

Saint No!

2

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BEAST TAMER

The Invincible Saint
and the Quest for Fluff



I'm Just a Passing



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Chapter 1: Spirit Wolf Fenrir? No! From Now On, I Am Fen-fen!

Among all the Demon Kings of history, none have been so mighty, nor lauded so high, as Zag'giel. A master of the art of war, he utilized his soldiers to their greatest possible effect, ingeniously thwarting all who would stand in his way, no matter how strong. Within a few short years, he had brought all of the Dark Continent to heel. He was by disposition a cautious commander, and yet his own personal strength could only be described as overwhelming. All who took up arms against him met only with despair.

Zag'giel had the mind of a researcher as well as that of a warlord, and brought many convenient magics from ancient times back into modern usage. He was a bloody conqueror and a wise sage—just and honorable, and remorseless beyond compare. He had no understanding of the feelings of the weak. He was the perfect despot. The most feared of all Kings of Demons.

Right now, though, he was suffering the fluffy ministrations of a young girl.

“Good kitty!” the girl sang as she fluffed and fluffed his fluffy fur. “You like it here, don’t you? Right here?”

“*S-Stop!*” the King of Demons protested. “*Be g-gentle with our forehead! If you persist in this, we shall...we shall lose our composure completely!*”

“That’s fine! I *like* it when you lose your composure, Zaggy!”

“*Our vassals have at times told us that we do not understand the emotions of others,*” Zag'giel gasped out. “*But you, Kanata, we especially do not understandaaaaaaahh—!*”

The two carried on their ridiculous escapades right in the middle of the road. When Zag'giel had been in his humanoid form, he’d had soldiers to patrol roads such as these and deliver him reports, but now he was a strange ball of fur with two triangular ears sticking out of his head. It looked for all the world like a girl playing with a small animal.

In fact, a girl playing with a small animal was *exactly* what was happening. Their conversation, however, was, in a word, concerning.

“Ahh,” Kanata sighed, smiling. “That was goooooood...” Her skin was glossy with perspiration.

“Haa... Haa...” Zag’giel gasped for breath. “*Will this really help us become stronger?*” Finally free, he plopped himself down on Kanata’s lap. “*No. We must not entertain such thoughts. We must have faith in our master! This training will lead us to ultimate power! We are certain!*”

He was certainly *wrong*. This was not training at all, but merely a somewhat-excessive degree of love. Would the day ever come for Zag’giel to realize his error? Most likely, it would not.

“You’re *already* the fluffiest, but you wanna get even fluffier?” Kanata marveled. “You’re so committed to the fluff, Zaggy! It’s absolutely positively amazing!”

“*I-It is? We do not understand well this unit of power—fluff—you speak of, but your praise does our heart well.*”

Their misunderstanding as firm as ever, the two shared a look, and laughed.

“Well,” said Kanata, “that’s about enough of a rest. Let’s keep going!” She stood up from where she’d been sitting on a large boulder on the side of the road, dusted herself off, and picked up Zag’giel, placing him on her head.

“*It seems the road continues on to the west,*” Zag’giel observed. “*What is in that direction? We wandered the human realms for many years, but we never drew close to human settlements. We fear our knowledge of geography leaves something to be desired.*”

“Well, let me think,” Kanata said. “There’s a few small villages farther along, and then if we keep going we’ll reach the headquarters of the Holy Church.”

“*The Holy Church. The religious institution that reveres that Goddess?*”

“Yeah! Although mainly what they do is help people get their Professions when they turn fifteen. Oh, and they do stuff like running orphanages, distributing alms, purifying the spirits of the dead...”

"Hm. They do some good work, it seems, but if that Goddess is one of their patrons, we cannot trust them. We have our doubts about their work as well. Was it not you, Kanata, and not the Church, who exorcised the spirits in the Royal Capital, purified the sewers, and gave succor to those who had been poisoned?"

Indeed, if Kanata hadn't taken care of the issue with the sewers in Undertown, it would have been a disaster for the city. The polluted water would have spoiled the land, ruining crops and spreading new diseases farther and farther as the deaths mounted. The signs had been there for all to see, but if Kanata had been much later in redressing the problem, it would have spread to the whole of the Royal Capital. And the cause of the pollution had been the restless dead.

Kanata had made the exorcism look easy, but that hideous amalgamation of restless souls bore curses of not inconsiderable power. Such an entity having taken up residence in the sewers could not possibly have happened by chance. It was simply not possible that the Church had *failed to notice* such an immense presence beneath the city. No—it was an issue that they were actively neglecting. And yes, the Church did have the issue of overlooking the needs of Undertown, whose people did not have the money to give the Church fat tithes. But if it had been left unaddressed, the damage would have spread to Midtown and even Hightown. The inescapable conclusion was that the Holy Church was acting out of active malice.

It was only natural that Zag'giel would hold such suspicions of a Church run by that atrocious Goddess. For Kanata's part, although everything she had heard of the Goddess's scheme had come from Zag'giel himself, she didn't seem all that surprised. Indeed, the revelation that the gods saw human souls as nothing more than their nourishment and wielded the Demon King to that end like an instrument of harvest did not seem to come as much of a shock at all. Why? Because Kanata cared for only one thing—the fluff! All of her energy was devoted to that end. She had no attention to spare for unrelated matters. As her brother Alus was well aware, Kanata was a congenitally unserious person.

Kanata had played the part of a perfect lady for no reason other than her manic desire to become a Beast Tamer. She wasn't especially interested in

saving the world or thwarting the Goddess's schemes. All she cared about was befriending cute and fluffy critters. And so, despite setting out on her journey with no destination in mind, she had led herself and Zag'giel steadfastly to the west.

"We know not how much the humans of the Sacred Church have gleaned of the Goddess's true nature," Zag'giel continued, *"but that she is our enemy, there can be no doubt. And you would have us march straight to their headquarters."*

"Yeah!" Kanata said. "When we met the Goddess, I thought I could smell just a *liiiittle* whiff of some kind of fluff lingering on her. I have a feeling that there's a new fluff-fluff waiting for us to the west!"

The Goddess had descended from the heavens for hardly a minute, but Kanata was still able to detect the aroma of fluff. Her nose was sharper than any dog's, and she was putting it to work on *this* nonsense of all possible things.

"Oh? Then you would not retreat, but rather seize the opportunity to take the offensive, invading their very citadel! A brilliant stratagem—and what courage! Truly, you are the one worthy to be my master."

"Hehe!" Kanata giggled. "Right? My fluffdar is pinging like crazy!"

"Hmm..." Zag'giel pondered. "We know nothing of this 'fluffdar,' but if it is related to the 'fluff,' it must certainly have to do with martial prowess. Wretch of a Goddess! If you would think to take arms against us, we shall strike you down from your haughty post!"

"Hehehe! Fluff-fluff! Fluffy-fluff! I wonder what the new fluffy-fluff will be!"

The two were very fond of each other, despite their persistent failure of communication. Laughing cheerfully, they continued into the west.

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The grandest building in the Holy City Lordentia was the High Cathedral of the Holy Church. And deep underground, in the heart of the city itself, was a prison. It was dimly lit by flickering braziers and echoed with the cries of a beast—for imprisoned there was a great silver wolf. He was a beautiful creature, seeming to shine white with an inner light.

The cell could hold several humans with room to spare, but the wolf was big enough to fill it out himself. He was sprawled out, as if trying to take up as much space as possible. Even in prison, he cut an imposing figure. He was such a splendid wolf that if one were to meet him in the mountains or the forest, they would have no recourse but to fall down in worship.

“*Grrrr...*”

The wolf curled his lips back into a snarl. He was frustrated at how weak his body had grown in his imprisonment. This environment was bad for him. Even the color of his fur seemed to be dimming. They weren’t feeding him enough either—he had grown thin enough for his rib cage to be visible, and his eyes had become cloudy.

But cloudy as they were, their light had not yet gone out.

“Defiant as ever, I see,” someone said, stepping out of the darkness.

She was a cloistered sister wearing a white habit, but despite her dress, there was something lascivious about her affect.

“I would advise you to give it up and become my servant. You have your own duty, do you not? The Spirit Wolf must follow a Saint. Would you not serve me as you served the First Saint, long ago? It would set a *terrible* example to the faithful if you were to refuse. You were *hoping* to find a Saint to serve when you left your hiding place in the Forest of Spirits to come to a human village, were you not? Why are you so insistent on refusing me?”

“*How dare you treat me this way?!*” the wolf demanded, growling as he projected his thoughts to the sister telepathically. “*What of our promise?!*”

“I’m afraid this treatment is necessary, due to your continued defiance,” the sister said. “Swear that you will become the servant of myself, Saint Marianne, and you will be released.” She stuck her foot in a gap between the bars. The wolf in the cage would have loved to bite her juicy toes off, but Marianne’s foot was pressing down on his muzzle. “At least tell me what you want,” she said. “I am a Saint, the head of the Holy Church with its millions of devoted followers. All of your desires will be seen to. You can have anything you wish. You need only submit to me.”

The Spirit Wolf growled ferociously. *“I have no desires! I will only obey a true Saint! I will never submit to you!”*

Marianne stomped again on his face. He whimpered. His four limbs were bound by chains, but the thing really restraining him was the magic circle carved into the floor. Whenever he tried to resist, it would shine, sapping him of his strength.

“You’ll only obey a true Saint? I have no idea what you’re insinuating. I have shown you definite proof that I hold the Profession of Saint. My orders come from the Goddess herself. Do you dare to defy the will of the gods?”



“Sainthood is not a matter of Profession! It is one’s deeds that mark them as a Saint!” The wolf pushed his way past Marianne’s foot. *“Nothing you have done has been Saintly! You spread ill will throughout the world, and inflict torment on its people! You carnal temptress! You succubus! I will never obey you! Never ever ever ever ever!”*

At the word *succubus*, Marianne’s face tensed up in rage. She lifted her leg up high.

“You! Are! More! Trouble! Than! You’re! Worth!” she shouted, stomping and stomping and stomping on his face. Her eyes were lit up with sadistic glee. With her full thighs peeking out through the high slits on her habit, she looked even less like an innocent cloistered sister.

“Gh-Gh...” the wolf whimpered in pain.

“I shall pray to the Goddess for your quick recovery,” Marianne said, sneering fiendishly. “Not that you should need it. I know you have a *hard head*.” She turned her back and left, two formidable warrior-priests stepping out of the shadows to follow her as her guard.

The Spirit Wolf did not even have the strength to lift his head as he watched her leave.

“*My Lady Saint...*” he said. “*Wherever you are... Please...*”

One thousand years ago, the Spirit Wolf had lost his Saint. She had saved the world, and passed into death as if she were falling asleep. Released from his duty to protect her, he secluded himself in a hollow in the Spirit Tree, far away from the human realm, and there he slumbered. It was a peaceful life, but a boring one, and lonely. It was like he had been cut off from part of himself—another half that should have been there but wasn’t.

What had awoken the Spirit Wolf from his eternal slumber was a smell. It was familiar and comforting. It made him think of the First Saint. He had halfway become part of the tree, but the scent wafting in on the winds was enough to stir his heart.

It was the birth of a Saint.

He knew he must go to meet her. It was his duty as Spirit Wolf to serve the Saint. He shook off the vines that had grown around him and departed from his hollow. He left the Forest of Spirits, which humankind cannot enter, and wandered the world. But though he searched for fifteen years, he could not find his Saint. Finally, after his heart had grown weak from the fatigue of his long journey, he'd been taken unawares and captured by this false Saint.

"Please... Come to me. I wish... I wish but to see your face..." He howled pitifully, his voice strange and thin in the confined space.

And then—

"Wh-What's this?!" His nose twitched. Before his conscious mind had noticed, his nose had picked up a scent wafting into the stale air of the prison. It was so distant and so faint that none but the Spirit Wolf could have detected it. He knew that scent. It was the same that he had smelled a thousand years ago, and then again fifteen years in the past. *"That purity! It's been so long! I'd recognize that smell anywhere!"* It was coming closer. *"The Saint is coming! The true Saint, not this pretender!"*

This was no time to wallow in self-pity!

"I must pay her my respects!" His resolve was firm, but no matter how hard he struggled, there was no breaking free of the magic circle binding him. *"Then I have no choice... If I fail at this, my soul will be destroyed. Even if I succeed, I will lose the greater part of my power. But if Her Holiness has come, I must protect her! The true Saint exists! I will not be fooled by that succubus!"*

He gathered the last of his strength and gave a mighty cry. His silver fur, which shone like moonlight, grew brighter and brighter still until his form was no longer solid. The light was so bright that it shone out of the underground prison like a beam of sunlight. And then, a white furball plopped out of the cell.

"I seem to have been successful," he said. The furball wiggled and changed shape. Short legs protruded out of it, and it took on a face that looked like the Spirit Wolf's, albeit much younger. *"I split myself off into this form. I may lack power, but at least I can warn Her Holiness of the danger!"* The rest of him—his husk—was still in the prison cell, bound tight as ever. Its soul departed, it merely looked to be sleeping. It might fool the false Saint, for a while at least.

“Wait for me, Your Holiness!” he said as he pitter-pattered up the stairs. “Your faithful hound, the Spirit Wolf Fenrir, shall speed at once to your side!”

† † †

Kanata and Zag’giel made their way down the road. The sky was blue as far as the eye could see. The wind was pleasantly cool, and the light of the sun was warm against their skin. It was the perfect weather for travel.

There were many people traveling this stone-paved road to the west, but Kanata in her school uniform, wearing a catlike magic beast on her head, stood out like a sore thumb. Her happy smile, though, warmed the hearts of the passersby who saw her.

As she followed the road up a gently sloping hill, Kanata turned to look back in the direction she had come from.

“The Royal Capital’s gotten so small!” she said.

“Indeed,” Zag’giel nodded. “As vast as the city is, it will soon be out of sight.” The Royal Capital was the very heart of the kingdom, but now it looked no bigger than the ring between Kanata’s index finger and thumb. “With your legs, Kanata, we could have moved much faster along the road.”

“Well, but, I mean,” Kanata said, “we’ve waited so long to go on this journey! We should take our time and really savor it.”

“You are not wrong. Our pressing concerns have been settled, thanks to your intervention. We would accompany you to the ends of the world.”

“You’ll come with me to the ends of the world?!” Kanata marveled. “Yay!” She intended to lead him to the very ends of the world of fluff.

“We shall!” Zag’giel declared, laughing proudly. “Let it be known that wherever Kanata shall go, there too shall go Zaggy!” He had no idea.

“Well, I guess we’d better get started!” Kanata said, making grabbing motions with her hands as she loomed over the tiny creature.

“Hm?!” Zag’giel balked. “Wait! By ‘the ends of the world,’ we meant we would follow you anywhere on our journey, not— Kanata! Kanata, what is that look in your eyes?! You are frightening us!” He pushed away with all his strength, but

Kanata's face drew closer and closer.

"Ahhh!" Kanata exclaimed. "Your round little body's so so jiggly!"

"Kanata, calm yourself! We have a long way to go down this road!"

"Oh, that's fine. I can fluff you as I walk!"

"What does that mean? Kanata, what does that mean?!"

But there was no stopping Kanata when she got like this. She was certainly drawing stares from the passersby now, as she fluffed and fluffed Zag'giel to her heart's content.

† † †

"Let's stop for lunch!" Kanata declared. "Today's entrée is grilled ham and cheese!"

"Oho!" Zag'giel exclaimed, clapping his stubby forepaws. *"Grilled ham and cheese, is it?"*

They sat down on a large tree stump a ways out of sight of the road. The sun was high in the sky—it was the perfect time for an early lunch.

"Wait," Zag'giel asked, *"what exactly is grilled ham and cheese?"* Zag'giel was learning more about human cuisine by the day, but there were still many dishes he had never heard of. The sandwich Kanata had mentioned was one such dish.

"Just wait and see!" Kanata laughed. "It'll be delicious!"

Kanata used her dimensional magic to access the extradimensional space she had created, which she called her Inventory Screen. She took out the fresh ingredients she had brought and set to work. Her cooking skills were no less like magic.

"First, a layer of mayonnaise on the bread..."

Zag'giel nodded along passionately as Kanata cooked, following each step of preparation.

"We see. A condiment made of vinegar, oil, and egg. It is hard to resist licking it up on its own."

"And on top we put thin-cut pieces of ham!" Kanata continued, ignoring

Zag'giel's comment.

"We see, we see! We, too, are partial to salted pork."

"Make a barrier with shredded cheese..."

"A curious shape! There must be some purpose behind it."

"And you break an egg in the middle!"

"Ah! The wall of cheese prevents the egg from running!"

"Salt and pepper...a bit more ham...and finish it off with another slice of bread!"

"You could eat this dish with one hand, could you not? It seems perfect for taking a meal out of doors."

Kanata giggled. "Well, you could do *that* with any old sandwich! But now, for the *pièce de résistance*!" She held the sandwich with both hands and closed her eyes, focusing intently.

"Tasty, tasty, tasty food!" she intoned. The aroma of toasted bread wafted over the area.

"Incredible! You toasted it with fire magic?!" Zag'giel's senses could detect magic power emanating from Kanata's hands. His ears perked up in surprise. *"Fire magic is famed for its destructive power, but it is difficult to control. It is no small feat to achieve the precision needed to use it for cooking! But it's no more than we should expect from our master."* Lost in his admiration for Kanata's handiwork, Zag'giel didn't notice the line of drool running down his chin. *"But what a smell,"* he said. *"It is most stimulating to our appetite. Truly, bread is a foodstuff worthy of awe!"* His luxuriant tail swayed back and forth impatiently as he waited for the sandwich to be finished.

"Okay," Kanata said. "I think that about does it!" She opened her hands, revealing the bread, toasted golden brown. "Perfect!"

"Ooh! So this is grilled ham and cheese!"

"And you cut it in half to eat!" Kanata split the sandwich perfectly down the middle, letting the still-runny yolk of the egg and the melted cheese ooze out.

A drop of liquid threatened to fall out of the sandwich and onto the floor.

“No!” cried Zag’giel. “We will not allow a single drop to be wasted!” He leapt into the air to catch it, but was unable to jump high enough. *“Nhh... We cannot even jump such a short distance!”* he lamented as he bounced on the ground. *“This body is far too weak!”*

The curse the Goddess inflicted on Zag’giel had been broken, and Zag’giel could return to his original form at any time, but if he did so he was sure to once again find himself at the mercy of the curt and distant version of Kanata. The gorgeous features of his humanoid form did not interest her in the slightest. Zag’giel had thought Kanata was sending him a message that he must gain power in his black furball form as well.

“But our master Kanata believes that we can achieve ultimate power in this feeble form. We must not disappoint her!” Zag’giel would never dream of betraying Kanata’s trust in him by turning back into his original form.

He had misunderstood, of course. Kanata’s displeasure was solely due to his true form’s lack of fluff. She had no regard for his strength one way or another.

“Ahhh!” Kanata sighed. The image of Zag’giel struggling to get back to his feet had overcome her with passion. *“Zaggy’s so cute when he messes up a jump like that!”*

She had complete faith that Zag’giel would one day become the greatest (fluff) of all.

“Here you are!” Kanata said, finally reining in her fluff reverie and offering Zag’giel his sandwich. *“Careful! It’s hot!”* Grilled cheese of any kind is best eaten while it’s hot. Nobody wants to eat a cold block of solidified cheese and egg.

“Our thanks! Our thanks indeed!” Zag’giel had been salivating for some time now, thanks to the delectable smell. Without even bothering to get to his feet, he took a big bite out of the sandwich, right out of Kanata’s hand. *“Oh?!* *This...this is...”* The salty ham blended with the egg and cheese to create a rich, mellow flavor. The slight acidity of the mayonnaise and the hint of spice from the pepper rounded it out perfectly. The ingredients harmonized wonderfully to create an absolutely singular flavor.

“Delicious! Delectable! Dangerously so, even!” Zag’giel’s praise for the sandwich was so effusive that beams of golden light might as well have been shooting from his mouth.

“I’m so glad you like it, Zaggy!” Kanata licked up the runny egg and cheese and took a bite herself. “You’re right!” she said. “It *is* good!”

“It is! Your cooking is without peer! We had never tasted such delights before entering your service. We would have never imagined such things could exist!” The corners of Zag’giel’s mouth were stained yellow with eggy cheese.

“Oh my gosh, Zaggy, your mouth is all messy! It’s so cute! I feel like I’m falling for you all over again! I can’t *handle* it!” Kanata wiped the goop from Zag’giel’s face, her body shaking with throes of passion. Some people on the road happened to see her and wondered what on earth was happening, but Kanata remained blissfully unconcerned with their attention, and the two enjoyed a wonderful lunch.

“Well, our bellies are nice and full,” Kanata said. “Time to hit the road!”

Their short rest concluded, Kanata took to her feet.

“Yes! We are not far from a town, it seems.”

The two had overheard travelers saying as much on the road. It seemed that just over the crest of this gently sloping hill, they would find a small town. This road was frequented by merchants, and there were many such settlements dotting its course offering inns for them to stay the night.

“Yeah,” Kanata said. “I don’t wanna make my Zaggy sleep outside! We gotta make it to town so we can get a room at an inn!”

“Is that not our line?” Zag’giel rejoined. *“It would not do for a young girl such as yourself to sleep out of doors. We are used to life in the wilds. There is no need to worry on our account.”*

“As long as I have your fluff for a pillow, I can sleep anywhere! Even on top of a boulder or a bed of needles!”

“We would rather not. Such sleeping arrangements may well imperil our life.”

“Oh! I guess you’re right! I’ll have to get a nice soft mattress for my Zaggy

pillow."

"There is also the option of refraining from using us as a pillow entirely..."

"Wait," Kanata said. "You want to use *me* as a pillow? That would be fantastic!"

"H-Hm... Well, we suppose you are nigh invincible, after all..."

They set out for the village, Zag'giel perched again on Kanata's head. But then, just as soon as she started walking, Kanata stopped.

"Kanata? What is the matter? Is the town not ahead?"

"Fluff-fluff..."

"What?"

"I can smell the fluff!" Kanata's head whipped around, staring in a completely different direction than the road to the village.

"Say what?! You can smell the fluff? Kanata, what does that mean? Is it our body? You can smell our body?" Despite taking a bath with Kanata every day, Zag'giel was suddenly concerned about his body odor. He lifted up his foreleg to sniff at his armpit. Normally, such a gesture would have thrown Kanata into a fit of mania, but this time was different. Kanata was staring far off into the distance, at something only she could sense.

"Target acquired!"

"What?!"

"Fluff-fluff-fluff-fluff-fluuuuuuuuff!"

"Nuhaaaaaaa?! K-Kanataaaaaaa!"

Supporting Zag'giel to keep him from falling, Kanata pelted off into the wilderness at top speed, leaving behind a plume of dust. The other travelers on the road stared in shock, jaws hanging open. "What in the world?!"

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"Sniff sniff..." Fenrir sniffed at the air. His sharp senses were telling him that his master, the true Saint, was nearby. *"She's close! Her Holiness is close! I can smell her! Wait for me, Master, just a while longer... Your servant will speed to*

your side!"

Full of conviction, he howled gloriously to the sky. It echoed far away. Unfortunately, however, he was currently bound and suspended in midair.

He was hanging upside down, his tiny little limbs each tied to a pole, borne aloft by goblins walking on two legs. They cheered happily and cried out, "Gob gob!" as they hefted him through the forest.

"Hya ha ha! Meat! It's been so long since we've had meat!"

"Gonna give my kids some proper food to eat!"

"Goblins," Fenrir said, addressing the goblin at the front. "Your kindness to your children is truly commendable. However, I must go to Her Holiness the Saint. If you wish to assist me in this glorious task, release me from my bonds at once!"

"You can't eat glory, though, can you?" said the lead goblin.

"No," Fenrir admitted. "You cannot..."

"Then who cares! We need meat, and you'll do!"

"Yeah! Yeah!" chimed in another goblin. "Shut up and let us eat you! I promise we'll use every last bone!"

"D-Do you even know what you propose?" Fenrir demanded. "To eat the flesh of the Spirit Wolf Fenrir..."

"The Spirit Wolf Fenrir?! What's that supposed to mean? I've never heard of you."

"Me neither!" another goblin added.

"You ignorant goblins!" Fenrir cried. "How dare you!"

"Mmm," one of the goblins mused. "I wonder how this Fen thing tastes..."

"Well, let's eat him and find out!"

"Yeah! He's tiny, but he's so soft! Definitely worth eating!" The goblins drooled openly, fantasizing about eating Fenrir.

"But if we go back with just the one Fen, Lord Ogre is just gonna take the food

for himself..." a goblin griped.

"He calls himself our guardian," another added, "but he never really helps out."

"Talking about building an underground empire...making us dig and dig and dig..." the goblin sighed. "All we want is to live in peace..."

"Weak magic beasts get gobbled up by the strong," a goblin said. "There's nothing weaklings like us can do about it."

"I hate being a goblin..."

The goblins sighed and adjusted their grips on the poles. Goblins were some of the weakest magic beasts, and they knew it. But it sounded like an ogre had taken up residence with these goblins, calling himself their *guardian*. He stole their food and forced them to do hard labor. It was a sorry tale.

"I see..." Fenrir said. "You have endured your own hardships. I, too, have had my share of troubles. However, if you struggle to feed yourselves, there is no reason for you to remain here. Would you be so kind as to release me?"

"No," all the goblins said at once. It was amazing how synchronized they were.

"Lord Ogre is terrifying!" one goblin said. "If we try to run away, he'll crush our heads in his hands!"

"If we don't bring him meat, he'll eat us instead!" another added.

Clearly, this so-called Lord Ogre governed entirely by fear.

"I knew it..." Fenrir sighed. "There's no negotiating with them. Then I must break free with force! Haaaaaaaah!" The Spirit Wolf concentrated his power. His hair stood on end, and he seemed to grow in size. "These meager rope-vines will not hold me! Haaaaaaaaaaaah!" The vines began to strain and creak—it looked like they were on the verge of splitting!

"Haaaaaaaaaaa...aa...a..." It was a false hope. Fenrir's power ran out, and he deflated like a balloon.

"Oh, stop trying to escape!"

“Quit struggling and let us eat you!”

“Grr...” Fenrir was proud and defiant. *“I will not give up! I will not! I will never yield until I have reunited with My Lady Saint!”* The goblins ignored Fenrir and went on talking to each other about how they were going to cook him.

“We should stuff him with herbs and roast him whole!”

“No! It’s gotta be a stew!”

They carried on in that vein for a while, without any concern for the fact that the ingredients were listening.

“If I had my real power, these bonds would be nothing!” Fenrir cried. *“But I’m stuck in this tiny fragment of my body! Perhaps I left too much of myself behind. But if I hadn’t reduced my power to such a degree, I could not have slipped through the barrier on the Church’s prison. I suppose I had no other recourse, but I can’t believe there’s nothing I can do against goblins, the weakest magic beasts! Gah! Your Holiness! Where are you?!”* She was closer than when he had been imprisoned in his cell, but still so far away. Fenrir cried out in torment.

He had faced many trials since escaping his cell. He was able to avoid notice by the Church’s guards, but his legs were so short, and the distance he had to travel was so long. In the end, he decided to instead *roll* down the road. But he hit a steep downhill slope and went faster than he had intended, colliding with a carriage that knocked him into the river. With his tiny legs, he couldn’t even properly doggy-paddle, and he was carried downstream until he reached the shore, where he was immediately captured by goblins.

“It’s all over,” he said. *“I really am going to be eaten by goblins...”* He was too weak to break free. It really was the end. *“My Lady Saint,”* he sighed. *“Wherever could you be? I may never again sit in your presence, smelling your gentle scent...”* He took in a long breath, hoping that maybe the scent of the Saint drifting in from far away would give him comfort in his last moments. *“What’s this? Perhaps it’s my imagination, but her scent seems to be growing stronger. Is this an illusion, conjured up by my weak and failing heart?”*

It was no illusion. The calming, refreshing scent of the Saint was coming closer and closer to the forest. Fenrir could feel her approaching with staggering speed. *“Has she found me?! Your Holiness! I am here! Your faithful servant*

awaits you!" He howled and howled for all he was worth.

"Awoooooooo! Awawaoooooooooooo!"

And then, he heard a girl's voice answering back!

"Fl...ff..."

It was too far away to hear what she was saying clearly, but Fenrir didn't want to miss a single word the Saint said.

"What's she saying?!" he cried, perking up his ears and concentrating. *"What is My Lady Saint saying?!"*

He could hear her calling in her sacred voice. *"Fluuuff-fluuuuuuuuff!"*

"Fluff-fluff...?" Fenrir echoed. What in the world could that possibly mean?

† † †

Kanata was like the wind itself. Using wind magic to lower her air resistance, and with powerful force and perfect technique, she coursed across the plains faster than a hawk in mid-dive. Even Melissa the Zephyr—the Adventurers' Guild receptionist back in the Royal Capital and a capable adventurer herself—had felt her claim to her sobriquet slipping by the second she'd seen Kanata race by.

"Kanata!" Zag'giel clung on to her head for dear life. *"Where are you going! What has happened?! Kanataaaaaaa!"*

"Fluff fluff fluff fluff fluff fluff fluff fluuuuuuuuff!" Kanata didn't even seem to hear Zag'giel's screams. She was taking the minimal consideration of keeping him from falling off, but most of her attention was focused on something too far away for Zag'giel to see.

Kanata sniffed the air, finding her way to the whatever-it-was by scent.

"It's close!" she said. *"I can smell it!"*

"What are you, a dog?!"

In truth, she was far greater. Not even the Spirit Wolf himself could have pinpointed a precise location from this distance. Another heroic feat born of the love of fluff. Kanata's nose was itching for fluff, and fluff alone. And so she ran, enthralled by the scent, dashing across fields, passing by forests, leaping over

streams, flying over mountains and valleys, far, far off of her intended route.

And finally she slammed on the brakes, coming to a screeching halt in front of her destination. Some goblins were carrying a long pole between them, to which was tied a white ball of fur.

“Fluff Fluuuuuuff! I found yooooooooou!”

“H-Hey!” said one of the goblins. “Who are you?!”

“Wh-Wh-Where did you come from?!” demanded the other.

Understandably, they were shocked by the sudden appearance of a human girl on the scene. It was rare enough for humans to come this deep into the forest, but for a young girl to come alone was flat-out suicidal. And yet, the goblins could sense a strange aura of menace coming from the girl before their eyes.

“Wh-Wh-What does a human want with us?!”

“If you’re looking for a fight, take it up with Lord Ogre!”

They tried to intimidate her as best they could, but the black-haired girl didn’t even seem to notice. Smiling, she drew closer and closer.

“No!” a goblin shouted. “St-St-Stay away!”

“Are you after our food?! No way! That’s ours! We need it! If we come back empty-handed, Lord Ogre will have our heads!”

The goblins were paralyzed with fear. To all appearances, she was just a slender-bodied girl, but she was shrouded in an aura of undeniable, overwhelming might.

Then the goblins noticed that their poles were suddenly lighter. The girl was holding the white furball they had captured in one of her arms. The ropes, untied, fell to the ground.

“When did she—?!”

“I didn’t even see her move!”

The girl raised her free right arm. The goblins felt an intense pressure, as if a giant magic beast were looming over them.

“Awawawawah!” one babbled.

“N-No... We’re going to die...” said the other. They looked like they might pass out at any second.

But Kanata held up the palm of her hand and presented it to the goblins. “I have a proposition,” she said.

The goblins stared blankly. They were so overwhelmed it was hard for them to even breathe. A black hole appeared above Kanata’s hand, and from it fell bread, eggs, and ham.

“Let’s make a trade!”

+++

“Holy gob! What was that?! I’ve never tasted anything so good!”

“Have humans been eating stuff like this this whole time?!”

Tears were streaming down the goblins’ faces as they devoured Kanata’s grilled-ham-and-cheese sandwiches. Their fear seemed totally forgotten. Up until now, they had known of no cuisine beyond roasting and stewing.

Kanata held her head up high. “Then it’s a deal. I’ll be taking the fluffy baby?”

“Such are the words of Kanata,” Zag’giel added. He had been serving as interpreter.

The goblins didn’t hesitate for a second. “Yeah! Go right ahead!” they said, and, taking their sandwiches along with them, left in high spirits.

“It would have been a simple matter to defeat those creatures,” said Zag’giel, “and yet, Kanata, you would choose to reach an accord with them. We have abiding respect for your wisdom and compassion. As a king, we feel we must learn from your example.”

“Eeh heh,” Kanata giggled. “Zaggy, you’re making me blush! But hold on! First, this cutie.”

Kanata turned her attention toward the newcomer. She cleansed his silver-white fur with magic, revealing its brilliant luster. He didn’t have any visible injuries, but Kanata cast a healing spell anyway, just to be safe.

He should have been all better, but the white furball was still quivering away.

“Are you okay?” Kanata asked. “Did the goblins scare you?”

Zag’giel regarded the furball with contempt.

“*What is this pitiful creature?*” he asked. Nobody was there to point out that Zag’giel himself was every bit the pitiful little furball this puppy was.

They watched him shake and tremble, and then suddenly the new furball raised his head, gazing up at Kanata with his eyes—blue like the depths of the ocean.

“I...” he said, “*I was right. I was right all along...*” Tears began to flow from those deep-blue eyes of his.

“Huh?!” Kanata flinched back. She hadn’t been expecting this reaction. “Are you okay?! Does it hurt?! Did my spell not work?!”

But the furball leaped into the air with pure jubilation and landed on her chest. “*Your Holiness! I-I have waited so long for you! Day after day after day after day! Y-You’re here! You came for me!*”

“Whoa! The fluff is fluffing me?! Is it my youthful allure? My floof-ful allure? Being a Beast Tamer is *amazing!*”

The furball wagged his tail as she squeezed him tight, greedily.

† † †

“Aha ha ha...fluff fluff...white and soft...waggy waggy little tail...so cute...so cute!”

Kanata shook with emotion—the white fluff had just jumped up onto her chest! Ever since she had been a little girl, fluffy critters would run from Kanata whenever she tried to touch them. For this fluffball to be wagging his tail and showering her with affection of his own volition was beyond her wildest dreams. Her entire consciousness was absorbed in the sensation of soft, fluffy fluff. All else had been excised.

The furball yapped and whined, conveying his words of joy to her telepathically. “*My Lady Saint! Oh, how I’ve longed to meet you! I’ve missed you so desperately!*”

Telepathy took too much magic power for an ordinary animal to use. Moreover, animals would inevitably flee in terror before the aura of might that Kanata unconsciously projected. But if this furball was a magic beast, then what kind of magic beast was it? Even Kanata, who had read all of *The Bestiary of Albert Molmo, Tamer of Legends (Complete Edition)* had never heard of something like this before.

“*Your Holiness!*” he cried again. “*My Lady Saint!*”

What was that about? In his heartfelt cries, he had repeatedly called Kanata a Saint, but *that* was not the Profession Kanata had chosen. Moreover, as far as Kanata could remember, she had not met this fluffball before today. In fact, she was sure of it. If she had ever set eyes on such marvelous white fluff in the past, she would not possibly have forgotten—it would have been burned into her memory for all of time. Perhaps the furball was mistaking Kanata for someone else?

But Kanata’s cognitive faculties were currently on par with the average zombie. None of that occurred to her in the slightest.

“White...fluff...cu-cu-cute...” she said. She was lost in the bliss of fluff.

“*It’s me!*” the furball said, still pressed up into Kanata’s chest as she squatted to the ground. “*Your faithful servant! Please! Let me hear you say my name!*”

But someone else was there, grumbling and seething—Zag’giel, the first and original fluff-fluff.

“*Who do you think you are?!*” he hissed from his perch on Kanata’s head. His tail shot up in an attempt at intimidation. “*How dare you address our master in such a familiar tone?! Begone from her!*”

Eventually, subjected to the fury of Zag’giel, the white fluff looked up from Kanata’s chest. “*Hm?*” he said. “*Who’s this black furball?!*”

“*F-Furball?! You have some nerve to say that when you are nothing but a white furball yourself!?*”

“*You dare?! Ruffian furball!?*”

“*What are you supposed to be if not a furball?!*”

The pair meowed and hissed and yipped and yapped. Zag'giel had had just about enough of this white fluff thing that wouldn't let go of Kanata. He jumped up from Kanata's head, his back to the sun as he dropped on the furball.

"Nothing you say makes any sense! Then, take this!" His round body spun and spun, faster and faster, as he tackled the white fluffball for all he was worth.

"Hmph! Come, then!" the white furball declared.

Zag'giel struck him and bounced lightly off of his soft white fur, landing next to the white fluff in Kanata's arms.

"Knave!" Zag'giel spat. *"Wastrel!"*

"Don't you dare touch Her Holiness, furball!"

"Silence! How dare you touch our master!"

"Villain!"

"Insolent cur!"

The two flailed in Kanata's arms, battering each other with their tiny, stubby legs.

"Oh good golly jeez!" Kanata marveled. "Double fluff?! I wasn't—I wasn't ready—!" She held them tight in her arms like bouquets of fluffy flowers. Never in her life had she experienced such pure jubilation.

"Aaah!" she cried. "I-I can't hold back!" Something in her snapped. "Y-Y-Y-Y-Y-Y," Kanata stammered. "Y-Y-Y-Y-Y-Y-Y-Y..."

"Y?" both furballs asked at once, stopping their fight to stare up at her, uncertain what to make of her change in behavior.

"Kanata, what is it?" Zag'giel asked.

"Do you need something, Your Holiness?" asked the newcomer.

Those cute round eyes looking up at her was too much. All that was left of Kanata's rationality boiled over, and evaporated, and was gone.

"Y-Y-Y-You two are so naughty..." she said.



The white fluff didn't know what to make of this, but Zag'giel, who had heard that phrase before, twitched involuntarily. "N-No!" he shouted. "Kanata! Get ahold of yourself!"

"Y-Your Holiness? Have I done something to offend—?"

Kanata's eyes were burning hot. Her breath was labored. She was so worked up that her body had started to sweat. From the fire in her eyes, it was clear that she was beyond reason. "Haah..." she panted. "Haah... Haah... The double fluff is so cute... I can't...I can't...I can't hold myself back!"

"K-Kanata! Stop! A lady must not do such a—"

"Your Holiness? Your Holiness?! What are you doing?!"

Their desperate pleas seemed to have the opposite effect. Kanata only looked *more* excited. "Your cute cute cute bodies are just drawing me in!" she said. And then, she breathed in. She breathed in double.

Slurp slurp slurp!

It was a terrible, inhuman sight. Kanata was sucking so hard it seemed like she might inhale the two furballs entirely.

"Ghwaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

"Nooooooooooooo!"

Deep in the forest, far from any human settlements, the two cried out, mewing and yapping for their lives.

† † †

"La la la la la~♪"

Kanata skipped through the forest with a brilliant grin on her face. She'd had her fill of fluff. The black and white furballs she was carrying in her arms drooped lifelessly. Whatever she had done to them, their coats of fur were slick and moist.

"What could Her Holiness have been doing...?" the white fluff muttered, still in a daze.

“Hah. Then you do not know. You have much to learn, novitiate.” For all his haughty pride, Zag’giel was exactly as wrung out as the white furball.

“Then... You know? What was that?”

“We know indeed. In truth...”

“In truth what?!”

“In truth, Kanata has been training us,” Zag’giel pontificated to his rapt audience.

“Th-That was training?!” the white furball balked.

“Yes indeed! She ambushes us with this peculiar training in order to hone our strength!”

This was, of course, completely wrong, but it was what Zag’giel had decided was the case. This was a special training that would lead him to further power. It was a perfect delusion.

“If we had known such an ambush was coming,” Zag’giel continued, *“we would have been well able to endure it. But caught unawares, it has reduced us to total enervation! This is the teaching Kanata means to impart. Do not lower your guard. You must constantly bear in mind that battle can start at any time. Your heart must be an eternal battleground.”*

It was as if in an archery contest he had spun around and loosed an arrow in precisely the opposite direction. The white fluffball closed his eyes, gave it a good long think, and then opened them again.

“I see!” he said. Needless to say, he did not. *“Truly, even the great battles of my past did not exhaust me as much as this training. Her Holiness is incredible! I have never even heard of training so strict!”*

“Indeed, indeed!” Zag’giel said. They really did match one another. *“Kanata is truly incredible! We are proud to have her as our master!”*

“Her Holiness hasn’t changed a day in the past thousand years! She is always putting the people around her above herself!”

Something in the white furball’s praise of Kanata struck Zag’giel as off. *“Thousand years, you say?”* he asked. *“What do you mean?! Kanata is only*

fifteen years—”

“Aaah!” the furball cried, suddenly interrupting. “I forgot! Oh no!” He clambered down from his position in Kanata’s arms and bounced down to the ground, making his way in front of Kanata and sitting with an air of solemnity.

“O-wha-wha—?” Kanata said. “Sit! He’s sitting!”

“My Lady Saint, please forgive my earlier indiscretion! I lost myself in the joy of our long-awaited reunion! I thank you deeply for coming to meet me yourself in my hour of greatest need, when I had urgent need to seek you.”

He bowed his head politely, and Kanata clutched her hands over her heart.

“Oh my gooooosh!” she marveled. “The puppy bows!” But she shook her head. “No, no, no,” she said. “I mustn’t be rude. That was a lovely introduction!” She was already reaching out for him. The desire to squeeze the cute puppy furball was burning in her heart, but after fluffing her fill earlier, Kanata was in a state of postfluff clarity. At the very least she could *introduce herself*.

“I’m Kanata!” she said. “Nice to meet you! This is Zaggy! Say hi!” Kanata held Zag’giel aloft in her arms.

The King of Demons adopted a superior posture. “*We do not think you will be of much use to Kanata. All the assistance she needs we can provide. However, it is not we who decide these things, but Kanata. If you wish to join us, prepare yourself! This life is not for the faint of heart!*” He puffed his chest out as much as he could, with all the gravitas of a senior student.

However, the white fluff wasn’t paying any attention to Zag’giel at all. He was perplexed by something in Kanata’s self-introduction.

“Did you say... ‘nice to meet you’?” His voice was shaking.

“Yeah!” said Kanata. “Nice to meet you!”

“Wh-What?!” Dizzy with shock, he staggered forward up to Kanata’s feet and stood up on his two hind legs. “*We’ve met before, Your Holiness! It’s me! The Spirit Wolf Fenrir! Have you forgotten your long journeys by my side?*”

Kanata’s attention was somewhere else. “He jumps up on two legs! C-C-

Cuuute!" The furball bouncing on his hind legs had shot an arrow through her heart.

"Your Holiness! Please remember!"

"Okay! I'm remembering!" Kanata wasn't really listening to what was being said, but she gave it her all anyway. She had to, if fluff was at stake. "Nhhhhh!" She used her top-tier recollective powers to call up her memory of her entire past.

"Do you remember our first great feat, freeing the beastmen from the tyrannical rule of Imperial Azamut?! Ah, you were so magnificent then, Your Holiness."

"Hm? Imperial Azamut? Like, the neighboring country? No...I don't remember that..."

"Th-Then... Do you remember saving the people of the Kingdom of Falkas from famine?!"

"I don't... I'm sorry..."

"Bringing rain to the drought-stricken Farlé Grasslands, averting desertification and slaking the thirst of the masses?!"

"I don't think I know you..."

"Defeating a dark god from another world who tried to send their soldiers here? Defeating the Demon King with the Hero on the Dark Continent?! That was such a terrific battle—you must remember it!"

"I really don't know what you're talking about."

"No... No way..."

Fenrir had recounted many tales from his time journeying with the Saint, but Kanata really had no memory of any of it. Even accounting for the increasingly large part of her memory that had been sacrificed entirely to contain nothing more than Zaggy's fluff, she wouldn't have forgotten something as big as *that*.

"She...really doesn't remember..." Fenrir's ears flattened against his head. Kanata was still worked up over the fluff, but Fenrir had fallen into a deep sadness.

“I don’t,” Kanata said. “But are you sure this isn’t our first meeting? To begin with, I’m not a Saint...” Saint *had* been one of the thousands of Professions she had gotten to pick from in her Selection Ceremony, but what Kanata had picked was not Saint, but Beast Tamer. The white fluffball *must* be thinking of someone else.

“No! I would not mistake Her Holiness! This smell can only belong to My Lady Saint!”

“S-Smell?” Kanata asked. “Do I smell?!”

“Fear not,” Zag’giel said as Kanata sniffed at her clothing. “You always smell clean and well washed. But this furball, we think, has not had a bath in some time. We detect a certain odor.” He was still trying to assert dominance over the newcomer, as if he hadn’t been dirty with grass and sweat and mud only recently himself.

“Not that!” Fenrir went on. “The unique smell of Her Holiness’s soul! I could never forget such a splendid fragrance. She is Her Holiness!” He pulled his forelegs up onto Kanata’s lap, his back legs still bouncing away.

“Wah ha ha ha!” Kanata laughed. “That’s precious! Too precious! Am I even allowed to see something as precious as this?! They should... They should charge for admission!”

“My Lady Saint! Please! Remember! My Lady Saint!”

“Enough of your yapping!” Zag’giel stepped between Fenrir and Kanata. *“It is plain that Kanata is not your Saint! You yourself said this happened a millennium ago, but Kanata is a child of fifteen years of age! And perhaps you are not aware of this, but the souls of dead humans are the sustenance of the gods. Reincarnation is a myth! You are being ridiculous!”*

“I am not being ridiculous! Please! Believe me, Your Holiness! You have to believe me!”

Zag’giel was aware of the relationship between humans and the gods, but he did not know that Kanata had been reborn from another world, with her memories of her previous life intact—her previous life, which she had lived out in a sterile hospital room with plastic tubes connected to her body. Whoever it

was Fenrir remembered, it was not Kanata.

“You really...really don’t remember...” He could see from Kanata’s expression that she really didn’t remember who she was. Fenrir took a step back and turned his ears down, dejected.

Kanata squatted down and reached out to pet Fenrir gently on the head. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I really don’t know what you’re talking about. But I don’t think you’re lying or anything.”

If she had been reborn here from a different world, it was possible that before that, she had existed in a different world as well. If reincarnation took place between different worlds, it wasn’t completely impossible for Fenrir’s Saint to have been reborn in Kanata’s world.

Kanata couldn’t imagine the sadness Fenrir had been feeling, searching in vain for his precious master for a thousand years. But she could at least give him her hand.

“I may not be your Saint,” Kanata said, “but I would very much like to be friends with you. We can go on all kinds of adventures, and make lots of memories of our own! If that’s...okay with you...”

Fenrir lifted his drooping head to look up at Kanata. *“Such kind eyes,”* he said. *“I knew it...”* Gazing into her smile, he could feel an old memory come back to him anew—a girl’s joyful smile, her black hair fluttering in the breeze. That sight had been the beginning of his journey. He remembered traveling with his master, in her original incarnation. She had helped so many people, but nobody had ever taken the time to help her. She’d helped, and helped, and helped, and helped...but even at that last moment, when they had been parted forever, nobody had come to her aid. Perhaps it was best that she’d lost the memories of her life. She had been released from her charge as Saint.

Fenrir made up his mind then and there that he would stay by her side to assure her happiness. It was not because she was a *Saint* that he decided to serve her, but simply because she was such a sweet and kind girl. Even if her form and her name had changed, this *was* the master Fenrir had been searching for. And he would protect her, not for the sake of the world, but for her own sake.

Having made up his mind, Fenrir's ears perked up to attention. "Your Holiness...no," he corrected himself. "Lady Kanata! I believe I was not mistaken! Remember me or not, you are the only one I will serve!"

"Really?! Oh my gosh, I'm so happy!" Kanata spread her arms wide in joy, inviting Fenrir to jump in. He did so with no hesitation.

"I promise, Lady Kanata! I will be of use to you!"

"Yeah! I can't wait to travel with you, Fen-fen!"

"Fen-fen...?"

"Yes! Fen-fen! Every Beast Tamer worth her salt knows you gotta give nicknames to your magic beasts!" she said with an air of knowing confidence. This notion of hers was left over from her previous life—in fact, it was straight from the video games she used to play.

Fenrir closed his eyes, grimacing as if he were in pain. "Nhh..."

"We see," said Zag'giel. "That explains some things..."

Zag'giel, of course, had vivid memories of being given a nickname of his own. His confusion over suddenly being called Zaggy. Whether his claim had any veracity to it, Fenrir had called himself a Spirit Wolf. Of course he would resist being given such an utterly undignified name.

"But if one cannot overcome this trial," he said, *"then one has no right to call themselves Kanata's servant."* He nodded, more sure than ever of his merit.

Fenrir, meanwhile, kept his eyes shut. "Fen-fen..." he echoed.

"Yeah!" said Kanata. "Fen-fen!" She sounded so cheerful when she said the name.

Suddenly Fenrir's eyes snapped open. Was he angry about being ridiculed with a nickname?

"I understand!" Fenrir said with shocking earnestness, sitting up very straight and wagging his tail so vigorously it looked like it might tear itself apart. *"I will no longer use the name Fenrir! From now on, I am Fen-fen, Kanata's number-one servant! My life is yours! I swear it!"*

“Wh-What?!” A shiver ran down Zag’giel’s spine. “Fen-fen...you...you accept it?! You have no objections?!” This newcomer was taking to this with far too much grace! “No, wait. We will not allow your claim to be the number-one servant to go unopposed. It is we who are Kanata’s number one! You are number two! The second!”

“Hmph,” said Fenrir. “What are you, anyway? You’ve been loitering around Lady Kanata for a while now, haven’t you. But a weak-looking furball like you has no right to call himself Lady Kanata’s servant!”

“We are telling you that you are also a furball! And moreover, this is not our true form!” Zag’giel jumped down from Kanata’s shoulder. “Perhaps seeing the difference in our power will cause you to understand. We are Zag’giel! The Demon King who unified the warring Dark Continent and reigned over its long peace!” As he landed, Zag’giel unleashed his transformation, shining with a vivid black light that grew brighter and brighter and shifted, until he stood before Fenrir in the form of a tall, beautiful man in a black cape. His magic power, vast and menacing, whirled around him like a hurricane.

Fenrir fell over on his back. *“Th-The Demon King?!”*

“Indeed. Unlike you, O self-proclaimed Spirit Wolf, we are the true King of Demons.”

“I-Impossible! Why would the Demon King be here?!”

“Hah. Our meeting with Kanata was nothing short of a miracle,” he said, haughtily. “And now the bond between us is—”

Suddenly he felt someone glaring down the back of his head. He looked over his shoulder to see Kanata staring at him through narrowed eyes.

“Kanata, what’s—?” he started. But Kanata’s silent glare was louder than he was.

“We are clarifying our position with this newcomer,” Zag’giel said. “If we must talk, then later we can—”

Kanata kept on staring.

She was clearly dissatisfied. Perhaps she had a problem with Zag’giel

introducing himself by his original name. Panicked, he turned back around to face Fenrir. “W-We are Zaggy!” he declared. “We are not the Demon King Zag’giel! We are merely a magic beast who admires Kanata!”

The beautiful youth turned back into the black cat-ball. He looked nervously over his shoulder.

“Eheh heh,” Kanata giggled. “That’s right! Zaggy is Zaggy.”

It seemed Zag’giel had been correct. He sighed, relieved to have Kanata back to normal.

Kanata was not fond of Zag’giel’s original form. Or, rather, it wasn’t that she wasn’t fond, so much as that she regarded his furball form as correct.

“L-Lady Kanata?!” Fenrir pointed a stubby paw at Zag’giel. “What is the meaning of all this?! Why are you working alongside the Demon King, the enemy of the entire world?!”

“Hah,” said Zag’giel. “It is as we said. We are not the King of Demons. We are nothing more than Kanata’s servant.”

“Y-You... You abandoned your status as Demon King?!” Fenrir’s eyes lit up. “Lady Kanata reformed the Demon King, the avatar of evil itself! I knew it! I knew she was the true Saint!”

“No,” Kanata said. “I’m a Beast Tamer!” She scooped up both furballs in her arms. “If I were a Saint, I would never have gotten so much fluffy fluffy fluff!” Kanata nuzzled her cheeks between the two critters, indulging herself to her heart’s content. “I’m so glad I’m a Beast Tamer! Fluff fluff, fluffy fluff, fluff fluff fluff!”

Zag’giel’s fine fur was smooth and almost cool to the touch. Fenrir’s was soft and warm like dandelion fluff. But as different as they were, both fluffs were sublime. Kanata was on cloud nine.

“We will concede the argument and acknowledge you as our companion,” Zag’giel said. *“After all, Kanata has chosen you. However, we will not call you the number-one servant! It was we who were with her from the start!”*

“I have served Lady Kanata for a thousand years!” objected Fenrir. *“But it isn’t*

a matter of seniority. We will know who is the number-one servant by their service!"

"Hisss...!"

"Grrrr...!"

The two thrust their heads together, glaring each other down. Sandwiched between them, Kanata looked like she had gone to heaven. It was a ridiculous tableau.

Chapter 2: Danger to the Village? No! This Is a Fluff Opportunity!

“Lady Kanata, I must ask. Do you have any idea where we are?” Fenrir asked.

“Kanata was running too fast,” Zag’giel answered. *“We must confess that we, too, do not know the way back.”*

Fenrir had fallen into a river and been captured by goblins in his escape from the Holy City to the west. He had no idea where they were. Zag’giel, who had been clinging to Kanata’s shoulder for dear life, had no more of an idea.

“I don’t have any more of a clue than you two do,” Kanata said. “I just smelled the fluff and came running.”

In other words, they were lost.

“The sun has almost set,” said Zag’giel. *“It may well be that we must spend the night in the woods.”*

“I’d be fine with that,” said Fenrir, *“but I would never dream of subjecting Lady Kanata to such a thing!”*

“I’d be perfectly fine too!” Kanata said. “But I was really hoping you two would get to sleep in a warm bed tonight.”

Melissa, the guild receptionist who helped them out from time to time, had insisted that Kanata bring a tent and sleeping bags in her inventory. The three had the option of camping if they needed to.

“Furball,” said Zag’giel. *“You call yourself a wolf, do you not? Then your nose must be sharp. Can you smell a human settlement anywhere?”*

“Silence, furball!” Fenrir retorted. *“My nose isn’t at its best in this body. But you’re the Demon King, aren’t you? Can’t you do something with your magic?!”*

The two glared daggers at each other, Kanata sandwiched between them.

“Ahh,” she sighed. “Quarreling fluffballs! So cute!”

Kanata hadn't changed a bit.

At this rate, night was going to fall, and the road would only get harder to find. The three were beginning to think that there may be no alternative to camping after all. But then, something unexpected happened. They heard the sound of hoofbeats somewhere far away. Whatever the hooves belonged to must have been moving fast, because as distant as they sounded, they were still completely audible.

"That sounds like people talking!" Kanata said. Her ears were sharper even than the two beasts'. "And I hear wheels! I wonder if it's a wagon." She turned to face the direction of the sounds.

"*Lady Kanata!*" Fenrir said. "*If they're merchants, they might let us ride in their wagon!*"

"*Even if they do not,*" Zag'giel added, "*they will be able to tell us the way to a human village. At the very least, following the sound of hoofbeats should take us to some manner of road.*"

"Yeah, exactly! Let's go!" Kanata held her two pets tight and ran off into the darkening forest.

† † †

"Ha ha!" the bandit shouted. "Leave the wagon to us, old man!"

"This cargo *must* reach the village!" the old man steering the covered wagon pleaded. "It is our only hope for tomorrow!"

Chasing him were some dozen or so men, filthy with mud, holding a torch in one hand and some nasty implement in the other.

"Shut up! The hell do *we* care?! Stop your horse, and we'll spare your life!"

"We aren't carrying anything of value! Please, let us go!"

"We'll decide what is and isn't of value! Stop the wagon, old man!"

"N-Never!" The old man spurred the horse on. "Baiko, run! They're gaining!"

But their cargo was heavy, and the road was narrow and uneven. The bandits were closing the distance. The axles of the wheels were loosening and making a

nasty straining sound. It was only a matter of time before the man and his wagon were caught.

The bluish-black horse stomped and whinnied, defying the bandits.

“Wow, that horse has some fight in it!” one of them said.

“Hey,” said another, “is it just me, or does that horse have horns?”

“Huh? I can’t tell for sure in this light...”

The wagon was slowing down. It looked like this was the limit to the horse’s stamina. The bandits, heartened, sped up to surround the wagon.

“We’ve been doing this for years!” the bandit at their head declared. “You’re not getting away!”

“Ha ha!” the others laughed.

The head bandit was so close he could almost touch the wagon with his fingertips, when—

“Good afternoon!” A girl greeted him from the side, completely calm.

“Eh?!” The bandit turned his head. A black-haired girl was running along next to him, as silent as a breeze. “Wh-Who the hell are you?!”

The girl smiled. “I’m just a passing Beast Tamer!”

“A Beast Tamer?” The bandit shook his head. Why was there a teenage girl running along next to them on this narrow road in the forest? And how was she keeping pace with these strong-legged bandits and greeting them like nothing in particular was happening? “No, not that! I’m asking where you *came* from!”

“From over there,” the girl said. “What are you people doing here, exactly?”

“Wh-What?! Isn’t it obvious?! We’re bandits! This is a holdup! But what about you? Are you planning on getting in our way?”

“Oh, no,” the girl said. “I was just hoping you would give me some directions.”

“As if!” the bandit said. “Get that girl too! We’ll sell her later!”

“Ha ha!” the others shouted, brandishing their weapons.

“Oh!” the girl said. “I see! You’re *evil* bandits!”

“I mean, that’s what I’ve been telling you...”

There was the sound of something moving very fast, and suddenly the girl vanished from sight. The bandits didn’t have time to process what was happening before the ones who had been near the girl suddenly lost consciousness and collapsed.

“Huh?!” The last thing the head bandit saw was his companions collapsing and tumbling off the road, when the girl struck him hard on the neck, knocking him out cold in a second.

“Wh-What?! What’s going on?!” A bandit waved his torch around, but he couldn’t find the girl. All he saw was bandits dropping, one after another.

It was utterly one-sided. A humiliating rout. The whole thing had taken less than ten seconds.

After they had been arrested and handed over to the Adventurers’ Guild, the bandits recalled the incident thus:

“It was like a shadow...a black shadow flying around the dark forest, silently picking us off...”

“It struck us on the back of our necks with just enough force to knock us out. You know, before I was a bandit, I used to be a pretty famous martial artist. I can tell how much skill something like that takes. There’s no human alive that could do that. It must have been some kind of forest spirit!”

“I was like, ‘no, please, I’m sorry, I won’t do it again, I swear, just don’t kill me,’ y’know?”

Melissa, who had been taking the bandits’ testimonies, sighed deeply as she finished writing.

+++

The wagon came to a stop, the horse utterly exhausted.

“This is as far as we go,” the old man said. “I’m sorry, everyone! I couldn’t make it!” He let go of the reins and sighed in resignation, stepping down from the driver’s seat to find the crude, leering bandits who had been waiting for him

—gone. “Wh-What?” He looked closely and saw the bandits collapsed here and there along the road. “What happened?!”

A girl stepped out from behind the wagon, startling the old man even further.

“Wah!” he cried, falling over in shock.

“Don’t worry, sir, everything’s okay!” Kanata said. She offered the old man her hand.

“Did you do this...?” he marveled.

“Yes, sir. It looked like they were attacking you.”

“Thank you so much,” the old man said. “You’ve saved me! You’re a very strong young lady, to take on so many bandits like that. What on earth is your Profession?”

“I’m a Beast Tamer!”

“A-A Beast Tamer?!” The old man reeled in surprise like so many before him, but the thing he said next came as even more of a surprise. “I’m a Beast Tamer too!”

† † †

Back on the main road, the wagon rolled along at a leisurely pace. The bandits, strung together by a length of rope the old man had with him, marched along in a disorderly crowd behind the wagon. They were being very obedient—their spirits were completely broken.

The old man had invited Kanata to his village as thanks for the rescue. Kanata’s party, which had been looking for a place to stay the night anyway, was more than happy to take him up on his offer.

“You’re the first Beast Tamer I’ve seen besides myself in a long while!” the old man said. “And so strong too... You’re an unusual young lady in a lot of ways, aren’t you?!”

“My name is Kanata Aldezia,” Kanata said politely. She was sitting in the front seat next to the driver. “It’s very nice to meet you!” The two shook hands.

“Oho ho!” The old man laughed. “Such a sweet girl too! I can scarcely believe

you're the one who finished off those bandits!"

"*We are Zaggy,*" said Zag'giel. "*Servant of Kanata.*"

"*And I am Fen-fen!*" Fenrir said. "*Also a servant of Lady Kanata!*"

"Hoh! I've never seen magic beasts like you two!" the old man exclaimed. "Not many can use telepathy like that. You must be pretty high-level!" A Beast Tamer himself, the man looked at the two furballs with professional interest.

"*You are wise to make that observation, elder,*" Zag'giel said.

"*Hah,*" Fenrir said. "*I suppose there's no hiding my power after all. You must be an excellent Beast Tamer, sir!*"

The two of them preened proudly on Kanata's shoulders, over the moon at being called *high-level*.

"Oh!" the old man said. "I almost forgot to introduce myself! My name is Albert Molmo. People call me Grandpa Monster! And this is my bicorn Baiko!"

"*Neigh!*" the bicorn whinnied.

"*Well, it seems someone has manners!*" Zag'giel said in response. "*Well met, Baiko.*"

"*As fellow servants of a Beast Tamer, I hope we can be good friends!*" said Fenrir.

"*Whinny! Neigh!*" It seemed like Zag'giel and Fenrir could understand what Baiko was saying. The three magic beasts carried on their conversation.

Kanata, meanwhile, was on a different tack entirely. "*The Albert Molmo?!*" Flustered, she hurriedly retrieved a worn-out book from her Inventory Screen. "*I-I-I-I read your book!*"

"Well, goodness me! That's the bestiary I published back in the day, isn't it? I was a youngster with a big head back then, and I only wrote the one, but I'm very glad to see that it found its way into your hands. I might just blush!"

"*I-I-I'm a b-big fan!*" Kanata stammered. "*Can I have your autograph?!*"

"O-Oh? Well, if you want me to sign my name, I suppose..."

"*Yay!*"

It was a rare sight to see Kanata this delighted by something that wasn't at all fluffy. Kanata's parents had bought *The Bestiary of Albert Molmo, Tamer of Legends (Complete Edition)* for her when she was very young, and it had been her favorite book ever since. She was delighted beyond her wildest dreams to have actually met the author. Kanata, enraptured, held the signed book tight in her arms.

"I was *right*," she said. "You really *are* supposed to give nicknames to your magic beasts."

"Quite right!" Albert said. "I'm glad you understand!"

The two seemed to have hit it off right away and were deep in conversation before they knew it.

"It isn't actually necessary to fight a magic beast for it to follow you," Albert said. "All that is needed is for you to show the beast that you are worthy of being its master."

"I see!" Kanata said. "There was something like that on page 260, right?"

"I found this one injured in the forest," he said, indicating Baiko. "I saved her life and she joined me out of the goodness of her heart! Gratitude, friendship—anything works, as long as you've touched the magic beast's heart. After all, with our lowered abilities as Beast Tamers, the strongest beast we could defeat would be a slime!"

"I guess that is a pretty big disadvantage," Kanata said. "I can see why not a lot of people wanna be Beast Tamers."

"I didn't mention it in my book, but during my travels, I learned that that was not always the case," Albert told her. "I read in an ancient document that some god or other put a curse on the Beast Tamer Profession! Perhaps this god had some reason to be afraid of humans and magic beasts being on good terms..." He shook his head. "These days, people think of Beast Tamer as a failure Profession because of the ability penalty. I never expected to meet another person weird enough to want to become one anyway!"

"Eheh heh," Kanata laughed. "I'll do *anything* for the fluff."

"Humans and magic beasts can understand each other, with Beast Tamers

serving as the bridge between our worlds. I hope you make friends with a great number of magic beasts, little Kanata.”

“I will! I promise!” Kanata said, thumping her fist against her chest. “I’ll hunt down the fluff all over the world!”

“Oho ho! Well, that’s good to hear.” The old man smiled fondly at Kanata, although he didn’t have much of an idea what she meant by *fluff*, exactly. The two Beast Tamers carried on talking cheerfully, big smiles on their faces. Kanata’s two magic beasts perched on top of the wagon cover, busying themselves with menacing the captives.

“You! Thieves! Pick up the pace! March!”

“Be grateful for Lady Kanata’s mercy!”

“Y-Yes sirs...” the bandits responded listlessly as they trailed behind the wagon. Zag’giel and Fenrir hadn’t been especially useful in driving off the bandits, but they nonetheless looked extremely pleased with themselves.



† † †

The sun had set beyond the horizon by the time they saw the village.

“There it is,” Albert said. “My hometown, Chestnut Village. It’s been an age and a half since I’ve come back to visit!”

A great throng of people had gathered around the entrance, next to a sign stating the village’s name.

“Mister Molmo!” a villager cried. “It’s so late! We were worried something had happened!” Holding lanterns, the villagers crowded around the wagon.

“I see you got my letter,” Albert said. “I’m sorry I’m so late. I ran into a little trouble on the road.” He looked behind himself, and the villagers followed his gaze.

“Wh-Who are those men?!” someone gasped. There was general upset among the crowd at the sight of the bandits bound behind Albert’s wagon.

“These men are the *trouble* I mentioned,” Albert said. “They attacked me on the road. But not to worry. This young lady here showed them what for and saved the cargo I brought!”

“Good evening!” Kanata chimed in cheerfully. “Is there any good fluff in this village?”

“Th-This girl?” one of the villagers marveled. “She took on all those bandits alone?!”

“City girls are something else...”

“Is she some kind of famous adventurer?”

The villagers peppered Kanata with words of thanks mixed in with curious questions.

“Now, now,” Albert said. “First, let’s get this wagon inside the village. We don’t want to lose any provisions, and we need to put the bandits somewhere.”

“But Mister Molmo,” someone said, “we don’t have anything extra to feed the bandits until the guards can get here...”

It seemed like this village was dealing with a food shortage. Albert’s wagon

was stuffed full of rations.

“Oh,” said Kanata. “In that case, I guess I’ll send them on ahead real fast.”

“Send them on ahead?” What on earth did *that* mean? As the villagers were puzzling it out, Kanata held her hand out toward the bandits and spoke a word of power.

“Annnd...warp!” she said. The next instant, Kanata and the bandits were gone.

“They vanished?! Wh-Where did they go?!”

† † †

“Boss, it’s time to scram and hit the hay.” One of Melissa’s junior staff members at the guild addressed her from behind as Melissa busied herself with paperwork.

“Bella,” Melissa said, “I’ll let it slide this time, but try not to use slang while we’re at work, would you?”

“Okaaay.” Bella sighed. It was unclear if she was actually going to follow those instructions.

Bella was a charming girl. She made a lot of mistakes, but the adventurers loved her—partially for her enormous chest. She wasn’t intimidated by the rough-and-tumble crowd of men that made up the guild’s adventurers, and she had the makings of a good receptionist. Melissa had been training this girl up as her successor. When Bella was ready, the job of receptionist would be hers, and Melissa could return to her life as an adventurer.

It wasn’t that Melissa *hated* working for the guild, but they had simply been keeping her far too busy. She was working overtime again today, finishing up the last of the paperwork, and yearning for her old freewheeling adventurer days. She really could use a stiff drink and a good night’s sleep. How she missed her old schedule of three days’ work and four days’ rest.

“I’m going home after I finish this last bit of paperwork,” Melissa said.

“Oh! I’ll wait for you, then,” said Bella. “I wanna get dinner with you.”

“You’re paying your own tab this time,” Melissa told her.

“Really? Fiiine.”

Melissa shook her head. “Incorrigible, aren’t you,” she said, smirking to herself as she looked over the last of the reports.

In the past few days, they had been struggling with a mountain of paperwork pertaining to a certain promising—or rather, *completely absurd*—new adventurer who had crashed into their lives like a comet, and her meritorious deeds. She struck down the Roc Brothers, who were wanted monsters in the area. She defeated a dragon when he suddenly appeared from nowhere and put him to work protecting the city. She not only cleansed the *entire* sewers of the *whole* Royal Capital, but expelled the spirit at the root of the corruption. And when a demon army from the Dark Continent showed up at their gates, she fought them off single-handedly. It was completely unaccountable. And all this disorder had shown up on Melissa’s desk in the form of paperwork.

“Where do you wanna go to eat?” Bella asked.

“There’s a new shop that opened up in Midtown. I’ve heard their mushroom quiche is good.”

“Ooh! I can’t wait!”

“I know, I know.” Melissa hammered out the last few sheets of paperwork and was about to call it a day when suddenly, without any warning, a girl appeared.

“Oh, Miss Melissa! Excellent.”

“Eh?! M-Miss Kanata?!”

Bella jumped behind Melissa. “Wow, who are those guys? How come they’re all tied up?”

Behind Kanata there were a number of men tied together along a rope like a string of beads. The men glanced around. It seemed that they didn’t have any more idea than Melissa and Bella of what was happening.

“Miss Kanata,” Melissa pressed, “what are you doing here? Didn’t you leave on your journey?”

“I did! The journey’s going great.”

“Well, I’m happy to hear that, but...who are *these* men?”

“These?” Kanata said. “These are bandits!”

“Bandits...” Melissa had a bad feeling about this. Specifically, she had a feeling that she might have to give up on that mushroom quiche tonight.

“Um, they were attacking people near Chestnut Village,” Kanata said.

“Oh! Ah! Boss, I know about them!” Bella said. “We have eyewitness accounts and damage reports. There’s even an outstanding request to do something about them!”

“I see,” Melissa said. She turned back to Kanata. “And you captured them and brought them to us?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“I suppose I should congratulate you,” Melissa said. Nothing would have surprised her about Kanata at this point, but taking down a dozen bandits on her own was no small feat. And now it was on *Melissa* to give the bandits an earful, see them to a jail cell, compile the accounts of the incident, and arrange for Kanata to be paid the quest reward.

“I just hope we get home before tomorrow morning...” Melissa lamented.

“Right! Well then,” said Bella, grabbing her bag and making for the door, “peace, y’all! I’m out!”

Melissa grabbed her by the shoulder. “*You* aren’t going anywhere.”

“Eeee...” Bella whined with a high-pitched wail that might as well have come up from hell itself.

“Good luck with everything!” Kanata chirped.

“Oh,” Melissa added, “Miss Kanata, I’ll need to give you your reward.”

“That’s okay,” Kanata said. “You can put it on my tab.” She began casting a spell.

“Also,” Melissa went on, “it’s fine if it’s just brief, but could you give me your account of what happened? It would be a big help for—”

“She’s gone...”

The two stared for a moment, dumbfounded, at the space where Kanata had been.

† † †

“Where did the girl go?!”

“Where are the bandits?!”

Kanata reappeared to find the villagers in a state of confusion. “I’m baaack!” she sang.

“Oh! There you are, Kanata!” Albert Molmo said, approaching her. “What in the world was that?!”

“I just took a quick jump to the Adventurers’ Guild to drop the bandits off!”

“Wh-Whaaaaaaat?!” The villagers within earshot couldn’t believe what they were hearing. Teleportation was an ancient, very advanced art. These rural villagers wouldn’t even have heard of it.

“We went through many long labors to revitalize the practice of teleportation in the modern age,” Zag’giel said. *“We suppose Kanata must have analyzed and mastered it from watching us cast it just the one time when we sent the demon army back to the Dark Continent. There is no word for it but genius.”*

“*That’s our Lady Kanata!*” Fenrir chimed in.

Kanata squeezed her two adoring furballs tight. “It looks like I can’t warp anywhere I haven’t been, though,” she observed.

“You must be able to visualize your destination. If you lack a clear image of the place, you will be unable to make the leap. In fact, we are awed that you could accomplish it after seeing this place only once.”

“Miss Melissa gave me her congratulations too,” Kanata said. It was true, although the corners of Melissa’s mouth had been twitching quite a bit the whole time. She hadn’t exactly been thrilled to suddenly be responsible for the crowd of bandits. “It feels good to do good deeds!”

Meanwhile, back in the guild where the two sat next to each other, Bella turned to Melissa and said, “This is good though! Being the ones in charge of

her *has* to be good for our careers. I just wish it didn't involve so much overtime..."

Melissa heaved a heavy sigh.

† † †

"Of course!" the village elder said. "You saved our village! Of course you may stay in my house! I'll draw you up a bath too. You must be tired from your journey."

"A bath!" Kanata cried. "Yay!"

"A *bath...*" Zag'giel mused, deflating slightly.

"Lady Kanata, I'll wash your back!" said Fenrir. He was raring to go.

"Come in, come in!" The elder waved them inside the biggest house in town. The village looked like a highway town, albeit a particularly poor one. It didn't look like things should be bad enough to need Albert Molmo to deliver an emergency shipment of food supplies, but it was clear that there was some kind of trouble going on.

"Well, first things first," Kanata said, "the bath! I'm gonna get Fen-fen nice and clean!"

"Lady Kanata!" Fenrir objected. *"There is truly no need for you to stoop to that level!"*

"It's fine! Don't worry about it!"

"You had best do that then," Zag'giel said. *"We have taken a bath every single day for some time now. Today, we think we would like to abstain."*

"Eheh heh," Kanata giggled. "No way, Zaggy! We gotta get you nice and shiny too!"

"Nh..." Zag'giel protested. *"At least let us bathe alone! Please! At the very least!"*

But Kanata took the white and black furballs under her arms and charged straight into the bath.

† † †

Just as Kanata promised, she scrubbed Zag'giel and Fenrir until they were sparkling clean, and in return, the two habitual residents of her shoulders washed her back. There was a brief dispute about who would get to scrub Kanata's upper back and who would scrub her lower back, but this story has gotten sidetracked enough already.

"Ah!" Kanata said. "That was a nice bath. I'll have to thank the village elder!" She had gotten out of her bath and was now in her pajamas. She dried her hair with wind magic and set to brushing her magic beasts' fur.

"Whoa!" Fenrir exclaimed. "*This feels so good, I don't know what to say!*"

"*Kanata had that brush made for us,*" Zag'giel said. "*You are only borrowing it. Bear that in mind.*"

They had gotten everything ready to go to bed when suddenly, they heard angry shouting outside the window. "Are you saying we're gonna keep letting them take our stuff?!"

"I didn't say that. But we don't have the strength to fight back! What do you want us to do?!"

It was the village elder and his son, engaged in urgent conversation. Next to them was the old man, Albert Molmo.

"We can hold out for some time, thanks to the provisions Mister Molmo brought us," the elder said.

"But what happens after that?! There's only so much food we can buy from outside the village. And if they notice what we're doing, they'll take all our food, every last scrap!"

"We'll distribute it to everyone and hide it piecemeal. The guild has to send an adventurer eventually..."

"You say that, but it's been months!" The elder's son brought his fist down on the table with a *thud*.

Kanata and her companions hid behind the corner in the hallway and listened in on their conversation.

"*Quite the commotion...*"

"If we butt in now, we'll just get in the way. We should keep watching for a bit..."

"I agree."

In short, the debate went as follows: Albert Molmo, who had brought them the big wagon full of food, had been traveling the world in that selfsame wagon and researching the ecology of magic beasts. However, upon hearing news that a crisis had struck his hometown, he'd spent every last one of his coins buying food to bring back to the village.

The crisis, in this case, took the form of goblin thieves. They still hadn't gone so far as to injure anyone, but they had been robbing the village's food supplies time and time again. It was getting worse, to the point that the village was now facing a famine.

Thanks to Albert's provisions, they could hold on for a while longer, but it was only a matter of time until the goblins stole that food as well. They had sent a request to the Adventurers' Guild, but there was still no sign of any adventurers showing up. The reward they could offer was low, and the risk was not inconsiderable.

Goblins were weak and cowardly creatures, and on principle the villagers should be enough to drive them off. However, in this case that was not possible. The one giving orders to the goblins was something else—an ogre.

Ogres were big enough to reach the roof of a house, and strong enough to uproot great trees with their bare hands. With a monster like that at the head of the goblins, the villagers were afraid to do anything except hide in their houses and wait for the magic beasts to leave.

At the end of the day, the Adventurers' Guild was really just a middleman for adventurers. Sometimes the staff would ask an adventurer to take on a request, but even then, if the reward was low, there wasn't really anything the guild could do about that. The village had seen some hard times, and they lacked the funds to offer a large reward. And besides, there was only a scant handful of adventurers who were even willing to take on an ogre.

An adventurer who took the village's request would be risking their life. If the villagers imagined that someone would be willing to take that risk for such a

small reward, it would amount to placing their hopes in a fairy-tale hero like the First Saint coming along.

Right now, there was no one injured in the village, and no young girls at risk of being abducted. However, when their food ran out, the situation would change. The magic beasts would smash their houses until they got what they wanted.

The elder and his son sighed darkly and hung their heads, when Albert Molmo spoke up with a proposition. “I will travel to the goblins’ nest and speak with them!”

“What?!”

“D-Don’t be ridiculous!”

The two interposed themselves to stop Albert from up and leaving the house on the spot. The old man seemed quite worked up.

“We’re not letting you go somewhere as dangerous as a goblins’ nest!”

“You brought us food! You don’t need to do any more for us!”

“This village is where I was born!” Albert declared. “What’s wrong with an old man risking his dwindling life to protect his home?!”

“But even so, sir,” said the elder’s son, “you shouldn’t go alone! Do you think you can tame an ogre?!”

“I—” Albert withered and fell silent.

Suddenly, Kanata erupted onto the scene, one hand on her hip and the other thrust up in a dramatic pose.

“I have heard your pleas!” she announced.

Zag’giel and Fenrir did their best poses as well at her feet.

“O-Oh! Miss! Were you listening?” the elder bowed his head. “I’m terribly sorry you had to hear such a thing! I’ll go prepare dinner for—”

The elder’s son, however, seemed to realize something. His eyes lit up. “That’s right! You defeated those bandits on your own, didn’t you? If you’re so strong—”

“Don’t be ridiculous, boy!” the elder interrupted. “Mister Molmo owes that

girl his life! How could we be so brazen as to demand she save our village on top of that?!"

"But nobody's taking our request. She's our only hope..."

"No matter how strong she is, she's still a young girl! There's no way I'm sending her into a goblins' nest! All we can do is pray that the food Mister Molmo brought us holds out until some brave adventurer takes our request."

"I'll do it!" Kanata said.

"Whaaaaa—?!"

Kanata teleported immediately to the guild where Melissa and Bella were working bleary-eyed through the night, snatched up the villagers' request, and left. She was in and out too fast to hear Melissa asking her for an explanation. After she left, Melissa crumpled down on her desk and started to cry.

"I'll head out first thing tomorrow!" Kanata said.

"Really? This is really all right?"

"It's fine, don't worry about it! You reap what you sow, and I intend to sow seeds of fluff!"

There was almost no possibility that Kanata would find anything fluffy in the goblins' nest. However, she held Albert Molmo in high esteem. If he was in trouble, as a fellow Beast Tamer, she felt bound to help out.

"I can't believe it... You'll accept our worthless request?!"

"Y-You're a Saint!"

"No, I'm a Beast Tamer!"

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The following morning, Kanata made her preparations and set out. The whole village gathered to see her off. According to what she had heard, the goblins made their den in the forest to the north, so Kanata made her way there on her first order of business—finding the place.

"Come out, come out, I know you're in there!" Kanata sang, knocking on a big tree.

“I thought I had hidden myself pretty well, but it seems you can see right through me,” the old man Albert Molmo said, stepping out from behind the tree. He was carrying a bag, hefted over his shoulder, and holding a walking stick.

“H-Hmph!” Zag’giel said. “*We, too, knew he was there, of course.*”

“*You did?!*” Fenrir was shocked. “*I can’t believe that damned Demon King noticed and I didn’t! I have been caught unawares! Lady Kanata, forgive me!*”

“Eheh heh heh heh!” Kanata laughed, looking down at the pair. “Don’t worry about it! You two are perfect as you are.”

Her two magic beasts had been shaking—Zag’giel was worrying that someone might see through his bluff, and Fenrir was shaking in fear.

“*Lady Kanata! Thank you for your mercy!*” Fenrir cried in relief.

“*Of course, Kanata saw through us,*” said Zag’giel, regretting his deception. “*Our mastery is far beneath hers...*”

The two of them rubbed affectionately against Kanata.

“Kanata,” Albert Molmo said, “might I accompany you to the nest?” His long experience was telling him that something was funny about this whole business. “Goblins have made their home in these mountains since ancient times, but I have never heard of them attacking a human village. They’re the sort of magic beasts who keep to themselves. They don’t usually cause trouble in the wider world.”

Albert had spent many years researching magic beasts, and he was well aware that goblins were cowardly creatures who disliked fighting. It didn’t make sense for them to attack a human settlement for no reason. The news that they were led by an ogre was also peculiar. In all his years, he had never heard of goblins and ogres joining forces.

“There’s something strange going on here,” he said. “I would like to help look into the matter. Don’t worry. I can take care of myself.”

“*The danger will be great, elder,*” said Zag’giel.

“*Are you certain you’re able to accompany us at your age?*” Fenrir asked. “*You*

shouldn't overexert yourself! Wait in the village. We'll tell you what happened when we get back."

Zag'giel and Fenrir seemed to be of the same mind as the villagers. The mountain roads were dangerous, and their destination was a den of monsters. All sorts of things could go wrong. Surely Kanata would have to agree.

"I don't see why not!" she said. "Glad to have you!"

Zag'giel and Fenrir balked. "*What?!*"

"Are you certain?" Albert asked. He was no less surprised by Kanata's decision. In fact, he had expected to be refused. His plan had been to sneak after them out of sight. He hadn't been ready for Kanata to simply accept his offer.

"But I have terms," she said.

"A-And those are?" He expected her to demand some kind of payment. No matter. Whatever it was, he would pay.

"I would *love* it if you wrote a second bestiary!" she said. "I'll be the first to read it!"

"O-Oh! Of course! This incident will no doubt find its way into the book too..." Albert could just about cry for joy.

"Then let's go! To the goblin den!" Cheerfully, Kanata led the way deeper into the forest.

† † †

"*Elder*," Zag'giel asked Albert Molmo, "*is Baiko not with you?*"

"Baiko's getting up there in years," Albert said. "She's resting in the village. She ran a long way to get here, you know."

"*I see!*" said Fenrir. "*But you seem quite healthy for your age. You haven't been slowing us down at all!*"

"The Beast Tamer Profession lowers all of your abilities, you know!" the old man said. "I've had to train hard to make up the difference. Why, when I was young, I— Ouch!" Just as he was saying that, Albert doubled over, his back

suddenly hurting him.

“Elder, you may lean on our shoulder if you have need,” Zag’giel offered.

“No!” said Fenrir. *“You should ride on my back!”*

The pair had great respect for Albert and would both gladly carry him, but in their current powerless bodies there was no way for them to support the weight of a grown man. They’d be flattened like pancakes if he tried to ride on them.

Kanata cheered them on and cast a powerful enchantment, raising their physical abilities far above their limits. *“Zaggy! Fen-fen! You can do it!”*

The two furballs were burning with an aura of power.

“Haaaaah!” Zag’giel shouted. *“The power! We feel the power!”*

“With this much power, we can do it!” said Fenrir.

With their newfound strength, the two of them tried to lift Albert on their backs. Legs shaking, they took to their feet and took a few faltering steps. But it wasn’t enough. Their smaller forms were too weak. In no time at all, their strength had been exhausted.

“N-Nh...”

“How vexing...”

“This is just a thought,” said Albert, “but perhaps you should cast that spell on me, instead?”

“Oh,” the other three said. The thought hadn’t occurred to them.

“Hm, okay,” said Kanata. “Power...up!” She cast her spell on Albert, lending him strength.

“A-Aaaah! This... This *pooooower!*” It was like his old, worn-out body was being given new life. His withered twigs of legs became mighty branches, while his pectoral muscles bulged out and hardened like stones. He looked like some kind of hypermuscular monster.

“Perhaps that is...too much power?” Zag’giel wondered.

“He looks like he could kill a bear,” Fenrir marveled. *“With this much strength,*

he could handle the ogre on his own, I expect.”

“Indeed...”

“A-Amazing!” Albert said. “My arthritis doesn’t hurt at all!”

“I’m so glad!” Kanata said, applauding.

“I look just like I did in my younger days...”

“Wh-What?! Elder! Do you mean to say that in your youth you were a muscle fiend?!”

“How much training did you do?!”

Alas, however splendid his muscles were, as a Beast Tamer, he could not use their full power. Such was the life he had chosen.

“I feel like I could run forever!” Albert said. “Let’s go, everyone! Follow me!”

“Yeah!”

Albert set a fast pace as the four continued on in search of the goblin den.

† † †

“That was much easier to find than I expected.”

“It was. Although we would not have found this place had not Kanata seen the goblin footprints.”

Hiding in the trees and making sure to stay quiet, Zag’giel and Fenrir scouted out the cave entrance before them—a wide entrance in a steep cliff. A gate made of goblin bones barred the way. There was no doubt about it: this was a goblin den.

“If only your nose were any good,” Zag’giel said scornfully, “it would have spared our master the effort. And after you made such a great show of being eager to help. A dog whose nose won’t work is less than useless.”

“Wh-Who are you calling a dog?! I am a Spirit Wolf! And if I had my original form, finding a goblin den would be no trouble at all! It’s just that I’ve lost too much power...”

“Then return to your original form! What is stopping you?”

“I have my reasons,” Fenrir said, suddenly taciturn. “Why should I tell the likes of you?”

“Hah. We see. You’ve been calling yourself the ‘Spirit Wolf Fenrir’ for some time, but what proof do you have? You’re nothing more than a joke.”

“S-Silence! You’re no more useful than I am!”

“We are not the same! We cursed ourself with this body for the lofty goal of —”

“Be quiet, you two!” Albert Molmo interrupted. “You’re going to get us caught! We don’t know how many goblins are in there. We should be careful.”

“Hmph,” Zag’giel said. “Even so, we will need to come out of hiding eventually. Kanata, what say you?”

“Lady Kanata, please!” Fenrir begged. “Give me a chance to redeem myself! I will act as the decoy, and lead the goblins on watch away!”

All three turned to Kanata for instructions, only to find her missing.

“Th-There she is!” Albert pointed toward the goblin cave. It looked like Kanata, in her characteristic approach, had walked straight up to the entrance.

“Hello!” she said, greeting the goblins.

The other three practically fell over in shock.

“K-Kanata!” shouted Zag’giel.

“Sh-Shouldn’t we investigate first?!” asked Fenrir.

“She’s greeting them without a care in the world!” Albert Molmo was stunned.

The goblins seemed no less surprised. They brandished their spears, menacing Kanata. But when they got a good look at her, their faces went pale.

“G-Gob gob!” said one.

“Gob gob gob!” said the other.

They threw down their spears and fell to their knees, begging for their lives.

“Could those goblins be—?” Fenrir was the first to notice. He had seen those

two goblins before. Back then, they had been carrying him between a pair of poles, getting ready to eat him for dinner. *“This is their den?!”* Thinking back, the goblins had at the time said something about an ogre.

“*S-Spare us!*” one of the goblins was saying.

“*Aren’t you the ones who gave us that delicious food?!*” said the other. They were too weak to use telepathy, though, and were unable to convey their meaning to Kanata. She cocked her head and regarded the goblins curiously.

“Kanata,” said Albert, “a Beast Tamer can communicate with the hearts of magic beasts. Watch.”

“O-Oh! You can do that? Incredible!” Kanata said.

Albert Molmo listened deeply to the goblins.

“I see, I see...” he said. “What was that? This is your cave and you’ll stab us with your sticks if we don’t leave?”

The goblins frantically shook their heads, doing their absolute best to communicate that that was *not* what they had said.

“Gob!”

“Gob gob!”

“What was that?” said Albert. “You’ll gobble me up? How dreadful!”

“Gob! Gob!”

“Gooooob!”

He was just making things up! The goblins, terrified that a misunderstanding would lead to their deaths, wept tears of frustration.

“Kidding!” Albert said, sticking out his tongue. The goblins, realizing that they were being made fools of, stamped their feet in anger. “You attacked my village, after all. Consider it a bit of payback.”

“Gob...” The old man’s words seemed to remind the goblins of something. They hung their heads and exchanged nervous glances.

“If you’re sorry, why don’t you tell me what’s happening here?”

It seemed he had gotten through to the goblins. They opened the way, leading Kanata's party deeper into the cave. It was dark inside, but the walls were lined with some kind of bioluminescent moss. The group could see well enough to not plummet to their doom. They never saw any goblins other than the ones they were following.

"This cave goes rather far back, doesn't it?" Kanata observed.

"Perhaps this was a natural cave that the goblins excavated farther..." Zag'giel mused.

"*What in the world would they need such a big den for?*" Fenrir asked. "Well?" he asked their guides.

"This used to just be a gathering place for a few goblin families," one goblin said, finally explaining their situation.

"Yeah," said the other. *"It was a lot smaller back in those days."*

Goblins were particularly weak among magic beasts. Even common animals hunted them as prey. But one day these goblins, used to living out their lives in fear, had happened upon a wounded ogre, who had been grievously injured in some faraway battle. The goblins discussed among themselves what they should do with this stranger, and eventually they decided to help him.

The ogre was a good-natured fellow, and offered to become the goblins' protector in thanks for saving his life. For the first time, the goblins were able to live in peace, without need to fear bears or wolves or other magic beasts. Rumors spread among goblinkind, and before long, this small cave was expanded to a grand underground neighborhood.

"And then one day, he started acting weird..." the goblin said.

"The population's increased, but the forest still gives us more than enough food. Even so, Lord Ogre ordered us to go find as much food as we can!" The food wasn't eaten, but just piled up in the storeroom.

The once-reliable guardian who protected them from beasts and humans had become a high and mighty tyrant seemingly overnight, even going so far as to order them to attack the neighboring village. So far, the humans had been too afraid of the ogre to fight back, and they'd been able to pillage without

resistance. But the goblins were terrified that before long the humans would launch a counteroffensive.

“I wonder what could have happened...” Kanata mused.

“*Us too. It would be one thing if he’d just gotten gradually more ambitious, but he just changed overnight...*” the goblin said.

“*Do you remember anything strange?*” Fenrir asked.

“*Well, now that you mention it...*”

“*The day Lord Ogre lost his marbles, there was some weirdo who came to the den.*”

They’d thought it was an adventurer come to attack them, but the hooded human simply muttered some incantation, as if casting a spell on the ogre, and left. The ogre was physically unaffected, and the goblins had reassured themselves that whatever that strange visit had been about, it at least hadn’t done any harm.

“*What kind of person were they?*” Fenrir asked.

The goblins looked troubled at the question. “*Hmm... Humans all look the same to me, but I’m pretty sure it was a female.*”

“*Pretty sure,*” the other goblin agreed. “*She had a huge chest and everything.*”

“*And I saw that her clothing was white underneath her cloak...*”

“*A woman wearing white clothing...*” Fenrir seemed lost in thought.

“*Thinking back, that was about when Lord Ogre started to talk about building an underground empire and all that nonsense.*”

“An empire!” Albert marveled. “He thinks big, this Lord Ogre, that’s for sure!”

“*He never used to be this way!*” one of the goblins protested.

“*He really didn’t. I’m sure that human female did something to him.*” The goblins nodded in agreement.

Deep in the cave, the silence was broken by the sounds of voices and activity. They came to a point where the tunnel split into a number of passages, and at last caught sight of other goblins. Some of them fled in fear or ran up to attack

when they saw Kanata's party, but the goblins who had been showing the party the way spoke to the other goblins and convinced them to back down. They shuffled away into the tunnels.

As they walked, they saw the pathway widening under their feet. It grew into a grand plaza with a high ceiling. They could see that it was still being excavated. The goblins were working with shovels and pickaxes to expand it farther. They looked anxious. It did not look like they were here by choice.

"Is that the ogre?" Kanata asked, but nobody felt the need to answer the question. That giant figure could be no one else. He had a sturdy body like an old gnarled tree. He made Albert Molmo, who was no slouch pumped up on Kanata's magic, look downright scrawny. He was sitting on a throne hewn from stone, but if he were standing, he would be taller than three grown adults stacked up on one another's shoulders.

His leering eyes settled upon the humans. "*Who are you?*"

"I'm Kanata!"

"*We are Zaggy.*"

"*Fen-fen!*"

"You can call me old man Molmo."

They could see a vein popping out on the ogre's forehead.

"*Humans. Servants of humans. Why you come here? You bring tribute? If you bring tribute, me kill you last.*"

"Oh, no," Kanata said, smiling brightly. "Quite the opposite. Would you please give the villagers back their food?"

The goblins chimed in to agree. "*Please, Lord Ogre, can't we stop doing this?*"

"*We don't wanna be an empire!*"

"*We just wanna go back to our quiet lives...*"

"*Bring back the old, nice Lord Ogre!*"

The ogre clenched the throne's armrest in rage, still more veins popping out on his forehead. His grip was strong—strong enough that the stone armrest

cracked under the pressure.

“You owe me for protect you!” he declared. *“You betray me?!”* He took to his feet. There was a black miasma hanging around him. *“You get in way of my empire! Idiots! Me crush you!”*

“Kanata!” Zag’giel said. “Stand back!”

“We’ll take care of this!” said Fenrir.

“Don’t leave me out of it!” Albert Molmo added.

The three stepped forward to protect their lady Kanata. Sneering in mockery, the ogre hefted his own throne above his head and brandished it at them.

“Wh-What terrible power!” Albert was stunned.

“Me cruuuuush yoooooou!” the Ogre bellowed, and he hurled the throne straight at Kanata’s party.

A horrible crashing sound echoed through the cave. A plume of dust welled up where the throne had struck. And when it cleared, standing there, unhurt, was Kanata.

“What?!” the Ogre said. “But me threw as hard as me can!”

“An attack of that power is nothing!” boasted Zag’giel.

“Your strength is lukewarm!” Fenrir declared.

The two of them seemed quite proud of themselves, despite not having done anything.

“Grrr!” The ogre ground his teeth in frustration.

“What’s this?” Kanata muttered to herself, getting a closer look at the ogre. “I recognize this magic from somewhere...”

Kanata *had* seen it before, in the sewers beneath the Royal Capital. The curse binding the horrific amalgam of ghosts—the heart of the pollution—had somehow felt very similar.

“Anyway,” she said, “let’s try dispelling it!”

“Graaaaaah!” The ogre, seized by a deep instinctual terror at Kanata’s smile,

began hurling anything he could grab at her, but the rocks and other objects glanced harmlessly off of her magic barrier.

“What aaaaare yoooooou?!”

She was right in front of him. The ogre swung his fist with all his might.

“I’m a Beast Tamer who loves fluff, and who will even help out the non-fluffy in a pinch!”

She released her barrier, meeting the ogre’s fist with a closed fist of her own.

“Hiya!”

The difference in sheer mass between the two should have been insurmountable, but somehow, in blatant disregard of the laws of physics, Kanata’s fist proved stronger. The ogre’s massive strike glanced off harmlessly.

“Hwuh?!” The ogre reeled back, but Kanata dashed in with extraordinary speed.

“Exorcism...punch!” she shouted, striking him with a jumping uppercut and dispelling the curse in a single blow.



“*Gwaah!*!” The ogre was knocked into the air by Kanata’s strike, and he hit the cave ceiling with a dull thud before yielding to the demands of gravity and falling back down to the ground.

“Are you all better?” Kanata asked. “Here, I’ll heal you up.” The ogre had a tough body, and with a bit of Kanata’s magic, he was back on his feet in no time.

“*Wh-What was I—?*” The ogre glanced around, confused.

“*Look!*” the goblins cried, gathering around. “*Lord Ogre’s back to normal!*”

“*What’s going on, everyone?*” the ogre asked. “*When did the den get so big? Did you do this for me? I told you I can sleep just fine in a goblin-sized room.*” It seemed that he had no memory of what had happened up to this point.

When asked, the ogre said he couldn’t remember what the hooded woman had done to him. He had no clearer idea than the rest of them who she could have been. In the end, they weren’t able to learn anything definite.

“*We’re so sorry!*” The goblins fell to their knees and groveled as they apologized.

“*How can I ever make it up to you...?*” the ogre said. “*I’ll accept full responsibility. Just please, don’t hurt the goblins!*”

“I’m an outsider here,” Kanata said. “Mister Molmo, sir, what do you think?”

“Y-You don’t have to call me sir!” Embarrassed, Albert Molmo cleared his throat. “Well, it does look like they’re genuinely sorry,” he said. “How about you bring back the food you stole and help repair the damage you did to the village?”

“*Th-That’s all?!*”

“Yes, yes,” Albert said. “I’ll have to register you as my own magic beasts, but as long as you behave yourselves, I see no reason why you should be punished.”

“*Thank you! Thank you!*” The goblins switched courses from miserable groveling to grateful adulation.

“Kanata’s the one you should be thanking!” Albert said. “Without her, we

might all have been in a spot of trouble! You might have been manipulated into destroying the village. Then your numbers would have increased, and before long the army would have come after you!"

"*Thank you, Lady Kanata!*"

"Oh, it's perfectly all right!" she said. "But there *is* something I would like to ask." She drew close to the ogre to whisper furtively in his ear.

"*What is it?*" the ogre asked. "*If it's in my power, I'll do any—*"

"Do you know any cute fluff-fluffs?" Kanata asked. "Will you introduce me?"

† † †

"I can't believe *none* of them were fluffy..." lamented Kanata.

"*Kanata,*" Zag'giel said. "*Be not disheartened.*"

"*You have us, Lady Kanata!*" said Fenrir. The two pawed tenderly at her, doing their best to cheer up their despondent master.

They brought the ogre along to apologize to the villagers, but the sight of him sent the villagers—who didn't know what was going on—into a moment of panic. Fortunately, Albert was able to explain before things got too out of hand.

The ogre apologized, and Albert agreed to watch over them to make sure the magic beasts took responsibility. In the end, the goblins were able to earn forgiveness. And that was the end of that.

"Thank you, Kanata!" Albert said. "This wouldn't have been possible without you."

"Not at all!" said Kanata. "If you hadn't come along, Mister Molmo, sir, we wouldn't have been able to resolve things so well."

"Oho ho," the old man laughed. "I'm just glad I got to do one last good deed before I retire."

"You're retiring?"

"I'm getting up there in years, you know. This was my plan. I sold off my belongings here years ago, but I always meant to settle down in this village." As he spoke, he watched the ogre and goblins, who were hard at work repairing

the destroyed buildings in the village. “Now, Kanata, there is something I would like to pass on to you. Or rather, someone.”

“To me?”

“Baiko!” Albert called. “Here, Baiko!” At his words, the bicorn came trotting up, pulling the wagon along. “I’d like you to have Baiko, and my old wagon. It may be a little old, but it’s made of high-quality wood. It’s a good little wagon. If you’re on the road, you may find yourself wanting a wagon, you know!”

“How wonderful!” Kanata cheered. “I’ve always wanted to travel in a wagon!”

One of her favorite video games in her previous life had been like this—traveling the land in a wagon, together with strange creatures. To Kanata, it was a very romantic image.

“Oh, may I, Mister Molmo, sir?” she asked.

“Of course! You can have it!”

At Albert’s urging, Kanata jumped up into the driver’s seat. “Oh, wow!” she said, taking the reins in her hands. It felt very different from when she had been riding as a passenger.

“What do you think?” Albert asked.

“I love it!” Kanata said, a big grin on her face. But then she put the reins down. “But...I can’t.”

“Why not?! Is something wrong?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “But Baiko...”

Baiko whinnied sadly, gazing at Albert with forlorn eyes. It was clear that she didn’t want to leave.

“Oh, Baiko...” Albert said, wrapping his arms gently around the bicorn’s neck. “You want to stay with me?”

“I would be too sad to take her from you,” Kanata said. “So I can’t accept—”

“Lady Kanata!” Fenrir interrupted. “Leave it to me! I can pull this wagon with or without Baiko’s help!”

“Fen-fen?! You can?!?”

“He can’t,” said Zag’giel.

Zag’giel was right, of course. No matter how hard Fenrir pulled, his body was just too much smaller than the bicorn’s. He could hardly even fit in the harness, let alone *pull* the thing. The wagon refused to budge.

“Lady Kanataaaaa!” Fenrir cried. “*Forgive me!*”

“Now, now. Everything’s okay.” Kanata stroked the Spirit Wolf’s fur, seeming quite content.

“I would still like you to have my old wagon,” Albert said. “But without a magic beast to pull it...”

“Oh!” said Kanata. “Then, how about this?”

“Hm?” Albert asked.

Kanata opened her Inventory Screen and sent the wagon to storage. It took about a second.

“Well, goodness gracious me!” Albert looked stupefied. “Kanata, you are just full of surprises, aren’t you! But I suppose with this, I can retire with no regrets.”

“You can’t!” said Kanata, knitting up her eyebrows. “You promised me a second book!”

“Ho ho!” Albert laughed. “So I did, didn’t I! I’ll write it, don’t you worry. And come visit some time!”

“I will!”

The villagers and goblins both saw Kanata off in high spirits as she left the village to carry on her quest.

Chapter 3: Waste of Time? No! Every Little Bit Counts!

“Useless so-called Spirit Wolf. What good are you at all? Your nose won’t work, you can’t pull a wagon... All you’re good for is being a ball of fur for Kanata to play with.”

“K-Kh...”

Of course, to Kanata, the quality of Fenrir’s fluffy fur was more than enough to make him a first-class companion, but the Spirit Wolf still found himself vexed by his inability to help.

“If only I had my original body,” he said. “Pulling that wagon would be nothing!”

“Huh?” Kanata asked. “You had an original body, Fen-fen?”

“Of course!” Fenrir boasted. “My original body is dozens of times bigger and more powerful than this feeble thing!”

“D-Dozens of times the fluff?” Kanata imagined herself falling asleep, sinking into an enormous ball of white fur. She began to drool. “H-How do we get you that big again?!” she asked. “Food? Lots and lots of food?” She reached her grasping hands out toward Fenrir.

“N-No,” Fenrir said. “You’re giving me plenty of food...”

He was starting to wish he hadn’t brought it up. There was nothing stopping them from retrieving his body if they went to the High Cathedral of the Holy Church, but that would mean confronting the reviled false Saint Marianne.

Fenrir did not wish to endanger Kanata due to his own circumstances, but it looked like he wouldn’t be of any use to her unless he retrieved his original body. Torn between those contradictory desires, he racked his brain in anguish. If his kind master learned of the horrible things that had befallen him in the Holy City, she would no doubt go charging in to smash up the Church in a fit of

righteous fury. But as strong as Kanata was, there was no guarantee that she would come out victorious against a Church with millions of followers across the world. There was a limit to how strong a single girl could be.

He had to keep his master safe. That was more important than retrieving his old power.

“Ah, if only what I said was true!” Fenrir said. *“I’m terribly sorry, but I made it up!”*

“R-Really...?” Kanata asked.

“Y-Yes! I’m so sorry to have gotten your hopes up!” Fenrir put on a big fake smile.

Kanata peered at him dubiously as Zag’giel kept his silence.

“So!” Fenrir said. “Where to next?”

They hadn’t gone far from the Holy City. Fenrir hoped he could lead them in some other direction, away from that place. But Kanata had already made her decision.

“To the west!” Kanata said.

“According to the map the village elder showed us yesterday, if we follow the road, we should arrive in the Holy City,” said Zag’giel.

“Wh-What?” Alas! She was headed straight back to the enemy stronghold!

† † †

Meanwhile, in the High Cathedral in the Holy City Lordentia...

“There goes *another* spell!” Saint Marianne tsked. The gem that had served as the nucleus of her curse shattered. Her magic had been undone.

This was the second. The first had been the one she had cast on the spirit lurking deep within the sewers of the Royal Capital. And now, the spell she had cast on the ogre who lived with that group of goblins had been broken as well. The spell—a curse, really—enveloped its victim in an evil miasma, granting them tremendous strength, but amplifying the evil in their heart. She herself should have been the only one with the power to lift it.

Marianne had been using this spell to gather faith from humans all over the world. It was a tactic that had won the young Saint no small amount of favor with the Goddess.

But now it seemed someone was getting in the way.

In both cases, things had proceeded as normal at first. The curse was developing nicely, well on its way to the point when its victim would go on a rampage, causing chaos in the surrounding lands. When that happened, Marianne would lift the curse and send the Temple Knights to exterminate the magic beast, now confused and powerless, as the cause of all the trouble. The people's faith in the Holy Church would grow deeper for their role in bringing the disaster to an end.

It was a despicable, cowardly tactic, but as long as nobody noticed what she was doing, nobody would find fault with her for it.

But how could her spells be broken, not once, but *twice*, in a matter of days?! Perhaps some terrifically strong adventurer could have stumbled upon one of the magic beasts and defeated them before Marianne had a chance, but that wouldn't explain how the *spell* was broken. The spirit in the sewer was not only released from the curse, but *purified*, and the ogre in the goblin den didn't even seem to be *dead*. It seemed that just the magic was broken, leaving him unharmed.

Marianne herself—the caster of the curse—was *sure* that she was the only one who knew about this spell of hers. But in that case, what could possibly be happening?

“The spell on the ogre was still new,” she mused. “It hadn’t had time to develop too much strength. But the spirit in the sewer was close to being complete.”

If it had been left alone for just a few more months, the poisonous sewer water would have spilled over, endangering everyone in the Royal Capital, and then the Temple Knights would have swooped in to save the day. It would have taken *hundreds* of priests to purify. On the other hand, it wasn’t out of the question for the local Church to have realized what was happening. Perhaps they dealt with it informally through the Adventurers’ Guild.

"So, an adventurer did it? But *surely* I would have heard of an adventurer who could use purification magic like that. As far as I know, there wasn't anyone in the Royal Capital with those abilities..." Even the Saint herself would be hard pressed to perform such an outlandish feat of purification on her own. She had heard that the people of Undertown—the ones most affected by the poisonous sewer—had said that they were saved thanks to the intervention of a single young girl. But that was nothing more than a rumor. "Who could possibly be responsible?"

Assuming that it was the same person who dispelled both curses, it seemed likely that whoever she was, she knew about Marianne's plans. Marianne wanted desperately to know more about what had transpired in the sewers of the Royal Capital, but the Adventurers' Guild was very strict about their independence. They might respond to pressure from the Church by simply refusing to give them any information...

"I must tell the Goddess..." Marianne scowled. She didn't want to do this. The Goddess might take umbrage at being bothered with this. It might be considered a sin.

Marianne left her room to pray before the statue of the Goddess hidden in the deepest part of the High Cathedral. As Saint, Marianne could commune with the gods to receive divine messages and guide the world on its proper course. Or so it was said. In truth, the Saint was nothing more than the gods' puppet. There were many ways to gather faith, and it was just as common for the gods to sow the seeds of calamity throughout the world. The gods grant the Profession of Saint to those who have the greatest faith of all—the ones who believe, from the bottom of their hearts, that anything the gods do is inherently correct, and that the gods are worthy to receive all glory and the entire world.

As Marianne's prayers reached the heavens, the statue began to glow with divine light.

"Marianne Ishfalke," the Goddess said, *"my Saint."*

"Goddess..." Marianne bowed deeply before the divine.

"My lost little lamb. I can feel the disquiet of your heart. Has something happened?"

“I’m afraid it has,” Marianne said. She explained the situation—that two of the curses she had cast as part of her faith-gathering scheme had been dispelled, and that she suspected a single person was behind this. That person might be headed to the Holy City Lordentia as they spoke, she said.

“No...” the Goddess said. “*Can it be...?*”

“Goddess?” Marianne lifted her head. It almost seemed like the Goddess was *afraid*.

“*It is nothing,*” the Goddess said. “*Do not concern yourself with it.*”

Marianne cleared her throat, and, with an air of great confidence, continued. “I will look into the matter at once, of course. And she shall be eliminated! I will be your sword against any apostate who would dare defy us!” She looked up at the statue—her Goddess—eyes shining with fervent faith.

But the Goddess’s next words sounded strained.

“N-No,” she said. “*Do not.*”

“What?”

“*The loss of one or two pawns is hardly a matter of concern. Let it be. Yes. I believe that would be best.*”

“But—”

“*This is not something you can handle! Touch a hot coal and you will be burnt! Idiot!*”

“Aaah! I’m so, so sorry!”

The Goddess was angry. Marianne curled up like a turtle, begging forgiveness.

The Goddess sighed. “*This is the girl,*” she said.

An image appeared, made of pure light. It showed a young girl, tightly embracing two balls of fluff—one white and one black.

“That child dispelled my curses?!” Marianne exclaimed, disbelieving. Then she realized she had for a second doubted the words of the Goddess. Shamefully, she tried to change the subject. “Are those...magic beasts she has with her? They look pretty weak. Don’t tell me... Is she a Beast Tamer?” She was staring

wide-eyed. This only seemed less and less believable.

“Do not be fooled by her appearance,” the Goddess said. “But there is no need to interfere. If we leave her to her own devices, she will move on to other lands in time. She will pass over us like a storm.”

“But you know who she is!” Marianne objected. “Are we really that helpless? There must be *some* way we can be rid of her...”

“*You doubt the words of the gods?*”

“N-No! I’m so sorry!”

“You must not involve yourself with this girl. She, alone, once defeated the armies of the Demon King. You do not have the power to contend with her.”

“The armies of the Demon King?! They came to this continent?!”

It had only been two days since a demonic army had appeared outside the Royal Capital. The information had yet to reach Marianne in the Holy City. Even a Hero—the very symbol of the strength of humankind—would struggle to defeat such an army alone. And yet, this girl had done it. It boggled the mind.

“So they did. The Demon King has regained his power and is now dwelling on this continent. Soon, there will come one worthy of the Profession Hero. But now is not the time to fight. Even if you gathered a fighting force of champions with Professions of the like of Sage or Divine Sword, there would be nothing they could do against her. Damn that heavy-soul girl. It’s like she distorts the very fabric of reality. Why was someone like that born into this world...?”

“Goddess?”

The Goddess had been muttering in dark irritation. It made Marianne worry. She had never seen her beautiful, aloof Goddess so shaken as to lose her composure.

“It is not your concern,” the Goddess snapped. “Continue as you are. Gather faith and offer souls to me. That is your role as Saint.”

“I understand,” Marianne said. She had been scolded twice now. Any more back talk would risk incurring the Goddess’s wrath. “Your will be done.” Marianne bowed to the wordless pressure and quietly obeyed.

“I leave the rest to you,” the Goddess said, and her presence departed from the statue.

Marianne stayed kneeling for a while, her hands clasped together, offering prayers of thanksgiving. Then, suddenly, she lifted her head. “Who’s there?”

“Your Holiness!” It was a knight on guard duty in the High Cathedral. He stepped forward.

“The will of the Goddess is absolute,” Marianne said. As a Saint, she was nothing more than a terrestrial representative of the Goddess. It would not be permitted for her to go against divine decree. “But we have a responsibility to monitor the Holy City for unrest.”

This wasn’t a violation of the Goddess’s will. After all, how could she avoid getting involved with the girl if she didn’t find out where exactly she was, in order to avoid her?

“If a black-haired girl accompanied by two small magic beasts comes into town, inform me at once.”

“Yes, Your Holiness!”

Nobody knew yet what would come of that order, for good or for ill.

† † †

Kanata’s journey was proceeding apace.

“Nhhh!”

“Grrrrr!”

Zag’giel and Fenrir each held a length of rope in their mouths, pulling as hard as they could. Kanata, meanwhile, was cheering. “Go! Go! Yay! Yay!”

Attached to the ropes was a wagon, its wheels stuck in the marsh. Behind it, in a line, were other merchant wagons, stuck in a jam. All of the merchants had gotten out to try to pull the wagon free, but the marsh was deeper than they had thought, and it wasn’t going well.

Kanata had been passing this scene when her companions expressed a desire to help.

“As weak as I am, I would like to lend my assistance,” said Fenrir.

“We will show these pitiful humans the strength of the King of Demons!”
Zag’giel added.

And so the two joined in with the team of merchants trying to pull out the wagon. But with their tiny, weak bodies, they weren’t doing much good.

Actually, there was *some* good that they were doing—they gave Kanata the joy of watching them try.

“Wow!” she sighed, taking a snapshot of the image to store in her brain’s photo album. “That was great...” She took the rope in one hand, and with no great effort at all, pulled the wagon out of the marsh.

Actually, she may have pulled it a little *too* hard. The wagon hopped a bit into the air, and the merchants fell over on their backsides. As for Zag’giel and Fenrir, they went rolling away.

“Oops oops oops!” Kanata said, running after them. “Zaggy! Fen-fen!”

Later, when Kanata had retrieved the pair, a representative of the merchants—a man wearing a turban—came to offer their thanks. “We really owe ya one,” he said.

“Oh, I didn’t do anything,” Kanata demurred. “Zaggy and Fen-fen did all the work!”

“Oh, did they now? I suppose I should thank *you*, then! Ha ha ha!”

The man offered them a ride with the caravan as thanks for their help. Kanata and her friends were thrilled to accept and climbed aboard with the luggage, bound for the Holy City.

A while later, the three were devouring the lunch boxes they had brought with them when they left the village. “This is good!” Kanata exclaimed.

“Indeed,” said Zag’giel. “*This is perhaps the second-best fare we have tasted, after Kanata’s cooking!*”

“K-Kanata’s cooking?!” Fenrir was incredulous. “*Furball! Why haven’t you told me about this?!*”

"Hmph. What of it? Yes, we have tasted Kanata's cooking, and you have not!"

"G-Gh...!"

"Bwa ha ha!" laughed Zag'giel. *"Does it hurt, Fen-fen? Curse it all you like, but we will forevermore have tasted Kanata's cooking before you!"*

"D-Demon King! You fiend! You won't get away with this!"

It looked like Zag'giel and Fenrir were getting into a fight. Their relationship was a powder keg, but stuck in their ridiculous furball bodies, all they managed to be was adorable.

"Stop fighting!" Kanata pouted. *"Well...you don't have to stop if you don't want to, I guess. It's cute the way you two bop each other!"* Because their legs were so short, all they could really do was flail at each other with their front paws. Kanata loved it.

They passed the time this way until Zag'giel and Fenrir dozed off. Suddenly they heard the merchants' representative calling out to them. *"You three! We're almost there!"* Zag'giel and Fenrir snapped awake. Kanata was a bit disappointed they had stopped napping, but she clambered to the front of the wagon to see.

"Oh, wow!" Kanata couldn't help gasping. It was like an entire mountain had been carved away to make room for the immense cathedral towering above, surrounded by waterfalls. The tall buildings of the city were pure white and absolutely stunning. The outward face of the Holy City was one of solemn grandeur.

"Well!" marveled Zag'giel. *"Humans have some ability after all. Although this is far too beautiful a place to worship that wretched Goddess."*

Fenrir, however, seemed completely dispirited. *"And now we're back here..."* he said.

"What's wrong, Fen-fen?"

"A-Ah! N-Nothing! Nothing's wrong!"

"Really? You can tell me if you're not feeling well."

"I am feeling one hundred percent absolutely well!" Fenrir objected. *"I am the*

very picture of health!" He focused his power, making his fur poof out.

"Aha ha!" Kanata laughed. "He's a little puff ball! Cute!"

"H-Hmph!" said Zag'giel. "*We can do that as well!*"

He tried. "*Curses! Our fur is too short!*"

"Oh my gosh, Zaggy's trying his best! Sooo cute!"

"*N-No! Not him! Pay attention to me, Lady Kanata!*"

Those two could be very jealous balls of fluff when their opposite furball was complimented.

† † †

The wagon drew closer and closer to the city, at last passing through its enormous gates carved with beautiful patterns. The entrance was a brilliant-white building, like a painting of a heavenly city.

"Welcome to the Holy City Lordentia," the merchant said. The clear sound of bells could be heard echoing from afar. "This is as far as we go. Thanks for the help, missy! And the little ones too."

"No, thank you!" said Kanata.

"*We commend you,*" said Zag'giel.

"*Can this Demon King not just say 'thank you'...?*" Fenrir wondered.

They parted ways with the merchants, who had come to this city to trade, and set out to look around the city. The streets of the Holy City were as beautiful as the rest of it. They didn't even see a single piece of litter. This was the headquarters of the Church, and many of the people walking around looked like some kind of clergy or other. The remainder seemed largely made up of people who had come to pray at the High Cathedral.

But looking closely, the robes worn by the clergy were of top-quality cloth, and here and there they caught glimpses of precious metals adorning their arms underneath the sleeves of their habits. It seemed that the alms given to the Church were not necessarily being put to the best use.

"*When we first saw this city, we thought it was beautiful,*" said Zag'giel, "but

seeing it up close, the falseness of it all is making us ill.”

“I agree,” said Fenrir. “*Their faith is nothing but a charade. It is wholly without value.*”

“I wonder if there’s any fluff around...” Kanata said.

“*Be that as it may,*” Zag’giel went on, “*this is the stronghold of the Holy Church. There must be something we can find here that will lead us to the Goddess.*”

“Wh-What was that?” Fenrir exclaimed. “*Lady Kanata, do you mean to fight that Goddess?*”

“No, no!” Kanata said. “I came here because I thought I could smell fluff.”

“Fluff?” Fenrir was confused. “*I, um, I hate to ask, Lady Kanata, but what is this ‘fluff’ you speak of?*”

“What is fluff? Gosh, that’s a bit hard to explain. Fluff is healing. Fluff is warmth. It’s the epitome of softness. It’s happiness itself...” Kanata was starting to get lost in her own world.

“Hah,” Zag’giel laughed, full of his own superiority. “*Don’t tell us you didn’t know.*”

“*And you mean to say that you do know, King of Demons?!*”

“Of course,” Zag’giel said. “*Very well. We shall teach you, ignorant one, of the fluff!*”

“*What is the fluff?*” Fenrir asked.

“*Fluff is a symbol of strength!*”

“A-A symbol of strength?!” Fenrir’s eyes shot open in surprise at Zag’giel’s declaration.

“*The ‘fluff score’ is a measurement of strength. Therefore, ‘fluff’ must symbolize a being of transcendental power!*”

“Incredible,” Fenrir said. “So that’s what fluff is...”

“*Kanata has oft associated us with the fluff,*” Zag’giel said. “*And what would we be associated with if not ultimate power?*”

“Ultimate power!” Kanata said. “Of course! Zaggy, that’s perfect! Yes! Fluff is ultimate power! That’s deep, Zaggy. Really, really deep...”

Deep as a puddle, maybe.

“I see...” Fenrir said. “*Then ‘fluff’ is a word that means ultimate power. In that case! Lady Kanata! I, too, will make the fluff my goal! I’ll be a better servant to you than a Demon King ever could!*”

“What?!” Kanata exclaimed. “Fen-fen too?! You’re gonna get *even fluffier*?!”

“I will! Just wait and see!”

Kanata staggered back, dizzy with joy. “Father... Mother...” she said, clasping her hands to her chest and gazing off in the direction of her parents’ home. “Your daughter is truly happy. I’m so glad I became a Beast Tamer...”

“*But if you came here following the smell of fluff, could it be—?*” Fenrir hit on an idea. What if what Kanata was smelling was his original body, left behind in the High Cathedral?

“At first I thought maybe it was Fen-fen,” Kanata said. “But I still smell the fluff.” She sniffed at the air. Her sense of smell was preposterously good when it came to fluff. “It’s especially strong around that big cathedral...”

Fenrir balked. “*Oh?! O-Oh really?! But I don’t sense anything?!*” He was determined to play ignorant.

Zag’giel sighed in exasperation. “*Kanata is a human, and yet her nose is sharper than you, a dog. What a useless ball of fur.*”

“You’re every bit as useless!”

“Both of you are *super* useful!” Kanata said, making her way toward the High Cathedral, as the furball in her arms and the furball on her head started yet another fight.

The High Cathedral was built into a tall, craggy mountain. They had to cross a long suspension bridge to get to the entryway. Below the bridge was a deep waterfall basin. There was no saving you if you fell off, but vast crowds of worshippers came on pilgrimages every day nonetheless. Kanata lined up and waited for her turn to cross.

“What should I do, what should I do?” Fenrir was muttering. “I mustn’t interfere with Lady Kanata’s plans, but inside there is that false Saint!”

“What are you muttering about?” asked Zag’giel.

“N-Nothing! Pay it no mind!”

“You are a strange one...”

“Fen-fen’s strangeness is part of what makes him cute!” Kanata said. She pet the puppy gently on his head. In the end, Fenrir wasn’t able to come up with a way to stop Kanata.

Finally, it was their turn to cross. “Wow!” Kanata said, looking down from the bridge’s entrance. “We’re so high up!” But before she could cross, a pair of spears crossed in front of her, barring the way. “Wah?!”

A knight, dressed from head to toe in armor and wearing a heavy helmet, leered down at her through his visor.

“Who dares?!” Zag’giel spat.

The knight flinched.

“Am I not allowed to bring magic beasts?” Kanata asked. “I’m a Beast Tamer, you know...”

“No,” the knight said. “That isn’t it.” He gestured to a basin set beside the bridge. Inside was a number of coins. “You have not given your donation.”

In other words, to cross this bridge, they would have to pay a toll.

“How much is it?” Kanata asked.

“Are you a follower of the Holy Church?”

“No,” Kanata said. “I don’t worship any particular god.”

“Heretic,” the knight growled. “In that case, to cross you must pay one hundred gold to wash away your sins.”

“One hundred gold?!”

“This is extortion!”

“Then convert,” he said. “It will have to be quick, but as a Temple Knight, I am

qualified to give baptisms.”

“I won’t,” Kanata said, flatly.

This is a bit of a digression, but you might be wondering why Kanata, who, as she said, didn’t worship any gods, qualified for the Profession of Saint back in her Selection Ceremony. A Saint must have both high abilities and unshakable faith. Kanata was faithful, not to the gods, but to something else. The fluff. It was the fluff that was inherently correct. It was the fluff that was worthy to receive all glory and the entire world.

For someone with such a bizarre yet unshakable faith to have been allowed to become a Saint was a serious error on the part of the gods.

“The only thing I worship is the fluff,” Kanata said. “And besides, I’m out of money.”

“Go, then,” said the knight. He sent her away, thinking her nothing more than a strange young lady.

“One hundred gold...” Kanata pouted as they returned the way they came.

“*Phew...*” Fenrir was relieved. “*At least that buys me some time...*”

“*If we must go to the High Cathedral, then we must earn money,*” said Zag’giel. “*We do not doubt that Kanata can easily raise one hundred gold.*”

“All right!” Kanata said. “Let’s go adventuring!”

† † †

“Then *why* would you come back *here*!?” Melissa sobbed. She had finally finished the paperwork relating to the bandits and the incident with the ogre and goblins. But just when she had a moment to breathe, who should appear but Kanata? If the gods existed, Melissa thought, they were tormenting her.

“I tried looking for work back there, but there isn’t an Adventurers’ Guild in the Holy City...”

“As vexing as that is,” Melissa agreed. “The Holy Church has too much influence there, and they have the Temple Knights to deal with anything that comes up. They won’t let the guild get a foothold.”

"Then the guild doesn't take requests from the people in the Holy City?" Kanata asked.

"As a matter of fact, we do," Melissa said, retrieving a stack of requests from a drawer. "There's a great deal of discrimination based on how much one can afford to tithe to the Holy Church. If you can't afford to give alms, your problems aren't going to be addressed."

"We see," Zag'iel mused. *"It does not surprise us to hear this of that city. Its shine is only surface deep."*

"Some of those people send the guild requests by mail," Melissa said. "But it's hard to justify giving these to adventurers. The rewards are all very low." The Adventurers' Guild was not a charitable institution. It existed in order to find paying work for adventurers. "So we take the requests, but we don't do anything with them. I wish there was more I could do to help those people, but..."

"May I see the requests?" Kanata asked.

"Oh, yes, go ahead. But they really don't offer much of a reward. This isn't like cleaning the sewers, where you got paid by the step. Your talents would be better used elsewhere, Miss Kanata. If you need money, I can find you a lucrative request." Melissa knew of several outstanding high-difficulty requests. With Kanata's abilities, she could fulfill them easily. The reward would easily come out to more than one hundred gold.

But Kanata was busy looking over the folder of requests Melissa had handed her. "I'll take all these requests," she said, shutting the folder.

"A-All of them?"

"Yes, ma'am," Kanata said. "It should be just enough money to get into the High Cathedral." Each individual request paid almost nothing, but taken together, they could move mountains.

"B-But there's so many of them! And the difficulty level is all over the place! I think in your case, you would be better off doing just one high-difficulty request..."

"But these people will be in trouble if no one takes their requests, right?"

“I... I suppose...”

“Then it’s perfect! I’ll make some money, help the people of the Holy City with their problems, and clear out some of your backlog of requests! It’s a win-win-win!”

“So you say,” Melissa replied. “But Miss Kanata, you really aren’t getting a very good—”

“Well, I’m off!”

“Aah!” Melissa shouted as Kanata teleported back to the Holy City, folder of requests in hand. “She’s ignoring me again!”

† † †

“And you...*sent them away*?” Marianne asked. Before her, the Temple Knight was shaking in his boots.

“Y-Yes, Your Holiness!” he said. “I’m so sorry!”

The knight hadn’t heard he was supposed to keep an eye out for the girl until after he had sent her away. Marianne had the whimpering man removed from the room and went to gaze out the window.

“I knew it,” she said. “She’s here in the Holy City. I don’t know what she’s after, but the Goddess’s command was that I was not to interfere with her. I’m not meant to act. And yet...” There was a strange feeling in her chest. A nervous anticipation of something for which she had no words.

† † †

In a ramshackle house in the slums of the Holy City—not visible from outside the walls—a mother lamented her powerlessness to help her sick son.

“Mama, it hurts...”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m so, so sorry. If only we could afford a doctor.”

“Hello!” Kanata said, bursting into the scene with no warning. “I got your request!”

“*Where is the patient?*” Zag’giel asked. “*We should begin immediately. This will not take long.*”

“Lady Kanata is going to heal you!” said Fenrir.

Kanata’s magic cured the boy in the blink of an eye.

“Wh-What?!” the mother and child exclaimed at once.

“My child!” the mother said. “The doctor told me he wouldn’t last the winter, but now he’s all better!”

“Thank you, miss!” said the boy.

The two thanked Kanata over and over again as they signed the quest completion form, and Kanata left as quickly as she had come.

“One down, lots to go!” she said.

“With your skills, Kanata,” Zag’giel said, *“it would be a simple matter to gather the humans of the Holy City together and heal them all at once, but this is a request after all. It will be a nuisance of a task to visit them one by one, but we suppose that is how it must be done.”*

“We should do all the healing requests today first,” said Fenrir. *“The next one is from a tailor who lives three houses down!”*

“Kay-kay!”

The next day, they moved on to a cleaning job. There was an old church, built before the Holy City had grown as big as it had, where the poor buried their dead in a communal cemetery. But the only person living at the church was an old cloistered sister. She wasn’t really able to perform proper funerals for everyone, let alone keep the cemetery cleaned and purified. It had gotten bad enough that there was a risk of the corpses rising as undead magic beasts.

Of course, with Kanata’s purification magic, it was easy work.

“Squeaky clean, squeaky clean!” she chanted, and the gravestones immediately became sparkling clean. They looked brand-new. Now the dead interred in the cemetery could return to their eternal rest.

The old cloistered sister clasped her hands together, giving Kanata her most heartfelt thanks. “That light!” she marveled. “I can’t believe it! Those filthy gray tombstones are sparkling again!”

“Shall we search for lost items next?” asked Zag’giel.

“We have requests for a ring, a wallet, missing pets...” said Fenrir.

“No problem!” said Kanata. “I’ll find them with detection magic!”

A misplaced wedding ring. A stolen wallet. Someone’s keepsake—an old watch. Kanata listened to her clients describe their missing items and then found them one after another with magic.

“I’m not sure what to do about the missing pets, though...” Ordinary animals were afraid of Kanata. They could sense her aura of might, and would instinctively flee before she could get close.

“Kanata! Allow us to handle this!”

“Watch! I’ll show you that I’m not useless!”

For once, Zag’giel and Fenrir actually lived up to their boasts. The pair did a splendid job rounding up the missing pets. Maybe *too* splendid...

“Keep your distance!” Zag’giel said, tired of the throng of animals showering him with attention. *“We have no interest in becoming the lover of a cat!”*

“I’m not a dog!” Fenrir protested. *“I’m not a dog!”*

Apparently Zag’giel and Fenrir, in their current bodies, were irresistibly attractive to cats and dogs. All they had to do was walk around, and the missing pets in the area would come to them.

“Okay!” Kanata said. *“Let’s keep up the pace!”*

Her progress continued unabated. She kept on finishing request after request with bewildering speed. There was an old woman who could no longer walk and wanted to visit her relatives living far away. Kanata picked her up and took her there in no time. There was someone who needed a huge quantity of a common ore. Kanata stuffed her Inventory Screen full of the stuff and easily made the delivery. She played with children at an orphanage. She taught aspiring adventurers how to fight with a sword and use magic. And in only a matter of days, all of the problems facing the poor of the Holy City had been resolved.

Her reward was a vast pile of well-used copper coins, and the joyful gratitude

of the people.

“Thank you! Thank you!”

“We had completely given up! We thought nobody would ever help!”

“You’re the only one who has ever lent us a hand...”

At some point, the gratitude gave way to worship. Kanata found herself surrounded by a crowd of people singing her praises.

“The Holy Church never does anything... But you! You came to us in our hour of need!”

“There’s no doubt in my heart. You are the true Saint!”

“Your Holiness!” the crowd cried. “Your Holiness! Your Holiness!”

“No, no, I’m a Beast Tamer!” Kanata protested. “I want fluff!”

“Fluff!” They started to chant. “Fluff! Fluff! Fluff!”

They had no idea what Kanata meant by fluff. They were repeating it as nothing but an invocation of faith. And so another group misunderstood Kanata, and the cult of her faithful spread yet farther.

† † †

Saint Marianne sat in her room, fuming.

“So *that’s* what she’s come here to do!” she said. “She’s making a fool of the Holy Church!”

The source of her anger could be traced to the rumors she had been hearing day after day of someone people were calling the ‘True Saint.’ It seemed that someone had been helping the poor of the city—the people the Church had overlooked—and had been doing it for virtually nothing. This girl had healed serious diseases without so much as an incantation. She had purified a cemetery. Even animals loved her, the rumors said.

Some of the details were a little off, but the rumors were essentially correct. Due to the miracles this girl had performed, many people had changed the object of their faith from the Church to this so-called True Saint.

Faith was the source of the gods’ power. Marianne was the Saint of the Holy

Church! It was unthinkable for her to allow someone to steal faith out from under their noses, no matter how little. And this was happening in the stronghold of the Holy Church—the very Holy City Lordentia itself! Coming here of all places and stealing worshippers from the Church was nothing short of a declaration of war.

“Taking me lightly, are you?!” she demanded of the air. “Are you?! Are you?!” She bit down hard on her thumb, splitting the nail with her teeth. This girl wasn’t satisfied with just breaking Marianne’s curses. She had come here to pillage the Church’s faith directly! She should have already sent the Temple Knights out to have the heretics burnt at the stake! If only the Goddess hadn’t told her not to get involved...

“And they call her the *True Saint*?!” Marianne spat. “Meaning, I suppose, that I am *not*. Preposterous! I am the one chosen by the gods as their Saint! Me, and no one else!”

She glared out the window. There were voices outside—yet another crowd talking excitedly about this so-called True Saint. It wasn’t just those too impoverished to give alms to the Holy Church. Even some priests and cloistered sisters had gone to pay the girl their respects.

Marianne had sent her subordinates to investigate what had happened in the Royal Capital and the nearby village, and they’d found signs of the girl’s passing. She wandered from place to place, it seemed, performing miracles and stealing believers from the Church. What could she possibly be after?

“Oooh, I can’t take this!” Marianne exclaimed. “I’m so, so angry!” She looked in the mirror. Her face was in a terrible state. There was no way she could appear in front of the believers looking like that. She decided that she needed to take some time to relieve her stress.

Marianne headed to the prison underneath the High Cathedral, where the Spirit Wolf was bound. It had been a while since she’d paid a visit to see that obstinate pup. No doubt she would find him the same as always, unbroken, glaring at her in bitter defiance.

Stomping on his face always made her feel better.

“It’s *his* fault, after all,” she muttered to herself as she walked. “If only he

would hurry up and submit. If he were mine, nobody would be fooled by that ridiculous imitation Saint." If the Spirit Wolf who had accompanied the First Saint on her quest to save the world were to obey her, then nobody would doubt her bona fides. She would just have to torment him until his spirit broke. Then all she would have to do would be to appear before the faithful with her new pet. "Oooh, I can't wait!" she said, licking her lips at the thought.

Alone, Marianne set foot inside the dimly lit prison.

"Good afternoon, my dear Fenrir!" she said. "I do hope you've been in good spirits."

She retrieved a thorned whip from among the torture implements hanging from the wall and stepped toward the cell where the Spirit Wolf was bound.

"*There* you are!" she said. "What's wrong, my dear Fenrir? Have you been lonely without me here to play with you?" The wolf, who would usually greet her with a menacing snarl, didn't even lift his head.

"Well, now, what *is* the matter?" Marianne continued, growing increasingly concerned. "I don't see any obvious injuries... Fenrir, respond." She cracked her whip, but Fenrir didn't even twitch. He stayed there, collapsed inside the barrier that restrained his strength using power from the faith of the Church's believers.

"He doesn't look *dead*," she observed. "Just empty. Like a cast-off husk..." It didn't look like exhaustion. It looked like his soul had entirely left his body. In fact... "No! Can it be?!" Marianne's intuition as a Saint was warning her of danger. "Can it be that this truly *is* a husk, and the real Spirit Wolf has gone to that girl's side...?"

Marianne had a bad feeling about this.

The Spirit Wolf was not like a magic beast—a creature that has a physical body—but was in truth something closer to a phantom. He probably *would* be able to split himself into multiple bodies, if he had a need to. The barrier was set up to seal powerful beings using greater and greater strength in proportion to the beings' power. If Fenrir had left the vast majority of his power here, maybe, just maybe, he could have escaped. She hadn't heard anything about the young girl who had been the cause of her bad day being accompanied by a

Spirit Wolf, but perhaps he had only recently broken out and had yet to meet up with her. Perhaps he was going there now.

“I haven’t forgotten what the Goddess said,” Marianne said. “But we can’t lose the Spirit Wolf. The Spirit Wolf is one of the very symbols of Sainthood! At this rate, she’ll steal *all* our believers!”

Marianne tossed the whip aside and ran up the stairs. She had to get the situation under control. “No inquisitions—I mean, questions! No questions!” she declared. “You! This is urgent! Summon the commander of the Temple Knights!”

“Y-Y-Y-Yes, Your Holiness! Right away!” The underling she had selected ran off.

Soon, the commander of the Temple Knights was here with his retinue, kneeling before Marianne. “Your Holiness, Saint Marianne, what, may I ask, is this urgent business you speak of?”

“I need you to assemble the Temple Knights,” she said.

“Yes, Your Holiness! My most loyal knights, the First Division, are ready at your command!”

“Not just the First,” Marianne answered. “I need every division currently in the Holy City.”

“All of the Temple Knights?!” The commander balked. “What in the world has happened?!”

There were more than five thousand Temple Knights in the Holy City. Even discounting the additional two thousand who were currently away on missions in other lands, mustering their full force would be a significant feat. Ordinarily this would only happen if another country were invading.

“Heresy,” Marianne responded.

“An army of heretics is marching on the city?!” The Temple Knights had heard no such report. For Saint Marianne, their superior in the Church, to have learned something like this ahead of them, the very people responsible for the city’s defense, made the commander feel a sudden bout of vertigo. But the next

words out of their Saint's mouth blew that bit of vertigo out of the water.

"Not an army. You have but one opponent."

"O-One?! Your Holiness, you mean to dispatch the whole of the Temple Knights against a single heretic?!"

"Yes. Nothing less than your full force will do."

Frankly speaking, the commander thought Marianne had lost her mind. He had to restrain himself from asking out loud if she was mad. But the Saint was the representative of the Goddess, and her orders had equal weight.

"She is a strange girl with black hair and black eyes," Marianne continued. "She carries around two magic beasts that look like giant furballs. It's possible that one of them is the Spirit Wolf Fenrir."

"The Spirit Wolf Fenrir?! From the legend?!" The commander did not know about the underground prison. He had only heard of the Spirit Wolf Fenrir as a character in a fairy tale.

"The same," said Marianne. "This girl has deceived him and is now manipulating the Spirit Wolf, who should rightly be by my side. If *that* isn't heresy, then *what is*?!"

"Then you mean to say that an evil witch has infiltrated the Holy City beneath our very noses!" The commander was appalled. "Your Holiness! Forgive me!"

"It's in the past," Marianne said. "But we can't let ourselves be caught unawares again! Find the Spirit Wolf and bring him to me!"

"Yes, Your Holiness! And what of the evil witch?"

"Kill her, of course! She abducted the Spirit Wolf—a servant of the gods! Only death could be enough to atone for such a sin!"

"It shall be done! We will eliminate the witch with all haste, and bring the Spirit Wolf to Your Holiness!"

"Splendid!" Marianne looked down at the man kneeling before her and laughed, sounding every bit like an evil witch in her own right.

† † †

“And that does it...” Melissa finished off the last bit of paperwork. She was still on duty as a receptionist for the guild, though, so she resisted the urge to collapse onto her desk.

“Sup, boss!” Bella said by way of greeting.

“Bella, didn’t I tell you to speak properly while we’re at work? Don’t make me have to scold you.”

“I get it, I get it!” Bella responded. “Jeez. And after I helped you and everything.”

“Yes, yes, thank you so much,” said Melissa. “I’ll treat you to dinner as a reward.”

“Aww! You’re so generous, boss! I love you!”

Melissa gave a sigh of exasperation at her energetic student and turned her attention back to the girl who had brought in the stack of papers in the first place—the root of all their troubles. Kanata received her reward gleefully.

“You really finished up every single request,” Melissa said. “Your star just won’t stop rising, will it, Miss Kanata?” And her dashing between all those different requests had created an exhausting amount of paperwork. Melissa had hardly gotten a wink of sleep since this started.

The guildmaster—a man in his thirties or forties—walked up to her as they parted ways. “Melissa!” he said. “Great job clearing out all those low-value requests! It really helps to be rid of all that bad debt. I’m impressed you got the adventurers to do work with such a low payout!”

“It was only one, actually,” said Melissa. “She did all of the requests on her own.”

“A-Aah!” the guildmaster cried, recalling the girl who had appeared out of the blue and turned their world upside down. It was somewhat surprising he had managed to forget her. *“That girl! Well, results are results, so I’m not complaining. I promise you, I’ll push for your promotion at the next general meeting! It would give me a lot of peace of mind to know that you’ll be here to take over when I retire.”*

“What?!” Melissa exclaimed. “Wait, hold on! I haven’t quit being an adventurer, you know! I’m only helping out because of the shortage of staff members! I have no intention of actually becoming a guild official, you—”

“Please, Melissa!” The guildmaster gave her an achingly pitiable expression. “I can’t let you go, you’re the best worker I have! And the pay is much better than being an adventurer. You’re young! This is your chance to move up in the world!”

“And in exchange,” Melissa shouted, “you’ll work me to death nonstop and I’ll miss out on having a young adulthood entirely!” She cried out in despair.

Bella, watching from afar, pressed her hands together to offer a prayer in sympathy. “Poor boss...”

“I wonder what’s the matter with Miss Melissa?” Kanata cocked her head, puzzled by Melissa’s sudden scream.

“Perhaps she is crying for joy,” Zag’giel offered. “That you have completed these requests, Kanata, can only serve to raise her standing in the eyes of the guild.”

“Yes!” Fenrir agreed. *“It is a happy occasion!”*

“Well, okay,” said Kanata. “As long as she’s happy!”

The three left the Adventurers’ Guild with a spring in their step.

Chapter 4: The True Saint? No! I'm a Fluff-Oriented Beast Tamer!

Kanata returned to the Holy City, still hoping to visit the High Cathedral. As she walked, she saw people glancing her way, whispering to each other and bowing their heads. Word of the True Saint had already spread throughout the city.

“Kanata,” Zag’giel said. *“This is late in the asking, but are you not fatigued from such frequent teleportation?”* Teleportation was a great feat of magic, requiring multiple complicated magic circles, a grand ritual, or else a tremendous expenditure of magic power. It wasn’t the sort of thing one ordinarily did with Kanata’s habitual air of going off for a little walk.

“Not one bit!” Kanata said. “I could do a thousand more of those before I started getting tired!”

“How foolish of us...” Zag’giel muttered. *“Of course Kanata defies all logic.”*

“Lady Kanata! You’re amazing!” Fenrir cheered, running up ahead and trying desperately to block them from going toward the High Cathedral. *“But, you know, perhaps we had better not go to the High Cathedral. It’s really boring. Nothing to see at all. We’ve helped the poor of this city, and we have money we can use for traveling expenses! We can—”*

“Left, right, left, right,” Kanata said, her eyes tracking Fenrir’s paws as he paced about restlessly. “Fen-fen’s doing little circles! Wow! Cuuute!” Bizarrely, she didn’t appear to take note of his suspicious behavior at all. Instead it was Zag’giel, looking down from Kanata’s shoulders, who finally said something.

“All right. We’ve kept from prying until now, but you are plainly hiding something.”

“Wh-Wh-What?! H-How dare you! I have hidden nothing!”

“Your eyes are darting all over the place, you imbecile. Did you really think you had us fooled?”

“N-No! I was no match for the perceptive powers of the Demon King!”

“Fwa ha ha! Do not take us lightly!”

In fact, Fenrir was one of the worst liars in the world. Just about anyone could have seen through his deception. But at least Zag’giel had finally called him out.

“Well,” said Kanata, “if you *really really* don’t wanna go, Fen-fen, we don’t gotta.” Kanata could still sense the presence of the fluff, but if her precious Fenrir insisted, she would just have to give up on it. In fact, she would do so gladly.

“Thank you, Lady Kanata!” Fenrir said. *“Now, come! Come! Let us depart at once!”* Fenrir pushed his body against Kanata’s thighs, urging her to move, when they heard a man’s loud voice.

“There she is!”

The people of the city turned to look at what was happening. What they saw was a man clad head to toe in plate armor pointing in Kanata’s direction. Suddenly, a great cry went up as a force of knights fell into rank. Wielding their halberds, they pushed the passersby away from the scene and moved to surround Kanata.

“It does not seem the Holy Church is of a mood to give us a friendly greeting,” Zag’giel scoffed.

“One of those furballs might be the Spirit Wolf that Saint Marianne spoke of!” said one of the knights. “Capture them alive. Kill the woman! Those are our orders!”

“Witch!” shouted another. “Give us the Spirit Wolf and die!”

It seemed like they were going to have her executed as a blasphemer and a witch.

“Witch?” Kanata responded, seemingly unperturbed by the host of knights surrounding her. “No, I’m a Beast Tamer. Yay fluff!”

“Fluff?” the knight said. “What is that supposed to mean...?” Suddenly it hit him. “Isn’t that the holy word that heretic cult uses?! You’re invoking a heretical word in front of the Temple Knights! You insult the Church itself!” Enraged, the

knights pressed their halberds in closer. One more step and Kanata would be skewered.

“G-Good Temple Knights!” someone shouted. “Please, stop this! That girl is the True Saint!”

“Absurd!” a knight shot back. “The only Saint in the Holy City is Saint Marianne! Interfere, and perhaps we’ll start to wonder if you’re a heretic too.”

“E-Eee!”

“This isn’t a show! Disperse! Disperse!” The knight swung his halberd around, chasing the crowd away.

“It can’t be...” The blood was draining from Fenrir’s face. Everything he had feared was coming to pass. Even if they defeated these Temple Knights, the Holy Church itself now considered them spiritual rivals. Now no matter where they went, they would be branded as heretics.

“I am so sorry, Lady Kanata,” Fenrir said. *“This is all my fault! If only I had explained things to you sooner!”*

“Fen-fen...”

“At least allow me to buy you time to flee!” Fenrir bolted forward and dug his heels in to pounce—only to be immediately caught by Kanata.

“Fen-fen, no!”

“Lady Kanata...”

Kanata looked into Fenrir’s eyes, her face deadly serious. “Fen-fen,” she said, “you and I are friends! You don’t have to try to solve things by yourself! There must be something I can do!”

Fenrir burst into tears. At last, he was ready to tell them the truth he had been hiding. *“The truth is...my real body is inside that cathedral.”*

“You said something like that before,” Zag’giel observed. *“Then that was true?”*

“Yes. *This is just a small piece of my body that I split off and moved my consciousness into.*”

"We see! Then Spirit Wolves are something similar to actual spirits. A magic beast could not perform such a feat."

"But it cost me most of my power..." Fenrir glanced at his enfeebled body, sighing in self-derision. "Lady Kanata," he said, "the Holy Church is a terrible organization ruled by a false Saint and her blind faith in the gods. If we have angered them, it means that from here on, all of their millions of faithful around the world are now our enemies. They are cunning. They led me into a cowardly trap and held me prisoner for a long time. If only I had endured the crushing loneliness and waited for you quietly... None of this would have happened..."

"Uh-uh!" Kanata disagreed. "You didn't do anything wrong! You broke out to come meet me! Thank you, Fen-fen!"

"Lady Kanata..." Fenrir sniffled.

"So if we go to the High Cathedral, we can get your body back?" Kanata asked.

"Yes...but I didn't want to expose you to danger, Lady Kanata." Fenrir hung his head. "It was a mistake to deceive you. I am so, so, so sorry."

"Fen-fen..." Kanata whispered, holding the puppy in her arms and smiling down at him with motherly love. "No more apologies."

"L-Lady Kanataaaaaaaa!" Fenrir's ears were ringing from pure emotion. His eyes were so full of tears that he couldn't see anything at all. From this point on, he could no longer hear what she was saying, nor see what expression was on her face.

"Wowww," Kanata marveled, her eyes going heart shaped as her desires overpowered her mind. "There's a...giant Fen-fen...in there..." She took a step forward. "Fluff fluff...fluff fluff...aha ha ha ha ha ha ha..."

"D-Don't move!"

"Enough! Kill her! Don't hit the furballs!"

The knights thrust at her with their halberds as one. The sharp heads of their weapons came down in a hail of metal, with nowhere to dodge. The Temple Knights of the Holy Church were the elite among the elite. They were powerful

fighters, trained from a young age to protect the Church. In the Adventurers' Guild's ranking system, the weakest of them would still easily qualify for B-Rank. They wore armor and carried halberds that had both been granted a blessing of strength through a ritual ceremony, and they had been drilled until they could fight as a seamless unit. They were far more dangerous than a random encounter with magic beasts. Anything short of the calamitous magic beasts that lived in the Dark Continent would be no challenge for them at all.

"Futile resistance," Zag'giel said. *"Have you any idea who it is you face?"*

Indeed—the girl before the Temple Knights had once defeated an army of the Dark Continent's magic beasts entirely on her own. When the heads of the knights' halberds made contact with her soft, feminine skin, their weapons twisted up, or splintered, or shattered into pieces.

"I-Impossible!"

Kanata's defensive magic had not only prevented all damage from the attack—it had destroyed the knights' weapons.

"Excuse me!" Kanata said. "Coming through!" A magic barrier appeared around her as she walked, pushing the Temple Knights aside and allowing her to pass.

The knights were helpless. "Gh—! I can't stop her! What are these barriers?!"

"Backup! We need backup! It'll take every knight in the city to stop this woman!"

"Can your entire army stop our master, we wonder?" Zag'giel laughed haughtily. As per usual, of course, he hadn't done anything in particular to earn that pride. He had been sitting on Kanata's head the whole time.

A great force of Temple Knights gathered to try to prevent Kanata from advancing, but they were all pushed aside by her barrier. It looked to an observer like they were parting in two of their own accord.

"What's happening?!" an onlooker said. "It's like the First Saint parting the sea!"

"A miracle!"

"I knew it. That girl is the True Saint!"

The people of the Holy City trailed after Kanata, as if they had been invited. They had a feeling that Kanata was about to work a few more miracles, and they didn't want to look away for a second.



† † †

“Forward, men! Charge! Push her back!”

“We can’t! She just won’t stop!”

“Don’t be a crybaby! You’re a knight!”

“I *want* to cry! What is *happening*!?”

The Temple Knights were completely helpless. Kanata’s barrier shoved them off to either side of her, completely killing any momentum their charge may have had. Not only that, but the people of the Holy City followed after her and offered prayers as they walked. It was like something the First Saint would do in a story. She had brought succor to the oppressed, and now she was leading them to confront the source of their woes. Even some of the Temple Knights were beginning to wonder if what they were witnessing was a genuine miracle.

The girl herself, though, had eyes only for the fluff within the High Cathedral, and she had no particular interest in leading the people to salvation at all. “Fluff fluff...fluff fluff...” she repeated. “Eheh heh heh heh...” But everyone watching, ignorant of Kanata’s character and circumstances, could only perceive what was happening as a divine miracle.

At last, Kanata reached the bridge that connected the city to the High Cathedral. The guard on duty was overcome with fear.

“E-Eeeee!” he shouted, falling flat on his butt.

“Here you go!” Kanata said. “One hundred gold coins!” She handed the guard a bag filled with the requisite alms, and made her way across the bridge.

The people of the city who had followed Kanata this far halted.

“We shouldn’t go any closer,” one of them said. “We must watch, and see what the True Saint shall do.”

“I agree. I don’t know what’s going to happen, but I can only imagine that she will perform some incredible miracle!”

“Today will mark the rebirth of the Holy City,” another said. “Something big is about to happen.”

They prayed devoutly as they watched Kanata cross over to the Cathedral.

The Church's holiness was a farce. They did nothing but enrich themselves. They gave no aid to the weak. In fact, they were behind many of the evil deeds happening in the shadows. And deep down, the people of the Holy City were well aware of that fact. They felt a faint sense of the corruption lurking in their city—the other side of the Holy Church. And yet, if they spoke out, they would be labeled apostates. Nobody was willing to take the risk. They were afraid—of making an enemy of the whole world. Of the wrath of the gods.

But as the people watched Kanata cross the bridge, they knew. It would end today. Today, everything would change.

† † †

"What?!" Marianne balked at the Temple Knights' hurried report. Even they, the strongest fighting force in the Holy City, had been unable to lay a single finger on that absurd little girl. "Of all the ridiculous—"

"Hi hi!" Kanata called out, cheerfully shutting the grand doors of the High Cathedral behind her like they were the swinging doors of a pub.

"Eeek!" The Temple Knights, who by now had had a taste of what Kanata could do, fell over themselves in their haste to get away.

"Pitiful." Marianne herself had been seized with fear for a second, but she was determined not to let it show. "When this is over, you cowards are relieved of your duty!" She laughed imperiously. "So, witch," she said. "You have made it this far. Well done. However, this is the High Cathedral of the Holy Church! This place is under the divine protection of the Goddess Herself. Do not think things will go as you plan."

Marianne uttered a prayer—a catalyst to activate the awesome magic of the High Cathedral. The lights of the chandelier high above them began to flicker.

"Now you will taste divine retribution!" Marianne reached out her hand, pointing toward Kanata, and lightning began to strike from the chandelier itself, bolt after bolt after bolt. It was enough power to blast the tiles clean off the floor, enough that even the Temple Knights, who were not its target, could feel its force. And it was all aimed toward Kanata.

There was a burning smell. The knights who had been struck in the cross fire were twitching on the floor, their armor charred black and foam coming from their mouths. And as for Kanata, who took the brunt of the attack—

“Wow! That was incredible!”

“*Hmph*,” Zag’giel complained. “*Our whole body is tingling*.”

“*Look!*” said Fenrir. “*The electricity made our hair stand on end!*”

“Oh my gosh! Pointy fluff!” Kanata marveled at her two pets. Their fur standing on end from the electricity made them even more ball-shaped. Kanata, of course, was completely unharmed. Not a single thread of her clothing had been singed.

Marianne recoiled in shock. “I-Impossible! It didn’t even injure you—?!”

That had not been ordinary lightning. It was a high-level spell that struck with the power of the gods themselves. All living things were powerless before it.

“The gods will not harm her!” One of the Temple Knights fell to his knees, struck by awe. “It’s true! This girl is the True Saint!”

It took some guts to say that in front of the woman who spoke for the Holy Church itself. Saint Marianne shot him a look that seemed to say, *how dare you*, and turned to leave. Relieving that knight of duty would not be punishment enough.

“Defend this point with your lives,” she said.

“S-Saint Marianne?!”

“Where are you going?!”

Marianne left the bewildered Temple Knights behind and went to prepare the High Cathedral’s next line of defenses. The Cathedral had several traps, each more deadly than the last, to use against invaders. Marianne didn’t know how the girl had avoided the lightning, but could she perform a second miracle? Or a third?!

“The next one will get her for sure!” she boasted. “She won’t do as she likes with my Cathedral!”

In fact, Kanata had the run of the place. Marianne's traps not only failed to stop her, they didn't even slow her down. The Temple Knights, meanwhile, whom Marianne had been depending on to protect the High Cathedral, threw down their weapons and surrendered. In the end, fire, a blizzard, poison, curses, and hypnosis all proved ineffective against Kanata. Her barrier protected her from all harm.



“This can’t be happening!” Panicked and overcome with despair, Marianne fled desperately from Kanata. “This can’t be happening! This can’t be happening!”

“I wonder where she’s going!” Kanata said, giggling as she walked through the Cathedral.

Marianne gasped for breath as she staggered and fell up the stairs. “Haaah... Haaah... That... That girl is a monster! But if I can only reach the top floor...”

The top floor of the High Cathedral housed Marianne’s own quarters, where she kept her last resort. A weapon given to her by the Goddess. A weapon strong enough to rip that girl apart. “I’ll show her! I’ll make her pay!”

“Are you looking for something?” Kanata asked.

“E-Eee!”

Kanata suddenly appeared on the stairs, having finally decided to come after her. Marianne tried to run, to even stand up, but her body wouldn’t obey.

“No! No! Stay away!”

“Oh, okay,” Kanata agreed.

“Come again?”

“I was wondering if you could give me directions, but you seem to be looking for something yourself,” the girl said, jogging up the stairs away from Marianne.

“What is she...?” Marianne shook her head, baffled by Kanata’s inexplicable behavior. “No, now’s not the time. I must reach the top floor! She will be sorry she let me go!”

She crawled up the stairs, still unable to stand. At last, she came to her chambers unharmed. All she had to do now was retrieve the weapon.

“Awaken, my angels!” she cried, and the two reliefs decorating the wall of her room creaked and began to move. They emerged from the wall as fierce-looking stone statues, and sprouted wings from their backs. There were two of them—her angels from heaven. These two had been given to her as guardians. They would not fall, not even to that girl. A human cannot contend with the

power of the gods.

“Now, come,” Marianne said, settling in to wait for Kanata. “I’ll be waiting!”

She waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Eventually she felt well enough to stand, and she made herself a cup of tea.

“Wh-Where did she go?”

† † †

Why had Kanata not gone after Saint Marianne? That should be obvious enough. She hadn’t come here to defeat her in the first place.

“Fluff, fluff, fluff, fluff~♪” Kanata sang. She hummed to herself all the way to the prison where Fenrir had been held.

“Lady Kanata, this is the door! We must head down!”

“Okay!”

Fenrir led Kanata through the prison to his cell. There, still bound, they found a great white wolf.

“Fluff fluff!” Kanata cried. “A *big* fluff fluff!” All she had eyes for was the Spirit Wolf’s fur.

“Lady Kanata!” Fenrir said. *“Wait! There’s a powerful barrier here!”*

Kanata had snapped the prison bars apart like they were candy canes. The binding Fenrir warned of suppressed a creature more intensely the more powerful they were.

“What was that?” Kanata asked as she stepped inside. The barrier immediately went over capacity and ripped itself apart.

“*Nothing,*” said Fenrir. “*Never mind.*” The cell bars and the barrier had both proven to be no more of an obstacle to Kanata than anything else in the Cathedral.

“Lady Kanata, excuse me.” Fenrir jumped down from Kanata’s shoulder and

nuzzled up close to the great white wolf slumped on the floor. The parts of him that touched his cast-off body glowed brightly. That light soon spread to the rest of the wolf, until the whole prison was enveloped in blinding white light.

Kanata opened her eyes to see the Spirit Wolf Fenrir, once again fully complete. He moved unsteadily at first, but he took to his feet and then sat down in front of Kanata, with proper form. *“I am the Spirit Wolf Fenrir,”* he said, *“Lady Kanata’s follower, Fen-fen. Now that I have regained my former power, I will do my utmost to be of use to you, Lady Kanata!”*

“*Damn it all!*” Zag’giel cursed. “*He is cool!*” He seethed with envy as Kanata dove headlong into the fluff.

“Big huge fluff fluuuuff!”

“*Lady Kanata?!*”

“Fluff fluff! Ha ha! Fluff fluff! Ha ha!” She rubbed her face against Fenrir’s body, taking her time refilling her body’s fluff reserves.

But after a while, she seemed less excited. “*It’s stiff,*” she pouted.

“*What?*”

“*It’s not fluffy, it’s stiff!*” Kanata huffed. “*And it kinda stinks a bit...*”

Fenrir had been cruelly imprisoned for a long time. His hygiene had reached a truly miserable state. *“I-I apologize?”* Fenrir bowed his head sadly as Kanata administered emergency purification magic. (To her, this counted as an emergency.)

“*Hah,*” said Zag’giel. *“Our master is saying that in your present state you are still far from true fluff.”*

“*I-I see...*” Fenrir nodded. *“In that case, I must keep improving. And I shall!”*

“*Yeah!*” Kanata cheered. “Fluffier and fluffier and fluffier! First, you should take a bath.”

“*What does a bath have to do with this...?*” Fenrir wondered. “*No, I mustn’t think such things. Lady Kanata must have her reasons!*”

“*Indeed. A servant must be able to perceive their master’s desire without*

needing to be told. You have taken this lesson to heart, we see."

Fenrir and Zag'giel nodded to each other, confused as always. It didn't seem like this was going to be cleared up any time soon.

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"Well, we did what we came for, I guess! Ready to leave?" Kanata was starting to get excited as she imagined finding an inn with a large bath and getting Fenrir nice and properly clean.

"Wait, Lady Kanata," said Fenrir. "We shouldn't leave that false Saint to her devices! That woman is a wicked evildoer who uses faith as a means for world domination!"

"But we got Fen-fen's big fluff-fluff back," Kanata said. "I wouldn't mind going back home. That Saint wasn't very fluffy or anything."

"No, Kanata," interjected Zag'giel. "If we leave her be, we will only find ourselves hunted by the Holy Church. We may even have a bounty put on our heads. We should take care to wrap up loose ends, lest we regret it in the future. So let us teach that wretch a proper lesson."

"Really?" Kanata said. "It doesn't seem like such a big deal to me..."

"It does not seem a big deal to you to make an enemy of the Holy Church itself? You are truly brave, our master."

"You have a gentle heart, Lady Kanata," Fenrir said. "You would forgive even an evil temptress like her? Very well. If she tries something, I will protect you!"

"Okay! Then let's get going!" Kanata was eager to get on the road.

"Very well."

"Then let's be off!"

Having reached an accord, the three left the underground prison. They were making their way out of the front door of the High Cathedral when someone smashed through the ceiling to appear in front of them.

"Don't leave!" It was Marianne and her two angel statues. It seemed she was fed up with waiting. Her chest was heaving with barely suppressed rage. Her

twisted face could not possibly have looked more unsaintly. “I was waiting for you to show up *forever!* You were just going to leave me there and *go home*?! Are you *so* determined to humiliate me?! That’s *it*! I’m not holding back anymore. You made me *angry*!”

The angel statues stepped forward from behind Marianne, as if on cue. It was like they were the Saint’s anger made solid. They spread their wings wide, preparing to attack.

“*Lady Kanata! Allow me!*” Fenrir stepped in front of Kanata.

Zag’giel followed, transforming from a furball to the King of Demons as he walked.

“You are as good as your word, we see,” he said. “Very well. We shall accompany you. If you intend to do battle in that body, then it only seems fair that we should unleash our true form as well!”

“Ridiculous,” Marianne spat. “Fenrir, have you already forgotten your defeat to my angel statues? What difference do you think one more companion will make?”

“*I haven’t forgotten*,” Fenrir answered. “*And I won’t shame myself by making excuses. That was a fair defeat. But it will not happen again. That, I promise you.*”

He crouched low, power welling up in his body. Zag’giel cracked his neck and strolled forward.

“Tch!” said Marianne. “Go, my angels! Deliver swift judgment unto these fools!”

“You take the angel to the right,” Zag’giel said. “The one to the left is ours.”

“*Got it!*”

Zag’giel and Fenrir moved so skillfully in concert with each other that one would hardly think this was their first time fighting side by side. In a flash, an attack from Zag’giel’s sharp claws shattered one of the angel’s arms, while Fenrir crushed the other angel’s leg to pieces with his powerful jaw.

“You broke them in a single blow?!” Marianne couldn’t believe it.

“Who the hell do you think we are?” Zag’giel growled.

“*We are the servants of Lady Kanata!*” said Fenrir.

The angels had taken more damage than they had anticipated. They beat their powerful wings, flying backward to put distance between themselves and their opponents, as they launched a swarm of angel feathers that fell from the sky like arrows. It was a fearsome barrage, certainly deadly to anyone it hit. But Zag’giel stepped forward fearlessly, and Fenrir opened his mouth to roar, breathing out a torrent of cold air that froze the feathers solid.

“*It’s over!*” the two said in unison. They leapt crosswise past each other, Zag’giel striking with his claws and Fenrir with his fangs, smashing the statues to smithereens.

“N-Nooooo!” Marianne rent at her hair. “How can they be that strong?! That was the power of heaven! The world of the gods! Their world is above ours! Mortals aren’t supposed to be able to beat them!”

“Hmph,” Zag’giel scoffed. “Stone has no will. It cannot defeat us. We are sworn to our master!”

“*I’m not like I was last time!*” Fenrir declared. “*I am no longer a lost pup, alone in the world!*”

“Gwaaaaaaaaah!” Marianne bit her lip hard enough to draw blood. She threw the veil she had been wearing to the floor and took off running at full speed.

“She’s running away again!” Zag’giel observed.

“*We can’t let her go,*” said Fenrir. “*We need to make her atone for her sins!*”



Marianne ran until she reached the deepest part of the High Cathedral, where there stood a beautiful statue of the Goddess. Even her last resort had failed.

“M-My Goddess!” She prayed for all she was worth. “My Goddess! Please! Hear my prayers!” A light shone down upon the stone statue. “Aah! Goddess!” She breathed a sigh of relief, letting herself relax just a little.

But when the Goddess spoke, it was with harsh invective.

“*Useless idiot!*” she screamed. “*This is what happens when you don’t listen to me! Thanks to your rashness, we have now lost the stone angels on top of everything else! Do you have any idea how much faith it costs to make even one of those things?!*”

“F-Forgive me! My Goddess! Please! Please, save me!”

The statue seemed to regard Marianne begging for her life with scornful eyes. As far as she was concerned, Marianne was now worthless to her. “*If you had come to ask me for aid during the fight, I might have granted you strength, but begging for your life? Is not a Saint meant to defy the enemies of the gods until the very last? If you are too shameless to do at least that much, I will have to punish you appropriately. At least try to land one solid blow on that heavy-soul girl.*”

“G-Goddess?” As Marianne groveled on the floor, her body was bathed in brilliant divine light.

“*O Marianne Ishfalte! My Saint!*” the Goddess proclaimed in a loud, songlike voice. “*Such splendid devotion, to give over your very body in the battle to destroy the enemies of the gods! It pains my heart to inflict such cruel trials on my faithful little lamb, but if you will not hear otherwise, so be it. Now, Saint! Have your miracle!*”

“Goddess? What...? What are you...?” Marianne was stupefied. The first thing she noticed was that she was unsteady on her feet. The culprit turned out to be the Goddess statue itself, which had begun to shake as it turned to liquid, pulling Marianne in.

“N-Nooooooooo!” she cried. “Goddess! Forgive me! Goooooddeeeeeess! Someone! Anyone! Heeeeeeeeelp!”

"Wh-What in the world?! The statue ate her...?!" Fenrir said, arriving on the scene.

"That wretch of a Goddess," added Zag'giel. "This is just like when she inflicted her curse upon us! She does what she wills and calls it a *miracle* or *trial* or what have you. Meddling coward!"

The statue, having now consumed the Saint entirely, suddenly began to move. It seemed alive. It even had a heartbeat. The fragments of the angel statues Zag'giel and Fenrir had broken began to crawl on the floor, making their way toward it.

"Should we destroy it while we have the chance?" Fenrir asked.

"Patience," Zag'giel counseled. "If we attack now, it will absorb us as well."

It was just as Zag'giel said. The living statue seemed to consume everything around it. Something was about to be born. Something that required a colossal amount of energy. It didn't take long. The hard stone split open like a cocoon, releasing this new creature upon the world. It wailed, the high-pitched cry of a newborn.

"Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

It was a terrible monster. Its musculature was ludicrously overdeveloped. It had curved horns on its head, wings like a bat, and six eyes like an insect. It was unnervingly pale. It looked like a devil, but pure white.

"This... This is far stronger than the angel statues," Zag'giel said. "Damn that Goddess! She's created something truly absurd!"

"It has ten times the latent power! No, a hundred! Ridiculous!"

Zag'giel was the strongest of all magic beasts, but even he despaired of his chances against the thing.

"Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" it wailed, its voice full of enough hate for the entire world. Marianne was gone. She had fused with the Goddess and the angel statues. She and her body had both vanished from existence. There was no saving her from that thing.

The white demon glared at Zag'giel and Fenrir. They began to sweat. This was

a monster created by sacrificing a Saint. It moved forward, and...ignored the two entirely?

“What...”

“...In the hells?!”

The white devil went straight to where Kanata was waiting, her arms folded as she watched.

“K-Kanata!” Zag’giel shouted. “Run! We underestimated them! Beings of this world have no hope against that abomination!”

“Please, Lady Kanata!” Fenrir pitched in. “We’ll block its way. You escape!”

Kanata seemed completely unperturbed by her pets’ frantic disposition. Calmly, she opened her eyes and glanced over the white devil.

“Hmm...” she said. “Fluff score, zero.”

† † †

“Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The monster gathered its power. It was enough to distort and detonate space itself, causing a huge explosion that blasted out of the domed roof of the High Cathedral.

The people of the city, gathered outside, screamed in fear. And then they saw a strange, winged creature rising from the ruins of the High Cathedral.

“Wh-What’s that?!”

“A monster!”

“Why was there a monster in the High Cathedral?!”

The sudden appearance of the white devil had thrown the townsfolk into chaos. After all, it had just burst out from the roof of the building towering directly above the Holy City. Everyone could see it, not just the people who had followed after Kanata.

“What power!” Zag’giel marveled. “It destroyed the building just by releasing its magic!”

“I don’t know if we could have gotten out of that if Kanata hadn’t protected us with her barrier!”

Kanata had created another barrier and jumped high into the air, avoiding the explosion, and landed deftly on the roof of the ruined Cathedral. The city watched restlessly.

“If we do not end this, those humans may be in danger,” Zag’giel said.

“*If we run now, it’s the people who will pay the price...*” Fenrir agreed.

“Why are its feathers so hard?!” Kanata demanded. “That’s terrible! It’s the *opposite* of fluff!” As usual, she was on a somewhat different tack from her pets.

“Kyaaaaaaaaah!” The devil spread its wings, launching a lightning-fast strike with its enormous body. Its target was Kanata. Perhaps there was some vestige of Marianne’s anger in it, or perhaps these were its orders from the Goddess, but the white devil seemed to be attacking none but her.

The devil’s fist struck Kanata’s barrier, shattering her shield like glass. It had stopped an ogre’s attacks, pushed away the Temple Knights, and saved her from an explosion, but the white devil’s power was too much for it.

“Kanata!” cried Zag’giel.

“Lady Kanata!” cried Fenrir.

It was the first time either of them had seen her defenses breached.

“Kyaaaaaaaaah!” the devil wailed, not letting up its attack for a second. It swung its fist at the now-defenseless Kanata. But though it had penetrated her first barrier, it was stopped by a second barrier inches away from Kanata’s body.

“I’m okay!” she said, smiling cheerfully to reassure Zag’giel and Fenrir. Every time the devil struck at her, it would break through her first barrier only to be stopped by a new barrier she would create in its place. It still couldn’t hit her.

“Kyaaaaaaaaah!” It screeched in anger, laying into her with clear fury. It was striking her hundreds of times in the blink of an eye, but Kanata matched its speed easily, stopping attack after attack.

It swung and swung and swung, only to be blocked and blocked and blocked.

Each attack sent a shock wave of energy that shook the roof, sending the once-beautiful Cathedral ever further into ruin. But it wasn't able to touch a single hair on Kanata's head.

"Kyaaaaaaaa...aaa..." The devil, which had seemed to have infinite power, was starting to weaken. It couldn't get past Kanata's defenses. Finally, defeated in their battle of attrition, it fell to its knees.

But Kanata wasn't finished. Her barrier expanded, sending the devil flying. It landed among the half-broken ruins of the roof, too overcome by fatigue to rise.

"Now it's my turn!" she said.

The devil trembled with fear, but it was out of magic. Its exhausted body couldn't even move.

"Hmm..." Kanata glanced around at the devil's body like she was watching something. "I see, I see," she said. "Maybe...here?" She thrust both hands inside the devil's torso.

"Gyaah?!" the devil screamed. But even though Kanata had thrust her hands into its body, it didn't seem to have taken any damage.

"Here we go!" Kanata said, grabbing on to something inside of the devil. She used her magic carefully, taking pains not to damage whatever it was. "There!" she said. She focused her energy, and fissures formed all over the devil's body, bright light shining out from within. There was a flash of light.

And then everyone watching saw Kanata standing over the devil's empty husk, holding the unconscious and naked body of Saint Marianne in her arms.

"Wh-What?!" Fenrir balked.

"That was a perfect fusion!" Zag'giel said. "She must have recreated only the woman from inside the thing!"

"Easy does it!" Kanata said, hefting Marianne. "Oh, good," she said as she looked her over. "She's just unconscious."

It was like a miracle. The onlookers, who had seen the whole battle, couldn't believe their eyes.

“Th-The monster is gone...and Lady Marianne was inside?!”

“Was Lady Marianne the monster?!”

“It can’t be! The monster must have been controlling her!”

“I see! Then the True Saint saved her from the monster’s control!”

“Incredible! She defeated the monster and rescued Lady Marianne from its clutches! She really is the True Saint!”

“The Saint! The Saint! The True Saint!”

Kanata was too far away to hear any of that. She sat, stroking Marianne’s hair. “Oh!” she said. “Her hair’s pretty soft. I suppose I’d give her a fluff score of ten.”

“Kanata never changes, we suppose,” said Zag’giel.

“She doesn’t seek the approval of others, but follows what her own heart tells her is right. Lady Kanata is fantastic!”

And the city kept on praising Kanata all the way until sunset.

† † †

A few days later, Marianne was clinging tight to Kanata, effusive love pouring out from every one of her pores.

“Lady Kanata!” she cried. “O Your Holiness! Please! Make me one of your followers!”

Cast aside by her Goddess, fused with the stone statue to such a degree that her very soul itself had vanished into the amalgam, Marianne had been reborn by Kanata’s hands. The event had triggered in her a religious awakening. She had truly repented of her wicked deeds, and now sought the true faith.

“I will do anything you ask of me! Please! How may I be of use?!” Marianne begged.

“Hmm...” Kanata thought about it. “I don’t really *need* anything right now...”

“You don’t?! Well...I can polish your shoes! I’ll do it with my tongue if you like!”

“I think I’ll pass.”

“Awwww...”

While the woman clinging to her was certainly as *affectionate* as a dog, her fluff score wasn’t particularly high, and Kanata didn’t have much attention to spare for her.



Zag'giel and Fenrir couldn't believe what they were seeing.

"*She's changed a little* too much," Zag'giel quipped.

"Who is *this woman*!?" Fenrir added.

Marianne hadn't just changed her ways; this was a full-on religious conversion. She issued a proclamation to the whole Church: "Henceforth, the Holy Church will no longer worship that wretched Goddess, but instead our Holy Lady Kanata! This is the birth of Kanataism!"

It wasn't without its issues, but this development would mean a dramatic loss of faith in the Goddess, severely limiting her ability to interfere in affairs of the world. However, Kanata had an objection.

"Not that!" she said. "Ixnay on Kanataism!"

"But why not?" Marianne was stunned. "Please! Guide us, Your Holiness! We are your lost flock! You are the True Saint! Nobody but you is worthy of our worship!"

"No," said Kanata. "You've got it all wrong! It isn't *me* you should worship..."

"Then..." Marianne asked attentively, "what is?"

"The fluff!"

"The...fluff?"

"Yes, the fluff!"

Marianne was stumped, but Kanata launched right into a confident sermon. "Thou shalt love the fluff. Whosoever shall fluff thee on thy right cheek, turn to them the other also. Twice the fluff is twice as good."

"What...?" It was simply impossible for Marianne to understand what Kanata was saying. Their values and sensibilities were simply too different.

"If you want to thank me," Kanata said, "I don't need tributes or worship. I seek but one thing—the fluff! Find fluff for me! I'll happily take every last bit of it!"

"I...I see!" Marianne couldn't understand Kanata's words at all, but she thought she could understand her meaning. Don't think. Feel. That was what

Kanata was saying. “Fluff! The holy word that binds us all together!” Fluff must be a many-faceted word indeed. It no doubt had such meanings as ‘the happiness of small things’ and ‘kindness to one’s neighbors.’ From now on, she would not give prayers, but chant the holy word and live her fullest life.

“Thank you! I understand!” Marianne said. Of course, she didn’t in the slightest. However, mistaken as it was, her faith in Kanata was what saved her from despair. Right now it was completely unstoppable. Anything Kanata said must be correct. “The fluff! It’s the fluff!”

“Yes!” Kanata said. “Fluff! Please tell me if you find some!”

“I will!” Marianne said. “I will find it! My own splendid fluff!”

That day marked the true birth of Fluffism. But because of the seminal misunderstanding of the meaning of fluff, Kanata saw absolutely no benefit from it.

† † †

“Wow! Amazing, Fen-fen! You got the wagon moving!”

“Aha ha!” Fenrir laughed as he pulled the wagon along with his tremendous strength. *“This is light work! See? I told you I could move it in my original body! Far better than some furball, eh?”*

“Hmph,” replied Zag’giel. *“It would be no great difficulty for us in our original body either. But who would have the King of Demons himself pull a wagon? It is work that suits a mongrel like you. Now walk briskly.”*

“You dare?!” Fenrir said. A piece of his tail split off, turning into a white furball—the Fenrir they had grown to know and love. He leapt at Zag’giel. *“Who are you calling a mongrel?! You take that back!”* the large and small Fenrirs both said at once.

“You can spread your consciousness between multiple bodies?!” Zag’giel was stunned. *“What are Spirit Wolves made of—?!”*

“Take it back! Take it back!”

“Stop talking with both bodies at once! It’s disconcerting!”

“W-Wow!” Kanata said. “It is double the fluff, for real! I can hug Fen-fen tight

in my arms while I rest my head against Fen-fen to sleep! And Zaggy can be my pillow! Oh, it's perfect!"

The furballs had gotten to fighting again like they always did, while Kanata imagined herself in a black-and-white fluff sandwich. She couldn't wait.

A great crowd gathered to see them off as they departed the Holy City.

"Fluff fluff! Fluff fluff!" they cried.

Kanata had left an enormous mark on the city. The Church stopped manipulating the people's faith for its own profit and stopped discriminating on the basis of how many alms a family could afford to give. They abandoned their practice of keeping the area around the High Cathedral manically pristine while neglecting the rest of the city. Those who had plenty gave food and medicine to those who had none. Saint Marianne confessed her sins and pledged to live as a cloistered sister, devoting her life to faith. The city had converted to Fluffism.

"Everyone," Marianne said, "let us all pray for Her Holiness's safe travels. Let us invoke the holy words! Fluff fluff!"

"Fluff fluff!" the people repeated.

"Eheh heh," Kanata giggled. "Everyone's into fluff now! I'm so glad I could teach them how wonderful the fluff is!"

"Indeed," Zag'giel intoned. "We, too, must not delay in our quest for ever-greater fluff!"

"Bring it, furball!" Fenrir shot back. "I will be the one to achieve fluff worthy of Lady Kanata!"

"Oh my gosh!" Kanata said. "Zaggy, Fen-fen, I love you!"

And so, as confused as ever, the three set out again on their quest to seek out new fluff.

Side Story: You Lack Training? No! What You Lack Is Fluff!

This story takes place shortly before the day Kanata left the Holy City Lordentia. Kanata had finally gotten Fenrir, in his original giant form, into a bath, but— “Hard! It’s hard!” Kanata whined.

“Hard...is it?”

Kanata had washed and washed Fenrir until he was clean, dried him, and brushed his fur with her special brush made of dragon underscale until it sparkled. But even so, Fenrir’s fur was still strangely hard. The smaller Fenrir had had fur like dandelion fluff, soft and pleasant to run your hands through. But the big Fenrir’s fur felt like it was made of iron.

“Fen-fee-en!” she demanded as she brushed and brushed. “Why are you so *bristly*!?”

“I-I apologize. My tough fur is meant as armor against attacks...”

“Fluff doesn’t need armor!” Kanata declared.

“Fluff doesn’t need armor?!” Fenrir couldn’t believe his ears, but he eventually came to an interpretation that made sense. *“I-I see! I must throw away my armor and devote everything to attack power! The best defense is a good offense!”*

Once again, the misunderstanding continued unbroken.

“You didn’t really have any attack power as a furball either,” Kanata said.

Kanata missed rubbing her face against Fenrir’s fur until she choked on it. It was hard to say whether she liked Fenrir’s poofy coat or Zag’giel’s slick fur better.

“This isn’t working!” she cried. “It won’t get softer no matter how much I— Huh?” Just as she was about to call it quits, the teeth of the brush caught on something hard. “What’s this?”

She held it up to the light. It was a shard of pale-white stone.

“Is that porcelain?” Fenrir wondered. “It doesn’t quite look right...”

“It’s hard but it’s kinda soft?” Kanata said. “It feels weird to touch.”

“Here,” said Zag’giel, from his perch on Kanata’s shoulder. “Let us see.” He examined it for a while. “We sense traces of powerful magic. Of course. This must be a piece of that monster.”

The monster—the white devil Kanata had defeated. This had been part of its body. It must have gotten tangled up in Fenrir’s fur during the battle. *“You’re right...” Fenrir said. “This must be from the white devil.”*

“So it’s trash, I guess?” Kanata asked. “Should we throw it away?”

“It may come in useful, if we are not mistaken,” Zag’giel said. “Kanata, you should place it in your extradimensional storage.”

“Kay kay!” Kanata said, sending the shard to her Inventory Screen.

“Now that I have recovered my original body,” Fenrir said, “perhaps we should go for a test ride?”

“Test ride?” Kanata blinked. As fun as it would be to ride around on Fenrir’s back, that didn’t seem to be what he had in mind.

“Have you forgotten? The old wagon Mister Molmo gave us!”

“Oh, that’s right! You said you were gonna pull it, Fen-fen!”

“Yes! Today is the day I will prove myself useful!” Fenrir stood up straight and proud.

Zag’giel, who was still stuck as a furball and therefore completely useless, glared at him.

“Damned brownnoser of a wolf,” Zag’giel muttered.

“N-No!” Fenrir protested. “That isn’t it at all! All this jealousy is unbecoming of you! For a Demon King, you can be quite petty...”

“What did you say?! The nerve of this newcomer! Respect your seniors!”

“What difference does it make which of us came first? We are both servants of

Lady Kanata!"

Kanata gazed fondly at her two squabbling pets. "Aww, you two are such good friends!"

"*We are not friends!*" said Zag'giel and Fenrir.

"See?" said Kanata. "Perfectly in sync!"

"*Ghh...!*" both exclaimed at once. "*Stop copying!*"

They were in perfect harmony, even in their arguments.

† † †

"*This hurts a little...*"

Kanata had taken the wagon out of her Inventory Screen and attached the harness to Fenrir, but as the harness was made for a bicorn, it didn't fit onto Fenrir's larger body.

"Are you okay?" Kanata asked. "Should I take it off?"

"*No, I am sure it will stretch out with use. We should continue as we are!*"

"Okay, Fen-fen, you got this!"

"*With you cheering me on I can do anything, Lady Kanata!*" Fenrir took a step forward, giving the wagon a strong pull, flexing the muscles of his powerful chest. It was too much for the poor harness. It burst open. "N-No!"

Fenrir hadn't moved the cart a single inch.

"*My, my,*" Zag'giel intoned, mocking. "*Well done, mongrel.*"

"*You—!*" Did he have to rub it in?

"It's okay, Fen-fen," Kanata said. "Zaggy, no bullying."

"*Tch.*"

"Mister Molmo said it was an old wagon," Kanata went on, comforting the despondent Fenrir. "It's not your fault, Fen-fen. Everything's all right."

"*L-Lady Kanata...*" Fenrir choked back tears as she patted him on the head.

"But we do need to get it fixed," Kanata said. "I think the wheels are loose

too..." After all the years of travel it had been through with Albert Molmo, the wagon was certainly overdue for maintenance.

"*But who do we know that might fix this wagon?*" Zag'giel asked.

"Oh, I can think of someone!"

† † †

The Morsognir Smithy was a midsize shop that had been passed down through the same family for three generations. It wasn't the most professionally run shop in the world, but they did good work, and many famous sword fighters had come to them to have their weapons made. It had a good enough reputation, of a sort, for novice adventurers to want to commission them to make gear.

Recently, the previous owner of the shop had passed away, and the famous magic flame in their unique furnace went out. For a while it looked like it was never going to be relit. On top of that, Lily Morsognir, the fourth-generation owner, was hounded by debt collectors. It got to the point where she considered selling her body to pay them off, but in the end the problem resolved itself. Between her skill as a blacksmith—she was as good as any in her family—and her high-spirited disposition, she was now slowly rebuilding the shop's customer base.

It was rumored that her sudden reversal of fortunes had something to do with a certain black-haired girl, but only a small handful of people knew the truth.

Lily brought her hammer down with a shout, striking the red-hot metal with a resonant clang and scattering sparks like little fireworks. She had been working on this sword since this morning, when she'd received the request. It seemed like heavy work for a girl with such skinny arms, but Lily was smiling. She kept on wordlessly striking the metal, her cheeks flushed with excitement. She had been unable to use her forge until fairly recently. In fact, the feeling of fatigue building in her arm came to her as a relief.

As she worked, the bar of steel changed shape and the heavy *clang clang clang* of the hammer changed into a higher, clearer sound. Each time she struck it, sparks flew everywhere. This lump of metal was well on its way to being reborn as a sword.

“Okay!” she said. “This looks pretty good! Now all that’s left is to sharpen and temper the blade.” She placed the finished sword on top of the ashes and took off her goggles. It was time for a break.

“Jeez, it’s hot in there!” Lily exclaimed. Her skin, red from the heat of the furnace, was covered in droplets of sweat. She wiped off her sweat with a hand towel and poured herself a drink of water, which she gulped down in a second. The Morsognir furnace was unique. It was far and away hotter than a normal furnace. This was a great help to a blacksmith, but it also made the workshop hotter than any sauna.

“Nice work, partner,” Lily said, tapping her hammer appreciatively against the furnace—no longer blazing hot now that its work was done. Her furnace burned hotter than dragon fire. It was able to forge hard-to-work materials from magic beasts into strong alloys. It could create magic weapons with all sorts of uncommon abilities. There was only one like it in the whole world. The one who had made it had long since passed away, leaving it unique and inimitable—a true treasure.

In fact, a group of scoundrels had tried to steal this furnace. They took advantage of Lily’s emotionally vulnerable state following the death of her father and mentor, and came demanding collection on debts of which Lily had no memory, all to try to push her out of the shop. But she had been saved from this dilemma by a certain intrepid girl.

“I wonder where Kanata’s journey has taken her today...” she contemplated. It really hadn’t been long enough ago for her to get this nostalgic about it, but she did owe Kanata for relighting her furnace. It was only natural for her to sometimes worry about Kanata’s safety.

Not that there was any need for it. Kanata was pretty much invincible.

“I’m doing good work with the fire you gave me,” she said, speaking to Kanata as if she were in the room. “I hope the ‘weapon’ I made for you is serving you well.”

Lily, who had grown up working in smithies with lots of older men, had never had a friend her own age. She had an older female acquaintance who came to check in on her shortly after her father passed away, but she was almost twelve

years older and not exactly a friend. To Lily, Kanata was the first friend she had made in her life, and she got lonely by herself in the smithy.

“Come back anytime you want,” she told the imaginary Kanata. “I’ll make you a sword this time.”

“Wow, Lily!” answered Kanata. “You’ve come a long way as a blacksmith! I’d love to see what kind of sword you’d make me!”

“Oh,” Lily said. “It’ll be brilliant and— Wait, what?!” She jumped into the air. Kanata was standing right behind her. “Kanata?! What are you doing here?! I thought you were on your journey!”

“Oh, yes, I’m in the middle of my journey right now!” Kanata said, smiling at the confused girl. “And I made a new friend!”

“Oh? But...why are you here?” Lily still wasn’t convinced that this Kanata wasn’t a hallucination she was having from sheer loneliness.

“I cast teleportation!” Kanata said. “As long as I’ve been somewhere once I can come back anytime I want.”

“Incredible...” Lily marveled. “I had no idea such a convenient spell existed! I’ve never heard of it before.”

“That is not surprising,” said Zag’giel, who was riding on Kanata’s shoulder, head proudly held high. *“It is an ancient spell that we ourself rediscovered. There is none but we and Kanata who can use it.”*

“Oh, hello kitty!” said Lily. “You seem to be doing well.”

“*We are not a cat!*”

Lily took off her gloves to pet Zag’giel’s fur. He mewed grumpily.

“So you say you made a new friend?” Lily asked. “What is this one? A dog? A bird?” She peered all over at Kanata’s body, but she didn’t see any new critters hiding there.

“*I’m out here. Your door is too small for me to fit through.*”

Lily jumped again. There was a giant blue eye looking in the window from outside.

“Aah! Jeez you’re big! Are you a magic beast?!”

“*My name is Fen-fen, girl who smells of fire and metal. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.*”

“Well, I am a Beast Tamer,” Kanata said. “Is it that surprising?”

“O-Oh, that’s right. I’m sorry, I forgot. You don’t usually have magic beasts following you around. It just gave me a bit of a shock!”

“*Implying,*” Zag’giel said, glaring at Lily through half-closed eyes, “*that you do not see us as a magic beast.*”

“Well, can you blame me?” Lily protested. “You don’t look like a magic beast at all. You look like a talking cat!”

“*We told you! We are not a cat! Kanata, grant us permission to show this insolent human our true form!*”

“No! Zaggy’s better fluffy!”

Zag’giel’s ears drooped at being denied so quickly. “*Fine,*” he said.

“So what brings you here today?” Lily asked. “You didn’t just come here for someone to talk to, right? You’re not *that* lonely, are you?” Lily, in fact, *was* that lonely, but she kept a tight lid on it. Her face was unaffected, but if she had a tail like Zag’giel or Fenrir, she would absolutely be wagging it happily.

“Well,” said Kanata, “I was hoping you could fix a wagon for me!”

“A wagon? Like...a *wagon* wagon?”

“The same!”

“Why a wagon? I mean, I *do* know how to make horseshoes, of course...” Lily grumbled as Kanata led her outside by the hand.

“Here it is!” Kanata said, pointing past Fenrir’s massive body at the covered wagon. “Ta-da! The wagon!”

“Y-Yes! The wagon!” It was a completely ordinary and very run-down wagon. There didn’t seem to be anything particularly special about it. All Lily could do was nod her head.

“The harness broke when we tried to put it on Fen-fen,” Kanata explained.

"And it's getting pretty old and worn down in a lot of places. It probably needs to be repaired..."

"So you're going to have *him* pull it..." Lily said. "He certainly looks strong, but this wagon was made for a horse, wasn't it?"

"That will not deter me!" Fenrir declared.

"Oh! Well, then!" said Lily. Fenrir certainly seemed excited enough about the prospect.

"Anyway," Kanata went on, smiling brightly. "I thought maybe you'd be able to fix it up!"

Lily scratched her head. This looked like it was going to be a lot of work. "A brush," she said, "and now a wagon. You realize that I specialize in weapons, right? This is really outside my area of expertise. I would really like it if you came to me with more normal—"

"So, can you do it?" Kanata asked.

"You bet your butt I can!"

Lily, it seemed, was as pliable as ever.

† † †

"Yeah, this thing is pretty beat up." Lily began her inspection of the wagon right away. She struck it here and there with a small mallet and noted the areas where the metal was showing signs of stress and where the wood had been damaged. "It's made of good lumber, and it isn't rusted too badly. It's freshly oiled too. It's obvious that this wagon's previous owner took good care of it."

"Eheh heh, did he now?" Kanata said.

"You seem pleased about something, Kanata."

"It makes me happy to hear you say nice things about Mister Molmo!"

"I understand well!" Fenrir piped in. *"I, too, feel proud whenever someone praises Lady Kanata."*

"Yes," said Zag'giel. *"To hear one whom you have recognized be given praise is a greater pleasure than to receive praise yourself."*

The pair nodded along, in full agreement with Kanata.

“Oh?” Lily asked. “So this Mister Molmo is someone you respect?”

“A ton!” Kanata replied. “He taught me everything I know!” Kanata took out her beloved bestiary, clearly beginning to get worked up.

“Well,” Lily said. “Isn’t that lovely?” With a little prodding from Kanata, she returned to the original topic. “So what do we do with this? Are there any materials you’d like me to use? If you have the money to spare we could reinforce it with mythril. It wouldn’t make it at all heavier but it would be a lot more sturdy.”

“Hmm...” Kanata thought. “Maybe...”

“*Lady Kanata*,” Fenrir suggested, “*didn’t that wicked false Saint give you back your gold?*” When Kanata entered the High Cathedral, she had paid the exorbitant toll in alms. Marianne had returned the money with her apologies, and a bit extra from her own personal finances.

“Mm hm,” Kanata said. “We have plenty of money.” But Kanata was uncertain. Now that they had come this far, she was determined to have the wagon fixed up the best she could so that Fenrir could have an easy time pulling it. She was seriously considering handing over all the money she had in exchange for a full restoration, when Zag’giel got her attention by bapping her on the ears.

“*Kanata. Kanata!*”

“Oooh! Zaggy’s whiskers are hitting my ears! It feels so good!”

“*Never mind that*,” Zag’giel said. “*What of that stone shard?*”

“Stone shard?” Kanata echoed. “You mean this?” She removed the fragment of pure white stone from her Inventory Screen and handed it over. “Lily! Lily!” she said.

“What is it? Have you made up your mind? There’s no reason to skimp on materials, if you ask me. That way—”

“Can you use this rock?”

“A...rock?” Lily looked dubiously at the shard of stone. “W-Well!” she said. All

of her senses and intuitions as a blacksmith were telling her that this rock was something wild. “Wait. Is this—?!” She took out a magnifying lens and peered closely at it through one eye. “I’ve never actually seen it before,” she explained, “but I’ve heard of this. A stone with a unique texture, both hard and soft. Enough stored magic power to make your fingers tingle. This is a Philosopher’s Stone! I’m sure of it!”



The Philosopher's Stone was an item out of legends, said to be made by the very greatest of alchemists over many long years.

"Hah," said Zag'giel. "It is as we suspected. That white devil had a ridiculous stockpile of magic power. We thought it might have been made of Philosopher's Stone. Then we were correct."

Zag'giel had been the first to take note of the stone's value. He hopped over onto Lily's shoulder. Zag'giel had been a researcher in addition to a ruler. In this case, he had been right on the money.

"However," Zag'giel continued, "this stone seems to have never progressed past white. It is not a true Philosopher's Stone. Philosopher's Stones are black when first created. Over time they turn white, and then red. Only then will it be complete. At this stage of development, it is nothing more than a rock with a great amount of magic power."

"Nothing more,' he says," Lily murmured. "If I use this as a catalyst to refine steel, I'll have a veritable *mountain* of orichalcum. The highest-grade metal of all. It makes mythril look like papier-mâché. I never imagined I would ever get my hands on it..." She clasped the stone shard tight, shaking with emotions. How many blacksmiths ever got a chance to work with materials like this? In her mind she was already imagining all of the weapons she could create with the Philosopher's Stone.

"Okay, Lily!" said Kanata. "I'm counting on you then!"

"Huh?"

"You're gonna use that rock to repair the wagon, right?"

"Repair...the wagon?"

"Yeah!"

"You don't want me to make you a legendary sword?"

"Nope!"

Lily closed her eyes tight.

"Nope!" Kanata repeated, in case Lily hadn't heard her the first time. She was

beaming happily.

“But that’s such a *waste!*” Lily cried, clutching her head in anguish.

Yes, if they used the Philosopher’s Stone, they could have an incredible wagon. It would be lighter than a feather, impervious to wind and rain and fire, and strong enough to carry a hundred passengers with no strain whatsoever. And, steeped as it was in magic, the wagon would be completely immune to any offensive spells. If they kept using it, it might even produce a spirit and gain intelligence and an identity. That was something that happened sometimes when someone used a magical item for a long time. Spirits that arose this way were considered to be the same sort of thing as spirits that emerged from nature, even if the method of their conception was different. If the owner of an item with a spirit treated it with care, it would be sure to grant them good fortune. A spirit born of a magic sword might even increase the power of its wielder.

Fenrir, by the way, who was currently idly scratching at his ears right next to the wagon, was near the very apex of spiritkind, but Lily, of course, did not know that.

“But why a cart?!” Lily protested. “It’s just a waste of orichalcum, godsdamn it!” She furrowed her brow and folded her arms, stewing in her thoughts. Lily was a blacksmith who specialized in weapons. It really would be a terrible waste for her to use this to make wagon parts.

“Don’t worry!” Kanata said. “I’ll give you any leftover ingredients as a present, just like last time!”

“You mean it?!” Lily’s dark mood vanished immediately. Kanata’s brush had been made with the dragon’s underscale she’d brought to the smithy, and Lily had been using the rest on a number of experimental new weapons. When they were finished, she planned to present them to the Royal Exhibition, although she still wasn’t sure if they would turn out well. But if she could use the orichalcum refined by the Philosopher’s Stone, she could make weapons of even-greater power.

“But you know, if this turns out badly, you’re giving up something even more valuable than the dragon underscale,” Lily said.

“Go ahead and have it!” said Kanata. “I can’t use it for anything!”

“I’m not giving it back, even if you beg.”

“One hundred percent A-okay!” Kanata said, making a circle with her index finger and thumb.

Lily, for her part, was no longer moody in the slightest.

“Okay!” she said. “Let’s do this!”

Full of motivation, Lily took measurements of the wagon’s every last detail, and then ran back, carrying the shard of stone, into the shop where the furnace was. When Kanata asked how long it would take, she said, “I’ll have it done right away! Wait right there!” It seemed like she was going to make all the parts she needed at once, and then affix them to the wagon all together.

While she was waiting for the upgrades to be completed, Kanata made a pot of tea and sat in the wagon, killing time by gazing at the sky.

“This is not a bad way to pass the hours,” Zag’giel said. He was curled up in a ball on Kanata’s lap.

“The wind is so nice and gentle too...” Kanata said.

“It is!” Fenrir agreed. *“If only the body of the wagon were a little bit higher up, it would make for a very comfortable place to sleep...”* Fenrir had dug a hole underneath the wagon, and was now curled up there, sheltered by the vehicle. It seemed like he was quite comfortable.

Suddenly, they heard footsteps coming up from behind the wagon.

“Excuse me,” the person said. “Is that you in there, Miss Kanata?” It was Melissa, the familiar guild receptionist. She seemed surprised.

“Miss Melissa!” Kanata said. “Good afternoon!”

“Yes, good afternoon.” Melissa and Kanata bowed politely to each other. “I thought you were still on your journey!” Melissa said. “With you popping up all over the place, it hardly feels like you’ve gone away at all!”

“Miss Lily said the same thing.”

“Oh? You’re acquainted with Lily?”

"I am!" Kanata said, producing a glittering brush. "She made me this!" It was made out of a dragon's underscale, sturdy enough to be a weapon. You could probably use it for a hundred years without breaking a single bristle on its head. "Isn't it amazing?" Kanata asked.

"Y-Yes, quite. But...dragon underscale? Don't tell me..." Melissa glanced at the rapier on her belt. As it turned out, she had had her sword reforged with dragon underscale not long ago. It had cost her an arm and a leg, but the results were worth every last coin. Melissa's original sword had been made when she was just starting out as an adventurer by the previous generation's Morsognir, but Lily, the new proprietor, had been able to use the underscale to send the weapon's attack power through the roof. It had passed from father to daughter to become what it was now.

Melissa had come here today to report to Lily how the upgraded sword had served her during her time wielding it. Her student Bella, as it happened, was taking well to work at the guild, but as skilled as she was, she had a habit of relying on others to do her work for her. That was why Melissa had left her at the guild to handle work on her own this one time.

This was necessary discipline she was performing as a mentor. It absolutely was not a case of pushing her own work onto a subordinate.

But it was also true that part of her was just glad for the break.

"Would you like to sit with us and have some tea, Miss Melissa?" Kanata asked politely.

"Why not, I suppose," Melissa said. "It looks like Lily is still in the middle of work. I may as well take you up on your offer." She sat down next to Kanata and took a cup of tea.

The cups and tea had both come from Kanata's Inventory Screen. Pretty much everything one could need for a comfortable life was jammed in there.

"How long has it been since I had a moment of quiet...?" Melissa mused.

"You always seem so busy, Miss Melissa," Kanata said.

"You don't know the half of it. And after I left home to lead a carefree life of adventure and derring-do too. How did it come to this?" Melissa held her cup in

both hands. She seemed to be falling into a dark mood. “The rest of my party triumphantly retired from the adventuring life, you see, and I thought I would use my sudden increase in free time to help out at the guild now and again. But before I knew it, I was a senior receptionist. And now that I’ve *made it*, there’s been more and more pressure on me to stay. Somehow I ended up on the high-status, high-pay, no-free-time track.” She sobbed. There were tears in her eyes now. “This was the *last* thing I wanted!”

“Oh no! That sounds terrible!”

“You know, Miss Kanata...” Melissa began. “You’re one of the *causes* of this terrible situation.” She sniffed, and shot Kanata a mildly resentful glance.

“I am?” Kanata cocked her head. She had no idea what Melissa meant.

“You’ve been achieving far too much!” Melissa said. “I don’t mind the paperwork so much, but because of all you’ve done, my *own* reputation as your *handler* has only gotten better and better!”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“It isn’t *exactly* bad,” Melissa said. “It’s always a relief to see the adventurers we’ve been assigned make it back safely, and of course I’m very proud and happy for you.”

“I see! So I need to do more and more to make you even prouder and more happy! I’ll do my best!”

“Noooooo!!!” Melissa bawled. “That isn’t what I meeeeeeeeaaan!!!”

She clung to Kanata, who pet her softly and made comforting noises. She was being comforted by the same person who had caused all her distress. Her emotions were in chaos, and her tears showed no sign of abating.

† † †

“It’s done! Come help me carry the stuff!”

It was such a pleasant spring day that the group had dozed off leaning against each other, when Lily’s voice woke them from their stupor. Lily was pushing a cart full of bright silver wagon parts, her arms glistening with droplets of sweat.

“Ick!” Melissa said. “I was drooling!”

“Here, take this,” Kanata said, proffering her handkerchief.

“Th-Thank you...” Melissa took Kanata’s handkerchief and bashfully hid the corner of her mouth, where a truly stupendous volume of drool had dribbled down the side of her face.

“Okay, everyone, come help,” Lily said. “I’ll do the work that needs precision. You just support the wagon while I get the parts on.”

“Kay kay,” Kanata agreed.

“*Very well. We shall lend you our aid,*” said Zag’giel.

“*If there’s any heavy lifting, leave it to me!*” Fenrir declared.

“Am I supposed to help too?” Melissa asked. “I mean...not that I mind or anything. Just as long as you take a look at my sword later.”

And so, following Lily’s instructions, the group replaced the worn-out axles, swapped the wagon’s canopy with a new one, fit in new floorboards, and attached the harness. Before long it was reborn, shining silver and good as new.

“How’s the harness?” Lily asked Fenrir. “I tried to make it as gentle to wear as I could, considering it’s made out of indestructible metal.”

“*It’s incredible! It distributes the weight over my entire body, and I think it’s adjusting its shape slightly to accommodate my movements! I could wear this all day!*”

Kanata gave Lily’s handiwork a round of applause. “Great job!”

“Ha ha...” Lily laughed, bashfully rubbing the underside of her nose. “Well, I’m glad to hear it! The wheels are reinforced with the same material too. You’ll have a smooth ride no matter how bumpy the road gets, and it should stop the axles from overheating if you ever need to pull it at some crazy speed.”

“Thank you so much, Miss Lily!” Kanata said.

Kanata had long dreamed of traveling the land in a covered wagon alongside her magic beasts. She’d played a game with a similar premise in her previous life. Naturally, she had assembled for herself a team of fluffy monsters then too.

“Considering how valuable that rock is, I really should be the one thanking

you," Lily said, smirking. She felt just a *little* guilty about this.

"All right," Melissa cut in. "Now it's my turn. Lily, I'd like to talk about my sword."

"Oh! Melissa! I didn't realize you were here!"

"I've been here the whole time! I was even helping you earlier! If you think you can get away with treating your customers this way, you have another thing coming, missy!"

Lily laughed. "I'm joking!" she said. "Sorry, sorry." It seemed like this sort of teasing was just how these two related to each other. "You're here for maintenance on your rapier? How's the sword treating you?"

"Absolutely splendidly," Melissa said. "You've outdone yourself yet again. They say that stronger materials can make a blade harder to use, but I've found this one just as easy to use as before, and the thrust is much, much more powerful."

"He he...really?" Lily proudly puffed out her skinny chest.

Suddenly, they were interrupted by a man's shrill voice. "Well, well! Terribly sorry to interrupt your lively conversation."

Lily's expression darkened. "Y-You! What do you want?!"

The newcomer was a man dressed in a showy outfit. He was accompanied by a number of violent-looking men who seemed to be guards.

"Lily?" Melissa asked. "Who are these men?"

"Debt collectors," Lily said. "My father borrowed money from them, or something."

"That's right!" the man said. "We're here about your old man's debt! You ready to pay up?"

"What are you talking about?" Lily responded. "I paid you already! Well, Kanata did..."

Just as Lily said, Kanata had settled the debt in her place. She had paid the exorbitant sum of one hundred gold coins in a single installment on the spot,

and taken the contract.

“Ah, yes,” the man said. “But we reexamined our records recently, and sadly it seems that you still have some debt to pay.”

“Wh-What?! Bullshit! You know what? My father never said a *word* about this supposed debt! Did he really borrow from you?!”

“My! Are you accusing me of lying? Look. Is this not your dear departed father’s signature?!” The man tapped the signature on the contract demonstratively.

“Gh—!” Lily exclaimed. “It really does look like his handwriting...”

“Looks like’ my ass! It’s the real thing! So what now?! This one’s a hundred gold too! Just give up already and give us the shop!”

“I-I’m not giving you the shop! I don’t know what you’re trying to do here, but you’re after the furnace, aren’t you? What on earth does a bunch of *loan sharks* want with a furnace? Who’s behind this?!”

In the face of Lily’s suspicious glare, the man turned his back and feigned ignorance. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said. “We’re talking about your debt here. Now, can you pay or can’t you?!”

“Nn...” Lily gritted her teeth. “I just spent my money restocking the shop. Just give me a bit of time. If I can sell the weapons I’ve made so far—”

“We’re not waiting a day longer! What do you take me for?! Stop talking and pay up!”

Lily withered before the man’s sudden temper. “Grrr...”

“Hey! Money! Pay if you want me to leave!” The man got right in her face, holding his palms out demanding money, his face saying, “Give me the money!”

“Here you are!” Kanata said, placing a bag full of coins in the man’s hand.

“Thank you very— Wait! This is the same thing that happened last time!!!” Suddenly the man remembered what had happened on that day—a day seared in his memory for all time. He had been threatening the girl, just like this, when, just like this... “You’re the same girl as last time!!!”

He recoiled at the sight of Kanata's face. She had been behind the wagon until now, so he hadn't noticed her.

"I trust this settles your accounts?" Kanata said, smiling very politely.

"Y-You!" The man's face twisted up into a scowl of rage. But then, he sneered. "Who cares?! I have *more* contracts!" He tossed out a huge pile of the contracts, littering the ground with them. Each one bore the same signature. "What now?!" he demanded. "Go ahead and pay them *all* back, if you can!"

"Here you go!"

"Nooooooooooooo!!!" The man screamed in despair as Kanata handed over yet more money.

Saint Marianne had given Kanata a considerable sum as an apology for her misdeeds. It was easily enough to pay off all the contracts.

"Curses!" the man spat. "Who in the hells are you?!"

"I'm a Beast Tamer!"

"Who cares?!"

"Well, you asked..." Kanata pouted as the man's face turned red with rage.

"Excuse me a moment, Miss Kanata," Melissa said. She had picked up one of the contracts the man had thrown on the ground. "I don't believe there is any need to pay these frauds at all. These signatures are forgeries!"

"Wh-What?! You're butting in too?! You got some complaint?!"

"My name is Melissa Straud, staff member of the Adventurers' Guild. I trust you don't mind if I inspect these contracts?"

"What is *that* supposed to mean? Isn't looking enough?"

"Not at all. I would like to inspect these. After all, these are not authentic signatures, are they?"

"And what is the basis for your accusation?"

"Under the laws of the kingdom," Melissa exposit, "signatures for the purpose of borrowing money must be signed in ink infused with one's own blood. If they are not, the contract is void. Were you not aware?"

“Wh-What about it...?” the man grumbled.

“Do you know why blood is used for this purpose?”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s just a blood seal...”

“It is so the blood can be inspected to see if it belongs to the person in question. That way there is an additional level of confirmation of identity, in addition to the signature itself.”

“What?!” the man exclaimed.

“So you didn’t know,” Melissa said. “Or so your face is telling me. It was a measure adopted to curtail the recent surge in forgeries, but most people don’t know the details, I’m afraid. Still, I don’t believe I’ve ever seen such an obvious forgery before in my life.”

“Wh-Wha...?”

“We have the equipment needed to confirm the blood seals at the guild. Would you care to accompany me? Oh, and I trust you are aware that forgery is a capital offense?”

“Eeeeeee...” The man choked under the weight of Melissa’s icy glare. His lackeys were growing unsettled. “Oh, to hell with the debt! It’s three girls! We’re taking it by force!”

“Yeah!” his men shouted. They drew closer, rolling up their sleeves to do some dirty work.

“Oh no!” Lily cried. “Melissa! What do we do?!”

But Melissa just sighed. “Oh well,” she said. “Ignorance is bliss, I suppose.”

“You!” one of the men said, grabbing hold of Kanata’s arm. “Get over here!”

The next moment he was in the sky. By the time he realized that the girl had thrown him, the ground was already distressingly far away.

“Eh?” he said, stunned. A fall from this height would kill him instantly. Certain he was about to die, the man fainted.

Kanata didn’t miss a beat. A second later, the rest of the thugs were alongside him up in the air.

“E-Eek!”

“Noooo!”

“Stooooop!”

But it wasn’t over. As they fell, Kanata caught them, tossing them back up in the air in some diabolical feat of juggling, cheering each time.

The loan shark fell to his knees at the sight of his men being used like a child’s playthings. “A d-demon!”

“I told you,” Kanata corrected him. “I’m a Beast Tamer!” She chased after the loan shark, apparently intent on adding him to her juggling act.

“Miss Kanata, wait!” Melissa interrupted.

“Hm?” Kanata stopped, catching the unconscious men in a pile using just one of her arms.

“Their methods are crude,” Melissa said, “but we still don’t know what would motivate a simple loan shark to do this. I believe Lily is correct. Someone must be pulling the strings.”

“I see!” Kanata said. “So you want to tail them!”

† † †

“*Sniff sniff... Lady Kanata, over here!*”

The men ran away, putting distance between themselves and the girls, but to no avail. It was an easy matter for Fenrir to use his nose to track them down. The people of the Royal Capital regarded Fenrir’s enormous body with astonishment, but when they noticed that he was accompanying Kanata, they seemed to regard the mystery as solved and to go about their day. After she drove off the demon army single-handed, there was hardly anyone in the Royal Capital who didn’t recognize Kanata. Some of them would offer her thanks or invocations of “Fluff fluff” as she passed, but thankfully, none of them made any kind of scene. The men never noticed them on their tail.

“Good job, Fen-fen!” Kanata said, praising the pup. “You’re so smart!”

“*Don’t be silly! This is nothing!*”

“If only she would give us permission to use our old body—!” Zag’giel despaired, sharpening his claws on the wall of someone’s house as he gave the stink eye to the wolf happily wagging his tail. Ever since Fenrir had regained his original body, he had been two or three steps ahead in their competition.

Kanata loved them both equally of course, but it was only natural for a servant to want *all* of his master’s attention.

“Miss Lily, Miss Melissa, it looks like those men went inside that building,” Kanata reported.

“That building...?” Melissa said, her eyes widening in recognition. “That’s a famous weapon shop!”

“The Jensen Armory...” Lily said. “They’re the biggest shop in the area. They have their own forge too...”

It looked the part. Through the window, the party could see a vast array of swords and suits of armor.

“I thought it might be another smithy after our furnace,” Lily muttered. “But *them*? Godsdamn it, Vigo.”

“Do you know the people here?” Kanata asked.

Lily made a face like she had swallowed a bug. “The owner of the shop is an old acquaintance of my father’s.”

“Oh?” Kanata said.

It seemed that it was someone Lily’s departed father had known who was pulling the strings here.

“We’re not going to learn anything out here,” Melissa said. “Shall we go inside?”

With Melissa at the lead, the party left the back alleyways they had been skulking through and entered the main area of threat.

“I’ll explain as we walk,” Lily said. And so she began. Lily had called the store owner her father’s old acquaintance, but more precisely they had been business partners when her father was a young man. The partner’s name was Vigo Jensen. He was a skilled artisan, but when it came time for her father to

inherit the Morsognir smithy, Vigo left.

“My father told me he hated us, but I had no idea he would go this far...” Lily said.

It didn’t sound like a mutual quarrel so much as a one-sided grudge on Vigo’s part. But since Vigo had spread false rumors to drive away their customers, Lily had certainly come to hate him as well. Her father had always wanted to mend the relationship with him, but until his dying day, he never learned what the cause of the enmity was.

And as Lily concluded her explanation, they reached the front of the shop. Inside, they found a lively atmosphere of prosperous commerce, with adventurers and staff here and there discussing this and that.

“We have the evidence of the forged contracts,” Melissa said. “If we returned to the guild, the guildmaster could help us take this to public investigations. But that would take time—time in which he might flee to somewhere else. But as a representative of the Adventurers’ Guild, I can’t go against investigative protocol...”

“But there would *be* no investigation if we hadn’t done all this, right?” Lily asked.

“Let’s just leave it at that,” Melissa rejoined.

“Eheh heh heh heh...” Kanata giggled. “It’s a sneaking mission!”

She looked like she was having fun, at least.

“Nah. Let’s just barge right in and cut to the chase,” Lily said. “That damned Vigo is seriously pissing me the hell off.”

“Lily!” Melissa exclaimed, but it was too late. With the invincible battle power of Kanata at her side, Lily ventured boldly into the shop.

“You there!” a man cried. “That area’s for workers only, can’t you—?”

“Shove it, blockhead,” said Lily.

“Excuse me!” Kanata sang.

“Should we really be doing this?” Melissa asked. “The guildmaster is bound to

be cross with me...but wait! If I can get him cross, maybe I can avoid the salary track! This might be my chance! I might get suspended! That's as good as a vacation!"

All three breezed right past him without a moment's notice, right on up the stairs.

The shop was a large three-story building. The first floor held the storefront, the second the workshop, and the third an area in which to conduct business. The farthest room back on the third floor was President Vigo's office.

"No entry past this—" the guard started to say.

"You wanna get juggled, punk?" Lily interrupted him. "Do you?! Huh?!"

Lily's threat didn't make much sense, but she was so menacing and in his face that the guard had no recourse but to clear the way. She stomped on through the third floor, and kicked in the door to Vigo's office.

"Vigo!" she shouted. "What in the hells?!"

"E-Eeek! You!" The loan shark from earlier, who had already been in the office, fell to his knees and begged forgiveness. Meanwhile, the burly man behind the desk put his feet up and regarded her with a relaxed demeanor.

"Ah, if it isn't Lily! How long has it been? Still working at the old shop?"

"Still working fine enough," she answered. "Your pathetic little loser schemes notwithstanding."

"You don't know what happened back then. You were still a snot-nosed little kid."

"Who cares about back then?! You have no right to act like some kindly old uncle." Lily slammed her hand on the table and glared down Vigo on the other side. "Don't get any ideas, Vigo. We know you're working with them."

Vigo's thick lips curled up in a smile. "Come now! You're the ones who came barging into my shop! In fact, I think I am going to ask you to leave."

"Don't!" the loan shark wailed. Vigo completely ignored him.

"Now turn around and go back home."

“You really think you can just say that?!”

“Excuse me,” said Melissa, removing one of the contracts from her effects. “We are investigating a case of a forged contract. May we ask you a few questions?”

“And *what* relationship do *I* have with these men?” Vigo asked.

“Do you really think you’re in a position to say that?!”

“My!” Vigo exclaimed. “What a fearsome young lady!”

“Did you call me ‘young lady’?” Melissa asked, blushing a little at being called “young.” “Goodness...”

Lily shot her friend a glare. “Melissa...”

“Well,” said Vigo. “How about this?” He took his feet down from their perch on the desk and placed his hands in front of him, fingers steepled. “Make a wager with me. For your furnace.”

“What?!” Lily’s anger gave way to confusion at the sudden offer. “Y-You audacious little thief! How dare you! Why in the world should I make a wager with you?!”

“If you win,” Vigo said, “I’ll stop interfering with your business. You can do as you like.”

“Who cares?!” Lily demanded. “If you expect me to wager my furnace, there’d better be something damn good in it for me if I win.”

“In that case, I’m afraid you might run into trouble sometime soon,” Vigo said pityingly. “Not that I would do anything, of course. But who’s to say what these very bad men might do!”

“You!” Lily bit her lip, enraged by the blatant coercion.

Looking across at her, Vigo chuckled. “Kah ha ha... Ah, well. Then I suppose I’ll sweeten the pot.” He opened one of the drawers on his desk, and took out a well-used hammer.

Lily was stunned. “That’s my father’s!”

“Yes. Your father once used this. Now it is my favorite hammer in all my

collection. I will wager this against your furnace.”

“It was missing from his estate!” Lily shot back. “You stole it!”

“What a terrible word, ‘steal,’” Vigo said. “I simply happened to purchase it somewhere. If someone else stole it from you, I certainly wouldn’t know anything about it.” He set the hammer down headfirst on the desk, waving his fingers dramatically. “I trust those conditions are to your favor? Now, how about it?”

Lily silently glared down Vigo’s smug face.

Melissa put a hand on her shoulder. “Lily,” she said, speaking calmly. “You don’t have to take him up on this. He’s guilty of forging paperwork. There’s going to be an investigation. This man already has no future.”

“Oh my!” Vigo said. “But if that were to happen, who *knows* where the hammer might end up!”

“You bastard!” Lily squeezed Melissa’s hand. “Melissa... I’m sorry. I want that hammer back no matter what. It’s a keepsake of my father.”

“Lily...” Sensing Lily’s determination, Melissa removed her hand.

Lily took a deep breath and once again turned to stare Vigo right in the eyes. “And what will we be wagering on?” she asked.

“Trial by combat,” Vigo said. “With weapons made by your own hand, by a warrior of your own choosing.”

“Trial by combat...”

“Do you have a problem with it? It’ll be like the preliminaries for the National Fencing Tournament! Shops furnish their own fighters with weapons there too, you know, trying to show off the merit of their work. It’s another form of honest competition!”

Speaking of the National Fencing Tournament, the three-time consecutive champion was, as it happened, in that very room—Kanata Aldezia. Although it was called a *fencing* tournament, in truth the fighters could use any weapon they pleased, not just swords. It was a grand event, where warriors from all over the land with all sorts of fighting techniques would gather for the

competition. Of course, being the smithy that equipped one of the fighters was an opportunity to advertise one's work. Every blacksmith wanted to be the one to forge the winner's weapon.

Vigo proposed to use the same rules as the fencing tournament.

"And where will we be having this trial by combat?"

"I'll book the nearby coliseum. It isn't big enough for an entire tournament, but isn't a smaller arena all the better for a duel?"

"And when?"

"Let's see. Let's do it three days from now. You *can* make a weapon in three days, can't you?"

"Fine," Lily said. "I accept your conditions. Let's do it."

"Ah," said Vigo. "And one more thing."

"What?"

"That black-haired girl is off limits."

"Me?" Kanata asked, gesturing to herself.

"You're a celebrity! Everyone knows you're the monster who won the National Fencing Tournament three years in a row. You'd win even if she gave you a broken stick to fight with. Ah, and the enormous wolf as well. This is meant to be a fair fight between *humans*."

"Okay," Kanata said. "That makes sense."

"Kanata!" A solid half of Lily's confidence came from having Kanata at her side. If she couldn't use her, this might be trouble.

"But even so," continued Kanata, "Miss Lily will never lose to you!"

"Is that so?" Vigo raised one eyebrow, but Kanata was firm.

"Miss Lily is the best blacksmith I've ever met!"

"K-Kanataaaaaaa!!!" Lily hugged Kanata and held on tight. She had come in full of bluster, but it seemed like she had misstepped. Vigo was a terrifying opponent. She clung to Kanata, rubbing her runny nose against her.

But Lily was wrong. Kanata's words were no empty praise. The fluff goods Lily had made for her—the brush and now the wagon accoutrements—were beyond compare. To Kanata, the fluff was all. Her head itself was full of fluff. Her eyes saw only fluff, and fluff was the only thing in her ears. In fact, no matter what you were to say to her, in her mind, she would somehow make it about fluff.

"Hm." Vigo said. "Quite high praise."

"I mean it," said Kanata. "Lily's work is the best I've ever held." Her work, of course, being the brush.

"Coming from *the Kanata Aldezia*, those words mean something. Well! It looks like this will be more entertaining than I thought!"

"I'm looking forward to it too," Kanata said. "I can't wait to see what you come up with! I do hope it isn't too boring!" In her mind, Kanata was expecting Vigo to make another brush.

"Gwa ha ha! As if I, the great Vigo Jensen, would produce something *boring*! I like you, girl!"

"I just hope it's a good fair match!"

"If she's a match for me at all!" Vigo bellowed.

The two were feeding off each other's energy, getting hyped up. Vigo was imagining a glorious trial by combat fought with the finest of weapons. Kanata was imagining them fluffing each other with brushes.

"Eheh heh heh heh heh heh!" laughed Kanata.

"Aha ha ha ha ha ha!" laughed Vigo.

† † †

"Melissa, please! I beg you!" Lily pleaded, pressing the palms of her hands together in an earnest entreaty.

Melissa sighed. "Hahhh... I had a feeling it would end up this way."

"I *could* hire someone else, but who's to say Vigo wouldn't bribe them? The only ones I can trust are you and Kanata. Please, Melissa! I'll do the

maintenance on your rapier for free!"

"Well...your father would never forgive me if I didn't, would he? And how could I abandon such a cute little thing in her hour of need? I'll do it."

"Hooray! Thank you, Melissa!" Lily jumped for joy into Melissa's arms.

"Don't mention it," Melissa said, holding her tight. But inside, she was crying. *Another day of precious free time, gone!*

"Okay, Melissa," Lily said. "Now hand over your sword."

"What? You're going to use my old blade?" Melissa took her rapier from her belt. She had come here in the first place to have Lily do maintenance on the thing.

"Kanata just brought me something incredible. If I use it, I might be able to refine your rapier's attack power."

"I suppose if you're using my darling blade as a base, it will take me less time to accustom myself to it."

"Then that settles that! And the experience I'll gain will serve perfectly well as payment."

"I'm happy to pay..." Melissa said. "Oh well. Do as you like."

Melissa handed over the rapier, and Lily went to take it to the forge immediately.

"I'll be back in three days!" Melissa shouted from outside. "Make sure you eat properly!"

"I know, I know!" Lily called back from the workshop.

"I hope she does..." Melissa muttered. "That girl forgets the outside world exists when she gets into her work..."

She was worried that Lily would forget to eat entirely, and she would find her three days later a shriveled husk. But she herself was quite busy as well. She had to return to the guild and finish her tasks as quickly as possible so that she might be able to get the day of the duel off from work. She wouldn't have time to check on Lily.

“Leave it to me, then!” said Kanata.

“Really, Miss Kanata? I would hate to interrupt your journey...”

“Of course! We’re not in any particular hurry, and I wanna see what amazing thing Lily comes up with!”

Kanata’s head was full of fantasies of brushes and other fluff accessories. Not that Melissa knew that. Melissa waved goodbye as she returned to the guild and bowed her head, entrusting Lily’s well-being to Kanata.

† † †

“Et voila! Spaghetti aglio e olio with spring cabbage and ham!” Kanata portioned the dish onto a big plate with a pair of tongs, and Lily, ravenous, devoured it greedily.

“Ahhhh!” she cried, cheeks stuffed full to bursting, chewing rapturously. “Holy crap! The way the saltiness of the ham comes through in the sauce! Perfectly accented with the sweetness of the cabbage—!”

“That’s because I infused the olive oil with juuuust a bit of garlic extract,” Kanata said. “It really makes the cabbage pop!”

“It’s godsdamned perfect!” Lily declared. “I can’t believe how much care you put into cooking! Why can’t you be my wife?! Ghk—!” She choked. “Something got caught in my throat!”

“Have some water!” Kanata said, proffering a cup.

Lily snatched up the water and gulped it down. “*Glug glug glug... Phaaah!* What the heck, did you put something in the water? This is great too!”

“I flavored it with lemon and mint!” Kanata said. “It should neutralize the aftertaste of the garlic!”

Lily squeezed Kanata tight around the middle, weeping. “You don’t overlook a damn thing! Marry me, Kanata! Please! I’m serious!”

Kanata’s pets were enjoying the meal not a single bit less.

“*Slurp slurp... Incredible!*” Zag’giel declared. “*Kanata’s cuisine is the greatest under the heavens!*”

“We are of alike minds, my comrade!” said Fenrir. *“Lady Kanata’s cooking is the best!”*

But all good things must come to an end.

“Thanks for the meal!” Lily said. “I’m gonna get back to work, I guess!”

“Good luck!” said Kanata, waving her goodbye while still wearing her apron.

Kanata had been handling everything, from food, to making sure Lily bathed, to making her bed, and even preparing changes of clothes. Thanks to her dedicated support, Lily was able to put her full attention into her project.

† † †

Three days later, Melissa stood with her rapier at the ready, a tense expression on her face. The most time off she could get off from work was half a day, so she had come here directly after her shift. She was still unarmored and wearing her receptionist’s uniform, but she was wearing well-fitting combat boots. Melissa was a nimble fighter who favored quick thrusts with her sword. This was how she preferred to fight.

“Finally,” she said.

“I’m sorry it took me so long to get everything ready,” Lily apologized.

“No harm done. You made it on time,” Melissa reassured her. “This sword is even easier to use than the last one. It almost feels as if the sword is wielding my arm rather than the other way around.”

“I couldn’t get the edge any harder than it was with the tempered underscale,” Lily said, “so I tried incorporating the new material into the body of the blade...”

“Yes. Better to focus on usability than to attempt refinement and do it poorly. With this sword, I am confident that I could defeat a top-tier adventurer.”

Melissa had once been a B-Rank adventurer, but she had not been neglecting her training even now that she was part of the Adventurers’ Guild staff. The only thing standing in the way of her ranking up was a relative lack of attack power. This new sword should resolve that issue entirely. She had not taken a rank test in quite some time, but in terms of ability, she was as good as any A-

Rank—the top percentile of all adventurers. No matter who Vigo found to be his champion, they would have a difficult time defeating her. It was far more likely that she would end the fight with a single move.

“Hm?” Kanata asked. “Where’s the brush?”

Nobody seemed to hear her. Alas, the battle of fluff Kanata had envisioned was never even on the table.

“That being said,” Melissa continued, “I had been worried about you working yourself to death, Lily, but if anything you look *better* than you did three days ago.”

“Oh, you won’t *believe* how good Kanata’s cooking is!” Lily said. “She’s kept me in good condition.”

“Is she really that good?”

“She could go pro. If she ran a restaurant I would eat there every day.”

“Wow...” Melissa said, loudly swallowing her saliva. She had been working overtime every day for the past three days, barely eating anything more than snacks. She had skipped lunch today as well. She would just about kill for a hot meal.

“When this is over, we’re getting food!” Melissa declared. “A feast to end all feasts!”

“Yeah!” Lily cheered. “A victory party! And Kanata, you’ve been doing nothing but looking after me these past few days. Dinner’s on me tonight!”

“Yay! I can’t wait! I’m so excited, Zaggy! Fen-fen!” In a way, Kanata had done the most out of any of them.

“*Excellent!*” said Zag’giel. “*While Kanata is without a doubt the best chef in the world, it is always a fascinating experience to sample human cuisine.*”

Fenrir agreed. “*It seems human cooking has changed while I was in seclusion. I intend to enjoy it!*”

But as Kanata’s team was rallying, they heard a voice from behind.

“Now, now. Isn’t it a little early to celebrate victory?” Vigo had arrived late.

The moneylender was with him, clinging on like a suckerfish to a shark. “Before we fight, the contract. I won’t have you weaseling out of a loss.”

He grinned like a shark.

Lily bared her teeth and growled low in her throat.

“Says you!” she spat back.

“I’ll take a look at those first, if you don’t mind,” said Melissa, giving them a careful read. “All right,” she said when she was finished. “These are indeed the same terms we agreed to before the fight. I suppose you both should sign it, then.”

Lily and Vigo signed the contract in ink mixed with their own blood.

“Very well,” Melissa said, “then to the victor will go the spoils. And both of you accept these terms?”

“I do,” said Vigo.

“Sure,” said Lily. The two nodded, glowering at each other the whole time.

“I would like to have Kanata hold on to the contract,” Melissa proposed. Kanata was not participating in the duel, and she was moreover the strongest fighter there. It would be impossible for Vigo to take the contract from her if he was of a mind to do some underhanded scheme.

They entered through the doors of the coliseum.

“Is this young lady your champion?” Vigo asked Lily, indicating Melissa.

“What are you implying?! Melissa’s strong enough that there are rumors she’s gonna be taking over as the next guildmaster!”

Melissa, who had no desire for the lonely life of a high-ranking guild officer, winced painfully. “Lily...don’t...”

“What about *you*?” Lily went on, not heeding Melissa’s interruption. “I don’t see *your* champion anywhere. Or are you going to make the loan shark fight?”

“Hah,” Vigo said. “Of course not. This man is merely one of my sycophants. Your opponent is already waiting for you in the arena.”

He turned away from Lily’s group and made his way to one of the side

entrances to the stand.

“Later, then,” he said. “Take care not to lose the deed to your shop.”

They parted ways and went for opposite ends of the stands overlooking the arena. Melissa, who was fighting, went in through the arena doors, where her opponent must be waiting.

“Bleeeh!” Lily shouted at Vigo from across the way, contorting her face and making every variety of obscene gesture.

“Miss Melissa, you can do it!” Kanata cheered.

“Of course,” Melissa said. “Leave it to me.”

“Melissa!” said Lily. “Go for the win, but don’t get yourself hurt, okay?!”

“Don’t worry. I have no intention of losing.” Melissa closed her eyes and steadied her breathing, sword in hand, advancing through the dimly lit corridor to the arena proper. The battle would start as soon as she entered the arena. On guard, she burst in to find—

“C-Cowards!” Lily screamed. “The lot of you!”

“Now, now,” said Vigo, smiling wickedly. “Nobody said the fight would be one-on-one.”

† † †

“No...” Melissa gritted her teeth. Her opponent was not one fighter, but ten men, waiting for her with weapons in hand. “Now that I think about it, the contract *didn’t* specify a one-on-one fight...”

The terms only stated that the champions of the parties in dispute would do battle, not how many champions there would be. Melissa heard the sound of iron bars falling shut behind her. The arena gate was closed. This was a trap. They weren’t planning on letting her go.

“*Human filth!*” Zag’giel shouted. “*You would sully this contest?!*”

“*You won’t get away with this!*” added Fenrir. The two, furious, had their fur standing on end.

“Get away with it? But I already have! The contract is signed! If you withdraw,

“it will be your loss! Now, I’ll be taking that deed!” Vigo stuck his tongue out at Lily as she glared him down.

Melissa, however, had not been panicking, but assessing the strength of her enemies.

“I’ve seen these men before...” she said.

They were former adventurers.

The Adventurers’ Guild allowed almost anyone to join if they wished, but by the same token, they placed many restrictions on their members. Members would receive penalties for bad behavior, for abandoning requests without notice, for threatening clients... And if the adventurer in question didn’t show any improvement, they would have their qualifications as an adventurer revoked. If they kept acting like bandits, they would be dismissed—no matter how high their rank had been.

All these men were former adventurers who had been kicked out of the guild for their many misdeeds.

One fighter in particular stood out. He was an enormous balding and bearded man, almost as tall as the walls of the arena. On the left side of his face was a deep scar he had gotten from a fight with a magic beast. He wielded a greataxe that looked like he had taken the blade straight off a guillotine.

“Cazulo the Bear Killer...” Melissa said. “Former A-Rank.”

The Bear Killer had earned his name for striking down a calamitous magic beast known only as the Doom Bear. His weapon looked larger and sharper than it had back in the day—no doubt this was Vigo’s handiwork.

Melissa had heard of Cazulo even before she became an adventurer. Back then he was the strongest of all the A-Ranks. That was ten years ago, but even if his skills had declined, he would still be a formidable opponent. It would be foolish to hope he had lost his strength.

If it were only Cazulo, Melissa would have a chance. But with the others in the arena, her odds of victory were looking pretty slim. Frankly, they were close to zero.

“Hey!” Vigo shouted down. “What am I paying you for?! Get her!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Cazulo hefted his giant axe and took a heavy step forward.

“Damn...” Melissa hissed.

If the rabble had taken the lead, she might have been able to thin the herd a bit. But as Cazulo approached, the others spread out around the perimeter of the arena. Even Melissa the Zephyr would struggle to fight so many men at once if she were to be surrounded. What’s more, the floor of the arena was sand, a disadvantage for a mobility fighter like her. This trap had been meticulously planned. Vigo had left nothing to chance. For whatever reason, he was absolutely obsessed with getting his hands on Lily’s furnace.

“Hyah!” Melissa struck before the enemy could close in on her. True to her sobriquet, she moved like the wind. “If this sand is going to impede me, I may as well use it!”

She kicked up a great plume of it as she ran, hiding her body from sight as she charged not for the men, but for the walls of the arena. She ran in a fast circle around the perimeter, the sand swirling and tossing until it became a veritable storm, robbing the men of their sight.

“Take advantage of the chaos,” she told herself, “and pick them off one by one!”

Melissa’s plan worked. Even Cazulo couldn’t make her out through the smoke screen of sand. But there was one thing she had not considered.

“Graaaaaaaaaah!” Cazulo held his axe out in front of him and spun it like a fan, creating a vortex of wind that sucked in all of the sand and blew it away.

“No—!” Melissa was bowled over by the force of the wind, as a number of men closed in at once.

“Let’s play!” one of them sneered.

“Nh...!” Melissa thrust back at the man’s sword as it bore down on her, striking it with the tip of her rapier. She was off-balance, but her sword was made of dragon underscale. It might yet have enough power to destroy her opponent’s weapon. Sparks flew, but the man’s sword didn’t break. It must

have been forged from quality steel. So much for hoping that the cowardly trap reflected a lack of confidence in Vigo's weapons.

"My skills as a blacksmith are second to none!" Vigo boasted, sneering down from the stands.

Melissa glared up at him. "If you're so skilled, then why?!" she demanded. But she was in the middle of a fight. Nobody bothered to respond to her question.

She skillfully maneuvered to try to move in while avoiding the area threatened by Cazulo's axe, but the other men got in her way, preventing her from attacking. It was all she could do not to get hit.

"If only I had had more time for training!" she lamented. Melissa was putting on a brave face, but her movements were slowly growing sluggish. A single hit from Cazulo would cleave her unarmored body in two. It was only a matter of time.

"Nghhh...!" Zag'giel exclaimed. "*Despicable cowardice! We must do something!*"

He leapt up into action, but Fenrir caught him by the scruff of his neck.

"Wait!" the Spirit Wolf objected. "*Both Kanata and we nonhumans are prohibited from entering! If we do anything, Melissa will lose immediately!*"

"Grh! But if we do not...!"

"Melissa!" Lily shouted. "Stop! Enough! Vigo, we sur—"

Her words were cut off by the sound of Cazulo's axe striking the ground. Melissa dodged the axe, but not the cloud of sand the axe kicked up. It tore at her body with enough force to cause nicks and scratches all over her exposed skin. The other men were familiar with Cazulo's attacks—they avoided the cloud of sand and charged in after Melissa as she retreated.

There was no hope for a comeback. Melissa would be defeated. Lily would lose the shop. Or so everyone watching was certain.

But they were wrong.

"Zaggy! Zaggy!"

“Kanata, what is it? Do you agree? We must save her, even at the cost of the match!”

“Well...” Kanata whispered into Zag’giel’s ear as the sound of Cazulo’s axe smashing against the arena floor rang out once again.

“*T-Truly?! We may?!*” Zag’giel looked up with shining eyes.

“It’s an emergency!” Kanata said. “This is way more important than the rules!”

“*We thank you! Then let us go at once!*”

“Hurry, hurry!” Kanata said, casting her teleportation spell. Everyone’s eyes were fixed on the arena. Nobody noticed that Kanata and Zag’giel were gone.

† † †

“Huff...huff...” Melissa was nearly unscathed. She had faced a veritable storm of attacks, but so far she had been able to avoid taking any serious blows. Still, she was at her limit. Even if she managed to dodge the next axe swing, there would be no evading the swarm. Her back was to the wall, and the underlings were cutting off her escape.

“Is this the end...?”

“Melissa!” Lily shouted. “You don’t have to do this! Stop!”

“It’s okay!” Melissa responded. “It’ll be okay... I haven’t lost yet!” This was the number-one rule for an adventurer: as long as you haven’t given up, you haven’t lost. There was still a chance. Melissa grabbed at the wall with her hand for support and steadied her breath the best she could.

“Fat chance!” Vigo cried. “That would take a miracle! Finish her!”

“Graaaaaah!” At Vigo’s command, Cazulo hefted his axe above his head. And then he swung. All the strength in his body was behind that blow. Even if Melissa managed to dodge, the shock wave would tear her to shreds.

“Nh—!” Melissa didn’t close her eyes. She kept them glued to that axe until the last possible moment. And then, suddenly, a black shadow filled her field of vision...

There was a terrible calamitous noise, and a burst of wind strong enough to send every last grain of sand on the arena floor airborne.

“Bleh!” Vigo spat sand out of his mouth. “Hold back a *little*, won’t you?” He scanned the arena to try to find the blood splatter Melissa surely must have been reduced to by now.

But she wasn’t. Melissa was being held safe in one arm of a beautiful young man.

“Are you unhurt?” the youth asked.

“Eh?! I...yes? What?” The sudden appearance of this gorgeous figure threw Melissa’s mind into disarray. She wondered if she had been killed and this was a figment of her dying mind’s imagination.

“Wh-Who the devil are you?! Where did *you* come from?!” Vigo shouted, springing up and leaning over the front row of the stands.

“Our name is Zag’giel,” the youth said. “We shall be joining this battle. We trust this will not be an issue? After all, it is not written that this is to be a one-on-one fight, is it?”

Vigo wasn’t the only one surprised by this sudden interruption.

“Wh-Who is *that*?!” Lily asked.

“It’s Zaggy!” Kanata replied. She had just teleported back to the stands.

“Zaggy?! That cool guy is your cat?! No way!”

“It’s just a shame that the only fluffy part is on his head...” Kanata sighed, resting her cheek on her hand.

“But is he allowed in the arena?” Lily muttered. “I’m glad he saved Melissa, but if we break the rules...”

“*I see!*” Fenrir exclaimed. “*The only ones prohibited by the contract were Lady Kanata herself, and nonhumanoids! If he is humanoid, he should be allowed to participate! Very clever, you Demon King! Alas! If only I too had a human form!*”

“It still feels like cheating...” Lily said. “Wait. Did you just say *Demon King*?!”

“*I did not!*” Fenrir lied. “*And he was trying to cheat us! This is just fighting fire*

with fire. They were the ones to break our trust!" He scoffed contemptuously at Vigo, satisfied that his own schemes would be his undoing.

"But even if he's in human form, he's supposed to be wielding a weapon I made, isn't he...?" Lily frowned.

"Yeah!" said Kanata. "That's why we stopped by your workshop first!"

"What?!" Lily took another look at Zag'giel. He had blocked Cazulo's blow with a sword he was holding in his right hand. "Wait! Is that the sword I was working on when this all started?!"

The sword had been hammered into form, but it was still untempered and unsharpened. It was still an incomplete item. And yet, Zag'giel had stopped the heavy axe easily.

"Impossible!" Vigo shouted. "How could he stop my axe with a half-finished sword?!"

"We do not deign often to fight with weapons," Zag'giel said, sending Cazulo's massive body along with his axe flying with a single strike. "But this is a fine sword. We would like to wield it again when it is complete."

"But that was *the Cazulo!*" Vigo protested, his mouth agape at the farce playing out in front of him.

"Can you stand?" Zag'giel asked.

"Y-Yes... Thank you." With Zag'giel's help, Melissa took to her feet.

"This can't be!" Vigo's eyes were darting everywhere in his confusion. Flecks of foam were forming at his mouth. "What's happening?! This isn't possible! Somebody that strong can't be real!"

Meanwhile, in the arena...

"Are we the one you should be looking at?" Zag'giel asked. "That man is your opponent, is he not?"

"What...?" Melissa said. She was struggling to stand, but her courage had not wavered in the slightest.

"We have evened the odds," Zag'giel declared.

Melissa looked. The riffraff were all lying unconscious. Zag'giel must have defeated them while she was distracted.

"Now it is a proper duel. We fear that man would not acknowledge your victory were we to finish it."

"Yes," Melissa said. "I understand. Thank you." She held her rapier level and lowered her stance. The sand that had made it so difficult to find her footing was gone. She snapped into position.

"G-Graaaaah!" Cazulo bellowed. Sensing Melissa's incoming attack, he scrambled to his feet and brandished his greataxe, its wicked blade big enough to fell a great tree with a single chop.

Cazulo undoubtedly had the advantage. With her wounds and her fatigue, Melissa would be unable to bring even half of her ordinary strength to bear. Her odds were three-to-seven at best. And yet...

"I will not lose to you!" Melissa declared. "Not with the sword Lily gave me!"

Suddenly, the blade of her sword, enhanced with the Philosopher's Stone, began to glow with a bright light. The brilliant magic enveloped the rapier, and then Melissa herself, trailing off of her body like an ephemeral cloak.

"I can do this!"

She darted forward, the fastest she had moved in her life. She was upon Cazulo too fast for him to counterattack. All he could do was desperately try to block, holding his axe in front of him like a shield. The glowing sword thrust ripped through the thick steel like tissue paper, aiming straight for his throat.

But the impact never came. Melissa had masterfully stopped her sword just close enough to only touch, but not pierce, his windpipe.

"Khh—"

"Do you concede?" Melissa asked.

Cazulo nodded fervently, and she removed her rapier. The greataxe clattered noisily to the floor.

"Lily!" Melissa cried. "We won!"

She gave Lily a V sign for victory as Lily jumped down from the stands to hug Melissa tight.

"I'm so glaaaaaad!" Lily sobbed. "I'm so glad you're alive!!!"

Melissa patted Lily soothingly on the head. "All thanks to the sword you made me," she said. "I can't believe it. A real magic weapon..."

It had only just awakened, but it seemed that there was indeed a spirit dwelling within Melissa's rapier. And, befitting its owner, Melissa the Zephyr, it seemed to be a spirit of wind. The sword had become something truly priceless.



“It’s an incredible sword,” Melissa marveled. “I’ll have to take care not to be swallowed up by its power.”

“Melissa...” Lily said.

“Yes, Lily? What is it?”

“I’ll... I’ll sell it to you for cheap.”

“You really are a professional. I see the future of the Morsognir Smithy is in safe hands.”

† † †

Vigo Jensen left the coliseum as fast as his legs could carry him, wailing, “It can’t be! It can’t be! It can’t beeeeeeee!!!” His mind refused to accept what he had seen with his own eyes. “How could that girl’s sword defeat my axe?! It’s impossible!”

Melissa would have never won if not for Lily’s sword—a sword that Vigo had to admit that his own craft could not equal.

Suddenly, he heard Kanata calling from behind him as he fled. “Excuse me!”

Vigo wheeled around, only for Zag’giel and Fenrir to come in behind him, cutting off his escape.

“You have lost,” said Zag’giel.

“You won’t get away!” added Fenrir.

Kanata walked up to Vigo, her shoes clacking on the pavement. “That hammer was your wager, right? Please be nice and give it to us.”

“Sh-Shut up! The furnace and the hammer are both mine! If only it weren’t for *him*, I would have been the greatest smith in the Royal Capital! And now he’s finally kicked the bucket! It should be *my* turn! How could I lose to that girl?! I don’t believe it! I can’t! It’s impossible!”

He raised the hammer and swung it at Kanata.

“Kanata!” exclaimed Zag’giel.

“How dare you?!” shouted Fenrir.

But Kanata moved faster than either of them could react.

“Hyah!” She didn’t dodge Vigo’s attack—she seized him by the arm and *threw* him.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!!”

“And there you are!” Kanata said, catching Vigo as he fell. “Have you calmed down?”

Vigo was out of his mind, still reeling from the terror of the fall. “It can’t be... It can’t be...” he muttered.

“It can,” Kanata said. “You lost.”

“No! Noooooo!!!” Vigo shook his head, refusing to accept reality.

But Kanata took something out of her Inventory Screen.

“Look at this, please,” she said. It was the brush Lily had made.

“Wh-What is this?” Vigo asked. “It’s extraordinary!” Even in his state, Vigo had the eyes of a master blacksmith. It still didn’t seem that he had accepted his defeat, but he couldn’t tear his eyes away from the masterpiece before him. “Is this made of dragon underscale?! The dragon seems to have been considerably ancient as well. But it’s difficult to work with the scales of an ancient dragon! How did she forge the underscale to such a fine point with those skinny arms of hers?! This isn’t just made of top-quality materials. This is a work of art!”

Vigo’s whole body was shaking. It seemed that he finally understood.

“I lost...” he said, slumping his shoulders in defeat. “I’m not even worthy to kiss the feet of Lily Morsognir. To say nothing of her father...” He fell to his knees and began to weep.

Kanata looked down at Vigo, smiling kindly. “Yes,” she said. “That is true. Do you know what you’re missing?”

Vigo looked up. Kanata’s smile was like a beam of sunlight.

“I know,” he said. “I’ve been such a fool, but at long last I finally understand. What I lack...is—”

“Fluff!” Kanata said.

“Pardon?” Vigo’s face stiffened.

“Fluff!” Kanata repeated, smiling down at him. “You see? It was the fluff that defeated you! You have not been giving enough mind to the fluff! With such low fluff-mindedness, you could never make a fluff brush as good as Miss Lily’s!”

“What? A brush?” Vigo had no idea what Kanata was talking about, but he thought he understood that Kanata was ordering him to make a brush. “I don’t have time to be messing with brushes! I need to rethink my weapon designs completely!”

“But didn’t you just lose to Miss Lily, the maker of this brush?”

“Gah!” he said. “I—!”

As nonsensical as Kanata’s words had been, here she had hit the bull’s-eye. “When you have made a fluff enhancer to surpass this brush,” Kanata solemnly intoned, “then you will have transcended your limitations.”

Steeped in Kanata’s divine aura, Vigo felt like his heart was cleansed of sin. It was all he could do to clasp his hands together in prayer. “A-Aaah!”

Zag’giel and Fenrir nodded sagely as they watched from the sidelines.

“Once again, Kanata has dispensed mercy to the evil, and shown them a path toward repentance,” Zag’giel observed.

“*That’s our Lady Kanata!*” Fenrir cheered. “*I knew my nose wasn’t wrong!*”

Kanata placed a hand on Vigo’s shoulder. “Seek the fluff. Create for me a worthy fluff enhancer.”

It had the weight of a divine pronouncement.

“I-I will! I will change my ways and make a fluff enhancer even greater than this one!”

His brainwashing—or, rather, *repentance*—complete, Vigo paid recompense for his crimes, along with his lackeys. He stopped making weapons altogether, and went on to become the finest brush artisan in the land.

And they lived happily ever after.

Afterword

New readers, may the fluff be with you! (This is a greeting used by the followers of Fluffism.)

Returning readers, may the fluff be with you! (This is a greeting used by the followers of Fluffism.)

I'm so pleased to talk to you in yet another afterword! It's been five whole months!

This book was originally posted on the website *Shosetsuka ni Naro* ("Let's be Novelists"), with some revisions and additions. I worked extra hard on the bonus story this time. Maybe a bit too hard! It's a bit long for a short story!

Once again, we have a tale of Kanata's various deeds on her unending quest for fluff. What did you think? I hope you enjoyed reading about Kanata and her cute fluff balls traveling the land and vanquishing evil.

Now, I'm writing this afterword around the end of June. The deadline this time is in the middle of the worst time of year—the rainy season—when the humble author of this piece suffers terrible atmospheric migraines. I've been spending my time writhing in hellish torment as I play the hit new game *The Last of Us Part II* and my dog pleads for me not to die. I just finished a no-hit run, taking down every enemy on the map with a single shot from my bow. It was crazy fun. I only barely turned in the manuscript on time.

In retrospect, maybe the migraines aren't exactly at fault here. Perhaps I had better move on before my manager gets any angrier.

I'm sorry! I promise to finish Volume 3 with time to spare! Really! Really really really! I already know what I'm going to write!

Oh, that's right. The next fluff will be a vampire. And a girl this time. I hope that piqued your interest! (Blatant self-promotion.) She isn't like those two useless balls of fluff who hang around Kanata. She is a huntress! And what does

she hunt? Oh, sparrows and swallows and pigeons, perhaps with a side of rat. Proud of her handiwork, she'll show them off to you. It *is* a bit hard to watch her dive into her meal right in front of you. But she's fluffy and cute so we love her anyway.

Unfortunately, you *will* need to clean up after her. Wings and beaks and feet and such. But she's fluffy and cute so we love her anyway.

And it is a bit creepy watching her lick up the blood when she's done, but she's fluffy and cute so we love her anyway.

Hold on—I was supposed to be telling you about how cute and fluffy she was! This is turning out kinda grotesque...

Anyway, with that (with that?), I'd like to end by thanking everyone who helped with this book.

First is my managing editor S. I'm so terribly sorry for the trouble I caused you! I'll do better! I may be a no-good writer who only barely squeaks their work in on an extended deadline, but I hope you will continue to work with me!

Next is Falmaro, for the illustrations. The cuteness quotient this time was perfect! All of the characters—Kanata, Zaggy, Fen-fen, and the rest—have never been more charming! I would be more than honored to work with you on the next one!

Finally, I would like to thank the editors, designers, proofreaders, salespeople, booksellers, and everyone else who made Volume 2 a reality.

And, of course, a huge thanks to you, the one reading this!

We will meet again, in Volume 3! Until then, you must have faith!

Farewell!

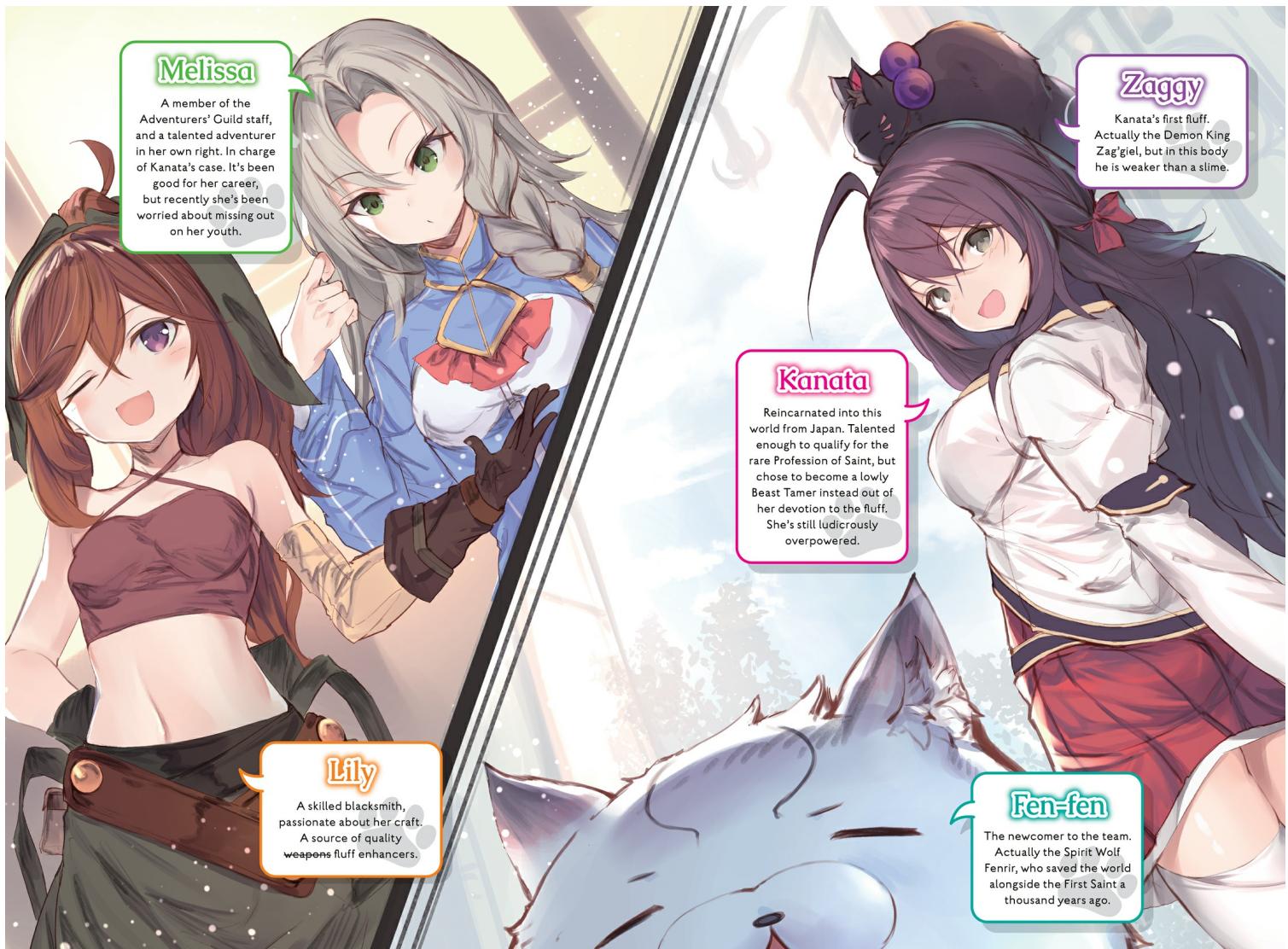
-Inumajin, June 2020

“Is it my
youthful allure?
My floof-ful
allure? Being
a Beast Tamer
is amazing!”

“Your
Holiness!
I've waited
so long for
you!!!”

Saint Nok
I'm Just a Passing
BEAST TAMER
The Invincible Saint
and the Quest for Fluff





**“Ehe he he he!
I wonder where
she’s going!”**

**“That...
That girl is a
monster!”**

In the end,
fire, a blizzard,
poison, curses,
and hypnosis
all proved
ineffective
against Kanata.
Her barrier
protected her
from all harm.



Bonus Translator's Notes

Floof-ful Allure and Post-Fluff Clarity:

Kanata, as I'm sure you're aware, has quite a number of somewhat peculiar things to say about her favorite substance—the fluff. For example, when the tiny fluffy Fenrir jumps up into her arms, she marvels over her good fortune, and wonders if she has finally entered her *mofumofumoteki* (モフモフモテ期): a portmanteau of *mofumofu* (fluff) and *moteki* (the period of one's life wherein one enjoys a great deal of romantic attention). Her floof-ful allure, if you will.

Not long after, when Kanata is trying to focus on Fenrir's story, she is noted as having sated herself on fluff and entered *kenja moudo* (賢者モード). Literally this means "sage mode." Figuratively—well, let's just say I think the term *post-fluff clarity* captures the sense of it pretty well.

Bella's Slang:

Throughout the book, Melissa, the experienced guild staff member, keeps needing to chide her new junior subordinate Bella over her inappropriate language at work. The first time we see Bella, she is getting in trouble for using the slightly outrageous word *aashi* (あーし) to refer to herself instead of something more appropriate.

Later on, she gets told off again for addressing Melissa as *paisen* (パイセン) instead of *senpai* (先輩). This is a common Japanese title used for one's senior. In the translation, I had Bella address Melissa as "boss." I think it fits her casual speech patterns, anyway. Melissa is her senior, and her mentor.

Every Little Bit Counts:

In English, Chapter 3 is called, *Waste of Time? No! Every Little Bit Counts!* In Japanese, the *Every Little Bit Counts* is "Chiri mo tsumoreba nanto yara desu!"

(塵も積もればなんとやらです！). This means, “Pile up dust and something something!” It is a reference to the proverb, “*Chiri mo tsumoreba yama to naru*” (塵も積もれば山となる), meaning “Pile up dust and you’ll have a mountain.” Even dust, if you have enough of it, can become something great.

The White Devil:

At the climax of their confrontation with Saint Marianne, the Goddess sacrifices her Saint to create a horrifying monster with which to fight Kanata. You might be asking, given the setting...is this a magic beast? Or a demon? The answer seems to be no—or at least, the Japanese gives no indication of that. The white devil is described as a *kaibutsu* (怪物), meaning *monster*, and *akuma* (悪魔), meaning demon or devil—but distinct from the word *mazoku* (魔族) used to refer to demons like our beloved Zaggy.

Bonus Glossary

New Characters:

Spirit Wolf Fenrir—*Shinookami Fenriru* (神狼 Fenriru) Fen-fen—*Fenfen* (フェン フェン)

Saint Marianne Ishfalke—*Seijo Mariannu Ishufaruke* (聖女マリアンヌ・イシュファルケ) Lord Ogre—*Ooga-sama* (オーガ様) Albert Molmo—*Arubaato Moromo* (アルバート・モルモ) Baiko—*Baiko* (バイコ)

Bella—*Bera* (ベラ)

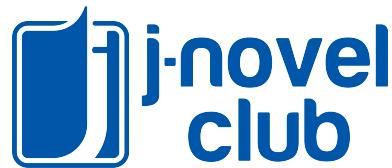
Morsognir—*Moozunguniru* (モーズソグニル) Vigo Jensen—*Vigo lensen* (ヴィゴ・イエンセン) Cazulo the Bear Killer—*Kumagoroshi no Kazuuro* (熊殺しのカズーロ)

Locations:

The Holy City Lordentia—*Seito Roodentia* (聖都ローデンティア) Imperial Azamut—*Azamuto Teikoku* (アザムト帝国) The Kingdom of Falkas—*Farukusu Oukoku* (ファルクス王国) The Farlé Grasslands—*Faare Daisougen* (ファーレ大草原) The High Cathedral—*Daiseidou* (大聖堂) Chestnut Village—*Maron Mura* (マロン村) The Jensen Armory—*lensen Buguten* (イエンセン武具店)

Others:

The Temple Knights—*Seikishidan* (精騎士団) The white devil—*Junpaku no Akuma* (純白の悪魔) Fluffism—*Mofumofukyou* (モフモフ教) The Doom Bear—*Onikuma* (鬼熊)



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Saint? No! I'm Just a Passing Beast Tamer! Volume 2

by Inumajin

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