

Natsume
Akatsuki

ILLUSTRATION BY

Kurone
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"Kazuma
Satou... Are
you glad you
were sent to
this world?
You don't
regret it?"

"No, no
regrets.
I'm glad
I could
come
here."



KONOSUBA: GOD'S BLESSING ON THIS WONDERFUL WORLD! 15



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KONOSUBA: GOD'S BLESSING ON THIS WONDERFUL WORLD! Cult Syndrome!

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NATSUME AKATSUKI
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Konosuba: God's Blessing on This Wonderful World!, 15

NATSUME AKATSUKI

Translation by Kevin Steinbach

Cover art by Kurone Mishima

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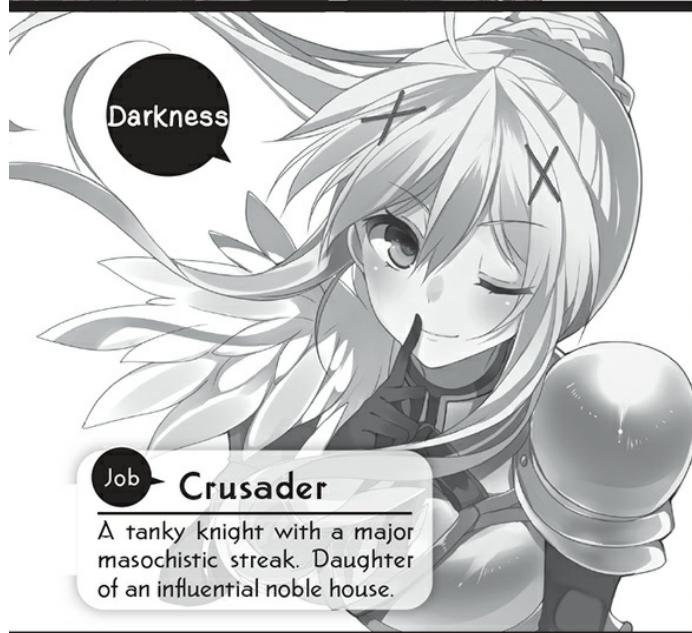
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Characters



Prologue



It was a perfectly ordinary scene on a perfectly ordinary day.

“Kazuma, Kazuma, grab the soy sauce for me!”

“Got it.”

Unlike Megumin and Darkness, who were early risers, Aqua and I had slept in a bit and were having a late breakfast. I passed the soy sauce to Aqua, who took it with a quick thank-you, but—

“Hey, I saw that. Your finger touched the soy sauce, didn’t it?”

“Did not.”

Okay, so it was partly the fault of the soy sauce container, but about one out of every five times Aqua tried to pour it, she touched the stuff and ended up purifying it.

“If you really didn’t touch it, then I dare you to put soy sauce on that thing. If it isn’t water, it should be fine, right?”

“...Hey, Kazuma, why do you always bully me like this? We’ve known each other a long time, haven’t we? So you understand what’s happening right now, don’t you?” Aqua looked up at me from her grilled fish with a gentle smile.

“I understand that’s what you always say when you’ve purified our seasonings. I told you—if it’s still soy sauce, pour some on that fish and eat it.”

“Oh, I’m going to! Who cares if I turn a few sauces into water anyway? It’ll just highlight the other ingredients, and I’m sure it’ll be delicious!” She poured some water on her fish and munched it angrily.

"...So what do you have to say for yourself?"

".....I'll go buy some more soy sauce later, but for now maybe you could just hand me that salt..."

Aqua shook the salt over her fish with a dejected expression. Just then:

"Oh! What do you think you're doing?! That's my fish! Give that back, you little monster!"

Chomusuke had worked her way over and snatched the fish, leaving Aqua in a rage. She darted to my feet with the fish in her mouth before stealing a glance back at Aqua.

"She thinks I'm beneath her," Aqua said. "Kazuma, step aside. I'm going to show this nasty little ball of black fur what the hierarchy *really* is in this house!"

"Aw, geez, can't we even have breakfast in peace?"

Chomusuke gave a big yawn and started nibbling on the fish, at which point Aqua cocked an eyebrow and attacked her.

"Ow! I can't believe this magical creature! She's not even afraid to raise her claws against a goddess! Fine, we'll settle this here and— Agggh, that's hot!"

The scratching I understood, but I wasn't sure what was hot. I was sort of curious, but not curious enough to interrupt my breakfast to look at them.

"Kazuma, I can't believe this! She just breathed fire!"

"Hey, stop that! Don't shake me when I'm trying to drink miso soup! Bah, I've been telling you all along she could do that. She exhales flames to cook her fish."

I couldn't believe Aqua was just figuring this out. Aqua, meanwhile, was trying to get some distance from Chomusuke, apparently afraid of her now.

"I see," she said. "I knew from the moment I met her that this was no ordinary kitty, and now I'm sure of it! I see it; I can see it now...! Yes, I can make out her true form!" I just kept eating as Aqua stole little peeks at Chomusuke. "Your true form is... Yes, it's some terrible demonic creature! Don't fight—let me sniff you! The smell of demon can't hide from my goddess nose!"

I guess she wasn't too sure about that, though, because she kept looking at me.

"Hey, I have no idea what her true form is. Don't expect me to back you up."

"...It's weird. I got a good whiff, but I'm not picking up any demon scent on her. Why does she smell like soap? She's a *cat*." Aqua squatted down in front of Chomusuke, who was still working on Aqua's former breakfast, and started talking to her seriously. "Hey, I'll let you have that fish. Just tell me what you really are. I'll keep it a secret between us!"

"Uh, she doesn't like it when you mess with her while she's trying to eat..."

"Waaaaahhh! Stop, stop! I get it; I won't ask about your true form again! Just please don't chew on my divine feather cloak!"

My words of warning were completely ignored as Chomusuke attacked Aqua. I simply watched, mulling over this most ordinary of moments.

".....Ahhh, so peaceful."

"What's peaceful, you stupid NEET?! I'll share my side dish with you at dinner —just get this thing off me!"

Chapter 1

Divine Punishment for This Priest!



1

Seresdina: Dark Priest and general of the Demon King's army.

Normally, a former-NEET adventurer like me couldn't hope to beat her even if she had both hands tied behind her back. But at this moment, I was crouching in an abandoned field with the pitiful general who had been ousted by Wiz and then fleeced of all her money by Vanir.

Serena kept putting her pointer and middle fingers together and gesturing at me with them. She seemed annoyed that I didn't know what she was getting at.

"A cigarette, damn it, a cigarette. Surely, a guy with a reputation as bad as yours keeps a few on him, right? Give me one. I haven't had a smoke since I got to this town. I had to keep up the innocent act."

"N-no, sorry, I don't have any."

What even were cigarettes in this world? I doubted they had rolled cigarettes like in my world, so maybe she meant pipe tobacco or something. What was this girl anyway, a street punk? And why was I, a former shut-in, acting polite to someone like her? I wondered why I wasn't the same way with that other punk, Dust.

Serena looked at the ground and scratched her head angrily. Not a trace of

her pristine image remained. Finally, she heaved a sigh. “Guess there’s no point trying to hide it now... I’m Seresdina, general of the Demon King responsible for strategy and secret intelligence. I’m a Dark Priest who worships Regina, the Dark God of puppetry and revenge.”

“Even you call her a Dark God? I thought religious types usually believed their own god was absolute and everyone else was an evil heretic.”

Serena looked at me. Her face was nothing like before: She wore a neutral expression like a bleak, emotionless doll. She was still beautiful, but being ambushed by that look freaked me out.

...Y’know, I was feeling all right with Wiz and Vanir around, but now that I think about it, am I all alone with a general of the Demon King, without even some decent equipment to protect me?

Yikes! I might be in a pretty tight spot.

“I said she’s the god of puppetry and revenge, didn’t I? It doesn’t get any darker than that.” Grim as her words were, Serena gave me a perfectly pure smile. Now that I knew who and what she really was and that she served a deity who specialized in manipulation, her smile really did look like the sort of grin you might see carved on the face of a puppet. It had been so comforting when she was acting calm and sweet, but now it seemed completely out of place.

The knowledge that the woman in front of me could kill me on a whim made my blood run cold, but I tried to maintain an outward appearance of calm. “...So puppetry. Are you saying that, like, those zombies at the graveyard that Turn Undead didn’t work for...?”

“Oh yeah, that was me. Those weren’t zombies; they were my puppets. And let me tell you, it wasn’t easy, digging all those corpses up out of their graves one by one in the middle of the night. They were just ordinary bodies being controlled by the Dark God’s power. That’s why none of the other priests could do anything about them, leaving me to save the day... I pull that trick a lot; it’s a great way to get people in a new town to trust you quickly.”

This girl was bad news. I mean, maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised. She was a general of the Demon King.

"...So that whole story you gave me about the Demon King actually being a beautiful girl under a curse..."

"Huh? Wait, you actually believed that? I pull that story out anytime I see a capable adventurer who looks like they might try to fight the Demon King. You know, *you don't have to go through all the danger of slaying the Demon King; the curse will end in good time; the king will be gone, and peace will return to the land.* That's enough to get most would-be heroes to keep their hands to themselves. Nobody wants to go out and risk getting torn to shreds. Give them half an excuse to stay home, and they'll pick the path of least resistance."

Appealing to their sympathy, though—that was low. Even if someone persisted in chasing down the Demon King, they might hesitate at a crucial moment if they thought the enemy was really a sweet young woman in disguise.

I was actually sort of impressed. I guess you don't get to be head of the Demon King's intelligence service by playing nice. (*But give me back the emotions I wasted believing you!*)

"But why are you telling me all this? Sure, Vanir and Wiz let slip who you really are, but that's not necessarily a reason to let me into your inner circle or whatever..."

Serena's smile never faltered. "Aw, it would only make things harder if I kept lying. If we're going to negotiate, we should do it with all our cards on the table. I've seen what you get up to now, and I've got to say, I can't for the life of me imagine why the Demon King is so worried about you. Let me ask you straight-out, okay? You're just a NEET who wants nothing more than to never have to work again—am I right?"

"Completely," I said immediately.

"You don't have the slightest desire to risk your life fighting the Demon King for the sake of humanity, do you?"

"Of course not."

"And when you hear that people you don't know and have never met are suffering under the thumb of the Demon King's army, how do you feel?"

"Bad for them, but..." I answered, taking more interest in my ear wax than our current exchange.

"....." Serena looked at me, expressionless. I had given all my answers without a moment's hesitation. And even though her face was neutral, I couldn't shake the sense she was looking at me with scorn.

Truth be told, even back when I lived in Japan, if someone said to me that less fortunate children were doing this or suffering that, I never felt particularly indignant about it and never felt any special need to do anything. If I'd been given a ton of money back then, I don't think it would have occurred to me to use it to help kids I didn't even know who lived on the other side of the planet. But I didn't think I was monstrous or anything—just an ordinary Japanese person.

...I think.

...I'd *like* to think...

"...Um, I'm sure it's not just me... I bet most people say the same thing. So maybe you could stop looking at me like that?"

"Huh? Oh yeah, sorry. I've known people who gave similar answers, but you're the first to give them so quickly..." Serena's expression didn't change, but she sounded apologetic. "The king told me to investigate this town where his generals kept disappearing and the man whose name kept coming up in connection with the foiling of his schemes... But now I see it was just you in the middle of it all. And on top of that—"

"Hold on a second. I can't let you act like this is all my fault. I don't start these things; I get dragged into them."

"Yes, as I was going to say, on top of that, I understand your personality very well now," Serena said and smiled. "Kazuma Satou. Why not make a deal with the Demon King's army?"

"Oh?"

Serena stayed seated on the ground. "Let me be frank. Thanks to a certain someone, the long stalemate between the Demon King's army and humanity seems like it's about to come to an end. Quite a few of the king's generals have

been taken out, and the barrier around his castle will crack sooner rather than later.”

“Oh-ho. And am I correct in assuming this ‘certain someone’ is yours truly?”

“...Ah—ahem, yes, it’s you. Why are you puffing your chest out? Don’t act all proud of yourself.”

Serena could glare at me all she wanted, but I saw it now. I was sort of a big deal. “I get it. The Demon King and his army are in a tight spot. If that barrier comes down, Crimson Magic attack squads are going to be teleporting in day and night for hit-and-run attacks.”

“It’s true. I don’t mind saying we’re backed against a wall. But the same is true of humanity, is it not?”

...Huh?

“Up until recently, a series of overpowered brutes with weird names and no regard for common sense kept popping up out of nowhere. Each time we encountered them, they would send us home crying... But not long ago—maybe around the time our fortune-tellers sensed a particularly peculiar aura—those would-be heroes with the weird names suddenly stopped showing up.”

Would-be heroes with weird names and no common sense... That had to be people coming from Japan, like me.

Except I guess they’d stopped coming.

.....Oh.

“...? What? Don’t act like it suddenly all makes sense to you... H-hey, why do you look so freaked out? ...Oh, who cares? The point is, that’s why I want to make a little deal with you.”

Considering the timing, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I might have something to do with why the cheaters had stopped showing up. Was it because I’d brought Aqua to this world?

No, couldn’t be... They’d assigned an angel to take over her job. The angel had looked perfectly competent; I was sure they were doing fine work up there. This couldn’t be my fault, I insisted to myself, trying to keep up a calm front.

"Wh-what sort of deal?"

"Your voice is giving you away. Seriously, what's going on?" Serena said, bothered by the unnatural tremble in my tone. But it didn't stop her from saying, "I want you to join the Demon King's army."

She sounded casual, as if she was inviting me to check out the latest nightclub...

".....Huh?"

What did she just say?

"Don't 'huh' me. I said you should join the Demon King's army. I know you have more in common with us than you do with humanity."

Hey now, that was unfair.

"I can't have you misjudging me here," I said. "I'm sure your investigation has revealed that people call me monstrous, and awful, and a NEET, and a lolicon __"

"I hadn't heard about the lolicon thing actually."

I ignored Serena, clenching my fist emphatically as I went on. "It's true, I have a few more feelings than most... And yes, I have plenty of money, a lifelong spot reserved at my favorite dirty shop, and I would love to lead a cushy life being fawned over by my party members (who definitely have a thing for me). I do burn through money sometimes, and every now and then I think about renting out the entire Guild tavern for a day for no reason at all, just to show that I can and to make life harder for everyone else..."

"...You're an even worse person than I realized."

I raised my fist higher, letting passion take the wheel. "But even I have an ever-so-slight sense of justice. If someone I don't know and have never met is in trouble in a place I've never even seen, then I couldn't care less. But when someone right in front of me asks for my help, even I'm not terrible enough to ignore them. I can understand why you would want my power on your side. But even so, I can't stand against those who helped me get this far!"

"...Um, I don't remember saying we wanted your *power*..."

.....

"Wait, you weren't trying to get me to join you so you wouldn't have to face my fearsome strength anymore?"

"Hell no. I'd be perfectly happy just to leave you to your own devices. But remember what I said earlier? The guys with the weird names have stopped showing up." Serena stood suddenly, shoving her face right next to mine. "And those weirdos? Some people claim they were sent here by the gods."

Well, they were.

...Not that I was going to say anything.

"They'd been popping up like daisies, but then you got here, and suddenly they stopped. It's like the gods felt you and you alone were enough. The Demon King is convinced you're like one of the heroes from those old fairy tales."

So the cheaters stopped coming after I brought Aqua here with me, and at about the same time, my name started showing up in connection with the defeat of a lot of the Demon King's generals. I could see why that would put a person on guard against me. What a nasty mix-up, though.

"I don't have it in me to live my life at the Demon King's castle, surrounded by monsters," I said. "You tell His Majesty that I'm not that important. All those generals I trashed... Those victories were just the result of dumb luck. Luck is my *one* worthwhile stat, y'know. But I'm an Adventurer, the weakest class, so you let him know I'm totally freaked by the idea that he thinks I'm his enemy and ask him if he'll stop."

A small smile came over Serena's face. "I thought as much. And now I've seen it with my own eyes. The Demon King is the only one itching to get you into the army. The guy's just overthinking it... Are you sure, though? I think you'd find it very profitable to join up with us... Ah, I know. You're a virgin, right? If you join us, you can lead as dissolute a life as you want. It isn't lost on me that many of those Crimson Magic Clan women are easy on the eyes."

".....I.....I won't do it. Before, that offer might have swayed me, but I'm popular with the ladies these days. I-it'll take more than that to make me dance to your tune."

"What's with the hesitation in your voice?"

Curse this general of the Demon King...! I should have known she'd be an excellent negotiator! Anyone who lacked my iron will would have given in already.

"...Meh, doesn't matter. I'll let the king know that you're just a shrimp, not worth his time. That should stop him from paying so much attention to you. I'll even get his goons to stop bothering you."

"Thanks, that would be great!"

"Um...sure. But in exchange, you can't tell anyone who I am, not even your friends. And you can't interfere with the plan we're about to set in motion in this town. And as for your two little friends—especially Wiz—you can't let them know I'm planning anything. Not a word, you understand? Those are my terms."

I agonized about it for a moment but then said, "Grrr... You leave me no choice. My sense of justice and my goodness of heart rebel against it, but if we were to have an all-out battle right now, the town would only suffer..."

"Yeah, whatever. Point is, you'll take the deal, right? I knew you were a smart guy." Serena smiled quietly, then got up, brushed off her butt where she'd been sitting on the ground, and walked away lazily, leaving me there.

"...Erm. Sorry, but, um... Could you...lend me some change...?"

Without a word, I handed money to the general of the Demon King my colleagues had taken for all she was worth not long ago. "You owe me one."

".....Grrr..."

I was on my way home after talking to Serena, thinking hard about the future.

"A general of the Demon King, huh..."

I sort of had the sense that I was secretly betraying humanity, and everyone else, but at least I would be safe now. All right, so the adventurer part of me, the part that was used to fighting with monsters, wasn't sure how I felt about this, but it wasn't like I could do much fighting against her all by myself. Sure, I'd been involved in the downfall of a number of the Demon King's generals, but if I was being honest, for the most part, I'd only been giving directions to everyone

else.

It was Aqua who had weakened Beldia before I finished him off with Steal.

Megumin had taken care of Vanir with an explosion.

Hans? Darkness had protected Aqua while she purified the hot spring, and Megumin had exploded him, too. Sylvia actually got *more* powerful after I'd locked her in that underground shelter.

That lady Wolbach, Megumin had handled most of that...

Each of those situations turned out for the best, but it was never thanks to just me. The reason I'd accepted Serena's deal was because otherwise we would have fought right then and there. And if I tried to take on a general of the Demon King head-to-head, all by myself, I was sure I would be killed on the spot.

I was profoundly grateful that, being as weak as I was, I was finally free of the Demon King's attention.

"Heeey, I'm home!"

I was still letting my thoughts wander as I opened the door...

"Waaah! Waaaahhhhh!!"

"Come on. Stop crying already. Kazuma should be here s— Oh, Kazuma! Welcome back! Your timing is perfect..."

I didn't go inside. I just gently shut the door again.

It immediately flew open. "Hey, don't you shut that door! It's rough in here!" Darkness exclaimed.

I had a bad feeling about this, but nonetheless, I asked, "So what did you do this time?"

I obviously wasn't going to get anything out of Aqua, who was perched on the couch, sobbing, her feet bare. Megumin explained instead with a sigh. "I guess she went berserk at the Guild or something, and the other adventurers and the staff chased her out... I don't know exactly what she did, but she's not welcome there for a while."

...Maybe she really had changed the Guild's wine to water after I left.

Darkness elaborated. "When Megumin and I got back here after investigating that woman, Aqua was crying and clutching some kind of bill." An invoice for the wasted alcohol, maybe.

...Wait, *investigating*?

"By 'that woman,' do you mean Serena? Is that why you and Megumin have been going out every morning?"

"That's right!" Darkness said excitedly. "And just listen, Kazuma! There's something strange about her! I figured any priest powerful enough to take out that many undead must have a bit of a reputation, so I started working my connections for any information... But there's not so much as a rumor of a priest named Serena in any of the towns around here!"

Megumin stroked Aqua's head and picked up the story. "What's more, according to the Guild's employees, she hasn't redeemed a single reward. Not one—and no matter how good-hearted a priest someone is, they wouldn't go that far. But you have to show your Adventurer's Card to receive a reward... I'm starting to wonder if there's some reason she doesn't want to show anyone her card."

These two were normally blathering idiots, and this was when they chose to get sharp?

"I wish you would use those brains a little more often... But anyway, listen. Don't do any more investigating. Everything's settled. Serena's going to keep her distance from me, and she isn't going to ask to join our party anymore," I said.

Megumin and Darkness only looked at each other in amazement.

2

The next day.

"What a novel feeling, to go out—just the two of us. What do you want at the Guild, though? Planning to have something to eat at the tavern?"

I'd brought Darkness down to the Guild. We'd left Megumin at home to look after the still-fragile Aqua. Besides, even if push came to shove, she wouldn't be able to use her Explosion spell downtown. So it seemed better to have Darkness with me, but...

"What's with your outfit?"

Darkness wasn't wearing her armor, for once she had dressed up like the noble girl she was. Instead of her normal tight skirt—easy to move around in—she was wearing a white dress and long gloves. And instead of a weapon, she was carrying a parasol.

"What do you mean? You're the one who invited me. Everyone in town already knows who and what I am anyway. I've decided to turn over a new leaf." She looked at the ground, a little embarrassed.

"...All right, well, never mind." I didn't *think* it would escalate to a battle.

That's right: I was going to keep an eye on Serena. I didn't mention to Darkness that I'd made a deal with a general of the Demon King. With her strong sense of right and wrong, it would only complicate things. I hadn't told Aqua, either; she'd have been all too happy to go pick a fight with Serena if she knew the truth. And Megumin... Well, do you have to ask?

I'd made a deal with an agent of the Demon King in exchange for my personal safety. Even I thought that was pretty low, but if Serena got driven out of this town on top of all the other generals who had come here and disappeared, we would get the king's attention for sure.

This wasn't only about my safety. This entire town could be in serious danger.



Then again, I remembered what Serena had said to me. About not interfering in what she was doing here. That nagged at me, so I'd come hoping to check out what she was up to, but...

"I doubt any of you have heard the name of the great goddess Regina, but I promise she can be of immense benefit to you all. Lady Regina's power is the real thing. She can grant any number of wishes!"

"You mean it?! Could she help even me get a boyfriend?! I always have to sleep in the stables, so whenever I ask anyone but an adventurer to go out with me, he tells me, 'I dunno, you smell like horse...!'"

"She can; she certainly can. Bring me a lock of hair from the man you fancy. Lady Regina's power will turn it into a charm that will make the two of you fall madly in love."

"Oh, Serena, I need one of those! Make a charm for me, too!"

"Hey, wait your turn! I was here first!"

...What was this commotion about?

Serena was standing in the middle of the Guild Hall, the absolute center of attention. Her smile never slipped as she entertained the woes of the various adventurers around her.

"I can help you with any worry, any concern. That's what a priest does..."

"...Uh, um...! I can't seem to make any friends...! I came back here with my best friend, but she's been so busy lately... F-friends—! I wish for friends who will have dinner with me! I'm so lonely, eating all by myself...!"

"I'm afraid even the great Lady Regina's power might find that a little challenging..."

".....O-oh. Okay. Sorry to bother you..."

Serena was the very image of how a priest should act. Other than a certain Crimson Magic Clan member dejectedly walking away, she was solving the problems of virtually every adventurer there.

Darkness tugged on my sleeve, saying uneasily, "Hey, Kazuma, what's going

on here? Did you bring me all the way to the Guild to see *her*...?"

"...? Yeah, sure I did. We're here to keep an eye on Serena. I'm worried about what she's up to."

"Wh-why, you...! Yesterday, you said you'd talked things out with her! You were the one who ordered us not to keep investigating her! And I...! I got all dressed up, and now...!" Darkness stared at the ground, her voice going up octave by octave.

.....

"...You thought I was asking you out on a date?"

"N-no...! N-n-n-no, I didn't...!" Darkness was blushing furiously (it was pretty obvious what she really thought); meanwhile, Serena noticed me and beckoned me over. She led me straight to a corner of the tavern. The other adventurers, out of consideration, gave us some space, leaving Serena and me alone.

Serena was wearing her usual pasted-on smile. "Looks like you kept your end of the bargain and didn't tell anyone about me. I want you to understand something. This is for all your benefit, too, okay? I'm not a very good fighter, but I've still managed to become a general of the Demon King. Remember, the Dark God Regina's areas of expertise are puppetry and *revenge*. If my life ends, payback won't stop with the person who kills me; a curse will befall everyone around them, too. I'd say at least half the people in this town would end up cursed."

She sounded totally nonchalant about it. She seemed amused by the disturbed look on my face; she kept smiling and continued. "The curse could take on different forms for different people. Some might just result in a bit of bodily harm, but a few lucky individuals might be petrified or killed outright. And if anyone other than you finds out who I really am, I'll have no choice but to fight. Just think how many casualties that might produce, eh? Think *hard* about it and keep your promise."

I wondered why she was willing to speak so freely to me personally. And this stuff about a curse if she died... Could it be a bluff? Otherwise, she could have just said that up front, and nobody would have killed her.

My thoughts must have been showing on my face, because Serena held out a hand to me. “Try stabbing me with a dagger or something. Go on, try it. Ahem, gently might be best.”

...?

“What are you talking about? I can’t stab you in public. You’re not Aqua.” Nonetheless, instead of a knife, I grabbed a toothpick from the tabletop and poked Serena’s hand with it...

“Hrk?!“ The instant I did, pain coursed through my own hand. I looked at it and saw blood dribbling out of my palm. I had the exact same wound Serena did.

Wow... So this was the power of the god of revenge.

“And there you have it,” Serena said.

“...I like living a nice, *safe* life in this town. I won’t fight you, so whatever you’re planning, maybe you could leave Axel out of it and just head back to the Demon King’s castle?”

Serena didn’t say a word; she just kept smiling at me. I sighed and got up, going back to the table where Darkness was waiting...

“Sorry about that, Darkness.”

“Young Lady! Young Miss Lalatina, what in the world is this?! What is this adorable matronly outfit you’ve adopted, Young Miss?!”

“Awww, Lalatina, those frills look perfect on you! C’mon, don’t hide your face; let us see you!”

“Hey there, Young Lady, why are you turning red? You should be proud of your clothes!”

Darkness, in her fancy outfit, sat in her chair, red up to her ears; her hands were over her face, and her shoulders were shaking. All the other adventurers were ribbing her relentlessly about her look.

“Hey, don’t tease the young lady! This isn’t the zoo! Shoo, shoo!” I said, dispersing the crowd, but all the time, I was wondering what Serena was plotting.

"Hurry! Lady Serena will be talking!"

"Come quick, or we won't get to see her precious face!"

It was several days after my visit to the Guild. Aqua was allowed back in now, but meanwhile, the whole town had started to go a little...strange.

"This way! Lady Serena's sermon will be starting! C'mon—let's go!"

"Awww, wait! What's going on? *Lady Serena* this and *Lady Serena* that. What's wrong with everyone? She's just a priest..."

Serena's name seemed to be on everyone's lips. In no time at all, she had practically set herself up as the holy woman of Axel.

"...I don't get it. What happened to this town while I was sealed away at home?"

"'Sealed away' is way too cool a term for what happened to you, you shut-in. While you were under house arrest, Serena made herself the face of this town," I told Aqua, who was shocked to discover the vibe in Axel when she finally got out of the house.

"I don't know why, but something feels off about that woman. I guess I won't do or say anything to her, though, since you told me not to," Megumin mumbled, trotting along behind Aqua and me.

Even Darkness was in on it. "The things she's doing seem praiseworthy, but... I know it sounds strange, but I just don't like her somehow. I'm with Megumin, though. If you say to keep out of it, Kazuma, then I will. Your warnings always seem to be on target. I'm done ignoring the things you say."

...Gee, my heart kind of hurt. What would the two of them think if they knew I'd made a deal with a general of the Demon King in secret? Would they berate me? Maybe beat me up?

Much as I'd made that deal out of fear for my own precious little life, though, I'd had their safety in mind, too. Aqua in particular: If the Demon King found out she was a goddess, he would never leave her alone.

Yeah, staying out of it was the way to go. The four of us headed for the Guild.

“Lady Serena! Lady Serena!”

“Lady Serena, please grant my wish!”

“Very well, very well, there’s no need to shove. Wait your turn, everyone! Lady Regina can grant all your wishes, and she does so freely. Come on, now.”

“Thank you so much, Lady Serena! What I wish for is...”

There in the middle of the street was Serena, surrounded by a crowd of adventurers. She was like a pop singer being mobbed by fans. Aqua hid herself behind me when she saw it. I guess she’d finally developed an aversion to Serena after being outwitted so many times.

When Serena saw me, she gave a small, polite bow.

At that moment...

“Lady Serena! I’m so sorry to interrupt, but this man was injured on a hunt! Seriously injured...! Please, can’t you help him?!”

Two adventurers came rushing from the direction of the town gate, carrying a third on a stretcher. His wounds were obviously grave; his eyes were glazed over, and his breath was ragged. Then, in a barely audible voice, he whispered, “...qua... T-take me to...Aqua...”

I wasn’t the only one who heard him—Aqua picked right up on it. “I’m over here!” she said. “Just leave this to me; I’ll have those wounds healed up in no time!” Obviously pleased that someone was turning to her, she bounded toward the injured man, beaming...

...but for some reason, Serena’s crowd stopped her.

“Hey, what are you doing? Get out of my way! I’ll smite your front teeth right out! That man needs healing...”

As Aqua fumed and shouted, Serena knelt by the injured adventurer’s side. Then she intoned, “*Heal! Heal! Heal!!*”

Each time she invoked her spell, the adventurer’s wounds closed up further. Finally, the light came back into his eyes. “Oh... Ohhh...,” he said. “Thank you,

Lady Serena...!” Tears poured from his eyes—even though just a moment before, he’d specifically said he wanted Aqua to help him.

What was going on here?

Adventurers got their wounds healed with magic pretty much all the time. It wasn’t usually enough to bring on a crying fit. Heck, Aqua had literally brought people back from the dead, and you saw how they treated her. They were grateful and all, sure, but they were risking their lives fighting monsters. It was their job to stand up front and shield priests, so it was a priest’s job to heal the wounds they sustained doing it. It was only fair. No priest could take on a monster alone, but by the same token, no party would survive for long without a priest.

In other words, Serena had only done a priest’s most basic job. Not that a guy shouldn’t be grateful, but it wasn’t exceptional. At least, it shouldn’t have been...

The formerly wounded adventurer went over to Aqua and held out his hand. I could see scars still left on his skin. I guess Serena’s power hadn’t been enough to heal them. But when Aqua tried to fix them...

Smack.

The injured guy slapped away her hand.

“Wha—?” Aqua squeaked.

“I only want Lady Serena to heal me. Butt out and leave me alone,” the man said.

4

Aqua shuffled back to us, her shoulders slumped. I couldn’t help feeling a surge of anger as I watched her.

Everything about this moment felt wrong.

Darkness and Megumin were watching Serena’s hangers-on, conflicted. Serena was still smiling beatifically.

What was a general of the Demon King doing in a town full of weakling novices? What in the world was she planning?

If she'd been nice enough to do something obvious and easy to figure out, I might have been able to act much sooner. Then again, I could just do my usual thing and pretend not to notice what was going on. But that made my chest feel even tighter. It was an irritation, almost like a really annoying itch...

The people around Serena were completely obsessed with this priest who'd appeared out of the blue, almost as if something was controlling them. This goddess, Regina, was supposed to be in charge of puppetry and revenge. That's what Serena had said.

...Just a guess, but did puppetry literally mean controlling people?

While I racked my brain about this, Aqua came up beside me and gave Serena and her followers a venomous look, then turned away sadly. We'd been living in this town a pretty long time by this point. Even Aqua, whom many people had treated as a troublemaker at first, had become something of a Guild mascot by now. She always used to drop by to have a drink with the other adventurers when she had some downtime, but suddenly no one seemed to want to have anything to do with her anymore.

She was a goddess who always found some way to cause problems the moment I wasn't looking, then expected me to clean up her mess. She was a goddess who never listened, always did exactly what I said not to do, and meanwhile acted like a total diva. She was a goddess, it sometimes seemed, in name only, without a shred of holiness or even sweetness about her. She was the goddess who'd sent me to this world in the first place, dooming me to this life of eternal struggle. She did something to piss me off every single day, and she was also the one person in this world I'd known longer than any other—

...Arrrgh, dammit!

Seeing Aqua so subdued, the exact opposite of how she normally was, it just pissed me off!

Aqua was the one person of the opposite sex in whom I had zero possibility of romantic interest. No matter what kind of terrible thing happened to her, it was always her own fault, so I never paid much attention, and I sure didn't get all

upset.

So why was I feeling that way now?

...Dammit, maybe I should forget about my deal and just take a swing at Serena. But I was dealing with a general the Demon King had sent specifically to investigate this area. If I didn't let her get out of town safely, he and his army would really be on my tail.

Let's be honest: I would have been shaking in my boots if I tried to pick a fight with even a particularly mean-looking street punk. What would I do if the Demon King himself came after me?

At that moment...

Poomf! Someone clapped me on the shoulder.

"Kazuma. I don't know exactly what's going on or what has you so thoughtful, but whatever you did, I'm sure you did it with all of us in mind. I should say that's well, then. The choices you make always turn out all right in the end."

It was Megumin, but instead of making me feel better, her words only made me angrier.

"She's right. When you told us not to get involved with that woman, you must have had your reasons. So please... The one thing you shouldn't do is have any regrets. Follow your heart."

Knowing who and what Serena was, I could only take Darkness's words as further provocation. But then there was that thing about Serena having the power of revenge. She'd claimed that stopping her would put a curse on this town, but maybe Aqua could do something about that?

No, no, don't do anything rash. It was too dangerous a gamble; if things went poorly, I wouldn't be able to make them better with an *Oops, guess I messed up.*

Serena was human. Maybe we could catch her with Bind when she wasn't expecting it, then wrap her in a carpet and fling her in a dungeon or something. No, she might be only human, but she was still a general of the Demon King and a Dark Priest to boot. Even if we surprised her with Bind like Aqua had done

before, she could probably get right out of it.

Argggh, what was I supposed to do? I didn't even have anyone to talk to about this!

Maybe I should break my promise and ask Wiz or Vanir? But if Serena found out and cursed the town...!

Serena came over to me smiling, as if she had no idea how gloomy my thoughts were getting. Aqua flinched and hid behind me. Serena walked right past us, her entourage in tow.

But before she got out of earshot, she stopped and whispered so softly that only I could hear:

"You remember your deal, don't you? Don't forget that if you break your promise, disaster will befall this town. My..." She gave a little giggle. "You look like you're absolutely *agonized*. Hmm, you know, I do owe you for that money you loaned me. Tell you what: If you try to interfere with me all by yourself, without leaning on Vanir or Wiz and without telling anyone who I really am... If you can do that, then I won't hold the town hostage. I'll face you alone, as my pride as a general of the Demon King demands. But I know you. You're a coward and a realist, a man who knows on which side his bread is buttered. I'm sure I can trust you not to do anything so foolish, can't I?" Then she whispered, "With this, we're even."

She seemed to want to be especially emphatic about that. Then she smiled again and left me behind.

Ugh, this was *killing* me. I wasn't some sort of do-gooder, and looking out for number one was definitely my life philosophy. But I did have an attachment to this town.

...No, wait. Think. Don't do anything rash.

If I did something reckless at this moment, I could get the entire town in deep trouble. But wasn't the town already in deep trouble? What really bugged me was that I was the only one she'd told about her identity.

Dammit, what am I supposed to do...?! Why should I be saddled with the destiny of this entire town? Why should I have to sweat it out all by myself?

I was standing there with my fists clenched, immobile, when Megumin put her hand gently on my arm.

She was looking at me intently. I was sure she was about to say something, so I preempted her by asking, “Y-yeah, what is it?”

“.....”

But she still didn’t speak, just kept looking at me.

Then I felt a sensation on the other arm. “.....What, you too?”

“.....”

There was Darkness to my left.

“What’s with you two? If you’ve got something to say, then say it!”

I guess after all this time together, they knew when I was hiding something. And they probably guessed that there was some reason I couldn’t tell them what it was.

...Maybe I should just go ahead and do it. I’d faced plenty of big bads in my time. But I had always been forced into it by circumstances or dragged into it by someone else. And now I was thinking of challenging a general of the Demon King, on purpose, all by myself.

Normally, I would have had the others to back me up, plus Aqua as an insurance policy if the worst should happen. But if I went into this alone and died without anybody knowing... The thought was enough to make my knees tremble. This wasn’t like me.

Yeah—could I let a moment of emotion make me cross a Rubicon like that? Me, a member of the weakest class of all? If I could bring myself to just close my eyes for a little while, I could keep on living as a rich man, with everything just the way it had always been.

But what if there was one more thing?

One more thing that could push me over the edge...

Oops...

“What, even you? Come on—say something already...,” I declared to Aqua,

who had come up and was touching my back. I wished the three of them would stop staring at me with those pleading looks in their eyes...

“Kazuma, Kazuma.”

Unlike the others, Aqua spoke in a small voice. I looked back at her. Normally, she buzzed with energy, like she didn’t know the meaning of the word *depressed*. She never seemed to think too hard about anything; she knew how to make you feel like you shouldn’t have a care in the world.

Yet today, for some reason, she looked distraught; her eyes were full of anxiety. On the verge of tears, she said:

“...Does this town not need me anymore?”

.....

“Let go of me,” I said to the three of them.

“Oh...”

Megumin and Darkness didn’t look as upset as Aqua, and when I gave this brusque instruction, they didn’t even complain (very unusual) but just took their hands off me.

I turned to Aqua, who was looking at me like an abandoned puppy. “Give me your best magical buffs. Something to make me stronger and faster.”

Aqua didn’t seem to wonder why I was asking; she just obediently cast her magic on me. I wasn’t looking at any of them anymore. All I could seem to see was the enemy’s back up ahead. So I didn’t even know what expressions were on their faces as I said, “Hey, Aqua.”

“...? What?”

Without taking my eyes off Serena, I turned to Aqua. “I think I’m about to take some serious damage. I’ll probably pass out. So make sure you keep me healed up, all right? And, Darkness, when I’m out cold, I want you to take me to the police precinct. Megumin, Serena’s groupies might get a little upset, so I want you to threaten—I mean, calm them down.”

“Wh-what?” Darkness asked. “Kazuma, what are you talking about?!”

“Kazuma, what...? What are you planning to do?!”

Instead of answering, I crouched down like a runner on the blocks, getting ready for the starting shot. I focused on the woman in front of me, Serena, gradually getting farther away.

“Kazuma, what are you going to do? Tell us! I have a bad feeling about this for some reason...,” Aqua said.

“H-hold it, Kazuma! I don’t know what you’re planning, but...! I know I said you could do what you wanted, but as suspicious as that woman is, she hasn’t done anything illegal! We can’t just—”

Darkness was still talking behind me as I, magically buffed, went racing off toward Serena.

“K-Kazuma, I don’t know what you’re planning, but you’re awfully cool right now! My Crimson Magic heart is fluttering!”

My name is Kazuma Satou. A man who believes in gender equality so strongly that I don’t mind drop-kicking a woman in the face.

“Megumin, don’t get all excited! And, Kazuma, *wait...!*”

I could hear my friends, but I just kept running toward my target...

“Let’s both get some sleep tonight! Starting tomorrow, I *really* bring the hurt!”

Serena turned in surprise, and I drop-kicked her right in the face.

Chapter 2

Divine Punishment for This NEET, Too!



1

I was in a dark room.

"I'm not going to play nice forever. I'm going to ask you one more time, Master Satou. Am I to understand that yesterday, you dropkicked an innocent priest for absolutely no reason at all?"

"That is correct."

I gave my answer, promptly and without hesitation, for the umpteenth time. The brunette knight in front of me nodded, tugging at her bangs. "All right. So you saw a passing priest, couldn't stand her for some reason, and randomly felt an irresistible urge to dropkick her. But she sensed you coming and turned around, so instead you kicked her in the face—that's your story. It was a fit of rage, in other words. Is that what happened?"

"That's what happened."

The pen in the woman's hand snapped in half. ".....It just so happens that I investigated that priest just the other day on Lady Dustiness's orders, and

you're saying this is *completely* unrelated to that fact?"

"N-no relation whatsoever... I think..."

The woman tossed the bits of broken pen aside. Then she smacked the table between us, *bam!* "Do you take me for a fool?! We've done our homework on that priest, and we *know* things! You think your flimsy excuses will pass muster with us?!" She reached across the table and grabbed me by the lapels.

"Nooo, stop! This is an illegal interrogation using violence! I want my lawyer! I have the money! Call me a lawyer!" I tried to get away from the woman, but my hands were chained together. That slowed me down enough that she just grabbed me by the scruff of the neck instead.

"Master Satou, you may not think much of me, but I *am* a knight of Axel! I've been entrusted with running this police station! It hasn't escaped me that things have been strange in this town lately! You know something about it, don't you? People might consider you a villain, but even you don't go around kicking women in the face for no reason! In fact, you've made significant contributions to Axel in the past, and that means there must be something going on here! Now, out with it! I know you're hiding something! And I know *something* is going on in this town!"

"I s-swear I don't know anything! You may be a knight, but you're lower-ranked than Darkness, right? I'll tell on you! I'll tell her that during the interrogation, you sexually harassed me in ways I can't even begin to describe!"

"H-hey, that's fabrication; don't do that! Anyway, Lady Dustiness is a well-known public figure. I know you're in the same party, but I also know that even a word from you wouldn't be enough to get her to abuse her power like that. Sucks for you! Just you wait—I'm gonna go get a magical item that can detect lies!" she declared, grinning triumphantly down at me.

A-awww, no...!

Suddenly, a voice came from outside. "Pardon me, ma'am!"

The knight never looked away from me as she said, "What is it? I'm busy right now. Busy with a certain quibbling, equivocating little—"

"Erm... Lady Dustiness is here, ma'am..."

"?!"

Those hesitant words were all it took: The knight let go of me immediately.

I was in the interrogation room of the town's police station. That was where you tend to end up when you kick someone right out in front of a big crowd.

I guess attacks really did rebound off Serena, because the moment I'd hit her with the dropkick, I felt a tremendous pain and lost consciousness. Aqua must have healed me or something, though, because now I didn't feel any pain and didn't have so much as a bruise.

Which brought us to this moment. The woman knight who was apparently the captain of this police station had been personally interrogating me, but now...

"What is Lady Dustiness doing here? I'll see her when I'm done with this guy. I'm sure he's hiding something. Master Satou has been quite a benefactor to our town in his own way. I think a brief detention should suffice. Tell Lady Dustiness that I'll get in touch with her when I have something to report." The woman didn't even look at the door of the interrogation chamber as she spoke.

This was bad...

I couldn't say a word about Serena. I especially couldn't tell Darkness or this hardheaded knight lady. I'd been planning to ask Darkness to spring me from jail, but I knew how much she hated anything that seemed even slightly shady. Given that I couldn't tell her what was supposedly going on, the chances of her helping me seemed slim to none...

Then the guy at the door started to sound very uncomfortable.

"A-about that..."

"Yes, what?" The woman finally looked angrily in his direction, only to discover...

"Ah, hello, sorry to barge in on you. I made him let me in."

Standing behind the guy at the door was Darkness.

The man bowed and left, while the knight saluted the moment she saw Darkness. I took that as my opportunity to shout, "Lady Lalatina!"

"D-don't call me that!" Darkness shot back. But then she composed herself and said, "Sorry. Ahem, how's it going? Did you get anything out of him?"

The knight straightened up and replied, "Ma'am! I'm certain he knows something, but his excuse and alleged motivation change every time I ask. One moment he did it because he wanted money, while the next it was because he was angry with her, and another time he swears he regretted his actions... Just give me a bit more time, ma'am, and I promise you I'll wring the truth out of him!"

Darkness looked directly at me. "Kazuma," she said. "Does this mean you can't even tell Megumin, Aqua, or me about that woman's secret?"

I nodded silently.

Darkness didn't say anything for a moment. Then she asked, "Will something bad happen if you tell anyone? Should I take this to mean that you're going to resolve this situation on your own? ...If you're unable to answer, you're welcome to simply stay silent."

"....."

I took her up on that and didn't say anything; Darkness studied me intently. Finally, she looked away from me, glancing at the knight, before scratching her cheek with distinct embarrassment. Finally, she said apologetically, "Erm... How about it? Do you think you could let him off as a favor to me? I mean, in light of all his fine work, maybe we could consider this a quarrel between adventurers..."

"Huh? ...Erm... Well. A-are you really serious, Lady Dustiness? No formal complaint has been filed, so I guess it's all right, but... Are you really doing this? I know how you hate to use your privilege this way." The woman looked from me to Darkness and back, as reluctant as she was surprised. Finally, she handed Darkness the key to my cuffs, still looking a little shocked. For that matter, I was probably looking at Darkness the same way. This was the woman who hadn't even been willing to throw her weight around when she'd practically had to sell herself to the local governor, and here she was getting me out of jail. She really had changed...

Darkness didn't seem bothered by the way the knight and I were looking at

her. "Kazuma, you don't have to say anything. I'll leave everything else to you. But at least let me clean up after you. What I mean is...you can rely on me, at least at a moment like this."

"Oh, my dear, sweet Lady Dustiness!"

"H-hey, get off me! Hold still, or I won't be able to undo your handcuffs!"

Darkness—hardheaded Darkness. The same Darkness who was obsessed with rules and her "duty as a human being" and so on. She'd put all that aside to help me because she trusted me. It made me so happy, I practically flung myself at her, clanking chains and all. She didn't resist. She just awkwardly tried to undo the locks.

The lady knight watched us, looking a bit shell-shocked. "Ah— Ahem... Lady Dustiness, could it be that you and Master Satou aren't...*just* party members...?" She almost sounded scared to hear the answer.

Darkness blushed a little but managed to put on a straight face as she undid my bindings. "...No, we're just party members. Isn't that right, Kazuma?"

"Yeah...I guess."

Darkness looked relieved to hear that, yet somehow a little bit sad at the same time.

The knight looked even gladder to hear it. "Y-yes, of course... Lady Dustiness, you're an object of adoration for all single female knights who pride themselves on their own clarity and discipline. I should have known there was no way you'd be involved with a man of such low repute...and a commoner, to boot... I see, just party members. Of course..."

.....

"Yes, absolutely, just party members. And we do all the things party members do: bathe together, huddle up in tight spaces with each other, help each other get our underpants off so we can use the toilet... Let's see, what else... There was that time I snuck into Darkness's house and almost had my way with her, and the time she snuck into my bed and almost had her way with me... Oh yeah, and let's not forget about the sedative-laced wine. Yeah, I think that about sums up our relationship."

“...?!”

“Wh-wh-wha—?! That’s not— This i-isn’t what it—!”

The knight stood with a dazed expression on her face as Darkness started to panic.

“D-d-d-did you two really...?! No, I understand! You’re comrades! You were just playing around, simply teasing each other; isn’t that right, Lady Dustiness?”

“Y-y-y-yes, that’s it exactly! That’s all it was...!”

The knight seemed really fixated on this for some reason, and Darkness was just about losing it. I looked at them, rubbing my wrists where the handcuffs had held me. “She also kissed me.”

““?!””

The knight stood there red-faced, her mouth flapping open and closed. Darkness, blushing up to her ears, buried her face in my back and just about collapsed.

Once I was safely out of the police station, Darkness gave me a piece of her mind. “I can’t believe you. I absolutely cannot believe you! Just look at this! Now the other nobles and knights are going to be gossiping about me! The next time you get arrested, don’t expect me to help..... Partly because I can never show my face there again...!”

“Tell me one thing I said that was untrue.”

That earned me a hard glare from Darkness, who was still red in the face. But she was looking a little chastened, too; she wasn’t really angry anymore. Realizing she wasn’t as upset as I thought she was, I decided to push my luck.

“Hey, Darkness. I have a favor to ask...”

2

“Please, there’s no need to feel any embarrassment when you speak to me. You may share any worry, any concern... Ah, my dear Kazuma, hello.”

“Yo, Serena. You can drop the ‘dear Kazuma’ stuff. Just my name is fine.”

In a corner of the Guild, Serena was offering her hand to a fretting adventurer. She greeted me with a smile when I showed up, and I smiled right back at her.

I'd asked Darkness to stay in the house for a while and to keep Megumin and Aqua with her. And to ask Aqua to put up an extra spirit barrier around the mansion. Finally, I'd asked her to tell everyone I wouldn't be back for a while.

Serena talked to me as calmly as if I hadn't attacked her just the day before. Likewise, I kept up my smile as though everything was copacetic...

"I see you're still helping out worried and wayward adventurers. Must be a tough gig. Want me to lend a hand?"

"Oh, my dear Kazuma, you needn't go out of your way on my account; I know how busy you are. You should take that strength of yours and go on a monster hunt or the like instead."

It was ordinary, unremarkable banter, but for some reason, the crowd of adventurers around Serena looked uneasy. A lot of them had been there when I kicked her.

Even though she had flat-out rejected me, I sat down not far away from her and her groupies. Serena started shooting me anxious glances. In the end, though, she got herself back under control. "My apologies," she said to the adventurer who had come to her. "Would you be so kind as to tell me what's on your mind?"

The adventurer who had waited patiently all through our conversation smiled. Then he hesitated for a second before saying, "Erm... I just can't seem to get a girl to go out with me. I'm pretty good friends with some people of the opposite sex, and sometimes they say, 'You're a really nice person.' That's great and all, but later on, when I ask if they'd go out with me, then they flat-out reject me..."

Yeah, I'd heard that one before. I was counting the knots in the wood of the table, pretending not to be interested; Serena managed to smile at the adventurer even though she seemed concerned about what I was doing.

"To be called a nice person is the greatest of compliments. A cool person may find their attractiveness fades with time, but a nice person will remain

attractive no matter how old they get. Please continue to be nice. I think the fact that so many people have told you the same thing shows just how attractive you are. It's too soon to worry about it or let it get you down. I'm certain you'll find someone who'll love you..."

Her words were so comforting, and her smile was so gentle. It didn't seem like she bothered using the power of her evil god to deal with small concerns like this.

The guy started to look a little more cheerful. "Y-yeah, you're right...! I was getting a little depressed because they always turned me down the exact same way... But thanks to you, I'm starting to feel better! Oh, Serena, thank you so m
—"

"If you think he's so great, why don't you go out with him, Serena?"

The adventurer hadn't quite finished his expression of gratitude before I unleashed a few reckless words of my own. Serena's groupies froze. The guy who'd been pouring his heart out to her slowly looked at me. His face suggested the thought hadn't even occurred to him, but also that it made him a little uneasy.

I decided to give him another push. Heck, I could help a person out every once in a while, too. Yeah, they called me a devil or heartless or whatever, but when someone was suffering right in front of me...

"You heard Serena. She thinks you're really attractive. She put the ball in your court. Now it's time to man up and make the next move! The reason you kept getting shot down was so that you could get together with Serena at this very moment!"

"W-wow, really?! O-okay, here goes... My dear Serena—!"

She cut him off before he even got around to asking her out. "Y-you're a very nice person, but I'm just not sure..."

He yelped and was about to run away, but I grabbed his hand. "You can't just give up, man! Women are tough! You can't take what they say at face value. You have to read between the lines! Haven't you ever heard of a *tsundere*?"

"Tsun...dere...?"

"U-um, excuse me..." Serena spoke up anxiously, starting to sweat.

"Haven't you heard that girls pretend to hate what they really love?"

"Y-you know, I *have* heard of that! I see, so that's what's going on here...!"

"Just a second...!"

Taking my encouragement to heart, the adventurer grabbed Serena's hand.
"My dear Serena! I— I—!"

"Stop, calm down a second...! Grrr, you filthy... I mean, m-my dear Kazuma, please...!"

I heard Serena from behind me. I was leaving to go find somewhere that could serve as a base for my harm-prevention activities, starting tomorrow.

3

It had been several days since I was released from police custody. I saw Serena and a few of her followers emerging from a particular dining establishment, looking around vigilantly. They were probably on guard against the harassment that someone or something had been inflicting on them over the past several days.

One of the adventurers—who had all pretty much gone from groupies to full-fledged, damn near religious devotees by now—said something to Serena. I picked it up with my Lip Reading skill: "It's all right, Lady Serena. I don't see anyone around."

I watched her and her friends carefully.

"Wind: perfect. Distance: perfect. Angle: perfect."

Positioned at the top of a distant building, I had them right where I wanted them. What was I doing at that moment? I was standing there with an arrow in my bow, taking aim at them with my Second Sight skill. From this distance, I could see them, but they couldn't see me. Admittedly, Serena would probably have a pretty good guess as to who had attacked her.

If I aimed for the head, I was certain to die along with her. And if all her

threats were true, I might also call down a terrible curse on everyone around us. But Serena was holding a cup of something, presumably whatever she'd gotten at the restaurant they'd just left. I didn't know what was in it—probably cold juice or coffee or something.

Perfect.

I'd shaved down the end of the arrow to round it off, so that even if it hit Serena, the wound wouldn't be fatal. I wasn't here for an assassination. No, my aim was...

"*Deadeye!*" *Pyoo!* The arrow went streaking through the air. Straight for—"Hrrgh! Eeeyow! She shouldn't drink her coffee so hot!" I exclaimed, falling to the ground, unable to bear the burning pain that assaulted my hand. I took another look at Serena with Second Sight, and I could see her waving her hand vigorously, trying to shake off the hot drink; my arrow had gone clean through the cup.

...Dammit. So this was no good, either. I got myself together and stood up, resuming my observation of Serena.

I'd learned a few things over the several days I spent harassing this woman. For one, doing damage to her indirectly, by setting a trap of some kind, still hurt me. I didn't have to attack her personally; even something like the burns inflicted from the coffee I'd spilled on her came back at me. If only indirect stuff had been safe... I'd been planning on buying a certain potion at Wiz's shop—one that exploded on impact...

Serena was healing her own hand and looking around. I didn't think she would see me, but just in case, I thought maybe I should activate Ambush and make myself scarce...

Something else I had learned about Serena's powers.

"U-um, Kazuma...? Erm, I know you said you wanted my help with something, but...it wouldn't happen to be illegal, would it...?"

Namely, that the change in the adventurers' attitudes clearly had something to do with those powers. There were all kinds who followed her around calling her "Lady Serena." But the one thing they had in common was that the most

fervent of them had been deeply involved with her.

"Well, I guess the act itself isn't exactly praiseworthy. But, Yunyun, I'm begging you, don't tell Megumin or anyone else. You're the only one I can count on."

"I'll do it. I'll *so* do it. I'll help you. We're friends, after all; you can leave it to me. Rely on me all you want!"



Yunyun must have been really happy to have someone counting on her, because she was suddenly all for it.

The time? Midnight. Despite the outrageousness of my request, Yunyun—who had been asking Serena for advice not that long ago—was here, helping me without a second thought.

Yunyun had gone to Serena just like so many other adventurers, but she had escaped unscathed. Why was it that she had been able to come into contact with Serena safely, if it wasn't simply that the Dark God of puppetry didn't want anything to do with her?

Yunyun and I were just outside the small room where Serena slept, a sturdy redoubt without so much as a window. Her followers had set up the place for her after some ne'er-do-well had started subjecting her to random attacks.

With Yunyun in tow, I began setting up shop outside the room. At my signal, Yunyun nodded, then began quietly intoning a magic spell. It was a favorite of the Crimson Magic Clan, a spell that bent light. That's right: It could make you invisible.

When Yunyun had put the spell around us, she said quietly, “Is that good, Kazuma? Now I just have to put silencing magic near the door to suppress sound, right? You know, things have been awfully strange around town lately. It wouldn't have anything to do with what you're doing, would it?”

“It sure does. I know our activities seem a little, um...criminal...but believe me, it's secretly to save the town, so don't worry. By the way, you can't tell anyone about tonight.”

“.....Sure.”

“Oops...!”

Yunyun's eyes started to brim because she knew she didn't have anyone to tell. I tried to comfort the forlorn girl as I prepared my own magic. Tonight's job was going to take a lot of MP. That's why I had bought a stone called manatite at Wiz's shop before I came here. The price of a chunk of manatite could go through the roof depending on the size and purity of the rock, so I'd just bought a few mid-range examples. It was cold enough at night that I didn't think it

melting would be a problem before morning.

Then I reached out toward the little shed...!

After I'd caught a few winks, I took a leisurely stroll past the shed again. I could hear muffled shouting from inside like somebody trying to endure something, along with some pounding on the door.

"Don't worry, Lady Serena. I'll do something about this thick, thick ice! Just hold on a few minutes!"

"I told you we should have gotten a proper room at the inn with a guard and everything! It would have had a toilet!"

"And how were we supposed to afford that?! Lady Serena, try to hold it in just a little longer! Hey, haven't you boiled any water yet?! Or found a wizard who can use fire magic or at least gotten my hammer or something?!"

"No hammer's gonna crack this! I don't know what twisted bastard did this, but he froze the locks solid! Arrrgh, what do we do...?!"

After I'd had Yunyun make me invisible, I'd spent most of the night using Create Water and Freeze to encase the door of the small building in ice.

Despite all this, though, one thing I still didn't understand was what Serena was after. What was the point of producing a bunch of hypnotized puppets in a town full of novice adventurers? I contemplated her possible motives as I watched the stuff on the door melt, munching on an ice treat I'd gotten from a street stall.

A few more days passed.

I touched base with Darkness, but nothing much was going on, other than that Megumin had started launching her daily explosions up into the air, since she couldn't leave the house, and Aqua was becoming increasingly annoying about her desire to go outside.

I'd worried that Serena might give up trying to target me and go for the other members of my household instead, but so far, she seemed to be sticking to our deal. I thought it all over as I silently set up my next trap.

I could see Serena growing weaker day by day. And the nasty rumor I'd

started about her a couple of days ago obviously had an effect.

"S-so here you are, my dear Kazuma...! I-I-I've b-been looking all over for you... I r-really have, you know that?"

As I was working away, a voice filled with barely restrained rage came from behind me. Given how she sounded, it was hard to believe she was still being as polite as she was, but anyway, I turned around and gave her a friendly wave. "Sup, Serena? Haven't seen you for a while. What's with the look? You'll scare off all your friends making a face like that."

I was out behind the inn I'd rented as my base of operations. Normally, it would be full of adventurers practicing their sword strokes after sleeping in the stables, washing their armor, or keeping up their equipment, and so on and so forth. But today there didn't seem to be many guests, and I had the place to myself.

Serena managed to give me a smile, although her lips kept twitching. "Yes, quite a while indeed... Say, what are you doing there?" she asked when she saw what I was fiddling around with in the garden.

"Don't you know about the balloons Wiz stocks in her shop? This thing here, it's called a water balloon—it's essentially a rubber pouch that expands when you fill it up with water. But me, I'm filling this one with glue and paint..."

"Stop that! Don't— I mean, I'm sure I have no idea what you intend to do with that, but if you plan to do some kind of mischief with it, well, two can play at that game." She took a step back. Her followers, a few of whom had come with her, stepped forward instead.

"Hey, what are you playing at?" I said.

"I can't imagine what you mean... But you listen: I've had it up to here with you. These people are almost completely my puppets. I've got them eating out of the palm of my hand. If I told them to kill you, they'd do so without a second thought... I can see I've underestimated you. I've been taking you too lightly. I have to say, I'm quite impressed that you managed to push me this far...! Oh, you've pushed me, all right!!"

This was bad. There was no one around but us. Serena had a smile on her

face, but her eyes were cold. Crap... Did I overdo it?

But I said, "Hey, *you're* the one who told me to try to stop you if I thought I could do it on my own. You said you would face me fair and square. And there's nothing fair about a bunch of you taking on one poor, weak adventurer..."

"Oh, just *shut the hell up!*" Serena exploded. This was definitely bad. "I c-c-c-can't believe you would—! How dare you spread those ugly, nasty, unpleasant rumors about me!" She looked at me with bloodshot eyes.

"H-hold on, now! I kept my end of the bargain! I didn't tell anyone your secret! So who cares what rumors I paid some punk adventurers to spread around?"

"How could I *not* care?! How could you tell everyone I'm actually a man?! Do you really believe that? And the way you made it sound more true by mixing in little bits of fact, like that I sometimes talk brusquely! Dammit, I can't tell you how many people came trying to find out if it was true! And some of them even... They dared say that...that they *wished* the rumor was true...! I don't know what's wrong with this town! But *you*...you I'm going to kill!!"

Staring at me wild-eyed, Serena raised her hands and started to intone a magic spell...! I noticed some old guy walking by, so I shouted: "Hey, that passerby is watching you!"

"Grrr...! O-oh, good morning, sir. Fine weather we're having, isn't it?"

Ah, Lady Serena, the holy cleric. I guess she knew the guy. She started up some innocuous chatter with him; meanwhile, her entourage stared vacantly into the middle distance. I guess their puppet-ification was really serious.

I was in a bad spot. I'd managed to seriously piss off a general of the Demon King. She'd said she was with his intelligence forces, so I had assumed she would be a more cerebral fighter. I'd underestimated her willingness to get physical right in the middle of town.

Now what? I was facing both Serena and her entourage. I was way out of my league. They'd probably kill me instantly.

Serena was wrapping up her conversation, and the old man was getting ready to walk away.

"All right, please let me grant you a magical blessing to protect you today..."

"Ahhh, I'd sure appreciate that."

Could I make a run for the police station? No, even with my Flee skill, there was a good chance Serena and her goons would catch me if she boosted them with support buffs.

Serena took a classic prayer pose, bringing her hands together at chest level.

And I saw my chance!

"A blessing, then, for your good health and safety this day..."

"Wind Breath!!"

Just as Serena was about to cast her spell, I whipped my hand upward as if I was trying to flip up her skirt, activating my wind magic at an upward angle.

Serena found her robe flipped right over her head. The long skirt that normally seemed so modest was a complete liability now. When I was sure the skirt was good and tangled around her head, I grabbed the wire at my hip and took aim...!

"Bind!!"

"Hey!" cried a muffled voice from under the skirt.



My skill tied Serena up, tangled robe and all. Normally, this would have been just a gimmick to buy time, but today...!

“Lady Serena?!”

“L-Lady Serena!”

“Lady Serena’s been tied up like a ham!”

One look at the hog-tied Serena was enough to bring her near-totally-puppeted adventurers back to their senses.

“O-oh, thank you...! I give thanks to thee, O pure and holy hindquarters...!” The passerby who’d been chatting with Serena dropped to his knees and started worshipping her underwear-clad behind.

“Hey...! Hold on...! Stop it!” Serena struggled under her dress, but I’d used special wire intended for big game. She might be a general, but she was also a human, and she wasn’t going to break out of that thing.

“Oh no! Her b-b-butt! Lady Serena’s sacred butt is exposed...!”

“Quick, hide it, hide it! Form up and keep her out of sight! Everyone, make a human wall!”

“Lady Serena, she...she actually wears black underwear...! I can’t believe my eyes...!”

For some reason, the adventurers, who had half come back to reality, still tried desperately to hide Serena’s exposed lower body. Serena, it appeared, lacked Aqua’s power and couldn’t undo my Bind magic. She also appeared to be out of patience for pretending to be nice, because she started shouting from the other side of her dress: “Damn you, Kazuma Satou! You’ll pay for this! Don’t think you won’t! When this Bind ends, I’ll—”

I didn’t know what she would do, but I was pretty terrified by the idea, so I decided to take countermeasures. I drew in a deep, deep breath. And then, in a voice you could hear from anywhere in town, I shouted:

“Oh nooooooooooo! The holy and famous cleric Lady Serena is here with her butt exposed for all to see!!”

“S-s-stop that!!”

4

“Master Satou, you’re back.”

“Yes, Miss Chief of Police, I am.”

I looked at the female knight across a small desk.

Yep: I was being interrogated once again.

As the perpetrator of the Great Serena Panties Unveiling, I’d been hauled back to the police station. Maybe it hadn’t been the right choice, causing a spectacle like that. Serena’s followers hadn’t been able to cover her, and my extremely vigorous Bind had kept her tied up for quite a while. My shouting had drawn a crowd, and some people had even started drinking right there in the street with Serena’s butt for company.

The commotion also attracted the police, leading to my being arrested...again.

In the cramped room at the police station, the knight gave a sigh. “Master Satou, let me be frank. You’re an immense headache.”

“Hey, you think you’re the only one who’s got it rough here?”

After my arrest, the police had visited Darkness, but she’d refused to vouch for me again. I guess making fun of her in front of this knight the last time around was turning out to have been a catastrophic choice.

“This time that priest did file a formal complaint. We can’t just turn you loose again, even as close to Lady Dustiness as you are. You’d need someone pretty influential to serve as your guarantor...”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

I felt bad leaning on Darkness all the time. And besides, even if she vouched for me, I was likely to just get myself arrested again pretty soon.

The lady knight sighed again, a deep, long sigh. She leaned on the table, then suddenly did a one-eighty from her stolid, serious demeanor. She started tearing at her hair. “Arrrgh, I can’t believe you! I just can’t! Why did you just let

them take you? You wouldn't have had to fight that hard to get away from our officers!"

"Uhhh, Chief, are you sure you should be saying that?"

Suddenly, she looked at me. "What *is* it about that woman anyway? Everyone who saw her underwear turned into a raving fanatic for her. I know she comports herself well. In this town full of absolute weirdos, she's the rare decent person with common sense... But she gains followers too quickly. Is that what's going on? Is it the underwear? Do people become believers because she promises to show them her underpants? Can a glimpse of some panties convince even the most hard-hearted to follow her? In this line of work, I've learned from experience how twisted the residents of this town can be, but still...even I can't believe...!"

.....?!

"Did you just say everyone became her followers? Just by seeing her panties? I mean, heck, I'd love to be part of a religion where the priestesses show you their underwear, but..."

Something felt really strange about this. The men of this town had been well trained by the succubi's services, and now a quick glimpse of Serena's underpants was causing them to lose their minds? Sure, they might say thank you for showing them such a beautiful thing, but it shouldn't be enough to make religious followers of them.

Thank you.

Why did those words nag at me? There was something about serving the god of revenge. Those people who followed Serena around—that guy she'd healed up was one of them. I could see how you might become a believer if someone had brought you back from the brink of death like that. But Aqua had healed people in even worse shape. She resurrected people practically on a daily basis. So why wasn't anyone worshipping her?

Man... I felt like I was *this* close to the truth. Yunyun, who'd asked Serena for advice but had left disappointed, was still sane. But the people who had seen her underwear when I left her exposed were all fervent believers now.

That had to mean...!

"Master Satou! Don't just stare into space—give me an answer! Tell me the woman's secret! Out with it!"

...Oops. There it went.

"Aaarrrrrghhhh! Why did you *do* that?! I was so close to figuring it all out, and you had to come butting in, you spinster knight!"

"How dare you say that! You said what should never be said! We female knights don't stay single because we *like* being alone! We know that having kids would impinge on our ability to do our duty, so we have to wait, hoping that some wonderful man will come along who will understand that and support us by— Don't you cover your ears, Master Satou! Listen to me! And if you're so upset about me being a spinster, maybe you could introduce me to some nice friend of yours...!"

The lady howled and shook the desk, but I tried to block her out and focus on my thoughts. Serena's powers of puppetry seemed to hinge on the creation of a debt or someone having feelings of gratitude toward her.

So how would you go about breaking that spell? Getting Aqua involved might be the quickest way, but if Serena found out who Aqua really was, we could find ourselves cornered, and I didn't want that.

But anyway, before I could take the time to worry about all that...

"Master Satou! I don't care if he has a trash personality; I just want him to have a decent income and...housework. I want a husband who can do some chores around the house! And he has to say *I love you* to me at least once a day...!"

"Hey, Chief, slow down a minute."

"What?" The lady knight, busy running her mouth about one weird thing or other, looked at me, annoyed for some reason.

"I've got a favor to ask. I want to send a letter as quickly as possible. Money's no object. I just need to get in touch with a friend of mine at the capital."

"Okay, Master Satou, please take care! If you ever have any trouble, just let me know!"

"Y-yeah, sure... Th-thanks..."

It was the day after I sent the letter. The chief of police, who'd had a complete attitude adjustment, snapped off a salute to me as refined as the one she'd given Darkness not long before. I guess she'd started to think of me as being as important as any noble.

In any event, I got her to send the letter I'd jotted down to a couple of ladies I knew in the capital...

"I never imagined that you were so close not just to Lady Dustiness but even to the Sinfonia family. And to receive explicit orders in a handwritten note from Lady Claire herself. Not to be rude to you... I've never heard of her doing such a thing before."

I had written to Claire and Lain, two women who served as Iris's bodyguards. The moment their responses arrived, all the sass vanished from the lady knight's attitude.

Now she was rubbing her hands and smiling at me. "When Mistress Lain came rushing in here clutching Lady Claire's letter and crying, I had no idea what could be going on. Ooh, Master Satou, you big womanizer! As if Lady Dustiness wasn't enough for you, you've even got Lady Claire and Mistress Lain wrapped around your little finger...!"

"Uh, I mean, well... You've got it all wrong, but okay..."

What was she trying to say about me? This lady seemed to think I was intimate with Claire and Lain, too. In my letter, I simply said that I'd gotten my memory back and that I wanted to come thank them in person the second I had the chance. I added a postscript stating that at the moment I was in just a little bit of a pickle, and if they could give me their personal endorsement, that would be great.

When the officer who was sent with the message had explained to them what

was happening to me, apparently Claire and Lain both immediately agreed to be my guarantors.

"...Hey, where are my two saviors anyway? I'd like to say hi to them."

"Lady Claire reports that starting today, she's going to be taking a vacation far away in a very well-hidden summer home, so even if you go to the capital, you absolutely won't see her. As for Mistress Lain, after instructing us to free you and signing her and Lady Claire's names as your guarantors, she immediately teleported away."

Gosh, how frightened were they of me?

Anyway, the knight showed me out of the police station. Every cop we passed stood perfectly straight and still, saluting us.

The knight clasped her hands behind herself and smiled, tilting her head slightly. "Master Satou," she said. "I think we could manage to look the other way if a little trouble was to occur in this town. So please, investigate or harass that priest just as much as you wish!"

"Erm, y-yeah, thanks..." Was this town really safe? This knight or noble or whoever she was was very easy to read... "After everything you said about idolizing Darkness, I guess I thought maybe you'd be a little more of a straight arrow..."

"What the rest of us idolize and find extremely cool is that such a prominent noble, who must have her pick of the litter when it comes to handsome men, nonetheless persists in remaining single. It's extremely heartening to those of us who are still alone... That reminds me. Master Satou, I see now what an excellent person you are, with a strong reputation and, as I recall, even your own mansion. And you've accumulated enough wealth that it might well be called a fortune, yes?"

"I...I guess?"

.....

"I'm twenty-three, single, remarkably loyal, told that I look amazing naked, and Aloerina is my n—"

"Okay, see ya! I really owe you; I promise I'll pay you back one day!"

I had a really bad feeling about this, so I hurried to get myself out of the police station.

Outside, fresh from my extremely cordial send-off from the station, I found the light blinding. My eyes must have been used to the gloom of the detention area. There was someone standing there, but with my fuzzy vision, I couldn't tell who. Then I made out the bright blue hair shimmering in the morning light and a light-blue feather cloak that gave off a pleasant vibe.

It was Aqua, whom I hadn't seen in so long, standing there with her arms open wide and a sweet, welcoming smile on her face. She looked like she was greeting a long-lost friend who'd finally come back home.

"Kazuma, welcome home! You've done amazing work!"

I thought I'd told her to stay in the house... Why couldn't she listen to what a guy said even once?

All right, to be fair, I wasn't completely unhappy. She might not have known exactly what was going on, but even though she'd been warned it was dangerous for her to be outside, she'd still come to meet me upon my release.



Feeling a bit better, I started to make my way toward Aqua...

"Now you've enjoyed the police station's hospitality even more times than I have, Kazuma. You can't call me an ex-con anymore! So how does it feel? You called the police on me the last time I tried to barricade myself inside the house. And then you called me an ex-con and gave me a real hard time. So how does it feel? How do you feel right now?"

.....

What a bitch!

"Don't tell me you came all this way just to give me an earful! Anyway, screw you! Why do you think I've had so many run-ins with the law? I've only been arrested because I've been trying to do the right thing and keep my town safe! Getting hauled in for stupid little offenses like the ones you commit isn't even the same thing, you goddess of crime!"

"Waaaaahhh! How dare you make fun of me! You're going to get so much divine punishment, you dumbass NEET! Why *have* you been to the police station so many times, then? Go on, tell me! If you're really so innocent, then tell me what's going on!"

Grrr, I haven't seen her in forever, and I already want to slap her!

If I could tell her what was going on, we wouldn't be having this problem!

Then there was Serena. She'd been so infuriated that I wouldn't have put it past her to lie in wait to attack me the moment I got out of jail. But no matter what happened, even if I met the very worst fate imaginable, as long as Aqua was safe, she could get me out of it somehow with her resurrection magic.

Anyway, that was a last resort. Serena seemed hostile to Aqua for some reason—maybe because they were both priests—and I wanted to get her back home as quickly as I could.

I made a shooing motion and said, "Arrrgh, fine, I'm sorry. I just don't like that priest, so I was giving her a hard time. There's no other special reason to speak of, so get back to the house and stay there. What'd you do to Darkness and Megumin anyway? They were supposed to be keeping an eye on you."

"They're both prisoners of my ultimate technique, the Hundred Hazes. It's this incredible performance, and once it starts, it goes on for a good half a day. Anyway, I'm sick of being shut up in the house. Unlike a certain professional NEET, I want to go outside every once in a while. It's no fair, Kazuma—you've been out all the time recently. Invite me to your sleepovers sometime!"

Aqua positioned herself beside me as she spoke. Apparently, this moron was eager to tag along with me even though she had no idea what I was doing. I privately resolved myself to have her show me this secret technique of hers some other time; meanwhile, I was deciding what to do with her.

...Well, for starters, it might be nice to get some mental fresh air. The food at the police station wasn't exactly fine dining. Maybe Aqua and I could grab something to eat while I tried to talk her around...

So we headed down the street, meaning to stop at a random restaurant. I was trying to think about what I would say to her when just ahead, I saw the absolute last crowd I wanted to run into right now. Of course, I was talking about...

"Yo, if it isn't Kazuma Satou. You got out faster than I expected. Didja know I've been waiting for you...? And you've got a little friend with you, huh? All right, let's settle this. I'm itching for a fight!"

...Serena, her eyes bloodshot and her usual composure nowhere to be seen. And she had her followers with her...

6

"Kazuma! Kazumaaaaa!! What's going on here?! Why are they all chasing us?! I haven't done anything to deserve any chasing! I mean...nothing *serious* anyway!"

"That means you did do *something*! When they get their sanity back, I want you to apologize to them! Dammit! She must have made all kinds of new followers while I was in jail! We're barreling through town, and nobody's even looking at us!"

Aqua and I were dashing down the streets, trying to get away. Heck, there

must've been at least ten other adventurers chasing us, but nobody on the streets even seemed to flinch at the commotion. Thankfully, Aqua's magic buffs were keeping us out of harm's way for now, but it seemed like only a matter of time before they cornered us.

Come to think of it...

"I was so sure she was more the cerebral type! Instead, I pull a few little pranks on her, and she completely loses it! She's not even *trying* to be subtle anymore!"

At least the last time she'd attacked me, Serena had acted concerned that people might see her. Now that possibility didn't seem to worry her at all. Either the gloves were really off, or she had brainwashed just that many people in town.

Aqua, running beside me with tears in her eyes, shouted, "Hey! I heard the complaint against you was sexual harassment! What the heck did you do to make such a sweet and loving priest so mad at you?!"

"I didn't do anything...*too* bad! I just pulled some pranks on her, and then I used ice magic to shut her up in a house with no toilet, and then I spread some unflattering rumors about her, and then I called a whole crowd together and showed them her underwear for about an hour!"

"Geez, I don't think you're allowed to complain if she wants to kill you!"

Dammit!

As we ran, I overturned the street-side displays of stores we passed in hopes of tripping up our pursuers. Shop owners shouted angrily behind me, but I didn't have time to apologize or pay everyone back.

If Serena could rampage through town like this, it meant we probably had a lot of enemies already. There was no telling who had been "puppeted." So Aqua and I did the most obvious thing. We headed for a less populated part of town.

Aqua might not have known what was going on, but she obediently followed me. This was bad. If anything happened to her, I might not be able to get resurrected anymore. Should I have Aqua head for the police station alone? Or maybe we should go straight back to the mansion...!

"Aqua, don't you sense anything at all when you look at those people?! I'm sure you can see straight through what's going on, like you did when Darkness's dad was cursed! Don't you feel any evil power from them?!"

"My unclouded eye sees that at this moment, the evilest man in town is running right next to me!"

What a bitch!

I stopped worrying about how to help her escape and started thinking that if I tripped her right now and sent her tumbling into the oncoming mob, maybe I could use the opportunity to escape. Just at that moment, though, a triumphant shout came from behind us.

"That corner leads to a dead end, Kazuma Satou! Too bad for you! Didn't you notice how the people on the street were acting? They were drawing you toward a less populated area! For your fate awaits you there...!"

She was right: Around that corner was a dead end, just a big wall.

Of course, I'd lived in this town long enough to know all about it.

"All right, Aqua, they're going to catch us at this rate. I want you to lean up against the wall and huddle down! I'll use you as a footstool to get on top of the wall! Then I can pull you up from above, simple as that!"

"I see! That's a great idea! In that case, why don't you lean against the wall?! I'll climb up and then pull you after me!"

"Wh-why, you...!"

I'd been running as fast as I could, but Aqua wasn't even breathing hard. We'd been together so long that we each knew what the other was thinking. So at almost the same moment, we turned the corner and...!

"Hff! Hff! S-so you finally see, do you, Kazuma Satou...?! That's a g-good priest you've got there; those magical—*hff, hff!*—buffs are something... *Hff, hff...*" Serena rounded the corner and, between gasps for air, started to close in on us.

It took her a moment to realize. To notice that Aqua and I hadn't stopped because we'd resigned ourselves to our fate.

She followed our eyes to see what we were looking at. And she found...

"Hello and welcome! We've been waiting for you, O honored customers! It's such fine weather today, we decided to get some fresh air and do a little selling to boot!"

"Oh, welcome, welcome! Vanir, you were right—the customers really did come to us!"

Wiz and Vanir had put out a blanket on the ground and set up shop right there in the alley.

I'm so sick of this all-seeing devil.

7

"Hey," Aqua said, "what are you selling here? Wait... Are you okay? Your head is smoking..."

"Oh, yes. Vanir was quite upset with me earlier. 'We finally moved that bug choleran, and what do you do? You go and stock more worthless items!' But I'm quite all right, Lady Aqua; I was given some sugar water, so my body should regenerate shortly, and if there's any real danger, then we could get some water from somewhere... Oh, why, Lady Aqua, that's the item Vanir especially recommends today!"

Aqua was squatting beside Wiz and examining the merchandise as they had a friendly conversation that sounded completely out of place given the current situation.

"Yo, Vanir, what's going on here? Didn't you get enough cash after fleecing me out of everything I had on me?"

"You aren't secretly behind everything that happens in this world, are you?" I said. "What are you doing here with a street shop right where I got chased while running for my life? Just how far can you see?"

Serena and I both advanced on Vanir. Serena's followers kept a polite distance; maybe she'd ordered them to.

Vanir only laughed at us. "Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Neither of you need be so upset! As it is my current calling in life to accumulate money, I shall appear anywhere if

the scent of cold hard cash is in the air. Oh, don't worry—I've got items here that I believe both of you will want. How about it? Won't you have a look?"

Vanir was one thing, but we couldn't start fighting right in front of Wiz. Serena and I glanced at each other, then decided to call a temporary truce.

...Actually, was now the time to break our deal and tell Wiz everything? With her, Vanir, and even a full-fledged goddess on my side, I felt like I might be able to pull it off somehow. The trick was, as friendly as I was with Vanir and Wiz, I wasn't sure whose side they would join. I didn't know anything about their relationship with Serena, just that they used to be colleagues.

I did remember that when another general of the Demon King, a slime named Hans, had dared to harm a human, Wiz had flown off the handle. Apparently, Hans had broken some agreement she had with the Demon King's army. I didn't know how that would play out right now, though. After all, Wiz was still a general of the Demon King, at least in name. If nothing else, I thought I could assume she wouldn't join Serena in attacking the town, but still...

"Listen up, and don't get any weird ideas, okay? Let's just play it nice and calm for now," Serena leaned over and whispered into my ear, as if she could read my mind... That was the scary thing about her: Unlike so many of the other generals I'd run into in the past, she could use her head.

"All right, you two, rather than having your little secret conversation, why not come over and take a look at my merchandise? I don't have to use my all-seeing power to know you're going to love what I've got for you."

Serena and I looked at each other again. Vanir sounded like a real sleaze. After a moment, he produced a piece of paper. "We can start with this! Let's see... *Shall not interfere... Cause no obstruction to...* Ah, yes! It's a written oath from yours truly, stating that I shall by no means get in the way of anyone plotting anything in this town, no matter what..."

Almost before he had finished speaking, Serena snatched the paper out of his hand. Come to think of it, he'd said he would hold Serena's personal information confidential, since she was a customer, but he hadn't said he wouldn't interfere with her. Devils like Vanir were always going on about contracts and stuff. Damn, I should've grabbed it first...

"Tell you what, Vanir. I guarantee I can pay more for it than she can. Wanna sell it to me?"

Serena, though, triumphantly said, "Now, now, early bird gets the worm, am I right? How much is it, Vanir? Give me a number."

"730,000 eris. 330 eris cheaper than normal."

"That's everything I have! Again! I've been saving up all I can recently! The least you could do is go easy on me!" Serena shouted, but it didn't stop her from flinging her purse at him.

"Always a pleasure!"

Wait...

"Hey, Serena, come to think of it, I loaned you some money, didn't I?! Give it back! You said that if I tried to stop you all on my own, you would face me fair and square like a general should! If you'd face me one-on-one, that would be one thing, but if you're going to get a bunch of your lackeys to chase me around town, then I want my money back! ...Heh-heh, though I guess then you won't have enough to buy that paper from Vanir!"

"Y-you filthy...! Dammit, fine. Hey, you!" Serena called to one of her followers. The guy had been standing and staring vacantly; now he shuffled over to her, still expressionless.

"Give me some money," she said, grabbing cash from him and then thrusting it at me. "There, is this enough?"

Shoot! I should have known it wouldn't be so easy.

No...wait.

".....? ...H-huh...? What am I doing here...?"

"Feh!"

Serena gave a click of her tongue: The moment she took his money, the adventurer regained his senses.

.....Well, now.

"Ahem, might I have a moment?" Serena said sweetly to the revived

adventurer.

"That's so weird. I could swear I was... Oh yes, Miss Serena, what is it? Say, why are you holding up your skirt? ...Hrk?!"

Acting all embarrassed, Serena lifted her skirt to show him what was underneath. "Sir... What do you think about this?"

The man virtually began to worship her when he saw what was under Serena's skirt. "Thank you! Thank you! Thank...you..." Slowly, his eyes unfocused again.

.....Well, now.

Aqua and Wiz began holding a whispered conference.

"Hey, did you see that? She pretends to be a sweet, innocent priest, but she just did something really lewd! Yuck, what a pervert!"

"My goodness! I always knew Miss Seresdina was a bit rough around the edges, but in the short time since I saw her last, she's gotten bold, too...!"

"Who's Seresdina? Do you know that priest?"

Serena ignored them completely, studying the now-docile adventurer. When she saw me looking at her, she clicked her tongue again and glanced away. "All right, Vanir, now you won't get in my way, right?! This paper constitutes a contract with me, right?"

"Yes, you may consider it a contract. And we devils never break a contract. So you may relax... Now, my punkish pal."

I was starting to get it: If you felt you owed Serena something, then she controlled you. And the way to break out of the puppet state was to repay that debt in whatever form. Just like when the guy had "given" Serena some money. Then she'd shown him her panties because she'd seen how effective it was at gaining followers when I had her tied up. She wasn't wrong—it was a pretty efficient way to create puppets.

"All right, punko. Next, I have something I think you'll find quite attractive."

...Huh? But then, when I'd tied Serena up, the guys who had already been puppeted who saw her panties actually came back to their senses for a

moment. How did that work...?

"...Hey, O one who's taken advantage of his nights out recently to avail himself of a certain service, enjoying not only the two ladies at his mansion but practically every female here—"

"Right, let's see what you've got for me! How about it, Vanir? What do you want me to buy? Just name it—the money's burning a hole in my pocket!"

Serena was looking at me like I was human garbage as I inspected what Vanir had brought for me.

"...The heck is this?"

"Collected in this case is our useless potion series, which our silly shopkeeper stocked some time ago."

He was *literally* calling them useless.

"Take this, for example! The new formula stat-up potion. A magically reformulated, highly valuable stat-raising brew, more powerful than the original!"

"And what are the side effects?"

"The counterpart stat to whatever was raised decreases by the same amount."

The counterpart stat?

"Give me an example. What happens if I drink that?"

"Say your Strength stat goes through the roof. But in exchange, your Intelligence plummets."

Ahhh.

"But maybe if you were a class that didn't need much Intelligence, like a warrior, it might actually be helpful?"

The moment I showed any interest in the potion, Serena plucked it out of Vanir's hand. "Just how much would your Intelligence drop?"

"It would be lower than the blue-haired priest friend of the boy there."

I grabbed the potion and shoved it back at Vanir.

"How about this, then?" he said. "Forbidden potion series one! A potion that will make you attractive to magical monsters for the rest of your life, perfect for leveling up! A potion that will boost your magic sky-high but kill off all the hair on your body! Another that will send your level off the charts...at the cost of losing all your magic! A potion that makes you attractive to the opposite sex but causes your body odor to smell like that of a goblin! And a special recommendation for the hard-core masochists among us who'd like to go through all that difficult training again, the level reset potion!"

"These might as well be industrial waste! I don't need any of these!" I interjected.

That was when Vanir said, "And finally, a potion that undoes puppetification!"

"Wait, what?"

That was one hell of an item to just throw in at the last moment there!

"Ah, I see I've caught your interest! This potion cures the unique status ailment called Puppet. There are no longer any monsters known to exist today that inflict this ailment, and presently only the occasional minor Dark God makes any use of it..."

"How dare you! Lady Regina is not a 'minor' deity!"

I took the potion from Vanir, ignoring the enraged Serena.

"This is the only one you have?"

Vanir pointed at Wiz. Right there where Aqua was crouched down with her, there was a practical pile of potions. Damn...help was help, but I hated to play right into Vanir's hands like that. I suspected Serena felt the same way, even though we were enemies.

She looked at the potions and growled, "I thought we had a contract. You said you wouldn't interfere with me."

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Hear the declaration of the all-seeing devil! If the boy takes this potion, it will certainly not interfere with you! Indeed, a moment shall

come when you will be profoundly grateful that he has it. Now, boy, the forbidden potion series and the anti-Puppet potion I just gave you are on the house! Because this is where the real fun begins! I have over there a complete case of anti-Puppet potions, yours for the special price of—”

But just as Vanir was cackling wildly and pointing to the box of potions, we heard: “Oh no, Lady Aqua! What are you doing? It’s true we have no use for those potions, but Vanir spent all morning getting them together. You can’t dip your finger in them!”

“I know, but you’re looking so pale. You need a little water. If the potions are useless anyway, then it won’t matter. Here, I’ll change them all into nice, clean water for you, and you can pour them over your head.”

“Thank you, Lady Aqua, I really appreciate it... But this water has some of your holy power in it, and it sort of makes me tingle...”

““.....””

Vanir, Serena, and I all went quiet. Vanir, who’d had us in the palm of his hand, was looking absolutely stupefied.

““...Pfffft!””

“!”

We knew it was no laughing matter, but Serena and I couldn’t resist.

8

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Bwaaa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I, even I myself, have been foolish! I should have finished you off sooner, O toilet goddess!”

“I’d like to see you try, you masked moron! I don’t know what you were trying to foist on Kazuma, but aren’t you embarrassed that you couldn’t even pull it off? And you call yourself the Great Devil? Did you make up that name? How’s it feel to have all your goods go bad? Come on, tell me! Because I love it! Pfffft, heh-heh-heh!”

““.....””

"Vanir Death Ray!"

"Reflect!"

I pointed to the commotion and muttered to Serena, “Hey, what do we do about those two?”

“Don’t ask me—I have no idea. Who is that priest anyway? She’s going toe to toe with Vanir.”

Well, she’s, um, a goddess.

Serena sighed deeply, glancing at a slightly singed Wiz—who probably got in the way of an especially powerful attack or something—and then closing her eyes. “Wiz is the only one who seems like she would have any chance of stopping them, and they practically fried her. I don’t think either of us will be able to do anything. *Sigh...* This is getting ridiculous. I don’t think any good can come of being involved with you. You keep too many freaks and weirdos around you. Not counting your friend who’s holding her own against Vanir right now, it’s all troublemakers in your circle, right?”

I couldn’t really deny that. From my famously stuck-in-the-head friend, to all the people of Crimson Magic Village, including a certain artificially augmented little sister, she was right.

The expression on my face must have said it all, because Serena looked a little taken aback, then grimaced. “Hmm... Anyway, forget it. I’m giving up on this town. I’ll be honest: I underestimated you. I should have gone all out from the start.” Then she sighed deeply. She looked glumly at Vanir and Aqua, who were still fighting.

Well, I couldn’t blame her. Who could seriously take on this gaggle of lunatics?

“You misguided goddess, you’re going to pay me back for all the potions you just ruined!”

“Mwa-ha-ha-ha! O devil who always thinks everything is going just the way he wants until the very, very last moment! I refuse to pay you back. If anything, you should pay *me* for turning your useless potions into delicious Aqua water!”

"Don't imitate the way I address people! That's my very identity!! I can't stand it anymore! I'm going to take every last coin you have on you!"

.....Yeah. I couldn't blame her one bit.

If it was going to work out for the best, though, that was fine by me. And it meant the "revenge for Aqua" thing was on hold for the time being.

.....

No, no! I didn't kick Serena because Aqua was feeling a little down. I didn't pick a fight with a general of the Demon King because Aqua suddenly seemed sad and lonely. That moron had nothing to do with it! I'd chosen to do it to clear the creeping guilt in my conscience.

I had to repeat that to myself a few times, but I managed to tell Serena, "So we're parting amicably, are we? Look, I'm telling the truth when I say I have zero interest in the Demon King, and he doesn't have to consider me a threat at all, okay? Gotta be honest—things in this town are so quiet that it's kind of hard to believe the Demon King and humanity really are at war for the fate of the world. Personally, I would be just as happy to stay out of it and not make any waves."

"Yeah, okay, great. I'll be sure to let the king know that you and this town aren't anything he has to worry about. I'll show myself out of here, too. Good enough for you?"

I let out a breath of relief. "So that's the deal... Hoo, you said you weren't that strong in terms of the Demon King's generals, but I have to say, I was pretty freaked out when I was facing you. Why would a general even worry about a small-fry, weakest-class guy like me? Make plans your own size..."

I was starting to let my mouth get ahead of my brain again as I reflected on how anxious I'd felt recently.

Serena shrugged, still watching Vanir and Aqua. "Hey, we've got problems of our own. Not that it matters now. Urgh, I don't like this... Everything might be tied up neatly for you, but I've got to go report to the king now." Serena didn't sound very happy as she observed the goddess/devil throw down with mounting exasperation. "I had orders: get you to join us or kill you... Well, I'll

talk my way out of it somehow. I've had my fill of you. I'll even forget that you exposed me in public. So I want you to forget everything, too."

"Uh-huh, sure. So we're even now, right?"

Serena pulled something like a pipe and tobacco from the folds of her priestly vestments. She packed some of the tobacco-like stuff into the pipe, then lit it with something that looked very familiar to me.

Then she slowly breathed out some smoke...

"I guess this is the end of the Demon King's pursuit of you. Oh, um, also. That friend of yours, Megumin—was that her name? There's a bounty on her, too. Want me to get rid of it?"

What, seriously? When had she managed that? Although she would probably be happy to know the Demon King had put a price on her head...

"Yeah, please, for sure. Wait, you mean there's no bounty on *my* head? If there is, get rid of that, too, if the number's very big."

"Sure, I can take care of that. I'll make certain it's all neat and tidy." Looking a little annoyed, she blew out more smoke, then took another drag on her pipe. "...Geez. The least you could do is be grateful," she said. She never looked at me, though. She just gazed at Aqua and Vanir, still fighting, and took another puff.

"Yeah, I'm grateful all right. Seriously, though, what were you planning in this town? It's just a bunch of amateurs who—"

.....Huh?

Why did I suddenly feel so...weird?

"Finally, you said it."

Serena still wouldn't look at me. Just, *fwoo*, another exhalation of smoke.

I...I said it? What...what did I say?

Why did I feel so out of it? Why was my head...getting...hazy...?

...*Oh*.

Oh...shit...!

"Ha, you're something else," Serena said. "I think you've figured out how my power works by now, right? No one else ever got so close to putting all the pieces together."

Shit! Shit... What a dirty trick...!

With Vanir and Aqua fighting, I'd gotten too caught up in the moment and let my guard down...

"You want to know what I was planning in a town full of novice adventurers? I'll answer all your questions; just be sure to thank me, okay? You asked, so I'll answer. But you owe me for it, all right?"

No... No...! Stoppit! Don't say anything else; I don't need to hear any more!

The thought boomed in my head, but I just couldn't get my voice to come out. In fact, my body didn't seem to be reacting to my instructions; my movements were slow and weak.

"No fair, using Wiz as a shield! ...Hey, she's turning kind of transparent..."

"Then you need only cease unleashing your waves of magical destruction! ... Hmm? Oops, it seems I've overdone it. That's my danger signal. If we keep going like this, our shopkeeper will disappear."

"Wh-wh-what do we do?! Tell me—what should we do? If I use healing magic, she's a goner!"

"There's sugar water in that bag over there; just douse her with it. Works every time. She'll snap back to life like a rhinoceros beetle...probably..."

Aqua and Vanir were fussing over Wiz, who was looking a little see-through.

Serena finally looked at me.

On her lips was a triumphant smile.

"Know what? It won't be too long before the army is sent to this town. This place is a backwater, though, a long way from the front lines. You can't get an army here by marching it along the byways. So instead, a handful of units are going to teleport in. That should be plenty, though, to overwhelm a town full of novices."

Stop! Don't tell me this.

"You know a fallen angel called Duke? He went missing in this town."

...?

Oh yeah, I remembered him: He'd challenged Wiz to a fight, claiming he was going to become a general of the Demon King's army.

"There's my answer. Did you take him out, too? I got a report from him before he disappeared. He said to be wary of you."

That bastard! He didn't need to do that! But I did seem to remember him saying something about Axel being considered an important strategic point. In other words, if this town was attacked...would it be my fault?

Okay, I couldn't worry about that right now. If I heard any more than this, I was going to be in real trouble!

"Hey, don't get the wrong idea, all right? The army's had its eye on this place for a long time now. From back before you really got their attention by taking out all those generals and bounty hunters."

Stop...!

.....

"Wh-why is that...?" I couldn't seem to get my mouth to work when I wanted it to, but now it forced itself open. Even though I knew that hearing more of Serena's secrets would only tighten her puppet strings around me, I couldn't seem to stop myself...

"Exactly *because* this town is full of novices," she said. "Because this is the first place they go. I may be a general of the Demon King now, but I'm still human. I used to be an adventurer once myself, y'know? When I wanted to get my start, where do you think I went? That's right—I came straight here to Axel. Everyone gets their first quest here. It's 'the town for beginning adventurers'! Built specifically where the world's weakest monsters live."

In game terms, it's the starter town. If it was supposed to be all beginners and novices, though, why did I feel like my group and I had so much trouble?

"So here's the question: What if this town for novice adventurers was to

disappear? For a complete and utter beginner, even the rusty blade of a goblin, normally considered a nice, easy target, is dangerous. And Giant Toads, which are simple enough to hunt if you get a few people together, live only in this exact area. So if this town disappears, where do novices go to train?"

...Ahhh.

"Starting to get the picture? With the exception of the Crimson Magic Clan and their weird farming gimmick, every single adventurer worth their salt starts here. They raise their levels, then move on to other towns. At least, everyone does who doesn't have a special reason to stay here. And after that, one way or another, they always end up getting in our way."

No, no, I couldn't listen to this...

"Now that the guys with the weird names have stopped showing up, if we can get rid of this town, the supply of adventurers will dry up. And the leader of the Demon King's generals, the Demon King's daughter? Pretty soon she'll be commanding a major assault on the stronghold defending the front lines, along with the capital. Betcha a lot of adventurers will get hurt very badly. They'll all carry on, in the blind faith that more fighting strength is on the way. And when they hear that this town, this incubator for adventurers, is gone, what do you think will happen?"

Well, I guess their morale would drop, obviously. In a world teeming with monsters, rebuilding a single town could take decades...

Arrrgh... My consciousness is...slipping away...

"Had about enough of my story? This power isn't a curse. There isn't a person alive who can resist it. Not even a man of your caliber. But don't worry. If I give an order you really don't want to follow, you can fight it. But doing so will hurt—badly. I know you; you're not just going to go quietly along with my puppeteering, are you? Now, I think I'll have a little fun seeing just how well you can resist my commands..."

She sounded pretty eager. I finally felt like I couldn't think anything anymore...

The last thing I heard was Serena whispering to me.

"Bend your ear to me... Isn't there something that smolders deep in your

heart? All the humiliation you've endured up to this moment, the outrages, the injustices, the mockery...bring it to mind. The people of this town don't take you seriously, do they? Don't they make fun of you for being in the weakest class? Aren't you angry with your party members for always slowing you down?"

Her words worked their way into my chest; they sounded so lovely.

"That's right. Ask yourself: *Why do I always have to clean up their messes?* Well, you don't have to put up with it anymore. Throw away the goodness of your heart. Cast aside common decency. Rid yourself of restraint and virtue. Join me in taking revenge. My comrades will reach this town eventually. When they do, you will join my puppets and me in striking from within. Yes, let us have vengeance on the people of this town. Let your former party members know of your wrath!"

"Wiz, are you okay? Hey, do you recognize me?"

"...? Lady Aqua? And...Vanir? What's the matter? Why are you looking at me from so close...?"

"Mm, if you lack your memories of the immediate past, then there's no need to recall exactly what happened. It will go well with you if you don't try too hard to recall it."

"H-he's right! If you don't remember, I'm sure that's a sign that it's best for you not to!" Aqua, crouching beside Wiz, called, "Kazuma, I think it's time for us to go home. I'm scared of Darkness and Megumin—while you've been away, they've been moping around the mansion acting like bears in a cave. I need you to come back and make them feel better."

Then she came walking toward me. She kept her distance from Serena but reached out to lead me home...

I dodged her outstretched hand.

".....?" She looked at me, befuddled.

Serena was watching her, obviously enjoying herself. Her shoulders started to tremble as she tried to hold back her laughter. "This man, you see... He says he never wants to go home to you again. He's *my* comrade now. Isn't that right, Kazuma? You don't need the potion that cures puppetry anymore, either, do

you? Go ahead—tell her!”

As Lady Serena spoke, I said, “I’m going to become a follower of Regina. I’m going to follow Lady Serena in everything I do from now on. Say good-bye to everyone for me.”

9

Lady Serena walked ahead of me, lost in thought. I wondered what was wrong. Was she worried about something? Then she stopped in her tracks and turned back to me. “So...you’re my puppet now, aren’t you? You’ll obey everything I say, right?”

Strange that she should ask about something so obviously true. Giving her a serious look, like I couldn’t imagine why she was asking, I said, “But of course, Lady Serena. For your sake, Lady Serena, if you told me to hold up that heavy-looking chest of yours all day in place of a bra, I would gladly obey.”

“Er, r-right, that’s good. I would never order you to do something so stupid, though; don’t worry. None of my other puppets have offered to become followers of Lady Regina, though, so I was just wondering. Hrm... Guess I’m overthinking it...”

She continued to look perplexed by me but nonetheless resumed walking. After a moment, her shoulders began shaking, as if she couldn’t restrain her joy. “Finally,” she whispered, softly enough that only I could hear. “Do you understand what this means, Kazuma? Do you know how long I’ve waited for this moment?! How long I’ve felt suffocated in the Demon King’s army, ever since those Crimson Magic morons kidnapped Lady Regina and sealed her up?!”

“I don’t know, milady.”

“Then shut up and listen! For some reason, several years ago, Lady Regina’s seal was suddenly broken. I thought that would restore my power, but that only happened recently. One day, out of the blue, the power I’d received from Lady Regina came flooding back! She finally gave me her blessing as recompense for all the years I’ve labored for her!”

“Maybe you were just the only follower of Regina left, Lady Serena.”

"I told you to shut up and listen; don't rain on my parade!"

After I'd said I would become a follower of Regina, Aqua howled something tearfully, but Lady Serena led me away, and we left Aqua and everyone else behind. Incidentally, I gave Aqua the un-puppet-ification potion I'd gotten from Vanir in order to stop her crying. She didn't seem to understand what it was, though. Now that I was a respectful and obedient follower of Lady Serena, I didn't need to have such a dangerous thing around.

Then Lady Serena told me that, now that she had a superb pawn like me in her possession, she was going to move to a new base. Apparently, she had been even so kind as to weaken her control over her other puppets in order to strengthen her control over me. I guess she had a finite quantity of control or something. Maybe there was even a limit to the number of people she could puppet at one time. The very fact that she was interested in increasing her control over me was a sign of how much she needed my strength and me.

As Lady Serena walked ahead of me in high spirits, I decided to take the opportunity to ask something that seemed pressing. "By the way, Lady Serena," I said. "Are there any conditions that would free me from being your puppet?"

Lady Serena stopped cold at that. "Are you *really* my puppet? If you are, why would you need to know that?" She didn't look at me, but her voice was hard.

"Oh, it's just that on the off chance your control over me should falter, Lady Serena, I would certainly find that most disagreeable. I want to be able to steer clear of anything that might undo this condition."

She seemed surprised by how calmly I answered. Finally, she turned and looked at me; then she took my face in both hands and scrutinized me very, very carefully. "Are you...? No, I feel Lady Regina's power emanating from you, and very strongly at that. Weird. I wonder if this is... You know, if I made my control too powerful, and the brainwashing is working *too* well... You're less like a puppet and more like a servant thinking and acting on his own. Hrm, well, never mind—that's perfect for me. You just keep at it."

"Certainly, Lady Serena," I replied promptly, and she looked pleased.

"Excellent. Then let me answer your question—and this will be something else you owe me for. The first thing is if you repay your debt to me. I think you

knew that already. Next, is having a strong sense of faith. You remember how when you tied me up and exposed my panties, everyone came to their senses for a moment? A particularly fortuitous happenstance, something that makes people give thanks to *their own* deity for their good fortune, is dangerous. I don't know what god you believe in, but watch out, okay?"

"It's all right—I believe in Lady Regina. If I was to stumble into a sexy situation with you, Lady Serena, like if I walked in on you in the bath, for example, I would give tremendous thanks to Lady Regina."

"O-okay... I mean, don't force it, all right? Everyone believes in something, no matter who they are. It doesn't have to be one of the gods. Some people worship devils or even Dark Gods, but there's always something. Before you came to have faith in Lady Regina, what did you believe in?"

"Nothing. I was nonsectarian."

"Ha, nonsectarian, nice. Well, if you don't want to say, that's all right. I think we're going to get along just fine, buddy."

"Buddy." She'd called me "buddy." It inspired me to work even harder for Lady Serena's sake.

We were standing in front of an attractive little inn.

"I think we'll stay here for tonight. Looks a little expensive, but we can indulge every once in a while. All right, Kazuma, cough up the cash."

My reply was immediate. "No way."

"What did you just say?"

"I said I refuse, ma'am. If I was to pay money, that would mean repaying the debt I owe you. I would no longer be your puppet."

"Y-yeah... Of course... Wait, but— Huh? Ahhh, forget it..." Lady Serena, looking somewhat confounded, pulled out her purse. Then she opened it and...

"Oh! Crap, I forgot Vanir fleeced me again! Kazuma, forget about debts or whatever for the moment and give me some money! I've released several of my other puppets to make my hold over you stronger. Lending me a few coins won't stop you from—"

"We mustn't, Lady Serena! It starts with a few coins, but it'll lead to your undoing! In all the manga and video games I know of, the villain always has a handle on things and then gets lax at the last minute, leading to their defeat. We've got no choice. I'll go try to wheedle some money out of someone."

"‘M-manga’? ‘Video games’...? A-anyway, okay, sounds good. Wait... But wouldn’t that mean I was asking you to repay a favor...?"

I left Lady Serena muttering to herself and went over to an adventurer wandering around near the inn. "Excuse me, my good sir, but might I have a moment? I hate to say this, but Lady Serena over there is hard up for cash and can't afford a room at the inn. Would you be so kind as to spare some of your abundance for the poor, pitiful Lady Serena, who simply has no idea how to get by in the world?"

"What?!" I heard Lady Serena exclaim from behind me.

The man in front of me, though, got out his wallet without a second thought. "Lady Serena's in trouble? Just leave it to me! I can't let poor Lady Serena... Lady Serena? Why am I calling her 'Lady'? ...Eh, anyway, here. Geez, a priest begging for alms. Try to keep it together, huh, Serena?"

"Oh... U-um, yes, thank you..." Lady Serena looked at the ground as if embarrassed. The man gave us some cash and then wandered away. Apparently, he was one of Lady Serena's followers—or had been. Giving us the money just now had released him from his puppet status, but that didn't matter.

After all, Lady Serena had *me*.

"Oh man... That guy was a pretty capable adventurer... Well, no choice, I guess. Let's go, Kazuma. Take that money and pay the nice inn people."

"Yes, ma'am. Now, before that..."

I went over to Lady Serena, who was looking tired somehow. Before I paid for the accommodations, I grabbed her ample bosom. And then, without a word, I squeezed.

"....."

Lady Serena and I looked at each other silently.

I continued squeezing her soft breasts.

Then Lady Serena abruptly swept my hands away.

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-what the hell?! Hey, hold on! What are you doing? Seriously, what are you doing?” she shouted, heedless in her panic that anyone might see us.

“Calm down, please, Lady Serena. People are looking.”

“That’s my line! Of course people are looking! What do you think you’re doing, just grabbing my breasts out of the blue?!”

She said the strangest things.

“What are you talking about? I went and got that money for you, didn’t I, Lady Serena? In other words, I owed you a little less than before. If I didn’t derive some additional benefit from you, my puppet-ification might have come undone. But you don’t have money, my lady. So I figured you could pay me this way.”

“?!?!?!? R-really? Wait...what? Something’s wrong here. That adventurer saw himself as giving the money to *me*... That caused him to look down on me, and that’s why he was freed from my puppeteering, so that basically means I got the money myself... *Huh?*”



I ignored Lady Serena—I didn’t really understand what she was talking about anyway—and went to pay for our accommodations.

“Hoo... I thought I’d really gotten my hands on a trump card, but now I’m starting to wonder... I feel like I hardly know what’s going on anymore...” Lady Serena sighed and closed her eyes, lying back on the bed. She seemed to be worried about something; I wondered what could be the matter.

Poor, tired Lady Serena. Maybe I should rub her shoulders.

“That sounds very stressful, milady. May I give you a shoulder massage?”

“Hmm? Would you? That sounds nice, actually...” She opened one eye.

“...Hey, what are you doing in my room anyway?”

She said the strangest things.

“What a question, ma’am. With that amount of money, I was only able to rent one room. Don’t worry about me; I don’t mind if the bed is a little small for two.”

“I’m not worried about you! I’m worried about *me*! What is it with you?! How can you act like us sleeping together is totally okay?! I thought you would be more of a shrinking violet when it came to women!”

“You commanded me, Lady Serena. You told me to abandon restraint, goodness of heart, decency, and virtue. I’m simply following your orders, milady, but it feels like I’ve been reborn somehow.”

“Is *that* what this is about?!” she yelled, sitting up in bed and clutching her head. Then, sounding spent, she said, “So...if I was to tell you to forget those orders, I’d be incurring an exceptional debt to you, huh?”

“Lady Serena, you took the limiter off my heart, and it’s brought indescribable fulfillment to my life. If you order me to control myself again, it would take a lot more than a little boob squeeze to make up for it.”

“Urgh,” Lady Serena groaned, sitting on the bed and holding her head in her hands. “Hey...why do I have to provide you a place to sleep? You could at least get somewhere to stay on your own. My other puppets have always done that.”

"I believe the situation is different with me. Unlike those other adventurers, I'm no longer able to go back to my home because of you, Lady Serena. That makes you responsible for me now."

"Grrr!" she exclaimed. "W-well, now that you've joined us, victory is practically ours. I'm going to work you like a dog from now on! Starting tomorrow, expect to earn your keep!" She clenched her fist emphatically, but she sounded like she was talking as much to herself as she was to me.

Chapter 3

A Goddess's Blessing for This Puppet!



1

Month A, Day X.

Lady Serena believes there's something wrong with my puppet state. For one thing, she seems displeased that I don't make even the slightest effort to do any work. She gets very angry and says she thought everything was going great but is now finding me weirdly resistant—and she currently considers me a nuisance. She's ordered me to keep a diary starting today, in hopes of better understanding what's going on in my mind.

Reading someone's diary, though? I'll need to exact significant compensation for that. As such, I've decided that every night before we go to sleep, she has to press her boobs against my back while calling me Master Kazuma.

Lady Serena looks depressed, like she's lost something very important.

Supposedly, she's actually going to read this diary I'm writing every single day. In other words, I have an excuse to sexually harass her, depending on what I write. Ah, my full heart is bursting.

Maybe I'll conclude each entry with a bit of erotic fiction.

No time like the present...

Month A, Day Y.

Lady Serena ordered me to stop writing erotic fiction. But when I told her that such an outrageous demand would require a substantial compensation, she just muttered “dammit” and gave up. Lady Serena looks most beautiful when she’s on the verge of tears.

I think for tonight’s erotic fiction, I might write something involving Lady Serena.

Lady Serena says that there’s definitely something weird about my puppet state. She says I certainly shouldn’t be able to speak so fluently.

Well anyway, on with the diary. I wonder what I should write...

Even as I was writing, I felt something soft press against my back. Yes: Lady Serena was naked and rubbing her two massive mountains up against me. “Oh, Master Kazumaaaa,” she breathed. “I can’t...I can’t hold it in anymore...” Geez, fine. As Lady Serena looked at me pleadingly, I drew her close and...

Oops, stop that! Lady Serena, don’t sneak a peek at someone’s diary and then burst out shouting. That’ll take some serious compensation, you know?

Month A, Day Z.

Lady Serena, her eyes brimming with tears, said I really must not make her the subject of my erotic fiction. The moment I told her that such an outrageous demand would require substantial compensation, she hit me.

The moment she did that, something very strange happened: Lady Serena sustained an injury in the very same place where she had struck me.

She panicked, wondering what was going on, but as compensation for hitting me, I said she had to strip down to her underwear, put her hands behind her head, and do a hundred squats right in front of me. I heard her mumble “dammit” and a few other things, but the sight of Lady Serena squatting until she sweated, her eyes full of tears, was truly gorgeous.

I think next time, I’ll have her do push-ups.

Month B, Day X.

Something terrible has happened.

It turns out that Lady Serena was connected to the Moguninnin, the ninja machine with the stupid name that I'd defeated back in Crimson Magic Village. She said she tried to puppet the thing, but it was too powerful for her to control, so instead she turned it loose to wreak havoc. In other words, it was Lady Serena's fault that I got into all that trouble. Wouldn't that constitute a major debt she now owes me?

In order to cancel out that debt, I decided to give Lady Serena a good smack on the head. So there was Lady Serena, holding her head and wondering why I'd smashed a fist into it, and there was me, right next to her, also holding my head.

Her confused, tearful face was absolutely adorable.

Month C, Day X.

Lady Serena came home almost in tears today.

She'd gone to the Guild to try to make more puppets and earn some money, but I guess Vanir had tried to pick a fight with her. He claimed that consultation work was *his* specialty and that, if she planned to continue in that line of work, he had some ideas for her. It was clearly a threat.

Lady Serena doesn't seem quite able to cope with Vanir; he demanded payment for trying to home in on his turf, and she came back penniless once again. Almost breaking down, she said that meant she wouldn't get to eat tonight.

My sukiyaki with a side of observing her absolute consternation was positively delicious.

Month C, Day Y.

I gather Megumin, Aqua, and Darkness are trying to figure out where I've gone. That reminded me that I once had wonderful party members who would worry about me when I went missing.

I informed Lady Serena while she was working on a side hustle in our room. I told her that if she didn't want me to go home, she would have to start rewarding me more handsomely. She said she was running herself ragged trying to pay for our room and asked how I could make such a selfish request, and

then she *really* did burst into tears.

Having lost her consulting job at the Adventurers Guild, Lady Serena asked if we could move down to a lower tier of accommodation. Personally, I was accustomed to a luxurious life in a huge mansion, but before I could finish telling her that if she wanted me to compromise my lifestyle, I would demand substantial compensation, she was already back at work.

I told Lady Serena that she was a very capable priest, so maybe she should get work as an adventurer. But she said her Adventurer's Card would reveal that she was a Dark Priest, and she wouldn't be able to take quests. That was part of the reason she'd never accepted a reward from the Guild yet.

What's more, it sounded like it was going to be a while before the Demon King's army got to this town, and she had to lay low here until then. Her other puppets and I would be agents on the inside when they arrived.

Lady Serena enviously watched me eat my dinner, a piece of the finest grilled meat. Naturally, I couldn't share it with her. If I repaid my debt to her that way, it would nix my puppetification. Instead, I would continue to dig myself deeper and deeper into her debt until I became her trusted right arm.

Lady Serena's dinner tonight, incidentally, was a bowl of corn soup.

Month D, Day X.

A fair amount of time has passed since I started living at this inn with Lady Serena. She's starting to look a little ragged. It must be a lot of work keeping someone like me fed, considering I eat three luxurious meals a day. But it was Lady Serena who told me to rid myself of restraint, so there's nothing I can do about it.

She keeps borrowing money from her various puppet adventurers and thus freeing them from servitude. It now seems I'm the only faithful servant she has left. She had a new gig going where she would show a passing adventurer her panties to puppet them, then ask them for money, but the police got mad at her. They lectured her about the laws regarding adult entertainment venues, then confiscated the money she'd earned. Lady Serena seems to be reaching her limit in more ways than one.

I told her she could pay what she owed me with her body, whereupon she asked, "What would I have to do to get you to pay for your own room?" When I gave her a detailed description, though, Lady Serena said the strangest thing. She said she was going to free me from my puppet state and that I should go *anywhere* else.

I remembered something else Lady Serena had said, though. She'd said I could fight orders that I truly didn't want to obey. As I resisted her command with all my might, despite the incredible pain, Lady Serena started acting very odd.

When I asked apprehensively what she was doing, she told me she was praying to Lady Regina to forcibly end my puppetification.

I think Lady Serena has gone completely insane. Hoping to resist release from puppetification, I prayed as hard as I could to the goddess in whom I now have a profound faith.

O most high Lady Regina, grant me power...!

Month E, Day X.

A rock came flying through the window of our room. The culprit was an Axis lady with golden hair who looked vaguely familiar. I guess she didn't like it that Lady Serena, a servant of the goddess Regina, was evangelizing in Axel.

Lady Serena rushed out of the inn, red in the face, and tried to chase her down, but she got away by the skin of her teeth. I gather she mocked Lady Serena as being "a hussy who gets followers by showing them her panties!" and spread unthinkable rumors about her. Every time Lady Serena passed a group of old ladies, they would start whispering, and I think it was starting to get to her.

When I asked her what she thought she was doing bringing Lady Regina's name into disrepute, Lady Serena collapsed into tears. She stared at me, feeble and defeated, and I grasped her hand and nodded.

"The price of comfort is five thousand eris or your boobs."

Month E, Day X.

Lady Serena has started acting very strange lately. She's been giving me all sorts of orders. Orders that seem to take no heed of their price, as if she *wants* me to be released from my puppet state.

Naturally, because I'm a faithful follower of Lady Regina and a dedicated servant of Lady Serena, I haven't hesitated to exact payment via her body. After all, surely it would be a blow to her if my puppet state was to be undone.

Lady Serena, appearing somehow tired from my gentlemanly sexual harassment, says she has somewhere to take me tomorrow. Maybe she means to cross the final frontier with me? I don't think I can sleep through the anticipation. I'd better wash up for tomorrow, just in case.

2

"....."

Lady Serena looked up from my diary, then closed it and let out a small sigh. "I'm considering returning you to that priest and her friends..."

"I refuse," I said immediately, and this time Lady Serena sighed more deeply. She looked very haggard compared to when we had first met. I, on the other hand, was looking very fit. Probably thanks to the fine dining I'd been doing recently.

Lady Serena silently took my hand. In her other hand, she held a toothpick. And then...

"Hngh?!"

Suddenly and violently, she stabbed my fingertip with it. Something red began bubbling out. Of course, Lady Serena's own finger began to bleed as well, the droplets dribbling onto the floor. "Did you really not believe in anyone before? Are you *really* a follower of Lady Regina now?!" she demanded, her face pale.

I couldn't believe she was asking me this. Surely, she couldn't have some kind of problem with my becoming a follower of Lady Regina.

"As I've told you, milady, I was nonsectarian. And I do believe in Lady Regina."

"Nobody in this world believes in nothing! Everyone follows a God, or a Dark

God, or a devil! Everyone in this land has their haven!"

"But I'm not from this land. In the country I come from, it's not particularly unusual. Plenty of people don't belong to any specific church."

"?!" Lady Serena looked startled. "Wh-what, really?"

"Really, milady. Well...maybe it's not quite fair to say we're *completely* nonsectarian. Near the end of the year, people have a big celebration for the birthday of the founder of one religion; then at the end of the same month, bells are rung to mark the turning of the year in accordance with another religion. And once the new year starts, we do what a different religion called Shinto says and pray for a year of health and success."

"Does your country have something against priests?"

Gee, I didn't really know.

Anyway, Lady Serena pressed her hands to her temples and let out a sigh. "I'm at the end of my rope... I just want to know how to free you from your puppet state. If I try to repay your debt to me, you stop me. And if I order you to get out of this room, *that's* when you endure the pain of resisting my commands. So I thought about trying to kill you, but now that you're a follower of Lady Regina, you've got the curse of vengeance..."

What a thing to do to a devoted Regina follower like me.

"Gah, dammit!" Lady Serena exclaimed. "What do I do? What do I *do*?! Tell me: How can I get you away from me?"

"You ordered me to follow you, Lady Serena, and now I believe my relationships with my former party members are in tatters. If you don't take responsibility and look after me for the rest of my life—"

"Aaaaggghhh! I'm not hearing this; I can't hear you! ...Wait, that's it! Listen, when Vanir gave you that forbidden potion set, he gave you a single de-puppetification brew, too, didn't he? Whatever happened to that?!" she demanded, clinging to me, practically in tears.

As I recalled...

"I believe I gave it to one of my party members, a priest called Aqua who has

the ability to change any liquid into pure water..."

"Gaaaaahhhh! Of all the luck! Of all the powers! Why would you give it to someone who can do *that*?!?" Lady Serena raced out of the room as fast as she could, tears flowing from her eyes. I could hear her saying, "How did this happen...?! Everything was going so well. Where did I go wrong? How did I screw up?! Damn it all, I was so close...! I'd puppeted so many of the adventurers in this town that everything was almost ready...! Where did I go wrong?!"

I trotted after her. "It's all right, Lady Serena. You still have me, don't you?"

"You're the whole problem!" Suddenly, she snapped. "You...! You don't listen to a damn word I say—you just ask and demand and take...! Errrg...!"

"Hngggh...! L-Lady Serena, if you choke me, you won't be able to...breathe... either...!"

Lady Serena let me go when she finally couldn't take the suffocation anymore. "Damn! Dammit! Shit! Why...?! How can you enter a religion so easily...?! You're supposed to think long and hard about which god to follow; it's supposed to be for life!" She pounded my chest with her fist and slumped to the ground. Her voice was shaking. Was she crying?

"But, milady, there were so many religions where I used to live... In fact, in my country, it was said there were eight million gods. So of course, it's not that hard to become a believer. I've even heard of a church in one country that worships a flying spaghetti monster."

"I hate your stupid country. I *hate* it!"

Lady Serena sat on the ground, covering her face with her hands. I lifted the hem of her skirt. I had to get compensation for her strangling me, of course. "You sure do like black, don't you, ma'am?" I commented.

"Arrrrghhhhhh!" Lady Serena leaped up, her eyes full of tears as she batted my hand away from her skirt. "We're going to your mansion! I know you'll tag along even if I order you not to, so come on!"

"Is that an order? If so, I'm going to require compensation!"

"Then don't come!"

"Are you telling me to stay here all alone? In that case, I'll need a proper apology and compensation for so cruelly making me lonely."

"Stop talking! Just stop talking! Everything you say makes me doubt my sanity!" Lady Serena was shouting now, not caring that people were looking. Finally, she dashed off toward my former house.

People tended to look at Lady Serena rather balefully these days—after all the strange things she had done. Rumors were spreading of a perverted woman who went around showing her panties to people. I didn't know how the situation had come to be like this, but I felt bad for her.

She rushed through town, making no effort at all to hide herself or what she was doing, until at last she arrived at the mansion I once knew so well. Without even stopping to catch her breath, she pounded on the door. "Open up! I know you're in there! Open this door! I'm returning your beloved party member to you!"

There was no answer. I guess they were out.

"Damn it all! Of all the times...! Come on—let's go! They must be at the Guild or something!" Lady Serena said and then stalked off.

As I trotted after her, I happened to glance back at the house.

.....

It looked so big and, with nobody home, so empty. Looking at it, I thought I felt a little tug on my heartstrings...

"Hey! What are you dawdling for? I need you with me or there's no point! Pick up the pace!" Serena snapped.

Sheesh, first stay behind, then hurry up and come with her—she must be a very busy person. She changes her mind every two seconds. I looked back at the mansion just once more...

.....?

"I said hurry up! I swear, I don't understand why you never, ever listen to me!"

"Hold on, Lady Serena. Did you see a girl in the window of the mansion?" It was only for an instant, but I thought I had seen a girl with golden hair peering out a second-floor window.

I wished they had told me they were letting a girl like that stay at our house. I might have even thought about coming back.

"I don't know what you're talking about! A girl? Have you started seeing things that shouldn't be seen? ...Wait, is there a *ghost* in that mansion? Don't tell me Lady Regina's blessings have also given you basic priest abilities... Bah, forget it! We need to get going!"

...?

Perplexed, I looked toward the house again. I didn't see any sign of the golden-haired girl I thought I had spotted. It was so weird. This was going to bother me. It went beyond the tugging at my heartstrings—it felt like someone who'd been with me a long time was sadly watching me leave...

I took one last look toward the house, completely flummoxed, then went to catch up with Lady Serena.

3

"Huh? Outside of town?"

"At this time of day, I would suspect so."

Lady Serena had rushed into the Adventurers Guild, and when she hadn't seen Aqua or the others anywhere, she'd been just about to rush right out again. That was when I'd offered my idea.

"What the hell would they be doing outside of town? What's out there?"

"It's not so much *what's* out there. Our spell-caster has a daily routine. She probably got both of the others to go with her. She usually heads out around this time."

Lady Serena looked absolutely defeated. "Why didn't you tell me that sooner?!" she bellowed, not caring that everyone in the Guild was looking at her. Maybe she was reaching her limit in more ways than one.

There was something more important, though. “Lady Serena, since we’re here, I’d like to get something to eat,” I said, settling myself at the closest table.

Lady Serena glared at me resentfully. “I’m not paying, dammit. I don’t need you to be any further in my debt.”

“Excuse me, I’ll have everything on the menu from *here* to *here*, on her tab, please.”

“I said I’m not paying, damn you! I’m not going to pay for your stupid— Er, ahem, I’ll just have, um, water, please.” Lady Serena tried to put on a decent front for the server (it seemed a little late for that), but then she resumed fidgeting. “L-listen...! I’ll bet you know roughly where outside town your friends are, don’t you? Tell me. I’m just going to go and look. You can sit here and eat.”

“I refuse. I can’t let you go alone, Lady Serena. Aside from an Arch-wizard everyone regards as possibly crazy, my former party includes a priest whose powers might be greater even than your own and a young woman who’s nothing if not sturdy. I don’t believe that pack of rabid dogs would listen to anything you had to say, milady, and if you ran into them out in the wild, I am certain there would be a fight.”

Lady Serena thought about that for a bit before she finally said, “All right, once you’re done eating all that stuff you ordered, I want you to come with me for a moment. Today, I’m finally going to give you a proper job to do.” Then she looked at me and, for once, she smiled.

“Gosh, you certainly took your time, Lady Serena. I feel like I’ve been waiting for you forever. I’m not sure what you have in mind here—after you treated me to such a lovely meal, you’re making me carry all this stuff. That’s going to affect who owes whom, you know?”

“Y-you...you damnable...” Lady Serena’s head drooped as I sat on the ground, acting quite lazy.

We were in the communal cemetery. When she’d told me we were coming here after my meal, I ate a bit of what I had left, then was considerate enough to come here by myself first. My servant’s heart deeply wished to share some of my food—I’d ordered so much that I couldn’t eat it all—with Lady Serena, who hadn’t been eating well recently. So I told her that I was going to the bathroom,

then left a quiet request with one of the Guild employees and slipped out...

“How was your meal?”

“Oh, it was tasty, all right! And it would have been even better if I hadn’t had to wash dishes until this late hour because I don’t have any damn money!” Lady Serena shouted, almost crying. “All right, I don’t have time to be chatting with you. Come on, Kazuma—we’re doing this! We’re digging up all the bodies sleeping in the ground here. I’m going to puppet them and make them my soldiers. I’ll take this area; you get that area over there.”

“I’m very sorry, but I have a religious objection to violating the dead.”

“‘Religious objection’?! You believe in Lady Regina! Religious objection, my ass! If you’re afraid to touch a dead body, then at least say so! Shut up and get started! Do what you’re asked for once in your life, instead of trying to get your own way!”

“I really must beg your indulgence.”

I couldn’t conceivably dig up dead bodies. I fought against the horrendous pain of resisting her order until, finally, Lady Serena gave up, once again looking like she might cry. “Dammit, fine! Just stand over there and don’t move!” she said. Then she took her shovel and started digging.

With all that work Lady Serena had had to do, it was quite late now. I wondered if Aqua and the others might not be home by this hour. In other words, even if she puppeted some corpses to attack the girls, would they be back in town already...?

I was about to tell her that even if she dug up those bodies and took them under her control, we couldn’t use them in town, but then I realized that to offer helpful advice would be to repay my debt to her. So instead I hardened my heart and simply watched Lady Serena dig, sweat pouring down her face.

“Hff... Hff... There! The first body! Now I just need to get this thing under my control and make it dig up more graves... *Marionette!*”

“Sorry, you don’t have enough Puppet Points.”

“...?!” Lady Serena looked at me in amazement. The corpse didn’t budge. “H-

hey! What are Puppet Points? What's going on here...?"

After some mumbling to herself, she clapped her hands. "Puppet Points must be how much control I've poured into you! You just gave it a stupid name! Listen up, Kazuma—don't fight me, okay? I'm going to negate just a little bit of your debt to me and get back some of my control. Remember, don't fight, all right?! As much as I'd love to break my control over you completely, I know by now that you won't let me. Listen. I'm only going to weaken my control slightly so that I can take on another puppet. You won't resist, will you?"

"Gosh, that's an awful lot of lead-in. Can I basically assume it's, like, comedian's banter?"

"No, it isn't! Now listen, I don't want you to resist, okay? Here goes...!I told you not to fight me! You're supposed to be my puppet! It wouldn't kill you to do what I actually say every *once* in a while!"

I was desperately resisting allowing any of Lady Serena's power within me to be drawn out. She had *me*; she didn't need any other puppets.

Lady Serena grabbed my stubborn self by the lapels and started choking me, her eyes full of tears.

"Urrrgh, h-hold on, Lady Serena...! While you were busy washing dishes and digging up corpses, it's gotten to be fully dark... They must be home by now..."

"Why didn't you say that *sooner*?! Anyway, whose fault is it that I have to wash dishes and dig up dead bodies...?! Gah! *Dammit!*"

She didn't even bother wiping off the tears that spilled down her cheeks, she just took off running for my mansion...

Lady Serena looked absolutely exhausted. I'm not sure why, but a beautiful woman who looks completely spent can be pretty attractive in her own way. At that moment, Lady Serena was knocking weakly on the door of the mansion. She didn't even have the strength to call out anymore.

Shortly after, we heard a voice from inside, though the door didn't open. "Who's calling at this hour? If you're a traveling salesman, fine, I'll listen to you, but if this is some religious thing, then get lost." The voice belonged to Aqua. It had been so long since I'd heard her speak, but she sounded just as dumb as

ever.

"Hey there, it's me. I came to give back that guy you all seem to like so much."

There was a moment of silence when Aqua heard Lady Serena's voice. Then the door cracked open just the tiniest bit. Aqua was peering out from inside. "Kazuma...? Really? You really mean it?" She was looking at me like she could hardly believe what she was seeing.

There was a huge crash from inside, then the sound of rushing footsteps.

Lady Serena leaned toward me and whispered into my ear, "Just keep your mouth shut, all right? It'll make things simple. If you behave, when we get back to the inn, believe me, I'll *compensate* you very, very well."

"I don't wanna wait until we get back. Give me my compensation now."

Lady Serena groaned with a grimace but only for a moment; then she got herself together, crossed her arms, and stood proudly. The door finally opened all the way to reveal Megumin and Darkness standing behind Aqua, looking somewhat uneasy. The moment they saw me, they both lit up.

And then...

".....May I ask what that man is doing?"

Megumin said, her face grim. "That man," of course, being...

"You can just ignore him for now. In fact, I've come to return him."

That's right; I was "that man," and at the moment, I was sitting on the ground, industriously holding up Lady Serena's skirt and inspecting her panties at close range. Everyone except Lady Serena was watching me in astonishment.

Megumin managed to avert her eyes from my underwear study, looking like the sight pained her; then she stepped forward, obviously angry. "What in the world have you done to Kazuma? Even for this loser, such unabashed sexual harassment is out of character. I know how much he loves to harass women, but he always finds some way to pretend that he just stumbled into the situation or come up with another excuse. When he harasses *me*, he's always weirdly clever about it, so to see him like this..."

She trailed off there, but I was curious where she had been about to go. "To

see him like this..." what?

"The way this loser always grows frightened the moment I try to get close to him is both one of his worst and one of his best qualities. I've known you were suspicious for some time, and now I want to know what you've done. I've been hearing the rumors about you and Kazuma around town. Now here you are, trying to return your little pet. You have to be plotting something. To see him in such a sorry state is..."

Is what? Is what?!

"...Listen. The fact is, we don't need *this* Kazuma. If you're going to give him back to us, could you return him to normal first? It's not very nice to steal something from someone and then try to give it back after you've broken it." That was Aqua, putting her own spin on the conversation...

There were a few things I would have liked to say about calling someone "not needed" or "broken," but Lady Serena had ordered me not to talk, so I wouldn't. Anyway, I was too busy veritably worshipping her panties.

Lady Serena held a hand out toward Aqua. "Let's make a deal. I'll turn this guy back to normal, if you give me that potion you're holding. Do that, and I'll give him back to you, good as new."

Aqua looked at the potion she had been clutching to her chest. And then...

"Sorry, but no. This potion is the last thing Kazuma gave me before he lost his mind. I don't have to give it to you. Why do you want it anyway? What did that weird devil say to you? Tell me how you plan to use this thing."

Creaak. I heard Lady Serena's teeth grind together. She was probably really reaching her limit after all the trouble she'd gone through on my account. She looked at the ground and said softly, "You'd best listen to what I say while I've still got control of myself, you understand? I wouldn't want you to underestimate me. I may not look like much, but—"

She never got to finish.

"This came from Kazuma, and it's precious to me. You can't have it!"

"Fine, I understand. I guess the negotiations are over, then. You're finished!"

Lady Serena shouted, pointing at Aqua. Darkness was already stepping between them.

“Death!”

Lady Serena shouted, and the end of her finger glowed, and then...!

“.....Huh?” Lady Serena said stupidly as the light in her fingertip faded.

“Got you!” Aqua and Darkness cried, then pounced on her.

4

Lady Serena was forced to the ground, where Darkness sat on her to pin her down. Darkness wasn’t wearing her armor, but her toned body was more than enough to handle Lady Serena, who was just a priest.

“Dammit, my magic...! But why...?! Lady Regina, Lady Regina! Give me power...!” cried Lady Serena, trying to squirm her way out from under Darkness.

Darkness grabbed her by the neck and began making demands. “All right, it’s time for you to set this man free from his curse... Wh-what the—? I can’t breathe, either?!”

While Darkness was distracted, Lady Serena pointed a finger at her from the ground. “Death! Death! D—”

She tried the spell again and again until Darkness clapped a hand over her mouth, but nothing happened.

Now, what was I supposed to do in this situation? Should I help Lady Serena or...?

“...Hey, you guys,” Aqua said, “are we sure we want him back? I don’t need *this*.”

“Ugh...,” Darkness said. “I guess maybe...I don’t...need...*this*, either?”

I wondered if “this” was supposed to refer to me; I was still peeking under Lady Serena’s skirt while Darkness had her pinned.

That’s when I felt someone tug on my sleeve. Megumin stood there, looking oddly happy. Then she grasped the hem of her robe and began to raise it up bit

by bit...

"Gosh... You all like black, don't you?" I said, crouching on the floor and inspecting Megumin's panties, with which I was now confronted, at point-blank range.

"M-Megumin?!" Darkness exclaimed.

"Megumin, I never knew you had it in you!" Aqua added. Megumin ignored them, placing a satisfied hand on my head as I looked at her underpants.

"If no one else has any need of him, then *I* shall take this man." She looked positively triumphant.

"Oh!" Darkness said, suddenly concerned.

I must say, this was a very odd situation.

Darkness sat astride Lady Serena, who struggled to free herself, her mouth still covered. Megumin was patting my head, and I was continuing to observe her panties.

But then...

"...Oh-ho. I see your blessing from the minor goddess Regina has been cut in half. A deity's blessing is distributed among their followers. That has to mean Regina was such a minor goddess that you were her only believer. You had her power all to yourself until now, but since our Kazuma believes in her, too..."



"...?!" Lady Serena was still gagged, but she managed to stare daggers at me. I guess, even though I was supposed to be her puppet, my becoming Lady Regina's follower had weakened Lady Serena's power significantly. Oops. But glaring at me wouldn't change anything.

Aqua crouched down by Lady Serena and pried Darkness's hand off her mouth. "Turn Kazuma back to normal right now!" she said.

"...Use that potion on him and he'll change back. Although I think you can expect him to put up quite the resistance." Lady Serena sounded absolutely exhausted.

What was going on here? How should I, Lady Serena's loyal servant, act at this moment? Megumin had one of my hands in a vise grip and wasn't letting go. Her other hand was still patting my head. And me, I just crouched there, looking up Megumin's skirt...

"Heh-heh, it's been a while, Kazuma," Megumin said, both a little embarrassed and unmistakably pleased. My fervent wish was to help Lady Serena, but I found the devilish Megumin so tempting when she smiled like that... Lady Serena had unleashed all my most basic instincts, and I was totally unable to control myself. *So I'm very, very sorry, Lady Serena, but please forgive me.*

"Maybe you can explain this while you're at it," Darkness said. "What were you even thinking? How was it amusing to turn our Kazuma into a remorseless pervert like this?"

"I didn't know it was going to happen! I just tried to make him my puppet. I simply forced him to abandon all morals and inhibitions... I didn't realize how much he would change!" Lady Serena bit her lip, clearly pained. "I can't tell you how awful it's been... He always finds some reason to refuse to work, and the moment he gets the slightest opportunity, he sexually harasses me. He's leading a pathetic life of complete selfishness and indulgence..."

"Gee, that actually doesn't sound that much different from usual for Kazuma," Aqua said. "Well anyway, if we use this potion on him, he'll go back to normal, right?" She started to come closer to me.

"Personally, I don't really mind him like this..." Megumin was blushing a little as I continued to study her panties. She also had a firm grip on my hand so I couldn't get away. If she really was all right with me being this way, then she would let go of me.

Aqua approached cautiously. "All right, Kazuma, I'm going to turn you back to normal now, so just be a good boy, okay?"

"I wanna stay like this," I said immediately, but Aqua kept gradually closing the distance between us.

"Now, that won't do. There you go, hold still, just like that..."

"Hey, Priest, stay sharp! I guarantee he's going to try something!" Lady Serena snapped.

Aqua, feeling she didn't need the warning, replied, "Y-yeah, I get it. How long do you think I've known Kazuma? Megumin, hold on tight—don't let him get away! Okay, here we go..."

"Steal!!"

~~~~~"Oh!"~~~~~

I looked away from Megumin's panties just long enough to stretch out my hand toward Aqua. With one single application of my skill, I popped the potion right out of her hands. And then...

"Hiyaah!"

"Nooooo!"

...I threw it away as hard as I could.

Aqua made a sliding catch an instant before the bottle hit the ground.

"I told you! I knew he would try something!"

"Well, what was I supposed to do?! He's worked you over enough; you should know how it goes! You never can guess what he's going to come up with! Megumin! Megumiiin!!" Aqua, almost in tears, was clinging to Megumin, clutching the potion close in hopes that I wouldn't be able to steal it again.

Then Lady Serena, still pinned down by Darkness, said, "I order you, my

puppet, Kazuma Satou: Sit still and don't move!"

"Okay, I have no choice," Megumin said. "I'm pretty happy with you the way you are now, but... Here, Kazuma. I'm going to give you a great big hug. Just stay...still...? H-hey, don't struggle! Hold still! Aqua, quick! He's nuzzling my chest...!"

"Megumin, hold on to him! Don't let him turn this way!"

While my face was buried in Megumin's chest, I felt something cold running down the back of my head.

No sooner had it happened than I felt something leave my body.

*No, stop! I want to stay the way I am! There were still things I wanted to do to Lady Serena! Things I can only do with the power of Lady Regina, the goddess of revenge...!*

"Huh?"

Why did I need the goddess of revenge again? For that matter..."Lady Serena"? Why was I thinking of a general of the Demon King in those honorifics?

And why was I suddenly a fervent believer in some goddess I hardly knew anything about?

...Ah, so that was it. The moment before Serena put me under her control, I remember swearing that I would have my revenge on the general of the Demon King who'd hurt my useless goddess...

5

"Kazuma, how are you feeling? Are you better?"

Someone was slapping my cheeks. I raised my head to find myself looking into Megumin's eyes.

.....

"I think a stronger hug would have made a few things better."

"Yep, he's back to normal. All right... H-hey, I know you're fixed now, so get

away from me!"

Megumin peeled me off her, and I had no choice but to stand up. For some reason, I still felt like I was in a dream. One where I was serving the most wonderful goddess... Oh well. I had always basically been nonsectarian.

"Kazuma, are you all right?" Aqua asked. "If you're so desperate to serve a deity that you would resort to worshipping Regina—a goddess so minor that I've hardly ever heard of her—then I think you'd be better off worshipping me. There are lots of benefits. For example, I can improve that awful handwriting of yours so it's beautiful and flowing."

"Pass. Why do you think I would worship a minor goddess anyway? Wait... huh?"

...?

Why *had* I done that?

"I don't know—you tell me."

"Geez, I...I have no idea." I found that unsettling, but now wasn't the time to worry about it.

"Hey, I see you're back to normal," said Serena, who was stretched out on the ground with Darkness still on top of her. The question was what to do with her now.

"You're a tough one to get rid of," I said.

"Any chance you'd just let me go, then? Heck, we even lived together for a while, right? I think the best option for both of us is to go our separate ways."

She was trying to sound casual and had both her arms outstretched. She knew perfectly well that I couldn't do anything to her. Even something like take her to the police.

...Gee, this left me feeling extremely uneasy and not at all like anything had been resolved.

Well maybe, knowing that Aqua could bring me back to life even if the curse of revenge killed me, we could take her somewhere way outside of town, and I could—

Nah. I didn't have it in me to kill anyone.

If I had that kind of nerve, I never would have earned the nickname Loser.

So maybe we could wrap her in a carpet and leave her in a dungeon somewhere... No, that would be like indirect murder...

Dang, you live with someone for a little while, and you start having all sorts of complex feelings about them. But just letting her go didn't seem like a plan, either.

"I can see you're agonizing. Think of it this way, Kazuma: Does letting me go actually do you any harm? If you set me free, I bet they'd reconsider attacking this town. Believe me, I've had enough of being anywhere remotely close to where you are. That's the truth. Then there's Wiz, a general of the Demon King in name only. And Vanir, too. If we attack Axel, who knows what'll happen to that addled pair? I can go back to the castle and put a stop to that plan. You let me go, and I don't touch this town. How about it? A proper bargain this time." Serena had a slight smile on her face, as if she could see everything I was thinking about.

From her perch atop Serena, Darkness asked, "Kazuma, who exactly is this woman anyway? Does she have some connection to the Demon King? If it's to keep the people of this town safe, then I'll kill her if you tell me to."

I grabbed her shoulders before she could say something even more ridiculous. Darkness was a noble and the temporary governor of our town. She could also be surprisingly short-tempered, and I wouldn't put it past her to actually off Serena if she thought it would keep people safe.

Still, what she said hardened my resolve.

"Hey, what's that? Why do you still have that?" Serena said, her face tightening when she saw what I was holding.

"Sorry, Serena. There won't be any bargaining. Believe me, this is going to hurt me as much as it hurts you. Literally."

I'd pulled out Vanir's forbidden potion set from my bag. They all had terrible, ridiculous effects, but I seemed to remember that one of them would reset the level of the imbiber.

I was always leaning on my friends for help. But this time, this one time, I would see this through to the end all by myself. Using this potion on Serena would presumably invoke Regina's curse of vengeance and cause my level to be reset, too.

"What do you think you're doing? Come on, Kazuma, don't. We shared a room together, didn't we? Make the smart choice and let me go."

But then, one of us was a general of the Demon King and one of us was a NEET who belonged to the weakest class. Getting sent back to Level 1 was going to be a lot worse for one of us than the other.

I pulled out the level reset potion and knelt down by Serena. "Sorry, but maybe we could both start fresh."

"...?!" Serena started thrashing then, but Darkness slammed a fist into her stomach. "Hrgh!"

"Hngh?! Wh-what the hell?! Hey, Kazuma, when I punched this lady, I felt it in my own stomach!"

"Yeah, any damage done to her gets suffered by the attacker as well," I said quietly. "Don't even think about trying to kill her. Apparently, killing her would call down a curse that would cause a mass death."

"I see," Megumin said. "So that's why you went unconscious when you kicked her." She was nodding to herself.

Without a word, Darkness, for some reason, pinched Serena's cheek.

"Eeeyow-ow-ow! Why would you do that?!" Serena demanded.

"Hrn...! I know you're hiding something. Come on—spit it out! You can't fool me! *Hff, hff...* O-ow, that hurts...! Hnnngh... But pain such as this is hardly enough to best me...!"

"Hiding something'? Kazuma knows pretty much the entire story! Ouch! Stop that! I promise you, there's really nothing else besides what I told him! Ow, stoppit! I know this pain has to be coming back at you! Stop already!"

Serena tried desperately to shove away Darkness, who had begun a very special form of one-person play using Regina's blessing.

As for me, I held the potion in my hand.

"Hey, Kazuma, would you make this lady stop—? Wh-whoa, hold on now, stay back. You know your own level's going to plummet, right? Think about it—what do you gain from dropping me to Level 1? S-stop and think already!"

I tilted the bottle toward the panicking Serena. "Eh, I'll just take my time and level back up. I hit the level cap pretty quickly anyway. I've got plenty of money to keep me living large, so there's no rush... Your faithful servant will accompany you to the bitter end, 'Lady' Serena. Let's go back to square one... together."

Serena, frowning hard, grabbed Darkness's hand as our Crusader tried to pinch her cheek again.

"You really are the most dangerous thing for the Demon King's army."

"You're giving me too much credit. I'm going to live the easy life from now on. If you ever make it back to the Demon King's castle, give him my regards."

I was sort of kidding, but Serena ignored me; instead, she pointed her finger at me. What did she think she was doing?

...Oh.

"I guess I can't let you live after all. With you back to normal, I'm Lady Regina's only follower again, and that means I've got my power back. Good-bye, my selfish puppet."

I tried to grab her arm, and Darkness tried to clap a hand over her mouth, but Serena was too fast.

*"Death!"*

## Chapter 4

### A Calling for This Adventurer!



1

“Welcome home, my dear, beloved husband!”

I opened my eyes to find myself in a very familiar white room, with Lady Eris standing there grinning at me. “You look like you’re having fun, milady.”

“Doesn’t it kind of freshen things up? I know coming here is nothing new for you these days. I apologize, though. It was inappropriate of me to ignore how unhappy you are.” She smiled, but there was a hint of pain in it.

“Say it again,” I said.

“No, I don’t think I will... Even though I started it.”

Gee, and she was always so full of spunk when she was the chief.

“S-so, uh, what happened to...you know? After she cast Death on me?”

“Darkness snapped and started beating the crap out of her, and now they’re both unconscious. My senior goddess is busy resurrecting you. As for Megumin, since she tied up that Demon King’s general nice and tight, she’s been tending to Darkness. What I’m saying is, don’t worry. Everyone’s fine, okay?”

Then Lady Eris smiled at me, and I felt my heart grow lighter. All I needed to do now was have Aqua resurrect me, and then I could get down to business. Honestly, it sucked being Level 1 again, but I figured it was the best way to

render Serena powerless. I'd had a few other ideas, but I really wanted to wrap things up on my own.

Feeling a little better about the situation, I sat down and hugged my knees to my chest. Man, it had been a while since I last died... I knew life just tended to be nasty, brutish, and short in this world for weaklings like me, but I couldn't help wondering if there was anything at all I could do about that. It was depressing to drop dead so easily.

The biggest problem was that my resistance to coming here was gradually eroding. I wasn't sure I was comfortable being comfortable with the idea of dying.

Eris didn't say anything, just smiled at me, looking into my eyes. The way she stood there with her hands clasped in front of her chest, she didn't really have to say anything—just her being there felt healing. Looking at her, I thought I could feel my attachment to the world weakening. I wanted to stay here forever.

I had that feeling every time I came here. I always asked myself, how come I had to fight with the Demon King's generals or whatever? Why did I constantly have to mix it up with these powerful foes in some other world? Sure, I'd earned lots of money, but now I heard that the Demon King's daughter was going to attack the capital and that a squadron was going to be sent specifically to my town and everything...

Ugh...

I was feeling awfully depressed. Maybe that was just a side effect of dying.

But no, I had to get back. Right now, the only person who knew about the assault on the capital or the group coming to Axel was me. And even though I'd brought down Serena's level, I'd reset mine, too...

"Sigh..."

That was the most I could muster when I thought about what was coming.

Lady Eris looked at me, sitting there and sighing, with some worry. "Are you all right? No...of course not, I guess. You are dead, after all..." She squatted down so she was eye to eye with me, hugging her own knees to her chest, and

gazed at me, concerned.



"I always knew you were sweet and kind, Chief. You sure you don't want to quit being a goddess, get married, and run off to some faraway alternate world with me?"

"You know you're asking for some divine punishment, teasing a goddess like that when you're already dating Megumin, right?"

Oh yeah, Megumin! "Lady Eris, you wouldn't just happen to secretly have a thing for me, and you're pretending to be friends with Megumin but burning with jealousy inside and throwing a wrench into the works every time we're about to cross the final frontier.....would you?"

"Of course not—that's ridiculous! Hey, no, what's that face you're making? You don't believe me?! Why are we even having this discussion?!"

My poor, battered heart started to feel better just having the opportunity to tease Lady Eris a little.

*"Kazuma, Kazuma! Everything's ready on our end, so come home!"*

The moment was spoiled when we heard the voice of the most useless goddess I knew, exercising her one talent as usual: the ability to be completely oblivious to a mood. I put my hands over my ears and pretended not to hear her, wanting just a few more minutes here before I had to go back to that cruel world.

Eris looked distressed by my attempts to avoid reality. "U-um, I think my senior goddess is calling you. Not that I don't sympathize, but..."

"Dying left and right like this is seriously depressing, and knowing I'll probably just die again is even worse. I'm beginning to think it might be better to start a fresh, new life and try it all over again."

"Goodness..." Eris continued to hug her knees, still looking alarmed. "I guess that makes sense; normally, dying even once is quite a shock. But in your case, Kazuma, your deaths have all been easy, so the emotional shock has been minimal..." Then she had a quiet smile on her face. She tilted her head inquisitively and said, "Haven't you made a lot of wonderful friends and memories in this world, though? Aren't there still things you want to do? Come on—try to think back to those pleasant days..."

That prompted me to think about everything I had done and experienced in this other world. I remembered how Aqua and I had worked with our hands and slept in the stables when we first got here. All the debt I'd been saddled with for the stupidest reasons. Party members who caused nothing but trouble and always needed me to clean up their messes. A town full of weirdos, freaks, and jerkwads.

And all the times I had died as a result.

I'd come *this* close to getting in good with my party members, yet somehow I'd managed to end my life without ever crossing that final line.

“.....Yeah, I think being reborn is the best option.”

“What?!”

Maybe I could get her to send me back to Earth as a cat in some rich family's house. Then I could spend my whole life sleeping and doing whatever I wanted.

“*Kazuma, hurry up! Come on!*”

Aqua sounded so carefree.

I'd tried. Oh God, how I'd tried. If I came back to life now, I figured I was just going to drop dead again before too long.

“I'm going to go live a new life now!” I shouted into the void. “You guys can take care of stuff in that world! Tell the girls to be happy!”

“Whaaaat?!” Eris exclaimed, first astonished but then finally silent. And then...

“*You're being dumb again! I've had just about enough of this! Why is it I can set my watch by how often you say stupid things? Are you that eager to make my life difficult? Are you just stupid? That's it, isn't it? You're just stupid. That's why you went prancing off after that priestess, right?!*”

“Huh?!” I exclaimed, the blood rushing to my head. “You wanna see stupid? Look in the mirror! Why do you think I picked a fight with a general of the Demon King?! Listen to me. I was conducting a secret battle with that priestess to keep our town safe! And it finally led to me getting brainwashed and dragged off...”

“*Hey! Megumin, what are you doing? Huh? Wait...!*”

...Uh-oh.

“Do whatever you want—it’s no skin off my nose! You can draw stupid stuff on my body or whatever you like! Until you all beg me to come back, weeping and crying, I’ll never—”

“*Megumin, what are you doing? Seriously, what?! Kazuma, Kazuma! If you don’t come back quick...! If you don’t come back...!*”

N-no! They weren’t going to pull the wool over my eyes, and they weren’t going to suck me in with their little games. It didn’t matter to me what they did with my corpse at this point. Empty threats...!

“*Kazuma, Megumin is—! She says she’s going to take your first time! She’s trying to do something absolutely unspeakable! You know, all day I’ve been wondering what’s gotten into her!*”

Damn her and her feminine wiles!

“.....” When she saw me hug my knees and start mumbling to myself, Lady Eris’s look became colder somehow.

*Crap, if I don’t go back, I’m going to miss the very moment when I finally become an adult...! But if I do go back, it’ll only prove that I’m an easy guy Megumin can manipulate with a honeypot trap... No, no, no, but—!*

“*Megumin,*” Aqua said, “*I don’t think Kazuma can cope with something so big for his very first time! Stop, he’s gonna break!*”

?!

“*That’s the first Megumin was talking about?!*”

“*Don’t do that, Megumin! That’s for eating! You can’t do that with it! You’ll earn divine retribution!*”

“Stop her! Aqua, I’m coming—just stop her!”

“*Ahhh! Megumin, Megumin! N-no more—we’re out of time! Kazuma said he’s coming home! Quick, pull his pants back up...!*”

I jumped to my feet. “Okay, Lady Eris, I’m in a hurry, so I guess this is good-bye!” I raced for the familiar door.

"Y-yes, farewell... Oh! Kazuma, I'm sorry—I know you're in such a hurry, but there's something extremely important I have to tell you..."

"What, now?! We've had all the time in the world, and you waited until now?! When I get back to the mortal plane, incarnate yourself as the chief and tell me then!"

*"Why do you always act so manly, Megumin?! Come on—we have to get rid of the evidence before Kazuma comes back!"*

Starting to feel sick with anxiety, I turned back to Eris. She looked at me apologetically. "The truth is, this world is now—"

*"Megumin, we're supposed to put them on, not pull them off! Stop that—there's no more time...!"*

"I'm sorry, Lady Eris, but I don't think I can process what you're saying right now! Aqua, stop her! I'll give you some pocket change later—just get her to stop!"

Aqua's voice, coming down at us from the sky, made it impossible to maintain a serious atmosphere. *"Oh no, she's seen so many parts of you she shouldn't see... Argh, Megumin, no! No, don't... Ahhh..."*

"Don't give up! Listen to me, Aqua—don't you throw in the towel! Keep fighting! I'm on my way!"

Eris, red-faced, shouted as fast as she could: "This world is in real danger! If things keep going this way, there's a very serious possibility humanity will be wiped out by the Demon King's army! I'm begging you—listen to me!"

When I opened my eyes, Aqua was peering down at me.

"Oh, Kazuma! Welcome back! That was a close one!"

"W-w-welcome back," Megumin said, her face flushed and her breath a bit ragged. She was hiding something behind her back. The moment our eyes met, she looked away.

My pants were in a sorry state; they'd obviously been pulled up in an awful hurry. Aqua and Megumin weren't moving a muscle. Serena and Darkness lay on the floor, still out cold.

"O-okay then, I'll just go back to helping Darkness," Megumin said, and then she scuttled away from me as if she was fleeing. I watched her go, then turned toward Aqua, who still looked a little uneasy.

"Hey, Aqua."

"Yes, what?! I stopped her, okay? She and I, we definitely didn't do a close study of Little Kazuma, okay?!"

...Damn them...

I finally got myself together and said:

"...You mentioned going back home to the heavenly realm. Still up for that?"

2

"Kazuma, wake up! It's morning! Come on, quick! Hurry and get up!"

It was the next day. Aqua burst into my room without so much as a knock, shouting as usual. When I finally convinced myself to peek from under the covers, I could see it was hardly even light out.

"What *time* is it?"

"It's almost five o'clock, silly."

*That's way too early...*

I squirmed back under my blanket, but Aqua launched herself at me. "What, are you trying to go back to sleep?! Come on—get up, get up! You need to get ready so we can go on a quest and level you up!"

"Gimme a break... I was barhopping all last night, so the plan today is to sleep until nighttime... We were celebrating defeating a general of the Demon King yesterday..."

The day before, I'd told Aqua what Eris had told me. My plan had worked perfectly; Serena and I both found ourselves back at Level 1. We'd handed Serena over to the police, and I told them everything I had learned. In her weakened state, Serena wouldn't be able to cast any powerful curses on anyone. The chief of police said something about finally being able to squeeze

some answers out of Serena. She was also going to make sure that the capital knew about the Demon King's daughter's attack and that we would be ready for anything they tried to pull in Axel.

Finally, we were told that there was going to be a big bounty in it for us for having captured a general of the Demon King and having nixed her plans before anything happened.

When it came to me personally, though, stuck back at the very first level, there wasn't much I could do. I couldn't help at the capital, and I had done all I could about Serena's plan to puppet powerful adventurers and use them as a fifth column in an attack on Axel. With that plan foiled, I doubted the Demon King's forces would be able to take the town. Without Serena's leadership, the attack might even fall apart entirely.

All of which meant I could relax. I'd spent the day before celebrating, drinking late into the night. But now Aqua was perched on my bed, smacking me and shouting, "Wake up, wake uuup! Come on, hurry! This is for humanity! This is for the future! We have to go stop the Demon King!"

Stop the Demon King. There was a reason she wouldn't shut up about that ridiculous idea, wasn't there? That's right: It had to do with what Eris had said to me.

"Don't worry about the Demon King," I said. "One of these days, a hero chosen by some goddess will take care of him... G'night now..."

"We have a perfectly good goddess right here! And I hereby certify you as that hero, so get up and let's go!"

Eris had told me this world was in danger. It had to do with something Serena had mentioned, too: the lack of new hero candidates. Heroes with cheats had been coming here from Japan. Sending them had been Aqua's job. But when that angel started covering for her, somehow they just couldn't get anyone over here.

Part of it was that the angels were very serious about their morals. When they tried to enlist someone to come here, they completely refused to sugarcoat it at all. No lies were told. They were completely honest about what had happened to the other Japanese people who'd come over here, anticipated survival rates,

side effects of learning the local language, and exactly how tough life could be around these parts. They spelled out every detail.

In other words, it turned out that this lackadaisical goddess was exactly who they'd needed to run what amounted to a scam-hero thing.

"You sent us all over here without even telling us what we were getting into," I said. "I'm going to sleep till noon, just to spite you."

"You *always* sleep till noon! Come on—I'm asking you as a goddess! How can you refuse a deity of peerless beauty, begging you with tears in her eyes?!"

There were lots of bad guys in this world. Even if we defeated the Demon King, there would still be plenty of things to threaten humanity. Meanwhile, I guess the heavenly realm, having realized how good Aqua was at conning—I mean, *convincing*—people to come here, wanted her to hurry back.

"I dunno. You think Heaven really has that bad of a personnel shortage? We could just ship them a random goblin; at the absolute minimum, he'd do as good a job as you."

"I've got an idea. If you're going to keep making fun of me, then I'm going to use my voice imitation magic to imitate a certain weirdo devil, and I'll spend the whole day cackling right next to your pillow."

It might have been one thing before my level dropped, way back when I hadn't known Aqua very well and had been eager to get her out of my party. But now that we were in a nice, stable situation, why should I go and take out the Demon King? The whole idea was ridiculous. Sheer luck, coincidence piled on coincidence, was the only reason I'd been able to foil Serena's plan. She'd said she was the weakest of all the king's generals. And she *still* killed me at the very end. With all that, I was supposed to go fight the Demon King, who was holed up in a castle surrounded by powerful minions?

That was probably the stupidest thing I'd ever heard.

I poked just my head out from under my covers, which Aqua was still pounding on. "This is the Demon King we're talking about, okay? There's no way I could take him on. Do you really think that highly of me? Do I really look to you like a man who can defeat the Demon King?"

"Of course not. There's no way. I'm not that jaded."

...What a jerk.

"Well, what, then? Even if we did raise my level, we'd probably get eaten by some monster on our way to the castle. And if we somehow made it, the king's army would make me their punching bag, and that would be it. You, Darkness, and Megumin would be captured by the Demon King and subjected to the most awful fates imaginable. The kind of thing only Darkness could enjoy, know what I mean?"

"Of course I understand all that. I do have a plan. All you need to do is reach a decent level and then get close to the Demon King's Castle."

*Oh?*

"You've really got a plan? Let me in on it."

"Don't mind if I do! So step one is to go to the Demon King's castle, okay? Then, when we get there... Now, they say there's an enchanted barrier around the castle, right? One put there by the king's generals."

*...?*

Was that how it worked? I hadn't paid much attention to the details because I didn't think it would ever matter to me.

I didn't say anything, so Aqua went on. "Yesterday, Kazuma, you rendered one of the generals powerless. A Level-1 general can't possibly help maintain an enchantment like that, so now there are only...how many generals powering the barrier?"

"There were supposed to be eight generals of the Demon King, right? One of them, Beldia, was that Dullahan from back when we first got here. Then there were Vanir and Hans, Sylvia, Wolbach, and Serena, and we've dealt with all of them. That leaves...two more, including Wiz, I guess."

"Exactly! There are just two more generals of the Demon King! With my incredible goddess powers, it should be child's play to bring down a barrier supported by only two people! All we need to do is take out the barrier, or at least open a hole big enough for someone to get through!"

...

"Okay, assuming that works, what's your big plan for defeating the Demon King?"

Aqua, practically bursting with pride, said, "Once the barrier's down, the hard part is over. I'll just tell my sweet Axis followers and all the Crimson Magic people, not to mention some of the local bigwigs! With all the connections you've made, Kazuma, we should be able to get the word out to everyone! We tell them the barrier is down and the castle is just begging to be attacked!"

Man, talk about letting someone else do your dirty work. She wasn't entirely wrong. Without the protective barrier, the Demon King's army would be pinned down and forced to defend instead of attack. That would make the military situation a lot easier on us.

"And what if you can't bring down the barrier?"

"Then we won't have any choice. That's where you'll come in with your newly increased level, Kazuma."

*Oh-ho.*

"Do tell."

"You'll use your Sense Foe and Ambush abilities to sneak into the Demon King's bedchamber and murder him in his sleep."

"Bullshit."

Ignoring Aqua's pleas, I pulled the covers back over my head.

3

Darkness and Megumin were having lunch in the living room.

"Hey, Kazuma. Could I have a moment?" Aqua said, clasping her hands behind her back and looking very serious. She seemed like she was about to say something extremely important.

"Yeah, what? What's with the grim look?" I asked as I continued to chow down on a pile of roast duck. Darkness and Megumin kept eating, but they did

glance from me to Aqua and back.

Aqua looked me square in the eye and said, “Please listen to me! I can’t go on like this!”

Gee, that seemed sudden. I decided to hear her out, though. Talking around a mouthful of duck, I said, “Can’t go on like what?”

“I mean this dissolute lifestyle! Can you really live with yourself like this? Waking up after noon, just eating and sleeping, eating and sleeping?! You’ve changed, Kazuma! You’ve changed!”

That really was sudden. Megumin and Darkness put down their forks. “This man has always been like that, I believe,” Megumin said.

“Yeah, more or less,” Darkness agreed. “And you’ve lived pretty much the same way, Aqua.”

.....

“Yes, I know! I know it may seem like he’s always been like this! But I want him to go back to the Kazuma I used to know! The one mired in debt, the one who spent every day with tears of desperation in his eyes, working himself to the bone to earn even a few coins!”

“All right, come at me—I’ll use *you* to get some experience points.” I stood up with my fork in my hand; Aqua backed away, making a shooing motion at me.

“What’s gotten into you, Aqua? Usually you’re just as much a couch potato as Kazuma.”

“Mm. With that priest taken care of, I was afraid we might stop going on quests, but even I’m a little surprised. What’s going on, Aqua?” Darkness asked.

Aqua didn’t seem to immediately know what to say. “Um...I guess it’s, you know...a-an adventurer’s duty and responsibility or something...”

“““.....”””

“...Or something...” Aqua’s voice got quieter and quieter as we looked at her. “A-as an adventurer, I feel the needy people of the world crying out for..... urgh...waaaaahhh!”

Finally unable to stand it any longer, Aqua went running off.

"What do you think's come over her?" Megumin asked as she sipped her after-lunch tea. Darkness, dabbing at her mouth with a napkin, looked equally perplexed.

"You can just ignore her," I said. "She suddenly discovered her inner do-gooder or something, and now she's got this crazy idea that she wants to take out the Demon King."

""The Demon King!""

"Yikes!" I hadn't expected that kind of reaction.

"The Demon King! Yes, the perfect target for a hunt! If I could just drop in there, off him, and be on my way, it would secure my reputation as the strongest of them all. You captured Serena on your own, Kazuma, and our encounter with the Moguninnin was somehow anticlimactic, so I have some fuel left to burn."

When had Megumin become "the strongest of them all"? Anyway, toppling the Demon King wasn't exactly like running to the store.

Then it was Darkness's turn. "The Demon King... Ahhh, the Demon King... His attacks must be the most terrible in the world... Enough to shatter even my renowned armor in a single blow..." She started to blush like a daydreaming maiden. What a perv. Oh yeah... I'd almost forgotten my party members could get like this.

"Just for the record, I'm not going. Don't get any weird ideas just because we've taken out one general of the Demon King after another, you hear me? To be perfectly blunt, I think this group is one of the loser parties. So... Hey, I don't care if you *do* look at me with your eyes shining; I'm not going!"

"...Yeesh, what's with her?"

It was that evening. I was in my room, resting my head on my arms, deep in thought.

I just couldn't imagine what she was thinking. I mean, sure, I'd dragged her to another world against her will, so I could see how she might want to go home if

that were possible. But the way she wanted to go home so *suddenly*—it was like she didn't really care. I was a little bit shaken to realize the relationship between us was so tenuous.

...Then again, Megumin had told me that Aqua had been awfully depressed after Serena had puppeted most of the town, feeling like she was no longer needed. That was probably a big part of it. Maybe she wasn't a complete idiot.

.....

Maybe she'd just realized they actually wanted her back in Heaven, and she hadn't thought too hard about the consequences, like not being able to see any of us again. Or maybe goddesses had their own ways of thinking and feeling. She might not look like much, but she did have followers who actually worshipped her, so I guess she was a real deity. We might not have asked to be stuck together, but now we had been for quite a while. If it was what she really, truly wanted, then maybe I could...

Maybe...I could take...take out the Demon...

...Nah, talk about Impossible Difficulty.

I fell asleep after that. I didn't know for how long. But I woke up to what I thought was a voice somewhere in the distance.

“...osen.....you hold...”

The voice sounded very, very comforting. Somehow, it made a deep confidence well up from within me.

“...chosen by the gods.....great hero of legend...”

Yeah... I, chosen by the gods, was the legendary...

*Legendary?*

My eyes snapped open. Someone's breath tickled my ear as they whispered into it.

“O Kazuma Satou, chosen by the gods to be the great hero of legend... You hold in your hands the very fate of all humanity... Now rise up and bring low the Demon King! Grant the wish of your transcendent and beautiful goddess!”

I looked over, straight at the source of the voice: Aqua. “What do you think you’re doing?” I asked.

“I j-just wanted to admire how cute you look when you’re sleeping...”

I launched myself out of bed. “Megumin, Darkness, come here quick! Aqua’s trying to sneak into my bed!”

“Waaaaahhhh! I’m sorry! I was actually trying to brainwash you!”

4

“Here, Kazuma, have a look at this.”

It had been three days since Serena’s arrest. They’d gotten the entire story out of her already, and she’d been moved to a cell in the capital city.

After all this time of having the name Regina nag at me, only just now had I remembered where I’d heard it. Back when we went to get rid of a spirit called Lucy, that was the name of the goddess she had claimed to worship. Apparently, we kept taking out Regina’s followers. But since I’d been one of those followers for a while, I hoped she’d forgive me.

At the moment, I was sitting barefoot on the couch, going through my equipment. We went to every adventure loaded with scrolls and potions and stuff, but somehow, we had never used one. Even as a gamer, I had always been the type to save my most powerful healing items and then end up beating the last boss without ever using them. Now, I sat looking at the forbidden potion set that Vanir had foisted on me, wondering if there was any way I could possibly use it.

Darkness had sat down beside me, pulling her gear out like I had; Aqua was investigating it with interest but passed me a sheet of paper.

...?

I stopped and took it from her. Darkness leaned over to look. The paper bore a header in absolutely gorgeous penmanship: *How Do You Feel About the Demon King?*

“““Demon King” sounds wicked cool’ (bakery owner). ‘He probably secretly

feeds needy stray dragons on the side' (pet shop owner). 'Who cares? Lend me some money' (street punk). 'When I said I was leaving the castle to start a shop, the king said that was a good idea and loaned me some money' (pale shop owner). 'Bwa-ha-ha, I myself am more powerful than the Demon King' (not possible). 'What, you mean my wife?' (tired-looking old man). Uhhh... What is this?"

"Oh no! Not that one! Those are the answers to a questionnaire that I definitely didn't want you to see!"

I hardly thought it counted as a questionnaire.

"Have a look at *this* one! It shows how much this town's inhabitants are suffering and afraid under the Demon King!" Aqua produced another piece of paper with a flourish, and I took it reluctantly.

"Our shop doesn't seem to get any customers. Not sure why, but it's probably the Demon King's fault' (proprietor of lewd shop). 'I'm so afraid of the Demon King that I can't sleep at night, so I have to take naps during the day. That means I can't get a job. Hence, the fact that I have to sponge off my parents is the Demon King's fault' (NEET). 'The Demon King's existence is preventing my deity from gaining any popularity at all' (worshipper of an abandoned god). 'Terrifying, yes, terrifying, the Demon King is! I also find ice-cold Neroids terrifying' (theater person). 'It's the Demon King's fault I can't get a girlfriend' (middle-aged man). 'It's the Demon King's fault I can't get a boyfriend' (adventurer lady)..... My question stands. What is this?"

Aqua backed away in exaggerated shock—talk about overacting. "I can't believe this! Kazuma, do you really mean to tell me that the voices of these townspeople, crying out for comfort, mean nothing to you?! This is why people call you the NEET pet of some shameless woman!"

"H-hey, what was that? Did I get that nickname when I was under Serena's control?"

Aqua, pretending she hadn't heard my question, pointed right at me. "Aren't you embarrassed to call yourself an adventurer? While you sit here flirting with Darkness, people around the world live in fear of the Demon King! Apologize! In the name of adventurers everywhere, apologize! Say you're sorry to all the

people of this world!"

"I w-wasn't flirting with him; I was just trying to see what he was doing!"

It was at that point that Aqua finally demonstrated an interest in what I had been doing. "What's all this?" she asked.

"It's the forbidden potion set I got from Vanir. One that will cause magical monsters to be attracted to you for the rest of your life, one that will raise your magic but destroy all the hair on your body, and another that will get rid of all your magic power but send your level through the roof. Then there's this one—it'll make you attractive to the opposite sex, but you'll smell like a goblin, I guess. I'm thinking maybe I can work with these somehow."

I thought the smart play might be to combine the hair-killing potion and the level-up potion. Use them in the right order, and I could use my sky-high MP to raise my level back up. The side effects were the problem. I'd lose all my magic power, so I couldn't use spells anymore, and on top of that, I would be completely bald. It was nice to know I had something that would send my level skyrocketing in a pinch, but the real question was whether healing magic worked on baldness.

Well, I guess there was the bigger problem of not being able to use magic at all...

Aqua flinched back when she heard about the potions, but Darkness drew in close. "Say, Kazuma, sell me that potion that attracts monsters..."

"Absolutely not."

5

We were asked to take on a quest to see Serena safely to the capital city. But it would be a while before the capital was ready to receive us and everything was set to go. That gave me the perfect excuse to hang around being a total, shameless NEET in the interim.

*"Cock-a-doodle-doo!"*

At least, that had been the plan.

*“Bawk! Squawk...”*

“Stop that, Emperor Zel! Don’t make so much noise! *That man* says he should have cooked you for dinner long ago anyway! He’ll do it, too! Kaz-scum-a would absolutely do it! Now listen, sweetheart. Please go back to when you were cute and quiet. You’re very beautiful and handsome when you make a fuss, but it’s too early for all that noise. We need you to become a powerful dragon so we can defeat the Demon King. You have to grow big and strong, at least strong enough to fly us to his castle. Until then, just stay calm and build your strength.”

*“Sqrrraaak!”*

“No, Emperor Zel, be quiet!”

I jumped out of bed and flung open the window, shouting down at Aqua, “You’re the one making all the noise! Shut up already—it’s too early for this!” Emperor Zel’s coop was right underneath my window. Between him and Aqua, I couldn’t hear myself think. “What happened to him taking forever to raise, anyway? Wasn’t that chick supposed to have incredible magic powers or something?! Why has he turned into a chicken?!”

“Emperor Zel is a dragon, an enigmatic creature shrouded in mystery. I’m sure he burns with the desire to defeat the Demon King and that his mysterious powers are growing even now.”

Emperor Zel, currently accepting feed from Aqua in his chicken coop, had changed classes: from a chick to an exemplary chicken.

“Mysterious powers, my ass! If you don’t shut that bird up, I’m going to change him into dinner!”

Aqua looked at me as if she couldn’t believe what I was saying. “Emperor Zel, I’ll hold that devil off, so you run as fast as you can! Forget about me—just go! And when you’ve grown strong, we can go on a journey to defeat the Demon King together! Just watch out for the old butcher in town!”

*“Cluck, cluck, bkaaawww...”*

“Oh, Emperor Zel! You say you can’t bear to leave me behind? All right, then, we’ll fight this monster together! I’m your mother! I’ll protect you!” Aqua took the emperor out of his chicken coop, hugging him protectively, completely

absorbed in her weird game.

"I don't care what you do; I just want to get some sleep. Please. I'm begging you."

"So you won't threaten to eat Emperor Zel anymore?"

"Fine, I'll stop threatening to eat him. Just move that coop somewhere else."

Having extracted that promise from me, Aqua held up Emperor Zel, so she could look him in the eye, and told him that she was going to find Darkness and make her move his house.

I could picture Darkness, almost weeping with the impossibility of Aqua's demand.

I leaned my elbows on the windowsill. "Anyway, are you still talking about the Demon King?" I said. "Give it up already. His own daughter is still out there as one of his generals, and I'm sure his castle is lousy with elite monsters. Let's leave that stuff to the brawlers and enjoy our lives here. It's okay—someone will take care of it, I promise. As for us, we have a mansion, a reputation, and a fortune—our lives start now, am I right?"

Aqua, still looking at Emperor Zel, shook her head as if this was all ridiculous. "That's a peace-addled Japanese man for you... He can only think of what's best for him. It's softheadedness like that that causes Kazuma to die if you so much as ask him, *Do you like to pretend to go spelunking?*" She looked the chicken in the eye and cooed, "Mommy's right, isn't she?"

Dammit, she knew perfectly well *she* was the main reason I died so often. She also knew I couldn't reach her from the second floor, so she could say whatever she wanted.

"I wish you'd man up," she went on. "Our world is at war, you know. Haven't you heard? The Demon King's daughter is leading an army toward the capital right now. And Axel itself is threatened by an enemy...attack..."

She could call me peace-addled all she wanted; it didn't really faze me. This was the saga of a Japanese man used to a lifetime of peace...

...?

"H-hey, what's going on? Why are you just standing there with your mouth open? You tease me about pretending to go spelunking, but what are *you* doing, imitating a carp? That's a pretty good trick even for you." I flapped my mouth open and closed in imitation of Aqua.

"That's not it at all! It's the Demon King! Kazuma, now is our chance to take him down!"

She *still* wouldn't shut up about that.

"No! No, wait! Kazuma, don't go back to sleep; hear me out! If the Demon King's daughter, his general, is busy attacking the capital, then that means the castle is undefended! And if they'll be attacking our town at the same time...! They think the castle is safe behind the barrier, so they can send all their forces! If we attack while the army is away, we might catch the Demon King all by himself! Why would they leave any guards if they have a barrier?! We might never get another chance like this!"

...She wasn't wrong; we might have a slightly better shot now than if we attacked when everything was quiet...

"Yeah, but come on... Oh, hey, I've got a question. Can healing magic fix baldness?"

"Maybe if it's caused by burns destroying the hair follicles, but not normally. I'm sorry, Kazuma; I'd really like to be able to help you..."

"I'm not bald yet! The forbidden potion set included one that turns you bald but drives up your MP, right? I thought I would drink that, then take the one that turns MP into levels, that's all!" I was desperately trying to explain myself, fending off my own fear of going bald.

"Oh, that's gone."

"Huh? What do you mean, it's gone?"

Aqua held up Emperor Zel. "The potion that turns magic into levels? I gave it to him. Look at the fine physical specimen he's become. At this rate, I figure in another ten years, he'll be ready to knock out the Demon King with one swipe!"

She sounded so proud of herself...

"What?! Dammit! You gave that *thing* my special trump-card potion?! Why do you have to be such an idiot?! Why are you always screwing up people's plans like that?!"

"H-hey, don't get angry with me! I thought maybe if Emperor Zel grew up in a hurry and got nice and big, he might just be able to do something about the Demon King! And look, he does seem awfully strong, doesn't he?!"

From my high vantage point, I looked down on Aqua and her chicken.

"Hmph!" I snorted.

"What are you two arguing about? It's too early in the morning for all this noise. Kazuma, breakfast is ready, so... G-gee, you look like you're having fun..." Darkness came to my room to call me for breakfast, sounding lighthearted as she saw me.

"Stopit! If anything happens to this window, the mosquitoes will get in! If you break my window, I'm taking your room until it's fixed! *Wind Breath!*"

"No fair using magic! If you don't want your window broken, then you should cooperate with me a little and take out the Demon King!" Aqua picked up a rock from the yard and flung it at my window. I used wind magic to bat it away. I wasn't going to last long like this, though.

"*Create Water!*" Water appeared directly over Aqua's head, soaking her with a *splish!*

She was sopping wet, but she looked totally refreshed. "Dumping nice, cool water on the goddess of water? How generous. Have you forgotten? I could live underwater with no problem. In some colder season, it might be a problem, but right now—"

I didn't let her finish. "*Create Earth!*"

"Noooo, stop that!"

A huge pile of dirt appeared right over the dripping Aqua.

Satisfied after having reduced Aqua to tears, I headed down to the living room. There I discovered Megumin sitting on the couch drinking tea, wearing her Crimson Magic Clan robe, and holding on firmly to her staff, seemingly

ready for battle at any moment.

"I've been waiting for you, Kazuma. Might I ask you to come with me for a bit when you're done eating? I have business to take care of, and I want you with me as a witness."

A bedraggled Aqua went to take a bath, while Darkness laundered Aqua's feather cloak for her.

"Yeah, sure. What's up? 'Witness' makes it sound like you've got a score to settle."

6

"I thought we were friends! Aren't we friends?! Aren't we very close friends?! I thought we just swore to be eternal rivals back in Crimson Magic Village—so how have we ended up like this?!"

"It is precisely because we are eternal rivals that we are like this! It was you who left me a letter stating that you had something important to talk about and telling me to meet you in the woods! Now, have at me!"

We were in the woods near town. Megumin was waving her staff imposingly at Yunyun, who looked so scared, I thought she might burst into tears.

"Wow, you challenged *her*, Yunyun?"

"No! I didn't! I didn't ask Megumin to come here to battle; I wanted to talk to her!"

Yunyun looked like she might finally start crying, but Megumin brandished her staff even more vigorously. "In that case, why did you choose such a deserted location to meet? You could have just come to my house for a simple chat!"

"Huh? B-but... I was afraid that if I interrupted you when you and Kazuma were sharing a moment, you might tell me never to come back... I read in a book somewhere that women's friendships are more delicate than tissue paper in the face of love..." She trailed off, losing confidence as she spoke.

"We're interrupted by all kinds of people just about every day, so I refuse to get angry about it now! And if your timing was really that bad, or if you were

interrupting us, then I would simply tell you to go home and chase you out!"

"Eep!"

That seemed potentially very damaging.

"So what *do* you want with Megumin?" I asked.

Yunyun held out a letter to Megumin. "This came from the people of Crimson Magic Village..."

Megumin took it and glanced over it. "So the Demon King's army is attacking the capital with all its strength. The government has asked Crimson Magic Village to come to its defense, and they're asking Crimson Magic Clan members everywhere to muster in the village. Heh-heh, it seems the moment they need our power has finally come. Very well! Yunyun, together let us show the Demon King...what..."

She trailed off as she kept reading. Yunyun looked uncomfortable. "Um... They did say to show it to you, s-so..."

I walked up to my frozen buddy and peeked at the letter. There I saw it. "Ooh, Yunyun, you're leading the First Army. I wouldn't expect any less from the next chief. And Megumin is...down here in the corner of the Second Army. It says 'spare' next to her name. She's the only one."

"I'm sure it's the fact that you can't use Advanced Magic that made them think— Aaahhhh!"

Megumin folded the letter into an airplane and set it sailing into the woods.

"What are you doing?! I have to show that letter to the other Crimson Magic Clan members!" Yunyun exclaimed, but Megumin ignored her.

"Forget about that. More importantly, Yunyun, what are you going to do? You've only just arrived in Axel. Will you head straight back home?"

Yunyun seemed lost for an answer. She wanted to say something but couldn't quite get it out. Instead she just stood there fidgeting.

"I cannot believe this girl! Even though she is to be the next chief, she always stands there squirming! If there's something you wish to say, then say it clearly!"

"Ow, ow! Fine, I'll say it! Just stop pulling my hair already! S-so, um...I'd heard that the Demon King's minions were going to attack Axel, too. And you know... I've started to make some fr—I mean, some acquaintances around here..." She looked at the ground, her voice hardly more than a whisper.

Ah, so that was it. "The people of your village want you to come home, but you've started to make some friends in Axel. You're saying you'd like to stay and protect the town if you can."

"Er! Well...y-yes... F-f-friends... Yes, I've made a few friends...!"

By "friends," did she mean...? Well, let's just say that recently, Yunyun had been hanging out with some people I thought might be better not to get too involved with. Specifically, one particular punk and the masked employee of a certain magical-item shop.

Yunyun nodded emphatically...but then her face darkened. "A summons from Crimson Magic Village, though that hardly ever happens. For the next chief to ignore something so rare..."

I understood now: She'd wanted to ask Megumin what she should do.

As for Megumin, the object of Yunyun's quest for advice, she was turning away from us and... *H-hey!*

"Megumin, stop! What are you—?"

But before I could stop her, she cried:

*"Expllosion!!"*

She launched her spell into the woods with zero warning. The part of the forest where she'd sent the letter flying was wiped out of existence.

"Oh no! Look what you've done, Megumin! I haven't shown that letter to anyone else yet! Oh no, what should I do...?!" Yunyun wailed, clutching her head. Meanwhile, Megumin, barely managing to stay on her feet, turned to me, looking absolutely triumphant. I transferred just enough MP to her for her to stay standing.

"What do you think of that, Kazuma?" she said. "That is the power of the one who *truly* ought to lead the First Army!"

Yunyun tore into the gloating Megumin. “Wh-what am I going to do now? What in the world am I supposed to do? For that matter, Megumin, why must you always, always make my life harder...?!”

“What a worrywart this beginner is! Just say the postman was captured by a wandering orc before he could deliver the letter, or that the goat-devil you’re keeping at your house ate it, or whatever! You want to protect this town, do you not? You need to stop agonizing over every little thing and assert yourself, Yunyun!”

I thought Megumin sounded absolutely out of line, but Yunyun actually blushed, looking equal parts happy and troubled. Maybe she was glad Megumin had destroyed the letter and pushed her in one particular direction. She looked at Megumin, who stood there with her chest puffed out proudly, as though she was staring at something very bright. I had to admit, maybe she could stand to learn a thing or two from the forcefulness of Megumin’s technique. Nonetheless...

I turned toward Megumin, who was still facing away from me.

“You just decided not to go because they said they didn’t need you there, didn’t you?”

“...?!”

I could see her flinch.

## Final Chapter

### A Farewell to This Starter Town!



1

“...ro... Big Bro, wake up...”

My covers felt heavy, and I thought I heard a voice calling me from far away. A kind and gentle voice, speaking words I had longed to hear...

“Big Bro, wake up! You’re gonna be late! Come on, quick!”

*Big Bro.* At those two sweet syllables, I opened my eyes.

“Good morning, Big Bro! Get up, and let’s jump into another day of Demon King slaying!” My self-proclaimed younger sister (age unclear) jumped on my bed...

“Get offa meeeee!”

“But, Big Broooo!”

As I jumped up, I grabbed my sheets, pulling them out from under Aqua and sending her tumbling to the floor. I didn’t even look at her, just dived right back under my quilt. Then I poked my head out from under the covers and glanced at

Aqua, who hadn't even managed to get up from the carpet yet. "Today's version was just a *little* better," I said.

"I knew the Big Bro thing would work on you, Kazuma, you lolicon," she said, getting up and dusting herself off.

Aqua had been pulling that sort of stunt every day for a while now. She was trying everything she could think of to get me to help her hunt the Demon King.

"Listen, Kazuma, I think it's about time for you to cave. The way we all cause problems and then, even though it's killing you, at the very last moment you manage to make everything work out is one of your best qualities, isn't it?"

"Who am I, your fairy godmother? I can't grant your every wish. I thought it was usually the goddess who was supposed to solve all the problems in the end anyway."

Aqua completely ignored my sarcastic barb; instead, she sat down on the carpet beside my bed, pulled her knees up to her chest, and said, "What can I do? My only abilities are purifying water, destroying devils and the undead, and bringing people back to life. Being a goddess isn't so great."

"G-geez, change of heart much? I'd expect a goddess to at least be able to seal away a simple demon king. Isn't subjugating evil spirits part of your portfolio?"

Aqua stared intently at a very specific part of the lower half of my body. "Keeping *that* evil thing under control is about the most I can do right now."

"H-hey, stop it... Stop it already, it's not my fault, that just happens in the morning! A-anyway..." I didn't get up, but I did look toward Aqua, trying to change the subject. "If things are borderline right now, then if we take out one more of the Demon King's generals, you ought to be able to bring down that barrier for sure, right? So how about we wait until then?"

The Demon King had one more general we didn't know anything about. "The last of the generals is supposed to be the Demon King's own daughter, right?" I went on. "I don't know how strong she is, but I don't even think someone like that could get away with attacking the capital without even a scratch. And there are plenty of those cheaters hanging out in the capital, too. Above all, my little

sister, the most powerful little sister in the world, lives there. Maybe she'll turn the tables on the Demon King's daughter, then get a bunch of the most powerful people in the country to go with her as bodyguards while she takes down that barrier. If our nation's most powerful inhabitants can't manage it, we can worry about it then."

Now, that really was asking other people to do the dirty work for us, but it was all I could handle. This wasn't like the rest of my time here, when I had lucked into pretty much everything that had happened. We weren't heroes, and we weren't chosen ones. In fact, we were less competent than your average adventuring party. It was kind of incredible that we hadn't all been wiped out yet...

"One general. One more general of the Demon King," Aqua mumbled to herself, still holding her knees.

*Huh...?*

"Hey, what are you—?"

"That's it! One more general of the Demon King! If we can take down one more of his generals, I *will* be able to break that barrier! And then someone else really might take care of the king himself for us! That's it! That's perfect!" She jumped to her feet, babbling.

She couldn't mean—!

"I'm going out for a few minutes!"

"Hey, hold on! Wait just a second!"

Before I could stop her, though, Aqua raced out of my room.

I chased after her (God, it was too early in the morning for a run like this) and finally reached my destination. I hated to admit it, but she was faster than I was; her stats were just so much higher.

"Where's Wiz? Don't try to hide her—get her out here!"

"O un-listening fool! I told you that my slacking shopkeeper is out! I, too, am searching for that oafish owner, lest she purchase some pointless stock while I can't keep an eye on her... H-hey! You had best cease trying to pull the mask off

my face!"

I knew it: I could hear the commotion from inside Wiz's store. I guess Wiz herself was out, though. I came in to find Aqua with her hands on Vanir's mask, trying to pry it off. He was fighting hard, but he managed to look at me. "Hrrrrggh, welcome to our store! O owner of this mad-dog goddess, bring her to heel!"

"Don't try to make me her owner; you'll only cause headaches for me. So Wiz's out? Come on, stop that, he can't even talk that way."

At that, Aqua reluctantly let go of the mask.

"Okay, you weird devil," she said. "If your powers aren't just a big con, then use your all-seeing eye to tell me where Wiz is right now."

"Hmph, ridiculous. You gods claim to be all-knowing and all-powerful, yet you're never any help. Don't you dare compare the falsehoods you spread with *my* power. In any event, as I believe I've said, extremely powerful people are difficult for me to see. That pitiful proprietor might lack business sense, but power she has." Vanir straightened his collar as he spoke.

"You talk big, but what you're really saying is you don't know. You never come through when it counts. I hate to have to say this, but maybe that makes you even lower than me on the totem pole."

"Very well," Vanir said after an awkward second. "It's been a while since I've demonstrated my true ability. We had best step outside, for today I shall settle things with this despicable deity."

These two really hated each other...

That was when I sensed someone behind me in the doorway. I turned and saw...

"Oh, Kazuma, Lady Aqua, welcome! What perfect timing. I just got something very interesting in stock..."

It was Wiz, smiling broadly. She showed us a bag that the penguin behind her was holding.

Vanir froze when he saw it.

Aqua, immediately interested, trotted over and looked in the penguin's bag. I ignored the penguin, which had frozen like a deer in headlights, and spoke instead for Vanir, who was equally immobilized. "Uh... So what'd you buy?"

"I'm so glad you asked!" Wiz produced the contents of the bag with a flourish, revealing...

"A paper ghost doll?"

"What? No, this is a powerful magical item that can control the weather. Hang this from the eaves of your house, and you can force the weather to be perfect! Weather-control magic usually requires lengthy rituals and rare catalysts. This takes out all the hassle. The only thing you have to do is hang it up! How about it? Isn't it great? It's great, isn't it?!"

It sure was. It *seemed* great anyway...

"So what's the catch? Does it, like, stop rain from falling for ten years when you use it? Or eat up a ton of magic?"

"Why would you think there would be any side effects? After making Vanir mad at me so many times, I've learned my lesson! To use this item, you just have someone with a fair amount of magic transfer some of that magic to the item, and then you hang it from the eaves of your house. Other than some slight limitations to the time of year when you can use it, there are no disadvantages whatsoever! How about it? Sounds like an excellent buy, right?"

Vanir finally managed to walk slowly over to us. He plucked the ghost doll-like thing Wiz was so proud of right out of her hand. "And what time of year *can* you use it?"

"Right now! It's a seasonal item for this very season! You don't think I'm stupid enough to buy an item people wouldn't be able to use right away, do you? Oh, Vanir, you worry too much."

".....My dear customer, I urge you to come with me." Leaving Wiz to grin to herself, Vanir took me by the shoulder and led me to a corner of the shop.

"I'm telling you right now, I'm not buying it," I said.

"Now, don't say that. This jun—I mean, this fine item does indeed possess

considerable magical power. I suspect she's telling the truth about its properties." Well, if Vanir said so, then it was probably the real deal. I had heard that Wiz liked to choose which items to stock based on how much magical power they possessed. I had a question, though.

"You know, I can hardly remember the last time we had any rain around here. Does it ever rain this time of year?"

"There was a passing shower once around this time, about twenty years ago."

"I'm not buying it."

Vanir pushed his masked face right up close to me. "Now, now, don't say that. The world's a big place. There might be areas that have flooding this time of year. Take it somewhere like that, and they would consider it a treasure. Buy now, and I'll even throw in a second forbidden potion series as a bonus."

"Sorry, pass. By the way, Aqua makes something a lot like that thing. There was this Megumin ghost doll she ginned up a while back."

"I might also see my way to giving you a little something I've been developing in secret, without our shopkeeper's knowledge: a powerful next-gen bit of merchandise, a life-size shopkeeper body pillow."

"I said, p— I mean, tell me more..."

While Vanir and I were busy with this conversation, I heard Wiz say, "Um...? Lady Aqua, what's the matter?"

"Now that I think about it, Wiz, it's already been more than a year since we've met. It's ironic, isn't it? I'm a goddess, and you're a Lich. Normally, we would be at each other's throats!"

"It really has been a while. Oh, I bought some cookies while I was out looking for magical items. Would you like one, Lady Aqua?"

"Ooh, sure! ...Wait, no. Wiz, listen. We're more than acquaintances by now, aren't we? Technically, it was my job to purify you the moment I laid eyes on you. You know, gods versus undead. We were never *supposed* to get along...!" Aqua nibbled on the cookie Wiz had given her as she spoke.

Vanir, sensing the tension, came smartly over and stood between Wiz and

Aqua, while their penguin mascot—erm, I mean Zeeleschilt—stood trembling beside the shopkeeper. I didn't think Aqua could really be serious, but...

As he stood protectively in front of Wiz, to my surprise, Vanir smiled. "What now, O violent goddess? I sense a most obnoxious aura coming from you at this moment. I know not what has happened, but if you intend to make trouble in this store, you can expect to be hit with a major repair bill. Approach us at your own risk." Then he beckoned to her with just one finger, ready for a fight.

Aqua completely ignored him. "Wiz... Please understand, I *have* to destroy you in order to protect the peace of this world! Believe me, it breaks my heart to have to destroy my own friend! But, Wiz, I'm begging you! I want to go back to the heavenly realm! I'll make sure it doesn't hurt, but I need you to return to dust!"

Sounding dramatic enough to be in a play, Aqua took up position against Wiz. For her part, Wiz just stared at her, unafraid but also confused. Finally, she cocked her head. "So if I return to the earth, you'll be able to get home to the heavenly realm, Lady Aqua?" She made it sound like no big deal.

"Yes!" Aqua cried. "I hate to say it, Wiz, but with things the way they are, I can't afford to look the other way anymore! Hate me for it if you must, but as a goddess..."

"It's all right."

"As a goddess...! .....'All right'? Hey, no, Wiz, you can't give up on living that easily. Do you take life so lightly? You'll get divine punishment for that, you know."

There were almost too many comebacks to that: *You're the one who's trying to kill her* or even *Does a Lich even have a life to give up on?* and so forth. But Wiz still just looked kind of blank.

"If you purify me, that will allow you to return to the heavenly realm, yes? I'm sure there must be some special reason you're asking, even if I can't guess what it is. We've known each other a long time now. I know you, Lady Aqua. How you're actually a kind and compassionate person. If you say you need to purify me, then I'll let you."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. This time it was Vanir's turn to get a little panicked. "What are you saying, Wiz?! Have you forgotten your promise to me?! You have some nerve, trying to renege on an agreement with a devil! Who will build my dungeon when you've gone to heaven? All the work I've done in your shop has been for that very purpose!"

Wiz looked surprised for a moment, but then she smiled. "Vanir... You actually called me by my name. I'm very sorry I won't be able to keep my promise to you. I do know one other Lich, someone who's been asleep in a mansion deep in the forest for a very long time. I'll introduce you to them. They should be able to help you..."

Vanir gritted his teeth. It didn't look like he was ready to give up, though; he didn't budge an inch from between Aqua and Wiz.

Wiz turned back toward Aqua, in spite of Vanir, and clasped her hands in front of her. "It would have been perfectly normal for you to purify me the very first day we met. Thank you, Lady Aqua, for letting me live so long. Thanks to you, I had the chance to run this shop with Vanir and meet all sorts of nice people. I've lived a very, very long time, but I feel this past year has been the happiest of my entire life. I mean it, you know. I don't feel any resentment...only gratitude."

"....." Without another word, Vanir stepped aside. He was still gritting his teeth—it was obvious this wasn't what he wanted—but he was going to respect Wiz's decision.

"You know, I built this store so I would have somewhere to welcome my old adventuring companions when they finally came home. And then, just the other day... Yes, I believe it was when you asked about my and Vanir's past and then fell asleep in the middle of the story, Lady Aqua. A very dear friend of mine came to the shop, and I was able to welcome them home. I got everything I wanted."

As for Aqua...

"*Sniff...sniiiff...*" She was moving away, barely holding back tears at this unexpected revelation.

In a tone like she was trying to comfort an unhappy child, Wiz said, "Lady

Aqua, I've always known that someone was going to purify me someday. Otherwise, I would literally live forever. And if I must be purified by someone, somewhere, I want it to be you. If I can be of some kind of help to you, then that's what I desire. Because..."

Wiz was trying hard to take the guilt away from Aqua, trying to make her feel better; we could see from her face that she was being completely truthful and earnest.

"...I like you very much, Lady Aqua."

She smiled gently. Vanir, Zeeleschilt, and I let our gazes drift toward Aqua, then toward Wiz, who seemed so much more concerned about Aqua than about herself.

At last, seemingly tormented by her conscience and unable to endure us looking at her anymore:

"S-sniff... W-waaaahhhhhh!" Aqua cried and ran out of the store.



I meandered back to the mansion in search of Aqua, wondering all the while if we humans of Axel could really live with ourselves, knowing that the most sincere, most kindhearted person in town was a Lich.

Megumin and Darkness were on the sofa in the living room, playing a board game.

"Hey, did Aqua come back?" I asked.

"Aqua? She came home in a huff earlier and has been shut up in her room ever since. She didn't come out, even when I said food was ready. What in the world happened?" Megumin said, but I only grunted in response. What should I do? Should I leave her alone for a while?

No...

"Hold that thought," I said. "And give me Aqua's food. I'll take it to her in her room."

Meal in hand, I headed upstairs.

"Hey, look, I know how you feel, but don't run out on me like that. Anyway, Megumin made dinner, so open up already."

There was a long pause; then I heard Aqua say, "Just leave me alone. I'm kind of struggling with my confidence as a goddess right now."

What? Only "kind of"?

I tried again, calling through the door, "Listen... You could probably stop worrying about defeating the Demon King now, right? Do you really need to go back to the heavenly realm that badly?"

"....."

Aqua could say what she wanted, but I knew she didn't really hate Wiz. She might pick fights with her or partially purify her when Wiz got caught up in Aqua's arguments with Vanir—in other words, it hadn't been all sunshine and rainbows for them. But even so, despite the fact that they were supposed to be

mortal enemies, they really got along okay.

I decided to try one more time. “You know that if you go back to Heaven, you won’t be able to see Wiz again, right?”

Not to mention any of the rest of us. Then again, Lady Eris could incarnate herself as Chris, so maybe it was possible? I wasn’t sure in Aqua’s case, though. She was in charge of Japan, I guess. Could she just pop down to this world whenever she wanted to?

I stood there in front of the door, getting no answer. “I brought some of the food Megumin made,” I said. “If you don’t want to eat, I’ll take it back downstairs, all right?”

“.....Leave the food there, please.”

So she was at least willing to eat.

“What in the world happened to Aqua? She’s always the first to the table. Does she have an upset stomach?” Megumin asked worriedly as I came back into the room. Darkness sat across from her with her arms folded and a grim look on her face. I guess Megumin was winning their game.

“Nothing to worry about,” I said. “I think she’s going to eat, at least. Then I’m sure she’ll get hungry again after a while and come downstairs.”

I was trying to be lighthearted, but in the end, Aqua never came out of her room that night.

3

I couldn’t sleep. It was sometime around midnight and so quiet that even the bugs weren’t chirping.

The argument this morning had been nothing special. For Aqua to tromp around causing trouble, then end up coming home in tears, was nothing new. Totally ordinary. So why did it bother me so much today?

I thought about how Aqua had gone silent on the other side of the door when I’d asked if she didn’t care that she wouldn’t be able to see Wiz again. Wiz wasn’t really the point, though. I’d been trying to ask something deeper.

*Don't you care if you never see us again?*

.....

.....

"Arrrgh!!"

I tossed from one side to the other in bed. Embarrassed to ask the question even in my head, I shoved my face into the pillow and screamed.

But that was what I really, really wanted to ask. We'd been here so long. Was she really still that desperate to go home? I was so used to living this life with these people now that it was hard for me to imagine Aqua disappearing from it.

Aqua...going home.

Leaving us forever.

...What would happen if she did? It would be Megumin, Darkness, and me—just the three of us. It would be just me and my stupendous fortune and my mansion, without Aqua to come begging for favors or causing problems or barging in right when things were about to get good...

.....*Huh?*

That actually sounded pretty sweet. What was I so worried about?

No...no, no. Aqua would burst into tears if she heard me say that. Anyway, life would be pretty boring without her around. Sure, I might have fewer problems, but I'd also have too much time on my hands.

I wondered how Aqua felt, though. Heck, why was I lying awake this long because of her? It made me angry. I was really ticked off.

"....."

I pulled the covers aside and got out of bed. I knew it was late, but I was going to go wake that idiot up and give her the third degree. Then I was going to give her a piece of my mind. I would tell her exactly how little we had to gain from going to defeat the Demon King and how much risk would be involved.

I left my room, trying to move as soundlessly as possible. I assumed Megumin and Darkness were asleep by now, and the last thing I needed was for them to

find me creeping around at this time of night and think I was heading to Aqua's for lewd reasons. In fact, it wasn't just the last thing I needed—it might be the last thing I ever did, the biggest mistake of my life.

I even activated Ambush, then headed for Aqua's room...

Then I saw Aqua, looking up at the night sky.

I hadn't reached her room yet. She was sitting on the balcony that stuck out over the front entrance on the second floor. There was a gorgeous full moon out tonight. Aqua, dressed in her light-blue feather cloak, was sitting and looking at it.

I'd come here ready to beat some sense into her, but... Sitting there, gazing up at the moon, Aqua really did look like a goddess. Come to think of it, back when I'd died in Japan and met her for the first time, I'd known she was a goddess at a glance. She really was gorgeous...

I had a thought.

*Maybe if she spent more time not talking.*

Aqua noticed me watching her. "What are you doing here? Couldn't sleep?"

I scratched the back of my head, a bit embarrassed, and came out onto the balcony. I couldn't exactly say I'd been, you know, admiring her. And I absolutely couldn't tell her I'd been captivated by the sight of her gazing at the moon. It would go to her head in a second.

Instead, I decided to say something completely unrelated to what I was really thinking. "Yeah, I guess I napped a little too much today. What about you? The mosquitoes'll get you out here."

Aqua kept her back to me, still staring upward, mumbling something about how I was just as much of a slob and a failure of a human being as ever.

.....

"First you won't eat, and now you're gazing at the moon. What's with you? Do you have a moon in the heavenly realm? Are you gods really like Princess Kaguya?"

"Heh, you've got it all wrong. I'm looking at it because it's pretty. I keep asking

myself: Who do you think I am? Even I cherish beautiful things from time to time. How about it? A goddess looking up at the moon. It's like something out of a painting, you know?"

Yeah, she was right. It could be a painting, and I had to be honest—it hammered home the fact that Aqua really was a goddess after all.

Not that I was about to say that out loud.

"Hey... You really want to go back to the heavenly realm that badly? It's been more than a year since we got here. We've met all kinds of people... Won't you be sad if you never get to see them again?"

"....." Aqua didn't answer, just kept looking at the sky. Finally, she whispered, as if she was talking to herself, "It's only been about a year. It's the strangest thing. I've spent a lot longer in the heavenly realm with the angels and the other gods. Living here, though, it's like every day has been a drama."

Yeah, and whose fault was that?

I forced the words down, refusing to say them. Instead I said, "If you were in the heavenly realm all that time, then you really are an old—"

"Say one more word, and I'll put a seal on the lower half of your body so strong, no human power will be able to undo it as long as you live."

For the first time in my life, I was sincerely terrified of Aqua.

She resumed mumbling. "See, in the heavenly realm...things don't really change from day to day. It's always the same. To be honest, it's pretty boring. Even if no change means no painful emotions."

Painful emotions... Maybe she was thinking of being collectively dumped by the town's adventurers recently. I was so occupied with the thought that I didn't say anything.

"A lot of people have apologized to me since then," Aqua said. "Even though, being a goddess, I hardly paid it any mind, you know?"

Yeah, right. Megumin and Darkness told me how down in the dumps Aqua had been.

Still looking at the moon, Aqua whispered a few words in a soft voice. She

didn't look especially lonely or sad. More like she was just gazing from afar at where she used to be. Almost like a lost child.

"I wish I could go home..."

She wasn't talking to me. She wasn't demanding, and she wasn't begging. It was just her small, personal wish.

I had no idea how long she had been in Heaven. No idea what kinds of acquaintances or even friends she might have had there. I didn't know what life had been like for her. I didn't know any of it. I was just the guy who had dragged her here against her will, and if it was what she really wanted, then I figured I should help her get home.

I hated to admit it, but it was also my fault that we weren't getting any new cheaters over here. Still... the Demon King, huh?

I wasn't sure what I should say to her. "I'm willing to...you know," I started. "I'm willing to start thinking a little harder about how we might actually deal with the Demon King. I'm not saying I'm going to rush right out there and do the deed, all right? But maybe, I dunno, we could get a bunch of those exploding potions from Wiz's place and make bombs with them. Then we could teleport to the Demon King's castle, bury them like land mines, and make it impossible for him to leave. You know, a siege. Or maybe we could get Yunyun to register the castle as a teleportation destination and harass him with daily explosions..." I was starting to talk too fast.

"Pfffft, hee-hee-hee! You resisted for so long, Kazuma, and now you start to break! I told you that I knew you would find a way in the end. But anyway, it's all right. With your puny level, one good thwack from the Demon King and we'd be lucky if there was even a body left to resurrect."

*Wh-what a jerk...*

She always had to take it just a bit too far. I stepped back from the balcony into the hallway and said, "If I'm puny, it's because instead of a cheat, I took you. I'm weak because you're never any help—so the next time you decide to trash-talk me, think about that first. You got that, you useless goddess?"

"Hey, come on over here. I'm gonna seal you up."

"I'm sorry."

If I stuck around much longer, she might snap and actually follow through on her threat. I told Aqua, who still hadn't moved a muscle, that she ought to hurry up and go to bed; then I made to go back to my own room.

From behind me, Aqua, hugging her knees and still watching the sky, said:

"Kazuma...Kazuma."

I stopped. "...? Yeah, what?" I turned to look at Aqua; her back remained facing to me.

"Kazuma Satou... Are you glad you were sent to this world? You don't regret it?"

Her question hung in the air. Back in Japan, I'd been a shut-in with no real future. Now I had a veritable fortune, my own house, and a bunch of beautiful otherworld women who liked me. Happy ending, right?

I know, when Serena killed me, I'd told Lady Eris I didn't want to go back. But still... I didn't have any regrets now, even if it meant admitting to Aqua that I was grateful. No matter how cruel this world had been to me, no matter how uncaring.

"No, no regrets. I'm glad I came here."

Aqua let out a long sigh; she seemed genuinely relieved to hear that. I'd been feeling a little guilty for dragging her here, but maybe she felt kind of the same way for sending me in the first place.

"That's good, then," she said. "Sleep tight, Kazuma. I know how beautiful I must look in the moonlight, but don't go getting any naughty ideas and doing anything weird, okay? You'll get divine punishment for it—you hear me?"

"Yeah, not gonna happen," I said. The promptness of my response seemed to annoy Aqua, and she started muttering about how she should go ahead and slap a seal on me anyway. I decided to pick up the pace to my room.

I collapsed into my bed, but wouldn't you know it, I still couldn't sleep. I just lay there, lost in thought.

*Defeating the Demon King, huh...?*

*Yeah, that's totally impossible...right?*

What if there was some simple way to take him out?

No, no, no, it had to be impossible.

But if I had a good, calm think about it, surely one or two ideas might—

That was when it struck me. Why was I thinking so seriously about slaying the Demon King? I chased the ridiculous thought out of my head, closing my eyes for some sleep. I let the sandman lead me away, my mind drifting. I had a thought I'd never really had before.

*I wish I had some power, some cheat, that would let me go toe to toe with the Demon King...*

## Epilogue



“Hey, Kazuma! Kazuma, wake up! Come on—get *up* already!”

I awoke to Darkness’s voice. I must not have been sleeping very deeply, because I snapped right back to consciousness. Or maybe it was the way she was shaking me and shouting.

.....

I closed my eyes again, hugged Darkness to me, and rolled onto my side... “Mrrrm, mrrrmf, I can’t eat any more...”

“D-dammit! I know you’re awake! Oh, st— Wait, hold on.....”

I was just trying to tease Darkness, who had stopped fighting me and just lay there in my arms, but then we heard:

“What are you doing? I told you to go wake up Kazuma! Good heavens, I take my eyes off you for one second and you go trying to tempt this man astray! What a floozy!”

“Huh?! N-n-n-no, you’ve got it all wrong! I haven’t done anything yet!”

Apparently, Megumin had come into the room, so I opened my eyes. Of course, I found myself looking right at Darkness. “So you came to attack me again?!” I said.

“Argh! Y-you...!” Darkness blushed furiously, brought to the edge of tears by my false accusation. Meanwhile, I ducked away from her, stretching as I asked the girls, “What’s up, you two? It’s a little early for all this commotion, don’tcha

think?"

"It's noon already! And anyway, something terrible has happened! Look at this!"

I sat up in bed—I didn't bother to do any more than that—and looked at something Megumin handed me.

It was a letter. I opened it to discover a note inside, written in almost frighteningly beautiful handwriting.

Dear all: A lovely summer is upon us. I hope you're doing well.

Darkness, please stop playing that game where you deliberately stub your toe on the corner of the dresser.

Megumin, take it easy on the explosions, or you're going to end up being a major cause of global warming.

Kazuma, I know you're little more than a giant mass of libido given human form, but please stop spreading everyone's laundry out on the floor and rolling around on it.

I balled up the letter and flung it into a corner of my room.

““Ahhh!”” the girls cried.

Megumin rushed over and grabbed it. “I understand how you feel, but please read to the very end.”

Fine. I resumed reading.

Now then, our world is a desolation beset by the scourge of the Demon King. In such dire circumstances, can a beautiful and lovely goddess such as myself let the Demon King go unchecked?

No, I certainly cannot.

To my faithful Axis believers who are scattered all over this world: Rising to the faith my one billion followers have placed in me, I now go forth on a journey. Yes, on a quest to become a legend...

I looked at Megumin and Darkness. “Does the Axis Church really have a billion followers?”

"If you counted every single one in the entire world, it would probably be a few hundred at best," Darkness said. Reassured, I went back to the letter.

Thus, with this lofty objective in mind...

...I'm gonna zip over there and take out the Demon King.

This time, I finally stood up. "That idiot...!"

Darkness looked at me, alarmed. "Aqua's been saving the pocket change you give her, Kazuma. She's got quite a bit saved up by now. I think she might be hoping to hire some capable adventurers on the way..."

I jumped down from my bed. We had to go after her...!

When I looked at the girls' faces, though, they both seemed oddly uncomfortable. I gave them a questioning look, and Megumin pointed to a corner of the letter. I looked at it...

...and found that if I stared very closely, I could see the faint traces of something that had been written and then erased. She'd probably drafted the letter, then erased something that didn't sound cool enough. It said:

P.S. Please look for me.

Wouldn't you normally write "Please *don't* look for me"?

What an idiot.

## **Afterword**

First of all, thank you for picking up this book. You could consider this volume to be “the protagonist, Kazuma Satou, strikes back.” He rarely picks his own fights, and when he does battle, he always ends up leaning on his friends for help. But to aid Aqua in her darkest hour, he’ll challenge a general of the Demon King all by himself, continuing to resist even after she brainwashes him...!

I doubt many people start reading at the afterword, but if you do...um, spoiler alert, I guess.

You get the idea.

Anyway, the fact that yet another book has made it successfully into publication is all thanks to the help and support of many people, starting with my illustrator, Kurone Mishima; my editor, I; and everyone in design, copyediting, and editorial. And above all, to the readers who continue to support and encourage me.

So, even though I’m repeating myself in every volume at this point...

To everyone who has stuck with this series, and to all my readers: thank you very, very much!

***Natsume Akatsuki***

# AFTERWORD



\*w\*  
Kurone Mishima

Lady Aqua drafting her note

# NEXT



Megumin, this is awful!  
Without Aqua, we can't  
get the worst muck off  
the toilet!

Um,  
Kazuma...



You think you've got it  
bad? Without Aqua, it  
will take ages to heat  
water for the bath!

H-hold on,  
Megumin...



Man... I guess Aqua  
actually did have a  
use around here...

As much as we  
complained about  
her, she sure made  
our lives easier...



Guys, Aqua is still right outside!



COMING  
SOON!!

.....  
Waaaaahhh!  
I swear I'm going on  
a journey for real!



KONOSUBA  
GOD'S BLESSING  
ON THIS WONDERFUL WORLD! 16

# KONOSUBA: AN EXPLOSION ON THIS WONDERFUL WORLD!

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# KISARAGI CORPORATION

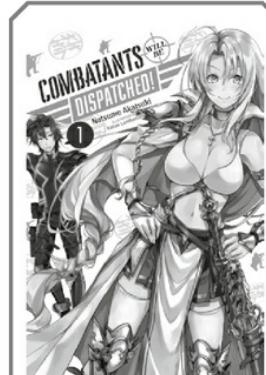
## COMBATANTS WILL BE DISPATCHED!



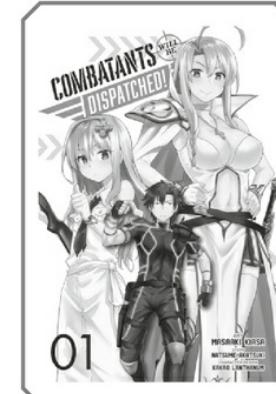
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