. The Holy Church may have been beyond the authority of the Adventurers’ Guild, but there was no reason to antagonize them. Like them, the Adventurers’ Guild had connections in kingdoms all over the land. Exterminating a magic beast that stood under their protection would only serve to worsen the relationship between the two organizations.

Theodoric had no reason to refuse this order—especially as it came from the head of the Holy Church herself.

“I refuse,” said Theodoric.

“Wh-What was that?!” Marianne was taken aback. “You intend to ignore the decree of the Saint of the Holy Church?!”

“Indeed, Saint Marianne. I do.” Theodoric steeped his fingers, seemingly unperturbed. “My company of Temple Knights specializes in hunting the undead. We are a special unit outside the usual command structures of the Holy Church, with authorization to move according to our own judgment.”

“That authorization is meant to enable you to act swiftly, without bothering with lengthy procedures,” said Marianne. “It is not an excuse for you to ignore a direct order from the Saint of the Holy Church! Do you wish to be charged with the sin of apostasy?!”

“Apostasy? Apostasy, you say?” Theodoric glared at Marianne from behind his steeped fingers. “Do you truly think I know nothing?!”

Marianne reeled back in the face of Theodoric’s scornful glare.

“Wh-What are you speaking of?! What do you claim to know?!”

“You failed to perform a task given to you in an oracle by the Goddess and were turned into a monster as punishment, only to be saved by some heathen adventurer, not even of the faith! I know that much, at least.”

Everyone living in the city nearby had seen Marianne, in her monstrous angelic form, burst through the roof of the High Cathedral. The Church’s cardinals had been planning to hold a serious inquiry into the matter, but it was a genuine surprise that the news had already gotten as far as Theodoric.

“Then,” the handsome knight continued, “in conspiracy with this adventurer, you became the founder of a new sect. I forget its name, but that hardly matters. The Saint is the symbol of the Holy Church itself, and here you are worshipping someone other than the Goddess! What word is there but apostasy?!”

“Gh...” Marianne’s protests died in her throat.

“You have not been stripped of your office despite your repeated misdeeds because it would cause discord among the masses of believers,” Theodoric continued. “However, do bear in mind that your authority within the Church is at an all-time low. Your title, I’m afraid, has become strictly ceremonial.” As Marianne bit her lip in frustration, Theodoric turned his attention to Kanata, who had been quietly watching the conversation. “Is this girl the reason you

had word of our activities in such short order?" he asked, peering intently at Kanata. "Perhaps Your Holiness should introduce us."

Marianne's response was curt. "This is our god."

"No!" said Kanata. "I'm a Beast Tamer!" Marianne looked disappointed by Kanata's flat rejection of divinity, but Kanata continued on, ignoring her. "My name is Kanata Aldezia."

"I see..." Theodoric looked over Kanata with his sharp, perceptive eyes. "Black hair...black eyes...the uniform of an academy from the Royal Capital... You must be the one my subordinates told me about. It was you who corrupted Saint Marianne's faith, got in the way of my duties, and even took my beloved from me!"

"Your beloved?" Kanata asked.

"N-Never mind that..." Theodoric said. "I take it you have no intention of handing over this vampire you've claimed as one of your minions?"

"None at all!" Kanata answered plainly. "Elizabat is my precious companion! I'd never hand her over to you!"

"Elizabat? You're calling her by some bizarre name?"

No sooner had the words left Theodoric's mouth than Elizavett, who was still perched on Kanata's shoulder, flew into a rage.

"Bizarre?! 'Tis the name my Mistress gave me! Exactly what about it do you find bizarre?!"

It *was* a bizarre name, no matter how you thought about it, but to Elizavett it was a precious term of endearment. It was natural enough that she would take Theodoric's words as an insult.

"Wh-What's this furball doing here, anyway?" Theodoric asked. "Is that another one of your companions?"

"Yes?" Kanata answered with a puzzled note in her voice. "This is Elizabat."

"What?! Don't be absurd! I'm not asking you to hand over some furball! I'm asking for the noble and beautiful Corpse Princess!"

“Hmph,” said Elizavett. “Praise from the likes of you does me no pleasure. In fact, it rather makes me nauseous.”

“And why are *you* the one answering?” Theodoric, of course, had no idea that drinking Kanata’s blood had transformed Elizavett into this pink ball of fluff. He was very confused.

“Before I met my Mistress, I considered it no ill fortune to die by your hands...” Elizavett said. *“But no longer! I have found a reason to live! I won’t allow any to destroy me! After all, my Mistress and I are bound together for life!”*

“Elizabat...”

“I am yours forever, Mistress,” said Elizavett.

Kanata was deeply moved by Elizavett’s proclamation of love, although she may have misunderstood some of the nuances of what the vampiric fluffball was saying.

“So,” said Theodoric, “you refuse to hand over the Corpse Princess Elizavett. You won’t even spare me a glance at her. I suppose you intend to resist me to the end, then?”

“B-But...” protested Elizavett. *“But I’m right here...”*

“The Holy Church has many hands, and eyes on the entire land,” Theodoric continued. “They will obey the Temple Knights over a Saint who cannot unify the Church. Wherever you flee, the eyes of our believers will be there waiting for you. I will pursue you to the ends of the earth, and take back what is mine!” His eyes were burning with passion, but something about him looked more like an obsessed stalker than a driven holy knight. “Elizavett, are you hiding outside the view of the mirror? Wait for me! The day is coming soon that I will gaze into your eyes!”

And with that, the mirror went dark.

“What is his problem...?” Elizavett shuddered. *“Truly, that man gives me the creeps...”*

“It seems we have no means of stopping his pursuit...” Zag’giel muttered darkly.

Neither the Adventurers' Guild nor the Holy Church, it seemed, were able to stop Theodoric's Temple Knights from doing as they pleased. The Holy Church had believers all over the world. If Kanata kept traveling from town to town, they would be able to find her in no time. And the Temple Knights could obtain information from any church anywhere using those mirrors. That was most likely the method they had used to track her down earlier that very day.

"Worry not, Lady Kanata!" said Fenrir. *"No matter how many come, I shall send them all flying!"* He could do it in his combined form, of course, but the proclamation still felt ridiculous coming from such a weak little ball of fluff. His attacks were more likely to send *him* flying than any foe.

"Yeah!" said Kanata, holding Fenrir tight and nuzzling against him with her cheeks. "Thank you, Fen-fen!"

Fenrir was so overjoyed by the attention that he started panting, his little puppy tongue dangling from his mouth.

"Of course, we will protect Kanata with our life as well," said Zag'giel. *"However, the enemy's best weapon is their numbers. If we must face continual attacks we will have no time to rest, causing us fatigue. It would do us well to treat this problem seriously."* Zag'giel had intoned his words with his usual coolheaded demeanor, but Kanata replied by burying her face in his tummy, rubbing against his delightful fluff.

"A-Ah! No fair!" said Elizavett. *"Me too! Me too!"*

"Of course you too, Elizabat!" said Kanata, pulling Elizavett into the fluff pile.

Marianne bowed her head apologetically before the four of them. "I am so sorry I was unable to be of use to you! The insolence of that man, and not just toward me, but Your Fluffiness as well! Now I'm not sure what I can do, short of joining you to fight them myself!" Kanata placed a hand on Marianne's bowed head and patted it gently. Marianne felt her faith growing further still at the gesture of benevolent forgiveness toward her useless self.

"No, thank you," Kanata said. "But Zaggy's right. It's gonna be a pain in the butt if they keep attacking us."

The knights were no threat to her as opponents in battle, but they certainly

could ruin her plans for a fun, enjoyable journey. Kanata's party stood out like a sore thumb. A young girl and her crowd of furballs riding in a covered wagon pulled by the Spirit Wolf himself would attract attention anywhere they went.

"Perhaps we could throw them off the trail with teleportation..." Zag'giel pondered. *"No, that wouldn't work. Teleportation can only take you to locations you have visited previously. If we are to continue our journey, we are sure to be spotted at some town we visit..."*

"Lady Kanata," Fenrir asked, *"can you think of anywhere you've been before that the Temple Knights can't reach?"*

The two furballs put their heads together, but neither were able to think of a workable idea until suddenly Kanata opened her mouth.

"Ah!" she exclaimed.

"Mistress!" said Elizavett. *"You have an idea?"*

"I do!" Kanata beamed. "I know of just the spot!"

† † †

"What?! You lost them?!" A crease formed in Theodoric's perfect brow when he heard the news from his subordinate. The Temple Knights had gathered what information they could about the Corpse Princess Elizavett, and the young girl who had abducted her, from the faithful in the Church, contacting churches across the kingdom to ascertain their whereabouts as quickly as possible. There should have been no way for them to escape the Holy Church's information network, even if the girl in question apparently—and impossibly—seemed to have somehow obtained mastery of the ancient lost magic of teleportation.

"I-It's like she suddenly vanished! There's been no sign of her anywhere since her departure from the Holy City Lordentia. Most likely, she used her teleportation to travel somewhere beyond the reach of the Church's eyes."

The Holy Church had adherents numbering in the hundreds of millions. Even if the miracles performed by a certain young Beast Tamer had caused the flock's faith to waver, the statistical effect was slight when one considered the size of the entire Church. Even if some of the Church's faithful were inclined to shelter her, someone else would be bound to report her whereabouts. For them to

receive no word of her at all could only mean that she had gone somewhere completely devoid of believers—a desert island, perhaps, or somewhere hidden far in the mountains. She might be able to hide herself from the Church’s pursuit that way, but it would not be easy for her to sustain a decent lifestyle somewhere so far from civilization. She would be hard pressed just to find food, let alone somewhere to rest and clean the filth from her body...

“The fiend!” Theodoric muttered, gritting his teeth in anguish. “Spiriting my beloved away to somewhere so dismal...”

“What was that...?”

“Nothing! Never you mind!” Theodoric said. “For the time being, round up all the Temple Knights under our command and return to headquarters. We need to rethink our strategy.”

“Yes, sir!” the knight said, straightening his posture and wiping the quizzical look he had been giving his commander off his face. “I will go immediately to assemble all one hundred and twenty-eight units!”

And with that, the mirror went dark.

When he was alone, Theodoric opened his desk drawer and took out something long and wrapped in cloth.

“My beloved...” he whispered quietly, removing the cloth with great care.

The artifact underneath had been enchanted to protect it from the elements, but the canvas had become frayed in several places nonetheless. It was, after all, a thing of great antiquity.

Beneath the cloth was a portrait, painted in vibrant colors—a portrait of a beautiful woman. She looked like a princess in her dark crimson dress. Her hair fluttering in the breeze lent her gaze an alluring mystique.

“Ah,” Theodoric breathed. “You are just as beautiful as I remember...”

The woman in the portrait had a noble presence far beyond that of the princess of Theodoric’s kingdom, and yet her smile seemed full of bountiful love. It captured Theodoric’s heart anew every time he set eyes on it, making his chest throb with pangs of agonized longing. If that was how this woman

looked to the person who had made the painting, how incomparable must the gaze of her genuine love have been?

Theodoric had been a newly ordained Temple Knight the first time he'd set eyes on the portrait. Since ancient times, the role of the Temple Knights had been to strike down the enemies of the Church, but there was one whom they were not to attack—the woman in the portrait, with the crimson dress and bright red eyes.

She was a vampire, he had been told—one of the Holy Church's most hated enemies. Vampires and other undead stood outside the cycle of rebirth. Their extermination was a matter of utmost importance. And yet this vampire, and this vampire alone, was taboo to the Temple Knights. The First Saint's order was still being obeyed, it turned out, even a thousand years later. The reason for the special treatment had been forgotten over the years, however, as had the location of the vampire princess's residence.

Young Theodoric found it peculiar that this specific vampire would receive such special treatment, and began to wonder what the reason could be. It wasn't some sense of justice that moved him, however, but the powerful longing in his chest. He studied the Church's oldest records, but he found no mention of the princess. He found nothing, until one night, he sneaked into the forbidden archives and discovered an ancient tome, thick with dust.

He read that the one who created that portrait had been none other than the First Saint herself—the founder of the Holy Church. She had painted it from memory in her old age. The vibrant colors spoke to the importance of this woman in her memory. She was someone the Saint had been unable to forget for as long as she lived. The Saint kept the identity of the woman in the portrait a secret until the day she died, speaking of her to none save her lifelong companion, the Spirit Wolf Fenrir.

Perhaps the book had been written by a close attendant of the Saint. How else would the writer have known such close-kept secrets? They must not have intended for any eyes but their own to see what they had written. It was some sort of secret diary, full of vague references to overheard conversations from the First Saint herself. Among them were a number of specific details about the woman in the painting.

The vampire's name was Elizavett. She met the First Saint when she was very young, and gave her succor from her troubles. The Saint felt profoundly indebted to her, and went to her deathbed still regretting her failure to pay her back in kind.

"Ahhh..." Theodoric sighed, pressing his cheek adoringly against the image. "My Elizavett..."

Theodoric knew that Elizavett's kind smile was not meant for him. He had fallen in love at first sight, but the deep emotions of the woman in the portrait had nothing to do with him whatsoever. Theodoric, however, was a methodical individual when he had a goal in mind. He knew back then that a neophyte Temple Knight like himself had no authorization to lead an expedition to some ancient, forgotten castle. First, he resolved to prove himself dependable on mission after mission, earning the approval of his superiors, in order to advance through the ranks as quickly as possible. In ten short years, he had obtained the rank of Captain. With his natural-born charisma, it wasn't long before he became the real authority behind the Temple Knights.

The rest was simple. He used the Holy Church's believers as an information network to learn everything he could about beautiful scarlet vampires. Most of it was vague rumors, but it was enough for him to identify the location of Elizavett's castle.

He set out with his Temple Knights. Publicly, it was an expedition to slay the Corpse Princess Elizavett, an archenemy of the Holy Church who had survived into modern times. Theodoric, however, had no intention at all of consigning Elizavett to the flames. His many years spent nursing his longing for the woman he'd glimpsed in a painting long ago had twisted those emotions into something self-centered and altogether nasty. In order to wed himself to the beautiful vampire, he would have to employ extraordinary means. On paper he would have her exterminated, but secretly he would spirit her away. He would keep her captive, hurt, and weakened, and train her like a dog until she broke and submitted to his will.

The knights spent the day soaking the old castle with oil, and waited until the sun went down to set it aflame. Perhaps it seemed strange to not attack during the daytime, when a vampire would be at her weakest, but many elder

vampires were able to suppress their weaknesses, and those that weren't were likely to keep their coffin somewhere safe, protected by a multitude of traps. The best time to attack was the very moment the sun sank beneath the horizon, aiming to strike just as Elizavett was rousing from her slumber.

The plan had gone off without a hitch. The knights ran her through with their holy spears, wounding her heavily. Theodoric had been prepared to lose dozens of men just to weaken her, but strangely, Elizavett offered no resistance whatsoever. Now all he had to do was lure the vampire into the open, weaken her to the greatest extent he could, and take her away.

Elizavett was every bit as beautiful as her portrait made her out to be. The spear wounds and the burns did not diminish her beauty in the slightest. Theodoric wanted to run onto the field and take her in his arms, but with her inhuman strength, he knew she could tear his body to shreds—hardly the outcome he desired at all.

Theodoric's knights executed his strategy exactly as they had been ordered, sending Elizavett plummeting from her castle window, pierced by spears and consumed by flames. It pained his heart to hurt his beloved Elizavett so, but it was an ordeal he would have to overcome if his unrequited love were to come to fruition. Outside the castle was a great horde of knights keeping Elizavett surrounded. She had nowhere to run, and her assailants were armed with holy silver. All he would have to do was stab her until she could no longer move, then nail down her arms and legs in a crucifix position and have her secretly carried to the Temple Knights' headquarters, where he would lock her away in the basement. He really believed that when he had her there, and thoroughly broke her will, his profound love for her would touch her heart.

However, there was a flaw in his clever plan—a black-haired young girl who abruptly forced her way onto the scene, accompanied by some absurd balls of fluff. And given the choice between the Temple Knights, the champions of justice, and the wicked vampire Elizavett, she had chosen the vampire in a heartbeat. That choice in itself was proof that she was definitely some kind of witch.

The next thing Theodoric knew, the girl had whisked Elizavett away using some ancient supermagic called teleportation. What did this girl intend to do

with such a precious creature? She must be subjecting her to cruel torments even now. The very thought of it pained Theodoric's heart.

"Elizavett," he said. "Where has she taken you? Don't worry. I will come to rescue you at once..."

† † †

"This form does allow me to overcome my weakness to sunlight," said Elizavett, *"but by the hells if it isn't hot!"* It had been several months since Kanata had left the Royal Capital on her journey and the weather was starting to feel like summer. The sun felt hotter on their backs by the day, and they were starting to see the shimmers of heat haze when they gazed out at the road ahead. *"Still..."* Elizavett added with a shiver, *"these strange chills keep running down my spine... Perhaps I am coming down with a cold."*

"Kanata," Zag'giel said, *"we know you said you know a place, but will this area truly do?"*

The wagon was rolling along a narrow path between fields of wheat growing tall in the late spring sun. Kanata had teleported them here immediately after they left the High Cathedral and said goodbye to Marianne. It seemed the destination she'd had in mind was this wheat field.

"Uh-huh!" said Kanata. "I figured it would give them a shock if we suddenly appeared on top of them, so I took us just a liiiittle ways out." Nobody bothered to ask *whom* Kanata was worried about shocking. "I told them I'd be back for summer vacation, though, so there's no problem!"

"Back for summer vacation..." Zag'giel repeated to himself. *"Where have we heard those words before...?"* Zag'giel looked around. They had come here to avoid the eyes of the Holy Church in order to throw off the Temple Knights' pursuit, and true enough, there was no sign of a church anywhere among the scattered farmhouses dotting the landscape. At the very least there was unlikely to be one of the Church's communication mirrors anywhere nearby. *"This does seem to be a sparsely populated area, we suppose..."*

Perhaps the reason there were so few workers in the fields was because it was lunchtime. They must surely all be resting and taking their meals in the shade of a tree somewhere. There were a number of people who spotted

Kanata from a distance and bowed their heads in her direction. Kanata waved.

“Acquaintances of yours?” Zag’giel asked.

“Yup!” said Kanata. “I’ve known them since I was a little girl!”

“Since you were a little girl, you say...” Zag’giel mused. It seemed he had realized something that had yet to strike the other two furballs. *“Then, that would mean this place is...”* Back in the Royal Capital, Zag’giel had met Kanata’s little brother Alus and had a brief conversation with him. Thinking back, Kanata had promised to return home for summer vacation, hadn’t she?

The wagon continued on down the road, and soon a house came into view.

“Is that the house of the village chieftain?” Elizavett asked.

“Nope!” said Kanata. “It’s the house of the lord of this land!”

“This?! But it’s not even as grand as my old run-down castle!”

It really didn’t look like the house of a lord. It was a bit nicer than the nearby farmhouses maybe, but still well within the range of an utterly normal house, with no trace of the grandeur suggested by its station. Even the lord of a small fiefdom in the hinterlands would not stoop to living in such an utterly common house.

“Mom! I’m home!” Kanata cried as she stepped through the threshold, causing Zag’giel to spring up to attention.

“W-We knew it!” he said. *“Kanata! A moment! A moment, if you please!”* He jumped down from Kanata’s head to her left shoulder, and whispered something in her ear that made her stick out her tongue in protest.

“Whaaaat?” Kanata said. “No way!”

“Please! We beg of you!” Zag’giel said, entreating her for all he was worth. *“At the very least, for our first greeting!”*

“Hmmm...” Kanata frowned. “Well, all right. Since you insist. But just for a bit, okay?”

“Our deepest gratitude!” Zag’giel exclaimed.

The other two furballs were left pondering what all that fuss could have been

about.

† † †

“Mom! I’m home!”

The woman washing plates in the kitchen looked up with a start at the sound of that voice. It was the voice of her daughter, who had left to go to an academy in the Royal Capital, saying she wanted to become a Beast Tamer. Rather than it feeling like a vacation, it had been lonely with her daughter and son both so far away. But still, she hadn’t thought it had gotten to the point where she was hearing voices...

“Hellooo?” The voice continued, much clearer than last time. “Mom, are you there? I’m coming in!”

Realizing in a flash that her daughter was actually speaking to her and she hadn’t been hallucinating after all, the woman dropped the plate she had been holding to the floor.

“Kanny?!”

Her son Alus had told them that Kanata had become a Beast Tamer and left the Royal Capital on a journey, but that the two of them would be visiting for summer vacation. Still, this was a very abrupt visit, even for Kanata.

“I wish you would have written ahead that you were coming!”

Despite her scolding words, Kanata’s mother’s voice cracked with emotion. Her dear daughter had come home. She had become a Beast Tamer, just as she’d always dreamed of since she was very small. She must have already begun befriending magic beasts too. A girl like her daughter was sure to be accompanied by some astonishingly powerful beasts. She made up her mind not to be afraid, no matter how terrifying Kanata’s new companions were.

“Just a moment, Kanny!” she said. “I’ll get the door!”

She ran over, her feet pitter-pattering on the floor, and opened the door wide.

“Kanny! Welcome home!”

“We are honored to make your acquaintance, esteemed mother of Kanata,”

said the tall, horned man who greeted her at the door. “We are Zaggy, your daughter’s companion.”

Kanata’s mother went stiff. For a long moment, she just stared at the man’s face. She took a deep breath.

“Esteemed mother of Kanata?” the man repeated.

“A-A hot guy?!!!”

† † †

Not far away, Boldow Aldezia, the lord of the fiefdom, was just beginning one of his famous lectures.

“Gentlemen, I ask you. What is magic?”

“Hahh...” A palpable sigh of disappointment went up among the students. They had gathered in a sandy lot large enough to practice in, only to find that their instructor had set up a blackboard right in the dead middle.

“Magic is the miracle of our world!” Boldow declared, striking the blackboard with enough force to snap the stick of chalk he was holding in half. “Magic is the dream of humanity! You cast a spell, unleashing it with words of power! That is the true moment when magic is made manifest!”

“Hahh...” Another sigh.

Boldow’s fiery words seemed to make no impact on the crowd of students whatsoever. They regarded him icily. Some of them were resting their heads on their hands, or yawning audibly. Not a single one of them seemed to be paying attention to the lecture.

“However!” Boldow roared. “I have my doubts about these so-called spells! If magic can only be cast through the precise recital of set words, how is it that there are those among magic beasts who can use magic as well?! There are demons out there who can speak human languages, of course, but they are not the only ones who can utilize magic! There are many types of magic beasts who clearly lack intelligence, and yet who can call forth its power with ease! Ergo! We can conclude that spells and incantations *per se* are not absolutely necessary in producing magical effects!”

“Hahh...”

“What is needed for magic is not a *spell*, but *intention*! Incantations exist only to focus your desires and thoughts in a specific direction. This is proof that simple force of will is all that is required to use magic!”

“Hahh...”

The audience for his lecture had been giving Boldow absolutely nothing, no matter how many controversial opinions he tossed their way. Chalk gripped tight in his hand, he began to tremble with frustrated passion.

“What is the matter with you people?! Is my lecture really that boring to you?! How do you expect to become first-rate Magicians with an attitude like that?!”

“No, the lecture’s fine...”

“It’s just...”

The students exchanged a glance and hung their shoulders.

“What is it, then?!” Boldow demanded. “If you have something you want to say, say it!”

“Well, if you insist...” The student closest to the blackboard raised his hand.

“Yes!” said Boldow, glad to have someone to call on.

“Respectfully sir, our Profession is Fencer, and right now, we are here for sword practice. I don’t see any need for the lecture on magic.”

The boy was, of course, correct. These bright young Fencers had come to learn swordsmanship from Boldow, their lord. None of them had the slightest reason to be interested in a lecture on magic.

“Ghh!” cried Boldow, reeling like he was injured. “Right where it hurts!”

“Also, my lord, you can’t use much magic either, can you?”

“I’ll have you know that I can manage a simple fire spell, at least!”

“I just mean... If we were going to be learning magic, wouldn’t we want to learn it from your wife, Lady Aleksia? She’s a Sage, isn’t she?”

“And a looker too,” added one of the other students.

“And so kind...” chimed in a third.

“That would be a hundred times better than listening to a lecture from a scruffy old dude like his lordship...”

“Yeah! Yeah!”

It seemed the whole class was in agreement. At some point the whole thing devolved into insults, as they started venting their frustration toward Boldow.

“Get out of here!”

“Go home!”

“Zero-magic lord!”

“You!!!” Lord Boldow shouted, red in the face. “You’re not getting Leksi! Her private lessons are mine, and mine alone!”

“Ewww!” The whole crowd of students—in fact, they were members of the village’s defensive militia—strongly objected to that line from Boldow.

“Nope! I am *not* interested in hearing about his lordship’s marital activities!”

“Are we going to study swordsmanship today or not?”

“I gotta go work the fields again in the afternoon...”

“Magic’s all well and good, but can we *please* get to practice? It’s the only thing I’m any good at.”

“Well, you certainly gave me an earful, I’ll say that...” Boldow muttered. Officially he might be the lord of the surrounding lands, complete with peerage and a noble title, but his position certainly hadn’t stopped him from taking a licking in this encounter. “All right, all right. Come on, let’s warm up with some strike practice.”

Boldow’s enthusiasm from the lecture on magic seemed to have completely vanished. He acted completely despondent as the class moved on to their sword drills. The students, on the other hand, finally seemed alert. They corrected their postures and began the practice in earnest.

But suddenly, they were interrupted. Boldow could hear a sound from far off

—his lovely wife, shouting at the top of her lungs. He wheeled around, glaring in the direction of the house.

“What was that?!” he said. “A hot guy?!”

The students didn’t seem to have heard anything. Their banter was as merciless as always.

“Huh? Lord Boldow, have you started hearing things?”

“You can always tell us if there’s something bothering you, you know. We won’t do anything to help, though.”

“We probably won’t even listen.”

Boldow, however, was on a different track entirely. “Who’s this scoundrel trying to seduce my Leksi?!” he roared, charging through the forest with such force that it shook the trees as he passed. He leapt down a cliff, hopped over a couple entire wheat fields, and within a few seconds was back at his wife’s side.

“You!” he said, addressing the man standing in front of her. “Rascal! Have you been making passes at Leksi?! Repent, or taste my fireballs!”

The man, however, turned to face Boldow and addressed him calmly. “Are you Kanata’s lord father?” he asked. “It is an honor to meet you. We are Zaggy, né Zag’giel. It is our honor to serve as one of Kanata’s companions.”

Boldow caught one glimpse of the man’s face—the lustrous black hair, the sharp intelligence evident in his eyes, the lips curled up in a measured smile, the unblemished skin and handsome features—and immediately reeled backward like a ghoul caught in the sunlight.

“G-Ghahaaaaah!” Boldow cried. “O-Oh no! He *is* hot! I can’t even hope to compete with him! But I’ll have you know, our house has its own pretty boy! Alus! Come to the door!”

“What foolishness are you yelling about now, father?” said Alus, suddenly appearing behind Boldow. He had set out for home the very first day of summer vacation, and had arrived here even before Kanata. He had been chopping wood behind the house when he heard some familiar voices in the doorway and came to look.

“Oh! Alus! Look! That hot guy was trying to hit on Leksi! You have to defeat him with the power of your good looks!”

“Seeing you right now, father, I feel more certain than ever that Kanata is indeed your daughter.” At the very least, both had a habit of running wild and refusing to listen to anything anyone else had to say. Alus’s face may have made him a worthy rival for Zag’giel, but he had no interest at all in fighting the Demon King. Instead, he shook his hand. “It is a pleasure to see you once more, Sir Zaggy.”

“Indeed, Sir Alus, the pleasure is ours,” Zag’giel said. But a moment later he did a small double take. “Wait. How is it you recognize us? We were not in this form when last we met.” They had encountered each other when the headmaster and teachers of Kanata’s school had tried to recruit Alus in a futile attempt to convince Kanata not to leave the academy immediately after becoming a Beast Tamer. Back then, Zag’giel had still been under the Goddess’s curse.

“I was present for the attack on the Royal Capital,” Alus explained. “Or at least, for the later portion. That was the form in which you set out on your journey, was it not?”

“Alus!” said Boldow, staggering forward in shock to whisper conspiratorially in his ear. “Don’t tell me you know this hot guy!”

“I really wish you would listen when people are talking, father,” said Alus. “This is Sir Zaggy. He is a magic beast serving as my sister’s companion.”

“A-A magic beast?! Him?! But if he’s a humanoid magic beast, wouldn’t that make him a demon? Like, from the Dark Continent?!” Zag’giel was not just *from* the Dark Continent, of course—he was the Demon King who ruled over that entire land.

“We are forever grateful for all your daughter has done for us,” said Zag’giel, shaking Boldow’s hand as he stood dumbfounded. “And we have heard many tales of her illustrious parents. This is a meeting we have long awaited, sir.”

“*Stop hogging the spotlight!*” Fenrir, who had been watching the whole time, quickly fused his bodies back together, reverting to his true form as the Spirit Wolf. He sat with his chest held high, towering above the humans as he glowed

with divine radiance. *“My name is Fen-fen, né Fenrir! I am Kanata’s number one servant! Kanata’s father! Kanata’s mother! Kanata’s younger brother! I bid you greetings!”*

“Wh-Whoa, this one’s *huge!*” Boldow said, gawking up at the wolf. “You made a beast like *this* one of your companions, Kanny?”

Alus, on the other hand, was the very picture of calm. “It is a pleasure to meet you. I bid you greetings as well,” he said, shaking Fenrir’s paw in a gesture that contrasted strangely with the formality of the exchange.

“W-Wait! Is this what we are doing?” asked a flustered Elizavett. *“I-In that case, I shall join as well! T-Transform! Darn you... Transform!!!”* Not wanting to be left out, Elizavett focused all the power in her body, shaking with the sheer effort. It took a minute, but after an intense burst of focus, she managed to overcome the fluffy shackles placed on her by Kanata’s holy blood. She transformed back into a beautiful woman in a red dress.

“Hah...hah...” Elizavett panted. “Very good. ’Twould seem I can yet return to my original form, so long as I have not drunk Mistress’s blood in a short while...” Catching her breath, she curtsied elegantly and gave her introduction in a lilting, songlike voice. “I am Elizabat, née Elizavett! Princess of the ancient vampires, promised to Kanata for life!”

“Th-This one’s a knockout beauty!” Boldow marveled. “Beast Tamers really have it made, huh!”

“Not as such,” said Alus. “My older sister really must be considered a special case.”

“I dislike the company of males, but for Kanata’s family, I will make an exception,” Elizavett declared, daintily holding out her hand. “I will allow you to kiss the back of my hand, if you wish.”

“R-Really?!” exclaimed Boldow, his eyes practically bulging out of his head.

“Father...” Alus sighed.

“Darling?” came the suddenly chill voice of Boldow’s wife Aleksia, who had been standing there the entire time.

“E-Eek!” Boldow cried, curling up into a ball and clinging to his wife’s feet, shaking furiously. “N-No! I wasn’t gonna, Leksi! I swear!”

Boldow wasn’t the only one who was shaking either. Kanata had been eyeing her three servants with a heavy-lidded, accusing gaze.

Zag’giel and Fenrir immediately began to beg or make excuses.

“W-We are turning back! We are turning back right now! We promised it would only be for a short time, did we not? See?!”

“Please! Wait! Just give me a minute longer!”

Elizavett, however, didn’t understand what had the other two in such a frantic rush. “Wh-What? Has something happened?” As she stared in confusion, she felt something push into her mouth. A second later, she registered what it was—Kanata’s finger. “Hwah? What are you—?”

She was partway through her sentence when she felt Kanata prick her own finger on her fang, feeding her just the tiniest amount of blood. Before she knew what was happening, she was back in her furball form.

“Okay!” said Kanata, beaming with pride as she reintroduced the three her own way. “This is Zaggy, this is Fen-fen, and this is Elizabat!” she said, hugging them tight to her chest. “Aren’t they just the *cutest*?!”



“I see...” Boldow said, taking a sip of tea as Kanata finished her explanation of everything that had happened since she’d first met Zag’giel. “So you’ve run into trouble with the Church, have you?” They had elected to move the conversation to the sitting room rather than stand around talking in the doorway.

“I can’t say I’m terribly worried,” said Alus. “This is Kanata, after all. Speaking frankly, I’d be worried for the Church.”

“Our Kanny’s just so full of energy it gets her in trouble sometimes,” her mother Aleksia said. “You held back a lot while you were at school, didn’t you? For me, though, it’s much nicer to see you having fun.”

If it had been almost anyone else, they would have reeled over backward foaming at the mouth in shock from the things they had heard. But Kanata’s family reacted to the news of Demon Kings and Spirit Wolves and Kanata’s struggles against the Church with hardly any apparent surprise at all. Zag’giel found himself deeply impressed.

“So,” Kanata continued, “I’d like to stay here for a little while, just until those Temple Knights give up on chasing Elizabat. Is that okay?”

“Of course it’s okay!” Boldow declared, thumping his fist against his chest for emphasis. “What parents *wouldn’t* be delighted to have their daughter back home? Stay as long as you like!”

“I am sorry to have been the cause of such trouble...” apologized Elizavett.

“Don’t be silly!” said Aleksia. “We’re all just delighted to see our family get bigger!”

“If anything, we should owe you an apology for all the nonsense my sister has put you through,” agreed Alus.

“We thank you, honored father, honored mother, Sir Alus.” Zag’giel bowed his head, and the other two furballs followed suit.

“Father, hm?” Boldow said. “What are your intentions with my daughter?! You’d better not be up to any funny business! Ah, I’ve been waiting for an

opportunity to use that line! I can't believe I got to say that!"

"N-Nothing like that, we assure you," Zag'giel answered.

"Wait, really?" said Boldow. "You mean I'm not getting a hot guy as a son-in-law after all?"

"Please, father, stop," begged Alus. "I am starting to feel genuinely embarrassed."

"What's that?!" Boldow demanded. "And what is it about your old man you find so embarrassing?"

"Your existence."

"My existence?!"

"Just so."

"'Just so,' he says..." Boldow slumped his shoulders in defeat at having been pronounced embarrassing by his own son. "Alus, you take after your mother more and more every day. Those cold eyes of yours are a dead ringer for hers when she's angry. I'm sorry you have such an embarrassing old man, I guess."

Boldow had pursued the way of the sword long enough to have obtained the strongest Profession in the Fencer class—Divine Sword. Moreover, he had the confidence of the king himself. By anyone's standards he was a father worthy of respect. But his day-to-day conduct was so questionable that he frequently found himself at the bottom rung of the Aldezia family.

"Well, all that aside," Boldow continued, turning his attention back toward Kanata. "You don't have to worry about a thing as long as you're under this roof! It might be a small fiefdom, but I can promise you we're beyond the Holy Church's reach. After all, we're way too far in the boonies to even *have* a church! Gah ha ha!" He laughed loudly.

"The Holy Church has little interest in lands that cannot provide an adequate tithe," Alus mused. "I suppose it's fortunate your fiefdom is so poor, father."

"Gah ha ha ha ha! Gah ha... Ha..." Boldow's laughter trailed off in the face of his son's merciless commentary. He slumped his shoulders once more. "My fiefdom is poor..." he sighed.

“Well, that’s enough talking for the moment!” Aleksia declared, standing up and clapping her hands together. “The whole family’s here tonight! I have to get started on dinner!”

“I’ll help, mom!” Kanata volunteered.

“Then we shall assist as well,” Zag’giel offered.

“I don’t know what I can do to help, but I’ll lend you my strength if I can!” said Fenrir.

“And I shall test the flavor with my refined palate!” added Elizavett.

“Oh, me too!” chimed in Boldow.

“Father,” Alus chided, “*you* had best return to the training grounds as fast as you can, and apologize to everyone from the militia. An instructor really isn’t supposed to simply run out on his students.”

“Fiiine...” Boldow sighed. “I’m sorry...” Slumping his shoulders for the third time that conversation, Boldow left with Alus to go back to the training grounds.

And so, Kanata’s summer vacation began in earnest.

Chapter 4: Enemies of the Gods? No! This Is Our Family!

“Now we just need to roast the meat in the oven, and wait for the stew to finish boiling,” Kanata’s mother said as she stirred the lightly boiling pot. “Thank you for all your help, everyone!” she added, patting Kanata on the head.

“Hee hee!” Kanata giggled happily.

Zag’giel found himself struck by the sight of Kanata’s innocent smile. Kanata’s mother brought out a side of her that Zag’giel hadn’t seen before. Kanata was paying careful attention to Aleksia’s every movement. No doubt she wanted her mother to think highly of her.

“I can handle the rest, so why don’t you go ahead and take the first bath?” Aleksia offered.

“Kay-kay!” sang Kanata. “Zaggy, Fen-fen, Elizabat, it’s time for a bath!”

“Very well,” said Zag’giel.

“As you command!” barked Fenrir.

“‘Twill be my first time seeing Mistress’s body naked,” Elizavett considered. “I hope I don’t get too—wait...” Suddenly, she seemed to realize something. She called for Kanata, who was carrying all three of them in her arms, to stop.

“Wait, wait, wait! Mistress... Surely you don’t intend to take these two beasts in the bath with us as well?!”

“I do?” said Kanata, blinking in perfect confusion at the question.

“Th-Th-Think about what you propose!” begged an astonished Elizavett. “Those two are men, are they not?! And you spoke of entering the bath with them as if it were no great thing at all. C-Could it be?! M-Mistress, have you been in the bath with those two before?!”

“I have?” Kanata answered.

“I-Indecency!” Elizavett spat, turning on the other two and battering them furiously with her wings. It was a desperately weak assault, but it was enough to send them tumbling from Kanata’s arms.

Fenrir landed with a bounce and glared up at Elizavett. *“Wh-What do you think you’re doing?! It’s my duty as Lady Kanata’s servant to wash her back! What right do you have to object?!”*

Zag’giel, on the other hand, seemed oddly dispirited. He just lay there on the floor, not moving to take to his feet. *“We... We have refused her many times for precisely this reason,”* he said. *“Alas, as you are no doubt about to learn, Kanata will not be defied on this point...”*

“Come on, Elizabat! Don’t be greedy!” Kanata scolded the pink fluff. “Don’t you wanna have a bath with everyone?”

“No, I don’t!” Elizavett protested. *“No man may leer at my Mistress’s naked body! To say nothing of my own!”*

“Who’s going to leer at your naked body?” said Fenrir. *“Don’t forget—you’ve been walking around naked and on four legs this whole time!”*

“We swear to you, we have never even once looked at Kanata with lecherous eyes...” Far from lecherous, Zag’giel looked utterly humiliated.

Unlike Fenrir, who had been a wolf from the start, Zag’giel was originally a demon, with a form resembling that of a human. He, for one, had a sense of shame. Kanata, however, seemed to pay his feelings no mind in the slightest as she fluffed him to her heart’s content. There was no place on his body that Kanata’s hands hadn’t touched.

“The Demon King Zag’giel is no more...” Zag’giel lamented, lying on his side, his eyes gazing off somewhere far away. *“I am just Zaggy the furball cat...”*

It looked as though he was on the verge of giving up.

Suddenly, who should appear but Boldow, back from training, his fingers spread wide in a dramatic pose. “Zaggy, take heart! I have heard your pleas!”

“Dad, you stink!” said Kanata, squeezing her nose tight.

Boldow frowned theatrically. “What? Really? I thought I smelled like flowers!”

“You don’t,” said Kanata. “You stink.”

“You should at least wipe the sweat from your body before coming in the house, father,” agreed Alus, who had returned together with his father after seeing him off to the training grounds. Unlike his father, he had taken the time to properly towel off before stepping inside. Between the two, he came a lot closer to smelling like flowers.

“Ah, but never mind that!” said Boldow. “A mixed bath, hm? I must say, I envy you...”

“Dear?” said Aleksia, shooting him a cold glare that spoke volumes.

“*Not!* I envy you *not!*” Boldow hastily added, before translating what Kanata’s mother had said with her eyes. “The boys should bathe with the boys, and the girls should bathe with the girls. So... Zaggy! Fen-fen! I suppose that means the three of *us* are getting naked together!”

And so it was decided.

† † †

Behind the Aldezia family’s humble abode stood an incongruously lavish open-air bath, decorated with curiously outlandish sensibilities, as if it were designed by someone from a foreign land.

“*Well! It has been some time since last we enjoyed an outdoor bath!*” exclaimed Zag’giel, nodding with appreciation atop Fenrir’s head.

The Spirit Wolf had rejoined his two parts, and was soaking happily in the large bath himself.

“*With a bath this big, there’s plenty of room for my combined form!*” Fenrir rejoiced.

“Kanata barely ever wanted anything for herself growing up, but for some reason she’s always been very particular about her baths,” Boldow explained. “She excavated this hot spring herself, believe it or not!”

“Everyone was quite astonished when hot water came spouting out of the ground behind our house, I assure you,” added Alus, stepping over the stones surrounding the hot spring and into the water.

“Kanata designed the space as well,” Boldow said. “Although I’m not sure why she divided it into male and female baths... We’re all family, after all!”

“The villagers use the hot springs as well from time to time, so it’s just as well, I suppose,” remarked Alus.

Neither of them had any knowledge of Japanese culture, of course. They had no idea what to make of some of Kanata’s peculiarities.

Boldow leaned back into the hot water, letting out a very dad-like grunt as he beckoned Zag’giel and Fenrir with his hand. “Get in, you two! Don’t let the heat get to you, it feels great!”

“I would be obliged!” answered Fenrir, leaping into the water.

“Excuse me, Sir Alus, but would you perhaps lend us your lap?” asked Zag’giel. His body was too small to reach the bottom of the bath, but with the addition of Alus’s lap the water was the perfect depth.

“Now, now, Zaggy, my boy,” said Boldow. “Kanata isn’t looking, you know? You can do whatever you like...”

Zag’giel’s eyes shot open. *“C-Could you mean...?!”*

“I most certainly do.”

Zag’giel could return to his original form without incurring one of Kanata’s stern glares.

“I-In that case, we shall not hold back!” he said, dispelling the curse and sinking into the hot water. “Lord Boldow! You have our gratitude for your kind consideration!” Zag’giel had vowed to remain in the black furball form in order to gain strength, but he couldn’t help longing to return to his original body from time to time. Boldow had seen straight through him.

“No problem!” Boldow declared, flashing Zag’giel a thumbs-up. “Still... I can’t believe we missed out on getting to bathe with that busty blonde babe! I could just about cry! If only there wasn’t this wall in the way...”

“Such vulgar thoughts do not befit one of your station,” Alus chided him, shooting his father a glare rather reminiscent of his mother. “I will tell mother.”

“A-Alus?!” Boldow groveled. “I’m sorry! Please forgive me! I’ll raise your

allowance!”

Across from the men’s bath, on the other side of a partition, Kanata and Elizavett were soaking in the women’s section.

“Hee hee!” The vampire laughed coquettishly. “We are all alone now, Mistress, are we not?”

“Uh-huh,” came Kanata’s half-hearted reply.

Elizavett was back in her original form, as a gorgeous woman with long blonde hair. She was doing her best to act seductive and alluring, but Kanata was having none of it. Kanata had been expecting to wash her fluffy pets thoroughly before relaxing into the bath to gaze upon the resplendent fluff, but Elizavett firmly believed that bathing naked together simply *wouldn’t* be the same if one of them had fur, and returned to her humanoid form before entering the bath.

“Ahh...” Elizavett sighed happily. “Such bliss...”

“I want some bliss too...” Kanata moped, leaning back and resting on her elbows. She reached out for the moon with one arm, making grabby gestures at imaginary fluff.

† † †

The next day, Kanata and her friends went out under the bright rays of the morning sun to help out with the local farms.

“Hyah!” Kanata cried, uprooting an old stump with a single light attack. “And heave!” she said, lifting the enormous chunk of wood above her head and tossing it on the pile with all of the other stumps and boulders she had cleared away. It would have taken three oxen to even budge that stump.

“Goodness gracious!” exclaimed a villager wearing a straw hat and carrying an array of farming equipment. “It sure is good to have you back, Lady Kanata! I don’t know how we can ever pay you back for that!”

“It would’ve taken us an entire year to clear the land!” agreed his companion. Perhaps the people of this land were used to Kanata’s Herculean strength—they certainly seemed grateful, but none of them were in the least astonished by her feats.

“Should I pull this one out next?” Kanata asked, placing her hand on the next stump standing in the way of cultivating this patch of land.

“Yes, please!” said the grateful villagers.

And what do you suppose Kanata’s three followers were doing while their master was working away?

“Curses!” bellowed Zag’giel. *“Damn you, weeeeeeeed!”*

“Mooooooooove!” cried Fenrir, pulling desperately himself.

“How dare this insolent weed defy me?!” Elizavett wailed.

The three were struggling with all of their combined might to pull a single weed out of the ground. However, as weak as they were, they were simply unable to do it. Even with all three chained together, they were unable to budge the weed an inch.

“Hah... Hah...” Zag’giel gasped for breath. *“What feeble efforts...”* he managed, berating the others through breaths of air. *“Such results...are unbecoming of a servant of Kanata...”*

“You’re not doing any better,” Fenrir grumbled. *“But that being said, I agree.”*

“Should we not then return to our original forms?” Elizavett asked. *“You are a Demon King and a Spirit Wolf, no? And I am an ancient vampire, called the Corpse Princess! Is there truly such a need to stick so diligently to—?”*

“Of course there is!” snapped the other two.

“Nwhoa!” exclaimed Elizavett, reeling from the pair’s suddenly forceful words.

“Kanata is teaching us to always strive to embody our ideal self!” declared Zag’giel.

“To never be satisfied!” added Fenrir. *“To always seek new strength!”*

“If we can obtain power in these wretched forms, we will have broken through the wall of our previous limits!” Zag’giel finished. The pair were remarkably in sync.

“M-Mistress said such a thing...?” Elizavett asked. Of course, she had not.

Kanata had never spoken a word of any of that to either of them. It was pure misunderstanding on their part—a misunderstanding that seemed determined to spread. *“In that case, ’tis no helping it. I, too, shall remain in this form, and obtain even further power!”*

“At last, you understand!” cheered Zag’giel.

“All right!” said Fenrir. *“Let’s combine our power, one more time!”*

“On three! One... Two... Threeeeeeee!”

Once again, the three began their desperate efforts at weeding. It was an extremely absurd performance, but Kanata saw their efforts in a somewhat different light. “Oh gosh,” she gasped. “Zaggy, Fen-fen, and Elizabat are all trying so hard! They’re just absolutely adorable!” In fact, their exquisite adorableness was enough to give Kanata a definite speed boost with her farm work. By noontime, the land was clear as far as the eye could see.

“Yes!” cheered Zag’giel.

“Yeaaaaah!” roared Fenrir. *“We did it!”*

“A victory!” celebrated Elizavett.

After hours of hard work, the three had finally succeeded in pulling out a single weed. They huddled close together, crying tears of joy.

“Yeah!” said Kanata, scooping the three up in her arms and raining a storm of kisses on their fluffy heads. “Good job! Well done!” Kanata, incidentally, had not only cleared the land, but tilled it as well to finish the job properly. However, she didn’t seem nearly as proud of her own achievement as she was of the three furballs for accomplishing their task. After all, it wasn’t often she got to enjoy the sight of her fluffballs so elated at having achieved a reasonably set objective.

“Lady Kanata!” the villagers cried, interrupting the questionably moving scene. “Come have lunch!”

“Coming!” Kanata chirped, heading over to where the villagers were resting in the shade of a large tree. The farmer’s wife and her helpers had made a large pot of vegetable soup for the workers. At first glance the broth looked dark and

somewhat ominous, but as it was ladled into bowls, Zag'giel and the others could see that it had a pleasant amber color.

Kanata had invented this soup seeking a flavor she had known from her previous life, fermenting a local equivalent of soybeans combined with certain mold cultures to produce soy sauce. Strictly speaking, as long as she could achieve fermentation, she didn't need to use soybeans specifically to produce something like soy sauce, but she wanted something close to soybeans regardless. After all, Kanata also had her eye on reproducing miso. In her previous life, Kanata had been confined in a hospital room until the day she died, but it seemed Japanese food, at least, had made a lasting impression on her palate.

Kanata's invention of soy sauce and miso had been well received by the residents of the fiefdom, and soon, traditional Japanese food had become popular in the surrounding territory.

"And an extra large helping for Lady Kanata and her hard workers!" said the villager serving soup.

"Yay!" Kanata cheered.

"You have our thanks," said Zag'giel.

"Thank you!" added Fenrir.

"Hmm..." Elizavett remarked. *"Tis quite pleasing, for country fare."*

The three sat together in the shade, enjoying the soup. The broth was made with a salty soy-sauce base, and it was packed full of hearty root vegetables. It was just the thing for their bodies, thirsty after a morning full of hard work.

"Delicious!" said Kanata.

"Indeed!" added Zag'giel.

"It's very good!" Fenrir agreed.

"I consider myself a gourmand, but this is my first time tasting such a flavor!" Elizavett marveled. *"It has a profound depth despite its simplicity."*

Thanks to Kanata's efforts, the plot of land was cleared and ready for crops as far as the eye could see. There was still a lot of work to do—fertilizer to spread,

saplings to plant, watering and weeding to be done, insects to be kept away—but eating good food while looking out at the results of the day's work was one of the finest pleasures in life.

“It's our home and all, but there really is nothing but farmland around here...” one of the villagers muttered.

“It's the middle of the middle of nowhere,” said another. “What more needs to be said?”

Despite being the territory ruled by Boldow the Divine Sword, there was no particular industry in the fiefdom, nor any urban developments worthy of the name ‘city.’ The only thing they had was plenty of fresh produce from the fertile land. Boldow was a man of few desires, and didn't levy taxes beyond necessity. The people of the fiefdom didn't expand their farms beyond reason either, although it seemed they had been planning on organizing the rare bit of field clearing when who should show up but Kanata, their very own heavy machinery in human form.

“We could make a bunch of copies of Kanata's inventions and sell them in nearby cities!” someone offered. “We could earn a ton of money that way!”

“We have plenty of specialty craftspeople around, but Lord Boldow really has no ambition whatsoever. He must not see any point in striking it rich...”

“Of course not!” said an older villager. “Call us a poor fiefdom if you like, but not one of us has gone hungry since Lord Boldow took over! Nobody dies in the winters, and thanks to Lady Aleksia, it's been years since we've had a serious case of disease. From my perspective, it's been like a miracle! We may not have money, but we do have wealth!”

Boldow may have had the lowest status in the Aldezia household, but it seemed he at least enjoyed the respect of his subjects. Even the Demon King himself held him in high regard.

“Indeed!” said Zag'giel. “We knew he was no ordinary man the moment we set eyes on him!”

The revered lord himself, meanwhile, was busy being cornered by his wife, who had heard what he had said about Elizavett earlier in the bath from their

son Alus.

“Does that mean...you aren’t satisfied with me?” she asked.

“N-No!” Boldow pleaded. “Not at all! I just wanted to get closer with our Kanny’s companions! I thought dirty talk would be the best way to make friends with a couple of guys! Please, Leksi! You gotta believe me!”

† † †

In the afternoon, Kanata and her fluffy companions paid a visit to the training grounds used by Boldow and the local militia, where Alus was facing off against his father. Alus had assumed a low stance, hiding the reach of his blade, while Boldow stood at ease, his wooden practice sword resting on one shoulder.

“Both of you, do your best!” Kanata cheered.

“Here I come, father,” said Alus.

“All right, then!” Boldow beckoned his son forward with his free hand. “Let’s see what you can do!”

Alus launched himself forward so quickly it looked like he might have learned how to teleport himself, striking from below. Boldow met the attack head-on, blocking with his own sword. But instead of clashing with his father’s blade, Alus circled around behind him, aiming to strike across the middle of Boldow’s exposed back using the momentum of his previous slash.

His sword, however, struck nothing but air. Alus’s eyes opened wide—Boldow was behind *him*. He brought up his sword in time to stop his father’s leisurely overhead strike. The wooden swords clashed together with a terrible cracking sound.

“Oho!” said Boldow, pressing the attack. “Not bad, Alus! You’ve gotten better!”

Alus was holding his sword in both hands, and yet it was taking all of his strength to hold back Boldow’s single-handed blows. Alus’s hefty wooden sword made a precarious creaking sound. He gasped. If his sword broke, Alus’s defeat would be all but assured.

Struggling to overcome his father’s ludicrous strength, Alus changed the angle

of his blade, letting Boldow's sword glance off to the side and saving his own from being cracked in two. He spun around and thrust his sword at Boldow's unprotected face. Boldow, however, simply tilted his head to the side to avoid the blade, countering with a well-placed side slash. Alus had seen the counterattack coming in time to block, but his guard had done nothing to prevent the blow from driving him back, digging a groove in the ground with his heels from the sheer force and sending him back to where he had started. Alus held his sword on guard, facing Boldow, waiting for his father to attack.

"Don't just stare!" Boldow told him as he calmly advanced on the boy. "The situation won't change if you stay still! Move! Move! Attack me!"

"Kh...! Yes, father!" Alus clenched his teeth and launched a series of sharp strikes, slashing high and low and in between in an elegant dance of bladework as Boldow parried each and every strike with his sword in one hand.

"Yes, good!" Boldow said. "You won't find a decisive opening if you don't attack! Don't get all passive just because you took a hit! Attack! Attack!"

"Haaaaah!" Alus shouted, his father's words spurring him to attack with greater and greater ferocity.

Meanwhile, Kanata's three fluffy companions were watching the bout attentively.

"Incredible!" Zag'giel rhapsodized. *"What splendid prowess!"*

"It seems like the son has a clear disadvantage..." Fenrir observed.

"I would say he is putting up a splendid fight, for his age!" Elizavett argued.

In fact, Alus was a superb swordsman. None of his peers—nor even your typical adult swordsman—would have been a match for him. He was so skilled that, if he were to become an adventurer that very day, his swordplay would earn him the coveted A-Rank in no time. However, the ease with which his father parried his every attack was nothing short of unnatural. Moreover, Boldow was fighting one-handed. The difference in their ability couldn't be more clear.

"Still, it seems Sir Alus has yet to concede..." said Zag'giel. Indeed, the fighting spirit in the young boy's eyes didn't seem to have dimmed in the slightest.

Alus delivered a flurry of quick strikes, concealing a single powerful blow that finally managed to deflect Boldow's sword. Seizing the opening, he stepped forward. "Hah!" he cried, aiming a thrust for Boldow's throat.

"Whoa!" Boldow bent over backward, narrowly avoiding the blade. "That one was close!"

But Alus wasn't finished. He had counted on his father dodging that thrust. As he thrust with the sword in his right hand, he had kept his left out of view to hide the pale lightning coursing through his arm.

"Lightning Bolt!!!" he shouted, aiming to finish the match with a close-range lightning spell.

Boldow would have easily defended against any spell Alus could cast. That was why he had attempted this two-stage plan of getting his father off-balance with a desperate thrust before following up with the fastest attack spell he knew.

"Oh crap!" Boldow said, a panicked expression crossing his face as he saw what was happening. There was a flash of light and a clap of thunder. The sand on the floor of the arena was kicked up by the force of the attack.

As the sand cloud settled, the onlookers could see Alus, his left hand held out to cast his spell. A sword was lying on the ground, charred black. And his father Boldow's fist was jabbed neatly against his jaw.

"And that's the match!" declared Boldow. "I win!"

"That was unfair, father," Alus grumbled as he relaxed his guard. "You promised me you would only fight with your one arm."

"Unfair? Pishposh! I never told you I wouldn't fight empty-handed! And you'll notice I punched you with my right arm, just like I said."

"Ngh!" If only the boys from Alus's school could see him now. With his face twisted in frustration, he almost looked like an actual child.

"Still!" Boldow said. "You did good! You had me worried there at the end!"

"That was a secret technique I developed to defeat you, you know, father," Alus said. "But I suppose I am still far from your level..."

“You developed a killer secret technique like that just to use against your own dad?” Boldow reeled. “That’s just cold! Sometimes you scare me, kid.”

“A lightning bolt like that wouldn’t have been enough to kill you, though, would it, father?”

“That’s a whole lotta faith you have in me, I gotta say! At this point, I’m quaking in my boots thinking about what it’s gonna be like when you come home for *winter* vacation!”

“I wish you wouldn’t speak that way after dispatching me so easily,” Alus grumbled. “It’s quite unsportsmanlike of you.”

After a brief bit of verbal sparring between father and son to follow up the swordplay, the two of them walked over to where Kanata and the others had been watching and cheering them on. Kanata greeted them with a great big smile on her face, but the three furballs were too busy trembling in awe of the match they had just witnessed.

“C-Could you make out what happened at the end, perchance?” asked Elizavett.

Fenrir shook his head. *“I couldn’t make out anything, with all the sand in the air...”*

Only Zag’giel had been able to make out what had transpired. *“Incredible...”* he muttered, shivering.

“Wh-What is?” demanded Elizavett. *“Could you tell what happened?!”*

“I couldn’t see how Lord Boldow avoided that lightning attack,” said Fenrir. *“Don’t tell me you were able to follow that, Demon King!”*

“We could,” Zag’giel answered. *“But only because combining close-range attacks with spellcasting has long been our specialty in combat.”*

Boldow had quickly ascertained that he had no time to dodge Alus’s spell, so he threw his sword in the air, sacrificing it to serve as a lightning rod while he countered with a bare-handed punch to Alus’s jaw. It was a feat easier said than done. The reaction time needed to pull off such a maneuver was nothing short of legendary. If he had misjudged the timing even a little, Boldow would have

ended up scorched by lightning. He needed to release his grip on the wooden sword just as the lightning struck, so that the electricity wouldn't travel from the blade down to his arm. It was a window of only a split second. Moreover, Boldow had done this while he was still off-balance from Alus's attack. How could anyone see such a thing and not be struck by awe?

"Sir Alus's stratagem of following one mortal blow with another is indeed formidable, but Lord Boldow was able to both dodge and counter the attack. His ability is truly abnormal, to say the very least. We ourselves would be hard pressed to overcome him, even at the height of our power." Zag'giel's respect for Boldow, it seemed, was only growing greater. By this point it was already stratospheric.

"But I gotta say..." Boldow said, "What the heck was that spell at the end?! That was wild! It's not fair! I wanna cast spells like that tooooooo!"

"I fear it would be impossible, father. You have no magic power whatsoever."

"First the militia, and now you..." Boldow grumbled. "But I won't give up! As long as I hold hope in my heart, one day my wish will be granted!"

"Hah..." Alus sighed with exasperation at his father's passionate declaration before turning to face Kanata. "Sister," he said.

"Uh-huh?" Kanata asked.

Alus passed his wooden sword over to Kanata. "Kindly give our fantasist of a father a taste of reality."

"Huh?" Boldow's face went white. "A-Against my darling Kanny? But I wouldn't have a chance!"

"Okay!" Kanata chirped. "I'll do my best!"

"Please, Kanny!" Boldow begged. "Listen to me!"

Kanata gave the sword a number of practice swings before rushing straight at her father.

"N-Noooooooooo!" cried the man the Demon King Zag'giel held in such high esteem, as Kanata sent him spiraling through the air.

"Mistress is extraordinary..." Elizavett marveled.

“Way to go, Lady Kanata!” cheered Fenrir.

“Kanata’s power is in an entirely different dimension,” said Zag’giel. *“There is simply no explanation for this.”* He turned to Alus, who had sat down with the three fluff balls, leaving his father to Kanata. *“And although you lost in the end, we must say you were splendid as well, Sir Alus.”*

“You do me an honor, Sir Zaggy,” said the boy, bowing his head before the black furball.

Zag’giel truly did think highly of Alus’s prowess, although he couldn’t help but worry whether the boy, with all his talent, had developed an inferiority complex from spending so much time around his father and sister. *“Tell us, Sir Alus. What do you think of Kanata and your lord father?”*

“I respect them a great deal,” came Alus’s immediate answer. *“When I followed in my older sister’s footsteps and went to attend school in the Royal Capital, the students and faculty spoke of my family often. My father and mother have both made significant contributions to this land’s well-being, and my sister outshines them both in sheer achievement.”*

“We can but imagine that you were compared to them often...”

“I was. But that also spurred me to work harder myself. I don’t feel bitter at all. After all, my father and mother and sister really are that extraordinary. I know that better than anyone. It holds my pride in check, you see. Otherwise I might have developed something of a big head.”

“We see...” Zag’giel nodded. Alus had been blessed with a good family, he thought. His easygoing father, his kind mother, and his sister, who was an undeniably strange person, but reliable and decisive when she had an objective in mind. Alus himself was growing up to be a wonderful, purehearted boy.

“Besides, I know what my family is like very well,” Alus continued. *“I believe there are things I can do to support them as well. After all, you’ve met my father and sister...”*

“Y-Yes, we see...” Zag’giel repeated. Knowing his master Kanata, he understood all too well what sort of help she and her father might need.

“And my mother looks all right at first glance, but she isn’t without her

troubles in that area as well..." Alus continued.

"Hm? Indeed? She seemed to us to be a kindly, maternal lady..."

"Oh, yes," said Alus. "Come to think of it, Sir Zaggy, you should know of this. The truth is..."

But before Alus could reveal whatever it was about his mother that was such great trouble, the woman herself appeared before their eyes carrying a large picnic basket covered in cloth, no doubt containing a home-cooked meal made by none other than the Archsage Aleksia herself. "Good job, everyone!" she said. "Now, mama has some delicious refreshments for my hardworking warriors!"

"Oho!" Zag'giel said, perking up. "That would be welcome indeed! We are certain everyone has worked up something of a hunger with all that training. We, too—"

"Sir Zaggy, I ask you to wait just one moment," Alus said, stopping him. "Mother," he asked, "did you perhaps prepare that meal yourself?"

"I did indeed!" Aleksia replied with a smile. "And this time I gave it even more of my all than usual!"

"I see," Alus said, his expression turning dark. "Even more of your all than usual, you say..."

"Sir Alus, what is the matter?" Zag'giel asked. "Are you not happy that your mother has prepared a homemade meal for you? For our part, we would be inclined to accept it with gratitude."

"Well..." Alus said, grasping to find the right thing to say. "Rather... You see..."

"Hm? But the meal your mother prepared for us last night was most delicious, was it not?" Zag'giel asked.

"Well, yes..." Alus managed. "I am sure it will be delicious. It's just..."

Zag'giel tilted his head in confusion. It was rare for Alus to struggle with his words like this.

"Ahhhhhh!" Kanata cried, struck by Zag'giel's adorable little gesture. "Zaggy's head tilt was just so *cute*!" she exclaimed, squeezing her father tight around the

side as he lay limply on the ground.

“Oh, there you are!” said Aleksia. “Kanny! Boldow! Come eat with us! I made all *sorts* of things today!”

“Huh?!” said Kanata. “Mom...did you make that yourself?!”

“Yes I did!”

“I see...” Kanata sighed, looking as dismal at the prospect as her brother did.

“*K-Kanata too...*” Zag’giel said. What in the world could possibly be inside that basket? The Demon King’s mind was racing furiously.

“All right, everyone!” Aleksia said. “Come dig in!” She spread a cloth on the ground in front of the rest of the family, and uncovered the basket.

Inside was nothing short of hell.

“*Wh-What is this?!* ” Zag’giel balked. Viscous, poisonous-looking bubbles rose from the frothing swamp in the basket. There were strange plants with human faces, moaning with low rumbling voices as the wormlike creatures coiled around the putrid mess throbbed and pulsed with life. And *something* was trying to burst out from deep within.

Truly, it was hell itself in miniature.

“*E-Even the Dark Continent where we were born held nothing so grotesque!*”

“Aren’t they cute?” said Aleksia.

“*C-Cute?!* ”

“I really think I nailed it this time!” she said, seizing hold of a clump of leafy greens and pulling it triumphantly out from the hell basket. In the fresh air, Zag’giel could see that the root had an unmistakably human figure. “Here you go!” she said.

“*Geeshashasha!*” the thing cried.

“*H-Here you go, did she say?!* ” Zag’giel repeated.

Meaning, that Aleksia intended them to eat this thing—this sinister magic beast that had emerged from her basket of nightmares—raw. Alus looked more perturbed than Zag’giel had ever seen him. He held his head high, but could not

bring himself to look. Kanata *was* looking, but her face was grim. Neither of them seemed like they were going to come forward with a way out of the situation. The other two furballs were clinging to each other, trembling with fear.

“H-Honored mother...” Zag’giel said. *“What, may we ask, is this mons—”* He cut himself off. *“This dish?”* he finished, correcting himself.

“Carrot salad sandwiches!” Aleksia declared proudly. “They’re cute when they’re squirming like that, don’t you think?”

Sandwiches, it need not be said, ordinarily do not squirm at all. Moreover, the creature flailing its humanlike limbs was clearly not a sandwich. Indeed, by all appearances, it wasn’t food at all. Far to the east, there were lands where people ate raw fish and the like, but even they would never dream of touching something so grotesque.

“Here you go, Zaggy!” Aleksia said brightly. “Say aah!”

Did he have to eat it? Was refusal not an option? Zag’giel thought back over his entire relationship with Kanata’s family. He considered the strange mood that had come over the training grounds. And he made up his mind.

“No!” he said. *“We will not flinch from this! Gh—!”*



"He ate it!" Fenrir exclaimed in awe as Zag'giel steeled his nerves and went to devour the creature.

"Such courage!" marveled Elizavett.

The "sandwich" wailed a horrible, unearthly death shriek as Zag'giel bit down. He chewed furiously until it was nothing but homogeneous paste, and swallowed.

"W-Well?" asked Fenrir.

"It's not going to burst out of your stomach, is it...?" wondered Elizavett.

The two watched, worried, as Zag'giel sat silently for a moment. Suddenly, his eyes snapped open. *"Delicious!"* he declared.

"Whaaaaaat?!" The other two furballs reeled.

The light texture and natural sweetness had indeed been a perfect match for carrot salad. There was a subtle sourness to it as well. Perhaps the carrots had been boiled with orange peel to lend subtlety to the flavor. It was, indeed, a thoroughly refreshing morsel.

"Mother's cooking really does taste good," Alus whispered quietly so only Zag'giel could hear. "But sometimes she produces these mysterious living creatures instead of regular food. Perhaps it's because her aesthetic sense is so strange. She always calls them *cute*..." Alus grabbed one of the hell monsters out of the basket himself and took a bite. "See? It really is enjoyable food, as long as you close your eyes and plug your ears as you eat. And through some sorcery or other, they're quite nutritious as well. The gentlemen from the militia have been looking much more robust ever since they learned to tolerate mother's cooking..."

Other than appearances, the mysterious life-forms were the perfect foodstuff. That was the true miracle of the Archsage Aleksia's cuisine.

"We see..." said Zag'giel. *"Then that is why Kanata insisted on helping to prepare dinner last night..."* She had been watching her mother closely to make sure she didn't do anything strange in a fit of passion.

"Gah ha ha!" Boldow laughed. "Your sandwiches are the best, Leksi! I must be

the luckiest man in the world to have got me a wife who's so handy in the kitchen!"

"Oh, you!" Aleksia blushed.

Boldow had been eating Aleksia's cooking since he was a young man, and had gotten used to its strange appearance. Or perhaps his will had simply been broken.

The family did their best to ignore the screams of the sandwiches as they ate.

"We suppose she, too, is one of Kanata's parents, after all..." Zag'giel muttered. He plugged his ears to block out the sound—he was fairly sure he could hear faint screams coming from inside his stomach.

† † †

It had been one week since Sir Theodoric's Temple Knights had lost sight of the Corpse Princess Elizavett.

"Our entire army has been searching for the witch, but there's been no sign of her anywhere..." Theodoric's voice was calm, but the quiet anger in his eyes had the Temple Knights standing at attention in front of him sweating with fear.

It was not known how far the girl could travel with that teleportation spell of hers, but it shouldn't matter. The Holy Church had believers watching in all corners of the world. It was true that Saint Marianne had turned apostate, but the effect of that development was still localized. None of the churches would dare defy an order from the Temple Knights. It was as Theodoric originally suspected. She must have gone somewhere where she could avoid being seen by humans altogether, in the far reaches of civilization, beyond the influence of the Holy Church.

Unfortunately, there was no shortage of such places in the world. Theodoric had three thousand Temple Knights under his command. It was impossible for them to search every location she could conceivably be. They would have to take the time to exhaustively go over the entirety of the fringes of the world with a fine-tooth comb.

"Well, no matter," Theodoric said. "You're dismissed. Don't contact me unless you learn something."

“Y-Yes, Sir!” the Temple Knights said, and left.

Alone in his office, Theodoric slumped despondently into his chair.

“And just when I thought we were finally to be wed...” he sighed.

Alas, Theodoric’s wish had gone unfulfilled. The wider they cast their net, the larger the holes. It would take a period of time measured in years to search every village without a nearby church one at a time.

“Take heart,” came a voice from above. *“Your wish may yet be granted.”*

A shiver ran down Theodoric’s spine. The voice he heard had been one of superb divinity. Above him, he could feel the presence of something whiter than the purest white.

“Y-You...” he said. “Could it be...?”

He looked up fearfully to see the Goddess, looking down at him with a smile of benevolent love. Ordinarily, the gods spoke to none other than their intermediary, the Saint. A direct visitation from the Goddess was nothing short of a miracle. Theodoric found himself utterly unable to move from the awe of it.

“Temple Knight Theodoric Grey,” the Goddess intoned. *“You love the Corpse Princess Elizavett, do you not? Despite your station, you harbor feelings for an undead—a being who defiles life itself, rejecting the cycle of death and rebirth...”*

“I-I...” Theodoric stammered. He knew perfectly well that his love was forbidden, but had he truly committed any sins so great as to force the Goddess—the creator of the entire world—to descend from the heavens to pronounce his guilt? Now that the gods had found out, he would have no choice but to give up on Elizavett and go to slay her in earnest. He scowled bitterly, caught between his faith and his longing for the vampire of his dreams.

The Goddess, however, simply smiled beneficently. *“Your love has moved my heart,”* she said.

“What...?”

“The purity of your love has moved me as few have before.”

Much to Theodoric’s surprise, the Goddess appeared to be praising him. How

could a divine being speak such blasphemous words?

“Ordinarily, such a love would not be permitted—your star-crossed love, transcending species itself. However, I shall grant you this indulgence. As a god, it is my right to pardon sins. Henceforth, none may call your love a sin.”

“A-Ahh!” Theodoric cried. “Your Divinity! You would bless my forbidden love?!”

“The love you have chosen is one of trial and tribulation. But worry not. I will reveal to you the place where your beloved is held prisoner. And I will give you the blessing of the Hero, that you may deliver the witch to her fitting end.”

Hero was a special Profession that only appeared when the Demon King threatened to destroy humanity, given to the one chosen to stand against the forces of darkness. It was a powerful class that would send all of someone’s abilities skyrocketing to dozens of times their previous limit, and came with a vast array of powerful magic and sword techniques. It was without a doubt the strongest Profession available to humankind, and the Goddess intended to grant it to Theodoric directly.

Theodoric made up his mind in that moment—he and Elizavett were destined to be wed. After all, the creator of the world herself had appeared to bless the union.

“The wicked witch who has spirited away your beloved hides in the northern reaches of the kingdom, in a small fiefdom on the border. Destroy her, and win back your beloved. Then, you must deliver the retribution of the gods to the heretical cult that protects her!”

Theodoric knelt down, taking a vow on his honor as a knight. “Your will be done! Just you watch, Your Divinity! I will destroy your enemies if it costs me my life!”

The Goddess nodded, smiling to herself as she changed Theodoric’s Profession to Hero. And soon, with the greatest power that could be granted to a human in his hands, he marched forth at the head of an army of Temple Knights, headed for the kingdom’s northern border.

“Ahhhh...” Elizavett sighed. “Truly, this is paradise...” She had just gotten out of the bath and was lying down to sleep, thinking over her many blessings. “The food is delectable, the bath is warm, and the people of this land are as good-natured as the family that governs them...”

The people of the Aldezia fiefdom had been happy to accept Kanata’s furballs into their community. Elizavett, Zag’giel, and Fenrir were almost entirely useless, but they worked hard, and people had taken to giving them treats as a reward for their efforts. Thanks to their kindness, the balls of fluff were starting to look even rounder than before.

“It would be a better paradise if I could sleep with all of you...” Kanata moped.

Ever since returning to her hometown, Kanata had been forced to let Zag’giel and Fenrir sleep in a separate bed. Partly, they were trying to avoid upsetting Elizavett by forcing her to share a bed with men, but Kanata’s father Boldow had also wanted his share of nighttime gossip between men. Zag’giel had been eager for the chance to talk with Boldow the Divine Sword as well, and so it was settled.

Fenrir, for his part, had thought it was terribly unfair. *“Why should you be the only one allowed by Lady Kanata’s side?!”* he had protested, but in the end he’d been compelled to sleep with the other men.

“You have me, Mistress,” Elizavett said, snuggling close. “Would you not rather embrace me than the likes of a man?”

Kanata wrapped her arms tight around the tiny vampire, burying her face against her fluffy stomach. *“Hnnnhhh...”* She breathed in deep, taking in all the fluff particles she could absorb. *“Fluff fluff...fluff fluuuuff...”*

“Hee hee hee!” Elizavett giggled. “You are truly precious, Mistress. But are you satisfied holding this small furball in your arms? Might I return to my original form, that we might enjoy each other more fully?”

“No, thank you!” Kanata chirped as she fed Elizavett her daily dose of blood.

“Nghn...” Elizavett grumbled in dissatisfaction as she sucked the blood from Kanata’s finger. “Mistress, your chaste virtue is most frustrating at times...”

Kanata’s blood served to heal Elizavett’s wounds, but it also possessed a

strange power that kept her trapped in her furball form. Zag'giel had theorized that this phenomenon resulted from the holy power in Kanata's blood clashing with Elizavett's undead nature.

"Such delicious blood..." she sighed. *"Between Mistress's blood and the tomato juice you produce in this village, 'tis difficult indeed to say which is more delectable..."*

"Elizabat!" said Kanata. "Don't drink *too* much or you'll make my finger swell up!"

"Oh, goodness!" said Aleksia as she stepped into the room dressed in a negligee. "I'm not interrupting, am I?"

Aleksia had been sharing a room with Kanata and Elizavett. She had insisted it was unfair for only Boldow to deepen his relationship with Kanata's new friends, so the three women in the house had been getting to know each other as well.

"I brought lots and lots of sweets!" Aleksia said. "I thought they would be nice to have while we chat."

"Yay! Sweets!" Kanata cheered. "Your sweets are the best, mom!"

"I wonder why her sweets don't come out looking like a map of the hell realms..." Elizavett mused to herself. Wary after the trauma of the mysterious life-forms Aleksia called "sandwiches," she poked gingerly at the cookies Kanata's mother had brought for them. Fortunately, these ones didn't scream. They were to all appearances ordinary cookies that crumbled deliciously in the mouth.

As the girls settled in for a lively chat over sweets, the boys' room was engaged in a discussion of their own.

"What?!" Boldow thundered. "Alus, you met the Goddess?!"

"I did," said Alus. "It was such an absurd situation that I debated with myself whether I should even bring it up, but I suppose you should at least know that she means to harm my sister and Sir Zaggy."

“S-S-S-S-So what was it like?!” Boldow stammered. “Was the Goddess a looker?! How big were her tits?!”

“Father...” Alus shook his head. “Must I speak to mother again?”

“Hey, come now! This is just how guys talk when they’re hanging out! Right, Zaggy?” Boldow turned to the furball for support, only to be met with evasiveness.

“H-Hm...” Zag’giel grunted. *“We must confess, we struggle to take your perspective on this...”*

“It’s an astonishing level of disrespect toward the gods, honestly,” Alus said. “I’m afraid the Goddess is a bit out of your league, father.”

“That is no goddess, but an evil spirit wearing the disguise of divinity!” Zag’giel declared, a grave look in his eyes. *“It was she who inflicted this curse upon us, as well. And now she seeks to draw Sir Alus into her schemes too...”*

“What’s this?” Boldow asked, sitting up in the futon he had been resting on. “That sounds kinda serious!”

“It is,” said Alus. “And that is why I would like you to listen seriously.” After all, the Goddess had offered to make Alus into a Hero in an attempt to use his power to destroy Kanata and Zag’giel.

“It was a splendid performance, Sir Alus,” Zag’giel remarked. *“Not only did you see through the Goddess’s lies, but you dealt her a blow with your sword as well. Alas, we were unable to strike even that single blow against her...”*

“It sounds like things are getting pretty out of hand all of a sudden,” Boldow said, scratching his chin in thought. “If it’s a god we’re dealing with, she probably already knows exactly where we are...”

“Most likely,” Zag’giel agreed. *“However, the gods exist in a dimension above our own. It takes a considerable amount of time and power for them to interfere in the material world. Still, we can count on the Goddess to twist the authority her divine providence grants her to send mortals trials and blessings as much as she can for the sake of furthering her evil schemes.”*

“The power to grant Professions to whomever she might choose is a powerful

tool,” Alus said. “I refused her, but I cannot deny that the offer she made is attractive indeed. And if I had not had the fortune to be acquainted with you and my sister, I might have taken her tale of an evil witch and the Demon King at face value.”

“Wait, hang on a minute!” said Boldow. “This is all sounding kinda familiar. You know, thinking back, I received a similar offer myself!”

“The so-called Goddess came to you as well?” Alus asked.

“She was a looker for sure, but something about her gave me the creeps...” Boldow recalled. “I think Leksi chased her away halfway through her spiel, so I didn’t get a great sense of what she was trying to tell us.”

“So she extended an offer to mother too,” Alus mused. “I suppose I can see why she would want the two of you on her side.”

“Rather careless of the Goddess, to approach the family of her target...” said Zag’giel.

“Well, us aside, what about that Theo boy who’s been so hard-set on Miss Elizavett? He seems like he’d accept the Goddess’s offer in a heartbeat...”

“You speak true. It would not be at all strange for a man so obsessed with Elizavett to harbor a hatred of Kanata as well. He would likely need no persuasion at all. It would not surprise us in the slightest if his forces were coming this way as we speak. Given the danger, we cannot ask you to aid us more than you already have.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” said Boldow. “There’s no need to act like a stranger! You’re as good as family, Zaggy! And what kind of father would I be if I didn’t protect my family when they’re in danger?”

“L-Lord Boldow!” Zag’giel exclaimed, overcome with emotion.

“You can call me ‘dad’ if you want,” Boldow offered.

“N-No thank you. We believe we have told you this before, but Kanata and we really are nothing more than master and servant.”

“Father doesn’t want to let a prospective son-in-law escape,” Alus said. “It’s written all over his face. He had long since given up hope of his daughter ever

being married.”

“Wow! You read me like a book! Way to go, Alus!”

“You are not exactly difficult to understand, father. But more to the point, it seems we must be on guard against a potential attack.”

“Yeah,” said Boldow. “I’ll let the militia boys know. They’ll be glad to have something to do for once.”

“Our thanks, both of you!” said Zag’giel.

“Incidentally,” Alus asked, “have any of you seen Sir Fen-fen? It seems that he has been missing for a while...”

“Fen-fen went to the girls’ room, all *‘I must stand guard over Lady Kanata!’*” Boldow answered.

“Wh-What?!” Zag’giel sputtered. *“That cheat, trying to keep Kanata to himself! This will not stand! We must go and stand guard over Kanata as well!”*

“Sister is the strongest of all of us...” Alus said, tilting his head in confusion. “Does she really need guards...?”

Zag’giel, however, was already flying out the door to join Fenrir in his sleepless guard-dog routine outside Kanata’s door. The two fell asleep as the sun rose over the horizon, leaning against each other. It was a sight that set Kanata’s heart well and truly aflutter when she woke up later that morning.

† † †

A few days after their conversation about the Goddess and her plans, Kanata’s family breakfast was interrupted by a young member of the militia bursting in through their front door.

“Lord Boldow! It’s an emergency! There’s a whole bunch of armored knights on horseback coming this way!”

“So they came after all...” Boldow grunted. “How many?”

“I have no idea! But a *lot*! There’s gotta be more of them than the population of the whole fiefdom!”

“Right,” said Boldow. “I’ll head out at once. Tell the militia to stand by. No

engaging them on your own!”

“Got it!”

“You’d better, or else I’ll roast the lot of you with my fireball spell!” Boldow waved his hands as if he were casting a spell.

“Not that you can cast fireball...” the youth quipped before bolting back out to convey Boldow’s orders. “Well, see you!”

“*Are you going as well, Lord Boldow?*” Zag’giel asked. Boldow showed no sign of taking to his feet.

“I,” Boldow declared, “am going to *eat my breakfast.*”

Zag’giel slumped forward in exasperation.

“Come now, Zaggy!” Boldow protested. “If I don’t eat breakfast, I won’t have my strength when I need it! Besides, I’d never leave a meal my Leksi cooked for me unfinished!”

“*W-We see!*” said Zag’giel. “*So your thoughts were on the battle even while eating breakfast. A true warrior!*”

“Sir Zaggy,” Alus cautioned the Demon King. “I would advise not taking anything my father says *too* seriously...”

But Zag’giel was already busy devouring his meal in imitation of Boldow. In the end, the family ate until they were full, then enjoyed a bit of tea after the meal before finally setting out to meet the oncoming knights.

The knights wore polished silver armor that reflected the powerful rays of the morning sun like thousands of mirrors as their column drew nearer from a distance. They trampled the fields as they approached.

“Those bastards!” said the youth from the militia, gritting his teeth. “That’s our wheat!”

“Calm down.” Boldow put a hand on the boy’s shoulder as he stepped out ahead of him. “The wheat’s important, but not as important as your life.”

The militia had fewer than a hundred members in its ranks—barely even a single percent of the number of knights arrayed against them. It seemed like

impossible odds, but Boldow strode out in front of the invading army as if he were going for a late morning stroll. He led his men within several dozen stride lengths of the army. At that distance, their sheer presence was just about a tangible force.

“Good day!” Boldow said, completely relaxed in the face of the knights’ overbearing pressure. “I’m the lord who governs this land, Boldow Aldezia. I must say, you lot are being rather disrespectful, the way you’re barging in here! I hope you realize, but the people of this fiefdom took great pains to grow that wheat your horses are trampling! I would very much appreciate it if you withdrew a little. Say, aaaaalllll the way over there, where you’ll be out of sight.”

The knights stirred with anger. No doubt they had taken Boldow’s suggestion as a provocation. They readied their lances to charge at a moment’s notice, but their commander held them back.

“I beg your pardon, Lord Boldow, but I am afraid I cannot do that.” The ranks of knights parted, and from their midst emerged a man whose armor was a different make from the rest. He removed his helmet in a graceful gesture, revealing the handsome face of Sir Theodoric. “I apologize for greeting you on horseback when you are on foot, but you understand the necessity of battle. I am Theodoric Grey, Commander of the Temple Knights under direct commission from the Holy Church. It is an honor to make your acquaintance.”

“Yes, yes, nice to meet you,” said Boldow. “But I really do need to ask you to refrain from having this battle of yours here. This is an official fiefdom, recognized by the crown. Direct commission from the Holy Church or no, you can’t just violate my borders like this!”

“No, I very much can,” Theodoric answered. “After all, you are harboring the enemies of the gods!”

“I’m *what?*” Boldow raised an eyebrow in indignant surprise.

Theodoric turned from the lord of the fiefdom himself to the residents of the fief, who were watching with clear worry, and the Aldezia family, who were standing between them and the army in order to protect them from harm. He took a deep breath.

“Kanata Aldezia!” he bellowed.

“Me?” Kanata asked innocently, as all eyes turned to her.

“Evil witch who dares defy the will of the gods!” Theodoric roared. “There will be no more running away for you this time! The Goddess is with us! We will find you, no matter where you hide! Now hand over Elizavett!”

“No way! I’m not giving you Elizabat! Hmph!” Kanata said, sticking her hands on her hips and pouting theatrically.

“Sister...” said Alus, skillfully plucking away a bread crumb left over from breakfast that had been stuck on Kanata’s cheek. “Nobody will take you seriously if you have food stuck to your face.”

Elizavett, meanwhile, huffed in annoyance from her perch on Kanata’s shoulder. “*Persistent bastard...*” she said. “*Do you not understand? I belong to Mistress!*”

“Hm?” Theodoric blinked, a puzzled look coming over his face.

“*I am not without sympathy, of course,*” Elizavett continued haughtily. “*I cannot fault you for being stricken with admiration for a peerless beauty such as myself. However, I, too, have a right to choose my partners. Never would I go with the likes of you! Some flowers one may never touch. Besides, ’twas you who burned down my castle! You’ve given me every reason to hold you in enmity, and not one to regard you with fondness!*”

Theodoric regarded the pink furball with clear irritation.

“That magic beast...” he said. “It was with you when we spoke in the mirror too, wasn’t it? If it’s your companion, Beast Tamer, tell it to quit butting in when we’re talking! Doesn’t it know we’re discussing important matters?”

“*I-I’m telling you, I am Elizavett!*” Elizavett protested. “*The one you seek!*”

“My Elizavett isn’t some pathetic furball!!!” Theodoric roared, sending flecks of saliva flying from his mouth.

“*Eeek!*” Elizavett cried, taking shelter behind Kanata’s head.

To Theodoric, the subject of Elizavett was conversational holy ground, not to be trodden on lightly. Elizavett was a miracle—the manifestation of his every

ideal—the embodiment of beauty. His love for her, cultivated from that one single glimpse of an ancient portrait, was no mere trifle. For this absurd creature to insist that she herself was Elizavett was an unbearable insult.

“’Tis no lie!” Elizavett insisted. *“I am Elizavett, I’m telling you!”*

“That’s right!” Kanata chirped, gently comforting the trembling furball. “Elizabat is Elizabat!” Then she held Elizavett’s fluffy body up to her nose and took a number of deep, heavy breaths.

“So you won’t give that up, I see...” Theodoric said. “Very well. Look at this!” He held up an object bundled in cloth and tore away the covering, revealing the portrait of the woman in the crimson dress. It seemed he had brought it all the way to the battlefield. “Lifelike, isn’t it, the portrait of my beloved?” he said, holding it high for all to see. “Behold! This is Elizavett! Now tell me, do you look *anything* like her?!”

“Ah!” cried Elizavett. *“Truly, ’tis me! And a good semblance, at that!”*

“Indeed,” agreed Zag’giel. *“It was painted by a skilled hand.”*

“It does look like you,” Fenrir nodded. *“Although the real you has a much haughtier smile. I can’t imagine you smiling so gracefully as that painting!”*

“No, it *doesn’t!!!*” Theodoric’s temper flared higher and higher as Zag’giel and Fenrir both backed up Elizavett’s claim. His gorgeous features were twisted in a mask of rage at the three furballs. Of course, he had no idea that this really was Elizavett transformed. Theodoric’s shoulders were heaving as he fumed, but he seemed to calm down a little bit after all the shouting. He brushed his hair out of his eyes and put his helmet back on.

“Well, no matter,” he said. “If you are so determined to keep me from Elizavett, I’ll tear this whole fiefdom apart until I find her!”

The knights readied their lances, waiting for Theodoric’s order.

“Hey, hey, wait, are you nuts?!” Boldow protested. “It’s right before the harvest!”

“I believe, Lord Aldezia, that rather than some trampled wheat fields, what you should worry for is your life!” Theodoric drew his sword, and pointed it in

the direction of the fiefdom's militia. "Knights, charge!"

And the army surged forward to attack, with perfect discipline.

† † †

The Goddess watched the battle from on high, her smile widening to a grin as the force of knights charged forth, trampling the wheat under their horses' hooves.

"Yes, my Hero Theodoric. Perfect," she said with a chuckle.

One of the skills Theodoric had obtained upon becoming Hero was known as *Morale*—an ability that raised the fighting strength of his allied combatants several times over. There was no limit to the area affected by this ability. Anyone Theodoric considered to be an ally would have their strength raised at no cost to him. Moreover, the knights under his command were elite fighters even before the boost from *Morale*. They were a force thousands strong, each with their abilities boosted many times over. They should be more than capable of crushing the wretched farmers who made up the population of the Aldezias' fiefdom underfoot. Theodoric himself, as well, had obtained tremendous power from the Profession change to Hero.

The Goddess was confident in her victory. "Even *she* shouldn't be able to resist a force like this!"

She meaning Kanata Aldezia—the girl with the power to defy the laws of her world. Her Profession of Beast Tamer should have lowered her abilities precipitously, but Kanata's strength was simply abnormal, even by the standards of the gods. And so, the Goddess had taken every conceivable precaution and played every card she had.

"A Hero needs companions, after all!"

She had scoured the entire world, seeking the strongest sword fighters she could to grant the Profession Divine Sword. She granted the Profession Sage to those she found with the most magic power, and the most skill at casting difficult magic. Nor were her efforts by any means limited to Divine Swords and Sages. She went around and around, granting the highest-level Professions she could to anyone who would take them. The Professions came with an oath of

loyalty, and a promise to strike down the enemies of the gods, but very few mortals saw fit to refuse the Goddess's offer. Most of them were desperate for power, and eager to prostrate themselves before the Goddess's authority in order to obtain a top-tier Profession.

"The strongest Hero, the strongest companions, and the strongest army..." the Goddess mused. Her preparations were complete. Not one element was lacking. It had cost her the greater half of her ability to intervene in the mortal world and produce a fighting force of such power, but that was no matter. Once that girl was gone, there would be none who could interfere with her designs.

This time, for certain, the Goddess would be rid of the girl who had gotten between her and humanity's faith—the girl who had ruined their harvest of souls. No more would she have to suffer the condescending attitude of her fellow gods, who'd never worked a day in their immortal lives and did nothing but devour the souls she prepared for their consumption.

"Now, Kanata Aldezia!" she said. "You will be destroyed, along with the ones you seek to protect!"

† † †

"Okay! Here I come!" Kanata sang, stretching out her shoulders as she prepared to take on yet another entire army. Before she could deliver their much-needed thrashing, however, Boldow stopped her.

"Now, now!" he said. "Why don't you let your old dad show you some of his cool side for a change?" He stepped up in front of the young men of the militia he had trained, and surveyed the crowd. "The lot of you aren't afraid of some puffed-up knights, are you?!"

The response was immediate. "Yes we are!"

"Of course we're afraid, you idiot! We're farmers!"

"This'll be our first actual battle and you want us to fight honest-to-goodness knights?! Are you *nuts*?!"

"How did we end up with this idiot for a lord anyway...?"

Not a one of them seemed at all happy with the developing situation.

“Father,” remarked Alus. “Was that meant to be your cool side? I must say, it wasn’t terribly impressive.”

“Gh!” Boldow shook his head. “Would it kill you to show some respect for your teacher every once in a while?! In formation, all of you! We’ll blast them with our fireballs!”

“We keep telling you, we can’t use magic!”

“May we please use our swords instead, sir?”

“I don’t think they’ll do much against those knights, but at least it’s better than pretending we can cast spells!”

The militia formed ranks between lines of banter, facing off against the oncoming army of knights. They spread their forces out, matching the width of the invaders’ column. They were severely outnumbered—their defensive line was full of holes—but thanks to their training, they showed no signs of freezing up even as the knights drew nearer. They waited, swords drawn, taking even, measured breaths, for Boldow’s next order.

“Awesome!” Boldow said. “I mean... Let’s go, everyone! Strike hard, then flow like water!”

It hardly seemed like proper orders, but with that, the militia charged forth, Boldow at their head.

† † †

The Goddess smiled with divine pity as she watched from the heavens. “Challenging my army of knights with a mere few score amateurs? I suppose that’s admirable of him.”

The difference in power between the two forces could not possibly be more stark. It was like watching an ant march out to challenge an elephant. There was only one possible outcome—the ant would be crushed in a second, ground into the dirt so that not even a corpse would remain.

That obvious outcome, however, did not come to pass. There was an enormous sound of metal being crushed, loud enough to reach the heavens themselves.

“Wh-What?!” said the Goddess. “What was that?!”

The army of knights had been stopped. A single line of farmers, not even a hundred strong, had halted the advance of a legion of knights dozens of times their size.

“Huh? We blocked them?” asked one of the militia youths, his boots digging a deep groove into the field from the effort of stopping a knight’s lance, as well as his entire horse.

“So...” another of his companions said. “I guess these knights are actually super weak?”

“More like *we’re* super *strong*, I think!” said another.

“I can’t believe it! There’s no way a bunch of farmers from the middle of nowhere are stronger than all these knights!”

“Is this the result of Lord Boldow’s training, maybe...?”

Everyone shook their heads at once.

“No way!”

“Anything but that!”

“Of course it is!” Boldow shouted as he took on the dead center of the knights’ column, where the enemy forces were thickest. “Can’t you guys have just a *little* bit of faith in me?” He shook his head, turning his mind back to the battle. “We broke their charge!” he said. “Now it’s just a melee! All of these knights are enemies, so go as nuts as you like!”

“Yeah!” The militia cheered.

“Let’s! Go!” Boldow roared.

One by one, the knights in their first-rate armor fell before the farmers’ homegrown sword techniques. The Goddess couldn’t believe what she was seeing. “Impossible!” she cried. “That’s the strongest army humanity has to offer! This can’t be happening!” And yet, impossibly, it was. The Goddess’s divine eyes would not deceive her about something like this.

There must be some sort of explanation, the Goddess thought. She looked up

and down the battlefield, searching for some sort of clue, until finally she noticed that the men of the militia all seemed to be enshrouded in a powerful magic aura. It didn't seem like the spell originated with the men themselves. Someone must have been casting it from behind the ranks of battle. She followed the threads of sorcery, and who should she find but the very object of her hatred herself, cheering for all she was worth.

"Go! Go! You can do it!" Kanata cheered, her voice carrying a potent enhancement spell, empowering the militia far beyond the buff given to the knights by the Hero's Morale ability.

"It can't be!" the Goddess wailed. "It simply can't! The Hero's Morale ability is meant to be the strongest enhancement magic to exist in this entire world!" Kanata must have created entirely new theories of magic, not relying on the Profession system, enabling her to design hitherto impossible spells. The Goddess trembled in fear. "That girl is a monster..."

"Is it just me," said one of the militia youths, "or are we all fighting way better than usual today?"

"You're right," another agreed. "But I always feel my best with Lady Kanata cheering for us!"

"Lady Kanata's the best! Even if she is a bit of a weirdo."

"You got that right! She's kind and beautiful, and works hard for all of us. She is a bit of a weirdo, though."

The militia was having such an easy time with the battle that they were chatting cheerfully with each other as they cut down knight after helpless knight.

"Hey!" Boldow chided them. "Don't go around calling my daughter a weirdo! She's a precious, adorable girl who takes after me and Leksi!"

"Yeah, true enough."

"She gets her weirdness from you after all, Lord Boldow!"

"Yuh-huh! Fortunately she's got Lady Aleksia's blood to cancel it out!"

"You punks!" Boldow snapped. "Running your mouth about this and that! I'm

gonna have the lot of you found guilty of disrespecting your liege lord!”

It hardly sounded like a proper conversation between a lord and his subjects, but the militia’s coordination was absolutely perfect. It was clear that their training had not been in vain.

“Theodoric, what are you doing?!” the Goddess hissed. “Your army needs your command!”

As if he could hear her voice, Theodoric chose just that moment to make his next move, sending the powerful companions assembled for him by the Goddess herself into the chaotic melee to which the battle had devolved. The Temple Knights that formed the bulk of the army were strong, but these individuals were among the mightiest representatives of humanity.

“Ha-hah!” A man leapt onto the scene, easily vaulting over the Temple Knights’ raised lances. He was an enormous, muscular, hairy man, hefting a sword that was oversized even for him. At a glance, he almost looked like some sort of apelike magic beast. “Now, taste the power the Goddess gave me! The strength of the Divine Sword!”

“Kee hee hee!” Another man laughed wickedly as he arrived on the scene, using magic to fly through the air. He stroked his goatee, a sadistic smile playing on his face. “My magic is so powerful I hardly get the opportunity to put it to use! I’ve been itching to try out all these spells I’ve learned from becoming a Sage. You will make excellent targets!” Magic power the likes of which few men could hope to match swirled around his raised right hand. Whatever spell he was preparing to cast must have been awesome indeed. Even this militia, with its first-class training and empowered by Kanata’s powerful support magic, would surely be unable to contend with *this* duo.

“Fools who would defy the gods!” the Divine Sword bellowed. “You’ll be nothing more than a stain on my blade!” He swung his sword, intent on reducing the militia to mincemeat. He should have had no problem, but...

“I will *not*!” Boldow said, deftly meeting the Divine Sword’s attack with his own sword. “In the first place, you should try *not* to get stains on your sword! Even a useless rusty one like that!” Boldow’s attack cut the Divine Sword’s weapon in two right above the hilt, its blade sent flying.

“N-No way!” the man said, watching dumbfounded as his sword spiraled overhead. “My sword! Gaaaah!!!”

The flat of his blade came down hard on his own head, knocking him unconscious.

The Goddess was at a loss for words. “He defeated my chosen Divine Sword...?!” It beggared belief. She had made that man Divine Sword because of his peerless ability. How could he have lost at swordplay?

Who *was* that man?

“Leksi!” Boldow called out toward his family, waving with a big grin on his face. “Leksi, did you see that?! I looked really cool there, didn’t I?!”

“Miserable idiot,” said the flying Sage as he aimed a spell from overhead at Boldow. “Still, I must thank you for looking the other way in the middle of a battle. Now, be reduced to ash!” He launched a massive ball of scorching flames Boldow’s way, but before it could reach him, it was stopped by a barrier of water.

“I did see!” said Boldow’s wife Aleksia. It had been her spell that protected Boldow from the enemy’s fireball. “You were amazing, honey!”

The water, which had appeared like a great ocean wave out of nowhere, surged up in a whirlpool to swallow up the flying Sage.

“M-My top-tier fire magic! Gone in an instant! Gablub blub blub blub blub!!!” The man floundered helplessly as he was carried away by the force of the water.

Neither the Divine Sword nor the Sage had lasted for more than a single second. The Goddess’s fingernails dug into the flesh of her cheek as she watched one impossibility follow another. “Why?” she demanded. “What *are* these people?!”

Still, the Goddess had granted Professions to many more than those two. If there was no hope for victory in a one-on-one battle, they would simply have to attack as a group. Theodoric seemed to have reached the same conclusion. He gave his orders, and five more men came flying to attack Boldow and Aleksia, who had now begun to chat happily with each other.

Suddenly, there was a peal of thunder and a flash of light. A boy appeared, wielding a sword crackling with lightning. In just a few blasts of lightning from his enchanted blade, the men fell out of the sky without even reaching their targets.

“Excuse me,” said Alus. “Although to be honest, I don’t know that my illustrious father and mother truly need assistance from the likes of me...”

“Now, now, don’t put yourself down like that!” said Aleksia. “Thank you for the help, Alus!”

“H-H-Hey, wait a minute!” Boldow stammered. “That was wild! What was *that*?! You cast magic through your sword?! Holy crap, I wanna try!”

Alus, it seemed, had used his sword as a medium to accelerate his lightning magic in order to take out all five men at once.

In the realm of the gods, the Goddess grabbed tight the image of the battle below, peering in close.

“Why?!” she demanded. “Why?! I granted them the strongest Professions of all! How could they lose so easily?!”

And then, she noticed something.

“W-Wait...” she said. “Those three! Are they...?!”

Back when the Goddess had been making divine visitations the world over in search of strong fighters to entice with the promise of high-level Professions, there had been a scant few who refused her offer—the same three now handily dispatching her chosen warriors. Back then, the Goddess had felt dizzy at the realization that these powerful humans refusing her invitation were the very family of her hated enemy. The distress she felt then, however, was nothing compared to the emotions swirling in her heart now as she watched the army she had taken such pains to prepare dwindle before her eyes. It wasn’t just the daughter then, but the whole family who possessed such abnormal strength. Worse, Kanata herself, the very nexus of all this preposterous might, had not even taken the field. The entire army was going to be destroyed without even reaching her.

“Theodoric!” the Goddess shrieked, fully hysterical at this point. “Stop

standing around and do something! Theodoric!!!”

“Raaaaaah!” Theodoric raised his voice above the combat. “Everyone! All knights! Focus all your strength and take down those three!” Unless they could do something about Boldow, Aleksia, and Alus, the army stood no hope of ever facing Kanata.

“All right then, you sorry lot!” Boldow declared. “Behold my almighty magics, the fruit of long years of training!”

“Oh, my!” exclaimed Aleksia. “You’re going to use magic, darling?”

“I don’t believe he can,” said Alus. “Father really has no magic whatsoever.”

Boldow stood with his sword in a high guard as the army closed in, closed his eyes, and began a rushed incantation. “Dragon who casts his wind from the cloudless skies! Tiger who dances amidst the sandstorm! Cross over from the world of the invisible and form a contract with me! Arise, O Tempest! Rage, O Hurricane! Strike down my foes with the hammer of wind!” he said, not even pausing to take a breath.

His eyes shot open.

“Wind Storm!” he yelled, bringing his sword down.

The force of the cut was enough to cause a whirlwind to appear in midair, scattering the oncoming army with a shock wave so powerful it looked like space itself was being distorted.

“Well?!” Boldow laughed. “What do you think of my magic *now*?!”

“Oh my goodness!” said Aleksia.

“I’m fairly certain that was the shock wave from your sword attack, actually,” commented Alus.

Boldow ignored his son. “There’s more where that came from!” he said. “Inferno Flare!”

“You’re just using friction from your sword to ignite the air in front of you,” Alus opined.

“Ground Shaker!”

“Now you’re striking the earth’s surface to disrupt the bedrock under your opponent’s feet.”

“Maelstrom!”

“You made an underground water current erupt using a similar technique to last time,” the boy observed.

“Why is my own son being so mean to me?!” Boldow lamented. “I’m going to cry!”

“Mean?” said Alus. “On the contrary, father, you’re producing effects beyond your typical magic, just by swinging your sword. It’s honestly incredible.”

“Meaning it *is* magic, right?” Boldow asked.

“Not in the slightest.”

“N-Nooooooooo!” Boldow wailed, clinging tight to his wife Aleksia. “L-Leksi! Your son, he’s bullying me!”

“Now, now,” Aleksia said, patting her husband on the head. “Here, I’ll show you how it’s done.”



Aleksia cast spell after spell, blasting the knights away with destructive power rivaling her husband's sword techniques.

"Whoa, Leksi! You're amazing!" marveled Boldow. "But I'm not about to lose, myself!"

The husband and wife began an overtly flirty competition to outdo each other in destructive power. It was more than the enemy army could bear. Their ranks began rapidly dissolving in the face of the ludicrously overpowered duo. A few minutes later, almost none of the knights were so much as moving.

Their commander, Theodoric, stood alone.

"I-It can't be!" he said, disbelieving his eyes. "My army! My Temple Knights! But... We had the Goddess's blessing! How could we lose...?" All around him, his army lay still. At a glance he might have taken it for a field of corpses, but in fact none of them were actually dead, a fact that spoke even more to how much they had been outclassed.

"And?" Elizavett asked Theodoric. *"What will you do? Do you still intend to harass me?"* She had been watching from the sidelines with Kanata and the two other magic beasts, but now that the fighting seemed to be over, Kanata had made her way over to Theodoric.

"D..." Theodoric muttered, too quietly to hear. "D... D..." He was staring at the ground, his gorgeous hair suddenly looking quite a bit messy.

"D?" Elizavett asked.

"Duel!" Theodoric said. "I challenge you to a duel!"

Theodoric's Profession of Hero was, without a doubt, the strongest available to humanity. He had been holding back during the battle, not engaging directly himself, all so that he could save his power for the battle with Kanata. And now the battle was over, and he stood yet uninjured. If he could defeat Kanata in single combat, perhaps there was some hope for victory after all.

In the first place, Theodoric's goal had always been Elizavett. As long as he could get his hands on her, whatever happened next didn't really concern him in the slightest. He really, truly believed in his heart of hearts that if only he

were to slay the evil witch keeping her ensorcelled, Elizavett would become his.

“If I win, you are to hand over Elizavett, and never again interfere with my destined love! Can’t you see that Elizavett wishes to come to me?!”

Perhaps the overwhelming defeat had knocked a few screws loose in Sir Theodoric’s brain. His delusions had reached the point where it seemed he could no longer distinguish reality from fantasy at all. Even as he reprobated Kanata, his every word dripped with delirious narcissism.

“We ask this only to confirm,” said Zag’giel, *“but you have never actually been romantically involved with this knight, have you?”*

“Of course not!” Elizavett shuddered at the thought. *“I belong only to my Mistress!”*

“Those wretched furballs, interrupting again,” Theodoric spat contemptuously. “Cease this nonsense and produce Elizavett at once, witch!” he demanded. “She must bear witness to our duel! One sight of my heroic gallantry, and your vile mind control powers will break in an instant!”

“We keep telling you!” Fenrir objected from Kanata’s arms.

“Mind control?” Elizavett sighed from her perch on her Mistress’s shoulder. *“I assure you, I am under no such thing. I am quite clearheaded, in fact!”*

“I was certain you were jesting,” said Theodoric. “Do you actually mean to tell me that this furball is Elizavett herself?!”

“Yes?” Kanata answered.

“Lies!” Theodoric declared. “You mean to deceive me! Do your insults know no bounds? There is no way that pitiful creature is my beloved Elizavett! Enough! I’ll kill you and your ridiculous furballs, and search for Elizavett myself!”

Theodoric was fast—so fast that even the Divine Sword Boldow, the Archsage Aleksia, and Alus found themselves unable to respond to his attack in time.

“Hah!” he shouted as he struck.

Kanata, however, effortlessly caught the blade between her index finger and thumb, stopping it dead in midair. Theodoric pulled and pushed, but with his sword stuck in Kanata’s iron grip, he was unable to budge it so much as an inch.

“M-My full-power all-out attack!” he cried.

He blinked, his handsome face slack in an expression of vacant surprise, snot dripping from his nose. It was a truly wretched sight for someone so well regarded for his looks.

“Stay-Away-From-Elizabat Punch!” Kanata cried out as she gave Theodoric what seemed to be a light tap, but apparently had enough force to send him tumbling to the ground.

“Wahh...” Theodoric sobbed, getting down on his hands and knees to grovel before Kanata. “Pleaaaaase...” he moaned, tears streaming down his face. “Please...just let me see Elizavett!”

“He strikes quite the pitiable figure in loss...” observed Zag’giel.

“Maybe you should show him your true form, just the once?” proposed Fenrir.

“My, my...” Elizavett sighed unhappily. *“What a nuisance.”* Nonetheless, she hopped off Kanata’s shoulder, flapping her wings to stay airborne as she returned to her true vampiric form. The single furball split into a cloud of smaller bats and then reformed. When she had finished, she stood before Theodoric as a princess of peerless beauty, wearing a familiar crimson dress.

“Ah!” Theodoric cried. “Elizavett! Elizavett!!!”

She was even more beautiful than she appeared in the painting. Theodoric wept with gratitude as he went to embrace his beloved, only to receive a sharp heel to the face for his trouble.

“Keep your hands away! You disgust me!” said Elizavett, kicking the downed Theodoric in the head again. “I would never form an everlasting bond with a superficial man like you, who sees only with his eyes! I should have you know, I do not hate this form my Mistress gave me, which you have done nothing but belittle and scorn! My Mistress loves me dearly in any form I might take—*that* is why she is fit to be my bosom companion! Your love is nothing more than a petty, self-centered infatuation. It has no hope of overcoming the vast, warm love of my Mistress! Know your place!”

“A-Ah...” At long last, Theodoric understood. He had merely been infatuated over Elizavett’s appearance. Not one speck of his love had in fact ever reached

the vampire at all. And with that, bereft of his power, he fell unconscious.

“What a relief to be done with him!” Elizavett said. “And now, there are none who would interfere with me and my Mistress!”

“We will interfere, we promise you,” countered Zag’giel.

“If you want to win Lady Kanata’s heart, you’ll have to do it over my dead body!” added Fenrir.

“Kh...” Elizavett frowned. “None but two furballs, I suppose...”

While she was still pouting, Kanata stuck her index finger into Elizavett’s mouth, feeding her her own blood in a manner most undignified for a vampire. In just a moment, Elizavett was back to her pink furball form.

“Welcome back, Elizabat!” said Kanata, hugging the erstwhile vampire tight.

“M-Mistress...” Elizavett ventured. *“Do you not think my human form is better for when we are to embrace?”*

“Not at all!” said Kanata. “Ahhh...fluff fluff poof poof! This is the beeeest!”

After all, Kanata was judging Elizavett by her appearances at *least* as much as Theodoric had been.

† † †

After the battle was over, the Temple Knights were arrested on charges of invading the Aldezia fiefdom. Kanata contacted the Adventurers’ Guild, who arranged to have them sent to the Royal Capital to await their trial.

Ordinarily, the Temple Knights would have enjoyed the protection of the Holy Church in such matters, but in this case, Saint Marianne Ishfalke herself expressly refused to cover for the knights’ actions. Theodoric, their leader, seemed unlikely to escape without a long time behind bars.

The wheat fields that had served as the battleground were restored to their former glory thanks to a generous application of healing magic from Kanata and Aleksia, much to the delight of the grateful farmers. Once the excitement had settled down, Kanata and the rest of the family got down to enjoying a leisurely summer vacation, taking the opportunity to get a much-needed rest and restore their fighting spirits.

And finally, the day came for Kanata to set off once more on her journey.

“Bye-bye, everyone!” Kanata said as she boarded her wagon, waving to the assembled crowd of people from all over the fiefdom. “I’ll see you all later, okay?”

“Take care!” Boldow cried.

“Make sure to visit for winter vacation, would you?” said Aleksia.

“Sir Zaggy, Sir Fen-fen, Madam Elizabat!” Alus added. “I wish you all the best!”

The three furballs waved back at Kanata’s family.

“Perhaps it is simply because we have tarried here so long,” said Zag’giel, “but we find ourself reluctant to leave.”

“It really is a wonderful place,” Fenrir agreed. “Lady Kanata, do you suppose we could pay a visit from time to time even before winter?”

“I would be happy no matter where we go, as long as I can stay by my Mistress’s side,” said Elizavett. “But I suppose this place has its charms. If you two are so keen on a return visit, I would be glad to accompany you.”

“Yeah!” said Kanata. “We can come back here whenever you like!”

They made their departure, thoroughly refreshed by the visit home.

“I wonder what kind of fluff we’ll meet next!” Kanata said.

“We take it, then, Kanata, that you intend to seek out yet more companions of worthy fluff?” asked Zag’giel.

“Of course!” Kanata replied. “We still don’t have *nearly* enough! Things are only gonna get fluffier from here!”

“That’s our Lady Kanata!” said Fenrir. “Such devotion!”

“How cold of you, Mistress!” Elizavett protested. “Seeking out more servants when you already have your Elizabat. But I must admit, there is something charming about your refusal to settle for a single love...”

“Aw! I love you too, Elizabat! And all of you!” said Kanata, nuzzling her face against all three fluffballs at once. “Fluffy fluffy fluff fluff fluff!”

As she enjoyed her assembled fluff to her heart's content, however, Kanata's thoughts were already racing ahead to the fluff the party might encounter next...

† † †

The Goddess's world of pure white was strewn with shards of broken stone—the shattered and crushed remains of the angels who had once served her, now pulverized until they were nearly reduced to sand.

“To hell with you! To hell with *all* of you!!!” the Goddess shrieked as her foot came down on an angel's head. The air filled with a small cloud of rock dust as the angel shattered under the force of her heel. She stomped and stomped, her hair wild and her breath ragged. In her current state, she looked less like a Goddess worthy of human faith than ever before.

The cause of the Goddess's divine rage, of course, was the crushing defeat she had suffered at the hands of Kanata Aldezia. Or, to be more precise, she had been defeated without ever reaching Kanata herself. Her elite army of knights had been unable to lay a single hand even on the people of Kanata's homeland. Worse, the effort of creating so many artificial champions had cost her nearly all of her ability to interfere in the world below. And all the while, Kanata had been saving people and providing succor left and right, stealing the faith that rightly belonged to the Goddess herself!

The old scheme of using the magic beasts of the Dark Continent to slaughter humanity for their harvest of souls was no longer possible. With Zag'giel alive and well, and still in possession of the Profession Demon King, there was no chance of an army leaving the borders of the Dark Continent. Indeed, the Goddess no longer had the power to challenge Kanata at all. At this rate, she could expect her strength to continue to decline as long as Kanata remained alive, if not longer. And knowing Kanata, she would undoubtedly live a long, healthy life...

“How could this be happening to me?! To *me*?!” the Goddess wailed. Smashing the angels had done nothing to alleviate her shame. After all, the Goddess's angels didn't speak. No...to recover from an upset like this, she would need to torment some pitiful humans, to see their faces twisted in

anguish. With her ability to manifest in the mortal world exhausted, however, even that sport was denied her.

The other three gods were surely aware of what had happened. After all, they had already taken such pains to chastise her for her earlier failures. No doubt they would all be eager to eliminate her, to increase their own portions of souls and faith...

“Damned pests, hiding in the heavens and devouring *my* souls!” the Goddess spat. After all, it was she who had taken the role of Goddess, raising humanity for the harvest. The other three did no work whatsoever—so why should she give her portion of souls over to the likes of them? This, too, would have never happened if it weren’t for that girl—that bug in her perfect system.

“Damn yoooooooouuuuu!” she screamed. “Kanata Aldeziaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!” Everything had been set up perfectly, if only that girl hadn’t come to this world. “I’ll kill her! Yes... That’s what it’s come down to now! I’ll use every last bit of my power to materialize in the physical world, and kill her myself!”

“Well, *someone’s* in a mood!” came a boy’s voice from behind her. The Goddess turned around to see the god who favored the form of a young boy, perched theatrically atop one of her broken angels.

“S-So...” she said. “You’re here...”

“Yes, well, I apologize for showing myself in uninvited,” the boy said. “But I believe you owe me an apology as well, do you not?”

“I-I haven’t failed yet...” the Goddess protested. “I was on my way to attack the girl myself when you showed up...”

“You might as well not bother, honestly,” the boy said. “Humanity’s faith in you is weakening by the day. You may be a supernal being, but as you are now your power on the ground is far from absolute.”

“I have enough power left to defeat a single human!”

“The whole reason things went this badly is because you were too afraid of that single human to confront her directly in the first place, you know,” the boy said, sighing with exasperation. The Goddess’s face twitched, but her colleague had more to say. “That said, after that battle, I’m more certain than ever. It’s

her.”

“Her?” the Goddess asked. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten? Or perhaps you’ve been *trying* to forget...” the boy said, teasing.

“Just tell me! What do you mean, *her*?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Other than our present issue, I can think of only one other *her* who’s ever managed to defy us.”

“You don’t mean...?” the Goddess said. Kanata Aldezia was a monster capable of driving off the gods themselves, but before her there had been someone who had managed to escape their grasp—the most virtuous, most beautiful, and strongest soul thus far in human history. She was to be the finest feast the gods had ever had, and yet...

“Stripped of their mortal bodies and reduced to pure soul, humans have no power whatsoever. In that state, they should be helpless to prevent us from enjoying their succulent essence,” the boy explained. “But one soul somehow managed to get away...”

When the current gods had unseated the native gods of this world and transformed it into a great harvesting ground for human souls, one human woman became aware of what had transpired. Before she died, she made a deal with a god from another world, allowing her soul to escape from this world ruled by soul-eating gods.

“Do you remember what she said?” the boy continued. “When she stood in front of all of us, right before slipping through our fingers?”

The Goddess remembered well enough.

The woman had met their eyes directly before vanishing into the dimensional rift, and said, “*In my current state, I am no match for the likes of you. But mark my words, I will be back. I will gain the strength to defeat you, no matter how long it takes.*”

It had been a thousand years since she had delivered that declaration.

“It can’t be!” the Goddess exclaimed. “Do you mean to tell me she spent a

thousand years gaining power?! A human psyche could never withstand it!”

“Balance is the principle behind all worlds,” said the boy. “Most likely, she spent the past thousand years being reincarnated into one utterly miserable life after the next. She would have spent the time powerless, wretched, utterly victimized, again and again for a millennium. And with each life, her soul would have grown progressively heavier, until she attracted the attention of the otherworld god once again. Or rather...” he corrected himself. “The god in question may have been aware of her plan from the very beginning. They know what we have been doing, after all. We must consider the possibility that they acted as an accomplice in this.”

“But how could one person endure such a hell?” The Goddess balked.

“With each life her memories would have been worn down, until she forgot who she was entirely,” the boy agreed. “And yet, even so, she chose to return here. It’s terrifying. Utterly beyond the scope of common sense. All I can say is, there’s a reason they called her the First Saint...”

Images of that day were filling the Goddess’s mind—images she wanted desperately to forget. That woman prophesied her return as she escaped the reach of the absolute gods. It sent a shiver down her spine. Physically, the black-haired Kanata resembled her in some ways, but not in others. Her unwavering posture, however, made it easy to imagine that they were the same person.

“As she is now, she has the strength to defeat us,” the boy said. “I don’t know if she has her memories or not, but she’s stolen our faith bit by bit, thwarted our harvest, and reduced our strength. No doubt she is simply waiting for an opportunity to attack us directly.”

“In that case, why are we wasting time?!” the Goddess demanded. “Stop acting like this has nothing to do with you and help me! If all four of us work together, surely we can defeat even her!”

“Yes, that is our plan,” the boy said.

For a second, the Goddess’s face lit up, but then he continued.

“You, however, we do not need.”

“Excuse me?” Her expression froze.

“After all of your failures, we’re beginning to think you’re bad luck to have around,” the boy said. “We’ve decided to put you to a better use.”

Rings of light appeared around the Goddess’s wrists and ankles, binding her in place.

“Wh-What are—?!”

“We’ll be putting what’s left of your power to our own use,” the boy told her. “All of us are in agreement on this.”

“D-Don’t be absurd!” the Goddess spat. “Who do you think has been working this whole time on your behalf while you pigs did nothing but stay in the heavens and feast on the souls I prepared?! If you think you can get away with this—”

“Of course we can get away with it,” the boy rejoined. “The three of us have spent the last thousand years preparing ourselves for her return. We’ve even been limiting the amount of souls we consume, to have as many as we can to convert into strength.”

“In other words,” said the god who took the form of an old man, appearing behind the Goddess and placing a hand on her shoulder, “you have not the power to resist us.”

“You’re just about the least appetizing Goddess I’ve ever seen, but I’ll still be glad to devour you,” said the god who took the form of a young girl, licking at the Goddess’s exposed neck.

“Your sacrifice won’t be in vain,” the boy assured her as he placed his hands on the Goddess’s cheeks. “I promise you, we *will* defeat our enemy.”

“S-Stop it!” the Goddess pleaded. “Noooooooo!!!”

Her screams echoed throughout the white realm, accompanied by the sounds of greedy consumption.

Side Story: Won't Accept a Promotion? No! You'll Stop the Drug Trade and Move Up in the World!

One day, the heads of every branch of the Adventurers' Guild convened for a grand conference. There were tough men with muscles hewn like solid rock, old wizards with long, white beards, fearsome women with bodies covered in old scars...all of them formidable enough to rein in the rowdiest of adventurers.

As well as masters of their individual guilds, they were each former A-Rank adventurers. After all, combat strength was one of the qualities most desired in a guildmaster, if for no other reason than to avoid the scorn of the adventurers they were charged with managing. There was a notable exception to this, however—the head of the largest Adventurers' Guild branch of all, the Royal Capital branch itself, was an unassuming man who had worked his way up through the bureaucracy. He had no ability in combat whatsoever. Surrounded by so many overwhelmingly powerful warriors, he seemed completely unable to form a coherent sentence. In fact, just being there seemed to be causing his anemia to act up. He looked like he might faint at any moment.

"Don't tell me..." said Melissa, the Royal Capital branch receptionist. She glanced down at the guildmaster curled in on himself in his seat at the round table. "Is *this* why you insisted on bringing a mere receptionist along?"

"I'll stand by the decision, Melissa," the guildmaster managed, even as he sweat under the combined pressure of the other guildmasters and Melissa's own piercing glare. "You're the best fighter in the Royal Capital branch. Why, from what I hear, just the other day you took down a former A-Rank with a bounty on his head, all on your own no less!"

The guildmaster was a small, mustachioed man who lacked the charisma of a natural leader, but had a brilliant mind for delegating work. It was that talent that had earned him his position.

"I had fortune and allies on my side," Melissa said. "It wasn't just my own power that won that fight."

Kanata had given her training, after all, and she had been wielding a genuine magic sword made by Lily the genius blacksmith. Still, for a mere former B-Rank who had been away from the field for some time, overcoming a foe with such a grim reputation and steep bounty was nothing short of a miracle.

“That just makes you all the more valuable, you know,” the guildmaster said. “I’m certain my eyes aren’t mistaken.” He had first scouted Melissa for her current role based on her achievements as an adventurer. “This is just between you and me,” he went on, “but you’re a lock for a senior position as far as anyone’s concerned. We’re just waiting to make it official.”

“What?! Don’t be absurd!” Melissa exclaimed, drawing glances from all over the room. “E-Excuse my outburst,” she added, lowering her head in apology. As a mere receptionist, her presence at this meeting was already out of the ordinary. Who knew what punishment she might receive if she was thought to be showing disrespect? Fortunately, the conference proper had not yet started, and the various guildmasters turned their curious glances away from Melissa to resume their own conversations. “Wh-What do you mean?” Melissa asked, making sure to keep her voice down this time. “I don’t have anything near the experience or qualifications for senior staff!”

“No, I’m sure you’ll find you do,” the guildmaster told her. “You’re a bit young, it’s true, but you’re certainly not wanting for ability. Officially I brought you along for ‘personal protection,’ but I’m also trying to give you an opportunity to gain experience. And look! You’re a bit tense, but you seem to be holding up just fine surrounded by all these bigwigs. Meanwhile I can’t even keep my hands from trembling for the sake of appearances!”

“You don’t seem to be shaking so much *now*...” Melissa observed.

“And that sharp, calculating eye of yours is another one of your assets!” the guildmaster insisted. “You are extraordinary, I assure you. You’ve got the skills. You’ve got the guts. The adventurers like you. Look, the senior staff appointment is just a stepping stone. My hope is you’ll keep building experience and moving up in the world until you’re ready to replace me as guildmaster.”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to refuse,” Melissa said.

“The position comes with a suitable salary, you know. Your receptionist salary

is pretty decent, but it'll be nothing compared to what you'll make as senior staff."

"I don't want it," Melissa said. "I know what will happen if I take the job—you'll work me so hard that I won't have any opportunities to enjoy the extravagant salary. The last vice guildmaster quit over the workload, if I'm not mistaken."

The head receptionist at the time had been promoted to vice guildmaster in their place, and they, too, had already begun to develop the same dead look in their eyes. Melissa did not want to end up that way herself.

"Do what I do, then!" the guildmaster implored. "Raise up new talent and put them to work to give yourself some free time!"

"I'd rather you did some work yourself, honestly," Melissa shot back.

In fact, Melissa did have her eyes on a particular junior of hers—a new receptionist by the name of Bella. She was a quick learner, and popular with the adventurers as well. She acted less like a proper receptionist than a waitress at some disreputable bar, but that was something Melissa hoped she could learn. However, Melissa was not interested in making Bella into an underling to boss around. She had only one objective in cultivating her talent.

"I've told you that I intend to return to adventuring once things calm down a bit at the guild, haven't I?" Melissa said. "Besides, you yourself promised that I would only be helping out for a short while back when you first scouted me..."

And yet, it had already been years since she was recruited. She had been working at the guild long enough that she now had juniors to show the ropes.

Her former adventuring party had split up for some insignificant reason, or else she would have never accepted the offer in the first place. It was common for B-Rank adventurers and above to operate in fixed parties of the same rank, which made it hard for someone in her position to find companions to adventure with afterward. Melissa had worked in parties her entire career up to that point, and was having a hard time adapting to a solo career. Meanwhile, she was running into trouble finding any parties recruiting adventurers of her rank. That was when the guildmaster approached her with a job offer. The salary the guildmaster offered her was much higher than what she could make

as an adventurer, and she jumped at the opportunity without a second thought.

Ah, if only she could go back in time and stop her younger self from making such a foolish decision. As good as the salary was, it came with not even a tenth of the time off she needed to live a decent life.

“Yes, yes, I received your request,” said the guildmaster. “But I never said I’d grant it, did I?”

Needless to say, the guildmaster’s attitude provoked no small bit of anger in Melissa.

“Excuse me?! Did I hear you correctly? Well in that case, if that’s your attitude, maybe I’ll simply quit!”

“You can’t quit!” the guildmaster told her. “Without you, the whole front desk will fall apart! All those juniors of yours you worked so hard to teach will be absolutely swamped! You don’t want that, do you?”

“Nh...” was all Melissa could say.

“If you were the kind of irresponsible woman who was capable of putting her own convenience above her subordinates, you would have quit long ago, wouldn’t you?”

“N-Nh...” Melissa had wanted to quit many times before, but just like the guildmaster said, she had always found herself unwilling to abandon her precious junior receptionists. “You... You... You scheming old fox!”

“Bwa ha ha!” The guildmaster laughed, now completely relaxed in the face of Melissa’s invective. “Rage all you want, but you’re getting promoted whether you like it or not! Now quit complaining and move up in the world already!”

If Kanata had heard Melissa say the word “fox” she would surely have begun searching all around for signs of a fluffy tail. But alas, the only one here now was the small but cunning guildmaster.

“My apologies for the delay.” At last, the old man in charge of the conference entered the room and took his seat. The meeting was finally about to begin. The young staff members who had been scurrying around providing cups of tea and reading materials to all in attendance finished their jobs as well.

In that moment, Melissa wished for nothing more than to accompany the servers out of the room. She had heard that the city where they were holding this conference was home to a famous café that served the most delightfully fluffy pancakes. How she wished she could try the tea there and come straight home with arms full of presents for Lily and Bella, before taking a long vacation and spending the whole time asleep.

Alas, such a fantasy amounted to no more than escapism.

“It’s useless!” the guildmaster said. “You’re staying here with me to cross wits with all these wicked old devils! You’ll gain experience and move up in the world before you know it, mark my words!”

“Stop reading people’s minds!” Melissa demanded. “And shut up about moving up in the world!”

† † †

“Our next topic,” the conference chairman said, “concerns requests that were deemed unfulfilled due to the reward on offer being too low. It seems that in the past few months, the backlog of these requests has shrunk by more than half...”

Melissa, as it happened, knew some things about this subject. The Adventurers’ Guild received some requests with a reward offer so low that they weren’t even worth putting up on the guild’s bulletin board. Some of these were in fact quite dangerous, but most were posted by impoverished farmers or people living on the outskirts of the kingdom, where assistance from the crown was hard to come by. The kingdom’s resources were not without limits, and it was loath to underwrite requests to the Adventurers’ Guild that came from small villages or outlying settlements unless there had been substantial loss of life. Needless to say, there was certainly no hope of the *army* getting involved in such situations either. Money makes the world go round, it was said, and with no money, the people in these situations could do nothing but deal with the damages as they came.

The guild, of course, wanted to help these people, but with the adventurers themselves unwilling to take such low-paying requests, there was nothing they could do. Some staff members would discreetly ask the adventurers under their

purview to handle some of these requests, but it was never enough.

“Strangely enough,” the chairman continued, “it seems as though this vast quantity of requests was in fact completed by a single adventurer. Does anyone know anything about this affair?”

Melissa gave a meaningful look to the guildmaster of the Royal Capital branch, sitting beside her. He nodded once in response, and raised his hand. “I believe our Melissa Straud has something to report,” he said.

“Huh?!” Melissa, who had expected the guildmaster to explain the situation himself, sprung to her feet, acutely aware of suddenly being the center of attention. She cleared her throat, preparing herself to speak. “I’m Melissa, from the front desk department of the Royal Capital branch. I can vouch that this high-quantity request clearance was performed by Miss Kanata Aldezia, an adventurer under my management.”

“I see,” said the chair. “But the volume of requests in this case is truly incredible. Did this adventurer really complete all of them by herself?”

“Yes,” said Melissa, “the report is correct. Miss Kanata personally cleared all of the requests herself. Well, to be precise, she has a number of magic beasts in her service as well. Fundamentally, however, she cleared them alone.” Melissa had confirmed it with her own eyes, and written the report herself. Kanata’s balls of fluff didn’t seem to be especially useful, outside their role of keeping Kanata in a good mood. For being a Beast Tamer, she didn’t seem to use her beasts in battle at all, but Kanata never showed any signs of doubting her choice of Profession.

“But this whole thing is strange, from the very first request...” the chairman said, pushing his pair of tiny spectacles up the bridge of his nose as he looked over the paperwork. “You say that the Church had been neglecting the sewers in the Royal Capital’s Undertown to the point where the filth had turned toxic, but this adventurer cleaned it all in a single day? A job like that would take a team of thousands *months* to complete! I’m sure you can understand why we would suspect a forged report in such a case.”

“As the person who oversaw the completion of that request, I can testify to its veracity,” said Melissa. “The details are included in the report.”

Melissa had inspected the sewers under the Royal Capital herself, with the help of some of her colleagues. She found the water to be even cleaner than the sewers of Hightown, which the Church took great pains to purify regularly. The purification spell Kanata had cast was so powerful that the wastewater had remained clean and safe to drink even months after the fact. Just as miraculous was the transformation that had overtaken Undertown, which had been victim to the Church's neglect. The people living there had begun growing vegetables in the former slums, using the water and fertile earth given to them by Kanata, creating produce that tasted so good it qualified as astonishing. Chefs from Midtown had begun trading with Undertown for their vegetables. Where the people of Undertown had once been too impoverished to even pay taxes, now they were successful farmers.

"Then," the chairman asked, "the account of large-scale purification magic is true?"

"Yes," Melissa confirmed. "In fact, the effect of her spell seems to be still ongoing with no sign of attenuation. Send an inspector from the main branch if you have doubts."

The chairman hemmed and hawed. "Hrmm...but wouldn't that mean that this adventurer used purification magic on the level of a Saint?"

If anything, Saint was too low of an estimation. Even if everyone in the Holy Church capable of using purification magic combined their power, it was hard to imagine that they could pull off a feat comparable to Kanata's spell. Melissa, however, had spent day after day of overtime completing her report, and was confident that everything she had written was correct.

"And...you say this adventurer's Profession is Beast Tamer?" the chairman asked.

"It is," Melissa answered.

"Beast Tamer is a Profession that lowers every one of a person's abilities. Almost nobody would choose to become a Beast Tamer voluntarily. You understand that the idea that someone would be capable of something like this after selecting Beast Tamer as their Profession is even more impossible?"

"Yes, but it is the truth."

“Absolutely unbelievable...” the chairman said. “Or so I would like to say, but the truth is, we performed our own background check on this adventurer. It seems she is a woman of many talents who had a history of extraordinary achievements even during her time in school. And it seems her parents are none other than the Divine Sword Boldow and the Archsage Aleksia.”

At the mention of the Divine Sword and the Sage’s names, the conference hall erupted with voices.

“The Divine Sword and the Sage?!”

“I see! So it’s *their* child!”

“Then their child is as inhuman as they are...”

The legend of Boldow and Aleksia, who had gone from novice adventurers to S-Rank faster than anyone in the history of the guild, was well known by everyone in attendance. After all, it wasn’t just once or twice that the kingdom had been saved by that dynamic duo. One day, quite abruptly, they announced that they were quitting the adventuring life and getting married, leaving the third member of their party, Prince Leon, to ascend the throne. Now king, Leon granted Boldow and Aleksia noble titles and the position of margrave and margravine, and the two vanished to a secluded life in the country.

The loss of Boldow and Aleksia was a heavy one for the Adventurers’ Guild. Just before quitting, they had completed a very difficult request, saving the kingdom itself from disaster. It was when Boldow and Aleksia left that the guild’s fortunes began to decline. Everyone working for the guild shared a sense of regret at losing such valuable talent. And to think that their daughter had become an adventurer with the guild! It was a shock, but also an unexpected joy.

“We should raise her rank immediately and start giving her more difficult requests!” someone opined.

“This isn’t someone we should be passing off low-level requests to!” another agreed.

“I have told her as much myself,” interrupted Melissa, cutting the guildmasters off before they got too far into counting their unhatched chickens.

“But we must allow her to act according to her own desires.” Melissa earned a few glares for that remark. She was a mere receptionist, after all. But Melissa’s nerves had been honed by her long days working the reception desk. She wasn’t about to back down, even if the people here were as strong as A-Rank adventurers. “It would not make her happy for us to ignore the guild’s rules and raise her rank just to force her to take high-level requests,” she said.

“Even though she’d earn a greater reward and the respect of the people?”

“If that were what she wanted, do you think she would be going around clearing undervalued requests?” Melissa asked rhetorically. “They’re difficult work for low pay—the sorts of requests almost nobody would want to accept.”

“W-Well, I...”

“Kanata does not place great importance on the quest reward,” Melissa said. “She’s a selfless, virtuous girl—so much so that she used most of the reward money for purifying the sewers on renovations for Undertown. I don’t believe she’s someone you can lure with the promise of a high payout.”

Kanata, it was true, did not care much for material rewards—unless, of course, the reward on offer was fluff. From the outside, her conduct appeared to be of the highest virtue.

“That makes her sound like more of a Saint than the Saint herself...” the chairman mused. She was certainly far more saintly than the Saint of the Holy Church, who would never purify a graveyard or sewer unless there were generous alms involved.

“As things are now, Kanata is contributing more than we could have ever asked of her,” Melissa said. “I believe that what we should do is support her activities however we can, and respect her wishes. If we try to force requests on her we risk incurring her displeasure. If she were to quit, it would be a profound loss for the guild.”

In other words, it would be like the Divine Sword and the Sage quitting all over again. The conference seemed convinced by Melissa’s line of argument.

“Melissa Straud, thank you for your report,” the chairman said. “Regarding the topic at hand, let us continue to watch over her and provide whatever

support we can.”

Melissa hastily bowed her head, realizing as the chairman thanked her that she had perhaps gotten a little too worked up for her own good. All around her, guildmasters were praising her.

“She’s young, but she’s got a good head on her shoulders!”

“I wish we had someone like her at *our* branch...”

“Ha ha ha!” The Royal Capital branch guildmaster laughed. “That’s my handpicked successor you’re talking about! You’ll take her from my cold, dead hands!”

Most women Melissa’s age would have withered immediately in front of the assembled guildmasters, but Melissa had handled herself with aplomb. It seemed she had earned their favor.

“Now, on to our next topic,” the chairman said. “The dragon captured by the Royal Capital.”

“Well!” a guildmaster exclaimed. “How long has it been since we had a live dragon?!”

Dragon parts were top-tier materials for the creation of magic items. From their scales to their claws to their internal organs to their brains, every part of a dragon was tremendously valuable. Even finding a dragon dead of natural causes would be cause for celebration, but it had been decades since the last recorded capture of a living specimen.

“It seems the dragon was captured while unconscious, but woke up while it was being transported through the city and flew into a rage, only for its anger to be immediately quelled by an adventurer, who then put it to work as the guardian of the city,” the chairman reported. A dragon protecting a city. It would be hard to imagine a more formidable line of defense. “I believe we can guess at the answer, but which adventurer was it who performed this miraculous feat?”

“Erm...” Melissa said, timidly raising her hand again. “That would be mine...”

Once again, the eyes of the whole conference were on her. Melissa had no

choice but to continue.

“The dragon has been registered as a magic beast in her service, so I’m afraid using it for materials is out of the question. However, I must reiterate that she has given us a dragon. If a threat beyond the scope of humanity ever attacks the Royal Capital, we’ll all be extremely grateful to have such a guardian watching over us.”

It had been a heavy blow to the royal laboratories, which had been transporting the dragon to use as a test subject in their experiments, but such is life.

“She really does have a preposterous amount of talent, this Miss Kanata Aldezia...” a guildmaster said.

“An ordinary receptionist would have their hands full managing an adventurer like that,” another opined.

“I suppose we’re lucky it was Miss Melissa who was placed in charge of her case!”

Melissa, for her part, had mixed feelings about the girl who had been the cause of so much overtime, but the assembled guildmasters simply seemed delighted with her performance.

“Now, our next topic,” said the chairman. “We’ve heard rumors of a demon army from the Dark Continent advancing on the Royal Capital...”

“That...was mine as well,” Melissa said. At this point she was on the verge of tears.

“Unbelievable!”

“Yet again!”

One after another, the topics of discussion related back to Kanata, and each time Melissa was left explaining the situation. Internally Melissa wanted to vanish on the spot, but her pride as a guild staff member combined with the fluency of her explanations gave her the strength to stand up to the pressure from the guildmasters. And as she recounted meritorious deed after meritorious deed performed by her charge, the conference members’ respect

for both her and Kanata only continued to rise. The growing opinion of the room seemed to be that only Melissa was qualified to handle the reins of this monstrous adventurer. By the time the meeting was over, the guildmasters didn't seem to be regarding her as a mere assistant at all, but a full equal. There was no doubt in their minds that one day she, too, would hold the position of guildmaster.

† † †

“Now, our final topic for today's meeting,” the chairman began. “This concerns a high-priority request that we would like to see resolved as quickly as possible.” With the dragon serving as its guardian, the Royal Capital might as well have been protected by a wall of invincible steel, but that did not mean that the city was without its woes. There were many things besides the danger of rampaging monsters that threatened the livelihood of its people. “This request comes from the crown itself. It is, however, a matter of utmost secrecy. Any adventurer given this task will have to take great pains not to be found out.”

The chairman went on to explain the general details of the request. In recent years, a certain drug had been growing in popularity among those who made their living through battle. There were many types of potions that temporarily raised the user's combat ability, but this drug was a dangerous substance forbidden by the crown and circulated in black markets. It raised the imbibers' spirits as well as pushing their physical capabilities past their limits and increasing their reserves of magic power by a considerable amount. The effect lasted for only a short time, but it was easily comparable to high-level enhancement magic. That short time frame was a boon to the sellers as well, as a fighter would have to purchase a new dose every time they used it in combat.

“What makes this drug a dangerous substance,” the chairman said, “is the toll it takes after the fact.”

The royal laboratories had investigated, and found that the abnormally strong effect of the drug placed a proportionately heavy strain on the human body. Moreover, because of the short duration of the effect, users would take the drug many times, increasing the damage with each dose.

“This is an illegal substance, forbidden by the laws of the kingdom. But of course, a battle with a magic beast is a matter of life and death. If a drug like this can save you from dying, many people would gladly sacrifice some of their future life span. Some of our fellow adventurers will have gotten their hands on it as well.”

The drug enabled its users to easily defeat magic beasts they would ordinarily be unable to fight. When the effect wore off, their strength would vanish as well, so some adventurers had taken to using the drug habitually to clear requests above their regular ability, leaving themselves ruined in both body and mind. The whole reason the guild divided adventurers by rank was to prevent them from taking requests beyond their ability. It was a system that increased the life spans of adventurers as well as the rate of successfully cleared requests. This drug carried the risk of damaging the system in place for the adventurers’ protection.

“Even without the request from the crown, this is a matter we have an interest in looking into ourselves,” the chairman concluded.

The guildmasters seated around the table all began to talk at once.

“And here I was thinking it was a good thing to see our rate of successful requests going up...”

“I knew there was something strange about all these injuries we’ve been seeing lately, though.”

“They must be using the drug to clear requests that would ordinarily be impossible. The injuries would happen when the effect runs out in the middle of combat. Or perhaps even a result of side effects...”

“I’ve been seeing more and more adventurers’ bodies giving out on them, forcing them into an early retirement. This drug certainly does explain some things...”

“If you look at these numbers, you can see proof of the damage this drug is doing,” someone volunteered. It seemed that some of the guildmasters in attendance had expected this topic to come up.

“His Majesty is taking this situation very seriously,” the chairman said. “Right

now the drug seems to be limited to private citizens and adventurers, but if it continues to spread, eventually we can expect the kingdom's soldiers to get their hands on it. We're very fortunate that the king is not the kind of man who would order us to secure the drug's recipe in order to use it to increase his own army's military power." In fact, the request from the king was just the opposite—to find the creators of the drug and destroy the recipe and manufacturing facilities alike so that they could never be used again. "Ordinarily the crown would handle this sort of thing itself, but as it happens there is yet another problem at hand..."

Even more so than its use in battle, the drug was a problem for contests of skill, where it was a clear violation of the strict rules of such events.

"I'm sure you're all aware," the chairman continued, "but the National Fencing Tournament is nearly upon us." This was a major event meant to showcase the greatest sword fighters in the entire kingdom. Many of the guild's adventurers would be taking part as well.

"As it happens, several of the contestants who made it through the preliminaries have been discovered to be using the drug," the chairman said. The assembled guildmasters looked distinctly uncomfortable at that suggestion. They must have been wondering if any of their subordinates had resorted to such means. "What makes this so difficult is the short duration of the drug's effect. Because of that, the signs of its use only last for a moment as well." That was to say, it was impossible to detect the substance in a person's system before or after. "In this case, however, there were several cases of contestants' bodies falling apart after the preliminaries. These people were questioned, and it was determined that they had taken the drug. The royal laboratories were able to detect trace amounts in their systems as well..."

"Terrible..." one of the guildmasters remarked. "How dare they sully the honor of the National Fencing Tournament like that!"

In reality, it was nearly impossible to prevent someone from bringing the drug into a tournament match. After all, contestants were permitted to take healing potions and other such items into battle with them if they so chose. It would be easy for them to conceal a small amount of an illegal drug on their person.

“As you know, His Majesty regards the people of his kingdom as the land’s greatest treasure. He has expended no small effort in gathering and cultivating talented individuals.” Really, the king’s obsession with human talent bordered on manic. He’d founded several schools in the Royal Capital, inviting the finest instructors he could find whether near or far, all for the sake of bringing up a next generation to which he could entrust the future of his kingdom. He was especially fond of Kanata, who had achieved things unheard of in all of known history.

“Appearing in the National Fencing Tournament is a tremendous honor. There’s no shortage of nobles who would hire someone solely on the basis of having fought in the tournament proper. His Majesty is concerned that some of his subjects might ruin their potential solely for that one moment of glory.” The National Fencing Tournament was a venerable event, with history going back more than a hundred years. If contestants were polluting it with forbidden substances, it would be a stain on that proud tradition. “And that is why His Majesty asked the Adventurers’ Guild to perform our investigations out of sight and behind the scenes.”

From the chairman’s words, it seemed they would need to find an adventurer capable of operating undercover. There were many types of adventurers, with as many specialties as there were types of request. Some focused exclusively on vanquishing magic beasts, while others specialized in exploring dungeons and recovering artifacts. There were adventurers whose calling was gathering, who boasted knowledge of medicinal plants that would put a doctor to shame. And, of course, there were adventurers who specialized in moving unseen, gathering information from the shadows.

At this point, Melissa’s superior, the guildmaster of the Royal Capital branch, spoke up. “The issue seems to be,” he said, “that we don’t know who is involved with this drug and who isn’t.”

The request to eradicate the drug had come first to the guild branch in the Royal Capital. It was a very large request, one that should rightly fall to an S-Rank adventurer in terms of its scope alone, but the choice of adventurers who could take the request was severely limited. Nobody had ever heard of a request quite like this before. It would require investigative prowess, of course,

but it demanded a high level of combat strength as well, in case they were attacked during their investigation by opponents using the drug to send themselves into a frenzy. Moreover, they would need to be an adventurer of unimpeachable virtue who the guild could trust was not involved in the drug trade themselves. It was unlikely that the guild even had an S-Rank who fulfilled all of those qualifications.

“And I don’t know how trustworthy this information is,” the Royal Capital guildmaster continued, “but we’ve done a bit of investigation on our own already, and rumor has it that the inventor of this drug is going to be a participant in the National Fencing Tournament himself.” In other words, an adventurer assigned to this request would need at least enough martial ability to make it to the National Fencing Tournament proper.

“So,” said Melissa. “We’d need a perfect adventurer...”

“Oh, if only there were such an adventurer!” the guildmaster said, pressing his fingers to his lips in a theatrical display of thought as he glanced up at Melissa. “Perhaps someone who purified the sewers beneath the Royal Capital, and dominated a dragon, and drove off an army of demons, and exposed the rot of the Holy Church...someone the people might call the True Saint!”

Melissa suddenly became aware that all of the guildmasters in the room had their eyes on her. “Wh-What?”

“Oh, so you’ll help us out!” said the guildmaster. “Thanks a bunch, Melissa! I knew you’d come through for us!”

“I said nothing of the sort!” Melissa protested. “I-I mean, do you intend for Miss Kanata to take this request?! She certainly does have the ability for it, but you know there’s no guarantee she’ll say yes!”

“And that’s where *you*, the almighty receptionist, come in!” the guildmaster said. “It’s *your* job to force adventurers to take the damned requests by any means necessary!”

“I wish you wouldn’t make it sound like such disreputable work...” Melissa grumbled, angry at her boss’s turn of phrase. “Our job is to see to it that the right person gets the right job!”

The rank system for adventurers placed most of its weight on their combat abilities. There were many cases where adventurers of low rank were still suitable choices for high-ranking requests that fell within their area of expertise. Melissa, who had experience as an adventurer herself, had an excellent reputation for giving recommendations for requests suitable for an individual adventurer's skills. Thanks to her talent, the adventurers under her care had an unusually high rate of successfully completing requests. It had earned her quite a reputation, not just within the guild staff but among the adventurers as well. Alas, however, it was also the reason she was slowly losing to the guildmaster and his plot to saddle her with an unwanted promotion. If this were a game of chess between her and him, right now Melissa seemed to have found herself put in check.

And yet, Melissa was proud of her work. She wasn't about to stand by and let the task fall to an unsuited adventurer.

"I'm glad we're on the same page!" the guildmaster said. "And I can't think of any better person for this job than our Miss Kanata! So all that's left is for *you* to go and persuade her!"

Melissa suddenly realized, too late, that she had fallen for the guildmaster's ploy. The guildmaster liked to play the part of an incompetent buffoon, but he had earned his position for a reason. He must have said what he had in order to bait Melissa into making a declaration like that. Kanata really was the most suitable person she could think of for such a difficult request. Her ability in combat was off the charts, of course, but she was also brilliantly intelligent and extraordinarily beautiful. She could question people on the street without arousing suspicion and effectively analyze the vast amounts of information she would need to sort through. There was no reason not to suppose that her investigative prowess was as exemplary as everything else about her. Moreover, she met the most important qualification of all—there was no chance that Kanata had sullied her hands with the drug herself.

Melissa had been working with Kanata for months at this point, and knew her well. Kanata was a strange girl, to be certain, but she was an extraordinary individual. Her power came from the core of her being. Melissa didn't know what Kanata had done to obtain such strength, but she was certain that it had

nothing to do with dangerous, illegal drugs.

Kanata, by the way, happened at that very moment to be inhaling vast quantities of her own drug of choice—she had her face pressed right against her pets' fluff, taking deep breaths of the precious substance, her head spinning with euphoria.

"Very well," Melissa conceded. "I will approach Miss Kanata about the request."

The guildmasters nodded in approval at her response. They could tell from how she had comported herself throughout the conference that Melissa was a woman with a strong sense of responsibility. If she took on a task, she was certain to see it through to the end. They had already come to consider her a future guildmaster in her own right. After all, why else would she be at this conference? It put a smile on the old veterans' faces to see such a promising youngster in their organization.

"All right," said the chairman. "With that settled, that concludes today's meeting. And Melissa, good luck."

Before the chairman himself—the guildmaster of the main branch of the Adventurers' Guild—all Melissa could do was nod politely. But in her heart, she was crying bitter, messy tears...

† † †

"Jeez, boss, sounds like a lot of trouble..." was Bella's response when Melissa told her what had happened. The moment the meeting was over, she had come racing back to the Royal Capital to discuss the situation with Bella, her junior in the guild. Bella had lightly wavy, blonde hair and light-brown skin, with a pair of protruding canines that only made her smile cuter. But today there was no sign of that innocent smile as she pondered this situation.

"Tell me about it," said Melissa. "I tell you, I'm exhausted down to my very core."

The fatigue had hit her all at once. She felt like she needed to sleep for an entire day straight after getting home from a meeting like that, but she still had not yet had the opportunity to rest her head. If she lost her focus, she was at

risk of dozing off right there at the reception desk. Worse, the carriage ride home had been spent curled up gloomily in her seat as the guildmaster lectured her about this and that, increasing her fatigue considerably.

“But, like, wow!” Bella gushed. “They have you handling direct requests from the crown now? Even above the elite adventurers who report directly to the main branch? Nothing’s gonna stop you from moving up through the ranks now, boss! As your student, it’s inspirational!”

“If you’re so inspired, hurry up and take my place...” Melissa grumbled to herself.

It wasn’t as if the job would be over once Kanata accepted the request either. She would have to accompany Kanata as part of her investigation as a member of the Adventurers’ Guild staff. The focus of Melissa’s work was the reception desk, but she took to the field on many occasions, such as when she accompanied Kanata on her adventurer’s license qualification test, or when she directed traffic for the guild’s adventurers back when they captured the dragon.

“I wonder if you’ll get another bonus for this one!” Bella cooed, practically wriggling with desire. “There’s this hat I wanna buy *real bad*, you know...”

Melissa shot her a dead-eyed glare.

“I’m not buying you a hat,” she said. “Well...” she relented. “I suppose I will be relying on you to handle my work while I’m gone. Maybe once this case is settled we can go shopping together.”

“Seriously?!” Bella’s eyes lit up. “Hot damn! Just leave it to me!”

“You’ve gotten to the point where you can handle most of it on your own,” Melissa told her. “I’m expecting great things.” Aside from her uncouth habits of speech, Bella had become an excellent worker. Melissa thought Bella should easily be able to handle things while she was gone, especially when given the proper motivation.

Melissa, however, underestimated her own abilities. The amount of work she did regularly was far more than an ordinary person could handle, but Melissa herself had no idea. The next day, Bella would find herself weeping, anguished, as she struggled to keep up with Melissa’s work schedule from hell.

“Hat! Hat!” Bella chanted, ignorant of the fate that awaited her.

“Yes, yes,” said Melissa. “Just try to keep things professional once the guild opens.”

The time had come for the guild to open its doors. The staff greeted the mob of adventurers that came through the door with practiced, formal bows and a “Welcome to the Adventurers’ Guild!”

It was impossible to say which or how many of the adventurers had gotten their hands on the dangerous drug that had started this case, but the sooner they could resolve things, the better.

Melissa had already asked the other branches of the Adventurers’ Guild to let Kanata know Melissa was looking for her if she should ever come in through their doors, but she still had preparations to make in order to accompany her on the request. She pinched her cheeks and slapped her face, waking herself up as best she could as she prepared to handle the morning’s reception work.

† † †

“*Curse you!*” Fenrir cried as he pulled the wagon along down the plains. The wind was cool and pleasant that day, as the Spirit Wolf railed against his companions. “*Curse you curse you curse you! Cuuuuurse yooooou!*”

“*Bwa ha ha!*” Zag’giel laughed evilly as he lounged in Kanata’s lap, enjoying the sensation of the brush running down his back. “*Good! Seethe in your miserable envy! After all—Kanata had this brush made for us and us alone!*” The brush in question had been made with a generous helping of dragon underscale—a super-high-grade material. Its fine needles gave Zag’giel’s fur coat a luxuriant silky texture, and felt indescribably splendid on his skin. “*However,*” he continued, “*we are no miser. Once Kanata is finished brushing our fur, we shall allow you to have your turn as well.*”

“*I go second, though!*” Fenrir insisted. “*Newcomers last!*” Kanata’s pets seemed to have arrived at a strict system without any input from Kanata herself, where personal attention from Kanata was to be doled out in order of seniority. “*But you know,*” Fenrir added with a note of pride, “*I have a special item too—Kanata had this wagon upgraded for me, after all!*”

The old wagon had originally belonged to the elderly Beast Tamer Albert Molmo, but Kanata had gotten it restored using a shard of a Philosopher's Stone as a catalyst. Now it was far more comfortable to ride in and much easier to pull than the Royal Capital's finest carriages.

The two furballs who had been given special items all their own laughed and gloated, lording it over the newest member of the group.

"Bwa ha ha!" laughed Zag'giel.

"Ha ha ha!" laughed Fenrir.

"Ngayaaah!" Elizavett exclaimed, hopping up and down in circles around the driver's seat. It was the closest she could get to stomping her feet in her current form. *"Me too! I want a special item too!"* She looked up at Kanata with tears in her big, adorable eyes. *"Mistress! Might you please make something for me as well?"*

"Hah," scoffed Zag'giel. *"Foolishness. Kindhearted as Kanata may be, the hierarchy of her followers is absolute!"*

"It's at least a decade too early for a newcomer like yourself to be given her own—" Fenrir started to say, but before he could finish, Kanata cut him off.

"Of course!" Kanata agreed readily to the request, much to the astonishment of the two senior furballs. *"Let's do it!"*

"Kee hee hee!" Elizavett laughed triumphantly, fluttering up and landing on Kanata's shoulder to look down on her two companions. *"What was that about newcomers?"*

"We'll go visit Lily just as soon as I'm done giving you all a good brushing!" Kanata said.

And so, in just a few minutes, Kanata would plunge straight into the vortex of drama in the heart of the Royal Capital.

† † †

After finishing up her work that morning, Melissa took the afternoon to rest. She decided to pay a visit to a blacksmith she knew from her adventuring days so she could give her a share of the cookies Melissa had brought back as

souvenirs of her trip. The meeting with the guildmasters had exhausted her in all kinds of ways, but Melissa had still found time to do some sightseeing before their carriage arrived to take them back to the Royal Capital. It was a talent of hers.

It also gave her a useful tool to deal with the members of the guild staff who might be inclined to grumble about her taking the afternoon off. A souvenir and a pointed “Would you rather go on the next trip instead?” was generally enough to shut them up. Truly, Melissa was full of talents.

The blacksmith she was visiting was named Lily. She was an energetic girl who had inherited her small smithy from her late father. Lily was one of the countless people whom Kanata had helped in their time of need, and she had made a number of items for Kanata in return. There was no predicting what sorts of things Kanata would ask for, but the materials she brought for Lily to work with were always extremely rare items she would never have a chance to use otherwise. To a blacksmith, they were jobs worth taking.

“I don’t suppose there’s any chance Miss Kanata will be there again...”
Melissa said to herself.

The last time she had visited Lily, she had come to have her sword repaired and happened to run into Kanata by sheer coincidence. She had been drawn into a whole series of misadventures helping Lily with a dispute over her shop, ending up with her having to fight a former A-Rank adventurer with a bounty on his head. This time, though, it was she who had business with Kanata. Unfortunately, there was nothing she could do right now except wait for word.

The cowbell above the door rang as Melissa stepped into Lily’s smithy, where Lily was sitting behind the counter, her fire-red hair done up in a ponytail.

“Good afternoon, Lily,” Melissa said. “Is now a good time?”

“Oh! Melissa!” Lily greeted her old friend and big-sister figure. “Does your sword need maintenance? It hasn’t been that long since last time, but if you’ve noticed anything off you should tell me first thing.”

“No, no,” said Melissa. “Today I’m only here to bring you some souvenirs from my trip.”

Lily had upgraded Melissa's sword with the dragon underscale and Philosopher's Stone Kanata had brought her, reforging it into a powerful magic sword imbued with the element of wind. Without that weapon, she would have never been able to defeat a former A-Rank that easily. It let her create blasts of wind and raised her speed immensely. It was a hard weapon to use, to be sure, but for Melissa, whose Profession of Duelist placed speed above all else, it was the perfect fit.

"Here you are," Melissa said, handing over the cookies.

"Well, what have we here?!" Lily said as she accepted the present. "These are the famous cookies everyone's been talking about, aren't they?!" Blacksmithing was rugged, manly work, but Lily was nonetheless a girl. She was well aware of the latest fads in the realm of sweets. Lily brought out a plate for the cookies and began heating up a kettle of water for tea.

"How has your work been lately?" Melissa asked.

"Not bad, not bad," Lily said. "The customers we lost when my old man died have been coming back too. I guess that bastard Vigo must have been doing something to drive them off after all."

Vigo had been the senior disciple of Lily's father's old master back when he had been a student himself. After Lily's father's death, however, he turned to villainy in an attempt to get his hands on the magic furnace in Lily's smithy. Melissa thwarted his plans and Kanata broke his spirit, and now he was hard at work making amends for his crimes. It was as if whatever evil spirit had been animating him had vanished completely. It seemed he had even sent Lily a letter of apology.

"I'm glad to hear it," Melissa said. "I would have liked to check in on you sooner, but I've been so busy with work. I haven't had time to come visit..."

"They really do keep you busy, don't they?" Lily commiserated. "At this rate you'll have the adventurers thinking you're in line to be the next guildmaster..."

"Please, Lily... Not you too!" Melissa's dearest wish was to retire from guild work as soon as possible and return to being a simple adventurer, working when she liked and resting when she liked. She hadn't appreciated it at the time, but for all that she risked her life as an adventurer, her happy-go-lucky

lifestyle was far more comfortable than the way she was living now.

Promotion was no joke.

And yet, if she were to succeed at seeing this request to its resolution, her standing in the guild would only increase. Melissa wondered if the guildmasters were punishing her for her impertinence—if she had managed to earn their ire. The truth, however, couldn't have been further away. Those crafty old men and women loved Melissa. The path for her advancement was wide open whether she liked it or not. Indeed, it was poised to swallow her whole.

"I guess Kanata's been good for both of our careers, huh!" said Lily.

"I suppose," said Melissa. "If a promotion I never wanted counts as 'good'..." The topic, however, reminded her of her task at hand. "Speaking of which, Lily, has Miss Kanata been by your shop lately?"

"Kanata?" Lily said. "She teleports in for tea from time to time, but I haven't seen her in a while, no. I wonder if we're due for another visit soon! I tell you, that teleportation spell of hers is way too convenient. She's supposed to be off traveling in some far-flung land, but I keep forgetting she doesn't live right next door." Kanata's teleportation spell was a lost, superadvanced magic from the ancient past. It wasn't the sort of spell you could ordinarily use on a regular basis to casually pop in for tea, but Kanata made it look easy.

Speak of the devil, however, and she will appear. Suddenly, there was a brilliant light outside the smithy window. It was a light Melissa recognized. She had seen it many times working at the guild. Usually it was followed by a particular adventurer taking on huge quantities of requests all at once, to return later with news of their full completion. The juggernaut of a novice adventurer Melissa had somehow found herself responsible for had arrived.

"Miss Kanata!" she said. "Excellent. Actually, there's something I need to...talk..." But when she opened the smithy door, the words died in Melissa's throat. Zag'giel, for some reason, was clinging to the girl's face, covering it up entirely.

"Huff...puff..." breathed Kanata through Zag'giel's fluff.

"Miss Melissa," Zag'giel greeted the guild receptionist. *"It has been too long.*

Or, actually, it hasn't been long at all, has it?"

"I..." Melissa began, uncertain how to broach the topic. "What in the world?"

"Hmph," scoffed Zag'giel. *"Is it not obvious?"*

He was stretching his four stubby little legs out as far as they could reach, holding tight to Kanata's face. Needless to say, there was nothing obvious about why Kanata was wearing this furball like some kind of mask.

"This..." he began, pausing dramatically.

"This?" Melissa asked.

"This...is training!"

"T-Training...?" It was all Melissa could do to parrot Zag'giel's words back to him in the form of a question.

Kindly enough, the benevolent Zag'giel saw fit to explain things to the slow-witted receptionist. *"Indeed,"* he said. *"We can see how one might not understand the purpose of this exercise at a glance."*

"Huff...puff..." Kanata breathed.

"However, one must merely try it to understand. We assure you, great thought has been put into this method!"

"Huff...puff..."

"By striving to maintain our grip with our four limbs as Kanata's ticklish breath robs us of our concentration, we can train our body and mind alike most efficaciously! This is a flawless method of training devised by Kanata herself!"

"Huff...puff..."

Kanata gave no indication at all of whether this explanation was correct. She did nothing but take one deep breath after another. And with Zag'giel covering her face, it was impossible to tell what expression she was making either.

"If I may, Mister Zag'giel..." Melissa ventured. "I think Miss Kanata might just want you there so she can smell you while she walks around..."

"Hah," Zag'giel laughed. *"Perhaps it is too much for a callow amateur like yourself to understand..."*

“Perhaps...” said Melissa. Privately, however, she wondered whether the one misunderstanding the situation was Zag’giel himself. On the other hand, if he thought about it too deeply, his ego might collapse. Melissa decided not to press the matter any further.

“Hey!” piped up Fenrir. *“It’s my turn! Hurry up!”*

“’Twas your turn last time!” objected Elizavett. *“I am to go next!”*

To Melissa’s surprise, it seemed like the furballs actually enjoyed this. They were acting like small children pestering their parent to play with *them* next.

“Well...” said Lily, unable to bear this bizarre situation any longer. “Anyway, why don’t you come inside? I don’t want anyone spreading rumors about suspicious individuals loitering in front of my shop...”

“Huff...puff...” Kanata breathed.

“Don’t just stand there puffing!” snapped Melissa. “Use your words!”



“I suppose I should say hello again. Good afternoon, Miss Melissa, Miss Lily,” Kanata said, bowing politely once the furball mask was finally off her face. Her skin was looking bright and glossy from her heavy dose of belly fluff. “Now, was there something you wanted to talk to me about?” It seemed that Melissa’s words had, in fact, reached her when she was in that state. Kanata sat down, and Lily poured tea for her and her companions.

“Yes,” said Melissa. “You can drink your tea while you listen if you like. You see...” She went on to explain the entire situation with the illegal drug that had taken the Royal Capital by storm.

“Holy crap...” said Lily. “Do you think any of my customers might be involved?” As a blacksmith, a matter that concerned adventurers was her business as well. If one of her regular customers ignorantly got their hands on the drug, they might be out of action before they knew it.

“I couldn’t tell you, I’m afraid,” Melissa answered. “But according to the tests we’ve done, it shouldn’t be the sort of drug that’s easy to produce in large quantities, nor one simple enough for someone without technical expertise to manufacture even if they knew the formula. The guild’s opinion is that it’s most likely being made and distributed by a single genius alchemist.” The guild and the crown both were not without resources. They had been able to learn this much in their preliminary investigations, before assigning the request.

“Meaning that you’re in trouble if you can’t find the guy...” said Lily.

“That’s right,” Melissa confirmed. “The adventurers we’ve spoken to who destroyed their own bodies with the drug didn’t seem to know anything about the person who created it. We only have one lead, and it came from one of the users whose mind was damaged by the drug—that the creator intends to participate in the National Fencing Tournament. As clues go, it isn’t very reliable at all, but it’s our only lead. Our best option is to infiltrate the tournament in order to see what we can learn.”

“I see,” said Lily. “And that’s why you need someone like Kanata...”

The adventurer who took the request would have to make it through the

preliminaries all the way to the main tournament, as well as investigate the tournament's participants in order to find the drug's creator. It would be quite the difficult task.

"But you'll need a sword if you're going to participate in the National Fencing Tournament, won't you?" Lily said. "Hey, Kanata, what do you think of using one of mine?"

The smithy's customers from Lily's father's time had returned to the shop, but there was no denying that its status had suffered since Lily had taken over. Lily was a young woman, after all. She hadn't had time to earn a reputation of her own. Her father was a good enough smith that he had once forged a blade for Boldow the Divine Sword. If she wanted to stand in the same league as him, sending a contestant to the National Fencing Tournament with a sword of her own making would be a useful shortcut.

"I'll give you the sword for free, of course!" Lily went on. "Or...in your case, maybe I should make you another item for your pets! I see you got a new one too."

"Hang on, Lily," Melissa said. "Miss Kanata still hasn't said whether or not she intends to take the request." Melissa hoped Kanata would, of course, but it was a matter of steadfast principle for her to let the adventurer's own wishes take priority.

"I'd be happy to!" Kanata chirped her casual assent, not taking her eyes off the three furballs greedily devouring the cookies for a single second.

"Really?!" Melissa exclaimed, springing to her feet and leaning forward on the table. She had briefly forgotten her manners.

"Yes, of course!" said Kanata. "After all, both of you have helped me out a great deal!" Taking the difficult task Melissa was forcing on her with a cheerful smile on her face, Kanata looked like nothing short of a Saint.

"Hm." Zag'giel intoned. *"As expected of Kanata. We, too, shall lend you our strength, of course."*

"You can use me as a training partner!" Fenrir volunteered.

"I-I would prefer not to get hurt if I can avoid it," said Elizavett. *"But I will do*

my best to cheer you on!"

The furballs' mouths were covered in crumbs as they replied. Mister Molmo had once said that beasts tend to resemble their masters, but it seemed these three were taking after Kanata in a thoroughly useless way.

"In that case," said Melissa, "we should stop by the guild to complete the formal request procedure and then go register you for the National Fencing Tournament right away. I'm very sorry for the trouble."

Preliminary tournaments were still being held in many parts of the kingdom. The event in the Royal Capital would come only once all of them were complete. However, they didn't have unlimited time. It wasn't very likely that the preliminary tournaments would already be full, but the possibility was there.

"Will you be coming too, Miss Melissa?" Kanata asked.

"I will," she answered. "I've been given permission to prioritize this over my other affairs at the guild."

Although Kanata herself hadn't seemed to mind at all, Melissa had pretty much forced this request on her. It had always been her intention to support Kanata until the very end. The reception desk was as swamped as ever, but Melissa had arranged for her excellent junior to take her place. She had been laying the groundwork, getting her colleagues ready for her absence. They would survive without her.

Although she had yet to realize it herself, Melissa had already mastered the guildmaster's art of delegation. At this rate, Lily secretly thought to herself, nothing in the world could stop her from moving up in the bureaucracy.

† † †

"What?!" Melissa exclaimed at the National Fencing Tournament receptionist's answer. "She can't compete?! What do you mean she can't compete?!"

"It *is* Lady Kanata Aldezia, isn't it?" the receptionist queried, turning her attention to Kanata.

“Yes it is!” Kanata answered.

“Lady Kanata Aldezia, three-time consecutive winner of the National Fencing Tournament?”

“That’s right!”

“My lady, I had the honor of watching your performance every one of those years,” the receptionist politely gushed. “Your sublime sword work had me thoroughly enchanted.”

“Thank you very much!” Kanata said.

“I’ve been a fan of yours since your very first match. It really is a tremendous honor to meet you.”

She held out her hand to shake Kanata’s, but Elizavett battered it away.

“I would ask you to refrain,” she said. “Girl-child you may be, but my Mistress is not to be touched so lightly.”

“That aside,” Melissa protested, “what do you *mean* Kanata can’t enter the tournament?!”

The receptionist cleared her throat and produced a hefty tome. “Lady Kanata Aldezia was the winner of the one hundred thirty-fourth through one hundred thirty-sixth National Fencing Tournaments.”

“I know that!” Melissa snapped. “What *I* want to know is why she can’t compete in *this* one!”

“That,” the receptionist answered, “is the reason.”

“Excuse me...?”

“It is written, those who triumph in three consecutive National Fencing Tournaments are to be memorialized forever in the Hall of Fame, and kindly asked not to participate in further tournaments.”

“Th-That’s the first I’ve heard of such a rule!” Melissa complained.

“Yes, well, it was set in place fifteen years ago, but the only person since then who has achieved the feat of three consecutive victories is Lady Kanata Aldezia.”

“I-It can’t be...”

“Incidentally,” the receptionist went on to explain, “the reason such a rule was made in the first place is because of Boldow the Divine Sword. When he was younger, he used to win tournament after tournament, year after year, until the other fighters lost all their desire to participate.”

That was one reason, but the truth was that there was another one as well. The prize for triumphing in the tournament was the right to ask any reasonable favor of the king himself. The old king had simply gotten fed up with hearing the same impossible request every year to grant Boldow the ability to use magic.

“I’m sorry about my dad...” Kanata apologized.

“No, Miss Kanata, it’s not something *you* have anything to apologize for,” said Melissa. “Not to imply that Lord Boldow did anything wrong either...”

Melissa had not seen this development coming. She watched as the battle intensified between the receptionist, who wanted to shake Kanata’s hand, and Elizavett, who was trying to stop her, utterly miserable as her eyes followed their quick movements. Kanata had been her hope. She had no time to look for someone good enough in a fight to make it into the tournament right away. Moreover, without any way of knowing who was or wasn’t involved with the drug, she was at risk of word getting back to its creator if she handled the investigation poorly. She might have no choice but to abandon the idea of entering the National Fencing Tournament. It had been an unreliable lead, coming from someone whose mind had been addled by the drug, but it was her one and only thread leading back to the person behind it all. And now, it had been severed.

“Think, Melissa...” she told herself. “There must be some other way.”

“Oh!” said Kanata, striking her palm with her fist. “I have an idea!”

“Y-You have some kind of plan! I knew I should have trusted you, Miss Kanata!” Melissa leapt onto Kanata, wrapping her arms tight around her and crying tears of relief.

Both the receptionist and Elizavett clicked their tongues in irritation.

“Well? What’s your brilliant idea?” Melissa asked.

“It’s simple!” Kanata said. “*You* should enter the tournament, Miss Melissa!”

“...Huh?”

† † †

“So *you* ended up entering the tournament instead of Kanata?” Lily gawked once she returned to the smithy and explained the situation.

“That’s right!” said Kanata. “It was quick and easy!”

“The guild *tried* to look for a replacement...” Melissa grumbled.

The letter she had received from the guild had read, “At present, we have no available guild personnel with combat capabilities higher than Melissa Straud. Fight bravely. We are praying for you.”

It called to mind an image of the guildmasters giving her a thumbs-up and a cheesy smile.

“I can’t do this...” Melissa said, crumbling onto the table and sobbing bitterly. “You know,” she told the others once she had recovered herself a little, “I actually tried to join the National Fencing Tournament once myself, when I was just a novice adventurer...”

She’d failed in the second preliminary match. Back then, Melissa had just been made the youngest C-Rank adventurer in the guild, and she had gotten in above her head. Melissa, too, had a period when she was gung ho and full of life. Now she regarded it as another one of her youthful mistakes. She remembered the bitter beer she had drunk that evening in the consolation party put on by her friends, and drifted even deeper into her gloomy despair.

“W-Well, you’re quite a bit stronger than you were back then, aren’t you!” said Lily. “In fact, weren’t you strong enough to beat a former A-Rank adventurer and wanted criminal, *plus* a bunch of goons? That seems to me like proof positive that you’re stronger than an A-Rank!”

“The National Fencing Tournament is going to be *full* of people like that...” Melissa moaned. It seemed her loss in the tournament in her youth had left Melissa with a fair bit of trauma. She’d even stopped going to watch the tournaments in the aftermath. But she was right about one thing—the ability of

the fighters most likely would be no lower than it had been all those years ago. The National Fencing Tournament was a venerable event that claimed the prestige of determining the strongest sword fighter in the kingdom. It would be a gathering of mighty champions who had overcome their regions' preliminaries and been selected to take part in this competition. They were not opponents with which a former B-Rank and current receptionist could hope to contend.

"You'll do great!" said Kanata. "I'm sure you'll win this time, Miss Melissa!"

"I'm very glad to hear you say that, but..."

"She's right, Melissa!" Lily interrupted. "I don't know what things were like when you were young, but now you've got my weapon with you! You're in a completely different league from back then!"

"Please stop using the word 'young' like that," Melissa complained. "It sounds like you're implying that I'm not young anymore..."

Melissa lay despondent and miserable for some time, but she knew perfectly well she couldn't lay there forever. She ate the last of the cookies, drained a cup of black tea, and refocused her frame of mind.

"Now, then, I assume we are to continue as planned, with my role and Miss Kanata's reversed?"

"That's right!" said Kanata. "Just leave the investigation to me!"

The original plan had been for Kanata to fight while Melissa accompanied her as her second and kept an eye out for any suspicious activity among the contestants. Her habits and manner of speech aside, Kanata was as good as omnipotent. It was probably safe to leave the investigation to her.

"If there's an issue with the plan, it's on my end..." Melissa mused.

In order to make it to the main event where the creator of the forbidden drug was rumored to be participating, Melissa would have to make it through the preliminaries. The preliminaries would be held seven days from now, and then it would be another week until the tournament proper. There, too, she would have to do her best to win her matches and stay in the running so as to buy time for the investigation. Hopefully they would be able to sneak into the fighters' changing rooms and seize some samples of the drug to use as

evidence.

“I don’t know how much difference one week will make, but perhaps I should get back to training with this one as well,” Melissa said, touching her hand to the sword on her belt. It was really too fine a weapon for the likes of her, but all she could do was exert every effort for her partner blade. If she could manage to wield the full potential of this extraordinary weapon, maybe, just maybe, a miracle would occur and she would make it through the preliminaries.

“If you ever need repairs, your weapon’s in good hands!” said Lily. “And in exchange, promise me you’ll use her well in the tournament. It’ll be great publicity for my smithy!”

“Lily...” Melissa sighed. She had some respect for Lily’s indefatigable merchant spirit, but she wished her friend would at least refrain from saying things like that in front of the person in question.

“Honestly, I’d be glad to have Kanata in the tournament, but *you’re* even better, Melissa! If you win, everyone will say it’s because of my sword! And once I’m known as the blacksmith who forged the magic sword used by the winner of the National Fencing Tournament, the orders will come flooding in! Ka-ching!”

“Lily...” Melissa repeated. That one, unfortunately, had been a direct hit.

† † †

“Noooooooooooo!”

“Hiya!”

“Eeeeeeeeeek!”

“Fwah!”

“I caaaaaaaaaaaan’t!”

With each scream, Melissa was sent flying high into the air. Kanata had volunteered to be her training partner to help her learn the ins and outs of wielding her magic sword, but the difference in their ability was simply far too great. Kanata was easily able to dodge or parry Melissa’s every attack and return it with many times the force.

“Hey, hey!” said Lily, clanging an ornate pauldron with her hammer like a bell as she strode outside the smithy. “Isn’t this supposed to be training?”

“I-It’s fine,” Melissa insisted. “This sword is too powerful for me to use my full strength against any other training partner. I’m just grateful for the opportunity to train with it at all.” She pulled herself to her unsteady feet and raised her slender sword up to the side, level with the ground like a single wing. “Another round!”

“Go right ahead!” said Kanata, standing at ease with her wooden practice sword.

Melissa summoned a gust of wind to accelerate her movements and lunged straight for Kanata—or so it seemed. In fact, she used another gust to cancel the lunge and move into a quick side step, coming in with a follow-up jab from the flank. Changing the direction of her inertia all of a sudden like that made her body cry out in pain from the strain of the acceleration, but the speed she achieved in that moment was truly beyond human limits. It felt like her body was inside a box, and a giant had suddenly jerked the box to the side, but Melissa still managed to aim an accurate thrust at Kanata’s head.

The power of wind coursed through Melissa’s thrusting blade, accelerating the point to breathtaking speeds, so fast it created a blade of pure vacuum as a secondary attack.

Kanata, however, simply negated the wind energy head-on and sent Melissa flying through the air once again.

“Whyyyyyyyyyyy?!” Melissa cried as she flew. She had surpassed the limits of human speed, but Kanata, monster that she was, had surpassed even that.

“All right, Kanata!” Lily cut in. “It’s about time for us to switch out! Melissa, come bring your sword to the smithy for a checkup.”

“Okay-kay!” Kanata sang. “I’ll just fluff-fluff while I wait!”

“Aha,” said Zag’giel. *“So it will be time for our training next...”*

“Lady Kanata, wait!” pleaded Fenrir.

“Say, Mistress, is this truly training?” Elizavett asked. *“It seems rather queer to*

me. Or, rather, I am delighted to have you treat me so amorously, but would it not be better for me to return to my original form...?"

Even if Kanata had been listening to her question, however, there was no changing her mind. After all, Elizavett's original form didn't have *nearly* such splendid fluff.

"Fluff-fluff! Fluffy fluff!" Kanata sang, fluffing the three fluffballs all at once as Melissa passed by her and into the smithy.

The magic sword of wind Lily had created was made using materials produced by Kanata herself. The power it held was enormous. If Melissa wanted full use of its power, it would take every effort of both the wielder and maker to get each detail just right.

"It looks like the stress it places on your body has gone down by a lot," Lily observed. "Are you finding it more difficult to move than last time in any way?"

"Not at all," Melissa said. "I feel like we're in good form. I get the sense the sword is gradually adapting itself to my hand as well."

"You're up against Kanata," Lily said, "so I can't tell from watching whether you've gotten any stronger or not..."

"How strange," Melissa concurred. "I feel the same way." She was certain she had grown adept at wielding the magic sword, but none of her attacks had made the slightest impact on Kanata. Before today, she hadn't fully grasped how far beyond her that girl was.

"All right," said Lily. "In that case, you take a break while I make some adjustments."

"Thank you, Lily."

Melissa had been practicing every day as well, but she was endlessly grateful to Lily for taking so many long days to make sure the magic sword was being properly maintained. She was charging money for her services, of course, but Melissa was billing it all to the guild as mission expenses. It was her small bit of revenge on the guildmaster.

"I just hope I can make it through the preliminaries..." Melissa said.

There was no denying that she was in a different league from when she was a novice. Her work had changed, as had her friends and colleagues. Her present life was fulfilling in some ways, but she was full of lingering attachments. What were her friends from those days doing now, she wondered...

Lying with her head resting on Lily's table, Melissa drifted off to a nap thinking of all the things she couldn't change.

† † †

Several days later, the preliminary tournament had arrived. Melissa got out her old gear from her time as an adventurer to wear in the competition. Other than the boots, it had all been resting in the back of her closet. She hadn't expected to ever have use of it before she retired from the guild and returned to the adventuring life, but it seemed she would be putting it on again earlier than she'd thought.

A small part of her had been worried that she wouldn't fit into the outfit anymore after her years working a desk job.

Melissa arrived at the arena right on schedule, accompanied by Kanata. Lily would be making her way there on her own. As this was the preliminary tournament for the Royal Capital itself, the event took place in the same enormous arena used for the tournament proper. In some ways, it was like a rehearsal for the main event.

"What...is this?" Melissa stared in disbelief.

The number of people jammed into the arena was nothing short of enormous. She could only guess at how many matches it would take to winnow the crowd down to a single contestant.

"It's a hole in the rules, I'm afraid," the receptionist who'd registered Melissa said, stepping up beside her. "People who fail in the regional preliminaries often come here for a second attempt."

"You don't say!" Melissa remarked. "So the people here are..."

"I would say about eighty percent of them are people who failed other preliminaries, yes."

It was common knowledge that the Royal Capital held its preliminaries last of all, but Melissa never would have imagined so many people would have sought to exploit that fact like this. “Shouldn’t you have made a rule preventing this before the Hall of Fame thing?”

“Well, at one point we were considering instituting a rule to reject challengers who had already lost, so we could have a normal preliminary tournament, but...”

“But?” Melissa asked.

“His Majesty the King finds it more entertaining this way,” the receptionist said.

“Ah...”

It did sound like something the current king might say. He *was* rather...*unconventional*. Make no mistake, he was an excellent king, to be sure. He was a magnanimous monarch to his people, and a strong enough ruler that none of the other great powers dared to invade his kingdom. He was the very model of a king, possessing both kindness and strength. He was, however, something of a maniac when it came to human talent.

“His Majesty says we may find an undiscovered gem thrown away with the common rocks,” continued the receptionist.

“He did, did he.”

“And so, we hold one grand melee with all the contestants participating at once. The last fighter standing will be the one to advance to the tournament proper.”

“But that’s crazy!” Melissa exclaimed. “*This* is the preliminary for the storied and venerable National Fencing Tournament...?”

It was—unthinkably—going to be a battle royale. With such an enormous arena, it certainly might be possible to host a melee with this many participants, but surely the whole thing would be sheer chaos from the word “go.” Melissa had come here intending to try her sword technique against other fighters, but with so many people fighting it out, the whole thing lacked a certain sense of dignity.

“I understand how you feel,” the receptionist said, “but the preliminary is a popular event. The ticket sales are just about on par with the tournament proper.”

“So it’s the damned management!” Between the king’s selfish decrees and the profit motive, what chance did the dignity of the historic tournament even have? “I *thought* it looked like too many people came to watch the preliminaries...” Melissa said, glancing over at the nearly full stands. “Well, nothing for it but to try...”

“You have the look of someone who seriously intends to make it through the preliminaries,” the receptionist commented. “I’ve been watching the National Fencing Tournament for twenty years. I loved it so much I became a member of the staff. I like to think I have an eye for such things.”

It seemed this woman was quite the maniac herself.

“I have to,” said Melissa. “It’s for my job.”

For all that she hated her work at the Adventurers’ Guild and wanted to quit, Melissa took a certain amount of pride in her work and had a strong sense of duty. She had made what preparations she could. All there was left to do now was make full use of her training and win.

† † †

For days, Melissa had been spending her time being launched in the air or sent tumbling by Kanata without any real sense of whether she had been getting stronger or not. She had learned how to use her magic sword, but at the end of the day she was still a mere former B-Rank adventurer. Her initial thought in a melee of this size with such powerful opponents had been to keep her distance and bide her time—that was the only way she could see herself coming in first.

However...

“I-I don’t believe it!” the announcer’s voice rang out, amplified by his enchanted megaphone. “This lady’s got some *poooooower!!!*”

A woman shrouded in a gale of wind raced through the arena, making the large space seem tiny with her overwhelming speed. Wherever she ran, scores

of contestants were sent flying helplessly through the air.

“Coming in strong—maybe too strong—it’s Melissa Straud! Where did the guild find a receptionist like this one, let me ask you that?!” Even the announcer seemed to be getting excited.

Melissa, for her part, was no less surprised than anyone else.

I don’t believe it! she thought. *I’m actually doing this!*

Although she had retired from adventuring some time ago, Melissa hadn’t actually left combat behind at all. As receptionist, she sometimes had to use force to restrain violent individuals who couldn’t be reasoned with, and she had served as an examiner for adventurers’ qualifying tests many times. More recently, she had faced off against a dragon and risked her life fighting a former A-Rank. If anything, she had been facing far greater challenges than she ever had as an adventurer. And that, of course, was all before her training with Kanata, which had done wonders to help her master the use of her magic sword.

“H-Hey!” one of the other fighters shouted. “We gotta take *that one* out or the rest of us are just screwed! Everyone gang up on her!”

“O-Okay!” agreed his opponent. “Truce! Everyone, go after that woman!”

Melissa had drawn too much attention to herself. The spectacle of her dashing around the arena kicking up plumes of sand had excited the spectators in the stands, but it had also drawn the attention of her fellow competition. The preliminary was set up as a battle royale. There was nothing in the rules against everyone ganging up to attack a single fighter.

“Graaaaaaaaah!!!” With a mighty roar, the fighters all charged in unison toward Melissa.

“Too slow!” Rather than stand and face the onslaught head-on, Melissa charged straight through the mob using her superhuman speed, and attacked them from behind. She dashed through their confused formation, her feet flying just above the ground, cutting aside foes as she passed. When she was done, the mob was lying in a heap on the arena sand.

Melissa had been getting better and better at controlling the power of wind.

By now, her feet were hardly ever touching the ground at all. Melissa's Profession of Duelist gave her hardly any magic, but the wind magic she was using now came from her sword itself. Her own magic reserves were barely under any strain. It was the perfect showcase of the power of the magic sword made from rare materials by Lily, the brilliant young blacksmith.

Thank you, Lily! Melissa thought to herself. *With this sword, I can do this! You didn't skimp on the bill, but thank you just the same!*

Melissa's job earned her a high salary, but even still her jaw had dropped when she saw the price Lily was quoting her. Still, as expensive as it was, it had been worth every coin.

"That's a nice sword you got there!" One of the contestants was an A-Rank adventurer—higher rank than Melissa herself. "But it'll take more than a nice weapon to win *this* tournament!" He rushed her with his axe, bringing it down in a mighty blow.

He's strong! Melissa thought. *But nothing compared to Kanata!* Her skills would have to win her the day. She avoided the axe swing with only a hair's breadth to spare, creating an opening for her own counterattack. The man went down with a look of sheer surprise on his face.

"Did you see that counter!" the announcer roared. "No guard whatsoever! This is one receptionist who doesn't value her own life!"

Of course I value my life! Melissa thought. *But I could tell that attack wasn't going to hit...*

If she had made a single error, her head would have been split in two, but Melissa's mind was calm. Fighting against an opponent as overwhelmingly strong as Kanata day after day had lent her psychological strength as well. Compared to Kanata, all of these fierce warriors were like infants. Melissa herself was nowhere near Kanata's level either, of course, but having such a superlative target to compare them to kept her from losing her head in the fight.

"Somebody stop heeeeer!!!" one of the remaining contestants screamed.

But it was not to be. Ten minutes later, her opponents were all lying on the

ground, not moving. Melissa released her sword's magic and made her way to the center of the arena to cheers that seemed like they might bring the whole building down.

"Holy moly, Melissa! That was incredible!" Lily cheered from the stands.

"Moly holy, Miss Melissa!" Kanata agreed.

"I won..." Melissa said. "I really won..." Melissa knew she should feel overjoyed, but the whole thing just seemed unreal.

The announcer, at least, had passion to spare. "What power, ladies and gentlemen! What overwhelming might! I've never heard of anything like it in all the history of this tournament! The guild receptionist is this year's winner in the National Fencing Tournament preliminaries! She'll be running wild in the tournament proper as well, make no mistake! Make sure to place your bets with the official tournament bookie!"

They just had to finish it with an advertisement for the tournament's officially sponsored gambling, of course.

From all around her, Melissa could hear cheers and adoration directed her way.

"That was amazing, miss!"

"Can't wait to see you in the main event!"

"I'll be rooting for you!"

Melissa waved back awkwardly as the cheers grew louder and louder. Preliminaries or not, it seemed she had already made quite a splash.

† † †

Melissa let out a long, exhausted breath. "I'm just glad I was able to do my part of the job..." she said.

After finalizing Melissa's registration for the main tournament, the party returned to Lily's smithy. It looked like the victory had taken a tremendous weight off Melissa's shoulders. She was finally letting herself relax.

"Here you go!" said Kanata, handing Melissa a cup of fresh-brewed tea. "Have

some tea!”

“Thank you, Miss Kanata,” Melissa said, accepting the beverage and taking a drink. “Ahh...” she sighed. “It’s like the hot tea is seeping into every inch of my tired body.”

“So it looks like you’ll be going to the main event after all!” said Lily, taking Melissa’s sword off her hands to do some postmatch maintenance.

“So it does,” Melissa said. “Our investigation, on the other hand, is only getting started.” Melissa was going to be busy fighting in the tournament herself, giving her very little time to investigate which of the other participants was the manufacturer of the illegal drug.

“You can just leave that part to us!” said Kanata, flexing theatrically with a furball on each shoulder and a third atop her head.

“Naturally, we shall lend you our strength as well,” said Zag’giel.

“Is there any higher joy than helping Lady Kanata?” Fenrir agreed.

“I have little interest in the troubles of humankind,” said Elizavett. *“But if it is my Mistress’s desire, I suppose I must.”*

Melissa had no idea what use Kanata’s three pets might possibly be, but they certainly seemed motivated if nothing else.

“We have some time until the tournament proper,” Melissa pointed out. “How should we spend it, do you think? There’s no need for me to actually win the tournament, so I don’t suppose more training is strictly necessary...”

It wasn’t as if they would be expelled from the premises if Melissa lost a match. Melissa had already halfway completed her role just by getting this far. It might be a better idea to use the week they had until the main event to do some serious investigation. There might be some value in checking up on the leads the kingdom and the Adventurers’ Guild had already investigated, in case they had overlooked some key detail.

“Well, now that you mention it, there *is* somewhere I’d like to visit,” Kanata said.

Her idea, it turned out, was to visit the hospital treating the patients whose

bodies had been ruined by the drug they were pursuing.

“I see...” said Melissa. “You want to question them again. But you know, these people are very unwell. I don’t know if you’ll be able to get anything useful out of them.”

The rumor that the creator of the drug was going to be participating in the National Fencing Tournament had come from one such patient. If they could get more information out of them, it could increase their chances of finding the culprit. Besides, there weren’t any other leads to go on. Kanata’s suggestion was probably the optimal course of action.

After all, Kanata was a brilliant young lady when it came to topics unrelated to fluff.

† † †

A man lay in a hospital bed, staring up at the ceiling with clouded eyes. Next to him, a woman sat on the floor with her body propped up on the bed, sound asleep. She must have been someone important to him. Her eyes had the telltale signs of someone who had just been crying.

The man made no response as Kanata and her companions entered the room. The side effects of the drug harmed not only the body, but the mind as well.

“I don’t know...” Melissa said. It seemed hopeless. The man was awake, but the light of thought had gone out from his eyes. It must have taken heroic efforts for the last set of investigators to get any information out of him whatsoever, in his state. “Miss Kanata, perhaps we should leave...”

The guild had already given this man the best healing they could in their attempt to question him. He had been treated with expensive potions and healing spells from high-level priests. If all those efforts hadn’t been enough to help him, there was probably nothing anyone could do. It would be best for everyone if they left before the woman at his bedside woke up.

Or so Melissa thought.

“Don’t worry!” said Kanata. “It’ll be okay!”

It wasn’t clear whom she was addressing exactly—perhaps she was simply

speaking to everyone present. Either way, Kanata's relaxed tone did a great deal to alleviate Melissa's worry. Kanata held her hand over the patient and closed her eyes as if in prayer, casting a spell. This time she was focusing all of the healing energy she had used to cure the people of Undertown on just one individual.

"Mnhh...gh..." the previously unresponsive man moaned. Slowly, his eyes regained their focus. Kanata's healing magic had done what the doctors and priests alike could not, after everyone had given up on this man as a hopeless case. "H-Huh?" the man said. "What was I...?" He looked between his own hands and his wife, lying collapsed on his bedside.

The woman roused at the man's voice. She looked up, her eyes meeting his. For a second, they widened in shock. Then, tears welling up once again, she hugged him tight. "You idiot!" she cried. "Why did you have to use that stupid drug?!"

"I-I'm sorry..." the man said. "I thought it might help earn us some money, with you pregnant and everything..."

He had made a mistake in involving himself with the drug, but with a reason like that it was hard to hold it against him. Melissa and company let the man and woman recover their wits a bit before addressing the couple to introduce themselves.

"So you're the one who cured me?" the man asked.

"The doctors said his case was hopeless!" the woman exclaimed through her tears. "Thank you! Thank you so, so much!"

"I don't know how we can ever repay you..." agreed her husband.

"No need for thanks!" Kanata chirped, lightly brushing off the couple's heartfelt thanks. "But if you want to pay me back, just let me know if you see any good fluff!"

"Fluff?" the man and woman parroted in unison.

"That's right!" Kanata said, holding up Zag'giel as an example. "I'm looking for critters with the best fluff in the universe, like this cutie here!"

"Indeed," Zag'giel intoned. "We are a true paragon of fluff."

"I-I see..." the man said. "Or rather, I don't really get it, but if I see another magic beast like that I'll be sure to let you know."

"Yay!" Kanata cheered. "Thank you so very much!"

"Excellent!" said Fenrir.

"You will treat me with the same amorous affection even once you have found yet more servants, won't you, Mistress?" Elizavett asked. *"Although I would be even happier, could you attend to me in my original form..."*

The three furballs were all delighted at the prospect of further fluff, although none of them actually knew what Kanata meant by the word.

"Now then," said Melissa. "I am terribly sorry to bother you when you've only just returned to your senses, but I have a number of questions I was hoping you could answer." She proceeded to question the man as to what he knew about the origin of the drug.

"I'm afraid I don't know the person who made it..." he said. "But..."

"Yes?" probed Melissa.

"I heard them muttering to themselves when I left. Something like, *'Everything so far has been nothing more than an experiment. But just you wait for the big tournament! I'll show them all!'* This time of year, a 'big tournament' has gotta mean the National Fencing Tournament, right? That's what I thought, anyway."

"An experiment, they said?" Melissa asked. Perhaps the purpose of distributing the drug so widely had been to see what kind of effect it would have. That would also explain the information the guild had given her that the drug had stopped circulating quite recently. The creator must have concluded their experiment and moved on to their real goal of creating something that would help them win the National Fencing Tournament.

"Can you tell us anything about the person in question?" Melissa asked.

"Sorry..." the man replied. "They were of pretty average height and they had their face hidden behind a mask. I couldn't tell if they were a man or woman from their voice either, since it was so muffled..."

“And you purchased drugs from someone so suspicious?” Melissa said in disbelief.

Immediately, the man began making excuses. “I was desperate! I had just found out I was going to be a parent, and I was at my wit’s end!”

“Darling...” His wife sighed. “I really wish you had talked to me about it first...”

“Think of it from a man’s point of view!” he protested. “I would feel pathetic talking to you about something like that!”

“A lot less pathetic than how you ended up!” the woman shot back.

“What did you say?!”

“You heard me!”

It was mere minutes since the two had been crying tears of joyful gratitude, but it seemed the couple had already started bickering. Kanata’s three furballs took it upon themselves to step in.

“That’s enough, both of you,” said Zag’giel.

“I know that healthy couples argue with each other, but take care not to let it turn into a real fight!” Fenrir cautioned.

“Are you quite finished with this tedious spat of yours?” asked Elizavett. *“You mustn’t get so worked up, lest you harm the child in your belly.”*

“I-I’m sorry...” the two of them said, bowing their heads to the balls of fluff as they delivered their lecture. It was a surreal sight, but from Kanata’s point of view, the scene got full points for cuteness.

“Oh!” the man said, seeming to suddenly remember something. “There was something else. A small thing. Honestly, it’s kind of a useless bit of information...”

“Not at all!” Melissa said, jumping at the chance for further information.

“Please, tell me anything you remember, no matter how small!”

They still didn’t know what the culprit’s goals were in creating the drug. If only they knew what their intentions were with the National Fencing Tournament. Melissa was eager for even the tiniest scrap of information that

might lead them to unraveling the case.

“Well, there was one thing I noticed about them...”

“Well? What was it?”

“They had really, really good hair.”

† † †

“That really was a useless bit of information...” Melissa grumbled.

Given that the perpetrator apparently hid their identity under a mask, it was likely that their hair had been a wig as well. They were unlikely to identify them based on their physical characteristics. They didn’t even know if they were looking for a man or a woman.

Kanata, however, seemed to have taken the information very seriously indeed. “Good hair...” she repeated, nodding to herself. “Soft and shiny. I see, I see...”

The man’s wife, for her part, grew jealous when she heard her husband praise someone else’s hair, and soon the couple was arguing again. Kanata, Melissa, and the furballs left them to it, and exited the hospital.

“Well, we still don’t have any leads worthy of the name,” said Melissa. “What do we do now?”

“Is there anyone else we know of who used the drug?” Kanata asked.

“There is,” said Melissa. “Quite a number of them, in fact. The damage hasn’t been spreading as much since the source of the drug dried up, but there are many people all over the land who have received treatment for the harm it’s done to their bodies.”

“In that case, we should visit them!” Kanata suggested.

“More questioning, is it?” Melissa asked. “Unfortunately, it sounds like the only one who gave us any real information was the man we just spoke to. There are some patients whose cases were less severe, who are still capable of speech, but if we question them too aggressively, word might get back to the drug’s creator. If they realize they’re being investigated they might become cautious and withdraw from the tournament...”

“No, no, not that!” said Kanata.

“Then...you *don't* want to question the patients?”

“I just thought that since it looks like I can cure them after all, I should probably go cure everyone!” Kanata said the words like they were nothing.

“Indeed!” said Zag’giel. *“We had a feeling you would say as much, Kanata. We are proud to call you our master.”*

“That’s Lady Kanata for you!” agreed Fenrir. *“Her compassion is without bounds!”*

“’Tis their own fault for using the drug, I would think,” Elizavett huffed. *“Still... I suppose their families are worthy of pity, like the wife of that man before...”*

“Tee hee hee!” Kanata giggled at the praise. “Thank you, everyone!”

Melissa, for her part, felt a little ashamed of herself. She had been thinking only of completing the job, while Kanata was putting the well-being of the patients above all else. She really was a thoughtful girl. It was hard to believe she was only fifteen years old.

Work was important, to be sure, but it wasn’t the only thing that mattered in life. Melissa reflected that she could afford to take after Kanata’s example.

“Slurp slurp slurp slurp slurp!”

While Melissa was reflecting, Kanata had begun idly sucking at her pets’ fluff, making a horrible, filthy-sounding noise.

“K-Kanata!” Zag’giel protested. *“S-Stop this!”*

Some of Kanata’s traits, Melissa decided, were ones she would be better off not emulating.

† † †

“The shakes! They’re gone!”

“I don’t believe it! They told me I would never walk again!”

Patient after patient reacted with sheer astonishment at how well Kanata had been able to cure them. She spent the week leading up to the National Fencing Tournament main event visiting everyone they knew of who had become ill due

to the drug, and healing every single one. Her spells were so powerful that the excess energy healed everyone else in the hospital as well. The doctors didn't complain—they were happy to have a bit of rest.

The patients thanked Kanata profusely, proclaiming her to be a Saint before she dispelled that notion by demonstrating that she was, in fact, a Beast Tamer.

And, of course, she never neglected to use the opportunity to spread word of the fluff. “The thing I want is fluff!” she told them. “If you see any good fluff, let me know!”

Alas, nobody understood what she meant. “Fluff” had become a holy word used by followers of Fluffism, the new religion from the Holy City, and everyone simply assumed that Kanata was one of the fluffy faithful.

In the end they weren't able to find any new clues, but with the users of the drug all healed, the only remaining problem was finding the creator and bringing them to justice.

And at last, the day of the tournament arrived. If their information was to be trusted, their target would be somewhere among the competition...

† † †

As the National Fencing Tournament began, the announcer introduced the assembled contestants. Although the tournament had the word “fencing” in its name, its scope had been greatly expanded in recent years, and many of the fighters came wielding axes or hammers in lieu of the traditional sword.

Nonetheless, it had been a sword fighter who had won every tournament thus far, so perhaps it wasn't wrong to keep on calling it a fencing tournament after all.

“And last, but not least,” the announcer intoned, “blasting through the infamously difficult final preliminaries in the Royal Capital, the world's strongest receptionist, Melissa Strauuuuuuud!”

“Ha ha...” Melissa laughed dryly as she waved to the crowd.

She was met by an enormous cheer, so loud that it felt like the arena itself might collapse. The stands were full of people who had witnessed her prowess

in the preliminaries—her brand-new die-hard fans.

“How did I end up here, I wonder...” she said, suddenly gripped by anxiety at the eleventh hour.

The plan originally had been for Kanata to appear in the tournament, with Melissa herself playing the role of support and investigating from behind the scenes. Instead, she’d found herself in the spotlight. She had stood out so much that she was beginning to worry about whether it was going to impact her work as a receptionist in the future.

Actually, maybe it would be for the best if it got in the way of her work. She might finally get demoted instead of moving up in the world for a change. Such thoughts could be dangerous, though. She still needed to investigate the roster for anyone who might be suspicious. Melissa forced herself back to reality.

Kanata, Melissa’s second, was watching from the window in the waiting room. Melissa looked back over her shoulder just to make sure.

Miss Kanata... she thought, trying to signal her partner with just her eyes. *Please be on the lookout for anyone suspicious in the lineup...*

Kanata began gesticulating rapidly in response, sending Melissa silent signals of her own.

Their fluff scores are all pretty high for a bunch of humans! she was saying. *From right to left, I’d give them thirty points, then fifty-three points, then sixty-two... Oh! That person’s fluff is amazing! Eighty points for sure!*

“Miss Kanata...” Melissa sighed.

It was just as she had feared—the two of them had their roles reversed from what they should have been. She was beginning to feel distinctly uneasy. Her first bout, however, was going to be starting just as soon as they finished the opening ceremony. She wouldn’t even have time to stop by the waiting room first.

Of all the luck, she had to end up in the very first match of the tournament. Her opponent was a giant of a man wielding a pair of enormous greataxes—one in each hand.

“Hur hur hur...” the man laughed. “Let’s see how you fare against my Rocksplitter Dance!”

“I don’t suppose you might go easy on me...” Melissa said.

In terms of the Adventurers’ Guild ranking system, this man’s strength would put him easily above A-Rank. Somehow, though, Melissa felt strangely calm. Ever since meeting Kanata, she had found herself facing one difficult opponent after another, and somehow making it through each and every time.

“Match number one!” the referee declared. “Begin!”

Melissa stood her ground as the enormous man bore down on her, brandishing his twin axes. Each one was so big and hefty it looked like it would take two grown men to carry.

“Take this!” he bellowed, swinging his axes in a wild tempest of steel. One hit from that attack would be enough to take Melissa out of action, and this man was chaining one strike into another with all the speed of a whirlwind. “Rock! Splitter! D-Dance?!”

Melissa dodged each strike with ease. She slipped inside the man’s reach through the gaps in his blows and launched herself straight up in the air, nailing the giant man with a ferocious jumping-knee strike to the chin.

“Gh!” the man cried, stumbling for balance. “I-I can still—”

“No,” said Melissa. “It’s over.” She was behind him, her slender sword point at his exposed back.

“Wh-When did you...?!” the man exclaimed in shock. He didn’t dare move a muscle. If he did, Melissa’s rapier would run him through faster than he could blink. The killing intent radiating from the woman behind him testified to that much.

“Do you yield?”

“N-Nghaaaa!” the man cried, rallying his spirits. “I wouldn’t even *feel* a stab from a tiny sword like that!!!” Refusing to surrender, he went to swipe at his enemy with his axe. Before he could turn around, however, Melissa summoned a powerful cyclone from the point of her sword, tossing the giant man in the air

and out of the ring.

“Match!” the referee declared. “The winner is Melissa Straud!”

The whole thing had taken no more than five seconds of lightning-fast movement. For many of the onlookers, it had looked like Melissa was torn to shreds by the man’s axes, only for her to reappear a second later behind him, in complete control of the fight. They watched him struggle in vain as he was swallowed up by the onrushing wind.

It was a showy conclusion to the match. The crowd went wild.

“Hah...” Melissa let out a satisfied breath. Having made it all the way to the tournament itself, there wasn’t, strictly speaking, any need for Melissa to win her matches. Having come this far, however, she found herself wanting to see how far she could go.

“Miss Melissa! You did it!” Kanata gave Melissa a leaping hug, followed by her three furballs.

“Th-Thank you, Miss Kanata! Although I do think I had something of an advantage in that matchup.” It warmed Melissa’s heart to see Kanata and her furballs so happy about her victory, but she had come here in the first place on other business. “Anyway, what do you think? Did that person seem like a likely suspect to you?” Melissa had no way of knowing whether or not the giant man she had faced off against was the creator of the illegal drug. Maybe Kanata would have a better idea, with her superhuman perceptive powers.

“Hmm...” Kanata said, peering over at Melissa’s opponent. “That one?”

“Yes, him.”

“His fluff score wasn’t anything to speak of. Let’s hope the next one’s a little better.”

“M-Miss Kanataaaa!” Melissa wailed.

This request just might be hopeless after all.

† † †

“Well, from what our source said, the person we’re looking for is of medium build, with a nondescript physique,” Melissa considered. “It probably wasn’t

him.” The man she had just defeated was too large to fit on a stretcher, and had to be carried out of the arena by a huge crowd of staff members. Now she had nothing to do but wait in her waiting room until her next match.

“This is quite a well-furnished room, isn’t it?” Zag’giel observed.

“It’s a waiting room for a contestant in the National Fencing Contest!” said Fenrir. *“I guess it only makes sense for it to be this fancy!”*

“’Tis far too gaudy for my tastes,” Elizavett complained. *“Whoever designed this chamber has questionable tastes, indeed.”*

Kanata, however, had a different concern entirely. “But this is a problem for us!”

“You picked up on the issue too, Miss Kanata?” Melissa asked. “I didn’t expect for them to put us all in individual rooms...”

It was a luxurious, comfortable room, but right now it mainly served as an obstacle to the group’s investigation. If there were a single waiting area for all the contestants, they could observe and question them without arousing suspicion. But since they were all stuck in private rooms, Melissa would have to go out of her way to visit someone.

Anyone would be on their guard if a potential opponent in a future match were to suddenly knock on their door. The creator of the drug, especially, might have some sense that they were being pursued. If they took the evidence and fled, this whole thing would have been for naught.

“I suppose I can at least question my opponent in the previous round, under the pretense of a conciliatory visit...” Melissa proposed.

In other words, there was still a possibility of things working out, just so long as she kept winning. She had been fortunate enough to win her first bout, but there were sixteen fighters participating in the main tournament. If she didn’t have the luck to stumble upon the culprit before the semifinals, she would have to win four more times.

“It just seems impossible, no matter how I think about it...”

She did have Lily’s magic sword, and the benefit of Kanata’s training. It

certainly did seem to be the case that she was stronger now than she ever had been when she was active as an adventurer. However, in this tournament of world-class fighters, she couldn't count on getting lucky every time. "I don't suppose you have some sort of ingenious plan, do you?" she asked.

"Hm..." said Kanata. "Let me think..."

"If we were to return to our original form, we could use our magic to scan the area," Zag'giel proposed.

"Yeah?" said Fenrir. *"Well if I returned to my original form, I could use my nose to sniff them out! I don't believe for a second that some drug could escape my sense of smell!"*

"Could I but taste one drop of their blood, I should know at once whether there are any traces of the drug within their bodies," offered Elizavett.

The ridiculous balls of fluff, it turned out, boasted some pretty incredible abilities.

"Really?!" Melissa asked. "Then what are we waiting for?! We should start right now!"

"Alas, that would be impossible," Zag'giel said.

"It's unfortunate..." admitted Fenrir.

"It displeases Mistress for us to return to our original forms," Elizavett explained.

"Wh-What?!" Melissa demanded. "Why?!"

"Because that would lower their fluff score!" Kanata insisted.

What in the world was a *fluff* score, Melissa wondered. It was a phrase Kanata used often, but nobody had any idea what she actually meant by it.

Some furballs, however, had their theories.

"It is Kanata's wish for us to seek ever-greater fluff," said Zag'giel.

"That's right!" chimed in Fenrir. *"I believe Kanata is teaching us that we will never surpass our limits if we stay in our original forms!"*

"Is it so, I wonder...?" Elizavett wasn't so convinced. *"I wonder if she merely*

dislikes your wretched and unlovely original forms..."

Elizavett's guess wasn't far off the mark, but the other two refused to believe it.

"If that were the case," said Zag'giel, "it would imply she dislikes your original form as well."

"And what about the way you stick to Lady Kanata every chance you get?" Fenrir snapped. *"If we're wretched and unlovely, you're nothing but a nuisance!"*

"Y-You dare?!" Elizavett snapped. *"What terrible discourtesy to a peerless beauty like myself! I won't stand for it!"* Elizavett flapped her wings, fluttering up into the air. Soon, the three had launched into yet another fight.

Their furball forms, however, had no attack power whatsoever, and the fight showed no signs of reaching any sort of conclusion. The three continued launching attack after ineffectual attack until they had completely tired themselves out.

"L-Let's leave it there for today..." they agreed, huffing and puffing as they gasped for breath.

"You're all just super adorable today!" Kanata gushed, scooping all three up in her arms. *"You're the best fluff ever!"* She rained down a hail of kisses on the furballs' fluffy heads, absolutely delighted.

"Miss Kanata," Melissa ventured, *"is there any possibility you might let those three use their abilities, just for today's investigation?"*

"I dunno..." Kanata pouted. *"It would lower their fluff score, you know."*

"Please!" Melissa pleaded, clasping her hands together desperately.

"Hmm..." Kanata hemmed and hawed before finally giving way. *"All right. But only for the investigation!"*

"Hm," said Zag'giel. *"It has been too long since we were in this form. Truly, this is our proper body."*

"I can feel my senses getting sharper by the second!" Fenrir declared.

“Kee hee hee!” Elizavett laughed. “Now, receptionist! Be enthralled by my unearthly beauty!”

With the three back in their regal and imposing true forms, Melissa felt even more overwhelmed than before. This wasn’t the first time she had seen Zag’giel and Fenrir in their true forms as Demon King and Spirit Wolf. Their outlandish claims, it turned out, actually were completely true. The gorgeous woman with blonde hair and crimson eyes was a new addition, but Melissa could sense tremendous strength underneath her cold beauty as well. It went without saying, but all three of them were much stronger than Melissa herself. For that matter, they were almost certainly stronger than anyone participating in the tournament.

The fact that those three obeyed Kanata was just another sign of how incomprehensible the girl’s power truly was.

“Very well!” Zag’giel said. “Then we shall begin our part.” He touched his hand to the wall and spoke a short incantation, turning every wall in the building invisible. They could see every contestant in the building, and what they were doing.

“Wh-What the—?!” Melissa balked.

“A simple application of scrying magic,” explained Zag’giel. “In truth, the walls have not turned invisible, and the image we are seeing is a mere projection. They will not notice that we are watching them.”

“Next, it’s my turn!” said Fenrir. *“I just need to pinpoint which direction the drugs are in, and the rest should be easy!”* Fenrir’s nose twitched. A quizzical look came over his face. *“Miss Melissa... I would ask you to remain calm as I tell you what I’ve learned...”*

“O-Okay...” Melissa agreed.

“Every single one of the contestants smells of the drug. It’s the same scent I detected in the patients’ body odor in the hospital.”

“I-It can’t be!” Melissa reeled in shock. How could the drug have possibly spread this far?

“The large man you defeated earlier was using the drug as well,” Fenrir said.

“Perhaps we should ask him what he knows?”

“R-Right,” Melissa agreed. “Let’s hurry, then.”

Melissa hadn’t dealt her opponent any injury that should threaten his life, but she did damage him badly enough that he had been unable to rouse himself. She looked through Zag’giel’s pseudoinvisible wall, and saw him being carried down a hall to the infirmary. The five of them hurried to go question him.

“I-I don’t know! I don’t know nothin’!” the man insisted, pale faced and shaking. He was in bad condition, and not just because he was being questioned for his involvement in illegal drugs. It seemed he was having withdrawal symptoms now that the effect of the drug had worn off. Nonetheless, he insisted on playing innocent.

Elizavett stepped up to the side of his bed—or rather, the two beds that had been pushed together for him to rest on.

“Wh-Whoa...” The man’s eyes opened wide. “What’s a beauty like you doing visitin’ little old me? Eh heh heh...”

“Tedious oaf,” Elizavett spat, seizing him by the head and lifting him up out of his beds single-handed.

“E-Eeek!” The man shrieked in fear as Elizavett bit his neck. She passed it over her tongue like a sommelier tasting wine before violently spitting it out.

“Disgusting!” the vampire exclaimed. “And guilty, of course.”

She dropped him back on the bed with all the delicacy of someone discarding a used tissue.

“Do you know what I am?” she asked, bringing her face perilously close to his.

“Wh-What?!” the man asked.

“I am one of the ancient vampires,” Elizavett said. “And now, I have tasted your very blood.”

“N-No way! Th-Then, I’m—”

“Precisely! Henceforth, I could make you one of my ghouls with but a word—whensoever and wheresoever I wish! If that would be displeasing to you, you

are to never again lay your hands on the forbidden drug!” Elizavett said.

The man prostrated himself on the bed, curling up into as small a ball as he could and trembling fearsomely.

“Behold, receptionist,” Elizavett added, turning to Melissa. “I have set the stage for you. Now, interrogate this man to your heart’s content.”

It seemed that Elizavett’s high and mighty demeanor was merely a performance meant to scare the enormous man straight. Needless to say, Elizavett had no intention at all of making the man into a ghoul. Her sole objective had been to enable Melissa’s questioning of the man to go as smoothly as possible.

“My Mistress...” Elizavett pleaded, sidling up to Kanata like an amorous kitten and dropping her absolute-zero-ice-queen act in the blink of an eye. “Might I beg you for a palate cleanser?”

“Of course!” Kanata said. “And back to fluff you go!”

No matter how terrifying a vampire she was, as long as Elizavett remained one of Kanata’s servants, she was, it seemed, an ally of humanity. Melissa thanked her politely and went to interrogate the man.

† † †

In the end, the giant man didn’t know anything of note. There wasn’t a scrap of novel information, nor anything solid that could lead them back to the drug’s creator. The one and only characteristic he recalled about the person was that they had “pretty hair.”

“Maybe we *should* consider that a clue after all?” Melissa wondered.

The two people they had interrogated had testified to the same point. Perhaps the creator of the drug really did have an excellent head of hair. In which case, might they suppose that the person they were looking for was a woman?

“No, I mustn’t let such things bias me. The person in question wore a mask to conceal their identity when distributing the drug, after all. It would be foolish to assume that we have any idea what they look like.”

She dispelled the image of the suspect she had been creating in her head.

“Besides,” Melissa added. “I can’t imagine anyone could identify a suspect based just on the quality of their hair...”

She glanced over in Kanata’s direction and Kanata gave her a cheerful smile in return. No matter how many disciplines this girl had mastered, it would be absurd to ask her to search for a criminal on the basis of their hair alone.

“I guess we’re done, then!” Kanata chirped.

“Remember my words to you,” Elizavett said, turning to Melissa’s opponent. “You are to live a clean and honest life, without relying on some drug for your power.”

“Yes’m...” the man replied. He had been glum and subdued ever since Elizavett had had her way with him.

Kanata purged the drug from his body and he got up to leave, promising to continue working as an adventurer without resorting to dangerous shortcuts. They had cleared the first round of the tournament, but they still had no information that might lead them to their target.

“I suppose our only option now is to defeat the next opponent and question them after the match,” Melissa said.

Extracting information from her defeated opponents would be easy with help from Kanata’s three servants. It was possible that even the creator of the drug would fold in the face of such persuasive questioning. Between Elizavett’s icy aura and the threat of being made into a ghou, anyone, no matter how tough they were, was sure to sing like a bird.

The only problem was, if Melissa lost her match, the plan would end in failure.

“Don’t worry!” said Kanata. “You’ll do great!” She took Melissa’s hands in her own, warming her digits, which had turned cold and clammy from anxiety, with her own body heat. “You did all that training, remember? And you have Miss Lily’s magic sword! It’s perfect for you!”

“Miss Kanata...” Melissa looked up to see Kanata smiling at her. Somehow, the sight made her feel a lot calmer. “Thank you. I’ll do my best. That’s all I can

do, after all.”

She had been given the strongest teacher and the strongest sword she could ask for. All there was left to do was have faith and fight. The rest was up to fate.

“She really is going for it, though, huh...” Kanata said suddenly.

“Huh?” said Melissa. “What do you mean by that?”

“Oh!” said Kanata. “Nothing at all! Miss Lily told me not to say anything after all!”

“Lily did?” Melissa asked.

What on earth could Lily have told Kanata? Lily was fundamentally a good girl, but when money was involved she had the habit of turning to mischief. She wanted to ask more, but before she could say anything further, the announcer’s voice rang out. Her next match was going to be starting soon.

“Ah!” Melissa cried. “I have to go!”

“Good luck, Miss Melissa!” Kanata said.

Missella certainly was curious about what Lily was up to, but a member of the tournament staff was calling out to her. Resolving to press the matter once the match was over, Melissa hurried on to the arena.

† † †

The second match was against a slender swordswoman wielding two light, curved blades. She was a dangerous opponent who was proficient in unarmed combat as well as swordplay, and attacked with a continual chain of slashes and kicks. Melissa’s thrust, however, was faster.

“We have a winner!!!” cried the announcer, sending a stir through the crowd. “One touch from those fearsome twin swords would send blood spurting into the air, but they can’t even *hit* Melissa Straud! The receptionist advances to round three!!!”

Lily let out a great cheer from her seat in the stands. At some point, she had obtained a stack of papers that looked like they might be betting tickets, now clutched tight in her hand.

“What do you think of that woman, Miss Kanata?” Melissa whispered to her accomplice.

“Hmm...” Kanata whispered back. “Her hair care needs a bit of work. Thirty-five points.”

“No, not that!” Melissa was confused. Kanata was making eye contact this time at least, but the things she was saying weren’t particularly helpful.

After the woman returned to the waiting room, they pulled the same routine they’d done with the giant man. Elizavett’s threats had her talking right away. Unfortunately, however, while it turned out that this woman was a user of the drug, she knew almost nothing about its creator. All they learned was that the person they were looking for had “pretty hair.” It wasn’t much of a hint.

Melissa’s third round paired her up against a warrior wielding a spear nearly three times as long as his body. It was so long that the end drooped under its own weight, but the man wielded it deftly, launching thrust after thrust, circling the tip like a snake’s head to make it hard to read. Melissa instead used the power of wind contained within her magic sword to dodge the spear entirely, avoiding his persistent attacks with the help of some well-placed blasts of air. Each time they had an exchange, Melissa’s defensive motions grew smaller and more precise, until at last, she managed to step inside the spear’s reach and cut the weapon in half.

“It’s the guild receptionist!” the announcer cried. “Who would have thought she’d make it this far?! You adventurers had better step up your game!”

“Go, Melissa!” cried Lily, clutching her betting tickets tight in both hands. “Melissa’s the best!!!”

She must have bet everything on Melissa, although who could say whether it was out of confidence in her friend and the magic sword she herself had forged, or simple avarice. Either way, she was over the moon to see her long shot carry through this far. Melissa glanced up at her, just a little worried about the girl’s future, before returning her attention to Kanata.

“Miss Kanata, what about him?” she whispered.

“Not bad!” Kanata declared.

“S-So, he’s the one?!”

“Easily over seventy points!”

“I told you, I’m not asking about their hair!”

The spear fighter turned out to be innocent as well. That is, strictly speaking, he *was* quite guilty of using the drug, but they opted not to punish him. This request was a secret mission, after all. They had to find the criminal at fault without interrupting the tournament. Besides, as far as they were concerned, Elizavett’s threat was punishment enough. The man swore up and down that he would never use the drug again as long as he lived. And once again, the only information they were able to gain on the drug’s creator was the dubious statement that they had “just the most amazingly gorgeous hair.”

Melissa had made it to the semifinals without taking any significant damage. Her opponent this time was a magic-sword user like her—a heavy fighter wielding a greatsword enchanted with the power of fire. Unfortunately for him, however, his magic sword was like a candle before the mighty gale of Melissa’s blade. With a slash of her rapier she sent out a powerful gust of wind, extinguishing the man’s flames, before thrusting the sharp tip into a gap in his armor, bringing it dangerously close to his vulnerable throat. The man surrendered immediately.

Back in the waiting room, Melissa struggled to catch her breath. “Hah... I might have overdone it a little on that exchange...” she said, holding up her right hand, now sporting a serious burn wound.

“I’ll heal you!” said Kanata, quickly going to take care of the injury. The burn glowed with light and quickly vanished.

“That man was quite the adversary,” Melissa said. He was plainly a stronger fighter than her in the first place, and on top of that his abilities had been heightened by the forbidden drug. All Melissa could do was trust in Lily’s magic sword and thrust herself toward the inferno. It had taken real bravery to do that, but somehow she had managed to eke out a victory.

“Nonetheless,” said Zag’giel, *“you gave an exemplary performance.”*

“You’ve made it to the finals, right?” remarked Fenrir.

“Indeed!” added Elizavett. *“You have true skill!”*

“Thank you, you three,” said Melissa. Her next match would be the finals, but somehow it didn’t feel real at all. Melissa felt neither nervous nor excited. Compared to Lily, whose collection of betting tickets had grown by the hundreds and who was even now dancing with mad joy in the stands, Melissa felt positively numb.

After taking care of Melissa’s arm, Kanata and the rest went to question the magic-sword user Melissa had fought in the semifinals, but predictably enough, he wasn’t the creator of the drug either. They went to investigate the contestants on the other side of the lineup as well, but none of them were the person they were looking for.

“None of these people seem to be the one who created the drug,” Melissa said. “Which means, if our information is to be believed, there’s only one suspect left—my opponent in the final round.”

“Yes, there’s no doubt about it,” said Kanata. “It’s just like I thought.”

“Just like you thought?” asked Melissa. “Miss Kanata, don’t tell me you had an idea who the criminal was from the start?”

“All of your opponents told us the same thing, remember? The person we’re looking for has amazing hair. And that one’s hair is clearly the best. It’s practically glowing!”

It seemed there had been a purpose behind Kanata’s rating all of the contestants’ hair after all.

“You should have said so, then...” Melissa grumbled. “For that matter, what were you and Lily talking about earlier?”

“Oh!” said Kanata. “Um, well...you see...”

It was rare for Kanata to be at a loss for words. Melissa smiled and leaned in closer. “Well, Miss Kanata?”

“Eheh heh!” Kanata laughed. “Well, the truth is...”

Before Kanata had headed to the waiting room, Lily had taken her aside and said, “Kanata, listen to me. If you figure out who the criminal is in the middle of

the tournament, please don't tell Melissa until it's over, okay? Why? Well, because, if she finds out who it is she might withdraw from the tournament on the spot! Melissa isn't here to win, you know, she's just trying to find the criminal. But think about where that would leave me! It wouldn't be good advertisement for the magic sword I made at all! People might think Melissa quit because she didn't have confidence! They might question whether I'm really as good a blacksmith as I seem! Plus, she's a dark horse in the tournament. If she wins, I can earn a crazy amount of money on all these bets! Just imagine, I could go in with a single gold coin and come out with hundreds! Ha ha ha..."

She had practically been drooling as she spoke, so eager was she to count her chickens before they hatched.

"Liiiiiily!!!" Melissa cried.

She would have to have a serious talk with her later, as Lily's older-sister figure. Right now, her priority had to be getting through the final round with her body intact. Thanks to Kanata's healing magic, her burn wound was completely better, at least. In fact, Kanata seemed to have healed her stress and fatigue from her long days of overwork as well, leaving her body feeling better than ever. She resolved to win in the finals. She would defeat the criminal, learn the truth, and make it out alive. Then she would stop the production of the forbidden drug, completing the request. Somehow she had ended up handling the request herself even after entrusting it to Kanata, but that didn't matter. She had come this far, and she would see it through.

And at last, it came time for the final match. The contestants stood in the middle of the arena, swords at their sides.

"On one side," the announcer said, "we have a staff member of the Adventurers' Guild, a Fencer who fights with her own unique style! She's shattered all expectations, tearing through one powerful warrior after another in the Royal Capital preliminaries, and she's been making it through the main event at the same steady clip, all the way to the finals! Give it up for Melissa Straud, Fencer of the Zephyr!" The crowd cheered wildly. "And on the other, we have another first-time contestant! Who knows where someone this powerful has been hiding this whole time, but he's dominated every match in the

tournament with his peerless sword technique, making it all the way to the finals without taking a single hit! I give you Claude Kardashian, the Flowering Blade!”

Melissa’s opponent this time was a Fencer who gave the appearance of belonging to the nobility. He wore a wide-brimmed, feathered hat and a half cape on his right-hand side. His slender sword resembled Melissa’s rapier, albeit single edged and with a slight curve to the blade. It seemed to be designed for a fighting style that favored cuts over thrusts.

He was lightly armored and carrying a light sword. Melissa expected he would fight with a style similar to her own. She had been using her time between matches to search for the criminal, however, and had none left to learn more about her opponents. The best she could do was make a guess based on appearances.

In addition to his outfit and sword, however, there *was* one thing that caught Melissa’s attention.

“He really does have incredible hair...”

His hair was silver, with a gentle wave, and so lustrous that it seemed to shine in the light. They said he wore a mask and robe while he was distributing the forbidden drug to conceal his identity, but it seemed he had been neglecting to hide that magnificent head of hair.

“Now, fighters...” said the announcer, “by the orders of His Majesty the King... En garde!”

Wordlessly, the man drew his sword from its sheath and took a practiced fighting stance, with one leg forward. It was obvious from his movements that he was a man of considerable skill. Melissa drew her own sword and assumed a stance like an archer drawing a bow, drawing her sword arm back and holding her left hand out in front of her, taking careful aim at her opponent.

“And, duel!!!” the announcer roared.

At the signal, Melissa dashed forward. It was like her entire body was an arrow, launching toward the man—Claude—faster than the speed of sound.

“You’re fast,” Claude said, parrying her thrust. “But not too fast for my eyes.”

The swords clashed with a tremendous shower of sparks, but Claude escaped unharmed. Fluidly moving from the parry to a wide, circular attack, he slashed in Melissa's direction, but Melissa managed to block with the blade of her sword, using the momentum to recover her distance.

"He's strong..." Melissa muttered. Her opponent had fast eyes and lightning reflexes, and Herculean might on top of it all. The impact of his sword on her guard had sent tremors all the way down her arm. His sword technique was excellent, but even more extraordinary was his physical strength.

Among all the combat Professions, Fencer was notable for its generous boost to skill and speed. But in exchange, it hardly increased physical strength at all. There were plenty of adventurers with Professions related to Fencer, but rather than face enemies head-on, they were more suited to launching deadly attacks from behind the cover of more defense-focused Professions. This man, however, was abnormally strong. Far stronger than the level a human could achieve through mere training. There was no mistake.

"You're using that drug as well, aren't you?" said Melissa.

"Excuse me?" Claude's narrow eyes opened an inch. "What did you just say? I —"

"Not only that..." Melissa continued. "You created it. You're the very criminal who's been spreading it around the Royal Capital."

The man recoiled in shock. "H-How did you—?!"

It was, in fact, a blind accusation. Melissa had no evidence proving Claude to be the culprit. However, Claude's reaction confirmed it.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "How did you learn this?"

Those words would have sufficed for evidence of guilt, but Melissa went further. "I myself am nothing but an employee of the Adventurers' Guild. However, we received an official request through guild channels to ascertain your location. The kingdom and the Adventurers' Guild have both been aware of your activities for quite some time. And now that you have revealed your identity, you won't be able to keep getting away with distributing dangerous drugs to anyone you please!"



Claude said nothing, but there was a distinct glint in his eye as he glanced back over at her.

“You are a splendid swordsman, even without the drug,” Melissa said. “Why would you do something like this?” There was, in fact, a matter left unsolved. They knew who the culprit was, but not why he had done it. “I believe you were conducting an experiment in distributing the drug so widely. Is that right? In that case, what was the purpose behind your plan of using the drug to win the National Fencing Tournament?”

“Heh.” Claude’s lip curled upward in a sneer. “Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha...”

He laughed, low and sinister. He held out his hand, producing something in his palm—a small round thing, which looked for all the world like a hard candy.

“Miss Melissa!” Fenrir exclaimed, his nostrils picking up on the scent. *“Watch out! There’s some kind of powerful drug in that bag!”*

No sooner had he issued his warning, than Claude tossed the drugged candy into his mouth. He chewed, and swallowed.

“Everything I’ve made so far has been test products...just tests for my experiment,” he said. “Everything, just to produce *this* drug!”

A dark miasma rose from Claude’s body—magic energy dense enough to be seen by the naked eye. And suddenly, Claude’s body, pushed far past its limits, began to physically transform. His muscles and tendons grew and grew and grew, so fast that his bones snapped like twigs under their strength. He was being reborn—his body made anew.

“Behold!” he cried. “Am I not magnificent?!”

What could have driven this man so far? His body, transformed by the drug, was so much larger that it had burst right out of his clothes. He no longer resembled a human at all.

“This was a good experiment,” the monster said, “but alas, it has all come to waste. I suppose I may as well take my leave. But not before killing everyone here. You’re all witnesses, after all.”

There was a great crowd of spectators here to see one of the great spectacles

of the kingdom. Claude had just proclaimed his intentions to massacre a good portion of the population, right in front of them. There was a high-pitched scream from the spectator stands. Claude made up his mind to start with the woman who screamed, and leapt in her direction.

“Oh, shut up!” Melissa jumped in the air, thrusting with her rapier from below. It hit its mark, but the point was unable to pierce the thick hide the man’s skin had become.

“Oh? Would you like to die first?” Claude brought his oversized fists down at Melissa, striking her guard like a heavy hammer and knocking her out of the air. He was far too strong like this. Melissa could barely even fight him.

“W-Wait!” Melissa cried as Claude soared on toward the spectator stands.

“What a pity indeed!” Claude taunted. “If you, the strongest in this whole tournament, cannot defeat me, then there exists no one who can stop me from doing as I please!” He raised his fist before the trembling crowd, swung, and...stopped.

Melissa let out a chuckle. “Of course someone can stop you,” she said. “Her, right there.”

Standing in Claude’s way, blocking his mighty fist with a single hand, stood a young girl—Kanata Aldezia. She had bolted from her seat by the arena as Melissa’s second all the way to the spectator stands just in time to block his attack. The three furballs’ eyes were all spinning—they had been riding on her shoulders and head when it had happened—but it didn’t seem like they were hurt in any serious way.

“I-I can’t move my fist!” Claude cried. He was being held tight, unable to move his hand in any way, forward or back. “H-How can you project such power with such a slender body?! What drug did you use...? What did you do to get this strong?!”

“Just effort!” Kanata chirped.

“P-Preposterous!” the beast spat. “If mere effort can result in such strength, then what have I...? What have I...?!”

He raised his other hand aloft, projecting a ball of pure magical energy. It was

absolutely colorless—magic that had no aspect or element whatsoever—but such was its density that it was visible to the naked eye for everyone watching. If such a thing were released in the arena, it might result in an explosion big enough to send everyone there flying.

“I won’t have it!” Claude declared. “I won’t have you! I will negate your very existence!” he screamed, hurling the ball of energy straight for Kanata at point-blank range.

“No way, no how!” Kanata said. She repelled the ball of energy meant to blast her away with a wave of her hand, sending it spiraling off high into the atmosphere. There was a huge explosion somewhere far away, big enough to scatter the clouds from the sky and send a shock wave of wind loud enough to drown out the audience’s screams. “If you negated my existence, I wouldn’t get to fluff-fluff!”

“Fluff...fluff?” Claude asked. He did not know what those words signified, but in the face of such overwhelming power, he had no choice but to bend the knee.

“You didn’t answer my question,” Melissa said. She had finally caught up with Claude, using her sword to prop up her body. “Why did you do it?”

“I...” the man said, “wanted to be an Alchemist...” However, when he was fifteen years of age, the Profession revealed to him at his Selection Ceremony was Fencer. “And yet, I could not give up my dream! I continued my independent inquiries into alchemy, but I would never be acknowledged as an Alchemist. Even the Association of Alchemicals denied me membership! I thought that if I could make a drug with incredible powers beyond anything the Association could produce, I’d finally have gotten the better of them...”

“And so you began to develop the drug in question...” Melissa confirmed.

“That’s right,” Claude said. “I was always second rate as a swordsman, but with the help of my drugs I could match blades with the best around. But strength that comes from a drug is always going to fall short of the real thing. In the end I was a dilettante of a man, who excelled at neither swordplay nor alchemy...” he lamented pitifully.

“No!” said Kanata, with surprising conviction. “That’s not true at all! You were

just using the wrong methods! I can personally attest that you are absolutely amazing!”

“Wh-What do you know about it?!” Claude sputtered. “Someone like you, blessed with a powerful Profession, could never understand how I feel! But what Profession are you, to have obtained such power? A Sage? A Kaiser Fist?!”

“No!” replied Zag’giel from atop Kanata’s head. “*Kanata is a Beast Tamer!*”

“What...? A Beast Tamer?” Claude blinked. “You mean...the weakest Profession of all?”

“*Indeed.*”

“Th-Then...she really got this strong...?” he paused. “With just effort...?” Claude’s eyes went wide. Suddenly he understood—he was bearing witness to a miracle. The phenomenon manifesting before his eyes had nothing to do with Profession whatsoever. And that being—that sublime, resplendent being—had praised him.

“You already invented something *much* more amazing than that silly drug!” Kanata told him.

“Wh-What do you mean?”

“Your hair!” Kanata said, pointing to Claude’s luxurious, silver locks. It was so stunning that it stood out even on the man’s deformed body.

“M-My hair?” he asked.

“I knew from the moment I set eyes on it!” Kanata said. “You could never get such a luster through conventional means! What kind of shampoo do you use?!”

“O-Oh!” Claude hesitated. “It’s just something I put together myself...”

“I knew it!” Kanata exclaimed, shaking Claude’s hand. “Your shampoo is the best ever! Please, I would very much appreciate it if you might share some with me!”

“Y-You mean to say...you acknowledge my technique?” Claude asked.

“Of course!” Kanata said. “Only you could have created such a wonderful

shampoo!”

“F-For you to say such a thing...” Claude said, tears welling up in his eyes from sheer gratitude. “You’re the first person to ever acknowledge me!”

Afterward, Kanata treated Claude, restoring his disfigured body to normal, and he went quietly to his imprisonment. He was sure to receive a long sentence, but his change of heart, at least, appeared to be sincere. From then on, he held his head high when he walked. He was a master Alchemist of shampoo.

“*All’s well that ends well...*” Zag’giel said. “*Or...is it?*” Claude seemed happy, at least, so that was probably good enough.

The National Fencing Tournament was suspended due to the commotion Claude had caused. Furthermore, with more than half of the participants found to be using the illegal drug, the result of the tournament was declared void. The tournament staff apologized profusely to Melissa, who by rights should have been the winner, but Melissa was just as happy not to be saddled with the title of *winner of the National Fencing Tournament*.

Guildmasters from all over the land, however, had been in attendance during that match. There was no way Melissa was going to escape rising in their estimation after a performance like that. Perhaps it was already too late for her to avoid being promoted.

With the tournament suspended, all bets were void as well, and Lily, who should have been due for a big payout after betting everything on Melissa, was left with nothing but a refund of her initial wager. She seemed absolutely devastated. It was a pitiful enough sight that Melissa, who had been planning on giving her an earful about reckless gambling, decided to hold off for some other time.

Losing out on her dreams of making it big may have broken Lily’s spirit, but Melissa’s performance with her magic sword had raised the reputation of her smithy considerably. She began to get order after order from adventurers, but it would be a while before she worked up the energy to fill any of them.

And so, the morning of the day after came, and the request was turned in and marked successfully completed.

“And that concludes my report,” finished Melissa. “As the drug was produced without the use of Alchemist Profession Abilities, the royal laboratories’ verdict is that it is not reproducible by other Alchemists. There does not seem to be a need to worry about its rediscovery.”

“I see, I see!” the guildmaster said. “Wow, Melissa! Well done! You resolved the incident perfectly! I must say, your reputation within the guild has risen considerably as well!”

“On the contrary,” said Melissa, “all I did was perform the tasks assigned to me. It was Miss Kanata who saw the incident to its successful resolution.”

“And Kanata will get her reward, of course, and a little extra to boot! There’s no need to worry about her rank, of course. She has enough achievements already to be raised to S-Rank in the next meeting regardless. But I’m not going to overlook the contribution of my own subordinate! Melissa, your performance merits remark!”

“There is no need, I assure you.”

“So, how do you feel about the title *vice guildmaster*?”

“I refuse.”

“Don’t say that!”

“I refuse!”

“No matter what?” the guildmaster pleaded.

“No! Matter! What!” Melissa shouted back.

“There must be something!”

“There is not! Furthermore, you’ll find that I put in a request for a long vacation! I don’t suppose you’ll deny me that, will you?!”

“No, of course not, leave it to us!” the guildmaster replied. “The staff you trained are first-class! They’ll be more than able to fill the void while you’re gone! It seems like we’ve all been leaving a bit too much in your hands lately. This was a learning experience for us too.”

Melissa’s junior Bella was, right now, curled up in a ball underneath her desk

crying her eyes out on a stack of paperwork. All she could do was apologize in her heart to the perpetually exhausted Melissa for having ever taken her work for granted.

“In that case, I will be taking my leave,” Melissa said.

“Of course! And we’ll be waiting! That vice guildmaster seat will be ready the moment you come back.”

“If you do that, I really *will* quit,” Melissa said, shutting the door to the overbearing guildmaster’s office behind her.

“Hah... I really am tired...” she said when she was alone. For a while, she just wanted to think about anything other than work. She needed to spread her wings—take a leisurely journey to who-knows-where and try to recover her spirits. For the first time in a while, Melissa’s heart beat with something like excitement.

She would end up embroiled in a tremendous incident on that journey—one that would make her name known all over the world. But that is a story for another time.

† † †

“Mistress! Look! Look!” Elizavett posed for Kanata, looking stunningly beautiful with her red eyes and golden hair. “See the luster of my blonde locks? ’Tis beautiful, no?”

“Oh,” said Kanata, sounding completely uninterested. “Yeah, uh-huh...”

Upon completing the request, Kanata had obtained not only a considerable sum of reward money but also a good portion of shampoo from the newly reformed Claude. She’d had a wonderful time washing the three fluffballs in the bath, but then Elizavett had released her transformation and returned to her original form. Kanata was not amused. She had been planning on spending the time hugging and cuddling her three fluffballs, enjoying the sensation of their softer-than-ever fur. Now if she wanted to do that she would have to change Elizavett back.

Elizavett, however, had no idea what Kanata was thinking.

“Kee hee hee!” She laughed, excitedly waving her hair about. “I knew this would have even you swooning for me, Mistress! Now, come! Make love to me to your heart’s content! We can do it on the floor if you— Gwrf?!”

Kanata interrupted the vampire’s proposition, sticking a finger in her mouth to force-feed her more of her blood. Before she knew it, Elizavett had transformed right back into a furball.

“M-Mistress! Why?!”

“Oh my goooooosh!!!” Kanata said, enjoying Elizavett’s shampooed and softer-than-ever fluff to its very fullest. “I-I’m swoooooooning!”

“G-Godspeed, O ancient vampire...” said Zag’giel, watching from a safe distance as Elizavett was fluffed and fluffed.

“W-We’re with you in spirit!” added Fenrir, who was sitting beside him.

If the two had hoped to avoid Kanata’s affections, though, it was no use. Soon they were captured, and fluffed all together.

“Nghaaa!” cried Zag’giel. *“K-Kanata! Not theeeeere!”*

“Lady Kanata, stop! Noooooo!” protested Fenrir.

“Why won’t you do this when I’m in my human foooooorm?!” demanded Elizavett.

“Ahhhhhhhhhh!” Kanata sighed. “I’m so so soooooooo happy!!!”

Cries of joy and distress mingled in the room.

The quest for fluff, however, was far from over.

Afterword

Good eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeevening! (This is a greeting.)

And, about the wait... I'm soooooooooooooorry! (This is an apology.)

Honestly, it's been far too long. How have you been, everyone? I've been struggling with my physical health for the longest time, but I finally feel better and I'm full of energy. And, thanks to my revitalization, I finally managed to prepare this volume for publication!

Volume two was released in August 2020, nearly two years ago. It's so tardy that I'd have no cause to complain about any punishment. My two editors from the last volume and the three editors working on this one, however, never gave up on this book no matter how long the gap grew. They continued to support me all the way through. You'll never hear me say a word against them. Honestly, I'm grateful for all they've done.

As I said before, the reason for the delay was my own poor health, but I won't go into too much detail—I don't want to sound like I'm making excuses, after all! I will mention one thing, though. It turned out the root cause of the problems was completely different than we had initially thought. It was a real shock at the time, but the doctors knew what they were doing. And now I'm back on my feet, as healthy as ever. I couldn't believe how good it felt to be healthy again, and right away I went to immerse myself in the latest video game release.

That last part was a joke. I've been working hard at writing. The next volume should be out before too long as well. Please, believe me.

Now then, in this volume Kanata obtained her third fluff, adding a pink to the black and white—a veritable Neapolitan ice cream of fluff. Perhaps she has finally obtained true happiness. In the face of Kanata, neither the Demon King of the Dark Continent, nor the proud and aloof Spirit Wolf, nor even a haughty and domineering ancient vampire have any recourse but to become adorable

balls of fluff. Perhaps you, too, will end up becoming fluff by the time this is finished.

The evil gods have begun making secret maneuvers against the threat of Kanata, but not to worry—Kanata isn't about to lose. It's hard for me to imagine them even putting up a serious fight against her, and I'm the author! Even if all of them attacked her at once, Kanata would simply drive them off and continue on her merry way, searching for ever more fluffy companions on her quest. She'd save the world on the way, of course. It seems like Kanata can't help acting the part of a Saint whether she intends to or not. And you can be sure Miss Melissa will keep getting more and more work, and keep moving up and up the ranks. The day she can retire from being a guild receptionist and return to her leisurely life of adventure seems far away indeed. (I'm praying for you, Melissa!)

Finally, I would like to say some words of thanks to finish out this book.

To my editors, S, O, and A: thank you so much for keeping the pressure on day after day! If it weren't for you three I might have run away instead of pushing through when things got hard. I'm looking forward to working with you again in the future.

To Falmaro, who did the illustrations: you had the cover for this volume ready a long time ago, but thanks to a certain author I could name being unable to write, it took until now for it to be ready for publication. I'm so very sorry! It's been a while, but Kanata and her fluffy furballs are looking as cute as ever—no, even cuter!

To everyone in the editorial department, the designers, the proofreaders, the business people, the booksellers, and everyone else who made this possible: thank you! I couldn't have done it without you!

And to all of you reading this book after two years of waiting, I owe you my utmost thanks!

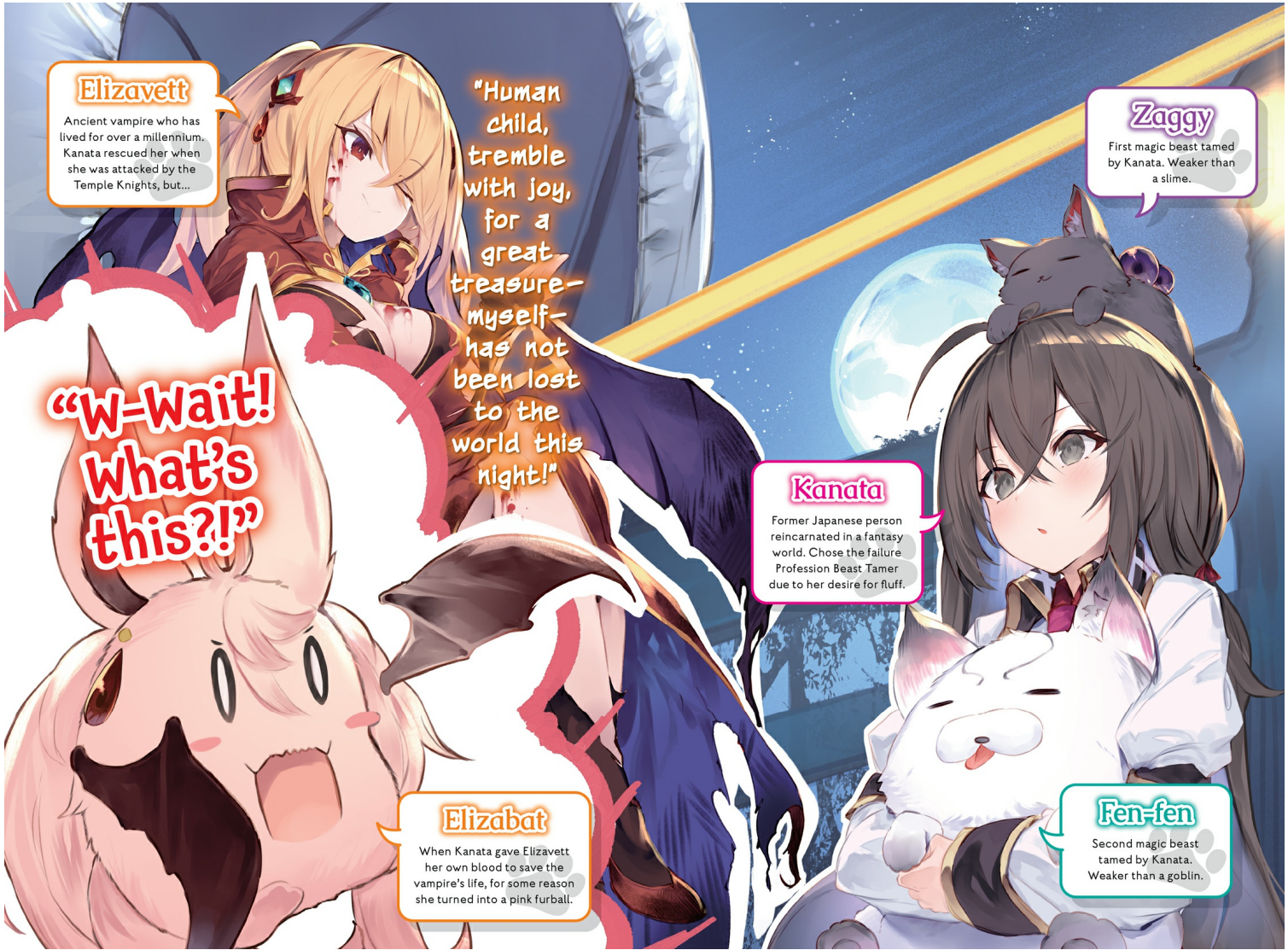
Until next time!

-Inumajin, June 2022

“Hiss!
Hisssss!”

“Bwa ha ha!
Behold our
mastery!
The day we
defeat a
slime is
drawing
ever
nearer!”

Saint? No!
I'm Just a Passing
BEAST
TAMER!
The
Invincible Saint
and the Quest
for Fluff



Elizavett

Ancient vampire who has lived for over a millennium. Kanata rescued her when she was attacked by the Temple Knights, but...

"Human child, tremble with joy, for a great treasure—myself—has not been lost to the world this night!"

Zaggy

First magic beast tamed by Kanata. Weaker than a slime.

Kanata

Former Japanese person reincarnated in a fantasy world. Chose the failure Profession Beast Tamer due to her desire for fluff.

Elizabat

When Kanata gave Elizavett her own blood to save the vampire's life, for some reason she turned into a pink furball.

Fen-fen

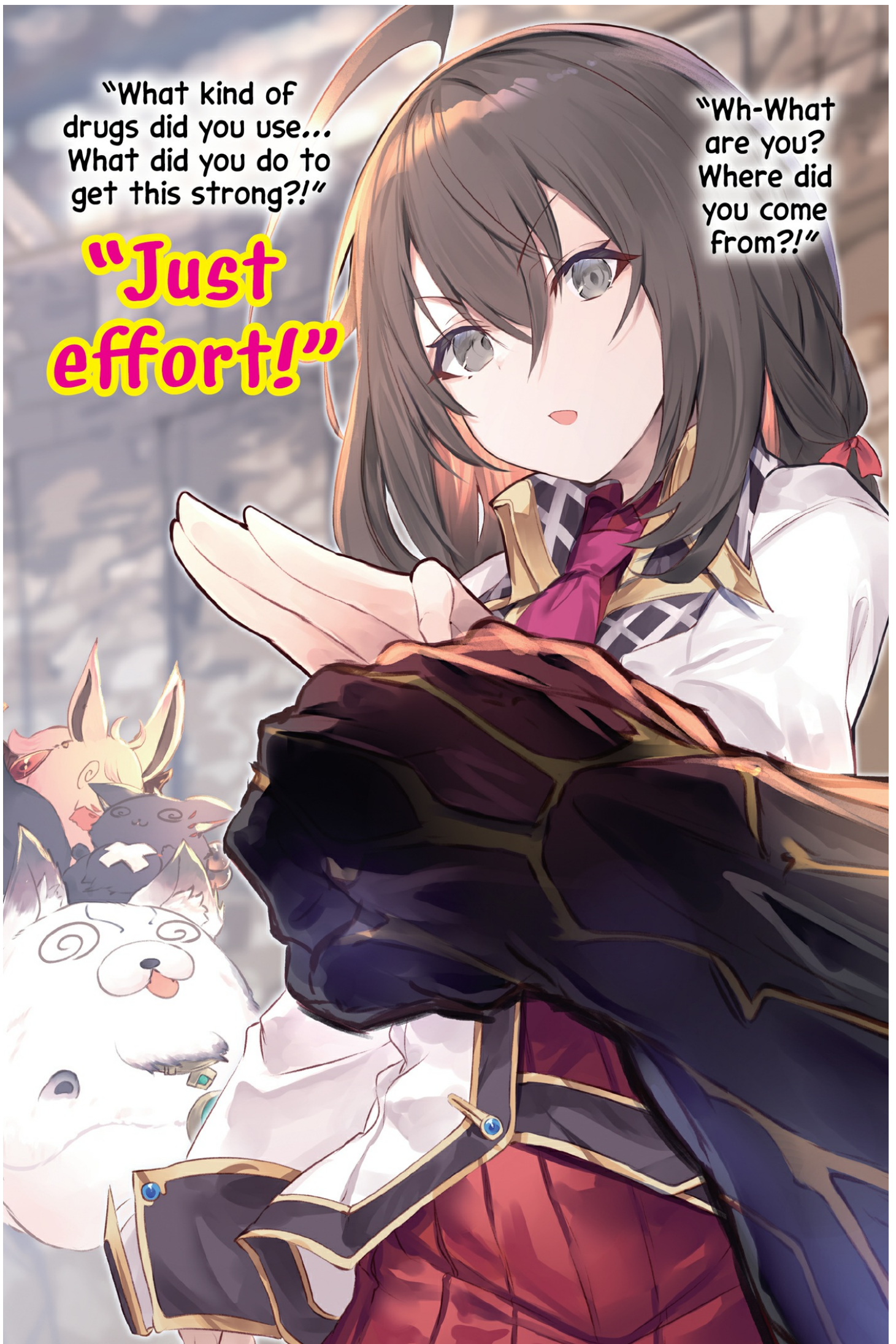
Second magic beast tamed by Kanata. Weaker than a goblin.

"W-Wait! What's this?!"

"What kind of
drugs did you use...
What did you do to
get this strong?!"

**"Just
effort!"**

"Wh-What
are you?
Where did
you come
from?!"





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Saint? No! I'm Just a Passing Beast Tamer! Volume 3

by Inumajin

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