
Saint? No!
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I'm Just a Passing
BEAST TAMER!
The Invincible Saint and the Quest for Fluff


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Chapter 1: Hero? Sage? Saint? No, Thank You! My Mind Is Made Up!

The teachers ran up and mobbed the black-haired girl from every side as soon as they saw her pass by.

“Lady Kanata! Our apologies for the delay!”

“I can’t believe this day is finally here!”

“We’re all so proud to be your teachers.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever looked forward to a Selection Ceremony this much!”

“Perhaps you’ll be one of the rare few chosen to become a Saint.”

They heaped praise on Kanata, forgetting their work registering students who entered the assembly hall.

Kanata had every feature considered enviable in a beautiful young woman: lustrous black hair, enchanting eyes, and fair skin. But she didn’t just have beauty. She had a definite grace to her bearing and a divine aura that made her hard to approach. Her teachers looked at her with reverence.

She gave them a gentle smile and brought her hands together as a blush crept into her cheeks.

“Thank you for your kind words!” she said. “I owe everything to your teaching. But I’m afraid I’m running late to the ceremony, so if you will excuse me...”

She bowed politely.

The teachers stepped aside to let her pass and stared idly as their star pupil walked by.

“It’s finally time.” Kanata passed through the door to the auditorium where the ceremony was about to begin. She balled her fists up tightly in front of her chest. She closed her eyes, forcing her pounding heart to still. Her teachers

hadn’t noticed, but Kanata was extremely tense.

“It will be all right,” she told herself. “I’ve trained so hard for this day. I’m *sure* I’ll be given the Profession I want!”

To Kanata, who had just turned fifteen this year, today was the most important day of her life. Today was the Selection Ceremony, when she and all of her fellow boys and girls would be given their Professions.

In this world, such things were decided by the gods themselves. It was not an unfair or random selection. The gods could see the Professions most suited for each person. It was nothing short of divine revelation.

The selections were also not simply a matter of talent. The gods took the way each child had spent their first fifteen years into account and would adjust the number and variety of Professions revealed to each on that basis. A child of merchants who had spent their early life helping in their parents’ business might be given something related to commerce. A child who had taken up the sword from a young age might be made some type of sword fighter. One who had engrossed themself deeply in the study of magic might have Professions related to magecraft revealed to them. Most would be given one or two choices. An extraordinary prodigy might have as many as five.

Among those, the Saints mentioned by Kanata’s teachers were exceptionally rare. It was a Saint’s job to receive oracles from the gods and guide humanity to the right path. They stood at the top of the Holy Church and all its tens of millions of believers around the world. They were the elite of the elite, with power and wealth surpassing even that of a king. It stood to reason that Kanata’s teachers wanted that for their student. There were other very rare Professions as well: the Hero, whose job was to defeat the armies of the Demon King from the Dark Continent, and the Sage, who pursued the truth of the world and led humanity to greater wisdom and more advanced technology. Usually, when a child was selected as one of these, their home country would gain international significance.

Regardless, the Selection Ceremony was an important ritual that happened only once in a person’s life. The decision made here would reflect everything a child had done so far.

“I’ve done everything I can,” said Kanata. “I have no regrets.” She stepped inside the large school auditorium to find her fellow graduates—all girls at Kanata’s school—waiting for her. They, too, were here for the ritual. The air was thick with tension. Every single person was on edge.

“Oh, look!” said someone. “It’s Lady Kanata!”

All around her, people started whispering:

“Do you suppose she’ll be selected as a Saint after all?”

“She might be a Sage. Lady Kanata *has* to be the greatest prodigy in the history of our school.”

“What about a Hero? Lady Kanata has the skills for it. Didn’t she win the national fencing tournament three times in a row? It feels a bit like she’s just showing off.”

Lady Kanata this, Lady Kanata that. A Saint or a Sage or a Hero. Kanata reached her seat in silence. Her chest burned as she waited for the ceremony to begin. None of those possibilities were acceptable to her.

Saint? Sage? Hero? she thought. *No, I don’t want such an overblown Profession. Anyway, my mind is made up.* She kept a straight face as more and more students turned their curious glances her way.

Born to the household of a lord of this land, Kanata had exerted all of her effort toward this day. She’d refused to grow complacent despite her considerable talent, and she’d trained diligently every day. Even when it got painful or difficult, she had refused to rest. She had never been absent from school even once. She grew up well versed in both literary and martial arts, and she was incredibly beautiful. Her etiquette and personality, too, were refined beyond compare. Why had she put in so much effort? It was because there was a Profession she hoped to be chosen for no matter what. She had overlooked nothing, no matter how slight, all for the sake of today’s Selection Ceremony.

“Silence, please! We will now begin the Selection Ceremony. When your name is called, please come forward and touch the holy orb.” The priest sent by the Church to conduct the ritual pushed his round glasses up onto the bridge of

his nose. “White Hawk Class, Ariel Martha.”

“H-Here!” The girl whose name had been called stood up and approached the altar to stand in front of the large round gem.

“Before we begin,” said the priest, “please remember that this is your only chance to determine your Profession. There is no precedent in history for recognizing a change in Profession after you decide it here. The gods will not permit it, no matter if you later change your mind. Therefore, I ask you to think carefully about your decision.”

Ariel gave a serious nod. She joined her hands in prayer before reaching out to touch the orb. “I pray, O gods, grant me the Profession to which I am most suited.”

Glowing letters appeared in the air. The priest read aloud, “It is revealed. You may be a Beast Tamer or a Diviner. Which will you choose?”

The girl looked between the two Professions.

“Beast Tamer would be kind of...” she started to say, an openly contemptuous expression on her face. “I choose Diviner!”

“I had no doubt that would be your decision,” said the priest, comforting her. “I can scarcely imagine that someone would choose Beast Tamer. I believe it ended up mixed in because the qualifications for that Profession are very broad. I wouldn’t worry that it appeared in the divine revelation.”

His tone seemed to calm her. Even if an unfortunate Profession were to appear, it was perfectly acceptable not to choose it.

“Now, place your hand to the divine writing, where it says ‘Diviner,’” the priest continued. “Your Profession shall be engraved onto your very soul.”

“O-Okay...” The girl touched the glowing letters as she was told, and the words vanished. They looked as though they were absorbed into her body.

“Now, your ceremony is complete,” the priest concluded. “In accordance with your Profession of Diviner, you will receive a blessing to your Magic and your Spirit. If you continue to pursue your path with discipline, you may even obtain abilities that grant you knowledge of the future.”

“Okay!”

“A Profession is not a job, and there is no requirement for you to perform a Diviner’s work in actuality. Of course, you may choose to do so if you wish.”

“I understand.” The girl bowed her head and returned to her seat. Her friends nearby congratulated her.

“Next,” said the priest, “Blue Swallow Class, Yolanda Feribell.”

“Present!” Yolanda stepped forward.

“You are suited for two Professions: Beast Tamer and Apothecary.”

“Beast Tamer again...” She trailed off.

“Now, there really is no need to pay it any mind. Most people can fulfill the conditions for that job, you see.”

“Well, that’s a relief. I’m fine with anything *except* Beast Tamer!”

“Indeed. All Beast Tamer serves to do is to lower your abilities. It is only because I must act as an officiator that I ask. You would like to choose Apothecary, then?”

“Of course!”

The ritual continued smoothly. Every student received their revelation from the gods and decided on their Profession with some combination of joy and fear. Finally, it was Kanata’s turn.

“Black Owl Class, Kanata Aldezia,” called the priest.

Kanata stood, all eyes on her. It was only natural. Everyone here was keenly interested to see which Profession was best suited for Kanata. Kanata held her head high and her back straight; her long, alluring black hair fluttered as she walked. She was like something out of a painting.

The girls watching the ceremony held their breaths.

“Please,” said the priest, “place your hand on the holy orb.”

“All right.” Kanata prayed and touched the gem, as the priest had instructed. There was a flash of light.

“What?!” The priest gasped, staggering back from the sheer brightness.

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeek!” the girls in the auditorium screamed.

Nobody was certain what had happened. A second later, however, they understood. A vast array of divine writing had appeared in the flash of light. The writing towered high above the holy orb. Nobody could tell exactly how many Professions were listed.

“I’ve never seen this many before!” the old priest exclaimed. He stared, neglecting to fix his crooked glasses, astonished at the pillar of light. “A thousand? Two thousand? Even advanced Professions I’ve never seen! All of them!”

“If I qualify for this many, surely it *must* be in there somewhere.” Holding back her excitement, Kanata faced the words of divine revelation.

As for the class, they were shocked into silence by the unprecedented number of Professions, and they watched with bated breath.

All sorts of Professions were written there: Saint. Hero. Sage. Paladin. Sword King. Holy Fist. Oracle. Dragon Knight. Archmage. Even more. There were rare and powerful Professions, jammed in so close together that they were hard to read. But none of them were the Profession Kanata was looking for.

It wasn’t until she had reached the very end that Kanata saw it. “It *is* there!” she cried. There, alone in a corner, was her chosen Profession. “Oh, thank goodness.” Kanata breathed a sigh of relief. Without waiting a second longer, she touched her hand to the letters. The rest of the divine writing crumbled away. That left only the Profession Kanata touched to be absorbed into her soul —her Profession for the rest of her life.

As soon as her ceremony was over, the students began chattering. All the way in the back, they couldn’t see what Profession Kanata had chosen.

“Did you see? What Profession did Lady Kanata choose?” one of them asked.

“I don’t know. It must be Saint, though, right?”

“No way, she’d be a Sage!”

“She might have chosen to be a Hero.”

“Oh, I can’t stand this suspense! I wish the priest would hurry up and tell us.”

It seemed this last sentiment was a common one. The students were very curious as to what Kanata had picked, and they were impatient to know the answer. Their gazes were fixed on the priest, urging him to hurry.

The priest looked like he couldn’t believe what he had seen. “L-Lady Kanata Aldezia?!” he squeaked, still frozen in place.

As close as he was, only he had seen what Kanata had chosen.

“Yes, Father? What is it?” Kanata was in high spirits, completely unlike the priest in front of her, who was now beginning to sweat. She smiled sweetly. The dream she had held for years was finally coming true.

The priest could only think that she had lost her mind. “Wh-Wh-Wh-What was the Profession you chose just now?! I thought I saw,” he spluttered, “but it can’t be! It can’t! It just can’t! I must be mistaken! You can’t have—”

“Yes, Father,” Kanata said. “The Profession I chose was Beast Tamer. With your help, I’ve finally achieved the Profession I’ve always wanted.” Kanata politely bowed.

Nobody had ever seen Kanata smile so much. Once, she had been known as The Princess of Sacred Ice, but now she was radiant and beaming.

“What have you doooooooone?!” screamed the priest. His voice echoed throughout the auditorium. “Beast Tamer? A *Beast Tamer*?! Why would you choose a Profession for *failures*?! I know they say all Professions are equal, but *that one*?!”

Kanata giggled. “Oh, a Profession for failures? But I’ve wanted to be a Beast Tamer for so long, what else could I do?”

“Stop giggling!” The priest sprung up, his back pain forgotten. “Do you understand what you’ve done?! Beast Tamer is a Profession that bestows the ability to command magic beasts, but in exchange it lowers your Vitality, your Strength, your Magic, your Spirit—all of your abilities! And even then, a magic beast will only acknowledge you as their master if you face them in single combat!”

“How wonderful! All I need to do is fight, and they’ll accept me!”

“What are you *saying*?! You’ll be as strong as the average *child*! You won’t even be able to defeat a *slime*!” the priest screamed.

By this point, he was weeping openly. After all, among the Professions revealed to Kanata was Saint—the symbol of the Church itself. It was a grave failure for the priest, as officiator of the ceremony. A girl with the potential to become a Saint, after they’d gone so long without one, had chosen Beast Tamer under his very nose. If the Holy Church were to learn of this, it could very likely end in his excommunication. He could feel everything he had labored to build crumbling under his feet.

“Ah, ah, ah,” the priest repeated as the color drained from his face. “W-We can change your Profession!” he said. “Perhaps, if we pray in earnest...”

“Please don’t worry, Father.” Kanata’s voice was gentle. She gave the priest a smile filled with benevolent kindness.

“O-Oh, such grace,” he mumbled. The priest, his mind still in turmoil, made the sign of the cross. He had seen a glimmer of hope in Kanata’s smile. Perhaps even now she could return to being a Saint. No. She *had* to. Her smile was nothing short of divine. Surely she could do something about this situation. He smiled back.

“Father, did you not say that there is no precedent in history for acknowledging a change in Profession? Let us abide by the gods’ laws. Isn’t that best, Father?”

“*Noooooooooooooooo!*” Far from offering a solution, Kanata’s response had only plunged him further into despair. The priest sobbed. “How could this be happening?!” he cried. “How could something this absurd be allowed?!” His knees buckled.

Kanata spoke gently to the priest. “Bless me, Father,” she said. “I have become a Beast Tamer, just as I wanted. There is nothing to worry about.”

“But... But... If this... I won’t...” he blubbered.

“It will be all right. Nobody could see that Saint appeared in the divine revelation, and I shall not speak of it to anyone. Your position is not in danger.”

“Ohhh.” The priest wiped the tears and snot from his face. “You can even see through my petty vanity... You really should have been a Saint.” In his mind, it was truly regrettable to have let someone like her get away.

“Excuse me, Father,” Kanata said with a formal bow. “There are other students waiting.” She turned, and without returning to her seat, left the auditorium, her skirt swaying as she walked.

“I did it,” she said. “I did it! I became a Beast Tamer, just like I always wanted! My efforts weren’t in vain!”

She was wrong, of course. Her efforts were very much in vain. With Kanata’s talents, Beast Tamer would have appeared in the divine writing whether she had exerted herself or not. Her ten years of hard work had served no benefit whatsoever in selecting her Profession. However, her decade of diligent work *had* given her a tremendous amount of power. Even *with* the general debuff from the Beast Tamer Profession, the feature that made people think of it as a black mark, even without any beasts to fight for her, there was nobody who was a match for her strength. She had become the strongest Beast Tamer in the world.

“Now, to find some fluffy beasts! Everything that I am, I devote to my quest for fluff. Wait for me, beasties!” She let herself imagine all the fluffy friends she had yet to meet. It was enough to melt her heart.

The students, who had been shocked speechless, seemed to return to themselves after Kanata left. They didn’t understand what had taken place until they heard the screams of the teachers waiting outside.

† † †

“A *Beeeeaaaaaaast Taaaaaaamer*?!”

Kanata’s teachers collectively let out the most horrifying scream when they heard what Profession she had chosen. They had been certain that this was the ceremony where Kanata was to become a Saint. Everyone had been. She went far beyond being a Renaissance woman. She had studied magic and medicine, theater and music, even cooking and art. In every one of those fields, she’d exhibited extraordinary talent. She had triumphed in so many contests, in so many fields, that it would be faster to list the tournaments held in the Royal

Capital that she *hadn't* won. She had been born with extraordinary talent, devoted herself single-mindedly to a life of discipline, and shown striking results.

Her teachers, for their part, had been supremely proud to have her in their classrooms. They'd been looking forward to a future where they could boast to everyone that *the* Kanata Aldezia had once been *their* student. How could she have chosen a Profession like Beast Tamer? They wept bitter tears.

Kanata curtsied politely. "Farewell, everyone," she said. "I wish you good health." Whether she knew what was in her teachers' hearts, she gave no indication.

"W-Wait! Lady Kanata Aldezia, where are you going?!" one teacher beseeched.

"I am going to enjoy a bit of beast taming." She smiled elegantly, as if she had declared her intention to enjoy the flowers accompanied by gentle harp music.

"Ex-Excuse me?!" several teachers continued. "We aren't finished here! We need to discuss your plans for education! To think you would throw away your future to become a lowly Beast Tamer!"

Skillfully dodging past her teachers as they attempted to restrain her, Kanata bowed her head in apology. "I am terribly sorry, but I have decided not to pursue higher education."

"*What?!*" her teachers all shouted at once, taken aback.

"Now that I have become a Beast Tamer," Kanata said, "I have no further business with this school."

For many long years she had played the part of a dignified and studious young lady, all in order to qualify for as many Professions as she could. Now that she had become a Beast Tamer, there was no longer any need for the facade.

"Ha ha ha," she started to laugh. "Aha ha ha! Aha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! I'm free! No more stuffy noble girls' schools! And good riddance!" She was giddy with her success, laughing maniacally as she effortlessly evaded her teachers.

"C-Come back here!"

Despite the major decline in her stats from becoming a Beast Tamer, Kanata showed no signs of difficulty. She could lose another tenth of her power and would still far outstrip her teachers in agility.

“Fluffy fluff~♪,” she sang as she skipped along. “Fluffy fluffy fluff~♪”

Anybody who knew Kanata during her time as a student would be shocked to see her skipping happily like this. She had finally discarded her honor-student mask. She left the school gates with a big grin on her face and headed for the edge of town.

“Oh, it’s been so *long*!” she exclaimed. “Finally...*finally* I can find fluffy beasties to pet!”

Why did Kanata pretend to be an honor student for so long, and why did she throw away every rare and valued Profession to select Beast Tamer? To understand, we must go back in time.

To the moment of her reincarnation.

As Kanata reflected on her trials, she, too, thought of what had happened before she was born.

† † †

In the beginning, there was darkness. There was no sound and no light. She was floating through an utterly empty expanse. It felt like an eternity passed, when suddenly she could hear someone calling her.

“Yoshino Kanata-san,” the someone said.

“Yes?” Yoshino Kanata had been her name once, so, hesitantly, she responded.

In the next second, a white, shining sphere appeared in her vision. It was the only thing she could see in the darkness.

The sphere seemed to recognize that Kanata was conscious. It spoke to her in a soft voice. “Listen calmly to my words. You have passed away. This is the Realm of the Hereafter.”

Kanata wasn't especially surprised. She had been expecting to die for a while.

"I knew it," she said. "So this is death."

If this was the Realm of the Hereafter, Kanata thought, then the sphere might be a god. She decided to try asking. "Are you a god?"

The sphere gave a well-rehearsed answer. "I am nothing more than an entity that manages souls. I am not any god that you would worship." It seemed like it got that question a lot. "I called you here because there was an irregularity with your soul."

"An irregularity?" Kanata was surprised. As far as she knew, she had been completely normal.

"Kanata-san, while you were alive, you were forced to endure many hardships."

"Was I?" she asked. "I think I led a pretty normal life. Really, by the standards of our world, I was sort of lucky." Kanata had never known severe hunger or thirst. Her death had been from natural causes. The moment of her death itself had been more frightening, but that, too, was comparatively mild. From Kanata's perspective, it was a fairly decent death. It was even a valuable experience, she thought, to feel her consciousness fade to the flat beeping of the ECG machine.

The glowing sphere, however, did not seem satisfied. "Since your birth you lived connected to many tubes, forbidden to leave the hospital, alone. The only time you met your family was on your deathbed. You do not consider these to have been hardships?"

"Oh, well, I had the internet," she said. "It may have only been through a computer screen, but I *was* able to interact with the outside world."

Aside from the medication, the injections, and the surgeries, her life could've been seen as the envy of any NEET. Although her parents had never come to visit while she was old enough to form memories, they'd always paid the hospital bills. She felt she must be grateful for that, if nothing else.

"Perhaps it is due to the considerable weight of your soul that you did not feel that these were hardships."

Despite everything, Kanata *was* a girl. There was no way she would let a comment about her weight slip by unchallenged.

“Excuse me, it’s rude to talk about people’s weight like that!” In fact, she thought, now that she was dead she must have withered away to skin and bones. She was probably very light!

“You misunderstand,” the sphere clarified. “I am speaking of the mass of your soul.”

Kanata didn’t know what that meant, but whatever it was didn’t sound good.

“It is not a matter of good or bad,” the sphere continued. “The scales are out of alignment. Your soul is uncommonly heavy. To bring balance to the World Tree, we must move your soul to another dimension.”

“Well I don’t really understand what that means, but wouldn’t it be enough to let me go free, now that I’ve died? I lived the best life I could, and I died a proper death, after all.”

“Then you have no regrets? Not even a small one? You truly mean to say that you have no regrets at all?”

“Hmm,” she thought aloud. “Regrets, is it?” Something finally came to mind after the sphere’s prodding. A regret. There was one thing. One thing that she had to regret from her life. “W-Well, if I must say, I suppose there was one...”

“I see. And what is your regret? Tell me, no matter what it is.”

“I wanted fluff.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Fluff. I wanted fluff.”

“Fluff, you say?” The sphere didn’t seem to understand. Somehow it gave the impression that it was tilting its head in confusion.

“I’m sure you know, but I lived my life in a sterile room. I never had a chance to touch an animal. And their fur looks so soft, I’m sure it would feel amazing to touch. Oh, if only I could have caressed the fluff and licked the fluff and breathed in the fluff and fondled the fluff and...”

Ah yes, fluff. Fluffy fluffy fluff. She used to get so worked up watching AVs (Animal Videos, in her case), longing desperately for what she couldn't touch with her hands.

"Fondle...you say?" The sphere floated a half step back away from her.

Had she said something strange, she wondered?

The sphere made a sound like it was clearing its throat. "Well," it continued, "regardless, it is good to hear that you have one regret."

"I do. I want the fluff. Would you let me pet your fluff, please? I mean, you don't look very fluffy, but—" She reached out to touch the sphere, but it dodged back.

"I-I am not for petting!" The sphere somehow gave the impression of a sigh. "I'll never understand why so many heavy souls are such strange people," it muttered before proceeding. "Let us return to the point. If you have a wish that was never granted in your previous life, it is within my power to grant it in your next life in a new world."

"Wait," said Kanata, "is this an isekai thing?"

"You are quick to understand. Exactly. You are to be reborn in another world."

"I had a sense that was where this was going. I'm a big web novel fan, you know." Web novels had been her constant companions in her dull hospital life. No, they'd been more than companions. It might be better to call them *friends*. She'd had no human friends in the real world, after all.

"You will be reborn in a world of swords and sorcery. You might call it a fantasy setting."

"Ooh!"

"And I will ensure that your...*fluffy animals* will be there for you."

"Wonderful!"

"Furthermore, to bring equilibrium between your past and future lives, I will grant you a blessing."

"Oh, my cheat powers!"

“You will be as strong of body as you were feeble in your past life. You will have as much fortune as you previously had misfortune. And as lonely as you were, you will have just as much companionship.”

“I’ll use my cheat powers to pet as many fluffy animals as possible! Isekai fluff fluff! Isekai fluff fluff!” she chanted. Kanata’s excitement showed no signs of abating. She wanted the fluff. She *needed* the fluff.

“I will take that as your consent to send your soul to another dimension,” said the sphere. “The contract is sealed.”

It seemed that this conversation had been nothing more than a prerequisite for her reincarnation. It felt to Kanata a little bit like she was being strung along, but she was getting fluffy animals out of the deal, so it didn’t bother her much.

“Everything is in order,” the sphere concluded. “I wish you a good life, Yoshino Kanata-san.”

“Thank you! I’ll be sure to pet lots of fluff!”

The sphere seemed a little taken aback by that last remark. “Ah. Indeed,” it said. “Good luck.”

The next thing Kanata felt was a strong pulling sensation. She felt her consciousness vanish, and she was reborn.

† † †

“The gods have spoken,” said the priest with the round glasses. “This child’s name is Kanata.”

“Kanata,” said the newborn’s mother. “What a strange name...”

“I like how it sounds, though,” said the father. The two said their child’s name to themselves, as if they were turning it over in their mouths.

Kanata’s mother lay down on the bed, exhausted from the birth. Her baby was cuddled up next to her, small cheek pressed close. “Kanata,” she said. “I’m so glad you were born...”

Kanata’s father, who had been watching from her bedside, touched his daughter’s hand with the tip of his finger. “Oh!” he cried. “Kanata grabbed my finger! She’s very strong. I’m sure she’ll grow up healthy and—wait, no, she *is*

strong! Ow ow ow! She's going to pull my finger off!"

"Oh, darling," said his wife, "you're such a kidder."

The baby smiled happily, her eyes still closed, as she listened to her parents' voices.

† † †

Time passed in the blink of an eye. Under the doting care of her loving parents, Kanata grew into a healthy three-year-old. And how did three-year-old Kanata spend her time?

"Puppy!" she cried out.

But the dog barked furiously at her, clearly unwilling to be pet. She tried again with another animal.

"Kitty!"

But the cat hissed and ran. No matter how many animals she approached, they would threaten her or flee.

"Today's no good either," Kanata sobbed.

It had been three years since her reincarnation and she had yet to touch an animal. She was beginning to suspect the sphere had lied. She had a healthy body, yes, but where was the fluff she was promised?! She sighed deeply and slumped her shoulders.

Her mother, who was holding her baby brother, smiled down at her. "No luck today either, Kanny?"

"No," she sniffed. "No luck at all, mama. They won't let me touch their fluff..."

"You're such a sweet girl," her mother said. "I wonder why animals won't let you hold them." She rested her dainty cheek in her hand and tilted her head in thought.

"*I* wanna know that *too*." Kanata pouted. She had been reborn seeking to pet fluff, but so far her quest had been fruitless. Animals cowered before her as if she were a terrible magic beast.

Her father laughed warmly. He'd walked in after returning from work. "Animals running away from you like always, Kanata?"

"Hmph..." Kanata puffed out her cheeks. Her father patted her on the head with his big hands. "Hm-Hmph," she said again.

"Now, now, don't pout," her father said. He squeezed her cheeks, forcing the air out of her mouth with a *bppppfpf*.

Perhaps she hadn't been able to achieve her fluffy dreams, but Kanata was glad to have been reborn to such kind parents. Her baby brother was cute too. If only he were fluffy as well. *That* would have been ideal. But her brother, who was taking his time to grow, still didn't have a single hair on his head. Her father was the lord of the fiefdom, but unlike many nobles, he had no illusions that he was better than anyone else. He was never strict with his daughter either. To the people of this world, steeped as they were in feudal values, he was an eccentric thinker.

"Animals really do hate you, though," he said. "You might have to become a Beast Tamer if you want to pet them so badly!"

"A Beast Tamer?" Kanata looked up. She had never heard this title before.

"Beast Tamers," her father explained, "are a Profession with the ability to befriend magic beasts. If you were one of them, you'd have no trouble at all getting your precious fluff!"

Kanata's face lit up. "Wow!" she said. "Wow wow! I wanna be a Beast Tamer!"

"Now, now, Kanny," her mother said.

"Ah, but Kanata," her father continued, "it can be very difficult to get the Profession you want! You know, when I was young I wanted to be a Magician, but the Profession I qualified for was Fencer."

"I'll work hard!" Kanata exclaimed. "I'll do my very, very best and I'll become a Beast Tamer!"

"I see! You'll do your very best, will you?"

"I will! My very *very* best!"

Her father picked Kanata up and let her ride on his shoulders, laughing. Even her mother cracked a smile at the sight. Her baby brother clapped his hands. He clearly had no idea what was happening.

And Kanata did her best. She studied every field of learning, mastered every art, honed her body, attended to her looks, and practiced flawless etiquette. She cut no corners, spared no effort, until the day of the ceremony.

Yes! It was all for the fluff!

And now that the Selection Ceremony had concluded, her long effort had finally borne fruit! Well, perhaps *all* that effort hadn't been strictly necessary. Beast Tamer was always going to be on her list of Professions, after all. Still, it was thanks to those efforts that she had more than enough power to compensate for the debuff, so they weren't exactly wasted.

Snapping out of her recollections, Kanata squeezed her fists tight, psyching herself up. "Beasties! Wait for me!"

"Excuse me, young lady. Are you leaving the city?" A nearby soldier in armor called out to her. This was the gatekeeper. He looked puzzled by the girl who seemed to be setting out to leave the city with no equipment and with her school uniform on.

"I am!"

"You are? I mean. There are magic beasts outside the city walls. It's dangerous to go out without a guard, wearing—"

"Have a nice day!"

"Are you even listening, young lady? Don't go out! Wait!!!"

But Kanata was already gone, sprinting toward the horizon.

† † †

Kanata left the town to go wander around inside the forest a short distance away. She walked so skillfully that she didn't even get mud from the forest on her nice shoes; the leaves under her feet made no sound as she crept along. Kanata could have been an Assassin—literally, it was one of the Professions she

could have chosen.

“Hmm,” she pondered. “I thought I would run into a magic beast right away, but I haven’t really seen any.”

Suddenly, she heard shouting. “Waaaaait!”

“Young lady! It’s dangerous to go alone!”

She looked over her shoulder to see the two gatekeepers, outfitted with spears and armor, waving frantically in her direction. It seemed that they had come after her.

The guards doubled over, gasping for breath. “You are *frightfully* fast, miss!” one puffed.

“We’re not in bad shape either,” said the other.

“What seems to be the matter, sirs?” Kanata asked. “Are you not needed to guard the gate?”

“What seems to be the— I saw you walk out of the gate like you had just decided you fancied a stroll, dressed as you are. I was worried about you!”

“There’s no issue, we just finished our shift. It’s just gonna cut into our lunch breaks a little is all.” They were off duty at the moment and more than willing to spend their break time helping this girl.

“Oh my!” Kanata gasped. “You shouldn’t waste your precious free time on me!”

“It’s not a waste at all!” said the guard. “We can’t just send you off alone now that we’ve found you!”

“You wish to come with me? Truly?” Kanata blinked.

“Well, in a way,” the guard said. “Miss, we came to take you back to town.” The guard raised the visor of his helmet, revealing a middle-aged face. Hot steam from his perspiration rose from inside his armor.

“Sir,” said the other guard, “allow me, please.” He also raised his visor. This guard was a young man. He was used to handling people of Kanata’s age, and he knew how her school operated. “Miss, you are a student at the Lulualas

Academy for Girls, are you not? And I believe that the color of your necktie marks you as a third year. Isn't this the day of your Selection Ceremony?"

"Yes!" said Kanata. "I just chose my Profession. I wanted to try my Profession Ability as soon as possible."

The older guard shrugged his shoulders and smiled with fond exasperation. "Ah," he said. "One of *those*. Sometimes fledglings with a battle Profession like Fencer or Magician get carried away and leave to challenge a magic beast. You shouldn't take magic beasts so lightly, miss! You should return to the city before you get hurt."

"Come on, sir," said the younger guard, stepping in front of the older guard, "we were both that age at one point, you know."

But what he had to say amounted to the same thing.

"There might not be much worse than slimes and goblins around here, but that doesn't mean it's safe to walk around alone. I'm sorry, but would you please come back with us?" The guard was speaking out of the goodness of his heart—both of them were upstanding, sensible grown-ups.

As the younger guard looked at Kanata's face, he suddenly seemed to remember something. "Hey," he said, "have I met you somewhere before?"

"Hey, hold on!" said the older guard. "Are you flirting with this young lady? She's a beautiful young lady to be sure, but she's much too young for you!"

The younger guard shook his head. "No! I really feel like I've seen her before. I'm sorry, but may I ask your name?"

"Of course! I am Kanata Aldezia," Kanata said.

No sooner had her name left her lips, than the guards' expressions froze. They both started to move and exclaimed at once, "Kanata Aldezia? *The* Kanata Aldezia?! The pride of the Lulualas Academy for Girls?! The girl they say is the second coming of the First Saint?!"

"Oh! I've heard of her!" said the older guard. "She's a famous swordsman! For the past three years in a row she's come in *first* in the Royal Capital's fencing tournament, against the best sword fighters in the country! I had no idea she

was so young!”

“I can’t believe we’d run into someone like Kanata Aldezia!” exclaimed the younger with excitement. Kanata, on the other hand, was on edge. She wanted to find a magic beast as soon as she could. Her fluff cravings had soared past their limits.

The older guard took the younger guard aside. “So, the girl turned out to be some kind of big deal, huh?”

“We probably don’t need to take her back to the city,” said the younger guard. “She’s gotta be stronger than us anyway.”

“Even so, we can’t just send her merrily on her way. No matter how strong she may be, she’s still a fifteen-year-old girl! And she’s walking around unarmed, in her school uniform and nice shoes, like she’s going shopping!”

“I guess we have to convince her somehow...”

“Now, young lady,” the older guard said, “I understand that you’re a formidable opponent. But could I ask you to return to the city, just temporarily? You should equip yourself properly and find a companion or two before you go out adventuring. So why don’t we—” He turned back to Kanata. “Hey, wait! Where did she go?!”

“Sir!” The younger guard pointed ahead. “Look! She got away!”

Indeed, Kanata had moved on while the guards had been discussing what to do. It didn’t seem like she and the guards were coming to an accord, and so, she reasoned, any further conversation would be meaningless. The fluff was more important. She had no use for guards who didn’t even have the good grace to be fluffy.

“Waaaaaiiiit!” shouted the guards as they began to chase after her again. Just then, something cried out from deep in the forest.

“*Gugeeeeeeey!*”

An ominous, piercing, discordant shriek rang out. The men covered their ears. They realized at once what that cry was. They had spent too long protecting the city to mistake it.

“A magic beast! No—was that?”

“Miss! Come here! It’s dangerous up ah—oh dear gods, why are you speeding up?!”

“Because there’s *fluff* up ahead!” Kanata cried.

Her head was too full of fluff for her to even think about stopping. The guards had never stood a chance.

Kanata’s sixth sense was telling her that the shrieking voice would lead her to the fluff. And if the fluff was there, Kanata must go. She had qualified to become an Oracle, you may recall—a credit to the precognitive powers she was currently exhibiting. The trees here were thick; they made a tight woven ceiling of branches that covered the gaps between them. Kanata took to the treetops, jumping from branch to branch, moving like the wind, until, in very little time, she reached her destination.

“*Gugeeeeeeey!*”

“*Gargargar!*”

Two enormous magic beasts spread their black wings and took to the sky. They had sharp beaks, like a crow’s, and a wingspan that cast a shadow great enough for five adults to sleep comfortably within it. At first glance, it looked like the two birds flying back and forth at high speeds might be fighting each other, but on closer inspection, they were targeting a figure cowering on the ground. It looked like a piece of tattered cloth or some other kind of rubbish, but that was not the case.

The cowering figure was a black ball of fur about the size of a kitten. Yes, that’s right, a ball of fur. Looking at its tiny shaking body, it was impossible to tell whether it had legs somewhere in there or not. Its only distinguishing feature was a pair of pointy, catlike ears that stuck out of its fluff. Its fur looked like it was ordinarily pitch-black and soft, but after so many attacks it had become filthy with blood and dirt.

“*Gugeeeeeeeey!*”

The giant birds kept attacking, swooping down to rake at the creature with their talons, then taking to the sky once more. Each time they attacked, the

creature would roll around on the ground, but it couldn't escape. It trembled in fear.

"*Gugeygeygeygeygeygey!*" the birds shrieked.

Their shrieks sounded almost like laughter. It was clear that these birds wanted to torment the furball to death.

Kanata moved to dash off and rescue the creature, but suddenly her path was blocked by the guards, who had finally caught up to her. They were slower than her, even after abandoning their helmets and spears.

The older guard huffed and puffed. "How are you so fast?! I was running all out! I'm actually impressed with myself for keeping up..."

"W-Wait!" the younger guard shouted. "Don't get close to those magic beasts!"

Despite being on the brink of collapse, the guards moved to block Kanata.

"Please, miss, listen to us!" said the older guard.

"The kingdom has put out a bounty on those beasts! You'd need a team of skilled knights or adventurers to take one down! No matter how strong you are, it's simply impossible to take on a monster like that unarmed!"

The two guards were genuinely concerned for Kanata's safety. For now, the birds were focused on the furball, but there was no telling if they would notice the humans and decide to attack.

"It's good that it wasn't a human who was attacked. We should get away while the magic beasts are killing each other," the guards called to Kanata.

However, Kanata showed no signs of moving. She was staring fixedly at the poor injured furball.

"You want to save the little one?" one of the guards asked. "Give it up. A magic beast won't show gratitude toward a human."

"It's a fight between magic beasts," said the other. "It's not our place as humans to interfere. We should leave and let nature take its course."

The guard was about to place his hand on Kanata's shoulder, when suddenly

Kanata seemed to return to herself.

“Sir guard,” she said, “I’ve actually given some thought to the matter of what to do if I should witness magic beasts fighting.”

The guard was probably correct. It wasn’t a human’s place to interfere with a fight between magic beasts that had nothing to do with them.

“Whether they are fighting to protect their territory, or hunting to live, for us to interfere would be nothing more than the self-serving self-interest of the human ego.”

She began to stride forward, with such assuredness that the guards forgot for a second that they were here to stop her. They let her walk past.

“However,” Kanata said, “I came to a conclusion of my own. In times such as this...”

“In times such as this?” the guards echoed, curious.

Kanata made a tight fist. “In times such as this, I shall side with the fluffiest!”

“That *is* self-serving!” blurted out one guard.

“You can’t get *more* self-interested!” shouted the other.

Kanata chortled and made a break for it, running ahead of the guards. “Of course it’s self-serving!” she called. “It’s absolutely solipsistic! It has nothing to do with the laws of nature! I didn’t come this far to be held back by something like that!”

All of Kanata’s efforts had been for this day. All of her talent, all of her training, all of her progress. All to be offered up on the altar of fluff! Kanata flew like the wind to the furball’s side. She was full of determination.

“That’s enough!” Kanata shouted.

“*Gugeeey?!*” the birds squawked.

For just a second they were so shocked to see a young girl cutting in between themselves and the furball that they stopped moving. But upon realizing that their opponent was a young girl, they cried with delight. This was more prey!

“*Gargargargar!*” Their terrible shrieks filled the air as one of the two flew

down to rake at Kanata with its wicked talons.

"You will harm the fluff no further!" Kanata declared. "I won't allow it!"

She swung up with one of her arms, smacking the monster on its incoming talons with the back of her hand. Just that small movement was enough to send the bird flying, looking for all the world like it was slipping on ice. It lost its stability and fell from the air in a tailspin, crashing noisily into a tree to one side behind Kanata.

"*Gu... Gugey?!*" The birds were confused.

They had fought humans who blocked their attacks with great shields, but never before had they seen a human parry their attacks with only her bare hands. She was strong. There would be no toying with or tormenting *this* human. For all that she looked like a small girl, this was an opponent worthy of their full strength. They had been careless, but no more. To bring down their opponent, they would have to change tactics.

"*Gugeeeeeey!*"

The bird who had crashed into the tree did not seem to be badly injured. Its rock-hard feathers had protected it from the blow. Both birds flew up high, wheeling around in great circles, trying to feel out a weakness in Kanata's defense.

Kanata, still keeping an eye on the birds, turned to the furball she had covered. "Are you all right? I'll get you out of here as soon as I can."

"M-Miu..." the furball cried feebly. It sounded like a small kitten.

"S-So cute!" Kanata was so charmed by the creature's adorable voice that she lost her focus.

The birds noticed. One bird stopped circling and dove straight for her. This time it was not using its talons, but its sharp, spear-like beak, launching its own body like a deadly arrow to impale its prey. This attack could tear through the thickest of shields and the sturdiest of armor as if they were tissue paper. Some of the humans these birds had fought had thought that they could brace themselves to take the hit and finish the bird off with a counterattack. For their cleverness, they had all ended up skewered on the birds' beaks. There was no

defense against the penetrative force of this dive.

The bird's hard feathers cut through the air, making a high-pitched whistling sound. Certain of its victory, it sped up, aiming to open a hole in the human's soft belly.

"*Gugeeeeeey!*" it cried.

With the help of gravity, it flew through the air faster than an arrow. It was flying just about fast enough to break the sound barrier.

"Miu! Miu!" the furball cried, trying as hard as it could to tell Kanata, *Behind you!*, but Kanata wouldn't turn around.

"Oh my *gosh*!" she exclaimed. "*Cuuuute*!"

The bird scoffed at her stupidity. Foolish human girl. She would die along with the critter. It braced its body for impact, stiffening its muscles and pulling its wings back around its body to minimize air resistance. Thin, stiff, and straight, it resembled nothing so much as an arrow. Its force was enough to break through a castle's strong gate as thoroughly as any battering ram. It bore down on Kanata, the roar deafening as it tore through the air. It had her. She would die with that goofy expression of adoration still on her face. Or so it thought.

"*Gu...gugeygey?!*"

Kanata blocked the attack effortlessly. No, *block* isn't quite the right word. She caught the bird's beak in her hand, stopping it in midair with nothing more than her reflexes and her grip strength. All that even after the debuff from the Beast Tamer Profession.

The two guards cried out in justifiable shock at her fearsome power. "N-No way!" one shouted. "O-One handed?!"

"Like she's playing catch! What *is* this girl?!"

However, the birds were still confident of their victory. That attack had been a feint. Even though its dive was faster than an arrow, there were some skilled adventurers who were able to dodge one way or another. And when they were off balance, the other bird would strike. The first bird would cry out when it dove, bringing the enemy's attention to itself, while the other streaked silently

through the air for the killing blow. These birds had perfected this flawless two-stage attack as brothers, and it had yet to be defeated.

The other bird silently flew at Kanata from behind, beak first.

“M-Miu! Miu!” The furball knew how dangerous this attack was. It tried desperately to warn her.

“You really are *just the cutest*!” Kanata exclaimed passionately, and she easily caught the second bird in her other hand. The birds, whose movement had been suddenly halted, vibrated in her grip.

“Miu...” The furball didn’t know what to make of this girl.

“Cute, cute, *cuuuuuute*!” Kanata couldn’t get enough of that little voice. Even its astonished gasp just now made her squirm—even as she still clutched the birds in both hands.



“Hold on, this isn’t the time for distractions!” Kanata exclaimed. “I need to help this baby. Well, let’s see. First of all—” She looked down at the giant birds she had captured.

The birds went stiff. This girl had looked careless and off her guard, but now they found their beaks held tight in her vice-like grip, unable to escape. They could do nothing but wait to be killed.

“Gu... Gug...” The birds withered under Kanata’s icy gaze. If they were human, they would have broken out in a cold sweat by now.

Kanata yanked the birds close to her face. “Bad!” she scolded as if they were mischievous children. She didn’t speak especially loudly, but the invincible strength in her voice struck the birds like lightning. Literally.

“*Gu... Gey...*” The birds spasmed violently and fainted, their eyes rolling back in their sockets. If they were conscious, they were too overwhelmed by fear to move.

“Don’t do it again, okay?” Kanata said in a motherly voice, squatting down near their heads.

Then she turned to look at the furball. The critter was pure black and completely round. If it weren’t for the eyes and ears, there would be no way of knowing which part was the face.

“M-Miu,” it cried, with all the loveliness of a sweet little kitten.

“Oh *wow*!” Kanata cried. “I can’t *handle* the cuteness!”

She staggered back, clutching her heart as if it had been struck. At that moment, there was no doubt in her mind. She *had* to bring this critter with her. But first, she had to tend to its wounds. Despite the relentless attacks, the furball wasn’t seriously injured, but it still had more than its fair share of painful cuts.

“Pain, pain, go away~♪” Kanata sang.

She held her hand over the furball cat and focused, and its wounds started to close before the guards’ eyes. Judging the danger to have passed, they ran up to Kanata.

“She’s using healing magic now?!” one said. “So quickly, and without an incantation!”

“You really are something else, aren’t you, miss?”

“That does it for your injuries,” Kanata said. “Now I need to get you cleaned up and fed! Then we can decide if you want to be my companion!”

She scooped up the furball cat, taking advantage of its surprise. It hadn’t been expecting to be healed so quickly either. It was just big enough to hold in both hands, and extraordinarily soft. Kanata felt like all the happiness in the world lay in that softness.

“Oh wooow,” Kanata gasped. “My hands are in heaven.”

Its fur was nicer to the touch than Kanata had ever dared dream, and beneath she could feel the furball cat’s soft, warm body. Kanata was in ecstasy. She wanted the fluff. She wanted to pet it for days on end. She wanted to fall into it. She wanted to lick it. She wanted to breathe it in. But Kanata’s will was iron.

“P-Patience,” she told herself.

Beneath her beatific smile, she was holding in bitter tears. She could see to the fluff *after* the critter was all better. This furball might end up being with her for life, after all! She didn’t want to take advantage of its vulnerable state. She wanted it to *choose* to become her companion, in a state of sound body and mind.

That was the way she would reach her fluffy, fluffy paradise. Her patience would be rewarded in fluff a thousand times over.

“He he he,” Kanata laughed. She looked like a saint, but her smile concealed a beastly lust.

“Hey! Hold on! Wait!” The guards called out for her to stop.

“Miss,” said the younger guard, “are you planning on bringing a magic beast home with you? As small as it is, a magic beast is a magic beast. You can’t make pets out of them. They’re not meant to live with humans. Furthermore, that’s not a type of magic beast I’ve ever seen. You should bring it to the Adventurers’ Guild and contact the researchers in the Royal Capital. They’ll know what to

do.”

Kanata confidently shook her head. “There’s no need to worry,” she said. “I am a Beast Tamer. Under the king’s laws, a Beast Tamer may bring a magic beast that they control with them into a city, taking full responsibility for its actions.”

“Oh, I see! If you’re a Beast Tamer, then— Wait, hold on! You’re a Beast Tamer?! That’s a loser Profession!”

“What?! Don’t Beast Tamers pay for their power to control magic beasts with a severe penalty to all abilities? But—”

“A severe penalty?” Kanata echoed. “I suppose my body does feel a tiny bit heavy. Or maybe it’s my imagination.”

“Your imagination?” one guard repeated.

“After watching you fight, I find that hard to believe,” said the other.

“But it’s the truth!” Kanata protested. “I did the ceremony properly. Ask the Church, they should have a record.”

“I’m not sure what to say,” the older guard said. “I’ve never heard of anything like this.”

“I don’t know how much more of this I can take,” said the younger. “I’m getting tired of strange things happening.”

The two sat down. They looked exhausted.

“And I’m afraid I must be going.” Kanata held the furball cat in one arm and curtsied properly with the other. “It was a pleasure to meet you, kind sirs. I will leave the rest in your capable hands.” With that, she darted off back in the direction of the city.

“Leave the rest in— Oh!” the older guard had almost forgotten. “The giant birds! It’s good that she took them down, but what exactly does she expect us to do?”

“Drag them back, I guess...” said the younger one. “There’s a bounty out for these two. We can’t just leave them here.”

The two guards sighed deeply as they roused themselves. They felt like they had already done enough work for one day.

Chapter 2: Furball Cat? No! I'm the Demon King Zag'giel!

Kanata made it back to the city in a flash. She bypassed the line of carts waiting for inspection at the gates, and she showed her uniform and school badge to the guard on duty. There was no need for any prolonged inspection for a student of the Lulualas Academy for Girls. All the guard needed to do was check her badge.

"Oh!" said the guard. "You're the reckless schoolgirl who went out without any equipment, aren't you?" He was supposed to let students pass, but if there was some kind of problem, that was different. The guard's job was to look after the safety of the townsfolk. Of course he would stop the girl he had heard a report about.

"Excuse me!" said Kanata. "I'm in a bit of a hurry! Tell the other guards I made it back safely, please!"

"Hey, wait! What's that ball of fur? Is that a magic—oh she's *fast*!"

Kanata tore through the gate like a whirlwind, running full speed through the crowded streets. She zigged and zagged, artfully avoiding any collisions with the townsfolk. She ran so fast that the people she passed could only take her for a sudden breeze. She was faster than a horse—too fast for the eye to follow. The magic beast in her arms didn't seem to cause her the slightest bit of trouble. To Kanata, who had trained her footwork to perfection, this pace was easy. Kanata ran like the wind to her destination: the dormitory attached to her school, where she lived in one of the rooms. Although she had graduated from the middle grades and declared her intention not to continue on to higher education, Kanata was still a student of the Lulualas Royal Academy for Girls and had a right to use the dormitory.

However, if she were to run into a teacher who knew she had become a Beast Tamer, she might be stopped again and waste valuable time. Kanata checked to make sure that nobody was in the area around the dormitory, and she started

to look for an open window.

“This time of day, there should be some left open to let in fresh air. Oh! There’s one!”

There was an open window leading to a hallway on the fourth floor. Perfect. Kanata turned toward it and jumped. She sailed free of gravity’s bonds and alighted on the window. She stuck her arm through the frame and skillfully slid into the hallway, to come face-to-face with the dorm caretaker, who was in the middle of cleaning.

“A-Ah?” The caretaker froze, clutching her feather duster. “L-Lady K-Kanata Aldezia?! Where did you come from?! This is the fourth floor!”

“Oh, that was somewhat improper of me,” said Kanata. “How embarrassing!”

“It’s not a matter of *impropriety*—” the caretaker started, but Kanata cut her off.

“I’m afraid I’m in a bit of a hurry,” said Kanata, “so I must take my leave.” She bowed to the confused caretaker and retreated to her own room.

“Home at last.” Kanata leaned against the door and sighed. She brought the furball cat in her arms up to her face and gave it a solid look. The cat stared back with intelligent eyes.

“I’m sorry about that,” Kanata said. “Do you need rest?”

The furball cat looked like it still had its guard up, but it let Kanata handle it as she liked without fighting back or running away.

“Shall we have a bath before dinner?” Kanata asked.

Each room in this dormitory had its own bathroom with a bathtub. This hadn’t always been the case. They’d been installed as a boon to Kanata the first time she’d won the royal fencing tournament three years ago.

The king had asked her to name her desire. He had never heard anyone ask for a *bath* before, but Kanata, who had lived in Japan in her previous life, found the lack of baths intolerable. She had begged for a bath every day when she lived with her parents too. They found it very peculiar. There *was* a large

communal bathhouse on the school campus, but students could only use it at certain times, not whenever they felt like it.

Kanata had enjoyed a great boost to her popularity with her dorm mates for getting them all private baths.

This set a precedent. Every time Kanata was summoned before the king to recognize one of her incredible feats, the dorm had ended up with another luxurious feature. The Lulualas Academy for Girls was one of the most prestigious schools for nobility in the Royal Capital, but a full half of its recent reputation was due to Kanata's achievements.

"A bath with a fluffy critter... All of my dreams are finally coming true." Kanata quickly undid her tie and stripped out of her uniform.

Even though she had just returned from a battle in the forest, Kanata's body didn't have a speck of dirt on it. She hadn't even broken a sweat. There wasn't any real need for her to get in the bath herself. A bucket of hot water would have been enough to clean the furball. But that didn't matter. She was getting in the bath with the fluff. It was *important*.

But as soon as she took off her underwear, the furball, who had been quiet up until now, cried out in surprise.

"Miu! Miu!" It pushed itself up with its stubby back legs and flailed its stubby front legs as hard as it could.

"Aha ha!" Kanata laughed. "What are you doing, you goof?"

This was far too cute! Kanata had no idea what the furball cat was trying to communicate. She was simply overwhelmed by the cuteness. She clutched the cat to her chest without thinking.

"So, so, *sooo* cute!" she cried. "Who told you you're allowed to be this cute?!"

"M-Miuuuu..." the furball cat cried weakly, sandwiched between her breasts.

"Oh no," said Kanata. "Did I hurt you?"

Realizing that she had been standing around naked, Kanata hurried into the bathroom. She placed the furball cat on a stool by the tub, where it sank limply, and put her hair up with a cord. She turned the lever by the bath faucet, and a

good volume of hot water began pouring out.

The building's water boiler, which used magic gems as a heat source, had also been a boon from the king. They had cold water plumbing for flush toilets, too, and personal kitchens that students could use to prepare simple meals—all boons Kanata had earned from the king. The king had even paid for the magic gems and the cost of installing the pipes. Every time Kanata won some important tournament or other, she would use the victory to raise her standard of living.

"Let's start by washing your body." Kanata wet the furball cat and grabbed a bar of soap. She got an excellent lather going and set to scrubbing. The white soap bubbles quickly became black and watery from the cat's filth.

"Wow," Kanata said. "Now let's rinse you off!"

She poured hot water on the cat, careful not to get any in its ears.

"Oh my gosh!" Grime of all sorts spread out in a pool around the cat—mud and blood and grass stains all mixed together.

"M-Miu miu," the cat whined. It seemed embarrassed by its situation.

"It looks like I'm going to have to give you a thorough cleaning," Kanata declared.

Overjoyed to have the opportunity to wash the fluff so many times, Kanata cheerfully started to lather up the soap again. She worked it into the furball's body, waited for it to seep into its fur, and rinsed. After a few rounds of this, her fingers slid through its fur cleanly. She rubbed and cleaned it all over.

"Does it itch anywhere?" Kanata asked.

"M-Miuuuu," the furball cat protested, but it let Kanata have her way.

"Ahhh! The fluff is so amazing when it's all slippery!" Kanata cried.

The furball's coat was lumpy and bunched together with soap. Kanata rinsed it clean with a good amount of hot water. It was still black, but the oily filth sticking to it was gone.

The tub was full by the time the furball was clean.

“Don’t worry. I’m going to get in slowly,” Kanata told the critter, holding it close to her chest as she stepped into the hot water.

“Ahhhh...”

“Miuuuuu...”

The girl and the critter both sighed contentedly as they sunk into the pleasantly hot water.

“So nice and comfy...” murmured Kanata.

“Miumiu...” agreed the furball cat. It draped itself over Kanata’s chest, gazing at her lovingly.

“Wow... You’ve melted!” Kanata marveled. “You look like mochi!”

Kanata was captivated by the adorable fluff ball, unable to look away. Her cheeks were flushed, and she was light-headed, but Kanata blamed that on the bath.

But no matter how long you stay in the tub, eventually you have to get out. After a while, they started to get too warm, so Kanata and the furball left the bath. Kanata got the towels and vigorously rubbed both of them dry. She ran a comb through the critter’s fur. Its fluff was soft and luxuriant. The furball cat was already round, but now that it was fully fluffed out it looked even more like a ball of fur. It almost looked like a comically plump cat. Kanata ran a hand over its lustrous fur. The sensation was worlds apart from how it had felt before it was clean.

“Wow, wow, wow!” Kanata said. “I can’t get enough of this sensation!” She had become a captive to the fluff. She would have pet it forever if she could.

“But, no, I shouldn’t. We need to get you fed! Are you hungry?”

“M-Miu!” The cat shook its head as if to say that it was quite all right and needed no further assistance. It seemed like it understood what she was saying. Some magic beasts were quite a bit more intelligent than animals. It had let Kanata bathe it, but it looked like it was still cautious about food.

“No?”

“Miu miu!” The furball cat faced away from her. I’ll be fine from here, it

seemed to say. Its stomach, though, rang out with a loud and adorable grumble.

"See?" said Kanata. "You're famished! Wait here!"

She wrapped a towel around her wet hair like a turban and, still dressed only in her bath towel, went to the kitchen. Kanata, who had studied hard to become a Beast Tamer, had encyclopedic knowledge of the diets of magic beasts. Unlike an animal, a healthy magic beast's stomach could handle just about anything. Because they were aggressive and attacked humans, most people thought that they were carnivores. But this was wrong. Most magic beasts had an omnivorous diet. It was perfectly all right to feed them human food, or so she had read in her favorite book growing up, *The Bestiary of Albert Molmo, Tamer of Legends (Complete Edition)*.

"We have milk and cheese," she mused as she took stock of the kitchen. "Then how about this?"

She had decided what to make. She drizzled olive oil into the frying pan and cut an onion into thin strips to fry. She took uncooked rice and added it to the pan, frying it with the onion. The Royal Capital, where Kanata lived, was a center of commerce, and it wasn't difficult to find ingredients from far to the east. Both rice and wheat were popular staple foods in the city.

While the rice and the onions were frying, Kanata set a kettle of water to boil. She added the hot water to the pan, and just as the plumpening rice grains had absorbed enough water to poke out from the surface, she added milk. She poured the milk in a little at a time to keep the temperature from dropping too quickly, making sure the milk's subtle umami flavor was properly absorbed into the rice.

Drawn in by the sweet scent of milk that was filling the room, the furball cat wandered up to Kanata's feet and started waving its tail in excitement.

"Al dente!" Kanata declared.

Satisfied that the rice grains had reached their perfect level of firmness, Kanata turned off the heat and seasoned the dish with salt and pepper. Quickly, before it could cool, she grabbed the cheese and grated it into the rice, stirring it in until the mixture became nice and gooey. And finally, she plated it.

“A Kanata Special,” she said. “Milk and Cheese Risotto!”

Kanata brought the risotto to the table and picked up the furball cat, who was now wandering in idle circles around her feet.

“It’s hot,” she said, “so I’ll be sure to blow on each bite before I feed it to you!”

“M-Miu—!” The furball kicked and squirmed. It seemed like it was saying there was *no way* it would let her do something so humiliating! But its legs were so short and stubby that it couldn’t put up much effective resistance.

“Oh...” Kanata’s face fell, “you don’t want to eat my food after all? It’s good, though...”

In fact, Kanata’s cooking was considered the very best by the girls living in the dormitory. They would often have parties on holidays, where each girl would bring a dish she had made. Everyone would scramble for Kanata’s. Her dishes would always be gone in the blink of an eye.

The cat, too, sniffed at the delicious scent wafting up from the risotto, and it stopped struggling, resigned to its fate. Kanata scooped up a spoonful of risotto and puffed until it was no hotter than body temperature.

“Now open wiiide,” she said, and she brought the spoon up to the furball cat’s mouth.

The cat looked between Kanata and the spoon, and then, with conviction, it chomped down.

The next instant, the furball cat’s fur stood on end, like it had been shocked.

“Miuuuuuuuuuu?!” It cried out in joy as the unbelievably delicious taste of milk and cheese filled its senses.



To a creature that had up until now tasted nothing but grasses and bugs, it must have seemed like nothing short of the food of the gods. No longer willing to be fed by Kanata, it jumped onto the table and began to single-mindedly devour the risotto.

“Oh, well you handle hot food better than a normal cat!” said Kanata.

She propped her elbows up on the table, watching fondly as the furball cat grappled with the risotto. It licked up every last grain of rice and then burped with a cute little *brap*.

“Oh! You finished your whole plate!” said Kanata. “Good job!”

She pet the furball softly on its head. It was so round that it was hard to tell where the body ended and the head began, but it was probably safe to assume that the place where its ears sprouted from counted as the head.

“Well, what now? Do you want a nap now that you’re full? Ahh,” said Kanata, “napping with the fluff... What could be better...”

All of her dreams really were coming true, one after another. Her happiness was at an all-time high.

“*No. Permit us to decline. We do not wish to sleep.*”

“What?” Kanata said. It sounded like someone had said something.

There wasn’t anyone there, however, except for the black furball cat.

“*It seems that eating some decent food recovered enough of our power for us to project our thoughts.*”

“Is that...*you* speaking?”

“*It is indeed.*” The furball cat puffed its chest—it was probably its chest—out with a “miu.”

“*Child*,” it continued, “*you have done well to rescue us from our torment, heal our wounds, purify our body, and even prepare food for us. We commend your devotion.*”

The critter spoke like some kind of king, Kanata thought. She’d had several audiences with the king of this land and had developed a good sense of how

kings spoke.

"*There are many things we must tell you, but first we must tell our rescuer our name.*" The furball cat's tail waved slowly. "*We are Zag'giel, the King of Demons.*"

† † †

Zag'giel, the King of Demons. That was what the furball cat had called himself when he'd suddenly spoken telepathically.

"Zag'giel...the King of Demons?" Kanata blinked.

Zag'giel gave a little "*ha*" of self-deprecating laughter. "*At present, we suppose, we are the* former *King of Demons. In the distant past we were inflicted with a curse by the gods, and thus we have become this frail, pathetic magic beast. Let it not be said that we are amused.*"

"Zag'giel, the...King of Demons?" Kanata said again.

"*Indeed. Perhaps it was long ago*," he reflected, "*but we were once the great enemy of humankind. We proclaimed ourself so, knowing full well that as a human, your duty is to slay us. Child, in the past centuries—no, perhaps since the day we were born, none have treated us as kindly as you. If your decision is to slay us, we will allow it.*"

"Zag'giel, the King of Demons."

"*What has come over you?*" said Zag'giel. "*Why do you repeat our name?*"

He regarded Kanata, who was muttering his name over and over again, with suspicion. Had she been paying attention or not?

"Zag'giel, the King of Demons..." she said. "I know! Zaggy!"

"*Pardon us?*"

Kanata, it seemed, had not been considering at all what she should do with the former Demon King, but rather was deep in thought trying to decide what to call him. The thought of slaying Zag'giel had never crossed her mind. She was entirely focused on how best to become friends.

"Nice to meet you, Zaggy!" she said.

“*Wait, child, wait... We do not understand. What do you mean by ‘Zaggy’?*”

“It’s a nickname!” exclaimed Kanata.

“*A nick...name? We see... Some manner of human custom*,” Zag’giel contemplated.

“I think it suits you!” said Kanata. “It’s super cute.”

Cute was a word that a man of Zag’giel’s dignity found hard to take as praise. Kanata saw a complicated expression cross his face, and the light in her eyes dimmed.

“Should I,” she reconsidered, “not call you that?”

“*Ah. Well. Ahem. If it is how you wish to address us, then we will not complain. We are in your debt, after all. Call us what you will.*” It wasn’t the most *serious* name for a former Demon King, but Zag’giel was of no mind to ruin this young girl’s good mood.

“Okay! Zaggy it is! And my name is Kanata Aldezia!”

“*We see. Our savior’s name is Kanata.*”

“Okay, Zaggy!”

“*Kanata.*”

“Zaggy~♪” she sang.

“*Yes. Kanata.*”

“Zaggy!” Kanata’s pupils seemed to go heart shaped.

“*Yes. It seems we know each other’s name. Now—*”

“Zaggy.” Kanata drew closer, breathing heavily.

“*K-Kanata, there is more we wish to—*”

“Zaggy!” She was right by his face now.

“Back up! Back up! You are too close to our face!”

“Ahhh, your tiny little round body feels so *good*!” Kanata marveled as she rubbed her cheeks happily against the furball.

Zag'giel pushed her off. "*Calm yourself, Kanata! There is more to say!*"

"Okaaay."

For all that she appeared mature and composed to the outside world, Kanata was secretly rather childish. Zag'giel sighed like an exasperated parent.

"*You brought us here not merely out of the goodness of your heart, but as a Beast Tamer with the intention of forming a contract. Is that not so?*"

"It is," said Kanata. "Sorry for my impure motives."

"*It is not a matter to be ashamed of. We are most grateful to you. It would give us great pleasure to be of service.*"

"So, you'll come with me?"

Zag'giel shook his head. "*No... Alas, we fear we cannot.*"

"Why not?" Kanata's face crumpled as though she was on the verge of tears.

"*We are in your debt, and we should like more than anything to repay it to you, but in our present form we have no power whatsoever. You are a Beast Tamer, are you not? A cast-off Demon King who has lost his power is unworthy of one so strong as you. If you seek companions, you had best look to magic beasts stronger than we.*"

"But I don't care about that at all!" Kanata shot to her feet. "I *need* you, Zaggy! I don't care in the slightest if you're weak or strong! Please, Zaggy, please be my companion!"

Zag'giel's eyes widened. He had not been prepared for Kanata's heartfelt plea. "*K-Kanata. You...need us?*"

"I do! Of course I do!" To Kanata, Zag'giel was indispensable not for his battle strength, but as a star member of her fluff brigade. Those adorable eyes. Those ears that made such cute little twitching motions. That soft body. And above all else, that fluffy, fluffy fur. He was pleasant to touch all over. It was almost unbelievable that such an ideal partner could even exist. Having known the touch of his fur, Kanata could never go back to a life without Zag'giel. She would need one fluff a day—no, more like a hundred fluffs a day to stave off the withdrawal symptoms. Kanata didn't need battle strength. What she needed

was fluff. Zag'giel's fluff more than made up for any weak points he may have had. He was fluffy. That alone made him Kanata's best match.

"*K-Kanata...if you say such things, we shall—!*"

Zag'giel was trembling with emotions. Not knowing Kanata's nature, Zag'giel thought she needed him purely as a battle companion. She must believe, he thought, that he could yet recover his former strength and rise from the ashes to reclaim his status as Demon King.

"*You would not desert us in our powerless state... You would grant us another chance!*" This overwhelmingly powerful young girl had said that she needed him. He wept, overwhelmed with emotion. "*Your feelings have touched our heart! We must accept, or else renounce the title of Demon King altogether! Kanata! Make us one of your companions!*"

"Zaggy!"

"*Kanata!*"

The two embraced, their fates now forever entwined. However, it seemed that they had managed to completely misunderstand each other.

† † †

The two held each other tight, both lost in their own—very different—reveries. Zag'giel was deeply touched by Kanata's faith that even in his current weak and shameful body, he could still reclaim his position as Demon King. Kanata was simply glad to have had her dearest wish from her previous life finally granted after years of animals fleeing from her: to have a fluffy friend of her very own. Misunderstandings aside, the two were now bound together.

"*Kanata*," Zag'giel started, hesitating for a second. "*We ask that you let us go. The embrace of a young maiden... We fear it may be perhaps a little much for us.*" He tried to gently push her away. It seemed like she might hug him forever if he didn't.

He failed completely. In fact, Kanata pushed him down to the floor. "Zaggy!"

"*Wah!*" Startled by the sudden development, Zag'giel looked up at Kanata, who was looming above him, hearts in her eyes once more. "*K-Kanata! What*

are you doing?!”

“Zaggy, you’re a naughty boy!”

“*C-Calm yourself, please! Have we done something to offend you?!*” Zag’giel was utterly baffled. He had no idea what might be the issue.

“You’re *naughty*, Zaggy! You’re drawing me in with that fluff of yours! I can’t stop myself!”

“*Dr-Drawing you in?! We don’t understand what you’re saying! Kanata! Why do you have that frightening look in your eyes?! Why are you breathing so hard?!*”

Kanata giggled. “Zaggy, Zaggy, Zaggy, Zaggy, Zaaaaaaggy!”

“K-Kanataaaaaa!”

Kanata shoved her face into Zag’giel’s belly, rubbing it around in his fluffy fur, enjoying the fluff for all it was worth. The room was filled with the sound of Zag’giel’s mournful cries of “miuuuuu” and strange slurping noises—not something most would hope to hear from someone petting an animal.

Just when Zag’giel was starting to worry if Kanata was going to slurp his insides out, there was a knock on the door.

“Lady Kanata? Lady Kanata Aldezia?! What in the world are you doing in that room?! Is there a boy in there with you?!” The voice of the dormitory caretaker they had met in the hallway came through.

“Hmph.” Kanata pouted as she lifted her face up from Zag’giel’s fluffy belly. “And just when I finally had a chance to get all fluffy-wuffy-huffy-snuffy.”

“*We don’t understand what is happening, but it seems we were spared?*” Zag’giel was suddenly starting to feel a bit uncertain about his choice of master. “*No... We must not entertain such thoughts. Kanata would not act without purpose. Perhaps...some form of training?*”

It had not been long since Zag’giel had witnessed Kanata’s effortless victory over the bird monsters. She must have gone to great efforts to have obtained such overwhelming strength. It could not have been talent alone by which she had reached such heights. That strange thing she had done to him must be part

of some mysterious training regimen, perhaps some manner of initiation.

"*Yes*," decided Zag'giel, returning his admiring gaze to Kanata. "*That must certainly be it.*"

It wasn't.

"I'm getting dressed! Please wait just a moment!" Kanata replied, bitter to have been interrupted enjoying her hard-earned fluff. She took off the bath towel and quickly changed into her school uniform.

"G-Getting dressed?!" the caretaker shouted. "So it *is* a man?!"

"Not at all!" said Kanata, throwing open the door and glaring daggers at the caretaker, who was flustered and blushing a deep red imagining what she thought must be going on. Kanata's expression seemed to be saying, *How dare you interfere with the fluff?!*

"Hmmm," the caretaker said as she took stock of the room behind Kanata. "I see, I see." There wasn't anything in the room that stood out as especially suspicious. "You seem to be telling the truth. Then you were just...alone? You *must* keep your voice down when you—"

"I wasn't!" Kanata interrupted. "I was petting this baby's fluff!" Zag'giel had wandered over by her feet. She picked him up and showed him to the increasingly disgruntled caretaker.

"Baby? Oh, a cat?! Hold on, pets aren't allowed in the dorm!"

"Oh, he's not a pet," said Kanata. "He's my precious companion."

Zag'giel sat in Kanata's hands, his tail swishing leisurely from side to side. "*Well met*," he said. "*We are Zag'gie— N-No, rather, we are Zaggy.*" It occurred to him that it might be unwise for a former Demon King to use his real name, so he hastily corrected himself to his new one. "*We are Kanata's new companion, as of this day.*"

Demon Kings, however, were the furthest thing from the caretaker's mind. "I-It talks?! Is that a magic beast?! Lady Kanata, what could you possibly be thinking, bringing a magic beast inside the city?!"

"It's all right," said Kanata. "I've become a Beast Tamer."

“Oh, I see! You have your Profession! Congratulations! Well, if you made him your companion with your Profession Ability, I suppose there’s no—wait, *you* became a Beast Tamer?! *You?!*”

“I don’t understand why everyone finds it so hard to believe.” Kanata sighed. She was getting rather tired of that reaction. “But, is there something you wanted? I would like to continue fluffing with Zaggy.”

“*F-Fluffing*,” said Zag’giel. “*More of that training from earlier... No, we mustn’t be afraid. If this can give us strength, it is precisely what we desire. Kanata! Hold nothing back! We shall endure all that you may throw at us!*”

“Z-Zaggy! You...” Kanata was touched. “I can fluff you any way I want?!”

“*You may! Do it!*”

“Zaaaaaggggggy!” The two were growing closer and closer, still completely misunderstanding each other.

The caretaker coughed. “I actually do have something I was supposed to tell you. Lady Kanata Aldezia, the headmaster wants you to come to his office at your earliest convenience.”

† † †

Rumors had spread around the school like wildfire that Kanata Aldezia, the prodigy of the Lulualas Royal Academy for Girls, had cast aside all manner of appropriate Professions to become a lowly Beast Tamer. Of course, many people refused to believe it (“No way! Impossible!”) or thought it was a joke (“As if The Princess of Sacred Ice would do something so ridiculous!”), but the simple fact was that it was true. Kanata Aldezia had become a Beast Tamer. The priest and the students had been there to witness it, and it was corroborated by her teachers. So great was the attention on the young prodigy Kanata Aldezia, that it was inevitable that she would be called to the headmaster’s office.

“Well? What did you want to discuss?” Kanata crossed her legs imperiously and leaned back on the sofa in the headmaster’s office. This interruption to her fluff time had left her in a profoundly bad mood. She didn’t even touch the tea she had been offered, and instead stared icily at the headmaster from across the room.

“N-Now, now, there’s no hurry. Why don’t you have a cup of tea?” The headmaster, an elderly man in good shape for his age, gave her a strained smile. He was quite sure that the sweat sticking to his forehead had nothing to do with the room’s temperature. He had been trembling for a while now. This sweat was certainly the result of nerves. Even the bushy mustache that he was so proud of seemed to have shriveled up. “I-I am very fond of these financier cakes, you know. They come from my favorite bakery. They have the most subtle brandy flavor, and they just melt in your mouth. How about it? I’m sure that once you’ve had something sweet, you’ll feel a bit—”

“No, thank you.”

“Eeek! I-I’m sorry!” The headmaster shrunk in on himself and cowered. She had rejected him so flatly. He really was not behaving at all like a headmaster, having lowered himself to cajoling his student with tea and sweets, but what else could he do before Kanata’s overwhelming presence? Kanata’s mood was so bad that it felt as though he were standing naked in a blizzard.

“*Kanata, there is no need to overpower this man*,” said Zag’giel from his perch on Kanata’s shoulder. “*A ruler of your stature must strive not to frighten her lessers.*” He rubbed his fluffy body up against her cheek.

“Ahhh,” Kanata sighed. “I got nuzzles from Zaggy!” Instantly, the icy presence that had filled the room vanished, and Kanata’s face relaxed into a silly smile.

“K-Kanata Aldezia?” The headmaster couldn’t believe his eyes. Kanata was cold and alluring, splendid and gorgeous, a superhuman worthy of respect and awe. That she might let someone see her make such a ridiculous face was simply unbelievable. Perhaps she was psychologically unwell. It was like she had suddenly changed, going against every norm and convention. It almost seemed like she had regressed in age. The headmaster was in shock, sweat dripping down his brow.

“If you say so, Zaggy,” Kanata said to the furball on her shoulder. “I guess I’ll talk to him.”

“*That is well. It gives us joy that you take our council. It is the duty of the strong to heed the words of the weak.*”

That black thing, the headmaster thought, must be the round furball Kanata

was said to have caught. The rumors that she had become a Beast Tamer must be true. “W-Well then,” he said. “Let’s get to the point.”

“Yes,” said Kanata. “Go on.” It was like the sullen Kanata from earlier had vanished, leaving a completely different and much more cheerful person in her place.

“The truth is, I heard that you chose Beast Tamer as your Profession. And that you don’t intend to advance to the next grade?”

“Yes,” said Kanata, a smile on her face. “Both points are correct. Why?”

The headmaster was at a loss for words. “I see... It’s true then... You seem happy...”

“I am! My lifelong wish has finally been granted! I’ve never been happier!”

“I see.” The headmaster massaged his temples. Kanata’s future had held such promise. She would have gone through the Selection Ceremony and advanced to upper-grade courses as a Saint or some other such rare and potent Profession. And one day, she would have become the pillar of the nation. Everyone at the school had had such high hopes and so much admiration for Kanata’s future.

But the girl herself had set her sights on something different. The rumors they’d heard, from the teachers who were at the Selection Ceremony, had said that she’d only ever enrolled in the school with the intent of becoming a Beast Tamer. That she had never had any intention of picking any other Profession.

Now, a child was, of course, free to choose whatever Profession they liked. Nobody else had any right to besmirch that decision. Indeed, to fail to respect the child’s will as paramount would be to defy the will of the gods themselves.

However. *However!* Surely that couldn’t apply to *Beast Tamer* of all Professions! It lowered your abilities! Its Profession Ability wouldn’t even let you tame a magic beast unless you were stronger than it! It was a Profession with no redeeming qualities whatsoever! It was as if she had tossed all her precious talent into a ditch.

Still, the latest detail to come out was that Kanata had left the city walls and immediately defeated two high-level monsters. Even with her abilities lowered,

a genius was still a genius. Even in the ditch where it had been thrown, her talent was alive and well. There was nothing that could be done about her choice in Profession, but she was still too precious a student to lose. Her being a Beast Tamer did not erase her achievements. Many students had enrolled in this school out of admiration for Kanata. In fact, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that *most* of the new students were here because of her. Her stellar record had even drawn supporters to donate funds, thanks to the good reputation it gave the school. If it was known that Kanata had declined to advance to the upper grades, the funds would dry up, and the students would be devastated. In a worst-case scenario, it might cause all sorts of trouble for the school administration.

The headmaster was desperate. He would not let her get away, he told himself. He roused his spirit and regarded her with steely resolve. "Could I not persuade you to rethink this? For a brilliant woman of letters like yourself to give up on her education would be a great loss to our school. No, to our kingdom."

"Nonetheless," answered Kanata, "that's the decision I've made."

"But what about your parents? The ones who pay your tuition! Would it not dishonor them to abruptly change course like this?"

"My mother and father?"

"Yes! Your mother and father!" From what the teachers had said, Kanata's decision not to advance had been made just this morning. If she had not discussed the matter with her parents, the headmaster could bring them here and get them on his side. "If they knew their precious daughter did such a thing, wouldn't it cause grief to your father, Boldow the Divine Sword, and your mother, the Archsage Aleksia?" Using a parent's love as a shield was an ugly tactic, unbecoming of an educator.

Call me a coward if you must, the headmaster thought, *but I am prepared to do what it takes to protect my school!*

He smirked to himself, satisfied that his scheme would work.

It didn't. Kanata dismissed the headmaster's tactic without a moment's hesitation. "Oh, they're completely fine with it. My parents know I chose this

school hoping to become a Beast Tamer. They'll be overjoyed, I'm sure."

"What. Did. You. Say?" There was no way she did this with her parents' blessing! "But! But! But! But! But!!!"

"In any event, my parents already have an excellent heir. It isn't especially a problem if their daughter is somewhat profligate."

Their excellent heir. The headmaster lifted his head at that phrase. "Oh! That's right! I also called for your younger brother!" That was a glimmer of hope.

Just then there was a knock on the door. "I am Alus Aldezia, middle-grade second year at the Academy of the Holy Word. May I come in?" A boy, blond haired and blue eyed, walked briskly into the office. He was young, but he looked very good in his white uniform. He didn't especially resemble his sister, except in that they were both frightfully beautiful. He wasn't on the same level as Kanata, but he too had exerted himself fully and received tremendous accolades.

"Heya, Alulu!" said Kanata. "Long time no see!"

"Sister," said Alus. He understood the gist of the situation from Kanata's casual greeting. Her plans, laid long ago, were finally coming to fruition. "I see, then, that you are no longer pretending."

"Alus!" said the headmaster. "Please, you have to get through to your sister! She has been behaving most peculiarly for a while now. She isn't speaking like herself! And she's been grinning like a loon! She must have some sort of condition!" He grabbed on to the boy's shirt.

Alus placed his hand on the headmaster's shoulder. "No, Headmaster. Nothing peculiar is happening. This is who she is. I am afraid the Kanata Aldezia you knew was an act. At home with us, she has always been ridiculous."

"Then," the headmaster hesitated, "she's sane? She's doing these things in full possession of her faculties?"

"Yes. My sister is in her right mind, although I do not know if I would call her sane."

“Hey! That’s mean!” Kanata clutched Zag’giel to her chest and pouted like a small child.

The headmaster lowered his head in despair. “I can’t believe this...”

“If you called me here to persuade her to stay on, I am afraid I must decline. My sister has wanted to be a Beast Tamer for as far back as I can remember. She isn’t going to change her mind because you or I said so.”

“F-For that long?” asked the headmaster.

“For that long,” Alus answered. “I gave up on changing her mind long ago. I shall see to the protection of House Aldezia. Headmaster, you had best stop trying to do the impossible as well.”

Kanata’s brother had been the headmaster’s hidden ace, but alas, in this game, aces were low. He had no cards left to play.

Alus walked past the headmaster, who had become nonresponsive, and sat down next to his sister. “Sister, is this magic beast one that you’ve tamed?”

“He is! Isn’t he cute?”

“*We are called Zaggy. It is an honor to meet you.*” Zag’giel held out his right front paw, and Alus shook it with his index finger.

“Another strange name,” he mused. “I am terribly sorry. It is my sister’s predilection to give everyone strange nicknames.”

“*We have come to rather like the name*,” said Zag’giel. “*We have no objections.*”

“You are very tolerant, Sir Zaggy,” said Alus. “My sister is somewhat lacking in common sense, but it is my hope that you will take good care of her.”

“*We swear to you that we shall protect her with our life*,” said Zag’giel. “*Even in this small and weak body.*” The boy and the furball cat bowed deeply to each other. It was an absurd scene, but both of them were deadly serious.

Kanata stood up from the sofa and looked over at the headmaster. “I suppose this meeting is finished? Headmaster, may I go back to the dormitory?”

The headmaster, who had sunk to his knees, looked up at her with a twisted

grimace. “Ha ha ha... Aha ha ha ha... This isn’t over, Kanata! You say you won’t change your mind, but I have more plans!”

Suddenly, the door to the office flew open, and the school’s teachers came flooding in, surrounding Kanata.

“And what exactly are you planning to do?” asked Alus, stepping in front of Kanata to protect her.

“*And now, you intend to persuade her by force?*” Zag’giel, too, leapt from her shoulder and arched his tail fearsomely.

The headmaster stood up. “Kanata, if you won’t listen to reason, you leave us no other choice.”

“Are you serious about this, Headmaster?” Kanata narrowed her eyes.

“Of course I’m serious!” Flecks of foam were flying from the headmaster’s mouth. “Teachers! Do it!”

“Yeeeaaaaaaaah!” The teachers issued a fearsome battle cry!

With their breathing in perfect timing, they raised their hands high above their heads, knelt, and, with surprising force, pressed their foreheads to the ground. And then, they revealed their secret weapon.

“Please at least keep your name on the student registry!”

It was a flawlessly executed supplication. They were desperate to at least have Kanata’s name remain attached to the school. Their desire to one day be able to say that they taught *the* Kanata Aldezia had brought them here, to a situation where their foreheads were planted firmly to the floor.

“Oh?” said Alus. “Adults are incredible. How far they will go to get what they want!”

“*This is...the determination of humanity!*” Zag’giel and Alus marveled at the teachers who were now casting aside their dignity and reputation.

With his head still rubbing against the floor, the headmaster cackled like a fiend. “This is an adult’s ultimate technique! Well, children?! How does it feel watching big adults grovel on the ground?! Unbearable, is it not?! Now! If you want us to ever stop begging, you will accept our conditions!”

“Um,” said Kanata, “as long as you don’t try to stop me, I don’t particularly mind.”

“Yay!” the teachers cheered.

And so Kanata came to be a fake student, enrolled but not present in the school.

† † †

Kanata stretched her arms above her head. “Freedom!” she cried. “For real this time!”

Everything had been for the sake of raising her chances of Beast Tamer appearing at the Selection Ceremony. However, acting the part of an elegant lady and following the strict rules of the school had gotten to her more than she’d realized. It was like every childish behavior she had been bottling up until now had come bursting out at once.

“I’m not comfortable here,” muttered Alus. “I would like to leave as soon as possible.”

“Okay, okay,” said Kanata. “I’ll show you to the school gate.”

“My thanks. Although it *was* your fault I was called here in the first place.”

True to its name, the Lulualas Academy for Girls admitted only girls as students. As a boy from a different school, he stood out in the hallways like a sore thumb. He felt like the girls were staring at him everywhere he went. Alus was a princely young man, and every bit the vision that his sister was. There was no way he could avoid attracting attention here. This was an academy for prim and proper noble girls, and to their etiquette lessons’ credit, nobody here was shrieking or chattering or swooning. Kanata, however, the very symbol of the school itself, was currently behaving like a small child.

“Ahhhh!” she sighed. “Zaggy, your fluff feels so goooooood...”

“*K-Kanata. Please do not pet us like that. You are embarrassing us.*”

“Zaggy’s embarrassed! He’s so cuuuuuute!”

She had become the exact opposite of her elegant and refined image. The strange way Kanata was acting seemed to shock the other students to the point

that they would not come close. Could this really be the Lady Kanata they had all admired?

"Tell me, sister," said Alus, "freedom is all well and good, but what do you plan to do after this?"

"Well, obviously, now that I've become a Beast Tamer, I'm gonna live the Beast Tamer life!"

"The Beast Tamer life?" Alus echoed.

"I'm gonna make lots and lots of fluffy friends and live a life of pleasure!" Kanata gave Zag'giel a good pat. This was the focus of all her desires from her previous life. To seek the fluff, to befriend the fluff, to live for the fluff.

"Hm." Alus nodded. "In other words, you intend to set out on a journey to gather companions."

"Yes! I want to see fluff from all over the world!"

"I should tell you it is dangerous for a girl to travel alone, but... Well, it's *you*, sister. In fact, I pity anyone who might try to attack you."

"Hmph. Pity, huh?"

"Of course. Have your abilities truly been lowered? I see no difference whatsoever."

"Hmm?" Kanata said. "You don't? I think they went down a *bit*. Maybe."

"*You* aren't even certain." Alus shook his head. "You are a strange one, sister."

"My little brother is saying such mean things!" lamented Kanata. "You're gonna make your sister cry. Zaggy, cheer me up."

Zag'giel hesitated. "*Shall we pet you on the head?*"

"Oh my gosh," said Kanata. "Please! That would be the best." Zag'giel stretched out his stumpy little paws and stroked Kanata's hair. Her eyes drooped in happy relaxation. Alus looked at Kanata's happy face and decided there was nothing to worry about. As long as she was happy, that was all that mattered.

“Well,” Alus said, “this is where I take my leave. If you have a quiet moment on your journey, I would appreciate it if you’d write me.”

“Huh? That sounds like a pain in the butt.”

“The *instant* she stops pretending...” Alus muttered.

“I dunno if I’m going to write,” said Kanata, “but I’ll definitely be dropping in. I gotta introduce Zaggy to mom and dad, y’know!”

“Very well. I intend to return home for summer vacation. I would be very happy to spend that time with you.” Alus bowed courteously, then turned and left.

Outside, the sun was starting to set.

“Let’s return to the dorm,” said Kanata. “The shops won’t be open much longer, so we should get ready for our journey tomorrow. After we go back and get dinner, let’s take another bath!”

“*Another bath?! W-We must decline!*”

“Aw,” said Kanata. “You don’t like baths, Zaggy?”

“*N-No*,” Zag’giel sputtered, “*that isn’t it. A man must not enter a bath with a young lady! We may be trapped in this body, but we were once a Demon King! We should bathe one at a time.*”

“Oh, don’t worry about it!” Kanata said. “It’s fine!”

Zag’giel, it turns out, didn’t really have any heart behind his protests. In the end, the two took a very long bath together. Then Kanata cleaned up their dinner, brushed her teeth, and changed into her sleeping clothes.

“*We are more than happy to sleep on the floor*,” said Zag’giel. *“Next to sleeping in the wilds, sleeping inside a room is like heaven.*”

“No way!” Kanata rejoined. “Zaggy, you go *here*.” She lifted up the bed’s comforter, creating a space big enough for Zag’giel to climb into. “Come on!”

“*No. We must refuse.*”

“Awww! But it’s so comfy in here! Sleep with me, Zaggy!”

“*No means no! But as a compromise, we shall sleep here.*” Zag’giel crawled up

next to Kanata's pillow and curled into even more of a ball.

"Hmph." Kanata pouted. "Well, I can fluff you any time from here, so I guess it's not bad." Zag'giel slept facing away from Kanata, so she nuzzled her face into his rear.

"*It's not our fault if you suffocate*," warned Zag'giel.

"Oh, I would *love* to be suffocated by fluff..." Kanata mumbled sleepily. She was starting to doze off. "Zaggy..." she said. "We're going shopping tomorrow... Tell me if there's anything you want..."

"*There is nothing*," said Zag'giel. "*Buy whatever you wish. You have given us food and a place to live. We could ask for nothing more.*"

Kanata said nothing.

"*Did she fall asleep?*" Zag'giel roused himself and took Kanata's blanket in his mouth to pull it up over her shoulders. "*Curse this weak body*," he said. "*It takes so much work just to move a single blanket.*" His labor finished, Zag'giel curled up and watched Kanata sleep.

"Eheh heh heh..." she muttered. "Zaggy..." It seemed she was having a pleasant dream. She was smiling and giggling like a little girl.

"*Kanata... We may be useless as a servant, but we are truly grateful to have been chosen by you.*" Zag'giel looked out the window, up at the moon.

"*The curse of the gods...*" he said. "*We shall regain our strength—strength worthy of one such as you. We look forward to a long partnership, Kanata.*" And Zag'giel fell into the first comfortable sleep he'd had in centuries.

† † †

Kanata awoke the next morning to sparrow songs outside. She ran over to open her window, hoping to meet some new feathered friends, but they scattered into the wind when she got close.

"Of course," she said. "I'm a *Beast* Tamer. It's not gonna make me any more popular with *animals*."

She slumped her shoulders. Even now that she was a Beast Tamer, animals fled before her in fear. The fault lay with the aura of might she unconsciously

projected, but Kanata herself had yet to realize this.

Today, however, was different. Animals could hate her all they liked. Zag'giel was here.

"*Mmph. Kanata. You are an early riser, we see.*" Zag'giel opened his eyes after Kanata rose, and stretched his stubby legs as far as they would go.

"Ahhhh! Cute! So cute!" With Kanata's exceptional memory, that image would be etched into her mind until the end of time.

"*Oh, stop staring so much.*"

"Okay," said Kanata. "I'll only stare a bit, then."

"*That isn't much better.*"

True to her word, Kanata kept stealing glances at Zag'giel as she made breakfast for the two of them. Zag'giel was the first to yield.

"*We retract our previous statement*," he said. *"This is just making us anxious. Please just act normally."*

"Yay!" Kanata cheered, hugging Zag'giel in her arms and rubbing her cheeks against him. "Zaggy, I love you!"

"This *is normal?!*"

Kanata squeezed and fluffed Zag'giel for a while, and then plopped his limp form onto her shoulders to head into town. Just as she had said yesterday, her plan today was to buy all the items she would need on her journey. Since she remained on the registry as a fake student, there was no need for her to move out of the dormitory. Her plan was to toss all of her luggage into her room as is.

"Okay, Zaggy!" she said when she was finished. "Let's set out on our journey to meet all our new friends!"

"*Wait, Kanata!*" Zag'giel nibbled her ear to get her to stop. "*Do you intend to go dressed like that?!*" Kanata was still dressed in her school uniform and carried no bags.

"Oww!" she said. "You're eating my ear!"

"*Kanata, listen!*"

“What is it, Zaggy?”

“*Are you not far underequipped to set out on a journey?*”

“Oh?” Kanata mused. “You think so?”

Kanata was a good enough survivalist to be a scout for the army. She knew how to purify water, how to start a fire, even how to identify edible plants and animals. It was easy for her to set out on a long journey without any equipment in particular.

“*Kanata, listen to us. We have spent many long years wandering in the wild. It is cold in the forest at night. There are places with no good footing, sharp, thorny grasses, even flowers that will make your skin well up like a burn. It is a dangerous place, quite unlike the city. This is not something you can overcome with strength alone. We must needs prepare ourselves properly.*”

“I see,” said Kanata. “You’re right. It’s important to be well prepared when setting out on a journey.”

She quietly nodded her head, giving some thought to the trials Zag’giel had faced up until now. She would be fine, but Zag’giel might not have it so easy. Kanata promised herself that she would obtain proper travel equipment so that her adorable Zag’giel could have as pleasant a journey as possible.

“*It is well that you understand*,” said Zag’giel.

“Leave it to me, Zaggy!” Kanata said. “I’m gonna get the best equipment ever!”

Zag’giel’s worries hadn’t exactly reached Kanata, but the result was the same: she agreed to obtain proper gear.

The two set out to the general store in high spirits, where they promptly encountered their first obstacle.

“I don’t have enough money!” proclaimed Kanata.

The equipment Kanata wanted would cost three orders of magnitude more than the money she had on hand. Kanata had lived in dormitories since she was six, where all of her living expenses were paid by the school and she could have

anything she wanted if she asked. The money she carried amounted to no more than pocket change.

This was a critical error. Things here did not work as they did in the academy, where all of her requests would be fulfilled to an extent. Kanata had no choice but to leave on her journey with nothing at all.

It wasn't as if she had no means of obtaining money. There were many individual royals or nobles who would support her with funds should she ask. The current king himself was one such person. He was an old friend of her father's and had become a big fan of Kanata's thanks to her three successive wins in the royal fencing tournament. He had doted on her and spoiled her with everything from pocket money to extensive renovations to her dormitory. If she were to go to the castle and play innocent, she could get as much money as she liked. However, if he heard that she planned to leave the Royal Capital and travel to other lands, he would most likely try to detain her. Kanata was done with people trying to stop her from leaving.

"Hmm," she pondered. "What to do..." She didn't think she knew anyone who would hand over the money without giving her an earful about her plans and situation. She would rather borrow money from her brother Alus.

Kanata would have kept considering bad option after bad option, but Zag'giel, on her shoulder, got her attention with a "miu!"

"*Kanata. If you are in want of money, would it not be wise to work for it? Can humans not sell their labor for money of commensurate value?*"

"That's it!" Kanata cried. "Zaggy, you're so smart!"

"*It has nothing to do with intelligence. You simply suffer from a profound lack of common sense, we think.*"

Kanata, who had spent her whole past life in a hospital, hadn't thought of work as a potential solution. "Change of plans!" Kanata declared. "I know somewhere I can get a job right away!"

"*Oh? In that case, lead on.*"

Kanata began to walk toward her new destination.

† † †

Kanata led the pair to a building that had a sign emblazoned with the image of swords crossed over a flame.

“Excuse me!” she called as she walked in through the double swinging doors.

Inside, there was a large room filled with rows of round tables and customers enjoying their food and drink. At a glance it looked like a pub, but in the back there was a place that resembled the reception area of a bank. There were several men and women there wearing employees’ uniforms and helping customers.

Zag’giel looked all around the shop from his perch on Kanata’s shoulder. “*You would work* here*? They do seem to be shorthanded, we suppose.*” He glanced at one of the waitresses, who was carrying eight steins of beer in her two arms.

“Mm,” answered Kanata. “It’s more like they can *introduce* me to work.”

“*We see. We did think the customers here had the look of vagrants and thrill seekers.*” Whether they were living it up in the pub or waiting in line at the reception area, everyone here had those distinctive sharp eyes and wore their weapons openly. These were not peaceful folk with respectable occupations—their business was battle.

“Uh huh!” Kanata nodded. “That’s ’cause this is the Adventurers’ Guild!”

True to its name, the Adventurers’ Guild both issued licenses to qualified adventurers and gathered clients’ requests from all over the land to hand off to adventurers in need of work. Many of the people who took jobs here were hardly better than bandits, but the guild maintained strict rules for conduct, and their punishments for troublemakers were harsher than those meted out by the courts.

Still, for people living in the margins of society, the guild offered a chance to strike it rich. People who couldn’t get steady work often became adventurers. There was always the risk of death, but those who survived and returned triumphant could enjoy a life of merrymaking. The Adventurers’ Guild was a private association, but because of its role in lowering the crime and unemployment rates, it enjoyed the support of many nations.

“The good thing about being an adventurer,” said Kanata, “is that they pay you on the spot when you complete a task.” Adventuring was famously more lucrative than finding employment as a soldier in the army. It was perfect for Kanata, who was in desperate need of cash.

“*Ah*,” said Zag’giel, “*then you intend to become an adventurer?*”

“Exactly! We’ll have to earn money on the road to cover our travel expenses, after all!” As she spoke, Kanata got in line for registration.

“*Kanata...*”

“What is it, Zaggy?”

“*We cannot help feeling that we are being watched.*”

“Oh? I wonder why!” Kanata was used to being the center of attention at her school, so it didn’t particularly bother her. But just as Zag’giel had said, at some point the boisterous conversations had grown silent. Everyone was staring at Kanata. She was, after all, a lovely-looking young lady wearing the uniform of the Lulualas Academy for Girls, a school for the children of the aristocracy. She didn’t fit at all with the rough-and-tumble atmosphere of the guild. The adventurers were thinking that someone had better tell her that she was in the wrong place.

However, this was the guildhall, where they were under the staff’s watchful eyes. They might be scolded if they said something untoward and frightened the girl. It was probably best to leave well enough alone. If they caused trouble by trying to help, their personal evaluation with the guild might suffer. The adventurers did their best to act unconcerned, although they kept stealing glances at Kanata.

“Next, please!” said the woman at one of the reception counters. It was finally Kanata’s turn, so she walked up. “Are you here to register?” the receptionist asked, just the slightest bit of surprise registering on her face. As part of the guild’s staff, it would reflect badly on her to act too overtly shocked by Kanata’s appearance. Besides, she was fairly used to strange outsiders dropping in from time to time. “I see you are wearing a school uniform. Are you a student?”

Kanata had very little interest in fashion. She had almost no clothes aside from her school uniform, just an evening dress for attending social events and formal wear for ceremonies, neither of which would be any better.

“I graduated from the middle grades just yesterday,” she said. “I don’t have any other clothes yet.” She had intended to buy a set of travel clothes and some outfits for daily wear, but as it turned out she didn’t have the money. “Are students not allowed to be adventurers?”

“No, the Adventurers’ Guild accepts anyone but criminals. However, to join us, you will need to demonstrate that you are skilled enough to be an adventurer.” The woman took out a piece of paper. On it was a client’s written request and a simple map. “In the forest outside the city is a thicket of medicinal herbs. You are to venture into the forest alone, harvest the herbs, and return. This is the minimum level of ability we expect of our adventurers.” The guild got many people Kanata’s age. Usually they would give up when faced with the reality of adventuring life. This task was a subtle threat, meant to teach them the dangers of the world outside the city walls.

The receptionist continued. “Most of the monsters in the forest are on the level of slimes and goblins, but make no mistake. They are more frightening than you think.” She leaned in close, looking Kanata straight in the eyes. “Slimes hide in trees and lie in wait to catch their prey unawares. If one of them lands on your head, it will immediately start to suffocate you with its semiliquid body and then slowly digest you.” It was actually very common for novice adventurers to get careless and end up asphyxiated to death by slimes.

“Fighting a goblin might sound exciting to a young girl like you,” she went on, “but please listen.” The receptionist explained how goblins were capable of reproducing with females of other species; how if Kanata were to lose a fight against them, she would be dragged off to a cave somewhere and forced to breed goblins until she died.

In truth, goblins were extremely timid creatures, and there were essentially no cases of anything like the gruesome fate being described actually happening, but the receptionist was embellishing the facts to try to scare Kanata off. It actually had more of an effect on the surrounding adventurers trying to focus on the day’s requests than on Kanata herself—they recoiled in disgust or went

stiff as they listened.

“Having heard all that, do you still want to be an adventurer?” asked the receptionist.

“Yep!” Kanata answered, as cheerful as ever.

The receptionist placed her palm on her forehead and sighed audibly. “Very well. Our guild doesn’t turn anyone away. If you’re sure you want it, I can’t stop you.” She handed Kanata a feather pen. “Sign here,” she said. “This indicates that you have accepted the request. You will receive your payment when you return with the medicinal herbs.”

“I get paid even for the test?”

“Yes. It’s both a test and a request with a reward. Well, truthfully it isn’t much of a reward. Are you certain you’re ready?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Then I wish you luck, Miss Kanata Aldezi—ah?!”

The receptionist knit her brows as she saw the name the girl had signed with. She felt like she had heard that name just the other day. That’s right, she remembered. When the gatekeepers had brought in those wanted monsters, they said the person who slew them was—

“See ya then!” Kanata said before the receptionist could get a word in, and left.

“Excuse me! Wait! I haven’t finished my explanation! The rules say you’re supposed to bring an observer with you! Will someone—” She looked around, trying to see if there was anyone who was willing to act as her observer, but everyone was averting their eyes. This girl looked like trouble, and nobody was willing to follow after her. It looked like the receptionist herself would have to do it. “Agh,” she exclaimed. “*Honestly!*”

Cursing her coldhearted colleagues for leaving the task to her, the receptionist retrieved her rapier from where it was hidden under the desk, sheath and all, and attached it to her belt. She swapped out her pumps for a pair of sturdy boots.

“I’m going to perform observation duties!” she cried behind her. “Someone please take over my booth!”

She stepped out of her reception booth, kicked the toes of her boots on the floor to adjust their fit, and chased after Kanata.

Chapter 3: Dragon Slaying? No! I'm Just Harvesting Medicinal Herbs!

"Miss, wait!"

Kanata stopped in her tracks and turned around when she heard someone calling to her. Someone had chased after her like this yesterday as well, and Kanata was dying to know why this was happening for the second day in a row. The reason, of course, was that Kanata had the habit of running on ahead without listening to what people were saying, but that bit of self-reflection had not occurred to her.

The receptionist from the guild was out of breath, panting. "Why?" she gasped. "I've been diligent with my training..."

She thought it was strange how long it had taken her to catch up with Kanata. The receptionist had run for all she was worth, but even still, she'd barely made it. She had taken on the duty of following after Kanata, after all. Kanata looked like she was walking quietly, but she was moving like the wind through the crowds of people on the street.

"My name is Melissa Straud," the receptionist said when she had finally caught her breath. "I am here to observe your test." She was wearing boots and wore a slender sword, and she extended her hand.



“The test is meant to be undergone alone,” Melissa said, “but if I witness misconduct on your part, or if I judge that you lack the strength to fight monsters, I will suspend the test immediately.”

“I see, so you need an observer...” Kanata took the offered hand in hers. Melissa’s hands were pretty, but her palm was rough like the sole of a foot. It was evident that this receptionist was fairly formidable.

“You do,” Melissa said. “I was going to explain it to you, but you left while I was still talking. If you’re to be a good adventurer, you *must* listen to the *entire* request.” Nobody at the school had been capable of lecturing Kanata like this. It was a new experience for her.

Kanata gave the receptionist another look. She had gray hair, with a braid that draped down over her shoulder. Her eyes were green and looked very kindly, although at the moment they were narrowed a little—she *was* chastising Kanata, after all. She was a little bit shorter than Kanata, but had a very robust physique. She didn’t get that body working as a receptionist. This was the result of training. The nicks and bumps on her rapier’s scabbard made it clear that the weapon was well used. Her guild uniform didn’t match the sword at all, and it didn’t look like it offered much in the way of defense, but she had made a point of putting on her boots—the most important item of all to an adventurer. Most of a quest was spent walking, of course, and choosing boots first spoke to her long experience.

“Miss Melissa,” said Kanata politely, “are you an adventurer, by any chance?”

“You have a good eye,” Melissa answered. “Yes, exactly so. Right now my focus is on my work with the guild, but I am also a B-Rank adventurer.”

Adventurer ranks were structured like a pyramid. A B-Rank adventurer like Melissa was likely to be famous enough for adventurers to know her by name. Given the disposition of its membership, the guild demanded martial prowess from its staff as well. Generally, staff members were scouted from among the adventurers themselves.

“We don’t have enough people willing to be observers, so I get left with the job fairly often,” Melissa explained. “You get the posted reward, but since that tends to be very little money most people aren’t willing to do it. Even more so

this time. I was pretty much forced into this."

"Oh, really! I see!" said Kanata. Melissa had mumbled the last part, so she didn't really catch all of what she'd said.

Recently there had been much talk of *safety* at the guild, and as a result they had adopted the rule of requiring aspiring adventurers to take a test to determine if they had aptitude for the job, with a more experienced adventurer accompanying them to ensure that they didn't die. They used to give adventurers their qualifications on the spot, but because of how many low-ranking adventurers had ended up dying they now felt compelled to adopt a minimal level of screening.

The observer had to be a fairly skilled adventurer, but as the requests given as trials never offered good rewards, there were very few people who wanted to do it. Time after time it was the guild staff, who were either confident in their abilities or else retired adventurers, left holding the bag. But the measure had resulted in a marked decline in the death rate for new adventurers, so it couldn't really be counted as a loss. Melissa wished that they would increase the reward given to the observers, or else hire more staff.

"Anyway," Melissa said, "I suppose I'll be working with you."

"Okay!" said Kanata. "Nice to meet you!"

The two bowed to each other and left the city.

"As your observer, I'm not meant to speak to you or give you advice. Unless you commit a clear infraction or are in danger of losing your life, I will do nothing but observe. Even if you encounter a monster, you must be able to handle it yourself or there is no point."

"Oh, that's fine," Kanata said.

"So you say," Melissa grumbled, "but I *must* say that you are *quite* underequipped."

They still hadn't started the test proper, so she was allowed to say this. Kanata was still wearing her school uniform and everyday shoes, and she seemed to lack even basic weapons or armor. How did this girl plan on fighting monsters? This looked less like the eagerness of an aspiring adventurer than an

attempt at suicide. It was possible Kanata might be a Magician, but even then she would be expected to at least bring a staff with her. Melissa *had* noticed the peculiar black furball riding on Kanata's shoulders, but it didn't seem to be any sort of weapon or armor either. At any rate, Melissa didn't voice any of those observations. All that mattered for the test was results. Whether Kanata had sufficient equipment, she would become an adventurer if she was able to perform the task.

"It doesn't look like you have a map. Do you know where the forest is?"

"Yes," said Kanata, "I remember perfectly well. I was there only yesterday."

"I see. Just yesterday—wait, you went out yesterday?" Melissa was with her today, so this time there was no issue, but certainly the guards wouldn't let an unequipped schoolgirl venture out the gate alone! "By yourself?" she asked.

"No, two guards came with me."

"Ahh, I see."

Melissa felt she understood what was going on. This girl, a comfortably sheltered young noble lady who knew nothing of the world, had had an opportunity to explore the forest with the guards' protection and had gotten carried away thinking that she could become an adventurer. She would surely give up and come back crying as soon as she got a little bit afraid. Maybe it would be a learning experience for her, to see that reality didn't work like her stories.

This test might be over before we reach the forest, Melissa thought.

The forest was, after all, a fair distance away from the city walls. Wearing her soft-heeled shoes, this girl's feet would probably get tired out from walking in no time. As the observer, it was Melissa's responsibility to see that aspiring adventurers who failed their tests got home safely. She was glad that this girl was so slender—it would make her easy to carry.

"Umm..." Kanata, who had been walking ahead of Melissa, turned around to address her.

"Oh!" Melissa exclaimed, surprised out of her thoughts. "Yes? What is it?"

“I’d like to reach the forest quickly. Is it all right if I run?”

“Huh? You want to run? In those shoes?”

“I do,” Kanata said. “But I’m worried that I might end up leaving you behind.”

“Leave me behind? You?” Melissa was speechless.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Well! This girl seemed to think she had the makings of a champion! The corners of Melissa’s mouth almost turned up into a smile, but she kept it in check. She was, in fact, a proud member of the Adventurers’ Guild. The girl seemed to be completely serious. Melissa decided to accompany her until the girl came to terms with reality. Melissa was the adult, after all.

“Run as fast as you like,” Melissa said. “I’ll show you why I’m called Melissa the Zephyr!”

“Oh? Excellent!” Kanata responded. “In that case, I’ll set a somewhat fast pace.”

“Go right ahead,” Melissa said, grinning. Then Kanata kicked off the pavement, making a sound like the earth splitting open. “Huh?”

Kanata had cracked the street’s cobblestone with pure leg strength. Before Melissa could recover from her surprise, she was struck by a blast of wind. Kanata’s starting dash was fast enough that a whirlwind had formed in the vacuum. While Melissa was choking on her dust, Kanata had gotten so far away that she looked smaller than a grain of rice.

Melissa was stunned. For a few seconds, she didn’t say anything. “Is this...a dream?” She pinched her cheeks. It hurt like normal. She pinched her arms. It hurt a bit more. “Hold on!” she said. “Th-This isn’t the time to be doing that! I need to go after her!”

Unable to believe her eyes, Melissa had briefly forgotten about her duty to the guild. “W-Waaaaait!” she cried at the top of her lungs as she ran for all she was worth. “I take it back! I take it baaaaaack!”

† † †

“*Kanata. Kanata. Hold a moment.*”

“Huh? What?” As fast as Kanata was running, she couldn’t make out what Zag’giel was saying.

“*Then we must resort to this...*” Zag’giel decided to use the most efficacious method at his disposal. He scooted up close to Kanata’s cheeks, and rubbed his body against them.

“Waaah?!” The instant she felt the fluff, Kanata’s mental state switched completely. She stopped dead in her tracks, creating a huge plume of dust. “Zaggy’s nuzzles...” she cooed.

“*Kanata. The proctor of the test is no longer with you. It would not do well to leave her behind.*”

“Fluffy fluffy fluff...” Kanata wasn’t listening.

“*Kanata!*” Zag’giel called out, smacking her on the face. “*Return to us!*”

“Aaah,” Kanata sighed. “He’s slapping my cheeks!”

She seemed elated.

“*Hm*,” mused Zag’giel. “*Perhaps it was not the wind that kept our voice from reaching her. Well, no matter. As long as she has stopped, that is enough.*”

Zag’giel obediently squatted his round body down on Kanata’s shoulders. There was no way to reach his master when she was in this state. He would let her do what she liked. Zag’giel had only been with her for a scant two days, but he had already developed a good sense of how to handle Kanata.

While Kanata was enjoying her fluff-fluff time, Melissa stumbled into view, so exhausted that she couldn’t even walk properly. She slowly made her way over on wobbling legs and opened her mouth as if to speak, but she seemed too tired to actually say anything. She was drenched in sweat and gasping for breath.

“Do you need something to drink?” Kanata asked.

Melissa silently nodded. Running all out for so long had left her desperately dehydrated. To her regret, she hadn’t brought her water flask, but as far as she could see, Kanata didn’t have one either. She couldn’t *just* be asking, could she? That would be unspeakably cruel.

Kanata held out a glass.

Wh-Where did that come from? Melissa thought.

The next instant, the glass started to fill with water. The whole thing took less than a second. Melissa had no idea what had happened.

“Here you go!” Kanata held it out for her—pure water to slake her desperate thirst.

All of Melissa’s doubts and astonishment vanished as the water went down her throat. “Th-Thank you... I needed that.” Melissa chided herself for her failure. She shouldn’t have provoked Kanata by bragging and saying that she could *run as fast as she liked*. If Kanata hadn’t been watching, she might have curled up into a ball on the ground out of pure shame. It was truly pitiful for the observer to need to be rescued by the examinee. Her colleagues must *never* see her like this.

“Would you like another?” Kanata asked.

“Oh! Um... Yes please. I would like another.” Her body had lost quite a bit of water. She was still craving hydration. She handed the glass back to Kanata, and in a moment it was filled back up with water. Kanata must have been using water magic without an incantation. Looking closely, the glass seemed to be made of ice as well, albeit very transparent ice of uniform thickness. Creating something like that would require tremendous skill with magic.

“I thought you might be a Magician,” Melissa said. “It’s incredible that you can cast spells without an incantation at your age. I have heard it’s a difficult skill to acquire.”

Kanata being a Magician also explained how she was able to run so quickly. She must have cast a spell to strengthen her own body, while also using magic to manipulate the wind. Using two spells without incantations at the same time was an advanced technique for which not everyone had the knack. This girl must be destined to become a Magician of extraordinary power.

“Hm?” Kanata responded. “I’m not a Magician, though.”

“Wh-What?!” Melissa’s hypothesis had been rejected. “Then...how can you use such high-level magic?”

“Oh,” said Kanata, “I tried hard and believed in myself.”

“You...tried hard.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

So the girl had studied magic but ultimately chose something else as her Profession. It wasn’t as if you became unable to use the magic you’d already learned if you chose a nonmagical Profession. Your power and precision might suffer, but in theory it was possible. However, it was strange that she was able to use powerful enchantments without an incantation, and create constructs with minute precision using water magic.

“I’ll have to ask you officially later, when we register you as an adventurer, but what *is* your Profession?” Melissa shook her head. “Ah, excuse me. I should have told you mine first. I am a Duelist. It’s an advanced form of the Fencer Profession.” As you gained experience, it was possible for one’s Profession to advance to a higher rank. Melissa had earned the Duelist Profession for her fighting style that emphasized the speed of her rapier. Boldow the Divine Sword, too, had once been a Fencer.

There were apparently some people who qualified for an advanced Profession from the very start, but Melissa had never seen it happen. She was beginning to wonder if Kanata might be one of them. She fixed her eyes on the girl. For a child who had just graduated from the middle grades to use such high-level magic, it wasn’t impossible to consider that she might have been given a very advanced Profession indeed. She might be a Magus—an advanced form of Magician. Even something like Sage wasn’t out of the picture. When she said that she wasn’t a Magician, she must have meant that her Profession was more advanced than that.

Kanata looked confused when Melissa asked her Profession. “Isn’t it obvious?” she said.

“Is it?” asked Melissa.

As far as she could tell, Kanata looked like a normal schoolgirl wearing her school uniform. The only things of particular note were her silky black hair and her captivating eyes. Melissa wasn’t generally attracted to women, but it was obvious that Kanata was beautiful. She seemed a little childish in her affect, but

that wasn't strange for a girl her age (although when she was fifteen, Melissa had been more of a country girl).

Really, the only peculiarity was the black furball riding on her shoulder. Speaking of which, what *was* that thing? When Kanata had first walked into the guild, Melissa had assumed it was some sort of fashion accessory...

Suddenly, the furball moved. His triangular ears perked up, and his big eyes met Melissa's. "*Our name is Zaggy*," he said. "*We are a magic beast in the service of Kanata.*"

"It talks!" Melissa exclaimed. "Wait—magic beast?!"

A magic beast that could understand human speech and communicate telepathically must be very high level indeed, but Melissa could sense no such power from the furball before her eyes. As part of the staff of the Adventurers' Guild she had extensive knowledge of magic beasts, but she had never seen one like this before.

Melissa began to wonder how Kanata had obtained the services of a magic beast. Magic beasts were said to bear unconditional hostility toward humans. There was only one Profession that could befriend them.

"Kanata..." Melissa said, shocked. "Are you..."

"Yes, ma'am!" Kanata answered. "I'm a Beast Tamer!"

"No..."

She wasn't a Sage, but a Beast Tamer. The weakest Profession. The Profession that lowered every single ability. Everyone knew not to pick Beast Tamer, even young children. It was absolutely unbelievable that there existed someone who would pick *that* Profession on purpose.

"No way!" Melissa exclaimed. "You're trying to trick me! There's no way a Beast Tamer could use such high-level magic! It's absurd! It goes against the very definition of the Profession!"

"I told you," said Kanata. "I tried hard and believed in myself."

"What do you *mean* you *tried hard* and *believed in yourself*?!" Melissa shouted.

There was no way. Kanata had to be the only person on the planet who could make something like this work through *hard work*. She couldn't believe it, but the truth of the matter was staring her in the face. If magic beasts were fond of her, Kanata could only be a Beast Tamer.

"It looks like you're better!" said Kanata. "We should keep going. The forest is right there!"

Melissa opened and shut her mouth in mute surprise. Kanata grabbed her arm and pulled her along.

† † †

"Are you okay, Zaggy?" asked Kanata. "You're not getting tired, are you?"

"*It is impossible that we could become fatigued from riding on your shoulder*," the former Demon King answered. "*We would rather walk alongside you under our own power, but in our current form we could not keep up with a human's walking speed. Curse this wretched body.*"

"But when you're on my shoulders, I can replenish my fluff reserves whenever I want!" Kanata said. "You should ride on my shoulders forever!"

Zag'giel nuzzled his body against Kanata's cheeks as they walked through the forest. "*That would not do. Not if we are to ever get better.*" By *better*, he meant his strength, of course. He was determined to regain his former power.

"Ah?! You're going to get even better? Incredible!" By *better*, Kanata meant in terms of fluffiness.

"*What are you saying? Our journey*"—toward achieving ultimate power, he meant—"*is only beginning!*"

"Our journey"—toward fluff, she meant—"is only beginning?! Zaggy, you're amazing! You've already captured my heart, how much more are you gonna make me fall for you?!"

"*Bear witness, Kanata! As long as you believe in us, we can reach any heights!*"

"Yeah! I believe in you, Zaggy!"

Melissa was walking along behind the two friends who continued to

misunderstand each other, observing their behavior. “She seems to have a good relationship with that magic beast, and the beast himself seems intelligent and rational. I don’t think he’s going to cause trouble in the city.”

Beast Tamers were allowed to bring their magic beasts with them into town, but that came with responsibility for the beast’s actions. The adventurer could get in trouble if the beast caused problems. They would be stripped of their license as an adventurer, and the magic beast would be executed. Really, this was lenient for bringing a magic beast into a well-populated city. The Adventurers’ Guild essentially saw Beast Tamers as no better than vermin. They were tolerated because the Profession itself lowered your abilities and because the magic beasts a Beast Tamer could tame were not usually very powerful. Otherwise, Beast Tamers would be very hard to control.

“Miss Kanata,” Melissa said, “where did you find this magic beast—Zaggy, I mean?”

“Just in the forest over there!” Kanata answered. “I helped him out yesterday when he was being picked on by some other magic beasts.”

“I see. Wait, yesterday?”

Yesterday was the day someone had defeated the Roc Brothers who had made the forest their territory. The soldiers who’d brought them in had said that they weren’t the ones who had taken them down. Could this girl possibly be the one responsible?

“No, no, no.” She shook her head. “There’s no way...” As incredible as Kanata’s magic was, she was just a schoolgirl without any battle experience. Only a high-ranking adventurer could have defeated monsters like that. Melissa firmly rejected the idea.

“Oh, Miss Melissa.” Kanata pointed toward a tree that stood alongside the path they were following. “Look, it’s a monster.”

“Hmm?” Looking closely, Melissa could indeed see something glossy and lustrous hiding in the foliage. “Oh, a slime. Well spotted, Miss Kanata. You’re very observant.” The abilities lowered by becoming a Beast Tamer included Perception. It really was impressive that Kanata had managed to spot it. Melissa’s opinion of the girl was only going up.

Slimes had a nasty habit of compensating for their slow movement by hiding in treetops and waiting for their prey to come to them. When some hapless victim passed under their hiding spot, they would drop down on their heads with the goal of suffocating them within their gooey body. Even skilled adventurers could die that way if they weren't careful. Despite being weak monsters, they were best not taken lightly.

"Well," Melissa continued, "slimes aren't generally very strong. In a fair fight, even a child with a stick could beat them. Since we have the opportunity, why don't you show me how you'd fight it?"

The slime seemed to notice it was being watched. It dropped down from the tree and began to quiver. It seemed to be appraising the situation.

"*Kanata*," said Zag'giel, standing up tall, "*we shall handle this.*" The slime didn't seem like it was about to run away.

"Zaggy!" Kanata exclaimed. "That's dangerous!"

"*Our very purpose is to do battle for our master. If we cannot defeat this slime, we shall never achieve our desire!*" Meaning, of course, his desire for ultimate power.

"What does that"—meaning fluff—"have to do with fighting the slime?"

"*It has everything to do with it! When we defeat an enemy, we will absorb a part of its soul. This is how we can advance! We beg of you, Kanata! Watch over our victory!*"

"Okay!" Kanata said after a moment's hesitation. "I am worried, but if you're determined to do it I won't stop you! Go for it! I'll be cheering for you!"

"*Excellent! To have you at our back is worth a million soldiers!*" Kanata and Zag'giel shared a look, their eyes both shining with passion.

Melissa watched through heavy-lidded eyes. "This isn't exactly a climactic battle," she said. "You don't have to do all that."

"*Face us, slime!*" Zag'giel declared. "*We shall defeat you, and you shall become our nourishment!*" He jumped off Kanata's shoulder with a fearsome "miu."

He messed up the landing and collapsed in a heap on the ground. The slime went to gobble him up.

“Z-Zaaaaaaggggyyyyyy!”

† † †

“*Kh! How... How could we be defeated by the likes of a slime?!*” Zag’giel was inconsolable.

“You did your best, though, Zaggy!” said Kanata. “Next time you’ll win for sure. I believe in you!”

“*K-Kanataaaa!*” Zag’giel’s eyes filled with tears. Kanata gently pet him on the head.

Kanata had thrust her hand into the slime to rescue Zag’giel, cleaned the residual goo off of him with water magic, and dried his fur with wind magic. After the slime’s prey had been ripped out of its body, it seemed to immediately recognize the power gap between itself and Kanata, and fled.

“I think this is the place,” Kanata said. She stopped walking, still petting Zag’giel affectionately.

“You really do have the map memorized,” marveled Melissa. “I can’t find fault with your sense of direction either. You are correct. This is where the medicinal herbs grow.” She made another note on her notepad, nodding approvingly.

“*Is that the place?*” Zag’giel pointed with one of his stubby legs.

There they could see many different herbs of all shapes and colors. On their own, the herbs didn’t have much in the way of healing power, but an infusion made by combining them with other herbs and certain monster organs would result in a powerful healing potion. The herb Kanata was supposed to harvest for the request was a very important ingredient—the base of the potion.

“All I need to do is pick them and the request will be complete?” Kanata asked.

“Yes,” said Melissa. “Well, technically it won’t be over until you safely return. So—” Melissa realized that she had almost said too much. She clapped a hand over her mouth.

The request didn't specify an amount of medicinal herbs to harvest. Kanata would fulfill its terms whether she returned with all of the herbs or only one. However, the number of herbs Kanata brought back would have an impact on her evaluation.

One of an adventurer's duties is to protect the local ecosystem, Melissa reminded herself. *Someone who would destroy a patch of medicinal herbs for her own benefit is not fit to be an adventurer.*

It wouldn't result in failure if an adventurer returned having uprooted the plants, but it would be a major mark against them in their evaluation.

"We did it, Zaggy!" Kanata sang. "We got an herb!"

"*You would take but one? Would not our reward increase the more herbs we harvest?*"

As Zag'giel voiced his concern, Kanata started watering the patch of herbs. "Maybe," she said, "but if we took all of them, the next people to take the test might have trouble! And there might be animals who eat these herbs..."

Perfect score, thought Melissa. *I don't believe I've ever seen someone get a perfect score before.* She was about to record her notes and Kanata's final score when she sensed a hostile presence. She stopped moving.

"Miss Kanata!" she said. "Watch out! Something's coming!"

"*Hm?! This presence...*" Zag'giel seemed agitated. Both his wild instinct and Melissa's intuition as an experienced adventurer told them that something powerful was coming close.

"It might be a bit dangerous to stay here, you two!" Kanata shouted.

Kanata moved before either of them had time to react. She placed a hand over Zag'giel where he was perched on her shoulder so that he wouldn't fall off and stepped quickly backward. She wrapped an arm around Melissa's waist and leapt back—and just in time. The hostile presence Melissa had felt was coming from overhead.

It came down in a rush of fire that set the ground ablaze, making a terrible noise that shook the earth and sent out a powerful shock wave. Through the

flames and the cloud of dust it had kicked up they saw it—its long neck covered in scales like iron, its breath so hot that the air seemed to twist and shimmer.

"*No!*" Zag'giel shouted.

"A dragon?!" Melissa was shocked. "No way... What's a dragon doing *here*?!"

The dragon stood taller than the trees of the forest. He stamped on the thicket of medicinal herbs, glaring down at Kanata and her companions with undisguised malice.

† † †

Melissa's voice was shaking. "Miss Kanata," she said, "stay calm, and slowly back away."

As far as she was concerned, the test was suspended. This was hardly the time to worry about it. The enormous *thing* standing before them, plain as day, was a dragon—not a pseudodragon like a wyvern or a wyrm, but an actual, real-life dragon, with four legs and wings sprouting from its back. A dragon was a magic beast so formidable that it could be fought off by nothing short of a team of A-Rank adventurers prepared to sacrifice their lives.

The dragon seemed to be aiming for Zag'giel.

"*We apologize, Kanata*," he said. "*That dragon is targeting us. We should have told you of this sooner.*" Zag'giel had an idea of who had ordered this attack. "*That dragon was once our subject, but he has come under the control of a traitorous worm. It is clear to see that he is no longer lucid—he has been subject to their brainwashing for so long that he has become no more than a puppet, living only to fight whom his master commands. He will not heed your words.*"

Zag'giel's fur was bristling. He stood between Kanata and the dragon as if to protect her.

"*We must do something to slow him down! Anything short of dying before you—that, we will not do.*"

The dragon roared. "*Guorrrrrrrr!*"

Trails of white steam issued from his mouth—a sign that the inflammable

liquid in the dragon's body was heating up in preparation to ignite. The dragon was readying itself for battle.

Zag'giel hissed like the catlike creature he was, mustering up every bit of his courage. "*Face us, dragon! We shall bring you to heel!*"

"Zaggy! No!" Kanata shouted.

"*Do not stop us, Kanata!*" Zag'giel shouted back. "*There are times that a man must not shirk his responsibilities!*"

Kanata didn't quite understand what was happening in Zag'giel's head, but she could tell that this was important to him. "Okay," she said. "All right. I won't stop you, Zaggy."

She wouldn't stop him, but she would support him with the whole of her power. Specifically, she hit him with every support spell she could think of—she pushed his attack power, his defense, his speed, his vitality, and his magic far beyond their limits.

"Go, Zaggy!" she cheered. "You can do it!"

Zag'giel cried out as the magic filled his body. A red aura haloed his figure.

"*Haaaaaa! This...power! This power flooding our body! With this we are a hundred—no, a thousand—no, ten thousand times as strong as we were before! With this power, we can win!*" Glowing red, he turned to face the dragon head-on.

"*Kanata! Behold!*" He charged forward, leaving red afterimages in his wake and shouting a fierce battle cry. "*Haaaaaaaaaaa!*" He approached just in front of the dragon's snout, when a puff of breath from the dragon's nostrils knocked him right back.

"*Haaaawhaaaaa?!*" Zag'giel rolled backward, tumbling like a ball, until he bumped back into Kanata.

"Welcome back, Zaggy," Kanata said.

"*S-So much power, and this dragon is yet far beyond us!*" Zag'giel *was* Zag'giel, even with his power increased ten thousandfold. His base power was too low for an increase of any magnitude to mean much.

“That’s not true!” said Kanata. “You’re way better!”

The dragon was covered head to toe in scales—it didn’t look at all like it would be pleasant to pet. Zag’giel was the clear victor on the basis of fluff alone. The dragon didn’t come anywhere near his level. Zag’giel’s fluff was simply too great. Or so Kanata thought, anyway.

“*K-Kanataaaaaa...*” Zag’giel sobbed, tears welling up in his eyes. Kanata patted him comfortingly on the head.

While Kanata and Zag’giel shared their tender moment, Melissa’s mind was in an entirely different place. The danger had not yet passed.

“I must buy time for those two to escape!” Stopping her arms from trembling through sheer force of will, Melissa drew her faithful rapier. Steel weapons could not pierce a dragon’s hard scales. Its claws were so keen that a glancing blow would be enough to kill—and dragons attacked relentlessly with their four limbs. Even the trees wouldn’t give her any cover. The dragon’s red-hot breath would burn her surroundings to ashes.

“There’s only one way,” Melissa said. “The underscale...”

For all that they were said to be invincible, dragons did have one weakness—a large inverted scale right underneath their chin. It was said that a dragon would fly into a rage if anyone were to touch this scale in particular. The underscale was harder than the dragon’s other scales, true, but because it was inverted there was a small gap between it and the surrounding scales. The underscale was a defense against attacks from below the dragon’s head, but its presence created another weak point.

“My rapier has a slender tip. I might be able to thrust it into the gap between the scales. Maybe...” She trailed off.

Melissa’s rapier had been forged for her out of mythril. As long as she could avoid the dragon’s scales, it should be able to stab through the dragon’s hard flesh and penetrate its vital organs. Those vital organs, however, were currently higher up than the top of the trees. She would need to strike when the dragon lowered his neck, or her sword would never reach.

“The dragon looks like it’s about to use its breath. It will most likely bring its head down when it does. I must strike at just that moment!”

In other words, a counterattack. It was a lot to ask of a B-Rank adventurer, but Melissa had no choice. Kanata was special. Her talent was beyond precious. She had to live so that she could one day become a great adventurer. It was the duty of an adventurer, after all, to be willing to die and entrust the future to the next generation.

Melissa held her rapier firm in her grip. She shifted her weight onto her front leg.

I must protect her! Melissa thought. *First, I will push Kanata back with the flat of my sword. Then, with my second step, I will evade its breath. And finally, I will thrust my blade into the gap of the underscale!*

There was no time to save Kanata’s magic beast. She would just have to pray that the dragon’s breath would happen to miss his small body.

More and more steam came from the dragon’s mouth. His eyes, with their vertical-slit pupils, were filled with malice. His breath would be coming at any moment.

Focus... Melissa told herself. *Focus... Focus...*

If she mistook the timing of the dragon’s breath, every one of them would be burnt to a crisp. She was concentrating as hard as she could, watching for that crucial moment.

“Um, Miss Melissa?” Kanata said, in a relaxed tone not at all appropriate to the situation.

“Y-Yes?” Melissa’s focus was broken. She hadn’t been expecting Kanata to *speak to her* of all things while she was trying to concentrate on the timing. The dragon stretched his neck up high. He was going to use his breath!

“No!” Melissa shouted.

But the breath didn’t come—the dragon was crying out in agony.

“*Grraaaaaaaaaa?!*” he screamed.

“Huh?!” Melissa was confused. “What?! What happened?!” The dragon

collapsed to the earth, writhing in pain. He looked like he was vomiting blood.

"Miss Melissa, is this the underscale?" Kanata was holding a large scale in her hand.

"H-How did you—" Melissa was flabbergasted.

"Oh! I ran, and I jumped, and I grabbed, and I pulled," said Kanata.

"You *what*?!" Melissa had been staring directly at the dragon, but Kanata's movements had been too quick for her to register. How fast could that girl possibly be?!

"*Grrrrrrroooooohhh!*"

The dragon slowly pulled himself to his feet. His eyes were burning with fury. If touching the underscale was enough to incur a dragon's wrath, you can imagine how much greater his anger would be at having it ripped clean off.

Kanata met his murderous eyes with her own imposing glare. "Hmph," she said. "Your fluff score is zero. No good at all."

She sighed, as if she had no interest whatsoever in the beast.

"*Garooooooon!*" the dragon bellowed. Enraged, and provoked by Kanata's lack of interest, he unleashed his breath.

"That's dangerous!" said Kanata. "Bad!"

She sounded for all the world like she was scolding a small child. Kanata held her arm out in front of her and a magic circle appeared, stopping the dragon's breath.

"What?!" Melissa screamed. "She stopped the dragon's breath?!"

Melissa hadn't thought there was any magic in the world that could do that. But, miraculously, Kanata's spell held it at bay, and not even the heat of the breath made it past the circle. No—it wasn't just being held at bay. It was being turned back. That magic circle wasn't meant for defense at all.

"If you mess around with fire, you can get burned!" Kanata said. "See? Like *this*!" Suddenly, flames appeared, with *twice* the intensity of the dragon fire. The dragon's breath was swallowed up by the inferno. The flames roared past

the dragon's maw all the way into the sky, where they pierced through the tranquil white clouds above, leaving the sky a brilliant shade of ultramarine.

"*Gh... Ghrrr...*" The dragon, the scales of its face burnt black, looked up at the cloudless sky. Bereft of hope before Kanata's overwhelming power, he lost consciousness. His massive body fell to the ground with a terrible clamor.

"That dragon could have started a forest fire!" said Kanata. "Are you all right, Miss Melissa?"

"A-Am I all right..." she echoed, dumbfounded. "Am I all right? Am I all right?!"

Melissa had come back to her senses, but she was shaking with awe. She could not believe that what she had just seen was real. What *was* this girl?! She had done battle with a dragon, emerged the victor, and didn't seem worked up at all! She was acting like she had just hung the laundry up to dry!

"What was that?" Melissa was panicking. "What was *that*?! You defeated a dragon! Alone! And what was that spell?! There isn't a Magician *alive* who could cast a spell like that! Miss Kanata! What in the gods' names *are* you?!"

Kanata gave Melissa a kindly, gentle smile.

"I'm a Beast Tamer!" she chirped.

Chapter 4: Exorcism? No! I'm Just Cleaning the Sewer!

"Open wide, Zaggy!" said Kanata. Zag'giel opened wide. "Well? Do you like it?"

"*Y-Yes*," said Zag'giel. "*It is quite good. However, Kanata! We are not a child! We find this style of eating to be most...humiliating.*" Zag'giel chewed the meat Kanata had given him, looking quite uncomfortable.

"Oh, don't worry about that!" said Kanata. "Okay, open wide!" Kanata paid no heed to her own food, instead holding out a spoon for Zag'giel.

"*So this is what it means to have loyalty to one's master*," Zag'giel muttered. "*We are prepared to die fighting for Kanata, but we were not prepared to endure this shame...*"

After defeating the dragon, Kanata and company had brought the medicinal herb back to the guildhall and had a late lunch in the attached pub. It wasn't a normal mealtime, so they were the only ones there. And at their quiet table, Kanata was taking her time spoiling Zag'giel to her heart's content.

By contrast, the guild itself was in an uproar. Melissa was up in the guildmaster's face, hounding him with the details of what had happened.

"I'm telling the truth!" she shouted. "There really was a dragon, and that girl really defeated it! Go there and see for yourself!"

"Look," said the guildmaster. "We sent an adventurer to investigate when we received your report. We're waiting for him to make it back."

Melissa was a capable guild officer and a serious person, who had won considerable fame as an adventurer. It was hard to imagine that she would lie about this, and yet her story defied all common sense. The guildmaster simply couldn't believe it. A girl of fifteen came from a school for the daughters of the aristocracy asking to be an adventurer. And not only did she receive a perfect score on her test, she also vanquished a dragon when one suddenly attacked? It

would be too absurd to write in a stage play for the masses. No aspiring novice was at that level. To defeat a dragon in single combat would place her above even A-Rank, making her one of the small number of S-Rank adventurers to exist in the world.

Suddenly, an adventurer ran into the guild with such force that he broke the swinging doors. “I-It’s true!” he gasped. “Everything Lissa said is true! H-Huge dragon! In the forest!” That was all he managed before he collapsed to the ground in a clatter. It looked like he had been running all out.

“See?!” said Melissa. “Kanata is going to be an *incredible* adventurer! We need to register her before she gets away!”

“I-I never would have imagined someone like that could exist!” The guildmaster felt light-headed, as if he might faint. He staggered as he took to his feet, still giving instructions to his other subordinates. “We need to recover this dragon!” he said. “And right after the incident with the rocs too... We still need to clean up after *that*.”

The guildmaster, with Melissa in tow, approached Kanata, who was still eating her lunch. “Kanata Aldezia, was it?” he said.

“Yes, sir,” said Kanata. “Have you made a decision? Do I have your permission to become an adventurer?”

“My permission?” The guildmaster blinked. “Well...”

“I see,” said Kanata. “Then we failed. Of course. The medicinal herb thicket was ruined, after all...”

“Huh?”

“Let’s go, Zaggy.” Kanata stood up, holding Zag’giel in her arms. “We’ll have to find some other way to earn money...”

The guildmaster started to panic. He held up both of his arms to block Kanata from leaving.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait!” he shouted. “You passed! You passed! We were just making the arrangements!”

Still with his arms out, he started to shepherd Kanata toward the reception

area.

“Really?” Kanata exclaimed. “Wonderful! Oh, then here! Please take this!” Kanata produced a medicinal herb from thin air.

The guildmaster balked. “What was that just now?”

“Hm?” Kanata looked puzzled. “It’s a medicinal herb.”

“Not the herb! I mean, where did it come from?! Was that dimensional magic?!”

“Yes, sir,” said Kanata. “I call it my Inventory Screen. It’s very useful.”

“Useful?!” The guildmaster was shocked. “That’s super-high-level magic! Only a Sage could handle something like that! Then...you’re a Sage?!”

“No, sir. I’m a Beast Tamer! Here, I have proof!” Kanata held Zag’giel up in front of the guildmaster’s face.

“*You may refer to us as Zaggy*,” he said.

The guildmaster thought he was losing his mind. “How in the blazes can a Beast Tamer use dimensional magic?!”

“By studying hard?” Kanata blinked.

“Studying?! You studied hard enough that you don’t even need a Profession to use it?!”

“Well,” said Kanata, “I thought that when I became a Beast Tamer, it would be nice to be able to carry lots and lots of toys and snacks for my cuties! So I tried really hard to learn how.”

“And *that’s* why you can use top-tier magic?!”

“Guildmaster,” said Melissa, “perhaps we should move on?”

She was trying her best to pacify the guildmaster, whose face had become bright red from shouting.

“Kanata,” she said, turning to the girl, “I am well aware that you are an exception to all kinds of rules. But whatever kind of person you are, there is no doubt in my mind that you will be invaluable to our guild. I would be much obliged if you chose to join us.”

“Yes, ma’am!” said Kanata. “Which makes you my senior! I’m looking forward to working with you!”

“S-Senior.” Melissa balked. “And yet you overtook my rank so quickly...” She shook her head. “I’m looking forward to working with you as well. I will leave the paperwork to our staff member in charge of such things.”

She led Kanata to a table where another staff member had a great array of papers spread out for them.

With just a hint of nervousness in his expression, the staff member explained the guild’s rules and the terms of Kanata’s contract. “Finally,” he concluded, “I need you to write your name, curriculum vitae, and Profession. These documents will be kept in high-security storage—nobody but us will read them.”

Kanata did as she was told and quickly wrote her information in the appropriate places on the forms. “Excuse me,” she said. “Am I meant to indicate any awards I’ve received in the section for my curriculum vitae?”

“Of course,” said the staff member. “They might improve your rank assessment, so it’s best if you include them.”

“Oh,” said Kanata, “but there isn’t enough space to write them all. Should I limit it to my major awards?”

“You’ve won that many? I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised that the girl who vanquished a dragon isn’t...your average...” The staff member trailed off. He was watching what Kanata was writing—National Fencing Tournament: Winner; National Magic Tournament: Winner; National Archery Tournament: Winner; King’s Prize for Advancement in Magic Theory: Recipient—it went on.

“F-Falsifying your record is a crime!” he said. “I happen to know that the winner of every National Fencing Tournament for the past few years has been—Wait. *You’re* Lady Kanata Aldezia?!”

“Yes, sir,” said Kanata. “I told you my name at the start.”

The staff member practically fell backward out of his seat. “G-Guildmaster! Miss Melissa! This girl is *the* Kanata Aldezia! The three-time winner of the fencing tournament! The one who ended every fight with a single move! The

one nobody was even able to *hit*! The girl they call the second coming of Boldow the Divine Sword!”

“Oh!” the guildmaster exclaimed. “You’re right! She acts so differently in the tournaments, I hadn’t noticed! Back then she was like a blade of ice! I can’t believe Kanata Aldezia is such a spacey-looking girl!”

“But she *does* have the same face!” said Melissa. “I *thought* I had seen her somewhere before. Then...the Kanata Aldezia who defeated those rocs yesterday is...”

All three stared intensely at Kanata.

“Oh, didn’t I tell you about the magic beasts who were bullying Zaggy?” Kanata asked.

“You didn’t say that they were *rocs*!” Melissa slammed her hand down on the table.

“Also,” Kanata continued, “my father is very much alive? I’m not sure how I could be his second coming.”

“Huh?” said the guildmaster. “Don’t tell me Boldow the Divine Sword is—”

“Yes, sir,” said Kanata. “He’s my father.”

“Whaaaaat?!” All three of the guild’s staff members staggered back at once.

“Y-Yes,” said Melissa. “They *do* share a surname, come to think of it. Then does that mean the Archsage Aleksia is...”

“My mother, yes,” Kanata finished.

“Incredible,” the guildmaster marveled. “So that’s why you’re so strong. You learned swordplay and dimensional magic from your parents, then?”

“Oh, no,” said Kanata. “I’ve never even seen my father use a sword or my mother cast a spell.”

In fact, it wasn’t until she had come to the Royal Capital that Kanata learned that her kind, beloved parents were such lofty people. The two were just living out their postretirement life in comfort.

“A prodigy...” muttered the guildmaster. “A prodigy among prodigies...

Melissa," he said, turning to his subordinate, "we mustn't let her get away!"

"That's what I've been telling you!" Melissa shot back. "We need to give her a proper reward for the rocs and the dragon! I don't know if we *have* enough in our coffers!"

While the guildmaster and Melissa carried on, Kanata finished her paperwork.

"Is this acceptable?" she asked.

"Of course!" said the staff member. The Adventurers' Guild was perpetually shorthanded. There was no way they would turn away a prodigy like this. With that conviction burning in his heart, he stamped the document with more force than was really necessary. "Thank you for your application! From now on, you are an adventurer!"

"But what will we do about her rank?" asked the guildmaster. "I'm sure we all agree that she already has the *skills* of an S-Rank adventurer. I would like to give her S-Rank qualifications right away."

"Under our bylaws, a perfect score on the test should let a novice adventurer skip two ranks to start as a D-Rank," said the staff member. "But nobody could deny that Miss Kanata is an exceptional case. I believe it would be appropriate to award her a rank of S, as a special provision."

As excited as they were, however, Kanata rejected the guild staff's proposition. "We mustn't cheat," she said. "Let's follow the rules as they're written."

"R-Really?" asked the guildmaster.

"Yes, sir," said Kanata. "Also, you don't need to give me a reward."

"Why not?!" all three said at once. The reward for the magic beasts she had defeated would easily be enough to buy a house in the Royal Capital. There was absolutely no reason to turn it down. But Kanata held firm.

"That was before I became an adventurer," she said. "The only request I took was to harvest a medicinal herb. Therefore, I would like a reward for the herb and nothing else." Aside from her fluff mania, Kanata was an honest, virtuous, and upright young lady. Her only issue was her strange obsession with fluff.

“*Well said, our master*,” said Zag’giel, nodding his fervent approval. “*The way of the true sovereign is to do naught that would bring you shame, but to advance solely by your own power!*”

“Ehehe,” Kanata giggled. “Zaggy, you’re so sweet!” She squeezed the former Demon King tight and nuzzled against his cheeks.

“*Kanata!*” protested her victim. “*You are embarrassing us!*”

“Well, it’s not bringing shame to *me*,” said Kanata, “so it’s no problem, right?”

† † †

Across the sea from the continent where humans lived lay a great land known as the Dark Continent, which was dominated by demonkind. There, in that paradise for magic beasts who delight in bloodshed, stood a great castle. Inside, a demon man sat upon a throne, listening to his servant’s report.

“What?!” he bellowed, striking the throne’s armrest and shooting to his feet. “You mean to tell me that not only were the Roc Brothers struck down, but the dragon too?!”

“Yes. My minions were watching with scrying magic. They say there is a human girl accompanying His Infernal Majesty—” He cut himself off. “My apologies. I meant to say she is accompanying the former king, Zag’giel. It seems that it is she who fought the Roc Brothers and the dragon.”

“Preposterous,” said the demon. “No human living could be a match for them!” The Roc Brothers had been ordered to go to the realm of humanity to search for the Demon King. However, it seemed that when they’d arrived there, they had all but neglected their duty. The dragon had already been robbed of his intelligence by magic. But as forgetful as they all were, their strength had been as formidable as ever. It was absurd to think that they could have been defeated by a human girl.

“But Lord Zarbok, the fact remains that every one of the magic beasts you sent has been defeated.”

“It must be Zag’giel himself who defeated them,” Zarbok mused. “Scrying magic is not always reliable—especially from as far away as the other side of an ocean. Your minions must have made a mistake.”

“It is as you say,” the servant said. “I defer to your insight.”

“Zag’giel...” Zarbok hissed. “So you have already regained that much of your power.”

When a demon was sent from the Dark Continent across the sea to human lands, it was important to prevent human forces in the outlying territories from taking notice. Humans were fragile, but their numbers were great. Their territory spread all over the world, with the sole exception of the Dark Continent. Alone, a human was weak. But as a people, nobody could deny that their strength far outstripped that of the demons. The humans must not become aware of their movements—not until the time was ripe for the demons to begin their attack in earnest. That was why it was magic beasts with the ability to fly that had been sent to human lands. But Zarbok could not have expected them to be defeated in such quick succession.

“With no Demon King to unify the Dark Continent, each region has fallen under the dominion of some powerful demon or other. It has been this way for centuries. If Zag’giel regains his power, there will be nothing stopping him from reclaiming his throne. After all, the next Demon King has yet to be crowned. We must end his life before that can happen.” Zarbok sighed. “To think that he was in the human realm this whole time. How much time did we waste searching the Dark Continent...”

Zarbok looked over at the small table by his throne. On the table, in a vessel that resembled a long-stemmed wine glass, was a single plant. “We must hurry,” he said. “It may not have shown any signs of change, but once it buds, it will grow quickly. From what I heard, in the words of the Goddess, the curse will be lifted when the flower blooms.”

“Lord Zarbok,” said the servant, “why do we not set fire to the flower?”

“Don’t be a fool,” said Zarbok. “The flower is nothing but a means to descry Zag’giel’s condition. If we burnt it, we would have no way of knowing what state he is in!”

“M-My apologies!”

“Now hurry!” Zarbok ordered his servant. “Send the next assassin! Before he regains his power!”

“Y-Yes, my liege!”

† † †

“It’s fine, isn’t it?” asked the guildmaster. “If Kanata doesn’t want a reward, it just means more profit for the guild.”

“Of course it isn’t fine!” Melissa snapped back. “Defeating the rocs and the dragon is an outlandish feat! If the headquarters and other adventurers find out, they’re sure to think that we’re unfairly exploiting our adventurers!”

“You’re right! That’s a problem!”

“Moreover,” said Melissa, “she didn’t *just* defeat them—thanks to her we were able to *capture* them! The Royal Capital laboratory would be willing to pay an enormous sum of money for a live dragon. I understand that the girl herself refused a reward, but to go along with that would be equivalent to defrauding her!”

“But other than money, we don’t have anything appropriate to offer her. What do we do?” The guildmaster was at a loss.

“We must think of some way to settle this amicably,” mused Melissa.

Melissa and the guildmaster continued to discuss the matter as the other staff member prepared Kanata’s adventurer identification.

“And finally,” said the staff member, “you have one last form to fill out.” He glanced over at where Zag’giel was sitting. “As a Beast Tamer, you will need to register your companions with the guild. Although I really can’t believe that you’re a Beast Tamer, Miss Kanata.” The staff member sniffled, and he watched Kanata write with great interest.

“I am!” said Kanata, taking Zag’giel’s stubby legs in her hands and wiggling them around with jerky motions. “Isn’t he the cutest?”

Zag’giel let Kanata do what she liked with his body, but his face was screwed up with a look of offended dignity.

“I suppose he is rather lovable,” the staff member said. “He looks like a cat crossed with a slime.”

“He’s so squishy!” Kanata declared.

“O-Oh, really?” The staff member hesitated. “May I touch him, just a bit?”

“*You may not*,” Zag’giel intoned. “*We are not some common dog who will wag its tail cheerfully no matter who may pet it. Only Kanata is permitted to touch us.*”

“I-I see...” The staff member slumped his shoulders, dejected.

“Should I write his name here?” asked Kanata.

“Yes, exactly,” said the staff member. “And please look over the rules. Once you’ve registered, you only need to present your identification card, and other cities should let you in without a problem.”

A Beast Tamer’s magic beasts were protected by law, but if one were to cause problems, it was the guild’s responsibility to see to its extermination. Still, most Beast Tamers only had beasts on the level of slimes or the like—nothing that could cause any problems worthy of the name. Registering their magic beasts was largely a formality.

“Za-ggy.” Kanata sounded it out as she wrote. “Okay, I’m done.”

“Very good,” said the staff member. “And your identification is ready. All we need now is a drop of your blood and Zaggy’s.”

Another staff member brought in a polished metal card and presented it to Kanata. The drop of blood left an imprint on the card of the unique structure of their soul, which would serve as proof of Kanata and Zag’giel’s identification.

“This card is made of durable materials. It won’t be easily destroyed. However, if it does become damaged somehow, you can get your card reissued at the nearest guild.” The staff member paused. “Oh! Do you need a needle to draw the drop of blood? I’ll give you two. Take care not to use the same one.”

“Nhh.” Kanata made a pained little noise. “There’s no way I could prick Zaggy with a needle...”

“*What are you saying? We are not afraid of the likes of a needle!*”

“But animals hate getting shots...” Kanata said.

“*We are no animal*,” Zag’giel declared. “*We told you, did we not? This is not our true form.*”

While Kanata hesitated, Zag’giel pricked his own forepaw on the needle in her hand and let a droplet of blood fall onto the card. Kanata and Zag’giel’s blood droplets both vanished, absorbed into the metal.

“Good,” said the staff member. “Thank you for your patience. Miss Kanata, you are now a D-Rank adventurer.”

Kanata cheered. “Now we can start earning money, Zaggy!”

“*If you had accepted the reward for the rocs and the dragon*,” said Zag’giel, “*then there would have been no need for us to seek further work.*”

“Well, maybe. But since I’m an adventurer now, I wanna try going on an adventure!”

“*Hah.*” Zag’giel laughed in amusement. “*If that is your will, Kanata, then we will not object. After all, to seek greater heights through victory over strong opponents is precisely our desire.*”

“Yes!” Kanata agreed. “We must reach greater and greater heights!” Of fluff, of course.

“*Indeed! We shall show you what lofty heights*”—of power—“*we shall reach!*”

The guild staff watched the two psych each other up, wondering if Kanata and Zag’giel were under some sort of mutual misunderstanding, but none of them voiced their concern.

“May I look for a job on the bulletin board over there?” Kanata asked.

“Of course!” the staff member said. “There are some cases where individuals with specialized skills are approached for certain jobs, but for the most part adventurers are free to choose their own work.”

“I wonder what sort of jobs there are...” Kanata said as she stood up.

“It’s well into the afternoon, so I’m afraid all of the good jobs have been taken. Why don’t you come back early tomorrow morning? The morning rush is quite a lot to get used to, but you will find better jobs than the ones still posted now.” True to the staff member’s words, the well-used corkboard was almost

empty.

"*Kanata*," said Zag'giel, "*you are currently D-Rank. The requests left seem to be too high in rank, or else unpleasant tasks that no one wished to do.*"

"Hmm..." Kanata shook her head. "But it's still a while until the sun sets, and there's nothing to do at home except fluffing with Zaggy..." Suddenly, her eyes lit up. "Oh, but that doesn't sound bad, does it? Let's fluff-fluff until dinner!"

"*Let us find a job!*" Zag'giel blurted out, dodging away from Kanata's hands and jumping up on the bulletin board. "*This one! What do you say to this one?!*" He selected one of the cards and pulled on it with his mouth, pulling it off of the bulletin board. Zag'giel and the card together slid down until they hit the ground, and rolled into Kanata's feet.

"Zaggy!" Kanata chastised her pet. "That was dangerous!"

She scooped Zag'giel up in her arms and took the card from his mouth. It looked like it had been on the board for a considerable amount of time. The paper was yellowing, and the edges showed signs of wear and tear.

Kanata looked over the request and nodded. "All right!" she said. "Let's go for it!"

"*Let us see...*" Zag'giel climbed up on Kanata's shoulder to get a look at the card, and then recoiled in surprise. "*What?! Kanata, are you serious?!*"

"Seriously serious~♪" Kanata sang. "Excuse me! We'd like to take this request!"

† † †

"Miss Kanata, do you really intend to take this request?"

"Mm-hm!" Kanata responded with a smile.

The staff member pursed his lips. That job had been left unwanted for years in a forgotten corner of the bulletin board. It was the last request anyone would want to take. The reward was low, it involved heavy labor and considerable risk, and above all else, it was filthy.

The request written on the card read, "clean the sewer."

Adventurers who lacked the strength to earn money battling beasts were often left with the dirty jobs and simple chores—jobs like searching for lost items, acting as security at various events, or cleaning up the kills of higher-level adventurers. And among those, the least desirable request of all was cleaning the sewer.

In the filthy miasma of the underground waterways, it was easy for abandoned pets to settle and turn into magic beasts. There were even places that were used as dumping grounds for human remains by criminal enterprises, leading to infestations by undead monsters like ghouls and ghosts. Nobody would agree to clean such a filthy and dangerous place for such a meager reward.

"*Kanata*," said Zag'giel. "*Are you certain? We, too, dislike this task. It is not proper work for a young lady.*"

"But look," said Kanata, "it's paid on commission! We get three copper coins for each stride-length cleaned!"

"One stride-length will be considerable work, you know," said the staff member. He sighed at Kanata's ignorance. "Listen, Miss Kanata. You are aware that the Royal Capital is divided into three districts, yes?"

The three districts were Hightown, where nobility and royalty lived; Midtown, which was home to knights and merchants and the like; and the slums of Undertown, where the destitute made their homes. In the very center, towering above the rest of the city, was the king's castle. The other districts formed rings around it like ripples in a pond. The thick stone walls between each section of the city were meant not only to fend off magic beast attacks, but to ensure the physical separation of different social classes.

The waste produced by life in the city flowed downhill from Hightown all the way down to Undertown. To ensure that Hightown remained sanitary, the Holy Church dispatched priests to perform rituals of purification that both cleaned the wastewater and prevented magic beasts from entering. However, the effect of these rituals only went as far as Midtown. The grace of the gods, it seemed, did not extend to the lower classes living in Undertown. Located as they were in a ring around the rest of the city, the residents of Undertown were no more

than another barrier—a wall of meat in the way of any magic beasts who would attack the metropolis.

"The request, you see, is to clean the *Undertown* sewer specifically," said the staff member.

This was a request placed by the kingdom itself. Even though the Undertown sewers were in Undertown, they connected directly to the sewers in Hightown. If they were to become *too* filthy, the stench and the contamination might find its way back upstream. As little as the reward on offer was, the kingdom *would* pay to ensure the job was done. It did not, however, rise to the level of priority where the kingdom was willing to make it a public service. At one point they must have had the idea of giving the work of cleaning up the sewers to low-ranking adventurers, but this was not work to which adventurers were well suited.

"It's full of magic beasts," the staff member continued. "The sludge is poisonous, and you could even get the plague. You have no idea how much work it is to clean the sewer." It would take ten workers an entire day to clean the sludge out of just a few stride-lengths of the Undertown sewer, and all for just a few copper coins—just barely enough money for the night's dinner. That was why this job had remained untouched for so long. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand," said Kanata. "Anyway, I'll be taking this request!"

"You don't understand *at all*!" the staff member exclaimed. "Were you even listening?!"

"I was listening!" Kanata said. "Thank you for your concern. But it would be terrible if no one cleaned the sewer, wouldn't it?"

"I-I suppose..." he admitted. "But I don't think there's any need for *you* to—"

"I'll be fine!" Kanata interrupted. "Leave it to me!" She held her head high, full of confidence.

"Hah..." the staff member sighed. "Very well. If you insist, you may take the request."

He stamped the yellowing paper where it said "request accepted." With that, it was officially Kanata's.

“The residents of Undertown are an ill-bred lot,” he said. “Take care not to get involved with anything on your way there.”

“Okay!” Kanata said in her singsong voice. “Well then, I’m off!”

As Kanata left, the staff member watched her go with one elbow propped up on his desk.

“It’s hard to believe that such an innocent girl can best the likes of rocs and dragons...” he muttered. He walked over to where the guildmaster and staff were wringing their hands over the conundrum of the reward for defeating those magic beasts.

† † †

Kanata found her path through the narrow alley blocked by two men—one large and one small. “Hey, lady! You got any idea whose turf you’re stepping on?!”

“Whoa, this girl’s a looker! I bet she’d fetch a high price!”

An ordinary girl would have withered before the two men raising their voices at her, but Kanata showed no signs of fear. Her eyes were completely dry. She raised a single eyebrow at her would-be attackers.

“*To think we would become involved in something the moment we left the main road to enter Undertown*,” said Zag’giel. “*We are in awe.*”

“Awe is right,” said Kanata. “It hasn’t even been ten seconds.”

The men, sure that Kanata’s cool demeanor was a bluff, took a few steps closer. “Come quietly and you won’t get hurt, you hear?”

“*Hmph*,” Zag’giel huffed disdainfully. “*Kanata, there is no need to trouble yourself with mere ruffians. We shall be more than enough to dispose of them.*”

“Now, now, Zaggy,” said Kanata, gently trying to prevent the men from using Zag’giel as their new soccer ball. “We might as well hear what they have to say first.”

“*You are most generous, Kanata*,” said Zag’giel. He turned to address the men. “*Very well. Foolish humans, our benevolent master has deigned to hear you. Speak.*”

“Whoa,” said the tall man, startled by Zag’giel’s pompous words. “A talking cat?!”

“Hey, boss,” said the short man, “I bet this girl’s a Beast Tamer!”

“Huh? A Beast Tamer? Hey, that’s a pretty wimpy-looking magic beast. I bet it couldn’t even take on a slime!”

“I hear that becoming a Beast Tamer lowers all your abilities,” the short man said. “I guess all you can get in that condition is rubbish like that!”

“*It is you who are rubbish!*” Zag’giel rejoined. “*You intend to abduct an outnumbered girl?!*”

“Hey! It’s her fault for coming alone to a place like this! We’re gonna have some fun with her and then sell her off. Maybe we’ll sell the talking cat too! Might make us a pretty penny!”

“Oh?” said Kanata. “In that case, we might have a bit of trouble.”

“Hah!” the taller man barked. “Trouble? Why, whatcha gonna do?”

“I think *you’re* the one in trouble here, missy!” The two men grinned wickedly and rushed straight for the girl.

† † †

“Right this way, m’lady! Right this way! Eheh heh...”

“This area is quite dirty, so please do watch your step.”

The street toughs who had tried to attack Kanata were now wringing their hands as they guided her through Undertown. They were so meek and obedient that it was impossible to imagine they were the people who were acting so tough just a few minutes ago. After all, Kanata had taught them that a man can fly.

A man can fly if he is struck by Kanata’s fist.

“I still can’t believe that *you* are Kanata Aldezia, m’lady,” one of the men said.

Kanata blinked. “You know of me?”

“Just rumors. Even round here, people talk about the girl who won the last three fencing tournaments in a row. I hear they call you The Princess of Sacred

Ice.”

“Well,” the other added, “there’s no way *we* could get our hands on a tournament ticket, so this is our first time seeing you in person.”

Kanata was just as beautiful in person as the rumors said, but her character was completely unlike the popular vision of her. Far from an icy presence, she seemed like a bright, cheerful, happy-go-lucky girl. This was why so few people recognized Kanata when they happened to meet her.

“So how come you’re not wearing your sword today?” the taller man asked.

“I don’t own my own sword,” said Kanata. “Besides, swordplay has never been one of my strong suits.”

The street toughs laughed. Coming from the strongest sword fighter in the kingdom, that statement could only be a joke. But Kanata’s statement was simply the cold reality. Kanata never *had* been especially good with the sword—that is to say, it was easy for her to accidentally kill people if she wasn’t careful. These men’s Professions were Fighter and Pugilist, after all, and Kanata had sent them flying with just a gentle tap. If Kanata had been using a sword, they would have been reduced to mincemeat.

“*This truly is a filthy place...*” Zag’giel curled his upper lip. “*The smell of it stings our nose.*”

The walls were covered in a reddish-brown sludge. At their feet was the skeleton of some creature, seemingly fused with the floor. It was being picked clean by a swarm of rats and insects.

“That’ll be the sewer,” the tall street tough said. “Lately it’s been even worse than usual around here.”

“Our sewer’s bad even by Undertown standards,” the other added.

The farther along the men led them, the worse the smell got. There was no sign of anyone living in the surrounding houses. It was easy to imagine why even people with insecure housing would avoid this place.

“There’s been this weird plague spreading around, too, thanks to all the waste that ends up here. Old folks and kids have been dropping like flies—their bodies

ain’t strong enough to endure it.”

Kanata and Zag’giel had seen many people on their way who seemed to have a nasty cough. They must have been suffering from the plague.

“The Church hasn’t sent a priest or a cloistered sister to heal the sick?” asked Kanata.

“*As if* the Church would ever do that,” the man replied. “The sons of bitches running it these days wouldn’t send someone anywhere they couldn’t get fat donations out of. Nobody heals gutter scum like us.”

“I see...” Kanata seemed lost in thought.

Before long, they had reached their destination.

“There it is, m’lady.” The street tough pointed ahead to the entrance to the sewer. Filthy black water was oozing out of it, too disgusting even to be called wastewater. It was viscous, and the waterway was clogged, raising the water level. Every now and then, a bubble would pop, releasing a cloud of extremely poisonous gas. “Any closer and you’ll be poisoned for sure.”

Kanata bowed politely. “Thank you for showing me the way,” she said. “I can handle myself from here.”

“M’lady,” the tough said, “what exactly are you planning on doing here? We did what you said and took you to the sewer, but you haven’t told us what this is about.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Kanata asked, puffing her chest out proudly. “I am here to clean the sewer at the behest of the Adventurers’ Guild!”

“You’re gonna try and do something about this?!”

“That’s the plan!” Kanata chirped.

“No, no, no!” The residents of Undertown had given up all hope of the sewer ever being cleaned and just did their best to avoid it. The taller man balked at her mad scheme, waving his hands from side to side. Did Kanata really plan on cleaning it all by herself? “No matter how strong you are, there’s nothing you can do about—hey, does the air suddenly smell a bit better?”

“Boss!” the shorter man piped in. “Look where m’lady’s standing! Everything’s

getting all clean!”

“Holy—you’re right! Look! The way we came in from is all clean too! I had no idea the road used to be white!”

As Kanata had approached the sewer, she had been continually invoking purification magics. After all, she would hate for her beloved Zag’giel to have his delightfully fluffy fur wind up smelling like wastewater. However, Kanata’s magic was powerful enough that it cleansed not only the air, but the street and the walls as well. The sludge and grime caking every surface turned to white sand—the aftereffects of purification—and vanished.

“P-Purification magic?!” The street tough was stunned. “That’s Holy Church stuff! I thought you were a Fencer!”

“No, I’m a Beast Tamer,” answered Kanata.

“That’s right!” the man said. The magic beast riding on her shoulder testified well enough to her claim. “You’re a Beast Tamer! That makes even *less* sense!”

The street toughs found themselves unable to comprehend the fact of Kanata’s existence. They turned their heads up toward the sky, hands on their foreheads.

“I understand that you two are poor,” said Kanata, stepping toward them. “But you mustn’t try to abduct people!”

“W-Well, I think it’s safe to say you taught us our lesson,” said the tall man.

“We won’t do it again. I promise,” said the short one.

“Good,” said Kanata. “Now, look at me.”

The two balked, afraid that she was going to hit them again, but they dared not defy her. They did as they were told. Kanata gently touched their cheeks with her cool hands and wordlessly cast a healing spell. The swelling where Kanata had punched them instantly subsided.

“You would heal us, after what we did to you?” the tall man marveled.

“What kindness!” said the short man. “M’lady, are you a Saint?!”

“No! I’m a Beast Tamer!”

The men were crying tears of gratitude—they had forgotten that Kanata had been the one to punch them in the first place.

“Also,” said Kanata, “I have a request. Would you gather all of the sick people into one place?”

“O-Okay, we can do that, but why exactly?”

“I believe I can heal them with my magic. I would very much appreciate it if you would gather everyone together while I’m busy cleaning the sewer and removing the source of the disease.”

“Y-You’re going to heal everyone?! But...we don’t have anything to pay you with...” The street toughs looked downcast, cursing their powerlessness and feeling guilty for their misdeeds.

“Consider it my thanks for guiding me here!” Kanata smiled.

The street toughs fell to their knees, overcome by religious awe, tears welling up from their eyes. “Thank you!” the taller one said. “I-I have no words! My mama’s gonna get better!”

“A Saint!” the shorter one cried. “I don’t care what Profession you are! M’lady, you’re a Saint!” They were weeping openly now.

“*Hmph*,” said Zag’giel. “*Foolish humans. At least you show proper gratitude toward our kindhearted master. Now repent, and apply yourselves properly!*”

“Yes, sir!” The street toughs prostrated themselves in worship, while Zag’giel, who hadn’t really done anything, sat up proudly. Kanata found his haughty stance to be simply adorable.

† † †

Zag’giel eyed the polluted wastewater. It was green and black in patches, almost in a marbled pattern. He screwed up his face. “*Purification magic or no*,” he said, “*it is quite the feat of courage to step foot in a place like that*.”

“Mm,” said Kanata. “Be careful not to get your fluff dirty, Zaggy.”

“*You hardly need to tell us that*,” Zag’giel said.

The sludge looked and smelled like pure poison. There was no way it was safe

to touch.

"Okay, on three," Kanata said. "One...two...three!" And she stepped into the sewer with no hesitation. Instantly, the filth around her transformed into white sand. Kanata's field of purification worked on even the most vile poison.

"I hadn't noticed before because it was hidden under the mud," Kanata observed, "but it looks like there's a place for people to walk."

True to her words, there was a platform on either side of the waterway wide enough to walk down single file. The sewer, which had been so filthy, was becoming purified at an astonishing rate. The wastewater was so clear that it looked like it might be safe to drink.

"*What power! We have never seen purification work with such speed. It seems that all we must do is follow this path upstream, and the sewer will be cleaned!*"

Every step Kanata took cleaned another bit of sewer and earned her another three copper coins. With a thousand steps, she would earn three thousand. In silver that would be thirty coins, or three in gold—the average monthly wages for a worker in the Royal Capital. And it would take Kanata no more than half an hour. In addition, this was not the only branch of the sewer. If Kanata were to follow after the filth and purify all of it, it would end up being an incredible sum of money. Ordinarily, there would be the concern of the client being stingy, but in this case the client was the kingdom itself. It would pay. Whatever government official had posted the request would probably faint if they knew.

"Let's keep it up!" Kanata said.

"*Indeed, we have no objections. We believe we are coming around to this task.*"

It was dark, so Kanata conjured a white light to see by.

"*Water... Recovery... Purification... Light...*" Zag'giel observed. "*Kanata, are we correct in surmising that you specialize in holy magic? Perhaps you would indeed be better suited to the Saint Profession, rather than Beast Tamer.*"

"Maybe," said Kanata, "but I'd rather do what I *wanna* do than what I'm good at. Also, holy magic comes in handy a lot, but I can cast every spell in the school's library."

“*Come to think of it, you used fire magic in the battle against the dragon, did you not? Truly, our master is an extraordinary human. We are in awe.*”

Kanata had learned all the magic she knew to increase the number of Professions available to her, hoping it would raise the odds of Beast Tamer making an appearance. But she had another reason—a personal one. The fluff. If her fluffy beasties’ throats were dry, she would have water magic to slake their thirst. If they were hurt, she could heal their wounds with recovery magic. If they got dirty, she wanted purification magic to clean them, and she had learned light magic so that she could shower them with love even in the dark. Everything Kanata had done—all the efforts she had made for all those years—came back to the fluff.

“*We thought there would be magic beasts making their homes in this place*,” Zag’giel mused, “*but we have yet to see any...*”

Perhaps the sludge was more poisonous than they had thought—too poisonous even for magic beasts who prefer to make their nests in filth. Needless to say, there was no sign of any rats or bats either. The air was clear around Kanata, thanks to her purification magic, but an ordinary person or animal would die of lung failure if they ended up in such a place.

“Hey Zaggy,” said Kanata, “doesn’t it seem like something’s off?”

“*What do you mean?*”

“Even if the Church’s purification magic doesn’t go past Midtown, isn’t this *too much* poison just to come from Undertown’s wastewater?”

“*Indeed. We thought so as well. This is too poisonous even for a magic beast. Kanata, do you suspect that some individual has deliberately poisoned the sewers?*”

“Exactly!” Kanata said. “Zaggy, you’re so smart!”

“*Hah.*” Zag’giel gave a single laugh. “*In the distant past, we too were a king, and the master of a great city. We know enough of urban planning to tell that this is unnatural.*”

“Right! That’s what I’m saying!”

“*Then that is why you have led us upstream*,” Zag’giel said. “*You seek the source of the poison. After all, a practitioner of your ability should be able to simply purify the whole sewer at once. Your spells could cover a far greater area than those cast by the priests of the Church.*”

“Got it in one! Nice going, Zaggy! Nothing gets by you!”

“*Hmph. It is no great matter.*”

Despite his words, Zag’giel held his head high with pride. Kanata took advantage of his position to pet his head lots and lots. All told, it was a win-win situation.

† † †

“*We have seen much of the sewer, but this is exceptionally bad. The poison here is like a fine mist. Even the poison mushroom forests on the Dark Continent were not so vile as this.*”

“Are you okay, Zaggy? It doesn’t hurt?”

“*There is no need for concern. With your purification magic, our nose does not so much as itch.*”

“That’s a relief! Tell me right away if it gets bad, okay?”

“*What of yourself, Kanata? You have been channeling purification magic for a considerable time. Is your magic not running low?*”

“Nope! This is nothing!” Kanata gave Zag’giel a bright smile. She hadn’t even broken a sweat.

“*As ever, we are in awe.*”

Magic power was not wholly separate from vitality. If a spellcaster were to overuse their magic, they would start to feel faint and sickly. It was similar to the symptoms of anemia. Kanata, however, had a ball of fluff on her shoulder that she could use for recovery anytime. She had no mental fatigue whatsoever. She would give him but one fluff, and her magic would be fully restored. She was a perpetual motion machine, running on the power of fluff.

“*However*,” said Zag’giel, “*it seems that the road becomes more difficult from this point onward. Take care not to slip and fall into the water.*”

“Okay!” Kanata replied.

Everything outside of her immediate area was shrouded in a green gas. It was impossible to see what lay ahead. Right now, this was confined to Undertown, but as things were, it would only be a matter of time before it spread to Midtown, and even Hightown.

“*This raises the likelihood that these are the workings of someone’s scheme*,” Zag’giel said. “*Otherwise there would be no reason for the poison to grow thicker as we travel upstream.*”

Ordinarily, sewer water would be more polluted the further downstream it went. For the opposite to be the case could only mean that the source was upstream. Kanata and Zag’giel had been right on the money. They reached the spot where the poison was thickest. All that was left was to find where it was coming from and—

“Wait.” Kanata stopped in her tracks. “Something’s moving.”

“*Hm?! Where?*” Zag’giel began scanning the area, when suddenly the sewer water erupted.

† † †

The sludge swelled up out of the wastewater, towering above them. It looked almost like a deformed clay doll. There were gaping holes in the sludge that resembled human faces, each screaming with anguish. Roaring and throbbing, it launched itself at Kanata.

“*Bwaaaaoooooo!*”

“*Kanata! Stand back! This thing must be an amalgamation of restless spirits! They must have obtained a body by possessing the toxic sludge! Its grudges are spilling forth as poison. To touch it would mean death!*” Zag’giel jumped down, intending to shield Kanata from harm, but once again missed the landing, rolled, and plummeted toward the water.

“Zaggy! Watch out!” Kanata caught him at the last possible second, but in the time she’d lost saving her companion, the sludge monster had come within striking range.

“*Bwaaaaoooooo!*” It wailed in torment, as two massive arms erupted from its back.

Kanata’s back was turned. It moved to grab and envelop her in its poisonous body. Anyone who was caught by that thing would die in anguish, even their bones welling up with sores. They would become one of the many dead spirits inside the monstrosity. With poisonous gas erupting from its body like steam, it grabbed hold of Kanata.

“*Bwaow?!*” The sludge monster ran straight into an invisible wall between itself and the girl. “*Bwa... Bwaaaoooo?!*”

“*We see! Incredible! Your purification field is too strong for an evil spirit to penetrate, even with a corporeal body!*”

“You will not touch a single hair of Zaggy’s fluff!” Kanata declared. “Only *I* may fluff him!” The parts of the sludge doll monster that touched Kanata’s barrier began to turn to white sand. Kanata narrowed her eyes and stared at it. “Is that thing the source of the poison?”

“*We believe so. It seems that upon obtaining a body, its resentment and pain were transformed into physical poison.*”

“*Bwaaaaoooo! Bwaaaaoooo!*” it bellowed, spreading itself out and striking at Kanata with a flurry of blows, hoping to break through the wall of purification. But each time it struck, the part that touched the wall turned to white sand. The sludge doll was getting smaller by the second.

“*We do not know how such a thing came to pass, but if you had been any later in coming it would have only continued to grow. It may well have swallowed the whole of the Royal Capital in its poison. Kanata, it would be cruel to prolong the suffering of these spirits. Release them from this tortured form!*”

“Yeah.” Kanata nodded. Then, addressing the monster, she raised one hand and closed her eyes in prayer. “This time, move on to your next life properly, okay?” she said. “I pray that you are reborn as something fluffy.”



Kanata's purification field expanded outward like an explosion, instantly turning the sludge to white sand. Spirits spilled out, their curses broken and their visages at peace. Kanata watched them as they flew up and away.

"Well, that takes care of that," said Kanata, opening her eyes. The sewer was as pure and clean as a temple, with white sand in piles here and there. It looked every bit like snow. "That has to have been the source of the poison."

"*Splendid work*," said Zag'giel. "*We do not believe a priest could have performed a better purification. Perhaps you truly should have been a Saint, Kanata.*"

"Well," Kanata responded, "I never would have worked that hard to become a *Saint*." Kanata's power, of course, had only been obtained thanks to her training to be a Beast Tamer.

"*May we ask how much of the sewer has been purified?*" asked Zag'giel.

"Oh," Kanata answered, "about the entire Royal Capital, give or take."

Zag'giel was at a loss for words. "*We... We see*." The Royal Capital was the biggest city in the kingdom, and Kanata had purified the entire sewer. Zag'giel decided not to think about it and nodded his head. "*The reward for the request was measured in stride-lengths, was it not?*" he asked. "*Such a large sum might well damage the kingdom's finances.*"

You can imagine how the guild staff member reacted when they came to confirm Kanata's completion of the request. Suffice it to say, they passed out from the shock.

† † †

By the time Kanata emerged from the sewer, the sun was setting on the horizon. When they saw her, the street toughs from earlier ran up.

"M'lady! You're safe!"

Behind them, in the area where they'd shown Kanata the entrance to the sewer earlier, was a great gathering of sick townsfolk. There were old men with agonized coughs and children with great dark spots around their eyes. They regarded Kanata with skepticism. Did this girl really purify the poison that had

been spilling from the sewer? It seemed hard to believe.

"*There are more here than we anticipated*," said Zag'giel. "*It will take days to see them all individually.*"

"S-Sorry, cat-man! But everyone here is suffering. Can't you do something?" the shorter man pleaded.

"Don't worry!" said Kanata. "I've got this."

With that casual reassurance, she held out her hands toward the gathered crowd.

"Ouchies go away! Ouchies go away!" she said in a singsong voice.

Incantations didn't need to be any one thing in particular, but such a casual way of casting magic drew more than a few suspicious glances.

"Don't be ridiculous, young lady!" said an old woman. "Such a terrible illness can't be—" Suddenly she stopped in surprise. Her throat was clear and her voice worked perfectly. In fact, the sound of coughing that had filled the area just a second ago was completely gone. A soft green light was shining down from overhead, casting a gentle veil over the crowd and purging their sickness from the very root.

"Mommy! My chest doesn't hurt anymore!"

"It's not just my cough! My knees haven't felt this good in years!"

"My eyes... I can see! I can see my daughter's face again! I never thought this day would come..."

"My arm! My amputated arm is back!"

Everyone was bathed in the light and instantly became the picture of perfect health.

"That should help everyone get better!" said Kanata. As casually as she spoke, she had performed a great feat of magic—essentially, a miracle.

"Y-Your Holiness!"

"The Saint of miracles!"

"Our savior!"

The people clasped their hands together and fell down in prayer, worshipping Kanata.

“My Lady Saint! Your Holiness!”

“No,” said Kanata, “I’m a Beast Tamer.” It didn’t seem like anyone heard her. They were busy with their fervent worship. Kanata sighed softly and beckoned the two street toughs forward from among the crowd. “Are there fields in this town?”

“Y-Yes, m’lady,” the tall one said. “Merchants in the Royal Capital don’t sell enough to us Undertowners to get by, so we gotta be self-sufficient.”

“But the earth here isn’t very good,” the shorter one added. “We can’t really grow enough...”

“Well then,” said Kanata. “Take this sand and till it into the soil.”

Kanata opened her Inventory Screen and deposited a great quantity of white sand. She had been collecting this the whole time as she purified the sewers.

“This is the purified sludge,” she said. “It should be good fertilizer.” With the poison removed, the resulting sand was very high in nutrients.

“Y-You...! Even after the horrible things we tried to do to you, you would show us this much kindness?”

“Hmm...” Kanata gave the matter a little thought. “I didn’t exactly do it for you. People help each other out when they’re in need. I hope you’d do the same for me. They say you reap what you sow, don’t they?”

Yes, you reap what you sow. And Kanata was hoping to reap a rich harvest of fluff.

“Everyone,” she said, addressing the crowd, “please let me know if you see any good fluff. No matter where or when it is, I’ll come running!”

Kanata was more than happy to use her healing of the masses as an opportunity to get what she wanted. There was very little she wouldn’t do for an opportunity to encounter the fluff. It was the fluff, and nothing but the fluff, that guided Kanata’s every move.

“I’m looking for the fluff, okay?” she said. “I wish for the fluff. I do not need

your thanks. I only need your fluffy fluffy fluff."

However, the crowd had no idea what Kanata was talking about. They could only imagine that the fluff was a sacred phrase—a Mystery. They were still in tears at the awe of Kanata's miracle.

"Your Holiness!"

"I knew it! This girl is a Saint!"

"My Lady Saint! Your Holiness!"

"No," Kanata said. "I'm a Beast Tamer!"

It seemed like they hadn't heeded her second objection to the term Saint any more than the first. The people were too busy giving their heartfelt thanks.

† † †

Zag'giel bit down on the huge hunk of meat, only to fail to sink his teeth in. "*Mpf! This is tough!*"

"Zaggy, hold on!" said Kanata. She took the knife lying on its side on the platter and began cutting the meat into thin strips. "You're supposed to cut it up thin before you eat it!"

Even with the knife dulled by long years of use, Kanata was able to cut the meat as thin as wood shavings produced by a hand plane. The edge of each thin slice of meat was charred black, but the inside was an appetizing pink, almost transparent with how thin it was. This was the guildhall pub's specialty: roast beef. It was self-service, in part because the staff liked to see the reactions of the occasional customer who tried biting into the meat directly, like Zag'giel had done just now.

"Open wide!" sang Kanata.

"*Our thanks, Kanata.*"

Zag'giel chewed on the meat, which was dressed with gravy. It seemed he had gotten used to this style of eating. Perhaps he was being corrupted by Kanata's influence. Zag'giel felt a sense of danger—if he continued to let Kanata spoil him like this, he might never become strong. However, after centuries of loneliness, he found it hard to resist Kanata's freely given kindness. In any

event, he had no choice in the matter. A good servant did as his master willed. Or so Zag'giel kept telling himself.

"*This is fantastic! Can this truly be the same dish as the hard ball of meat we bit into?!*"

The meat, having been slowly roasted over the fire and cut so thin as to be transparent by Kanata's brilliant knife skills, seemed to melt the moment it hit his tongue.

"Hehe." Kanata grinned. "There's lots and lots, so eat your fill!" With her wielding the knife, Kanata could cut the roast beef into a nearly limitless amount of thin slices. The chef watched from the kitchen, desperately envious of Kanata's skill.

"*Mm!*" Zag'giel licked his lips, eating noisily.

"Awww! Zaggy's so cute when he's so into his food. It makes me wanna stuff him until he bursts!"

Kanata rested her elbow on the table and her cheek on her hand, fondly watching Zag'giel eat. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were shimmering. She looked for all the world like a maiden regarding her lover.

"*Kanata, you should eat as well.*"

"I might," Kanata said, "if you're the one to feed me, Zaggy!"

"*Hm. We see your point. It would be awkward for only we to receive such care. Very well, we shall carry out this task.*" Zag'giel clutched the fork in his two stubby front paws. He somehow managed to skewer a slice of roast beef, and did his best to carry it to Kanata's mouth, but he was not used to walking on two legs. He stumbled. "*Wah!*" His round body rolled along the table, launching the roast beef into the air. It tumbled and flew and fell.

Not willing to let Zag'giel's fluffy kindness go to waste, Kanata moved like lightning. "Thanks! For! The! Meal!" she said, and she caught it in her mouth with reflexes faster than a hunting dog's. "'S nummy!" she said, chewing noisily. "Thanks, Zaggy!"

"*I-Indeed. It is important to eat well.*"

“Okay!” said Kanata. “Now it’s my turn! Ready for morsel number two?”

“*M-Mmmf*,” Zag’giel responded. “*We still find this somewhat embarrassing. But if it is Kanata’s will...*”

While Kanata and Zag’giel were having their little date, the reception area in the next room over was buzzing with activity. The cause, of course, was Kanata. Only yesterday she had taken down the two Roc Brothers, worth an enormous bounty, and then, just this morning, she had defeated a massive dragon. And now, when they had *still* not settled the matter of how to handle the bounty, she’d completed this request in a way that boggled the mind.

Kanata’s task had been simply to clean the sewer. Instead, for some reason, she had purified the entire sewer system of the Royal Capital and eliminated the source of the poison in Undertown. The curses of the vengeful dead had been transformed into poisonous sludge, spread throughout the sewer by a hideous amalgamation of evil spirits. If nobody had taken this request, it would have spread its poison farther and farther, gaining in strength until it attacked the hapless Royal Capital from underground. Kanata had done nothing less than save the lives of everyone in the city. She had been performing one heroic feat after another in these scant few days, and the guild was at its wits’ end trying to secure payment and confirm the accounts.

Moreover, it was dinnertime—the time when the great throng of adventurers completed their requests and returned home. They were lined up in front of the reception area, impatiently waiting their turn. If they cut in line, it would result in a black mark against them with the guild, so the violent adventurers stood waiting like they were told. But dinnertime was passing fast and the line hadn’t moved an inch. One angry male adventurer toward the back couldn’t let it slide any longer.

“Why in the hell are they so slow today?” he asked. “Gods, I’m starving...”

“Oh, didn’t you hear?” another adventurer said. “That lady over there completed some out-of-this-world request.”

“Oh, huh?” The man took a good look at her. “Wait, isn’t that the girl from earlier today?”

“I wouldn’t mess with her if I were you. Rumor is they jumped her all the way up to B-Rank.”

“Promoted on the same day she’s made an adventurer. Makes a perpetual D-Rank like me look like a damn joke. Who is she?”

“Kanata Aldezia. I’m sure you’ve heard of her. But who woulda thought she’d be such a cutie! It’s natural enough someone like her would be jumped up through the ranks. And that’s why, right now, we’re still waiting our turn.”

“Ahh, so that’s why that lot’ve started drinking without turning in their requests. Shit, wish I’d done that...”

He glared at a group of men who had already given up and gotten drinks at the pub. But he had already made it to the middle of the queue. It would feel like too much of a loss to back out now.

“Gods,” he added, “how long is this gonna go on? Could someone hold my godsdamned place?”

A man stepped out in front of the line—not an adventurer, but a middle-aged man in a well-tailored outfit. He bowed to the receptionist.

“Please!” he cried. “We beg your patience!” There was a huge clamor of voices, but the man raised his own above the crowd’s. “We guarantee that the money will be paid! However, we are currently over budget!” He bowed deeply. This was the government official who had posted the request to clean the sewer.

When the official had received a report that the request had been fulfilled, he had laughed scornfully at the sum of money being billed. The reward for cleaning the sewer was calculated by total stride-length. One stride was set at three copper coins. It was a terrible deal, so the request had sat untouched for a long time. But now an adventurer had taken it on. Because the reward was based on the amount cleaned, the guild did not have the reward money on hand, and they had sent the kingdom an invoice.

However, the sum quoted was five orders of magnitude more than he had expected. It was an absurd amount of money. There was no way that *cleaning*

the sewer would come to such a tremendous figure. It was ridiculous. Perhaps the guild had made a clerical error. Newer accountants made such mistakes from time to time. An hour later, when the receptionist had explained the situation, the color drained from his face.

He had thought that perhaps the guild had made a mistake. Perhaps they had thought that the request was not to clean the Undertown sewer, but all the sewers of the Royal Capital. If that were the case, it would at least end the project after years of no results. In fact, it would be purely to their advantage. The kingdom was under no obligation to pay for cleaning done anywhere except the requested area, Undertown. When it was decided that the Royal Capital's sewer should be cleaned in full, it took several thousand workers and a generous tithe to the Church to perform the purification ritual. It needed to be done time and time again, and the cost was in the tens of thousands of gold coins.

The sum the Adventurers' Guild was asking was six hundred gold. It was a more than fair price for cleaning the entire sewer, but it was not a sum they had readily available. Six hundred gold coins was a large amount of money. It wouldn't fit in the current season's budget, but to fail to pay would mean a breach of contract. The Adventurers' Guild was an independent organization that existed outside the king's laws and had the authority to unilaterally try to punish those who violated their rules.

"We understand very well that we are in the wrong here!" the man continued. "However! The amount exceeds our remaining budget!"

"I-I see..." Melissa—the receptionist—choked out a poor response to the functionary bowing and groveling before her. They were unable to pay the reward for the request. She had heard that somewhere before. *Just like us*, she thought. They had just been in the middle of deliberations over what to do with Kanata's reward for defeating the dragon and the rocs. Even if Kanata herself refused the reward, others might not be understanding. The guild had yet to think of a way to resolve the matter to everyone's satisfaction. Confronted with a man in the same position as she was, Melissa couldn't quite find it in her to be angry.

The client and the adventurer both had to sign a request—the adventurer promising to complete the task, and the client promising to pay the offered reward. According to the rules, if a client were to refuse to pay, the guild was to accept no excuse in collecting their money. But there was no obligation to press the matter right here and now. “Still,” said Melissa, “you can’t violate your contract with the guild.” Obligation or no, Melissa was a member of the guild’s staff. There was nothing else she could say.

“We will figure something out! The most we can give you right away is one hundred gold coins! I promise we will budget the rest in for next season, so please have patience until then!”

“Well, but...”

“Please! I beg you!” the man supplicated, pressing his forehead to the floor. This was *dogeza*, an apology technique from the far east. Incidentally, this man’s uncle was the headmaster of the Lulualas Academy for Girls.

“Um,” said Melissa, “doing that doesn’t change anything, you know. I’m just a member of the guild staff.”

“Please! I beg you!”

“It sounds fine, though, doesn’t it?” said Kanata, coming in from the side to join the conversation.

The functionary looked up at her, on the verge of tears. “What...did you say?”

“I said it sounds fine.”

“R-Really?! You’ll accept those terms?!”

“Yes,” said Kanata, “but I have terms of my own.”

Kanata’s terms amounted to the renovation of Undertown. The fundamental reason that Undertown lacked both labor power and money to purchase goods was that the residents of Midtown refused to employ them or trade with them. By putting a stop to this unjust treatment, Kanata argued, it would raise the standard of living in Undertown and also increase revenue for the kingdom, killing two birds with one stone. There was ill will and animosity aplenty between Undertown and the rest of the city, but Kanata planned to address the

matter by interceding herself.

The residents of Undertown were now Kanata's faithful. If the girl they revered as a Saint said so, they would happily obey. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not commit assault. Thou shalt practice honest work. The budget for this plan would come from the money she had earned for the request, excepting the one hundred she was to be paid immediately—a total of five hundred gold coins.

"Thank you! Thank you! We'll carry out your plan to the letter, my lady!" Overjoyed to have come out of this with his job intact, the man gave Kanata a repeat of his earlier *dogeza*.

"Miss Kanata," Melissa said as she processed the paperwork, "it might not be my place to ask, but are you really happy with this?"

Kanata gave Melissa a big smile. "I am very happy," she said.

Kanata had told the people of Undertown to seek the fluff. With everything she was doing for them, they would surely find her endless amounts of fluff out of gratitude. Kanata couldn't help grinning, just imagining her future surrounded by mountains of fluff.

Kanata had not properly communicated what she *meant* by the fluff, however, and "fluff" was currently being spread as a holy word by Kanata's faithful, but Kanata had no idea.

Chapter 5: Armor Upgrade? No, This is a Brush!

“A dream...” Zag’giel sat on his cold iron throne and muttered to himself.

He knew his body was still that pitiful furball thing. He had no knees to properly cross his legs, and his arms were too stubby to prop up on an elbow rest. Therefore, because he sat as he once could in his true form, this must be a dream. Moreover, he could remember well the cold air of his throne room and its scent—the scent of stone, scarred by sword marks, steeped in blood. It was here that he had sat when he ruled the Dark Continent in those far-off days, when there had been peace and prosperity among demonkind.

It was likely a dream of *that* day, one hundred years after he had taken the throne. If that was the case, he knew well what was about to happen next. Right on cue a formless voice, divine and feminine, addressed him.

“*Zag’giel, King of Demons. Why do you not make war on the land where humans live? Have not all Demon Kings who have claimed rulership of the Dark Continent prior to yourself led their armies to the human continent?*”

Zag’giel was fully aware who this voice was, and because he knew, he could not keep himself from laughing with scorn.

“Why do we not make war on the human realm, you ask? Hah. Rather, we would ask *you*, Goddess, you who are the friend of humanity, why such a thing interests you so? Is it not better that we avoid disturbing the peace between our peoples?”

The Goddess fell silent. It seemed Zag’giel had touched a nerve.

“We tire of endless war. That was the very reason we brought unity to the Dark Continent. Our land does not lack in natural resources. We have no need to rob and plunder. Now that the continent is pacified under our control, we have time to develop our civilization. Why need we cause a new conflict with the humans?”

“*You are king of the cruel and savage demonkind—the Demon King—are you*

not?”

“We are the *King* of Demons. One who is king must needs keep his thoughts ever on the good of his people. Perhaps, as a demon, we may grow bored with this life of peace, but for now we have had our fill of conflict, courtesy of the war for unification. Now is the time to recover our strength and heal our people. In such a way shall we build a kingdom to last a thousand years.”

Zag’giel wanted to do what no demon had done in history.

“*Are you serious? Now that you are Demon King, you should be possessed of an irrepressible hatred toward humanity. How have you managed to endure it?!*”

“And now you show your true colors. We have endured it, Goddess, because we see through your plot!”

Indeed, there was a horrible vortex of wicked desires in his mind. But because he understood that these were not his own, he had been able to push them into a small corner of his consciousness.

“The Demon Kings before us slaughtered humans without so much as a reason. And every time, the slaughter gave rise to a Hero who could oppose them. For years and years, you have caused this cycle to repeat.”

“*H-How much do you know?!*”

“We know nothing,” said Zag’giel, looking up at the ceiling as if glaring down the heavens themselves, “save that to you higher beings, humankind serves as food, and we demons are but an efficacious scythe for your harvest of souls. When their numbers grow great, you reap. When they decline, you raise up more. We have no desire to be subsumed by your worthless, abysmal system. We shall rule the world by our own will alone. Do not take us lightly, evil spirit who dares pretend to the name Goddess!”

He twisted his mouth into a grimace, baring his fangs.

“*I see. Understood. I have determined that you are of no further use to me. I must reconsider my choice of Demon King.*”

“You are no longer hiding your nature, then. What can you, who can do

naught but give revelations, hope to do against us?" He spoke mockingly, but his opponent was a higher being—a phantom who existed on a separate plane of reality. Zag'giel clenched his fists and channeled the magic power in his body.

When she replied, the Goddess's voice was dripping with melodramatic pity.

"*Zag'giel, King of Demons, your wicked heart knows nothing of compassion. To you, I will send a trial.*"

"A trial? What is it that you speak of?"

"*Drunk on your own power, you do whatsoever you please and torment the people to no end. As a Goddess, I cannot allow such conduct to pass uncorrected.*"

The Goddess's words were the complete opposite of the implications from the earlier conversation, and Zag'giel knitted his brows. Suddenly it hit him.

"You fiend! You intend to have your way with us under the pretense of divine trial!"

"*Your trial will be strenuous. You will be stripped of the whole of your power and live among the lesser beings. However, the gods are benevolent. They do not bestow trials that cannot be overcome.*"

"Gh!" Zag'giel cried. "Our body! It is so hot, it feels that it might melt!"

His body temperature rose dramatically, while his line of sight grew closer and closer to the ground. His legs and arms grew shorter, and his whole body became covered in black fur. Even his voice failed him.

"*Your trial is this*," the Goddess continued. "*Obtain the love of one million beings. Cruel king who knows not love, you must learn to love and be loved in turn.*"

A sacred light shone down from the ceiling, and a seed shaped like a walnut floated down from the heavens.

"*When this seed buds and blooms, your curse shall be lifted and you shall return to your original form. However, until then you must remain in the body of this pitiful creature. It may be difficult to obtain the love of one million beings in such a state, but I believe that you can overcome this trial. I await the day you*

are able to learn to be a kind, gentle Demon King."

"Scoundrel! This is meant to be a trial?! It amounts to no more than a coward's curse! An evil spirit the likes of *miu*—!" Zag'giel suddenly found that the only words he could form were the cries of the little catlike creature he had become. "Miu! Miu!" He tumbled down from his throne.

Zag'giel stood up on unsteady legs and reached out with his stubby paws to grab the seed. But before he could reach it, someone else reached down to pick it up.

"I thought it sounded like something strange was happening in here, but I never imagined..."

"*Z-Zarbok!*" Zag'giel cried.

Zarbok looked down at Zag'giel. His sunken eyes shone out of his sickly, emaciated face. "Hm..." he pondered. He looked over the seed, setting it on the palm of his hand. "This does not seem to be the origin of the curse. It seems more of a way to gauge how close the curse is to being released. I doubt anything would happen were I to destroy it."

"*We see*," said Zag'giel. "*However, we are heartened indeed that you, our right hand, are so quick to understand the situation. The love of a million, that blasted Goddess said. Fool. She has underestimated our support among demonkind. If you, our chancellor, were to vouchsafe our identity—that even in this form we are yet the Demon King Zag'giel—then this curse of hers would be broken in an instant.*"

Zarbok raised an eyebrow. "Oh?" he said. "How peculiar. I do not see the Demon King Zag'giel anywhere!"

"*Zarbok! What are you saying? You heard the conversation between ourself and the Goddess, did you not? We are Zag'giel! We are the King of Demons!*"

"Enough of your mewing! You are a strange beast. I certainly do not know of you."

"*Wh—?! Zarbok! You mean to betray us?!*"

"Guards!" Zarbok shouted, ignoring Zag'giel's angry words completely. "There

is no sign of the Demon King Zag'giel! Do something!"

Guards in armor opened the heavy door and entered. "Wh-What in the hells? Chancellor Zarbok, where did His Infernal Majesty go?!"

"That is *your* job to find out!" Zarbok rebuked them. "Do not neglect your duties, lest a strict punishment await you!" The guards shrank back at Zarbok's words. "However," he continued, "the hunt for the Demon King must come first. Send word all throughout the land! His Infernal Majesty must be found!"

"Yes sir!"

Zarbok sneered at the guards bowing in front of him. They didn't suspect a thing.

"Oh, one more thing," he said. "A pest got inside the castle. Have it disposed of outside."

He picked Zag'giel up by the scruff of his neck and thrust him at the guards.

"*W-Wait!*" Zag'giel shouted. "*We are— Ghak!*" Zag'giel spasmed, and lost consciousness.

"It may be infected with some disease," Zarbok said, "so go ahead and have it killed." The furball was smoking—Zarbok had shocked it with lightning magic. He shoved it off onto the guards. The guards looked suspicious, but they took it, bowed, and left.

When they were gone, Zarbok sat down on Zag'giel's throne and propped up his elbow. He snickered cunningly. "What fortune!" he said. "I had almost given up on becoming the Demon King, when the throne simply fell into my lap!"

Zarbok had always intended to betray Zag'giel, but the Demon King had never left him an opening. He had just about lost hope when this squabble took place. He could only be grateful to the Goddess.

"Come to think of it," he said, "that Goddess said that she would reconsider her choice of Demon King. I do not know what her game is, but that she wishes to plunge the world back into war is enough. Loot! Slaughter! That is a demon's true desire! And she would let us indulge in those all we please!"

Turning the seed over in his hand, Zarbok laughed, and laughed.

† † †

Thereafter, Zag'giel lived in hell. He was stabbed again and again by his loyal guards, lit on fire, and disposed of with the castle's waste. But somehow, he escaped with his life. The body he had been cursed with was weak and frail, but perhaps the curse itself did not allow him to die.

Chased out of the castle, he tried to approach a number of demons, but none of them would believe that he was the king. They treated him rather harshly. Zag'giel was stepped on, laughed at, and even injured for sport. For hundreds of years, that was his life. For sustenance, he drank muddy water and ate grass and bugs. It was miserable. Torturous.

As the centuries passed, both his hatred for the Goddess and his anger at his subordinate who had betrayed him began to fade. He simply spent his days wandering. He didn't even know why he continued to live. One day, he lost all hope of ever returning to his original body and threw himself into the sea.

The current carried him to the human continent, but nothing was different for him there. After all, his body was too weak to defeat a slime. His tormentors had changed, but his life of torment had not. However, one day, something a little unusual happened.

"*Gugeyeyey! What's wrong, Your Infernal Majesty?!*"

"*This is the former king?! No way! He's much too weak!*" The rocs circled in the air, cackling with earsplitting laughter.

"*Y-You—!*" Zag'giel staggered backward, squinting as he looked up. But all that came from his mouth was a feeble, kitten-like "miu miu!"

"*Stubborn though, isn't he?!*" said one of the birds, turning to shout at Zag'giel. "*I've had about enough of playing with you. Why don't you go ahead and die already! Then we can finish our mission!*"

"*Maybe it's 'cause he's the former king! He's got no claws or fangs, and his whole body is a soft, pudgy ball of fluff, but he just won't die!*"

The rocs were correct. He should have been long dead already in the face of their relentless assault, but he wasn't. As weak as his body was, Zag'giel could not die, even if he wanted to. He was every bit as powerless as he looked, but

his pathetic body nonetheless had infinite vitality. This was part of the Goddess's curse. No matter what wounds he received; no matter what poison he was dosed with; no matter if you drowned him or burned him or ate him, Zag'giel would not die. He would survive and experience the agony in full. It was a terrible fate.

Unlike the others who had attacked him day after day in the living hell that was his life, however, these attackers were somewhat different. They somehow knew who Zag'giel was, and seemed to be working under someone's orders. It was baffling. What did they hope to accomplish by killing him now, now that he had lost his power? In fact, if they *could* kill him, he would welcome it. Zag'giel was tired of his wretched and lonely life.

But then—

"That's enough!" Someone stepped between Zag'giel and the rocs—a beautiful young lady. It looked for all the world like she was protecting him. "You will harm the fluff no further!" she said, her voice full of brilliant conviction. "I won't allow it!"

The girl struck down the rocs who had been attacking him in an instant, and while Zag'giel was still recovering from the shock, she healed his wounds as well. Nobody had shown him such kindness in centuries—perhaps even in his whole life. She held him and gently stroked his fur. He had never imagined that the touch of another being could feel so warm and so good. He looked up at her and met her eyes with his big black pupils. "Yes?" the girl asked, smiling gently.

"*We...*" Zag'giel began, but he couldn't think of what to say. Looking at this girl's smile, he felt like his body was growing warm and floaty. His chest felt tight. After hundreds of years suffering under the curse, Zag'giel had finally, for the first time, felt the touch of love.

† † †

It was an unpleasant dream, nostalgic as it was, but at least it had ended with salvation. As he slowly came to consciousness, he felt like he was still wrapped in Kanata's embrace from his dream. The warmth of her skin—it was the thing he had been seeking all those years. Those centuries he had spent as the very weakest of magic beasts had worn him down. He had experienced unbearable

pain and suffered the agony of starvation many, many times. He had even started considering bowing down before that arrogant Goddess and begging for forgiveness, when Kanata had come gallantly to his rescue, offering him her hand as if it was the most obvious thing to do in the world. She could not imagine how much the warmth of her arms served to heal his weary heart.

Zag'giel roused himself. Next to him, a young woman with black hair was sleeping silently. Kanata Aldezia. With her perfectly composed features, she seemed cold as ice when she was silent. But the moment she opened her mouth, that perception would flip. She was a strange and amusing girl—exactly the kind of girl who would, despite all her genius, choose a useless magic beast like Zag'giel as her partner. He had no words to express his gratitude to her.

"*Kanata*," Zag'giel said. "*For you, we would do anything.*" He brushed the hair off of her cheeks as he made his vow.

"Really?!" Kanata's eyes snapped wide open, and she bolted up, wide awake. It seemed like she had heard him. Her sudden movement launched Zag'giel into the air, and Kanata caught him in her arms, pressing his soft belly against her face. "Anything? Anything at all?!"

"*A-Ah. Indeed. We did say those words...*" He patted her head as she ground her face into his body, thinking that perhaps his earlier statement had been a mistake.

"So then! So then!" said Kanata. "I can fluff-fluff you this way or that way?! All the ways I've been holding back on?!"

"*You have been holding back?!*" Kanata had relentlessly spoiled Zag'giel in all sorts of ways unbecoming of a human, but she had been holding back? In what ways could a Kanata who was no longer restraining herself possibly touch him?! Zag'giel's face spasmed. "*Wh-When we said* anything*, we meant mainly in terms of* battle*... We suspect that your* anything *and ours differ in some—*"

Zag'giel tried to correct his earlier error and push Kanata's face off of his belly, but it wasn't very effective. Kanata's fluff-fluff mode had been switched on.

"Zaggy! Zaggy! Zaggy! Zaggy Zaggy Zaggy Zaggy Zaggy Zaggyzaggyzaggy Zaaaaaggyyyyy!"

“*K-Kanata! Calm yourself! Kanataaaaaaaa!*”

Mere words could not express the level of fluffing that Kanata gave Zag’giel that morning.

† † †

“La la la~♪” Kanata sang as she walked cheerfully through the streets. Zag’giel was flopped on her right shoulder, having been wrung out like a towel. “I’ve got my daily supply of Zaggyite, and I’m good to go!”

What in the world was Zaggyite? Zag’giel was curious, but his instincts were telling him not to ask.

“*Be that as it may*,” he said, “*we have received our reward for our work with the guild. There is now nothing stopping us from making preparations for our journey.*”

“Yeah!” said Kanata. “Finally!”

Today was the day they would gear up. Kanata was full of motivation, and, unlike last time, her purse was full of money. She had received a large sum of money for yesterday’s request to clean the sewer. After all, the terms of the request were three copper coins per stride-length cleaned, and Kanata had purified the sewer almost in its entirety. The kingdom had set those terms out of stinginess, but now they worked to her advantage.

The reward Kanata was entitled to from the kingdom’s government office was no less than six hundred gold. It was a ridiculous amount of money—enough to make the official who posted the request beg on his knees and cry. It was only thanks to Kanata’s generous handling of the situation that the official hadn’t been fired with extreme prejudice. More than eighty percent of the reward would be spent on Kanata’s plan to improve conditions in Undertown. If it went well, it would also resolve an issue that had been troubling the office for many long years. As far as the official was concerned, Kanata was a Saint.

Although her reward had been substantially reduced, she was still left with one hundred gold coins—more than enough to get ready for their journey. “Melissa told me that they sell high-quality tents and sleeping bags at the guild, so let’s start by looking for rations!” Kanata said.

Melissa, the receptionist for the Adventurers' Guild, had been happy to recommend the tents and sleeping bags, but had cautioned her in the strongest terms against buying the guild's preserved food. She'd had a haunted look in her eyes as she spoke.

The hard rations sold at the guild were of the very highest quality. Each rectangular brick, about the size of a fist, had enough calories to last an entire day. For adventurers whose jobs took them on long trips, they were a lifesaver just in terms of reducing encumbrance. They were high in nutrition and could be stored for years at room temperature without going bad. As rations, they were perfect. Perfect, that is, except for taste.

Those who had tasted the rations agreed. The flavor was a mix of dried vomit, a dirty rag someone had used to wipe up spilled milk and then left in the sun, and grass that a dog had used as a toilet. They were cheap, and a lifesaver for low-ranking adventurers without much money, but nobody who had any other options wanted to eat the stuff. Melissa, of course, had had plenty of experience with the guild's rations during her time as an adventurer. She mercifully took it upon herself as Kanata's senior to save her promising junior from the same terrible fate.

"*Agreed*," said Zag'giel. "*Rations are an essential item. However, so too is our equipment. You do not mean to set out on a journey in that outfit, do you?*"

"Hm?" asked Kanata. "It's kinda cute, though."

"*Y-Yes, you speak true. Even we can see the cuteness of that outfit. However, it leaves something wanting in the way of defense, does it not?*"

Kanata was still wearing her school uniform from the Lulualas Academy for Girls. It was a stylish and well-made outfit, but it was not designed to stand up to a long journey. Outside the walls of the Royal Capital, the land was crawling with bandits and horrible magic beasts. No matter how strong Kanata was, Zag'giel thought it would be dangerous to leave without a sword and armor.

"Yeah, okay!" said Kanata. "If you say so, Zaggy, I'll find the strongest armor in the city!"

"*We are glad that you have seen reason. And fortunately, there is an equipment shop nearby. We should go inside.*"

“Okay! Let’s start by getting some armor.”

Kanata opened the door and stepped inside the shop they had happened upon. “Excuse me!” she cried.

“Welcome!” The cheerful shopkeeper greeted them with a big smile. “Well, aren’t you an adorable young lady! If you’re looking for a sword, we have some lightweight ones. And we just received a shipment of mythril armor! It’s very light and easy to wear.”

Kanata handed the shopkeeper a leather bag stuffed full of coins. “Give me the best armor I can get for this much money, please!” she said.

“Oh!” The shopkeeper rubbed her hands together, coins in her eyes as she counted Kanata’s gold. It had been a long time since she’d had such a big customer. “This much money could get you some top-tier armor, miss! Now, come this way and let’s get you fitted.”

“Thank you!” said Kanata. She bowed her head and held something out for the shopkeeper, who had just picked up her measuring tape. It was Zag’giel.

“*Kanata?!*” said Zag’giel.

“Miss?” asked the shopkeeper. Both of them stared blankly at her.

Kanata beamed. “Please give this baby the best armor you can!”

† † †

Zag’giel’s soft body dangled down from Kanata’s hands like a piece of mochi.

“Armor...for this cat? Armor for a cat to wear?” The shopkeeper cocked her head as she looked dubiously at Zag’giel.

“*Hmph!*” Zag’giel huffed, indignant. “*Insolence! We are no cat!*”

The shopkeeper was astonished. “I-It speaks! Is that a magic beast?!”

“Yes!” said Kanata. “He’s my precious companion!”

“A magic beast for a companion?!” The shopkeeper balked. “Then...miss, are you a Beast Tamer?”

“I am!” said Kanata, holding her head high with pride as she declared her low-ranking Profession. “I am a brand-new Beast Tamer!”

At once, the shopkeeper understood why the girl had a magic beast with her and was seized by a whole new anxiety. Beast Tamer was a Profession revealed, in the gods' magnanimity, to great numbers of petitioners at their Selection Ceremony, even if they had no skills or talents at all. However, very few people chose to become a Beast Tamer in actuality. While the Profession *did* allow you to befriend magic beasts, it would only work on beasts weaker than the tamer themself, and the substantial penalty it applied to all abilities was well known. It was not very useful to an adventurer. The most that could be expected of Beast Tamers would be picking medicinal herbs or cleaning sewers.

For a Beast Tamer to have this much money to buy equipment was absurd. The shopkeeper thought back to the bag Kanata had given her. The gold was the correct weight, so it most likely wasn't fake. This girl certainly seemed to have the means to pay. Her outfit was well tailored too. In fact, on second inspection, she seemed to be wearing the uniform of the Lulualas Academy for Girls. Most likely this was an upper-class girl, who had chosen to become a Beast Tamer out of some adventurous impulse or rebellion toward her parents. Nobility had it easy no matter what Profession they chose. That made sense. This must be nothing more than the idle hobby of a rich girl. Or so the shopkeeper believed, ignorant of the truth.

"But...armor for a magic beast..." the shopkeeper said. In all her work at this shop, she had never been asked to make armor for a magic beast before. Most Beast Tamers would prioritize their own defense, to compensate for their ability penalty. She had never imagined that there would be someone so eccentric as to put their companion's defense above their own. Still, to say she couldn't do it after having taken the request would damage the good name of the shop. "A-All right," she said. "Then I'll take your measurements."

First, the shopkeeper went to measure the fit of a helmet for Zag'giel. Magic beasts were fearsome beings, but the creature in front of her looked like nothing more than a roundish black cat. For a young girl like this to have caught it, it must be quite weak. With the tape measure in one hand, she quickly measured his body shape and limb length, and took stock of the amount of fur on his body. Zag'giel's flesh was as soft as jelly and his whole body was covered in fluffy fur. His legs were short and stubby, and he was so round that it wasn't

clear where his body ended and his head began. She came to the conclusion that the only way to fit armor for this thing would be to fit a single piece, with very few joints, onto his whole body.

"Excuse me for a moment," the shopkeeper said. Seized by a sudden whim, she took the helmet from one of the sets of mythril armor she had on display. It had been intended to be sold to a girl like Kanata, but the size and roundness might make it a perfect fit for the magic beast. She placed the helmet over Zag'giel's round body. It was such a perfect fit it looked like it had been made to order. "I knew it!" she said. "Perfect!"

"*Hm...*" Zag'giel considered. "*It is not uncomfortable. What say you, Kanata? Do we look gallant?*"

Kanata staggered backward like she had been struck by a meteor. "Oh my gosh," she said. "Too cute!" Her heart had been pierced by a cuteness great enough to kill a man. Even if she would need to have the rest of the armor made separately, she had to have this helmet. It was essential. Kanata swore that she would buy it, no matter what.

"*H-Hmm?!*" Zag'giel began to squirm and fidget under the helmet. "*Kanata, this will not do. There is an issue.*"

"Your *cuteness* is a *big* issue!" Kanata said, growing even more excited as she watched Zag'giel's cute little movements. "I might get a nosebleed!"

"*We hope you do not*," said Zag'giel. "*That would be troublesome. But rather, this helmet will not do.*"

"Huh? Why not?" asked Kanata. "It's so cute, though..."

"*It is nothing to do with cuteness...*" Zag'giel had tried to stand up, but all he could do was move his body slightly. "*Th-This helmet is too heavy for us. We cannot move.*"

As cute as Zag'giel was with his body quivering like that, if the armor was too heavy to move in, it wouldn't do. Kanata gave up on the helmet. "Oh," she said. "Okay. Instead of this, can we try your lightest helmet?"

"Um," the shopkeeper said, "miss, I don't have any helmets lighter than this one." Mythril was a kind of magical silver, even lighter than leather. It was so

light that a baby would still float on water wearing this helmet. But Zag'giel was even weaker than that.

"*N-Nhhh!*" he cried, straining himself with exertion as he spent his full strength in the effort to take to his feet. "*We shall not lose to a thing like this!*" But in the end, all he could do was jiggle his body.

The shopkeeper lost all hope at the sight. "I am so sorry. If this helmet won't do, I'm afraid I can't help you..." She had never imagined that there existed any being in the world too weak to wear mythril armor, but Zag'giel's feeble body had exceeded her expectations.



† † †

In the end, Kanata had no choice but to abandon her plan to find armor for Zag'giel. "We hope you come again," said the shopkeeper, bowing apologetically as she saw Kanata off.

When they were outside, both Beast Tamer and beast heaved a heavy sigh and slumped their shoulders, each disappointed for their own reasons.

"*To think that our strength has declined to such an extent...*"

"You were so *cute* wearing that helmet..."

Zag'giel was the type of man who would rather be seen as *cool* than *cute*. He cleared his throat, hoping to change the topic. "*It seems there is nothing that can be done. As much as we lament our powerlessness, if we cannot wear armor, there is nothing more to be said. Let us accept our defeat with grace.*"

He had initially been trying to get Kanata to obtain new equipment for herself. He was unsure in the first place why they had been purchasing armor for *him*. Now was the time to move on to buying gear for Kanata.

While Zag'giel was thinking, Kanata raised her head. "No," she said. "It's too early to give up, Zaggy."

"*What?*"

"If we can't *buy* you the strongest possible equipment..." Kanata said, trailing off suggestively.

"*What do you mean? What if we can't?*"

"Then we'll just have to make it!"

"*Make it, you say? Kanata, do you have prowess as a blacksmith as well?*"

In fact, she did. Kanata had honed all her skills as much as she could. It would be easy for her to hammer out basic equipment. However, Kanata had decided that nothing but the best would do for her Zaggy.

"Let's look for a professional blacksmith!" she said. She would have them make something to bring Zag'giel to a whole new level of cuteness—a whole new level of fluff! It didn't have to be armor necessarily. A ribbon might serve

just as well. It might look good on him.

"Eheh heh," she said, "Zaggy's so cute..."

"*Return to us, Kanata! You are lost in some fantasy!*"

"Eheh heh heh heh heh..." In Kanata's mind, her objective had strayed far from Zag'giel's original suggestion. She walked through the streets, thinking of nothing but Zag'giel in all sorts of cute accessories. She led them through a small street out of the main shopping district, where they somehow stumbled on a shop with a sign indicating a smithy. Perhaps even lost in her reverie, Kanata's senses were as sharp as ever.

"*She actually found one!*" Zag'giel marveled. "*We don't believe it...*"

"Excuse me!" Kanata stepped through the doorway. She could hear people ahead of her having a serious conversation. Whatever was happening seemed to take their full attention—they didn't even notice Kanata entering the shop.

A man wearing flashy clothes was speaking to a younger girl wearing a work outfit with her hair in a ponytail.

"Look, missy," he said. "Why don't you give up on this shop already? You're never gonna pay back your father's debt."

"I-I'll pay!" the girl said. "I promise I'll pay! Just give me a little bit more time!"

The man was clearly some kind of criminal, and while the girl was dressed lightly above the waist, she was also wearing a thick apron to protect herself from fire. Kanata figured that she was the blacksmith. Her skin was burnt red from the heat of the fire, but right now it had lost its color due to her fear. It was easy to imagine why—the man had mentioned some sort of debt.

"Please!" she said. "I need more time! Please, I beg you!" She bowed deeply.

The man regarded her with an air of boredom. "You can *say* that," he said, "but you don't have anything to pay *with*! How do you expect to keep a smithy running if you don't forge anything? If you don't make anything to sell, how do you expect to make money?"

"Th-That's just because the furnace is out!" she pleaded. "Once I hire a Magician to start the fire again, I'll get right back to work!"

A smile came to the man's face. He rubbed his chin. "But they won't be able to light it, will they? The furnace here isn't your typical furnace, is it?"

"N-No," the girl said. "It's an *incredible* furnace. It was my father's greatest masterpiece. When he was alive, we could create just about anything with it. At least...until the fire suddenly went out..."

"I am well aware," said the man. "A unique magic furnace, said to run hotter than dragon fire. It's too good an invention to waste on a poor little smithy. If you sold it, you could pay off your debt and have enough left over to live on your whole life! Or do you lack the contacts to sell it? In that case, I can help."

"I-I refuse! This is my father's keepsake! And why are you so obsessed with our furnace?! I hate to even think it, but were *you* the ones who put the fire—"

"That's enough," the man interrupted. "What a thing to accuse someone of! And the furnace isn't broken, is it? If you reignite it, it will work. But you can't. And since you can't, you can't make money! You'll borrow no more from us! And no one else will lend to you either! Not to a debt-ridden little smithy that can't pay its collections!"

"Kh..." The girl bit her lower lip in frustration.

"Hey, missy," said the man. "You're out of moves. You can't use the furnace. It would take a very high-level Magician to reignite it, but you don't have the money to pay for someone like that!"

"Nhh..."

"Well? Don't be stubborn—give up on the shop! Such a high-class furnace doesn't suit a run-down little shop like this anyway. I'm sure it'll be happier in a bigger workshop."

"I knew this was suspicious!" the girl said. "Did some other smithy hire you to get our furnace?"

"Oh, enough with your jokes. But what difference does it make? What matters is your debt. Can you pay it or not? What's your decision? A smithy without a single customer would go out of business even without the debt. Giving up the shop really is your best option."

The girl lowered her eyes as the man pressed his head closer, a sinister grin on his face.

The girl's shoulders were shaking; her eyes were swimming with tears. She couldn't deny the truth of the man's words. Even without the debt, she could see no choice but to give up the shop. The loan shark was right. Without customers, she had no income. And nobody would come to shop at a smithy without a working furnace. A smithy that could make nothing.

"She has a customer," said Kanata, coming up beside the pair.

"Wah?!" The man staggered back in surprise.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your conversation," Kanata said.

"I-If you're sorry, don't do it in the first place!" the man said. "I'm ahead of you in line!"

"But if I let things be, the shop will go away, right? That would be a problem for me too."

"What?! Have you been eavesdropping, you little punk? Nasty of you, ogling in on someone's misfortune without any intention of helping. Did you butt in out of a sense of guilt? Justice? This is a legitimate debt, with a legitimate contract! If you're gonna pick a fight, *you'll* be the one arrested."

"Well, I can't just stand by and watch this happen," said Kanata.

"Hah! Why? What would happen if you did! Or are you saying *you'll* pay this place's debt? Including interest, this place owes one hundred gold coins! If you got it, hand it over! Come on! All one hundred gold! The entire thing! Well?"

"Okay, here you go."

"Oh, thank you. Wait—*whaaaat*?!" Kanata had shoved her bag of coins into the man's hands as he rambled. He fell to the ground in shock.

"I believe you will find that to be one hundred coins," said Kanata. "Now, the contract, please?"

"It *iiiiis*!" the man exclaimed as he counted the money. "*One hundreeeeeeeeed*!" He had been unprepared for Kanata's counterattack. Never in his wildest dreams did he expect to be handed one hundred coins on

the spot. He shook his head feverishly, half out of his mind.

"Now, I don't believe we will need *this* anymore," said Kanata. She tossed the contract in the air and tore it into pieces with wind magic, reducing the thick paper to dust in a split second. She must have conjured an incredible number of blades of wind to cut it into such infinitesimally fine pieces.

The contract dust fell on the loan shark, and he sneezed. This girl was no ordinary person. "Eeeeeeeeeek!" he shrieked, and he crawled as fast as he could out of the store, too frightened out of his mind to stand. "I'm sorry to bother yooooooooooou!"

The girl stared at Kanata, dumbfounded. "Wh-Who are you?" she asked.

Kanata smiled. "I'm a Beast Tamer!"

† † †

"I'm Lily," the girl said. "I run this smithy. Well, to be honest, between one thing and another, I haven't been able to get any work done..."

"I see," said Kanata. "That sounds tough. My name is Kanata."

"*You may call us Zaggy.*"

"You really have a magic beast! I guess you weren't kidding when you said you were a Beast Tamer." Kanata was an odd customer, but she was also the first customer Lily had had since inheriting the shop. She decided to hear what Kanata wanted. Kanata's request was rather odd. "So...basically," Lily confirmed, "you want something for your...cat? Your slime? You want something for this furball thing to equip."

"Mmhm!" Kanata confirmed.

"*We are in your hands*," said Zag'giel. The pair bowed their heads.

Lily scratched the side of her head. "Well...um... I'm very grateful to you for paying off my debt. I'll do what I can. I have to thank you somehow, after all."

"*We, too, were astonished that you would hand over the entire sum at once*," said Zag'giel. "*However, it was most satisfying to witness. It was a deed befitting of our master. Without kindness, one's courage is in vain. We are truly honored*

to be your magic beast.”

“Aaah, oh wow!” Kanata gasped. “Zaggy! You’re too nice!”

Zag’giel pretended he hadn’t heard Kanata when she’d muttered something to herself about getting fluff-fluff items for cheap.

“But,” said Lily, “you heard what that man was saying, right? The fire in our forge’s furnace is out. I can’t make anything, no matter how much I want to.”

“So all I have to do is light a fire in that big furnace?” Kanata asked, touching its heavy iron doors with her hand.

“Yeah,” said Lily, “but it’s impossible. This is a magic furnace. It needs a magic flame to light it. Once it’s lit, it’ll keep working halfway to eternity, but that first flame is the problem. You need a lot of power. I’m not sure there’s a Magician good enough with fire magic in the entire Royal Capital. And even if there were, I have nothing to pay them with.”

“Like this?” asked Kanata.

“Right, exactly. You just cast a fire spell with that much power and the forge will—wait, what?! Wh-Wha... *What?!* How did you—”

The magic furnace was roaring merrily with bright flames. Lily was stunned. It was like it had never gone out—no, it seemed to be even more powerful than before. How was such a thing possible?!

“Didn’t you tell me how yourself?” Kanata asked. “I lit it with magic fire.”

“I didn’t think *you* could do it! The last Magician who lit the furnace was incredible! How in the blazes were you able to make it *even stronger*?! What *are* you?!”

“I told you, I’m a Beast Tamer!”

“Can Beast Tamers do things like that? I thought...” She trailed off. Kanata had answered her so casually that she didn’t know what to think. Yet another person had had their assumptions about Beast Tamers completely shattered.

As confused as she was, however, Lily understood that since coming to her shop, Kanata had, like a goddess from the heavens, resolved her problems with both the loan sharks and the forge in the space of a few minutes.

“H-How can I ever thank you?” she said. “You’re like a Saint from a make-believe story... I know you haven’t asked for anything, but there must be *something* I can—”

“Oh, it’s okay,” said Kanata. “I did ask for something.”

“You did?”

“Please give Zaggy the cutest fluff-fluff item you can! It’s a fair exchange.”

“That’s it?” Lily blinked.

“That’s it! In fact, I’ll be very grateful if you make one for me.” Kanata was completely serious.

Lily was trembling under the weight of Kanata’s expectations, but she clenched her fist and nodded. “All right!” she said. “I’ll make anything at all for you! I swear on the name of my dear departed father, the Great Smith!”

“Yay!” Kanata cheered.

“*We find this strange*,” said Zag’giel. “*Did we not come here to find some armor we might equip? What do you mean by the cutest fluff-fluff item? Or, rather, was not our objective to procure equipment for yourself, Kanata? It seems we have strayed far from our goal.*”

To put it plainly, Kanata had strayed from Zag’giel’s goals from the word go.

Unfortunately, the two girls were busy discussing the commission and didn’t hear Zag’giel’s objections. “The fluff is the important part!” said Kanata.

“I see!” said Lily. “I don’t quite understand, but I’ve mostly made sturdy and practical weapons and armor. I’ve never had a commission like this before! But you say he’s too weak even to equip mythril.” She sighed. “A metal lighter than mythril would be...”

“Impossible?”

“Hm?” said Lily. “Did I say that? A blacksmith doesn’t *ever* say ‘impossible.’ I can do it! I’ll make something for you!” She was clearly getting excited.

“Yay! Yay!” Kanata clapped.

“You want an item to make your furball fluffier, right? That doesn’t mean it

needs to be something worn on his body."

"What do you mean?"

"Just leave it to me! I'm in your debt, after all! I want to make it out of the best materials I can..." Lily glanced around her workshop. "Among the metal I have on hand, I suppose the best would be..."

"Oh!" said Kanata. "How about this?" She produced a scale the size of her palm. It had a dull metallic luster. "I happened to pick this up earlier, but I don't really have a use for it."

Lily took the scale and examined it with a magnifying glass. "What is this? It's not out of the question to use magic beast parts, but if it isn't tempered, it'll be hard to...to...to...to...wait, is this—" Lily suddenly thought she might know what this scale might be. Her eyes opened wide in shock.

"*The underscale that Kanata tore from a dragon*," said Zag'giel from his perch on Kanata's shoulder.

"I must be dreaming," Lily marveled. "The *underscale*?! And this looks like it's from a true dragon!"

"*Indeed it is.*" Zag'giel puffed his chest out proudly despite having had nothing to do with Kanata's victory.

"Y-You're giving me this to work with?" Lily asked. "You know this is a top-quality material..."

"Go right ahead!" said Kanata. "If there's any left over, consider it a present!"

"Are you sure? If you sold this, you could earn back that hundred gold you spent..."

"I'm absolutely sure! If this can make Zaggy even fluffier, it's a small price to pay."

"Goodness gracious..." Lily shook her head. "You really are the most outrageous customer I've ever had. You cleared my debt, gave me a job, provided materials... If I can't meet your expectations, I'll be a disgrace to blacksmiths everywhere! Wait just a moment! I'll show you what I can do!" Grinning, Lily donned her goggles and took her hammer in hand. Before long,

the clear sound of metal hitting metal filled the workshop for the first time in ages.

† † †

“It’s finished!”

“Ooh!”

“*What in the world is that?!*” Zag’giel looked dubiously at the item Lily was holding. It looked like a dagger, but its grip was very short and the blade was round and covered in a huge number of fine needles, each too thin to be seen by the naked eye.

“Zaggy’s fluff-fluff item!” Kanata cried. “Could it be—?!”

Lily laughed triumphantly. “It seems the girl has some idea,” she said, nodding along.

“*This weapon can make us stronger?*”

“Yes!” said Kanata. “It’ll make you the strongest”—in terms of fluff, she meant—“of all! Zaggy, you sit on my lap.”

“*Hm? You intend to equip us with it?*” Zag’giel thought it was a strange request, but he obediently sat down on Kanata’s lap as he was told.

Kanata took the thing by its hilt and ran the needles along Zag’giel’s body. “Okay, here I go!”

“*M-Mh! Oooooh?!*” The sensation struck him like a chill down his spine. “*Wh-What is this?!*” Zag’giel moaned in pleasure, enraptured, as Kanata ran it through his fur. “*We feel a tremendous stirring in our spirit! Incredible!*”

“Great!” said Kanata. “I’m gonna do more, okay?”

“*Excellent! This item is indeed the key to our strength!*”

“That’s right! Your fluff is gonna be fluff-fluffier than ever!”

“I can’t help feeling like there’s some miscommunication happening here,” Lily said, “but if you’re happy, I’m happy. It was a valuable experience for me too. I never thought I’d have an opportunity to work with a dragon underscale.”

Yes! Lily had made for them the strongest weapon of all—the brush! Made of

a dragon’s underscale, a sturdy material that could obtain any level of hardness a craftsman desired, depending on their technique, this brush would bring an animal’s fur to a whole new level of smooth softness. When Kanata finished brushing out Zag’giel’s fur, he was even fluffier than he had been before. Lily had fulfilled Kanata’s request marvelously.



“Thank you, Lily!” said Kanata. “This is the best fluff-fluff item I could have hoped for!”

“*Indeed. We feel that we have been reborn. As we are now, we could handily dispatch the likes of a slime!*”

“Oh,” said Lily, “well, I’m glad you like it.” She paused. “Um...good luck!” She meant it. She wanted Zag’giel to live his best life.

Kanata left the smithy satisfied, her goal achieved. “Come anytime if you want something else made!” Lily told her. “For you, I’ll forge anything!”

“I will! Thank you so much!”

“*You have our thanks.*”

“You’d better,” said Lily. “I haven’t even come close to paying back what I owe you.”

“Okay!” Kanata said, shouting back cheerfully as she walked away. Lily kept waving until the pair were out of sight.

“Father...” she said once she was alone, “I am going to do my best with this second chance. I’m not alone anymore. I’m sure those two will come around again. And I’m sure they’ll have some ridiculous commission for me.” She giggled to herself, imagining what absurd items they might ask her to make in the future. “And...” she said, “I will keep getting better!”

She went back inside, where the magic furnace was still working perfectly. Kanata’s sacred flames had done their job. The bell in the shop’s doorway chimed softly, as if it were blessing her.

Chapter 6: Saint? No! I'm Just a Passing Beast Tamer!

"*Truly, our spirits have never been higher. It has been quite some time since we have felt this refreshed. What say you? Is not our body more limber?*" Zag'giel darted from one of Kanata's shoulders to the other. It wasn't actually particularly fast, but it was more than enough to pierce Kanata's heart.

"Wooooowwww..." Kanata breathed. Zag'giel's soft, freshly brushed fluff was positively heavenly. "You've really powered up, Zaggy! This is *way* too amazing!"

"*However, Kanata, let us return to our original point. It was not we who needed equipment, but you yourself. Shall we go back to the smithy and have you armored?*"

It probably wouldn't make the best impression for them to return immediately after leaving, but with the send-off Lily had given them, she would certainly be happy to make equipment for Kanata.

"Equipment for me?"

"*Indeed.*"

"Why?" Kanata asked, confused. "I don't need it."

Zag'giel flailed his short stubby paws. "*What are you saying?! Of course you need it! How do you intend to defend yourself wearing that—*" He stopped himself. "*Although, come to think of it, you seem to have no trouble at all.*"

Zag'giel had yet to see Kanata take a single wound in battle. She was not only preposterously strong, but also a genius with healing and dimensional magic. It might not be an exaggeration to say she was invincible. All while her abilities were lowered by her Profession. It defied all logic.

"I'd rather prioritize you, Zaggy," she said. "I couldn't bear to see your fluff hurt!"

They argued in that vein for a while, each wanting to put the other first. In the end, Zag'giel was the one to fold. "*Kh... If we were not so weak, you would have no cause to worry for our defense. Very well! If you will do without armor, Kanata, then we shall grow until you do not need it!*"

"Zaggy's gonna grow?" Kanata asked.

"*Indeed! We shall grow until we can protect you!*" With his strong body, he meant.

"You're gonna protect me?" With his fluff, she meant.

Zag'giel was imagining his form changed into something fierce and tough, while Kanata was imagining an even fluffier Zag'giel, but both of them were excited for the future they envisioned.

"Mhh!" Kanata exclaimed. "That would be incredible!"

"*Yes! It shall be!*"

Their misunderstanding yet unresolved, they walked through the shopping district. Eventually, they noticed a conspicuous crowd.

"*What is that?*" asked Zag'giel. "*Is some performance about to start?*"

"I dunno..." Kanata mused. "I can't see from here."

The more they walked, the thicker the crowd got. It seemed to be concentrated around the great gate that connected Midtown to Undertown.

"Open the gate!" someone hollered. "Open the gaaaate!"

The gate was very, very large, and usually only one door would be open at a time. But now the guards seemed to be working to heave the whole thing wide open. Beyond the gate, Kanata and Zag'giel could see an enormous platform cart pulled along by a great team of horses.

"That's huge!" they heard someone in the crowd remark.

"I can't believe what I'm looking at..." said another.

As they watched, the crowd got a good look at the thing that was loaded onto the platform cart, and let out a cheer—it was a colossal dragon. The dragon was

held in place by layer upon layer of steel webbing to prevent it from getting away. However, the dragon showed no interest in going on a rampage. Perhaps he was unconscious—all he did was take in slow, shallow breaths. But even that was no joke. Each puff of his breath sent out a little whirlwind, tossing up dust and garbage from the street and making the townsfolk shriek as their clothes were blown upward.

Zag'giel looked. "*That is the dragon you defeated, Kanata. Is it not?*"

"Oh, you're right! It's missing the scale on its neck!"

Kanata had ripped the underscale off of the dragon's chin, and she'd taught him a lesson with her fire, which far outclassed his own. Realizing the difference between their power, the dragon had fainted from shock. He had yet to recover.

The guild, having finally set their sights on collecting the dragon, had arranged for him to be carried into town. He was probably taken alive so that the royal laboratories could use him as a subject for experiments. Although dragons were particularly dangerous magic beasts, this one didn't seem like he was in his best condition after what had happened.

"*Our old follower...*" Zag'giel sighed. "*There is nothing we can do. It is the law of the demon world that those who are defeated are the prey of the victor. But it gives us no pleasure to watch. Kanata, let us be gone.*"

"Oh," Kanata muttered, "the dragon's waking up."

Suddenly, the voices of screaming women filled the square. "It's awake! The dragon opened its eyes!"

"Didn't they give it something to make it sleep?!"

"It must have worn off!"

The townsfolk cowered and trembled as the dragon regarded them with frightful eyes—his pupils were narrow slits. Everyone was frozen in place, too frightened even to run. Even the guild staff members who had brought the dragon here looked tense. They were trying to calm the horses, just praying that the dragon would close his eyes again.

“D-Don’t worry, everyone!” said one of the guild staff, trying to calm down his subordinates. “Even if the dragon’s awake, the webs we have binding it are made special, out of steel. Even a dragon would be torn to shreds if it tried to break out of that!”

The staff member was immediately forced to retract his statement. A terrible rumbling issued from the dragon’s throat as his muscles seemed to grow. His limbs swelled up like tree trunks, and he effortlessly shattered the steel web.

“*Grarwooooooooooown!*” he bellowed, taking to his feet.

The townsfolk screamed.

The horses were wild with fear, while the guild staff were forced to cover their ears to block out the deafening roar. The onlookers were tripping over each other in their haste to escape.

“What in the world...?” The guild staff member who had spoken stared up at the dragon in disbelief. His vision felt like it was going dark. “I can’t...” he muttered. “It’s over...” He was so overcome by fear that he didn’t even notice that he was drooling.

If the dragon were to go on a rampage in the middle of the city, how many lives would be lost? The dragon would burn houses and gobble up humans. It could very well mean the destruction of the Royal Capital.

“*Graaooooooooooorn!*” The dragon’s eyes were red with fury. It was not a question of whether the *people* would forgive their mistake—the dragon certainly would not. The dragon would massacre these humans who’d dared to insult his pride by casting him in bonds. That’s what his burning eyes seemed to say.

“Someone...” the guild staff member gasped. “Someone...someone save us...”

But who would that someone be? As it happened, there *was* someone in the crowd who could stand up to that dragon. But the man’s cries for help were drowned out by the dragon’s roars.

† † †

The dragon would not forgive humankind for imprisoning him. He roared his

rage to the heavens.

“R-Run awaaaaay!”

“Don’t push! That’s dangerous!”

“Shut up! I don’t wanna die!”

The crowd was in a panic, pushing and shoving even as they tried to escape. They flowed past Kanata like river rapids rushing around a rock.

“*Look at his eyes!*” Zag’giel shouted. “*He has forgotten himself in his anger! If we do not put a stop to this, this city will be consumed by the flames!*” He mewled pitifully on Kanata’s shoulder. Zag’giel did not feel any moral obligation to save human lives, but this was the city in which Kanata lived. He was prepared to lay down his life at a single word from her.

“You’re right,” said Kanata. “Now, Zaggy...” she started.

“*Yes! We are yet trapped in this puny body, but if you wish it, Kanata, we shall risk our very life to stop him!*”

“Hold on tight, okay?” Kanata finished.

“*What?*” Alas, as worked up as Zag’giel was, it was not his time to shine.

Kanata placed a hand on Zag’giel’s back and stepped forward. She darted between the fleeing townsfolk, moving fast, until she came up to the dragon.

“Hey!” The guild staff member, who had refused to run away, spoke in a trembling voice. “What are you doing?! Do you wanna get eaten?!” But Kanata stepped past without paying him any mind.

“*Kanata*,” said Zag’giel, “*do you intend to face him here? He will not discriminate. If you fight in the city, you will be putting people in danger, will you not?*”

“Don’t worry,” said Kanata, “I’m not gonna fight him. I’m gonna use persuasion.”

“*What did you say?! Kanata, that is not possible! He may be the victim of mind-control magic, but he is yet an enemy! He is far too mad with rage to listen!*”

“It’ll be okay! If you wanna make friends with an animal, you can’t show any fear. You have to approach them calmly and openly. Empty your mind—that’s what the big shots in the animal world say.”

Zag’giel had no idea what Kanata was talking about.

The dragon looked down and noticed Kanata, approaching slowly, step by step.

“*Ghrrrrrrr...*” he growled, gazing down at them with wrathful eyes.

Will you be my first prey? he seemed to say. And then, recognizing Kanata, he suddenly stopped moving entirely.

Some of the fleeing townsfolk stopped, noticing the change in the dragon’s behavior. “Look!” someone shouted.

“It stopped!” said another.

Kanata smiled kindly and spread her arms wide. “It’s okay!” she said. “Don’t be afraid...” The dragon showed no signs of attacking.

“*Incredible!*” Zag’giel exclaimed in surprise. “*Kanata, you really were able to reach him!*”

However, a second later, Zag’giel realized that the dragon was acting strangely. The dragon was shaking and trembling.

“*Gh-Ghrrrrowrh...*” he rumbled.

He was terrified. In his mind, he was reliving his memories of the outlandish defeat he had suffered at this girl’s hands. No. *Defeat* might be too mild a term. He had been *crushed*, unable to resist as the girl ripped off his underscale and overwhelmed his breath—the pride of a dragon—with her own massively more powerful fire. In all his long life, he had never feared anyone as much as Kanata. His inability to stop quivering attested to that much. He knew how much power that girl hid in her small body.

In that moment, the dragon gave up all hope for victory. “*Gowrh... Ghwrron... Ghrrrroon...*” He drooped his head. At least, he hoped, it might be a quick death.

“See? Look!” said Kanata, petting the dragon above his nostrils. “He’s not afraid of me!”

“*No*,” said Zag’giel. “*Rather, we do not believe it would be possible for him to be* more *afraid.*”

The crowd, who had been watching with bated breath, broke out in a cheer. “She did it! She calmed the dragon’s fury!”

“It’s a miracle! The advent of a Saint!”

“Oh! Her smile is so full of love! That girl *must* be a Saint!” They hailed their savior with jubilation.

Kanata, meanwhile, was thinking, *A dragon’s nose doesn’t feel very good to pet. Its fluff score just isn’t high enough...*



† † †

“What did you say?!” Melissa turned pale when she heard the report from the adventurer who had come running into the guildhall. The live dragon had broken free midtransit and had begun to rampage in the middle of the city. Such a thing happening in a city full of ordinary humans would mean untold death and destruction. Melissa shook at the mere thought of it.

“We depart at once!” she said. There was no time to wait for the guildmaster’s approval. She gave orders as the highest-ranking member of the guild staff currently available. “Prioritize the evacuation of the residents, and recapture the dragon if you can! If it can’t be done, we must lure it outside the city at all costs! I knew it was reckless to try to capture a true dragon alive. To think the laboratories’ senseless demands would come to this...” Cursing the name of the royal laboratories that had demanded they bring the dragon back alive, as a *valuable test subject*, Melissa grabbed her sword. She was prepared to fight to the death.

Empty-handed adventurers and armed guild staff charged out of the guild and ran to the scene. But when they got there, they heard not screams, but cries of joy. There wasn’t a single dead or injured person to be found. In fact, they were grinning and applauding. Melissa could hear people saying things like “It’s a miracle!” or “A Saint!”

“Wh-What’s going on?” Melissa marveled. It looked like the cheering crowd was all facing one person. “Excuse me!” she said as she pushed her way through the wall of onlookers. “I need to get through!” And there, on the other side, was—

“Oh! Miss Melissa!” said the black-haired girl as she gently stroked the dragon above the nostrils.

“*Gwroooon... Gwroooooowon...*” the dragon said. He was lying flat on the ground in a show of total submission, shaking like a puppy caught in the rain. He looked like he thought the girl stroking his muzzle might at any moment rip off his snout.

“M-Miss Kanata?! You again?!” Kanata had crossed Melissa’s mind as a possible resource, it is true, but she hadn’t imagined the girl would arrive at the

scene of the crisis with such perfect timing. As soon as she saw Kanata and the cowering dragon, Melissa understood what had happened. “I still can’t believe how outlandishly powerful you are,” she said, returning the rapier, which she had so bravely brought to face a dragon, to its sheath. She was still afraid of the enormous dragon, but it didn’t look like he was going to do anything as long as Kanata was there. The memory of Kanata’s overwhelming victory was etched into the very core of the dragon’s being.

“Hello, Miss Melissa!” Kanata said. “I haven’t seen you since yesterday!”

“Hello? Is that what you have to say? First yesterday and now today... Miss Kanata, what are you *really*?!”

In three short days, Kanata had struck down the Roc Brothers, defeated a dragon, utterly purified the sewers, and now averted a crisis in the Royal Capital. Even the heroes of fantastic tales don’t perform such feats in such quick succession!

“No...” Melissa said. “First, I should thank you. Miss Kanata, because you were here, this ended without any of the city’s residents being hurt. I can’t imagine what we would have done without you. You have my unending gratitude.” She bowed her head deeply, but Kanata just casually waved it off.

“Oh, it’s no big deal,” Kanata said. “We just took care of it while we were out shopping.” To Kanata, apparently, subjugating dragons was something you did on the way back from a shopping trip.

Melissa was starting to doubt her own sanity. “But... We are in your debt once again. We still haven’t decided what to do with your reward for defeating the dragon. When the guildmaster hears about this, he is going to faint.”

Perhaps, Melissa thought, they could work out some alternative payment with Kanata, like the city official had done. But if the other adventurers learned that the guild had done that, it might diminish their trust. Part of the cooperative relationship between adventurers and the guild was the promise that the guild would pay reward money without trickery. It might cost them in the long run if they made an exception to the rule now. That was what Melissa hoped more than anything to prevent.

“Oh,” said Kanata. “I have an idea of what to do about that. Do you have a

moment?”

“I have a moment!” Melissa said. “Yes, I have a moment!” Kanata had given her a lifeboat. If there was a way to settle this without damaging the guild’s reputation, Melissa was all ears. “So what’s your brilliant plan?”

“Well,” began Kanata, “you see...”

Melissa nodded along. “I see... I see... Wait, what?!” Kanata’s plan was enough to make her reel in shock.

† † †

“Hey, Melissa, are we really just gonna watch? Shouldn’t we kill that thing while it’s being quiet?”

“I already explained,” Melissa answered the adventurer. “I’m in charge here, so follow my instructions.”

Kanata had asked Melissa to clear the area of people, and so she did. The townsfolk, now reduced to mere gawkers, were pushed back by the guild, but they remained at the far periphery of the area, watching the spectacle of the girl standing in front of the dragon. They were too far away, however, to hear what was being said, which was precisely what Kanata wanted.

Kanata, and Kanata alone, could resolve the affair with the dragon. Melissa and her adventurers stood silently and watched.

“But,” continued the adventurer who had objected, “what happens if it goes berserk again?”

“If that happens, Kanata will stop it,” said Melissa. “You can talk about killing it all you like, but do you have the strength to rip off a dragon’s scales? I certainly do not.”

“I-If you can’t do it, there’s no way I could,” he said. “But that’s not what I meant. We don’t have to use weapons. We could have the laboratories get us some poison...”

“The laboratories were the ones who wanted us to bring the dragon back alive. I doubt they’d give you permission to kill it. And anyway, the sleeping drug they gave it doesn’t seem to have worked. I don’t think they can handle

this either."

"But..." the adventurer protested, "I don't know about leaving it to that girl..."

"You wouldn't say that if you'd seen her work firsthand," said Melissa. "I'd trust her above the laboratories' poisons any day." With that, Melissa turned away from the adventurer and returned to watching Kanata. She was sick of repeating herself. The adventurer, sensing that he'd get nothing more from her, let out an anxious sigh.

The dragon was crouched down on the ground in front of Kanata, shaking like a puppy. He whined pitiably. His eyes, which had been red with fury only a minute ago, showed no hint of aggression. He looked around. Through his hazy consciousness, he perceived that he was surrounded by a great number of humans. He couldn't imagine that he would serve a human, but then why was he kneeling in submission? The dragon was confused.

"*Ghh...*" he managed, "*what...what am I doing?*" He decided to find somewhere quiet to collect his thoughts and spread his wings. The movement caused a stir in the crowd. And then, from below, he heard a voice.

"*He has recovered enough of his mind to speak?*" the voice asked. "*Perhaps his instinctual fear was too great for Zarbok's control to suppress. He must have broken free.*"

The dragon looked down, and he saw a young girl holding a black ball of fur in her arms. He recognized that voice. "*You!*" he exclaimed. "*Your Infernal Majesty?!*" He lowered his raised head back down, and once more prostrated himself.

"*Indeed we are*," Zag'giel said with a "miu." He looked adorable—completely lacking the dignity befitting his station. "*But we are impressed that you could recognize us in this state.*"

"*Ha ha!*" the dragon laughed. "*I would recognize your aura anywhere, no matter what form you took!*"

"*We see!*" Zag'giel said. "*No matter what form, is it?*" The truth is, the dragon had been made to memorize Zag'giel's current form while being brainwashed in order to kill him, but the pair were too overjoyed by their reunion to think of

something like that. “*Tell us*,” Zag’giel asked, “*how much do you remember?*”

“*I heard that you had perished, Your Infernal Majesty*,” the dragon said. “*I couldn’t believe it, so I hastened to your castle to see for myself. I remember Zarbok took me by surprise; everything after that is a blur. I think there were others like me. That bastard Zarbok must have done the same to many of your loyal retainers—the strong ones, at least.*”

“*We thought that might be the case...*” Zag’giel said. “*However, why would he send the Roc Brothers after us now of all times?*”

“*I can’t remember clearly, but I* think *I remember that he was in a hurry to send us to kill you.*”

“*He was in a hurry?*” Zarbok had taken control of Zag’giel’s army. What cause would he have to hurry now? The only thing he could imagine was that Zarbok feared that the curse might be broken. “*But why? The condition for lifting the Goddess’s curse—that so-called trial of hers—was to earn the love of one million...*”

As ill-natured as she was, the Goddess was still a supernal being. The conditions of her curse were absolute. There could be no other way to break it. Then why would Zarbok, who had been content to leave Zag’giel to his misery for the longest time, suddenly feel the need to send assassins? Perhaps he had seen a sign that the curse was beginning to lift?

“*Have we been earning love*?” Zag’giel asked. “*Impossible. Who would love one so ruthless as we?*” There was only one person he could think of...

“Hm?” Kanata asked, looking innocently down at the Demon King in her arms. “What’s wrong?” Kanata had taken him in, even in his feeble, pathetic state. Her heart was overflowing with infinitely more kindness and grace than that Goddess could imagine.

“*No...*” Zag’giel said, “*even if we have received love from Kanata, the curse will only be broken with the love of one million. Kanata alone would not be enough. There must be some other reason.*” Zag’giel rejected that line of thinking. “*Perhaps...*” he thought, “*as Kanata’s magic beast, the adulation she has received has passed on to us in the form of love?*”

It might be possible. Kanata had certainly performed incredible feats. She had performed so well in school that everyone had heard her reputation, brought down a wanted beast as soon as she became an adventurer, and healed the people of Undertown. Now she had saved the city from the threat of a rampaging dragon. Some of those who had witnessed her feats had gone so far as to bend their knees in worship. If that was the case, perhaps he could obtain sufficient love to break the curse from the faith the humans of the Royal Capital had for Kanata. Zag'giel had no way of knowing what state the seed the Goddess had given him was in, but perhaps it had started to bud. Perhaps that was why Zarbok was in a hurry.

"*Perhaps we are close to recovering our old strength*," Zag'giel mused. Zarbok must fear that the former ruler would once again conquer the Dark Continent and reign as Demon King. Zag'giel might even seek revenge against that wicked Goddess.

The dragon sent a puff of fire into the air. "*When you do*," he said, "*we shall strike Zarbok down!*"

"*No*," said Zag'giel, shaking his head once. "*We shall not.*"

"*Wh-What?!*"

"*We owe everything we have to Kanata*," said Zag'giel. "*It would not do to leave that debt unpaid. A human's lifespan is brief. So long as Kanata lives, we shall not abandon her.*"

"*I see!*" the dragon said. "*Such nobility, to always repay debts, even to a human! I suppose, then, that nothing can be done. I shall remain here, and serve Your Infernal Majesty once more!*"

"*No*," said Zag'giel. "*You are no longer under our command.*"

"*Wh-What?!*" the dragon said again.

"*From this day forward, you shall serve as one of Kanata's magic beasts.*"

"*A proud dragon such as I, lowered to becoming the possession of a human girl?!*" The dragon had taken Kanata for one of Zag'giel's servants. The suggestion that he might serve her came as a total shock.

"*Does that displease you?*" Zag'giel asked. "*Under our law, the victor may do as they will with the vanquished. It is only logical for the weak to serve the strong.*"

"*I...*" The dragon hesitated. "*I suppose that's true...*"

"*Then there is no reason to refuse. After all, Kanata has defeated you.*"

"*Wh-Wh-Whaaaaat?!*" the dragon roared. "*I lost to a little girl?! No...*" He hesitated. "*But...I was shaking! It was just like what happened when I challenged Your Infernal Majesty and lost! No...even greater than that! It's faint, but I remember...fire piercing the heavens...the difference between our power...*" He could feel the trauma coming back to him and quickly put a lid on those memories. "*I-It seems you speak true*," he said. "*The law is the law. I will not complain.*"

The dragon bowed his head to Kanata. "*I bid you greetings, my master*," he said. "*From this day, my fangs and my wings are yours! I shall serve you with the whole of my being.*"

Kanata smiled cheerfully. "Oh, that's okay!" she said. "I don't need them."

"*Wh— Hw— H-Huh?!*" the dragon and Zag'giel exclaimed together, shocked.

"Mister Dragon," Kanata said, "do you understand what makes you and Zaggy different?"

"*Wh... What makes us different?*"

"Look at how *cute* Zaggy is when he's all stunned like that! Oh my *gosh*! I want to dive face-first into his belly!" *I want to*, Kanata had said, as if she hadn't already done it. With a look of utter confusion on his face, the dragon watched her rub her face into his king's belly.

"*Wh-What do you mean?*"

"Can't you tell?" Kanata asked. "It's just that your fluff score isn't high enough to come along on my journey!"

"*My fluff score?*"

"Yes! Your fluff score!"

What on earth was a *fluff score*? The dragon was only getting more and more confused. He wasn't the most proficient in human speech, but he did his best to understand what Kanata was saying. His fluff score was too low, it seemed. It must be something Zag'giel had that he did not.

Suddenly it hit him. "*I see!*" said the dragon. "*I understand!*" Fluff must be a unit of power. That made sense. If his strength was one fluff, then Zag'giel's power would be one hundred fluff. Compared to the King of Demons, his power was nothing. He would only get in their way.

"You do?" Kanata asked.

"*Yes, I do. Of course. Truly, I am not fit to accompany you on your journey.*" He didn't understand at all, but his interpretation led him to the same place just as well. He acknowledged his inferiority with true sportsmanship. "*However*," he said, "*it would dishonor dragonkind if I did not find some way to be of use to you. Is there anything you would have me do?*"

"There is!" said Kanata. "I can think of a perfect job!"

"*You can?!*" Excited, the dragon began to wag his tail like a dog's. It was somewhat cute, but, alas, it did not raise his fluff score. "*What is it? I'll do anything!*"

"I'd like you to protect the Royal Capital," said Kanata. "Can you do that, Mister Dragon?"

"*Hmm...*" the dragon said. "*The guardian of a city, is it?*" He looked around, at the onlookers watching with curiosity and fear. "*It seems that while I was not myself, I caused these humans a great deal of trouble.*"

This was Kanata's plan that she'd shared with Melissa. The dragon would be registered as one of her magic beasts, and, in recompense for the panic he had caused, Kanata would have him serve as guardian of the region. The reward for defeating the dragon and the Roc Brothers would be paid over time, in the form of the dragon's living expenses.

"*I see, I see*," the dragon said when the matter was explained. "*I am very grateful for your help with food and housing.*"

In this way, the issue was resolved without any harm done to Kanata, or the

dragon, or the guild, or the people of the Royal Capital. If any party had cause to dislike the arrangement, it was the laboratories alone, who had been very much looking forward to getting their hands on a live dragon. But the panic, in any event, had been caused because of the failure of the laboratories' sleeping drug. With the dragon registered under Kanata's name, the guild had every right to simply ignore their protests.

"*Very well*," the dragon said. "*I shall protect this city until my bones are reduced to dust.*" He spread his wings wide, and he let forth a mighty roar. "*Heed me, humans! I am to serve as your protector! No harm shall befall this city as long as I reside within it!*"

The crowd murmured with surprise at the dragon's proclamation.

"*In the name of my master, Lady Kanata, I swear it!*" With a beat of his wings, he took to the sky. "*Now, I will leave to see for myself the lay of the land. Farewell!*"

"See you!" Kanata said, waving back at the dragon, who was now soaring high in the sky.

Once again, the people cried out with joy.

"Gods above! She didn't just quell the dragon's wrath! She tamed it and made it the guardian of our city!"

"If a magic beast is doing what she says, wouldn't that make her a Beast Tamer?"

"There's no way a *dragon* would take orders from someone as weak as a *Beast Tamer*!"

"Then...what does this mean?!"

"It's a miracle! The Saint has brought about a miracle!"

"I knew it! That girl *is* a Saint!"

"Your Holiness! Your Holiness! Your Holiness!"

The people from the Adventurers' Guild called out for quiet, but it looked like it was going to take a while for the crowd to settle down.

“Well!” said Kanata. “That settles that! Do you wanna get back to shopping, Zaggy?”

“*You give no thought to the adoration of the masses, we see*,” Zag’giel remarked. “*That is a mark of true greatness. That said, have you forgotten? You gave your money to Lily.*”

“Oh, that’s right!” Kanata said. “I guess we’ll have to earn more.”

“No, no, no,” Melissa interjected, “hang on! We need you to stay here so you can register your dragon and we can question you for the incident report! There’s lots to do without making more work for yourself. If you need money, you can take some out of your reward fund.”

Kanata puffed out her cheeks in a pout, and Zag’giel sighed in exasperation, while Melissa prepared herself for another day of overtime.

† † †

Once more, we return to the castle of the Demon King on the Dark Continent. Zarbok was trembling with fear, his face stiff, holding the glass that had once contained a seed—now it was an actual flower. It was still in its bud, but it was vibrantly colored and healthy. It looked like it might bloom at any moment.

“Impossible...” Zarbok muttered. “The flower has grown so quickly! At this rate, the curse on the Demon King will be broken...”

If the curse broke and the Demon King regained his strength, there was no question as to what he would do next. He would return to the Dark Continent and execute Zarbok as a traitor. The hatred Zag’giel must have for him after living a miserable life for so long, as the lowest of all magic beasts, must be unfathomable. Even if he surrendered completely, there was no chance at all that he would be forgiven. Zag’giel was ruthless. He would make an example of Zarbok and execute him in some unimaginably horrific way. The thought of it made his hair stand on end.

“Wh-What do I do? Has it come to this? Do I send my entire army to exterminate him?”

The Demon King Zag’giel was strong. He was a brilliant tactician, yes, and cunning, but the reason he had become the Demon King came down to power,

plain and simple. In the demon world, power was everything. The weak were to serve the strong. If the Demon King were to return, most of the Dark Continent would immediately flock to his banner. Zarbok, with his brainwashed soldiers, would be no match for him. Once the flower bloomed, it was over. Struggle as he might, Zarbok would have lost.

“Confound it!” he spat. “Everything had been going so well, for centuries! Why is this happening?!” He crouched down, clutching his head. He couldn’t play his strongest card—not if he wanted to one day make war on the humans. All he could do was send more assassins and pray. He would even pray to that wretched Goddess, begging her with his whole body and spirit for aid.

Suddenly, interrupting his hysterics, the door flew open. “Lord Zarbok!” said his minion. “Terrible news!”

“Wh-What’s all this ruckus about?!” Zarbok snapped at his minion, pretending to be merely annoyed. He hid the flower behind his back and did his best to act like nothing was wrong.

“Th-They’re all dead! Every magic beast you sent as an assassin! We’ve lost contact!”

“What?!” Zarbok snapped. “What happened?!”

“A-According to our scrying magic, they were struck down by dragon fire,” the minion said. “It seems the dragon has joined the enemy...”

“The dragon switched sides?!” That dragon had once sworn an oath of loyalty to Zag’giel. That was why it had been necessary to brainwash him and rob him of his mind. If he had switched sides, it could only mean that the mind control magic had been broken. There was only one person who could have overcome Zarbok’s powerful magics, returned the dragon to his senses, and then brought the dragon once more under his command—the Demon King Zag’giel.

“Curse you, Zag’giel!” Zarbok shouted. “How much of your power have you regained?!”

The flower was already peeking out of its bud. The Goddess had said that when Zag’giel had obtained the love of one million the curse would be broken and the flower would bloom. That couldn’t have been a lie. A curse such as that

would not be successful if the conditions contained a falsehood. Zag'giel was in the Royal Capital. Therefore, it stood to reason that he had obtained the love of the city's populace. That would account for the sudden growth of the flower.

Zarbok had thought that it would be impossible for a million people to love someone as cold and brutal as Zag'giel. He had certainly never expected him to become loved by humanity. His victory should have been assured when the Demon King was inflicted with that unyielding curse, but everything was falling to pieces around him.

"Curse you!" he shouted. "Curse you! *Cuuurse yooooooooou!*" The glass he was gripping in his hand began to crack under the pressure of his grip. He wanted to crush the accursed flower, but there was no point. The flower was nothing more than an indicator of when the curse would be lifted. Crushing it would only leave him ignorant of Zag'giel's state.

"L-Lord Zarbok! What do we do?" his minion asked.

"Ghhh..." The dragon had been the strongest fighter in his army. If he had switched sides, there would be no point in sending more assassins. They would simply be struck down. He was afraid of leaving himself vulnerable to attack from other demon nations if he made a move with his army, but if the Demon King returned, he would no doubt be executed on the spot. "We cut off the serpent's head before he has a chance to revive!" Zarbok declared. "Yes! If we leave now, we may yet make it in time!"

There wasn't a moment to lose. Zarbok threw away his dreams of invading the human realm and resolved himself to marshal his whole army with only one objective—the death of Zag'giel!

† † †

"Look, Zaggy! Look, look! We're finally ready to set out on our journey!"

"*Indeed! It is a thrilling sight!*"

Before them, spread out on the floor, was a great collection of preserved food and camping supplies. For the past several days, Zag'giel and Kanata had been scrounging up and down the city for travel supplies.

"*However*," Zag'giel said, "*is this not too great a quantity to fit in a bag?*" Then

he remembered. "*Ah, yes. You can use dimensional magic, we suppose.*"

"Yeah! It won't be a problem at all!" As she spoke, Kanata used her dimensional magic, and all of their goods were swallowed up by what looked like a black hole. Ordinarily, only a Sage could use dimensional magic. It was completely unheard of for a Beast Tamer to wield such powers, but by now Zag'giel had gotten used to Kanata's particular brand of absurdity.

"Finally!" Kanata said. "It's time to get this show on the road!"

"*We kept getting sidetracked and interrupted*." Zag'giel sighed. "*Although, we suppose much of that was due to our pursuers.*"

"Oh, don't worry about it! It's not your fault!"

"*Hm*," Zag'giel mused. "*We had already put thoughts of our life before this out of our mind. But if we are to be pursued, we should go to meet our pursuers ourselves! We swear to you, Kanata. We shall regain what we have lost and become a magic beast worthy of you!*"

Kanata chortled. "You're *plenty* worthy, Zaggy!" she said. "Honestly, I feel a bit bad keeping you to myself!" Of course, Zag'giel and Kanata were thinking in very different senses of the term "worthy."

The two finished chatting, and Kanata checked the room to make sure she hadn't left anything behind. Then, she closed the doors and locked them tight. She was still officially a student, so she left her room as it was. When she returned—*if* she returned—it would be alongside a great assemblage of fluff.

"Let's go, Zaggy!" Kanata said. "The quest for fluff awaits! We're gonna make lots of friends!"

"*Indeed, let us be off! But take care to choose companions that can at the very least outperform ourself.*"

"Huh?! Outperform Zaggy?! That's a high bar!"

"*Is it?*" Zag'giel blinked. "*Are you not perhaps overestimating us?*"

"No way! Zaggy's the best there is!" In terms of fluff, anyway.

"*W-We see! If you are to place such faith in us, we must exert ourself to the highest degree!*" Zag'giel was imagining himself in an even stronger body than

he'd had before, while Kanata was imagining him becoming fluffier and fluffier, but both of them had equally goofy grins on their faces. Perhaps the pair actually had a fair bit in common.

The two took their leave of the school dormitory, enjoying each other's company as they made their way out of the city, still caught up in their mutual misunderstanding.

† † †

They headed north along the main street of the Royal Capital, past the three sets of high walls, and toward the gate.

"I'm so excited, Zaggy!" Kanata said. "Where should we go first?"

"*Where to, you ask? You have yet to decide on a destination?*"

"Uh-uh." Kanata shook her head. "I was just gonna go wherever the wind takes me!"

"*Hmm...*" Zag'giel said. "*We can only imagine that setting out recklessly with no plan would end in death and disaster, but perhaps you, Kanata, would have little trouble.*"

"And you too, Zaggy! I feel a lot better knowing you'll be with me!"

"*Indeed? We must train harder to meet your lofty expectations!*"

Kanata chuckled. She was glad she wouldn't be lonely, and glad she'd have someone as soft and fluffy as Zaggy to serve as a body pillow.

She said as much, but Zag'giel wasn't listening—lost in his fantasies of Kanata relying on his power, he snuffled haughtily.

"Let's go!" Kanata cried.

"*Yes! May we find fortune on our journey!*" This time, they were ready to travel and eager to get on the road.

The two took their first step out of the north gate, but before they could take a second, they immediately encountered their first obstacle.

"Wait!" they heard voices shouting.

The two sighed deeply. It seemed that there were going to be yet more

interruptions.

“What is it?” Kanata asked.

She turned around to see a group of men in armor—heavy armor, not the kind worn by ordinary guards on patrol. These were knights sworn to protect the castle. They knelt before her.

“Lady Kanata Aldezia!” the knight at their head said in a commanding voice.

“Yes?” The look on Kanata’s face said that she was completely uninterested.

“We ask that you come with us! His Majesty the King requests an audience!”

A direct summons from the king? The guards at the gate were stunned.

“Oh,” said Kanata, pursing up her lips in annoyance. “The king?”

“*Kanata*,” Zag’giel asked, “*are you acquainted with the king of this land?*”

“I’ve met him a bunch of times when I won some tournament or other. He gave me lots of prizes. Not that I especially wanted them.”

As important as the king was, Kanata treated his gifts like presents from some distant uncle. The gate guards, who were listening in on the conversation, stared in disbelief. They were beginning to sweat.

“*Nonetheless, it is a summons from the ruler of this land. It would not do to refuse.*”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right, Zaggy,” Kanata said. “Honestly, that king is such a pain in the butt...” There was no refusing an audience with the king.

“Come this way!” the knight barked. “Your carriage is waiting!”

Beneath their helmets, the knights seemed palpably angry. The gate guards were shaking in their boots, already frightened by Kanata’s blatant disrespect. They were on the verge of tears. As far as they were concerned, the change of guard couldn’t come soon enough.

“Okay!” Kanata said, seemingly unaffected by the knights’ anger. She casually got in the carriage and was taken to the king’s castle, fluffing Zag’giel the whole way.

† † †

The king looked down at Kanata from his seat in the grand and lavish audience hall. He was a powerful man, with a honed physique and wild, golden hair that resembled nothing so much as a lion's mane. On his throne, the strength of his mighty presence was overwhelming. Everyone in the hall knelt before him.

Everyone, that is, except for Kanata. Nobody reproached her for it, though. After all, the king had given her permission.

"Kanata Aldezia," he intoned, in a low voice that reverberated powerfully through the room. His retainers seemed to tense up from where they were kneeling. She had been given some rewards by the crown, true, but what could cause the king to summon a mere schoolgirl directly before him?

"What is it, Your Majesty?" Kanata asked.

"First, we must offer our gratitude for pacifying the dragon and saving the Royal Capital from his wrath."

"Oh! You're very welcome!"

"Not only that, but you made the dragon the guardian of the region! Truly, it was splendid work. We hear he has already struck down a great number of dangerous magic beasts. On behalf of our people, we give you our thanks."

"No, no," said Kanata. "Thank *you* for letting Mister Dragon live here! If only his fluff score was just a bit higher...I could have taken him on my journey!"

"Ah, yes," said the king. "That is the reason we called you here."

"Oh?" said Kanata. "Are you interested in fluff, Your Majesty?"

"N-No!" the king coughed. "No. Not that." He decided to dispense with the pleasantries and ask Kanata directly. "We've heard you're leaving. Is that true?"

"It is. Why?"

"Are you serious?"

"Seriously serious!"

The king tensed up visibly at Kanata's casual reply. A vein popped out in his forehead as he gripped the armrest of his throne with shaking hands. Suddenly,

he raised his head. “Kaaaanny!” he said. “You gotta stay! Please?”

“Y-Your Majesty?!” The chancellor, who was standing beside him, froze up, startled by the king’s sudden change in behavior.

“No,” said Kanata, smiling as she firmly rejected the king’s request. “I’m leaving.”

The king tumbled out of his throne, all the way to where Kanata was standing. “But Kanny!” he protested. “You’re so strong! We need you! What’ll happen to the balance of power if you go to some other kingdom?! Please! Please, please, please stay here!”

“No, thank you~♪”

“Noooooooooo!”

The king’s retainers were gossiping noisily as the scene played out in front of them. Who was this man pleading so miserably before this young girl? It couldn’t be their king.

“Y-Your Majesty! A king must not allow himself to be seen behaving this way!” The chancellor ran over to pull him to his feet.

“Silence!” the king shouted, shaking his chancellor off. “What do you know about it?! Kanny here is the jewel of our kingdom! She’s the descendant of Boldow the Divine Sword and the Archsage Aleksia! It is certain that she will one day do some tremendous service to our land!”

“T-True,” the chancellor answered. “Lord Boldow and Lady Aleksia are extraordinary people, but—”

“Kanny’s just a girl, and she’s already surpassed both of them! Boldow could literally fight a thousand soldiers at once, and she’s even stronger than he is! And she’s wiser than Aleksia, who advanced our kingdom’s technology by three generations! I’m telling you, this girl is a national treasure! We can’t let any other kingdom get their hands on her! Why don’t you understand that?” He turned back to Kanata. “Please, Kanny!” he begged. “Pleeeeease don’t go!”

The king was sobbing messy tears, while his chancellor looked like he might cry for a somewhat different reason.

“I already told you, I’m not staying! Jeez!” Kanata said. She smacked the king lightly on his coarse head. “But I’m not moving to another country, you know. I just want to see the world. I’ll come back here eventually.”

“You will? You mean it?”

“Yes, I promise,” Kanata said.

The king sniffled, tears streaming down his face. “You’re a Saint!” he said. “You’re *my* Saint, Kanny!”

“I’m not a Saint!” Kanata said. “I’m a Beast Tamer!”

“*Well, that takes care of that*,” Zag’giel added at the very end, finally getting a word in edgewise.

The next second, a calamitous noise rang out. It sounded like it was coming from somewhere far away, but it was as loud as a clap of thunder.

“What is that?!” the king demanded.

“I-I don’t know! But look! There’s smoke rising outside the city walls!”

“What?! Magic beasts?! Or is it an invasion?!” The king ran to the balcony outside the audience chamber to take a look for himself. It was worse than he’d feared. The great walls of the Royal Capital were halfway in ruin. Beyond the broken walls, he could see a great herd of magic beasts. No. It was too regimented to be a disordered herd. This was an army. Their numbers were in the thousands—perhaps the tens of thousands. “How did such a force get here?! We should have noticed an army that size if it was within our borders!”

“*We can smell the lingering magic...*” Zag’giel said. “*This is a mass-scale dimensional shift! Teleportation!*”

“You know what this is, Zaggy?” Kanata asked.

“*We do. It is a difficult ritual requiring a great magic circle and an enormous amount of power, but with it you could send an army anywhere on the Dark Continent, even into enemy territory. It is the absolute apex of magic. In our time it was still in development. Zarbok must have completed it!*”

“That’s terrifying!” said the king. “Wait...how do you know so much about this

spell? Aren't you just a magic beast?!"

Zag'giel went silent.

"Look!" one of the guards shouted, pointing to the sky. There was an enormous figure projected above the city—a grand-scale illusion. The figure had pale skin and knotty horns protruding from his head. He did not look human.

"*Zarbok!*" Zag'giel shouted.

"A demon?! They've come from the Dark Continent to invade?!"

"No! After so long without a demon attack...why now?!" There was a crowd gathering on the balcony now, crying out in despair at the sight.

The illusion of Zarbok opened his mouth. "*Humans!*" he said. "*We are not here to destroy you. Rather, we have but one demand—surrender the former Demon King Zag'giel to us. If you do so, we will leave, and nobody else must be hurt. You have my word. However, should you refuse, I shall crush your miserable city with the full strength of my army!*" Zarbok clenched his open hand into a fist, and thunder rang out as if in response. "*I will wait one hour*," he said. "*If you have not acquiesced in that time, you will be destroyed.*"

The image vanished.

Immediately, the retainers started to shout frantically. "Th-This can't be! We're doomed! We have no hope of victory against such a large army of magic beasts!"

"We're no match for a demon! It's impossible!"

"Did he say the former Demon King Zag'giel?! Is he in the Royal Capital somewhere?! He had best reveal himself!"

Everyone in the Royal Capital had seen Zarbok's image. Panic was spreading like wildfire. It might not be long before the people started rioting.

"*So it has come to this*..." Zag'giel said. "*This is our responsibility. After all, it was we who formulated the principles behind that teleportation spell. If it were not for us, Zarbok would not have come here.*"

“Zaggy...”

“*He seeks our death, we think. In that case, the solution is simple.*”

“Zaggy?”

“*We are sorry, Kanata. We said we would do anything for you, and yet...*” He shook his head. “*Please. Forgive us.*”

“Z-Zaggy!”

“*Farewell, Kanata! Short though it was, our time with you was full of joy.*”

Zag’giel jumped off of Kanata’s shoulder, and took off running at top speed. Then, he was plucked back up off the floor and into Kanata’s arms. His top speed was not very fast. It seemed he would not get to make a moving sacrifice.

“Zaggy!” Kanata said. “You can’t!”

“*K-Kanata! Release us!*” Zag’giel flailed with his little legs, in a futile show of resistance. *“We— We must—!*”

“No! Way! I’m not letting go! Your responsibilities are my responsibilities, Zaggy, so if you’re gonna go out there, then I’m coming with you!”

“*Kanata...*” Tears came to Zag’giel’s eyes. Kanata’s love had touched his heart. “*You are a splendid girl...*”

“All right, Your Majesty,” Kanata said. “I’m gonna head out for a bit!”

“H-Huh?!” The king balked. “Kanny?!” But before he could tell her to stop, she had jumped down from the balcony. “Noooooooooo!” he cried again.

“It’ll be okay!” Kanata said. “Don’t worry!”

Kanata alighted on the city streets, landing with perfect form and using wind magic to disperse the impact of her fall.

“*K-Kanata... There is something we must say before we go...*”

“Aw,” Kanata said. “Zaggy’s cute when he’s all limp!” Kanata’s leap from the castle had shocked Zag’giel with fright. He was frozen, unable to move. Kanata held him firmly in her arms and walked toward the outer walls.

“*Are you not listening?!*”

Behind her, the king watched in awe as Kanata went to face the army. “She means to go alone!” he said. “The city! The people! She means to protect them herself!” He pressed his hands together, praying earnestly for her safe return.

The king didn’t notice because he was watching her from behind, but Kanata had a big goofy grin on her face.

“Eheh heh,” she laughed. “With that many magic beasts out there, there’s *got* to be some fluffy ones!”

But the king was too far away to hear what she’d said.

† † †

The sudden appearance of Zarbok’s army had left the Royal Capital in absolute chaos.

“Hey! What the hell is going on?! What are those adventurers doing?! Isn’t it their job to deal with stuff like this?!” someone in the crowd asked.

“What do you expect a single Adventurers’ Guild to do against a force like that?! This is the job of the *army*,” another person said.

“The army is assembling as we speak! But there isn’t much we can do in one hour...”

“Shouldn’t we just accept their terms? They say they’ll go home if we hand over the Demon King. We should try to find him as soon as we can!”

“Do you even know what the Demon King looks like?! More to the point, how exactly do you plan on capturing a Demon King?!”

The guard was unable to quiet the crowd without the help of the Adventurers’ Guild.

“Calm down!” Melissa shouted, arriving on the scene. “Everybody calm down!”

But no matter how hard she shouted, it didn’t have much effect. It looked like another busy day at work, and on the heels of so many others...

“Gods, I can’t take much more of this,” she lamented. There were dark shadows under her eyes. “I want to go home and take a bath.” A tear ran down her cheek.

“Are you all right, Miss Melissa? Do you need a handkerchief?”

Melissa sobbed, “Thank you so much...” She took the proffered handkerchief and wiped the tears from her eyes. Only then did she realize who it was that had given it to her. It was the source of all her trouble. “M-Miss Kanata?!”

“Yes!” Kanata said. She was smiling, and Zag’giel was riding on her shoulder. “It’s been three whole days!”

Kanata’s sweet smile did something to lift her spirits, but Melissa had a bad feeling about what was coming next.

“No,” she said. “Don’t tell me. Kanata, did you—”

“Oh, no, no,” Kanata said. “This doesn’t have anything to do with me.”

“Oh! You... You don’t say!” Melissa was embarrassed. She smiled apologetically. “I suppose I was being a bit unfair. There’s no way this army would be here because of you...”

“See, this time it’s Zaggy’s fault!” Kanata giggled like she had just gotten to the punch line of a joke.

“Excuse me?” Melissa froze up, bashful smile still on her face. She had no idea what Kanata could possibly mean. What in the world did that black furball have to do with the army of magic beasts?

The furball pulled himself up to stand with a semblance of dignity, and introduced himself. “*It is we whom they seek. We are the Demon King Zag’giel.*”

“Say whaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!”

A weakling like that was the King of Demons? No way. There was just no way. But this was *Kanata’s* magic beast they were talking about. Kanata had never been one to stick to the realm of the possible. What she said was distressingly credible. Melissa tried to think of what to do with this information, but after the string of all-nighters she’d pulled, her brain was screaming at her that it was at its limit.

“Well, I’d best be off!” Kanata said.

“Wait, where are you going?!”

“Out there, obviously!” Kanata pointed past the ruined walls. There were people fleeing from that direction, trying to put any amount of distance between themselves and the demons.

“Out there— Are you going to let them have the Demon King?!”

“Um, no? There’s no way in a million years I’m giving them Zaggy.”

“Then...what could you possibly intend to do against that army?!”

“I’m a Beast Tamer!” Kanata said. “There’s only one thing *to* do!” Kanata continued forward, dodging through the wave of humans fleeing toward them.

“Miss Kanata! Miss Kanataaaaaa! What does that *meaaaan*?!” Melissa’s voice was drowned out by the screams of the crowd. There was no hope of hearing a response.

But Kanata gave one. As she approached the other side of the wall, she declared her intentions. “I’m gonna get *so many* fluffy-fluff-fluffies!”

† † †

As Kanata approached the outer walls, the city around her grew silent. The gates had been closed shut, so Kanata squeezed through a hole in the wall and made it outside.

“*Your Infernal Majesty! I am so, so sorry...*” The dragon was crying out in torment. He had been captured. He’d tried to attack Zarbok’s army, but in the end he had been struck down. Even he, the champion of the Demon King’s army, could not prevail against tens of thousands of magic beasts. He was being held in place by a great number of them. Most likely he was being kept alive so that he could be brainwashed again and brought back into their ranks. His captives jeered, not at all concealing their wicked malice.

“*Zarbok!*” Zag’giel declared. “*We have come! Just as you requested!*”

At Zag’giel’s voice, the ranks of the army split, and Zarbok, their commander, came forth. “Well, well,” he said. “It has been too long, Your Infernal Majesty.”

“*Hmph. You would address us as an old friend, after what you have done? You truly have no shame.*”

“Perhaps I do not. But I am pleased to see you come along peacefully.” Zarbok nodded his head coolly and then raised one eyebrow in confusion as he regarded the girl. “But, who is this girl?” he asked. “Has Your Infernal Majesty taken to using human servants? My, my. What will they say?”

Zag’giel swallowed. “*Kanata... Kanata is no servant.*”

“Oh? Then what you mean to tell me is that she is your *friend*? To think, that the merciless King of Demons would grow so softhearted!”

“*Kanata...*” Zag’giel started, terribly flustered as he choked out the words, “*Kanata is our...our m-m-master!*”

“Your master.” Zarbok repeated. “Your *master*?! Aha ha ha ha ha ha ha haaaa!” He threw his shoulders back, laughing uproariously. “What a joke! The King of Demons, reduced to the servant of a human! Incredible! I am in awe!” But then he stopped. “No,” he said. “I apologize for laughing. I think I understand. It isn’t strange at all that you, who have become the lowest of all magic beasts, would seek out a human to take you in as a pet. I thought you might be regaining your powers, but it seems you have been crawling along in the dirt like always.” He gave Zag’giel a look of pure condescension.

Zarbok had expected Zag’giel to start shaking with humiliation, but instead, he laughed triumphantly. “*Hah. Then it is as we suspected. You feared we had regained our power. In which case, we assume, our curse is on the verge of breaking?*”

“Kh! How did you—?!”

“*It seems that we hit the mark. The flower is in your possession, is it not? Show it to us!*”

“I will do no such thing! The moment you appeared before my army was the moment your death was assured!”

Zarbok’s soldiers moved to obey his commands with a strange vacantness. They must have been under the same brainwashing technique as the mighty dragon had been. Even if Zag’giel were to cry out to them, none would take his

side.

"*Your purpose in coming here is to kill us, no?*" said Zag'giel. "*Do you intend to go directly home when you have disposed of us, or have you designs on the humans?*"

"Ah ha ha! Of *course* I have designs on the humans! Once I've taken care of you, I'll brainwash the ones I can use and kill the ones I can't! And then, I shall make the city my own, and from it, launch invasions of other countries! My plans may have gone a bit astray, but we have the spell that can move an entire army in the blink of an eye! I shall subjugate the human realm *first*, and then return to claim the Dark Continent! I will become the new King of Demons!"

Zarbok had no intention of giving up on his ambitions. He might as well have told them that he must be stopped here.

"*As we suspected*," said Zag'giel, "*you have no intention of keeping your promises. Then you leave us no other choice.*" He leapt down from Kanata's shoulders, doing a flip in midair and landing with grace. Then he slipped on the ground and rolled over onto his back.

Everyone went silent.

Still upside-down, Zag'giel skillfully moved his paws like he was trying to adopt some kind of guard, and glared down the army. "*Come! Face us!*"

"Pff—!" Zarbok snorted. "Bwa ha ha ha ha! What was *that*? Are you trying to get me to *laugh* to death?"

"*We do not jest! Now, come, Zarbok! Or are you afraid?!*"

"I have to admit, it is *impressive*, in a way, that you would make such a statement in your state." Zarbok looked like he didn't know how to respond.

An enormous magic beast came up behind Zarbok and kneeled—a great knight in jet-black armor, with no head. Or, rather, he did have a head, but he was carrying it tucked under his left arm. On his back he wore a great sword, rough-hewn out of a lump of iron.

"Lord Zarbok," he said. "Allow me to handle this."

"A dullahan," Zarbok said. "Very well! It would be a waste to send my whole

army to kill such a pathetic failure. Finish it with a single strike!”

“My lord!” The dullahan drew his sword, holding it in one hand as easily as if it were made of paper. He went to face Zag’giel. “Zag’giel, former King of Demons! I will sever your head from your neck!”

“*Our neck will not be cut so easily! Come at us! Hold nothing back!*” Nobody bothered to point out that Zag’giel didn’t seem to actually *have* a neck.

Zag’giel and the dullahan squared off, each ready to fight to the death, when the girl stepped in front of Zag’giel, protecting him.

“*Kanata...*” he said.

“Child,” the dullahan intoned, “do you know what it means to step between two warriors in a duel?” The head in his arms popped a vein in irritation. He pointed his sword at Kanata.

Kanata didn’t seem at all intimidated. She looked the dullahan over, glancing up and down its body, an expression of deep concentration on her face. Then she sighed. “Two points,” she said.

“Excuse me?” said the dullahan.

Kanata didn’t respond. She grabbed the tip of the knight’s sword with an air of despondency.

“What are you—” he started, but it became clear soon enough.

Kanata twisted the sword out of shape. The dullahan’s sword was made of strong metal from the Dark Continent, but Kanata bent it like it was soft candy.

“Nu—ha?!” the dullahan exclaimed. The force pulling on his sword was like nothing he had ever felt. He dropped his head and seized the hilt with both hands, planting his heels as he tried to pull. His sword made a horrible, discordant straining noise as it was transformed into scrap metal. “N-No! My beloved sword!” Clutching his ruined sword, he crumpled up into a ball.

“I’m gonna do a quick point assessment, Zaggy,” said Kanata. “Wait a minute, okay?”

“*K-Kanata, wait!*” Zag’giel cried, shocked out of his awed stupor, but while he was speaking, Kanata took one, then two steps toward the main host of magic

beasts and was somehow immediately upon them.

“Wha—?!” the magic beast before Kanata exclaimed.

“Hmm...” Kanata said. “Five points, maybe.”

The magic beast swung his axe, startled by Kanata’s sudden speed. Kanata caught it in one of her dainty hands and crushed it. “M-My aaaaaxe!” the magic beast cried. Just like the dullahan, his heart seemed to be broken along with his long-beloved weapon.

Kanata moved on, seemingly done with him. “Let’s say four points.”

“Eek!”

“Around eight points.”

“Aaaah!”

“Six points, give or take.”

“Nooooo!”

She moved like she was blinking in and out of existence, appearing in front of magic beast after magic beast, shattering their claws, breaking their fangs, and ruining their weapons. In the face of such overwhelming power, they would faint, or lose heart, or even soil themselves.

“What are you wretches doing?!” shouted Zarbok. “Get her! She’s only a little girl! Stop trying to fight her one-on-one, and gang up on her!”

The army obeyed, coming to attack her all at once. No matter how many directions they came from, Kanata effortlessly countered their attacks.

“Five points...seven points...three points...two points...four points...five points...” Kanata sighed. “None of these are any good!”

What could this girl possibly be awarding points for?! The magic beasts had no idea, even as Kanata rendered one after another unable to fight.

“Get her!” bellowed Zarbok. “I don’t care how! Somebody finish that girl!”

“W-We can’t! She just won’t stop!”

Indeed, there was no stopping Kanata. This single girl tore through the army,

tens of thousands strong, like a whirlwind, blowing aside everything in her path. “Two points...three points...six points...four points...five points...eight points...seven points...nine points...six points...three points...four points...nine points...five points...three points...five points...six points...two points...nine points...eight points...one point...” In their dwindling numbers, all the magic beasts could understand was that whatever it was that was being judged, they had been found wanting. “There really aren’t any good ones! No good at all. None of you would even reach up to Zaggy’s pinkie toe.”

“What did you say?!” Zarbok demanded, clearly panicking. “My soldiers are even lower than the weakest magic beast?!”

“Mm-hm,” said Kanata, flatly. “Even all of you together wouldn’t equal one of Zaggy’s feet.” And then, for good measure, she sent the whole army flying.

“What?!” said Zarbok. “What are you?!”

“I’m just a Beast Tamer,” Kanata said with a tone of mild confusion, not stopping her rampage through Zarbok’s army. “Why?”

“A Beast Tamer?! Can such a Beast Tamer even exist?!”

“Um, yes? I’m right here.”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up! If you were a Beast Tamer, you would send your magic beasts to fight! How can you wreck my army with your bare hands?!” Zarbok cried out in despair. “Stop! Stoooop! My army! My dreams of glory! Noooooooo!”

That whole exchange had taken ten seconds. In that time, Kanata had crushed the army Zarbok had brought with him. His dreams of invading the human realm would never come true now—not in a million years.

“No...” he said. “My ambitions... My dreams... I was to be King of Demons...” He looked at his defeated army and collapsed to his hands and knees.

“The reason you lost,” Kanata said, “is that your fluff score isn’t high enough.”

“Our...fluff score?” Zarbok had come here to kill the Demon King, but he was unable to even fight, his entire army defeated by this girl who had come out of nowhere. This *had* to be a nightmare.

“*Your* fluff score is zero, by the way,” Kanata said. “Not a bit of fluff anywhere on you.”

“My score is zero...” Zarbok said, miserably. “Even lower than my minions. My score is zero...”

“And *Zaggy’s* is one hundred,” Kanata finished. “You had lost the moment you started.”

“No...” In that instant, Zarbok gave in to despair.

Then, a light shone down from the heavens. Innumerable white feathers fluttered down to earth.

“*Do not lose heart, Zarbok*,” said a feminine voice. “*The gods have not abandoned you.*” A beautiful woman descended from on high, clad in a heavenly robe.

† † †

“*The Goddess! Why have you come here?!*” Zag’giel, who had finally managed to roll himself back onto his feet, glared up at the divine woman in the sky.

“Her wings have some pretty good fluff,” Kanata said. “They look soft. She’s a solid eighty points.” Even the advent of a goddess didn’t break her stride. She was still focused on her fluff assessment.

“*Why have I come here, you ask? Zag’giel, I have come to offer some words of guidance as your trial reaches its climax.*”

The Goddess smiled with divine solemnity and gestured with one hand. In response, a glass bottle containing the flower flew up out of Zarbok’s possession and into the sky. The flower had grown splendidly. It looked like it might bloom at any second.

“*Truly splendid, Zag’giel*,” the Goddess said, caressing the bottle with her fingertips. “*For you to have grown the flower of love so fully is no small feat. You have nearly gathered the love of one million. Only a little more, and you will have overcome the trial before you.*” She spoke as if praising Zag’giel for his success, but when she looked down at him it was with exaggerated pity. “*However...sadly, there is something I neglected to tell you.*”

The Goddess raised up the bottle, and the flower began to wilt from its stem. "*I am afraid that the time given to you is not endless. If you can not overcome your trial before the flower wilts, your life shall be forfeit.*" A triumphant grin teased over her face, despite her best efforts to hide it. "*Ah, but what shall you do? The flower wilts before your eyes. Can you gain the love you need in the time remaining? It does not seem possible.*"

The flower of love was an indicator of Zag'giel's condition. Its wilting must portend the end of the Demon King's life. Before their eyes, it began to dry out and crumble like sand.

"*You truly have a wicked heart*," said Zag'giel. "*We thought you might do something like this. That time limit is something you thought of only now, wasn't it!*"

"*Who can say*?" said the Goddess.

"*You never had any intention of allowing the curse to be lifted, did y—ghk!*" Smoke began rising from Zag'giel's body—the matter that made up his form was dissolving, turning to smoke with a sound like rushing wind.

"Zaggy, are you all right?! Hang in there!" Kanata ran over to him and held him in her arms. Zag'giel shook, only able to cry out in feeble moans.

"*K-Kanata...*" he said. "*It seems...that this is the end...*"

The Goddess pressed her hands together and wept at the moving display of Zag'giel forcing himself to give his last words.

"*Ah, what a sorrowful end!*" she said. "*Alas, Zag'giel. It would never have come to this had you accepted your role as Demon King.*"

As the Goddess cried her crocodile tears, Zarbok watched with a look of dark triumph on his face. "Ah ha ha! Are you dying? Are you dying, Zag'giel?! It serves you right! My dreams may have ended in ruin, but I am more than satisfied to see the death of my hated enemy!"

As the villains mocked him, Zag'giel strained himself to speak. "*We are sorry that we were unable to join you on your journey...*" he said. "*But in meeting you, Kanata, and spending our days together, we came to learn the meaning of happiness. It was you and you alone who extended your hand to us, to save us*

from our hell of loneliness. We were truly, truly happy. To you, we owe our salvation..."

"I feel the same way, Zaggy," Kanata said. "I was super happy every day. I got to wake up with you, cuddle you, feel your warmth and softness... But we're gonna stay together forever, you know."

"*We thank you, Kanata...*" said Zag'giel. "*We are glad we were able to bring you delight. But there is nothing you can do about this curse. The gods are higher beings than you or we. Under the laws of this world, such a curse is unbreakable.*"

"Is it?" Kanata asked.

"*It is.*" Zag'giel quietly nodded his head. "*The gods are our creators. It is impossible for we, the created, to triumph over them. With this body, ruined by the curse, it would be impossible even for us to...speak?*"

"You are speaking, though."

Zag'giel, in fact, seemed to have no problems speaking at all. He noticed that his body, too, felt better.

"H-Hey!" said Zarbok. "Goddess! What is this?! Why is Zag'giel not dead?!"

But the Goddess had no answers. "*I-Impossible! The death of Zag'giel was predetermined!*" Then she noticed that Zag'giel, in Kanata's arms, was glowing with a soft light. His body was recovering. "*That girl! It can't be! She resists the judgment of the gods through mere healing magic?! How can her magic be strong enough to vie with divine providence?!*"

Stunned though she was by Kanata's power, the Goddess thought she had some idea as to what was happening.

"*I had thought her fighting style was strange*," she mused. "*So is her outlandishly powerful magic! This girl must be one of the heavy souls! Is this the interference of the gods of another world?! But even for a heavy soul, her power is unheard of. A mortal who can contend with the gods...*"

The girl had been born with the greatest possible talent, but still she'd trained and trained and trained and trained and trained. And from those efforts, a

monster had been born—the thing that was Kanata Aldezia.

The Goddess ground her teeth in frustration, but this wasn't over. Not yet. The flower that showed Zag'giel's condition had wilted. That meant that the curse was still eating at Zag'giel's body in the present progressive tense. Unless and until the conditions were met, Zag'giel would not escape his fate.

"*Hmph*," the Goddess said. "*You struggle in vain, heavy-soul girl! It is only your healing magic that keeps Zag'giel alive! He has not fulfilled the terms of his trial! And now that the flower has wilted, it can never bloom! There is no time for him to gather the love of one million. Your magic will run out, and Zag'giel's life shall end!*" She grinned triumphantly.

"Love?" Kanata asked.

"*Yes, love! The love of a million people! Without that, Zag'giel is doomed!*"

The Goddess had expected her proclamation to throw Kanata into despair, but all she had done was teach Kanata how to break the curse.

"I have love," Kanata said. She held Zag'giel tighter.

"*Oh ho ho ho ho!*" the Goddess laughed, mocking. "*Were you not listening? You need the love of one million people! Your love alone will not be enough!*"

The Goddess had no idea. Kanata's superhuman power had come from sheer effort, but the wellspring of that effort—where it had all begun—was a single wish.

"A million is nothing!" Kanata said. "I love the fluff times infinity!"

Zag'giel looked up at her. "*K-Kanata?!*"

Kanata took him all in. His soft fluffy fur. His big round eyes. The pointy ears poking out from his head. His short stubby legs. His long tail. His adorable voice. The smell she had grown addicted to. She took it all in and shouted out with all her strength, "Zaggy fluff fluff, I love you!!!"

With that cry of love, a light shone out from Kanata's chest, and the withered flower produced a seed. It fell, and in almost no time, it sprouted, took root, grew, and produced a new bud. And then, in all its brilliant glory, it bloomed.

"*How could this be?!*" the Goddess cried. "*How can one girl have the love of a*

million?! Even a god could not perform such a feat!" And yet, the proof was before her own eyes.

"*The curse!*" Zag'giel said. "*It is breaking!*" He flew out of Kanata's arms into the sky. "*Kanata, behold! Our true form!*" His frail, weak body began to regain its strength. His stubby legs grew long while the black fur that had covered his body receded to just his head. He grew two splendid horns. The whole thing took less than a second. He created clothes for himself with magic and calmly alighted in front of Kanata.

"Ahh," Zag'giel sighed. "How long has it been? This...*this* is our body!" There was no trace of the black furball he had been. His body was that of a beautiful youth. "Kanata, we thank you. The curse under which we suffered has been broken."

"Zaggy...?" Kanata blinked.

Zag'giel smiled kindly at her. "Indeed, it is we. Kanata, your love has saved us."



The Goddess screamed and tore at her hair. “*How can this be?! A mere human, overcoming divine judgment?! Such a thing should not be possible!*”

Zarbok was trembling in fear, clutching his head and moaning pitiably. “Th-The Demon King is back! I’m ruined! It’s over!”

And as for Kanata...

“You’re not Zaggy!” she said. She seemed the most miserable of all.

“K-Kanata!” Zag’giel balked. “What’s wrong? Do you not recognize us?”

Kanata decided to try touching Zag’giel’s outstretched arm. It was slender and well toned. Zag’giel was beautiful enough to be a statue in a museum.

This only threw Kanata further into despair. “You’re not Zaggy!” She touched his lean and muscular chest. “You’re not Zaggy!” She touched his face, beautiful like the evening moon. “You’re not Zaaaaaggyyyyyy!” she screamed.

She seemed even more miserable than she had when Zag’giel was close to death. “Zaggy...” she sobbed. “Zaggy’s gone...”

“No, Kanata!” said Zag’giel. “We have not died! We are here!”

“But...” said Kanata. “But...” Sobbing like a child, Kanata finally touched Zag’giel’s hair. It was soft to the touch. She remembered this sensation...

“Zaggy!” She sighed with relief. “Zaggy, there you are! Oh, I’m so glad...”

“I-It seems she understands who we are...” Zag’giel, blissfully unaware of the fluffiness of his own hair, was shocked by Kanata’s behavior. “But Kanata’s behavior has been unaccountable from the very beginning, we suppose.”

He decided to let it slide. This was by no means the beginning of Kanata’s fluff mania. After the time they’d spent together, Zag’giel had come to understand her, if only a little.

“Kanata,” Zag’giel said. “Matters here are still not settled. Would you refrain from petting our head for the time being? You may pet us all you like later.”

“Fluff fluff, fluffy fluff, ehe he...”

“It seems she is not listening. Then we will do as we must.” Taking care not to separate Kanata from his head, Zag’giel pulled her into his arms so he could

turn and face Zarbok and his minions. “Our armies!” he shouted. “Return to us!” The forlorn magic beasts lifted their heads at the Demon King’s commanding voice. “Who would you serve? Your king, or this fool who dances to the Goddess’s whims?!”

Suddenly, the magic beasts returned to their senses. “Y-Your Infernal Majesty! Your Infernal Majesty, you have returned!”

“What... What have I been doing?!”

One after another, the sight of the King of Demons seemed to stir the magic beasts, breaking them out of their hypnosis. And then, as one, they prostrated themselves on the ground. Only Zarbok, trembling with fear, remained standing.

Calm and composed, Zag’giel maneuvered with Kanata in front of Zarbok. Zag’giel looked down at him, eyes shining with a cold light. “Zarbok. You have lost.”

“Eeeek!” Zarbok was sweating from every pore as he stared up at the overwhelming majesty that was Zag’giel.

“There are duties we must needs tend to in this land,” Zag’giel said. “If you repent and swear to us that you will give everything you have for the sake of peace on the Dark Continent, then we shall spare your life.”

Zarbok cried out. He pressed his head to the ground, groveling splendidly. “I-I-I swear!” he said. “I’ll never betray you again!”

“Very well. Then, return! Your presence has disturbed the people of the Royal Capital!” Zag’giel raised one hand and cast the same mass-scale teleportation spell Zarbok had used, returning Zarbok and his army to the Dark Continent. Zag’giel had been the one to formulate the basic structure of the spell. He understood how to cast it after having seen it once.

Now, the only ones remaining were the two of them and the dumbfounded Goddess. “What now, Goddess?” Zag’giel said. “It seems you are out of schemes.”

“*Nhh...*” the Goddess said. “*How dare you...*” She was shaking with humiliation, but Kanata had powers that rivaled those of the gods. As long as

Kanata was around, the Goddess would have to be careful about making a move.

As the two stared each other down, the gates of the Royal Capital suddenly swung open.

“To arms!” bellowed the king. “It would shame us to force Kanny to take on the army alone. If you have courage, follow me! To arms!”

“To aaaaarms!” echoed the crowd. A great force of knights and common townsfolk alike followed their king out of the gates, prepared to take to the field.

“To aaaaar— W-Wait. Where are the magic beasts?”

There was no sign of the magic beasts they had come here to fight. They stood there, confused, bereft of a target.

“Hey!” someone said. “Look! There’s a lady in the sky!”

“She has wings! Could she be a Goddess?”

“So sublime...just like the icons in the Church! To think I should see a Goddess with my living eyes!”

The crowd gathered around, gazing up at the Goddess. With this much attention, her options were severely limited. She seethed. Clenching her teeth, she glanced between Zag’giel and the townsfolk, and admitted defeat. “*D-Demon King Zag’giel*,” she said. “*Well done! You have learned love and repented of evil. With this maiden at your side, continue on the path of virtue.*” She hoped that would put the right spin on it. And then, exactly as if she were running away, she vanished into thin air.

The people cried with joy. “Incredible! The words of the Goddess!”

“That girl must have driven off the army of magic beasts and gotten the Demon King to repent!”

“A miracle! Only a Saint could perform such feats! She can be nothing other than a Saint!” The crowd turned their adulation from the Goddess to Saint Kanata.

“I’m not a Saint!” she protested, still petting Zag’giel’s hair. “I’m a Beast

Tamer!”

Nobody seemed to hear her.

“Well, Kanata,” said Zag’giel. “It seems we have been interrupted once again. What shall we do? If you are fatigued from combat, we would not object to returning to the Royal Capital...”

“I’m not even a little fatigued!” said Kanata. “I’m full of energy! And we have everything ready for our journey. Let’s go!”

“We are in full agreement.”

At long last, the two set out on their journey, the throng of cheering townsfolk behind them.

“Kannyyyyyyy!” the king cried. “Don’t go, Kanny! You’re a national treasuuuuuure!”

“Miss Kanata!” Melissa shouted, “What is going on? How can the guild possibly reward you for something like this?! At least give us an incident report! How are we going to settle this? Please! Tell me! I don’t wanna do more overtiiiiiime!”

“Come baaaaaaaack!” the two wailed at once. But their voices were drowned out by cries of joy and praises to Her Holiness the Saint.

† † †

The two left the Royal Capital and made their way south along the stone-paved road. This was not a major road, but it did see some traffic. Some of those passersby did a double take at the breathtakingly beautiful man and woman walking along.

“What this means,” Zag’giel continued, “is that human faith is the source of the gods’ power. The Goddess vanished to prevent her true nature from being revealed. Were it known, the people’s faith would surely diminish.”

“Huh!”

“You see, the human souls that ascend to the heavens upon the death of their mortal bodies are the gods’ sustenance. Magic beasts, by contrast, are like worker ants. The gods rely upon them to bring them their food.”

“Hm.”

“Powerful magic beasts vie with each other on the Dark Continent like venomous insects trapped together, fighting until only the strongest survives. The winner becomes the Demon King and brings their armies to invade the human realm. And when enough human souls have been harvested, the gods use Heroes or humans with other rare Professions to drive away the magic beasts. Then there will be peace for a time, while the humans and magic beasts both replenish their lost numbers. Most likely, Kanata, you, too, were meant to become a Hero or some such thing.”

“You don’t say!”

“You can think of Professions such as Hero or Demon King as nothing more than implements of harvest. But we discovered the gods’ machinations and refused to lead the magic beasts to attack. We sought to create lasting peace, but that damned Goddess inflicted us with that curse. We still hold the Profession of Demon King. It was to torment us that she kept us alive, but in the end it was her undoing. We have broken Zarbok’s ambition. We do not believe that the Dark Continent will invade while we are gone.”

“Oh, really!”

“Kanata,” Zag’giel said with a sigh. “What is this. Are we boring you?”

“Not at all!”

“We don’t believe you!” Usually, whenever he spoke, Kanata would nod along cheerfully with shining eyes. But now she was being blatantly curt. “You usually pay far more attention! Why now, when the curse is lifted, do you have no eyes for us? Do you think nothing of this body?!”

It was like she was a completely different person than the Kanata he had known when he was a little black furball. And he was gorgeous enough that no girl could look at him and not feel her chest stir a *little*. Walking together with Kanata, the pair looked like a painting.

“Hm...” Kanata said, looking Zag’giel’s body over with squinted eyes. “The only part that’s nice to touch is your hair,” she said. “I liked the old Zaggy better.”

“Gh-Ghwah?!” Zag’giel cried out like he had been stabbed. He collapsed to the ground, crying messy tears. “Why?! Why would you say something like that?! We have become stronger...a magic beast worthy of you! Kanata! We... We... Hm?!” Suddenly, he understood. The mystery was solved.

“We see,” he said. “It has nothing to do with strength. You simply prefer our earlier form. In that case, if we are to become worthy of you, we must seek to achieve ultimate power in that form as well! At last, we understand everything!”

Really, his understanding was still somewhat incomplete.

“We understand more or less how to perform such a curse,” Zag’giel said. “We cannot cast it with as much power, but it is simple enough to alter our form and our strength!”

And so, Zag’giel cast the curse on himself. His beautiful young body shrunk and shrunk until only his clothing remained. And then, from inside popped out a familiar black furball.

“Miu!” he said. “*Kanata! For you, we shall become the greatest of magic beasts, even in this form! We now understand for what you wish. It must have been to make us realize that you were so curt earlier.*”

For a while, Kanata just stared at Zag’giel. Silence fell. And then, Kanata’s shrieks of joy shattered the quiet.

“Eeeeeeeeeeee!” she squealed. “Zaaaaaaggyyyyyyyyy! Fluffy-wuffy-huffy-snuffy! Fluff fluff squeeze squeeze fluff fluff fluuuuuuuuff!”

“*K-Kanataaaaaaaaa?!*”

Kanata dove into Zag’giel’s soft fur, breathing it in, indulging in every inch. “Zaaaaggyyyy! This body is sooo gooood! You’re the best! Zaggy Zaggy Zaggy Zaggy Zaaaaaggyyyyyyy!”

“*K-Kanata, wait! There are people on the road. Wh-What if someone sees? Kanataaaaaaaaa!*”

And he got fluffed and fluffed and fluffed. It was honestly a bit excessive.

Afterword

New readers, may the fluff be with you! (This is a greeting used by the followers of fluff.)

Returning readers, may the fluff be with you! (This is a greeting used by the followers of fluff.)

I decided I wanted to try my hand at being a novelist, so I took something I'd posted on a web novel site, did some revisions and corrections, and wrote a bit of original material. I tried really hard to make it something that both people who knew this story as a web novel and people picking up the book for the first time could enjoy. If you enjoyed Kanata and Zag'giel's fluffy adventure, then I will have done my job. For a writer, there can be nothing better.

I wrote this book out of my own desire to read a story about a cute girl and a fluffy critter on a big adventure, but there was also another story that became a bit of a motif as I wrote. It was something I happened on more than twelve years ago.

I wasn't allowed to watch anime or read manga when I was growing up. The only exceptions to that rule were Disney and Studio Ghibli. The highlight of my week was always watching Friday Roadshow at nine o'clock on Friday night. They played all kinds of animated movies on that show, and I ate them up. There's one in particular I'll never forget staying up late (by a kid's standards) to watch: *Beauty and the Beast*, the world-famous smash hit, the jewel in the crown of Disney. The one they did the big live-action adaptation of that was so popular. The story of a cruel prince who was inflicted with a curse, who would not listen to the words of his retainers and lived on despairing of ever returning to human life, whose cold heart was thawed by the kindness of an innocent girl, and who finally broke the curse with the power of true love.

I thought it was a splendid story. I remember thinking to myself that one day I wanted to write a story as lovely as that. And now, twelve years plus later,

looking over my completed manuscript, all I can say is—how did it end up like this?! I mean, it *is* a happy ending! It is! Honestly!

Well, with fluff that cute there's no helping it. I guess Zaggy will have to deal with being fluffed for a while.

But one way or another, their quest has finally begun. In the next installment they'll add some white fluff to the party, bringing their fluff score even higher while Kanata performs feats that frankly outclass any Saint in the world. I would be delighted if you stuck around to see what happens next.

I'll conclude with some words of thanks to the people who helped make this possible. First, to everyone who read the web novel! It was your reactions and support that made it possible to get this published as an actual book! Thank you from the bottom of my heart. The story's somewhat different between the book and the web novel, but I am doing my best to make both enjoyable reads.

Also, thank you to S for editing! I am deeply moved by the passion you put into the work and grateful for your frank advice at every step of this process. I'm afraid I'm still very inexperienced as a writer, but I'm going to keep trying to improve! If it's to create good stories, I'll endure anything you throw at me!

Thank you to Falmaro for the adorable illustrations of Kanata, Zag'giel, and all the other characters! I couldn't have asked for better cute girls and cute fluff! Thank you, thank you, thank you! I look forward to doing more in the future.

Thank you to all the editors, designers, proofreaders, salespeople, booksellers, and everyone else who helped to make this a reality! I really am grateful to you.

And finally, a big thank you to the person reading this book right now.

Look forward to even more fluff in book two!

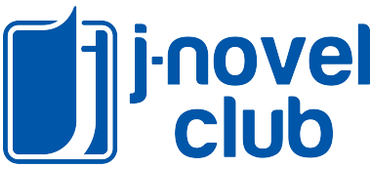
Catch you later!

-Inumajin, January 2020


Saint? No!
I'm Just a Passing
BEAST TAMER!
The Invincible Saint and the Quest for Fluff


"If you mess around with fire, you can get burned! See? Like this!"
"What?! She stopped the dragon's breath?!"
Suddenly, flames appeared, with twice the intensity of the dragon fire. The dragon's breath was swallowed up by the inferno. The flames roared past the dragon's maw all the way into the sky, where they pierced through the tranquil white clouds above, leaving the sky a brilliant shade of ultramarine.


"Ouchies go away!"
"Ouchies go away!"
"Mommy! My chest doesn't hurt anymore!"
"It's not just my cough! My knees haven't felt this good in years!"
"My arm! My amputated arm is back!"
"Your Holiness! My Lady Saint!"
"No, I'm a Beast Tamer!"



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Saint? No! I’m Just a Passing Beast Tamer! Volume 1

by Inumajin

Translated by Meteora Edited by Savannah McKendree

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