

Wind and Flame
By Angelus

Zanna walked through a forest unlike any they had experienced so far. The soft earth under their feet was coated with a verdant carpet of short grass, and the tall trees that stretched to the sky cast cool shade over everything below. It was quiet aside from the trickling of a stream running nearby, just out of sight. Zanna's long, sharp ears twitched this way and that, trying to pick up on the sounds of animals, but there were none to be heard. More strange was the almost oppressive blanket of energy in the air, like an invisible fog of untamed magical energy just waiting to be shaped.

It was no surprise that a portal to a place like this opened so readily. The real question now was, where exactly was this?

There was also no sign of Zanna's target. The Hunter's Guild had tasked them with tracking down and eliminating a medium-sized threat that had escaped through a portal to this world, but when Zanna arrived on the other side there was no trace of it. No footprints to follow or damage to the foliage, or any of the expected scorch marks a large, burning cat would make.

There weren't any obvious roads in sight, no signposts or hints of civilization. Zanna moved between the trees, following the stream down in the hopes that it might eventually lead to a town of some sort where they might be able to pick up a lead. Their tail dragged through the cool grass, sweeping the dew from the ground with the bit of fur that trailed off the tip of it.

Zanna adjusted their backpack straps on their shoulders, and pulled their bandana a little tighter around their neck as the wind picked up, rustling the leaves and whipping up a chill in the shade. They felt a tingle across their back, and they turned around.

Before them stood a tall man with pale, almost grey skin and faded purple hair that came down past his shoulders. He was wearing a long purple cap with gold adornments, and a matching cloak that swirled in the wind that swept in from behind him. He was surprised as Zanna turned to face him before he had a chance to speak up, and he blinked, unable to form words quick enough.

Zanna was equally as dumbfounded and their mind raced. Why was he so pale? He looks too well dressed to be wandering a forest. Does everyone here look like this? Dress like this?

The man took a step closer and looked down at Zanna with a scrutinizing glare. "You wouldn't happen to be part or fully Minish, would you?"

What's a Minish? Is that a common race? Do I look like one? Should I say I am if he thinks I am? "Minish?" is what Zanna settled on saying.

The man frowned and rolled his eyes. "Right. Picori? That's what you all call them. Are you a Picori?" he asked, his tone growing annoyed. The wind blew stronger.

Zanna shivered under the wind and gave an increasingly puzzled look. "I'm not sure what you mean."

He frowned. "Ugh. If you're trying to deflect you're doing a terrible job of it, everyone knows the stories about the Picori," he said, unimpressed.

Shit.

Zanna froze up, but the man continued. "Now that I look at you longer though, you don't really look like any Minish or Hylian I've ever seen." He walked around Zanna in a circle, looking them over, and the wind direction seemed to follow him, always blowing from behind him. Zanna stood still, allowing him to give them a look over. "Yeah, hmm. Your tail isn't even close to being a Minish tail, and your ears aren't quite Hylian and definitely aren't human." He stopped in front of Zanna, facing them again, staring hard with those red eyes of his. "So, what are you exactly?"

Deflect deflect deflect. "I could ask you the same thing!" Zanna blurted out. "You're the one with wind coming out of you." They jabbed an accusatory finger at their company.

He seemed surprised that Zanna had noticed. "Mmmh, true, I suppose I should introduce myself right?" The wind pulled away from Zanna, sucking in towards the man before erupting up from under him, billowing out his cloak and his pale purple hair. "Call me Vaati! The Soon-to-be-Legendary Wind Mage!" He spread his arms and struck a gallant pose, flashing a cocky grin full of sharp teeth at Zanna. The wind died down, and his clothes and hair fell perfectly back into place. He stared at Zanna a moment longer with an expectant look in his eyes. "Ah. I was really thinking you'd be impressed. Or scared. Anything really."

"I mean, it's cool, yeah," Zanna started, "But uh, Soon-to-be-Legendary? Are you like. Not that well known yet or something?"

Vaati bristled, puffing out his chest as though trying to seem larger, before letting out his breath in a defeated sigh. "Okay, admittedly, I'm new to this, but if you tell anyone that I'll pull the air out of your lungs."

"Who am I gonna tell? I'm new here too," Zanna said, immediately realizing their slip up.

"Oh? I knew it, you're NOT from Hyrule!" Vaati said triumphantly. "Where did you come in from then? Labrynna? No no, Termina! Wait wait! You're from here, but the far FUTURE!" he guessed, growing increasingly excited with each guess and waiting for Zanna to latch onto one.

"Well, I've never heard of any of these other places, and I'm pretty sure I'm not from the future." Zanna said plainly.

Vaati seemed supremely disappointed. "Ugh. Alright then, who ARE you?"

"Well. I can tell you that my name is Zanna, and that I'm here looking for a strange beast and was wondering if you've seen it."

"You're going to have to be more specific than 'strange.' Ten minutes ago I had to dice a living slime blob with wind blades, so unless you were looking for a slime blob..."

"It's more of like a person-sized really big cat but instead of fur it has fire," Zanna explained.

"Oh, that sounds just like the Burning Roar that's been terrorizing Mount Crenel's foothills for the last few months." Vatti commented. "We got wind of that news just before I st-er-got here."

"Months!?" Zanna blurted. "It only escaped a couple DAYS ago!"

"What? Okay, slow down, you are going to fill me in here or I won't be able to help you before the Sword Fighting Tournament at the Festival."

Zanna paused and took a deep breath. "Fine. Okay. Since it sounds like you get visitors from other worlds often, I'll tell you. But only. You." Zanna sighed. This was never easy. "Where I'm from, we get portals opening all the time, and some of our fauna can get through. If it's

something big like the thing I'm hunting, then the Guild I'm part of sends someone out to go and take care of it before it can cause havoc."

"Fauna like the Burning Roar, huh? So, you said that you usually find them fast, but if you're saying that for you it's only been a couple days but for us it's been here for a few months..."

"Then it's probably not my target, right?" Zanna guessed.

"What? No, I was gonna say time travel." Vaati replied.

"Wait when you asked if I was from the future I thought that was a joke?"

"Oh, that was serious. It's not THAT uncommon here." Vaati explained, unbothered. "The portal that brought it here must have sent it through space AND time. Or your portal did that to you, sending you into the near future. Either way, you're both here now, so you can take care of it." He paused. "And don't worry. Hyrule has seen worse than one burning cat. Or at least, it will soon."

"What does that mean?" Zanna asked, giving a quizzical look.

"Er, just. There's a foul wind blowing. Trust me. It's something we wind mages can just sense." Vaati averted his eyes.

Zanna narrowed their gaze in response. "Right. Well, if you can point me in the direction of, what was it, Mount Crenel? I can be on my way."

"And let you go alone? Hardly. I want the pleasure of killing an otherworldly beast myself, and besides, it'll give me a chance to really test, er, flex my powers." Vaati whipped up a wind for show.

"I can't let you put yourself at risk like that, you're not really familiar with the kind of creatures my world has," Zanna began, but Vaati cut them off.

"Look, I'm going to be your guide to Crenel, so I'm *already* coming with you. I can promise that I won't 'fight' the beast, but I absolutely will 'defend myself,' got it?" Vaati explained while heavily abusing air quotes.

Zanna grumbled, but relented. "Fine. Take the lead to the mountain, but I'll take the lead for the fight, okay?"

"Agreeable. Follow me then." Vaati stepped past Zanna with a flourish of his cloak, and Zanna followed as they moved their way through the woods.

The two strangers walked in silence through the misty forest. Zanna noted the ambient breeze billowing from Vaati's body that pushed back the chill mist and rustled the leaves. In the distant foliage, they swore they caught glimpses of wildlife: a shimmer of bright green, or a rustle of bright red. Whatever they were, they didn't approach.

"They're beneath our notice," Vaati said suddenly.

"Oh?"

"Chuchus and Octoroks," he continued. "They're weak monsters. Chuchus are like, living slime blobs, like I mentioned earlier..."

While Vaati spoke, Zanna slid their backpack off one shoulder and opened it to retrieve a sketchbook and a pencil. They hastily flipped to a blank page and began to make notes based on Vaati's dictation.

"...They're elongated and roughly the height of a person, with big eyes and frankly silly smiles," Vaati continued.

Zanna transcribed, using shorthand where it was convenient. "Are they common?"

"Uncommon I'd say, compared to Keese or Octoroks. Almost a shame too, I hear their jelly can be used in potent potion brewing if you know what you're doing. Alchemy never suited me though," he finished.

Zanna spoke as they finished their notes. "Did you go to school to learn your wind magic stuff then?"

"Something like that." Vaati stopped walking, and Zanna paused behind him, looking curiously over his shoulder. "I had a master, until recently. But I..." His voice wavered, hesitating. "I surpassed him. I didn't need him anymore, so I left."

"Sounds like it wasn't exactly an amicable parting..." Zanna said softly.

"It... We didn't see eye to eye, on methods." Vaati started walking again, faster now. The forest was starting to thin. "In the end we just, we had different goals."

"That's... fair enough, sure. I guess I can understand that." Zanna scribbled a few more notes in the margin of their notebook page before closing it and putting it back in their bag. "How far is the mountain from here anyways?" they asked, opting to change what was clearly an uncomfortable subject.

"Oh, it's on the opposite side of Hyrule, but thankfully not too far away. We have to cross the wooded area around Castle Town and then head north, but it's not too long a walk. We'll be in the foothills in no time." Vaati stopped the wind he was emanating as the forest broke and gave way to a flat, lightly wooded area with a well-worn dirt path. The trees were sparse enough that the sun shone freely on the path between them.

Zanna squinted against the light and raised a hand to shield their eyes as they adjusted to the light. "Castle Town?"

"Mhmm. It's the largest city in Hyrule. That's what I read about it at least," Vaati said with a wave of his hand. He was following the dirt road, and his pace had slowed to a comfortable stroll again.

"So you're not from here either, how did you get here?" Zanna tried asking.

"Portal also, though the portal between my world and this one opens at regular, predictable intervals. It's not a random occurrence like it seems to be for you." He took a few turns, the path through the woods winding. Up ahead, Zanna spotted a plume of white smoke diffusing above the treeline.

"That's... kinda cool. So when it opened, you came through."

"That's right. I had to go somewhere my former master wouldn't follow me."

"Oh. You think he would?" Zanna had a twinge of concern to their voice.

"I know he would, if he could, but he's uh. He's not really capable of following me all the way out here." The pair of them came across a small house on a short hill, and the chimney on top was billowing out a plume of white smoke. "Huh."

"What's this?" Zanna asked.

Vaati approached a small wooden signpost that was stuck in the ground at the bottom of the hill and leaned down to read the short sign. Zanna peered over his shoulder, but the writing on the sign was unintelligible to them. Luckily, Vaati seemed fluent, as he read it out. "It says, 'Castle Blacksmith.' Strange. I assumed a castle's blacksmith would live in the castle."

"Well the ventilation here is probably better than in the city," Zanna said, gesturing to the smoke.

"True, I guess you wouldn't want that floating around a largely populated area." Vaati pointed at the smoke plume, and a wind whipped up, twisting the smoke into a sharp zigzag pattern above the house. He looked at Zanna, proud of himself. Zanna snorted a sort of chuckle and rolled their eyes.

"Yeah yeah, very cool~" they said. "Come on, don't we gotta be someplace?" They gestured to keep moving down the path.

"Right right! You've got a job to do, I've got a festival to attend." He blew away the smoke he had shaped and motioned for Zanna to follow him as he got moving again.

They went north around the far side of the blacksmith's place, following a river as a stone wall rose into view. Zanna's ears flicked as they picked up faint music from the other side of the wall. "I'm guessing that festival you mentioned is on the other side of that?"

Vaati nodded. "Yeah, that's the wall around Castle Town."

"Why does it need a wall?"

"I... Huh." Vatti started to say something, then paused. "I think it used to be used to keep monsters out, but nowadays there's not really anything that threatening. It's maintained as a legacy thing. Or like a point of pride? It would be silly to just let it crumble when they know there's monsters out there," he said, reaching for an explanation.

"That makes enough sense to me. How are you going to get in though?"

"Oh, the front gate. The city is open to all travelers and all."

"Huh! Well that's cool. So what're you going to the festival for anyway?" Zanna asked. They had crossed a bridge over the river and were walking north along the western wall of Castle Town. In the distance, Zanna could see a mountain peak reaching for the sky. It was a light brown, all dirt and rock and no grass.

"Oh, there's a... I mean, I just feel like it would be a good place to get to know people, since I'm new here."

"I can see that. Maybe I can tag along?" Zanna suggested. "I don't have to head home as soon as we take care of this."

Vaati stopped in his tracks, and Zanna almost bumped into him. "That's not a good idea."

"Er, why?" Zanna took a couple steps back to make space between them.

"Like I said earlier, there's something bad coming on the wind. You shouldn't be here for it." He started walking again, moving at a brisk pace.

"I mean, maybe I could help?" Zanna offered. "I may not have cool magic but I fight all kinds of monsters at home, I bet."

"It's not what you're here for, and it's not what I'm here for. When you finish your mission, go home." Vaati's voice was stern and sharp.

"I thought that--"

"If you thought that part of my being here was to avoid what's coming, you're wrong. It can't be stopped. That's just how it is."

Zanna stayed silent, ears folded back and head downcast. They walked in silence as they crossed another couple of bridges over a river as the ground became dry and rocky. The mountain that loomed in the distance was now reaching for the sky before them.

"We're here," Vaati broke the silence. "How do we find this beast of yours?"

Zanna slid their backpack off and set it down, opening it up to dig out the hilt of a sword and a medium tranquilizer gun. "Well you said it's been terrorizing people around here right? We just need to find a way to get its attention." Zanna gave the sword hilt a firm swing, and a gleaming metal blade extended from it.

Vaati looked at it in surprise. "Well that's a neat toy."

"Collapsible sword. Makes for easy traveling and keeps me from looking too-"

Zanna was cut off as a deafening roar shook the air. They and Vaati clapped their hands over their ears and looked to the top of a tall ledge where a tremendous feline was roaring at them and spewing flames from its blazing body. It leaped down and slammed into the ground as Vaati and Zanna dove for cover behind a boulder.

"I thought you said it was medium sized!" Vaati shouted.

"It got a LOT bigger somehow! Maybe all the magic in the air!"

"Well what now?"

"Stay out of my way and keep safe, that's what!" Zanna ordered.

"Like hell!"

Zanna popped out from behind the boulder and locked eyes with their target. The huge feline was easily twice Vaati's height and covered head to toe in flames. Zanna had to squint against the hot wind coming off of it as it stared them down, roaring again. Zanna didn't back down, and before the beast could properly react, they fired the tranq dart at its shoulder, right into the meat. They ducked back behind cover with Vaati just as a wave of flame and superheated air blasted past them, breaking on the boulder and singing the hems of their clothes.

"What are you doing?" Vaati shouted over the roar of the fire.

"I hit it with a sleep dart, it should pass out any minute and that'll extinguish the fire!" Zanna explained.

There was a sound of metal against rock, and a melted tranq dart bounced over the top of their cover and clattered to the ground at their feet. "You mean that?" Vaati asked.

"Oh shit." Zanna leaned towards it, noting that the needle had melted and there was still fluid in the warped glass portion. "Run!" Zanna got up and bolted and Vaati did the same, splitting in the opposite direction. The Burning Roar vaulted their cover and slammed down between them, scorching the rock black.

Zanna brandished their sword and tried to step in close, but the heat waving off its body felt like it was burning their skin even from several feet away. They cursed under their breath as it turned to face them, snarling underneath a cowl of flames.

"Hey ugly, over here!" Vaati shouted, grabbing its attention. It whipped around to face him and lunged, slashing with blazing claws. Vaati leaped backwards, extending his dodge by pulling himself backwards with a vacuum of air that yanked on his cloak. But it was a close call, and he stumbled on landing, falling to one knee.

"Vaati, no!" Zanna yelled, thinking he had been hit, only able to see his body crumple after the attack. They tried to find an opening, but with how big it had become, the heat was too intense for an approach. They grit their teeth in frustration and took cover again, taking an opportunity to hide while the beast wasn't looking at them. "Damnit damnit, come on..."

“Hey!”

Zanna’s ears perked up as they heard a shout.

“HEY! What’s its weak spot?” It was Vaati’s voice. Zanna felt a wave of relief, that was quickly squashed by a roar of flames blasting in Vaati’s direction.

“Underbelly!” Zanna shouted back.

“Good! Get its attention and then keep it still!”

Zanna peeked out and saw the thing staring down Vaati who was doing his best to deflect its flames with thick walls of wind. They grabbed a fist-sized rock from the ground and hucked it, and it hit the cat square in the head. It grunted and whipped around, snarling. The ground around it had been scorched black from the attacks it had been launching. Zanna locked eyes with it and raised their arms and ears, and shouted at it as loud as they could. The feline froze in place, reassessing their target as Zanna tried to intimidate it.

It was just enough time. “Now!” Vaati yelled. With a grunt, he created a vacuum under the Burning Roar’s legs. The flames on the lower half of its body extinguished without air. The beast looked down, breaking eye contact with Zanna, and Zanna breathed out and rushed in. They closed the distance in a few fleet steps and then dropped into a foot-first slide. They dove under their target, and the heat of it bore down on them. Even with the immediate flames extinguished, it still felt like standing before an open oven. The heat forced Zanna’s eyes closed, and they blindly plunged their sword up. It hit the mark and sliced right through the flesh, tearing the monster open.

It yowled in pain, and the flames on its upper half smouldered, billowing thick black smoke. Zanna scuttled out from under it and joined Vaati on the opposite side as the monster burned and smoked, becoming consumed in smoke. Vaati whipped a breeze at it to clear the air, and the smoke dissipated. Nothing was left but a scorch mark.

“It... incinerated itself,” Zanna muttered in disbelief.

“Looks like it. That was... sure something.” Vaati looked himself over, and dusted some ash from his clothes.

“Sure was. Thanks for uh, the help,” Zanna said quickly.

“Help?” Vaati said, turning away and looking at the sky. “I dunno what you’re talking about, I was just a helpless civilian defending myself at the same time that you happened to be tracking down the same big, nasty beast. I didn’t do anything,” he said, smirking and playing coy.

“Hmm. True. Too true.” Zanna nodded in understanding.

“So,” Vaati turned back to face Zanna. “Headed home now, right?”

“I... Yeah. I guess I should.” Zanna sighed and picked up their backpack, which had remarkably survived the fight unscathed. They put their sword back in the bag and slung it back over their shoulders. “I probably won’t see you again, but. It was nice to meet someone here.” Zanna said, extending their hand for a shake.

“It was good to meet you too, Zanna.” Vaati grabbed their hand and gave it a firm squeeze. “Take care on your future hunts.” He let go and turned away, cloak ruffling in the wind.

Zanna watched him go, vanishing around a bend where the foothills ran back into the woods. Once he was out of sight, they pulled a trinket from their pocket and fiddled with it, until a portal opened before them, leading back home. They cast one last glance back down the path

that Vaati had departed down. They couldn't help thinking about what he said about the foul wind blowing, but they tried to put it out of their mind. It was time to leave Hyrule, and home was calling.