



Natsume
Akatsuki

ILLUSTRATION BY
Kurone
Mishima



Love,
Witches
& Other
Delusions!

KONOSUBA: GOD'S BLESSING ON THIS WONDERFUL WORLD! 2!





"Welcome!
Is this your first
time at our
establishment?"

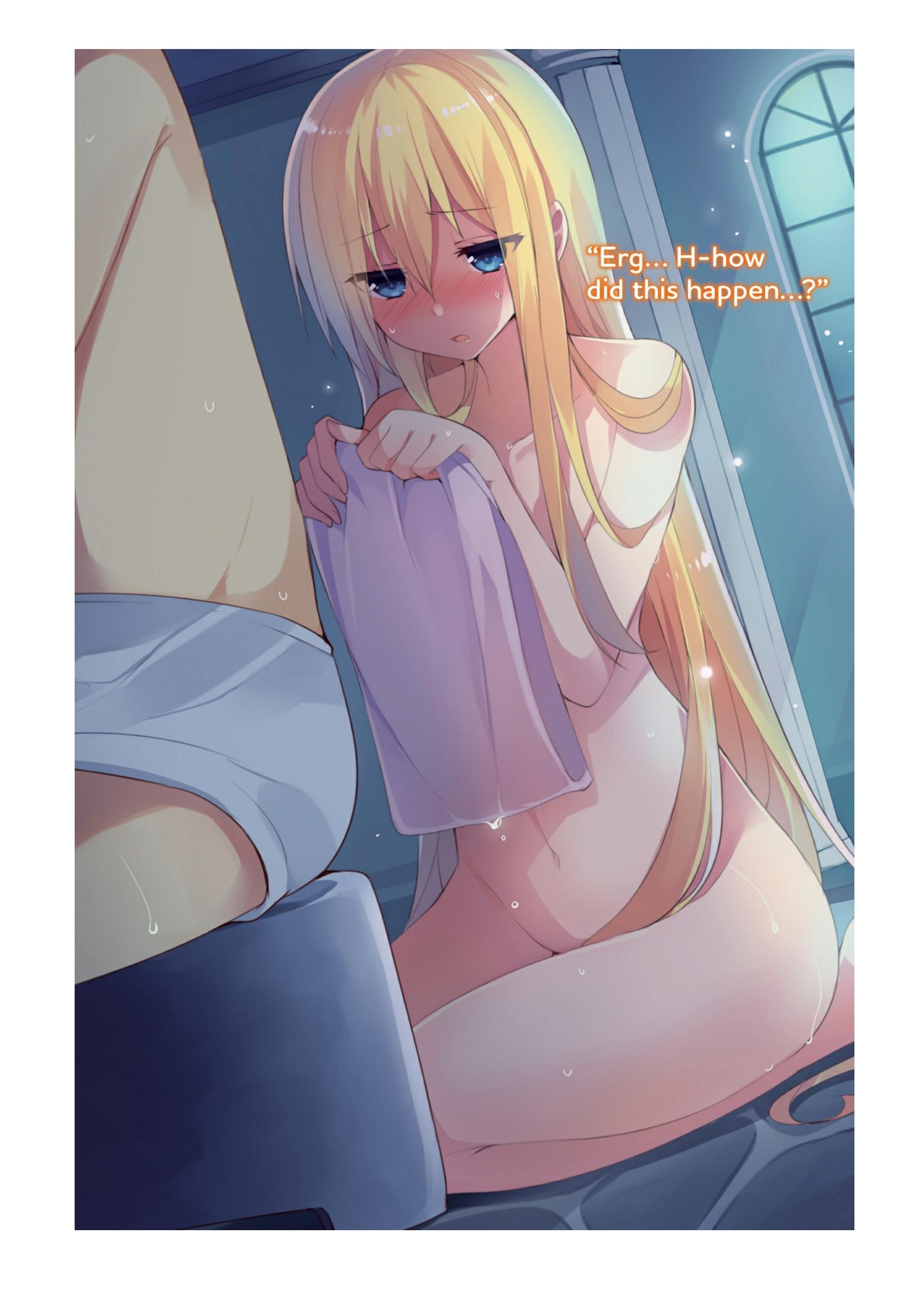


Keith

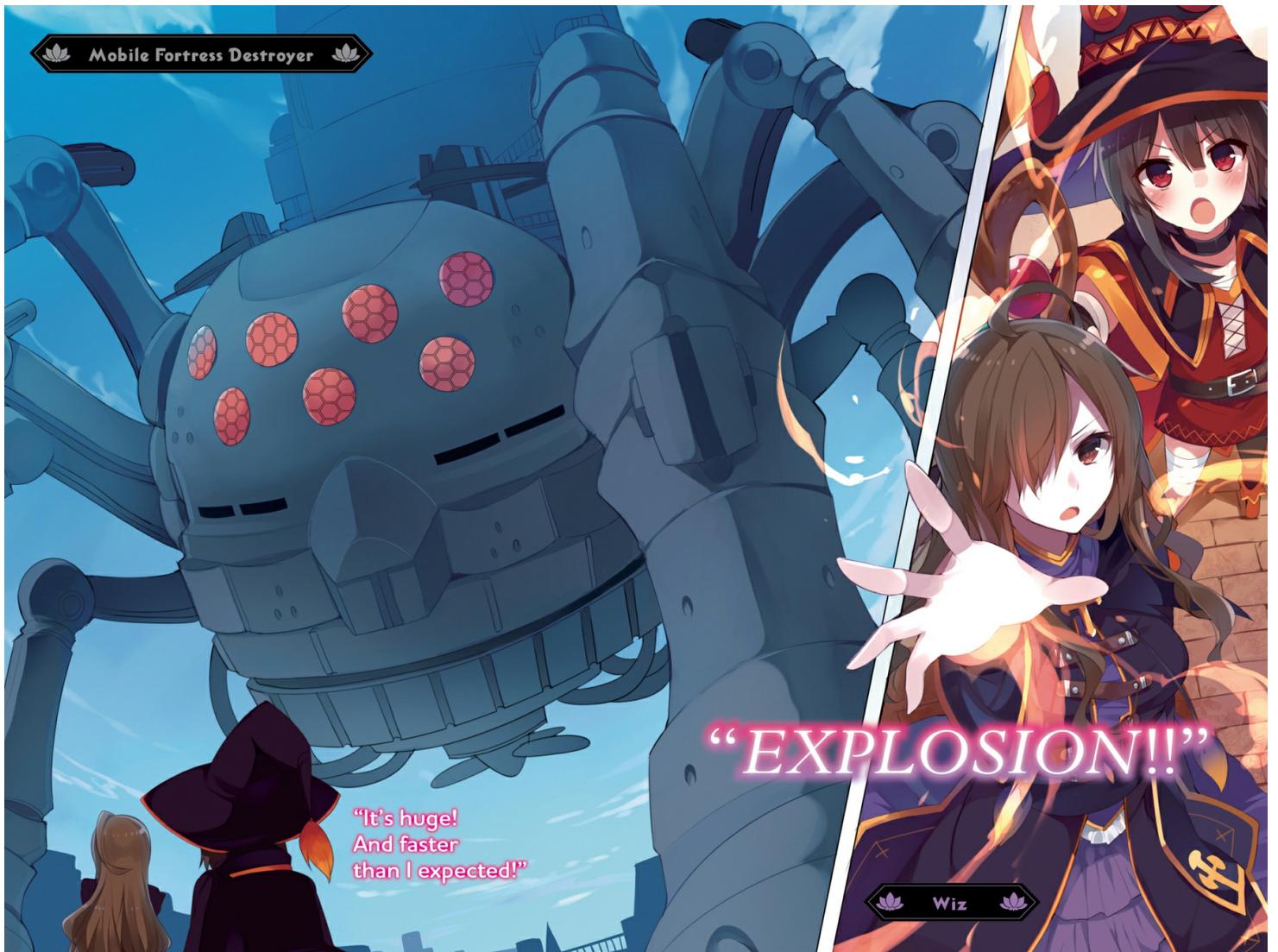


Dust





“Erg... H-how
did this happen...?”



KONOSUBA: GOD'S BLESSING ON THIS WONDERFUL WORLD! 2

Love,
Witches
& Other
Delusions!

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KONOSUBA: GOD'S BLESSING ON THIS **WONDERFUL WORLD!** Love, Witches & Other Delusions

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NATSUME AKATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION BY
KURONE MISHIMA



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Konosuba: God's Blessing on This Wonderful World!, Vol. 2

NATSUME AKATSUKI

Translation by Kevin Steinbach

Cover art by Kurone Mishima

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Character Profiles

The image displays five panels of character profiles, each featuring a main character and a supporting character, with dialogue boxes and status information.

Panel 1 (Top Left): Aqua (main character) and Arch-priest (supporting character).
Aqua: "I'm Aqua, goddess of water! The warm and fuzzy main character of this story, who fights the Demon King while healing hearts and bodies! My companion is a hikineET who couldn't hack it in Japan..."
Arch-priest: "....."
Status: Age Unknown, Job Arch-priest.

Panel 2 (Top Right): Wiz (main character) and Shopkeeper (supporting character).
Wiz: "I'm Wiz, and I support them all as proprietor of Wiz's Magical Item Shoppe... Ummmm... I'm also the main character."
Shopkeeper: "....."
Status: Age 20, Job Shopkeeper.

Panel 3 (Middle Left): Megumin (main character) and Arch-wizard (supporting character).
Megumin: "And alongside this self-proclaimed goddess is the true main character, holder of the greatest firepower and coolest secret move! The genius among geniuses of the Crimson Magic Clan—Megumin...!"
Arch-wizard: "....."
Status: Age 13, Job Arch-wizard.

Panel 4 (Middle Right): Eris (main character) and Unknown Goddess (supporting character).
Eris: "I am Eris. I'm the patron goddess of the Eris Church in this world and will be replacing Aqua, my senior, as the main character from this volume on."
Unknown Goddess: "....."
Status: Age Unknown, Job Unknown Goddess.

Panel 5 (Bottom Left): Darkness (main character) and Crusader (supporting character).
Darkness: "Accompanying them both is one with razor-sharp will and an iron defense, who constantly endures Kazuma's endless sexual harassment—the gallant secret main character, Darkness...!"
Crusader: "....."
Status: Age 18, Job Crusader.

Panel 6 (Bottom Right): Kazuma Satou (main character) and Adventurer (supporting character).
Kazuma Satou: "Hrrrrm. Hey, Eris...when did your boobs get so big? Lemme have a feel!"
Adventurer: "Hey! What happened to my intro?!"
Status: Age 16, Job Adventurer.

Prologue



“Kazuma Satou... Welcome to the Great Beyond. I am the goddess Eris, and I will show you a new path. Your life in this world is over.”

When I opened my eyes, I was in a place that looked like a Roman temple.

The girl before me spoke those words, but I couldn’t fathom what she meant.

She was clad in a billowing white Feather Dress, with long silver hair and alabaster skin.

I thought I could sense a shadow over her face, upon her somehow fleeting beauty.

There was no telling her actual age, but she could have passed for younger than me.

The blue eyes of the goddess who called herself Eris looked at me with pity as I stood there and stared at her.

As her words sank in, I realized I was dead.

It was all oddly familiar.

It had been like this when I met that *other* self-proclaimed goddess, Aqua, which was what led me to “that” world to begin with.

But this time, I remembered what had happened just before I died.

I see... I've died again.

As that thought crossed my mind, I felt something trickle down my cheek.

That hadn’t happened when I’d died the first time.

Huh... Who knew?

It turned out I'd liked that stupid, no-good world more than I thought.

Chapter 1

May I Trade with These True Friends!



1

“I want some cash!” I mourned, agonized.

Cash, yeah. And plenty of it.

At the tavern in the building known as the Adventurers Guild...

I clutched my head with both hands, my face smooshed into the table.

“So does everybody. Myself included, of course! ...Think about it. Isn’t this completely pathetic? Let’s say I—a goddess, remember!—*was* willing to live in a stable for the rest of my life; why would you let me? Wouldn’t you be ashamed to do that? If you understand, then make with the goods! Baby me!”

A beautiful young woman with light-blue hair harangued me as I sat there with my head in my hands.

She had good looks, if nothing else. Her name was Aqua, and allegedly she was some kind of goddess...

“...You don’t even know why I want the money, do you?”

“How should a pure, good-hearted, beautiful person like me know what goes through the dirty mind of some former *hikikomori*? You probably just want enough money to shut yourself away forever or something.”

"It's debt!" I spat.

Aqua quivered slightly and looked away.

"Debt! The debts *you've* racked up wind up garnishing most of our reward for every single quest! It's almost winter! This morning when I woke up inside my pile of straw, my eyebrows were frozen! All the other adventurers are already sleeping at the inn. What are we gonna do when it's winter for real, huh? We're gonna freeze to death on our haystacks, that's what! Never mind defeating the Demon King and making it home—I just want to make it through the night!"

I pounded the table as I shouted at Aqua, who had covered her ears, closed her eyes, and turned around.

This world was home to people called adventurers.

Day and night, they battled the monsters that threatened the populace, saved their wages for a drink at the bar, and generally lived never knowing if they would survive to see tomorrow.

And even these people, who did everything by the seat of their pants, still managed to get themselves a place at an inn when winter came.

Part of the reason, unfortunately, was that most weaker monsters hibernated in winter, leaving only powerful opponents in the field.

Our base of operations was Axel, a town full of novice adventurers. For a bunch of amateurs who barely had hair on their chests, taking on winter monsters was a suicide mission.

Bam! Aqua leaned over and began her retort by pounding the table.

"Well—Well—What was I supposed to do?! Without my super-incredible performance back then, this town might have been destroyed! And they put me in *debt*?! They should be thanking me! That bill was unjustified! In fact, I'll go protest to the receptionist here!"

"Hey, lay off, don't bother the desk lady! ...To be fair, they did give us a huge reward...even if they charged us enough to put us in the red right after that. 'Sorry, we had to destroy part of the town in order to save it.' You think they were gonna let us off scot-free?"

A general of the Demon King named Beldia had attacked this town.

The Demon King.

Yes, *that* Demon King.

Just like the ones you've seen in manga, video games, everything. And one of his generals attacked us.

Aqua was able to weaken Beldia by exploiting his vulnerability with a deluge of water, after which I'd overwhelmed him with an irresistible technique, and we got out with no problem. Except...

"Whatever! You spent the whole fight running, then after I finally weakened that Dullahan, you just used Steal to get his head. You owe me more praise! More adulation! Where's the kudos, the cheering, the coddling?! Everyone at this Guild should be all, *We knew you could do it, O revered goddess!*"

"You grandstanding idiot! You've been getting really full of yourself! Yes, I'll admit you *somehow* pulled it off against the Dullahan. Fine! All the reward, all the praise, and all the *debt* are yours! So you can just pay back the whole thing by yourself!"

"Waaah! I'm sorry! I apologize for getting carried away; please don't abandon me!"

Aqua wept and threw herself at me as I got up to leave the goddess of debt behind.

But someone called out to us:

"Really, do you two need to be at it first thing in the morning? Everyone's... not looking. I see the whole Guild is already used to this..."

"You are here quite early. Is there any good work?"

The speakers were our companions: Darkness, our Crusader-cum-hardcore masochist, and Megumin, our terminally tweeny Arch-wizard.

Darkness brushed aside her long golden hair as she sat down. She was dressed in casual civilian clothes, her great sword at her hip. Megumin sat beside her, a Wizard with an eye patch covering one of her red eyes.

"Hey guys, made all your preparations? We haven't found any work yet. I mean, under the circumstances, I figured there was no rush—we could wait till you got here." As I spoke, I looked around the Guild Hall. Despite the early hour, there were adventurers drinking to their hearts' content.

Some things were inevitable, right?

Everyone who had been part of the battle against the Demon King's general had gotten a reward. Adventurers with overflowing purses had no reason to go out of their way to hunt dangerous winter monsters.

As a result, we could have our pick of quests from the Guild's board...

I went over to the board to see if there was anything good.

"Let's see... Plenty of good payouts, but no quests that seem really worthwhile..."

Take out a pack of white wolves that has been attacking a farm. Reward: 1 million eris.

A One-Punch Bear has come out of hibernation and is living in a field—kill it. Reward: 2 million eris. Chase it off. Reward: 500,000 eris.

No way could we handle a pack of wolves. They were bigger than dogs, faster, and if they all came at us at once, we'd be done for.

And bears were out of the question. What if it attacked Megumin or me? Heck, we'd probably be finished if it gave us a pat on the head. I didn't want anything to do with a creature with a name like One-Punch Bear, anyway.

"What's this? 'Mobile Fortress Destroyer is in the vicinity. Seeking scouts to investigate its likely path.' Huh? What's Destroyer?"

"Destroyer is—it's Destroyer," Darkness said. "You know, fast, mobile...a fortress."

"It moves like vwoosh, vwoosh," added Megumin, "and tramples over everything in its path. Also it is strangely popular with children."

I see. I don't get it.

I let the girls' explanations go out my other ear and resumed my search for

work.

What was left was—

“Hey, what about this? Hunting Snow Sprites? That doesn’t sound very threatening.”

Every Snow Sprite you took out would net you a hundred thousand eris.

That was a fairly lucrative reward compared to those for the creatures we’d fought in the past, but its name wasn’t very intimidating, unlike wolves and bears.

“Snow Sprites are very weak monsters. Snowy fields are supposed to be heavily populated with them, and I hear you can slice them easily with a sword. But...”

Before Megumin could finish, I tore the piece of paper off the board. As I took the notice, Aqua joined in.

“Snow Sprite hunting? Snow Sprites aren’t particularly dangerous to people, but they say each time one dies, spring comes half a day sooner. If you’re going on that quest, let me just get ready,” and with a *Hang on!* she disappeared somewhere.

Megumin didn’t seem to have any objections to our taking on the quest.

Darkness muttered quietly, “Snow Sprites...?”

I figured our hardcore masochist of a Crusader would be the one to complain. She always wanted to tangle with some powerful monster.

But for some reason, she seemed almost happy.

While we waited, I had a bad feeling about Darkness’s mood. But we set off on our hunt as soon as Aqua got back.

2

In a field off away from town.

I was pretty sure there hadn’t been any snow in town yet, but this place—and this place only—shone white with it.

Then there were what must have been the Snow Sprites—fluffy white balls about the size of my palm—drifting here and here.

They sure didn't *look* dangerous.

So what made them worth a hundred thousand eris apiece?

There was that legend that spring would come a few hours sooner each time one of these creatures perished. Maybe some people who really couldn't wait for spring got together to offer a lavish reward.

After all, who said the monster had to be powerful just because the quest boasted a big payout?

Say you had an average monster that was ripping up fields but wasn't a danger to people, and one that was weak but loved fighting and would actively attack people. Of course the bounty would be higher on the weak but vicious one.

Yes, the price on the Sprites bothered me, but something else bothered me even more.

"...Can't you do something about that outfit?"

It was the middle of winter, and there was Aqua with a bug net and some small bottles, like a dumb kid about to go bug hunting.

Aqua looked at me with the kind of *duh* expression you would give a total moron.

Why, this little...!

"We catch some Snow Sprites and put them in these bottles. Then we put the bottles in a box with our drinks. We'll be able to have ice-cold Neroid any time we want! In other words, I'm inventing the refrigerator! What do you think? Smart, huh?"

I could see this going wrong somehow. But it was her idea, and she could do what she wanted.

And.....

"Hey, you—where's your armor?"

"In the shop."

As if Aqua wasn't enough, our party's one-woman wall, Darkness, was still in her civilian clothes, no armor, just her sword at her side.

"Yeah, the Demon King's general gave your armor a pretty good beating, didn't he? But are you sure you're going to be all right like that? Ehh, I guess it doesn't look like Snow Sprites are much for attacking, anyway."



"It's no problem. A little chilly, but I can just treat it like a test of my endurance..."

Dressed in only her tight black skirt and black shirt, Darkness stood there panting and looking pretty cold.

Or maybe this perv was one of those people who's always feeling hot. Maybe it melted her brain, too.

We collected ourselves and began the hunt.

"Megumin, Darkness! Get the one that went that way! Stay still, darn it!"

The Snow Sprites had drifted about lazily when we kept our distance, but as soon as we moved in for the attack, they started darting away.

It was hard to land a hit on them.

Well, they *were* worth a hundred thousand each. It couldn't be *too* easy.

I brought down my third or fourth Sprite, then let out a breath.

"I caught my fourth one! Look, Kazuma! Look at all of them!"

When I glanced toward Aqua's giddy shout, she was shoving a captured Snow Sprite into a bottle.

...Maybe I should've brought a net instead of my sword.

If we couldn't take down enough Sprites in the field, we could always finish off the ones in Aqua's jars.

"Kazuma, Darkness and I are chasing these Sprites around, but they are agile and hard to hit... Can I please just clear this field with Explosion?" Megumin asked, panting. She had finally managed to give one Sprite a knock with her staff after she and Darkness had chased it up and down the plain.

I'd been worried we might run into the wolves or the bear from the other quests, but my Sense Foe skill was always working, and if I felt anything, we could just run away.

"Fine, go for it, Megumin. Let's clean up this place."

Megumin gave me a thrilled look and began to chant—

“Explosion!!”

Megumin’s ultimate magic spell, which she could use only once per day, enveloped the snowy field.

The shock wave rattled the cold, dry air, and along with the roar of the blast, we could see bare earth where a crater had formed in the middle of the field.

Megumin flopped down, now altogether out of magic, but she still managed to triumphantly show us her Adventurer’s Card.

“Eight! I took out eight of them. I have leveled up!”

Hey, way to go.

Though she would’ve looked more impressive if she wasn’t facedown in the snow.

That made three for me and nine for Megumin. Altogether, we’d taken out twelve so far. Counting the ones Aqua had captured, we had sixteen, or 1.6 million eris.

That worked out to four hundred thousand per person.

And it hadn’t even been an hour.

This was the dreaded winter hunting?

Why wasn’t anyone else getting in on these weak and oh-so-profitable monsters?

At that moment, as if in answer to my question...

“Ah, there he is!”

Darkness took one look and then entered her stance, sword out and a small satisfied smile on her face.

He almost burst onto the scene, so fast my Sense Foe ability wasn’t able to warn me in time to get us out of there.

“...” Megumin, flush with victory just a moment ago, stayed silently on the ground and tried to play dead.

“...Kazuma. Let me tell you why adventurers stop taking on quests in the

winter.” Aqua backed up a step, never taking her eyes off the thing.

The thing that had all our attention took one gliding step forward.

“You’ve lived in Japan. Surely you’ve at least heard his name on the weather forecasts this time of year?”

His entire body was clad in thick white armor, and he exuded an unmitigated desire to kill us.

Yeah, I was Japanese. I knew who he was at the first glance, even before Aqua had said anything.

One look at that outrageous character, and I didn’t need Aqua to fill me in. But I waited anyway.

“Lord of the snow spirits, spoken of in tales of winter...”

He was wearing a big white samurai-style helmet and an immensely intricate warrior’s surcoat.

Freezing mist drifted from the blade in the white-masked swordsman’s grasp.

Aqua’s face was sober as she murmured:

“It’s General Winter. He has come.”

“Idiots! This whole stinking world! People and food and monsters—all complete idiots!”

The blade of the sword gleamed sharp as a razor. And then General Winter attacked.

3

Armor of purest white.

That’s kind of a dumb color for armor, but it did nothing to diminish the splendor of the Warring States-era armor.

The intricate design on his surcoat was covered in ice.

You didn’t have to get close to the katana with its cloud of freezing mist to see it had a cruel cutting edge.

General Winter boasted an intense presence and bloodlust as he took his stance, sword upright next to his head.

The naked blade glinted in the sun—and then the general leaped at his nearest foe, Darkness!

“Hrk?!”

Darkness made to block the move with her great sword, but— With a clear ringing sound, her sword, which had withstood even Beldia’s most violent attacks, was cut clean in half.

“Aaah! M-my sword—!”

Aqua was trying to put some distance between herself and the battle between Darkness and General Winter.

“General Winter,” she said. “A monster specifically targeted by the State for a huge bounty. He’s the spirit of winter itself... Spirits don’t have one ‘true’ body. They reach into the subconscious of the people they meet and draw on that for the form they take. A fire spirit might appear as a rampaging fire salamander, because we picture fire as an all-consuming inferno. A water spirit might pick up on the image of a pure, awesome, brilliant, gorgeous water goddess and appear as a beautiful woman... But the spirit of winter is sort of an exception. All the powerful monsters keep even adventurers inside in the winter, never mind the townspeople, so hardly anyone ever meets the spirit of winter...unless they came here from Japan with some kind of power-up.”

Aqua filled me in on the winter spirit even as she clutched her bottle full of Snow Sprites.

A white cloud of mist rushed from the mouth of the spirit’s mask, almost like fogging breath.

I stood next to Darkness with her shattered sword, keeping my own blade raised toward the general.

“You’re saying this guy is here because some Japanese jerk came to this world and had to be all, *Oh, winter! Like General Winter?!* What a pain; what are we supposed to do? How do you fight the spirit of winter?!”

Frankly, I didn't feel like we had the slightest chance of winning against the monster in front of us.

It might look like the armor of a human warrior, but apparently it was a spirit in corporeal form. I doubted things would somehow just work themselves out with a swipe of my sword.

Megumin, our last ray of hope, had already used her magic for the day.

In fact, she was still on the ground, playing dead. When this battle was over, maybe I'd step on her.

Aqua opened the lid of her bottle and freed the Snow Sprites she'd worked so hard to catch.

"Kazuma, listen! The winter spirit is a generous one! If we apologize from the bottoms of our hearts, he'll let us go!"

No sooner had she spoken than Aqua flung herself to the snowy ground.

"Kowtow, everybody!" she cried. "Come on, bow! Hurry, everyone, lay down your weapons! Apologize! Quick, Kazuma, apologize!!"

The former whatever-whatever threw aside her pride and shoved her forehead into the snow. It was a pretty impressive kowtow.

I felt somehow refreshed to see Aqua so readily humbling herself and Megumin doing a perfect impression of roadkill.

It was true: General Winter stopped looking at the prostrate Aqua.

Which meant he did even more looking at Darkness and me.

It didn't take much of a glance from him to convince me to throw myself to my knees—!

...Darkness, however, was still standing next to me.

"Hey, what're you doing? Get down here!"

Darkness had cast away the sundered pieces of her sword and was looking balefully at General Winter.

"Hrr! Even I have my pride as a Crusader—a Paladin! For a Knight like me to bow my head to a monster, just because I'm a little frightened—! Even if no one

saw me do it, still...!"

Great. I reached up with my left hand and dragged her head down.

"You're always running straight after some monster, and *now* you get a sense of pride?"

"S-stoppit! Hrr! What reward is there in being forced to bow the head I refuse to bow, in having my face forced to the earth?" She was panting. "Ahh, the snow chills...!"

I kept my own head down as I pressed her pervy face to the ground. Her cheeks were red. She was only pretending to resist.

I peeked up to see what General Winter was doing: He had already sheathed his sword.

I breathed a sigh of relief and kept my head dow—

Aqua shouted shrilly at me:

"Kazuma, your weapon! Your weapon! Get rid of the sword you're holding!"

With my face pushed into the freezing grass, I suddenly remembered that I was still holding my sword in my right hand. I tossed it away in a panic.

In the effort, I couldn't help but raise my head...

As my head came up, my eyes met the sight of General Winter, his left hand resting on his sheathed sword.

I could see that his thumb had nudged out the hilt, exposing just a bit of the blade.

He was preparing to draw and cut.

His empty right hand seemed to go fuzzy for an instant.

Then I heard a soft *ching*.

It seemed to be the sound of the sword being returned to its scabbard.

I was confused: With the sound still ringing in my ears, my eyes went from General Winter, where I'd accidentally put them, to the snow-covered ground, and then the white earth came closer and closer...

I remembered it perfectly.

General Winter had killed me.

"Er... Are you feeling better?"

"Oh...sorry. I kind of lost it there. Guess you're not seeing my best side."

I looked away, embarrassed to have burst into tears in front of a goddess in this pure white temple.

But the goddess, who had called herself Eris, shook her head with a sorrowful look and said, "You have nothing to be ashamed of. You lost your precious life..."

As she spoke, she closed her eyes sadly, as if she was concerned for me.

"Um, can I ask you something? What happened to that monster after he killed me?"

I was afraid the others might have thrown themselves at the creature to try to get revenge after he'd done me in.

"Things are well. After he cut you down, General Winter vanished."

I sighed, feeling a burden lift.

Eris looked mournfully at me then.

"Mr. Kazuma Satou... For something like this to happen to you, after you so kindly came to this world from your peaceful home in Japan... Brave visitor from another world. At least, by my power, may your next life be in your serene home country, with a wealthy family, where you will want for nothing. I shall send you to a place where you can live a happy life."

Eris's words reminded me.

When you died, you could either go to Heaven or start over as a baby.

It had been an exception to the rule that I'd gotten to take a mulligan in this bizarre world.

I hadn't lasted long, but I'd actually kind of enjoyed it, by the end.

I would never see that obnoxious bunch again. And that made me a little...

Well, just a little, but...it made me sad.

Maybe Eris could see it on my face, because she turned her sorrowful eyes to me again.

Then she held her right hand over my head...

All right, Kazuma, come back! What are you doing getting killed in a place like this?! You can't die yet!

Suddenly, I heard Aqua's voice.

It boomed in our chamber, followed by a sort of Doppler-shifted echo.

I gave a confused shout of my own. "Wai—Wh-what's that?!"

It seemed I wasn't the only one who was perplexed.

"Wha...? That voice—is that my senior, Aqua?! I thought that priestess looked like her, but—don't tell me it really *was* her?!" Eris exclaimed into empty space. Her eyes had gone wide, and she wore an expression of disbelief.

Aqua's voice came again.

Hey, Kazuma, can you hear me? I cast a spell called Resurrection on your body, so you can come back now! You're probably standing in front of a goddess, right? Have her produce a gate to us.

Whoa! No way, Goddess—you can really do that?!

Come to think of it, she'd brought back those adventurers the Dullahan had killed, hadn't she!

"Right, hang on, Aqua! I'm headed your way!"

I didn't know if she could hear my voice, but I shouted back into the empty space anyway and jumped for joy.

"W-w-w-wait just a minute! That is not how it works! I'm very sorry, but you've already come back to life once, and under the Heavenly Rules, you can't do it again! I'm afraid you, with your personal connection to my senior, are the only one who can speak to her on the other side, so could you please let her know for me?"

Eris seemed a bit panicked.

Aw, seriously? Guess I jumped for joy too soon.

I faced the empty space and called out:

“Hey, Aqua, can you hear me?! She says I’ve already come back to life once, so I can’t do it again! Divine rules or something!”

There was an instant of silent—

Huh? What goddess fed you that line? Tell me who you are! I’m an elite goddess, responsible for Japan! You think I’m going to take lip from some local deity like you?!

Sheesh, Aqua, cut it out.

The “local deity” in front of me wore a pinched expression.

“Um, she says her name is Eris...,” I timidly replied to Aqua.

Aqua screamed back hysterically:

Eris?! You mean the Eris who let a little national worship go to her head and is so overrated they even name their currency after her? That Eris? Hey, Kazuma, if she tries to give you any more guff, you go ahead and pull the padding right out of her shir—

“All right! I give! We’ll call this a special case! I’m opening a gate right now!”

Eris, blushing furiously, cut off Aqua’s tirade with a snap of her fingers.

As if at her signal, a plain white door appeared in front of me.

I thought I could hear Eris muttering something about Aqua being as unbearable as ever.

“This door leads to your current world... You know this is highly unusual, right? Normally no one gets to be magicked back to life more than once, prince or pauper. Geez. You said your name was Kazuma?”

“Oh, uh, yes, ma’am!” I answered, my voice shrill.

Next to our bumbling deity, this goddess seemed like the real thing.

Not to mention she was gorgeous, which only made me more nervous.

She had looked at me sadly throughout our conversation, but now she bit her lip, troubled.

Finally she gave me an impish wink and whispered, somehow cheerfully: "This is our little secret, okay?"

I gave her a thin smile and pushed open the door...



I could hear a voice from far away...

“...zuma! Kazuma!! Please wake up! Kazuma!”

It was Megumin, clutching me and crying.

...?

Huh? My right hand was warm.

I glanced at it and found Darkness crouching to my right and clasping my hand in both of hers, eyes closed as if in prayer.

I felt something looming over me and focused my gaze upward...

...and met the eyes of Aqua, who was looking down at me.

“Finally awake, huh? That girl was always so stubborn.”

As I listened to her, I began to notice that the back of my head was warm.

...Oh.

I guess my head was resting on Aqua’s knees.

Megumin and Darkness saw I had opened my eyes, and both of them hugged me wordlessly.

It was great that they were so happy to have me back, but man, this was kind of awkward—!

Aqua realized I was frozen with embarrassment, and she gave a smirk.

Sheesh. I should’ve left them here and just gotten myself reborn as a rich kid in Japan.

“Hey, Kazuma, don’t just lie there blushing. Say something! Don’t you have anything to say to us?” said Aqua, still smirking.

I don’t suppose I could exchange this useless goddess for the cute one I was with just a moment ago?

I looked up at Aqua and said three words.

"I wanna trade."

"Have it your way, you damned NEET! You want to see her so badly? I'll send you back there right now!"

"S-stop! You can't beat up someone who's just come back from the dead! What are you, the goddess of violence?!"

A vein bulged on Aqua's forehead as she held me down with one hand and made to punch me with the other.

Darkness held her back with a *now, now*, and I sat up, checking my body for any signs of its encounter with General Winter.

"How are you doing?" Megumin asked. "No problems anywhere?"

I patted myself down once more.

"Looks like I'm fine. Hey, how did I die, anyway?"

Aqua answered, "General Winter chopped off your head. It was a great cut. Which made it easy to reattach your head, by the way. I was able to get back some of your blood, too, but you're still a little low, so take it easy for a while or you'll get anemic, okay? Stay off our front line. If you lose any more blood, well, I can't make any promises."

"Chopped off my—!"

Hardly able to speak, I felt my neck.

No matter how many times I checked, though, there didn't seem to be any scar.

Some of the snowy field had been dyed red with my blood, and more of it had spattered on Darkness beside me.

Aqua had brought me back, sure, but dying still didn't appeal to me.

Winter here meant scarce food and a harsh environment. The only ones who should be out in it were the monsters who could win the battle for survival even under those conditions.

In other words, there were no nice, easy quests for novices like us.

Know what? Let's go back to town for today.

As soon as we got to town, we headed to the Guild to collect our reward.

"Boy, twelve Sprites in less than an hour: 1.2 million... That's a pretty good take, but I guess no amount of profit makes it worth dying. You said General Winter has a special bounty on his head, right? I wonder how much he'd bring in. He cracked Darkness's sword in one hit. He's stronger than Beldia, and he was worth three hundred million."

"General Winter will leave you alone if you do not touch the Snow Sprites. Still, he must be worth around two hundred million eris. Beldia was worth more because, as a general of the Demon King, he was not only powerful but a clear and present danger to humanity. General Winter is not a very aggressive monster, so he is worth less. Even so, two hundred million implies he is no easy foe."

I fell silent at Megumin's explanation.

Two hundred million...

That would be enough to pay off our debts, buy a house, and still have some money left over for fun.

"Megumin, could you use Explos—"

"Explosion won't work on General Winter. He appears in a human form, but he is a spirit. Spirits are fundamentally a sort of mass of magic with no corporeal form. And the leaders of these spirits have incredible Magic Defense. Explosion can certainly damage a creature of any type, but it would be difficult to stop a spirit with one blast...not that I would want to attempt an explosion against such a frightening opponent."

No go, huh? Seeing my dejected expression, a satisfied smile came over Aqua's face.

"Heh-heh! Kazuma, don't look so down. I wasn't just kowtowing to the general, you know. Look at this!"

As she spoke, she pulled out a small jar.

Inside was a Snow Sprite.

Apparently she hadn't let out all of them during the battle. There was one left.

"Whoa! Way to go, Aqua! All right, give it here; let me finish it off!"

I reached for the jar as I praised Aqua's unusually clever turn.

"Huh? N-no way! I'm taking this one home to use as a refrigerator! So we can have ice-cold Neroid even in the middle of summer... No! This one's miiine! I've even given it a name! I won't let you kill it! Stop! Stop it!"

She hugged the jar tightly, crouching back and putting up far more of a fight than I'd expected.

Man! We could have gotten a hundred thousand for that thing if we did it in...

But I guess Aqua had brought me back to life today. Much as I hated to leave a bird in the bush, I'd let it go this time.

We cashed out our reward, then divvied up what was left after it was garnished to pay our debt.

It was a little early, but we'd gotten a pretty good payday, so I figured on getting a room at the inn and letting my body rest. I didn't want to overdo it, having just come back from the dead and all.

Although... Well, it was a good amount for a day's work, but compared to our debt, it was a drop in the ocean.

My calculations confronted me directly with our grim reality, and as a sort of escape, I began to think about Eris, the goddess I'd met earlier that day.

She sure was a trim, beautiful woman. Not to mention pretty good-hearted.

She had seemed genuinely grieved that I had died, and then there was that sweet smile as she'd told me to keep it secret that she'd let me come back again.

I felt like I'd met my first real potential love interest since coming to this world.

Picturing Eris's face, I arrived at the inn before I knew it.

"Hee-hee! I'm gonna take good care of you, Snow Sprite. And when summer comes, we'll be rolling in ice! You and I are gonna open a shaved-ice shop together! You can be by my pillow when the summer heat makes it hard to sleep... Hey, Megumin, what do Snow Sprites eat, anyway?"

"I do not think anyone exactly knows. Do they even eat at all?"

"It looks so fluffy and soft," Darkness said. "I'm sure if you sprinkled some sugar on it and popped it in your mouth, it'd be delicious..."

So went their altogether unappetizing deliberations behind me.

As we reached the inn's door, I looked back at them.

I pictured Eris's pure form again.

Then I looked at the faces of my companions. All three looked back quizzically. They were silent, staring at me blankly.

"*Sigh...*"

"Ah!" they all exclaimed at once.

With the girls' commotion roaring behind me, I opened the door.

7

Several days after I had been killed...

"Hey, what did you say?"

I somehow held back my rage as I spoke to the guy in the now-silent Guild Hall.

Having just recently died for the *second* time, I had planned to take a few days to rest my body and see to my mental state.

And then today happened. I was still under orders not to do any strenuous physical activity, so I'd come to the Guild to see if there wasn't any work that involved some nice, easy lifting or something...

"C'mon, *lifting or something?* Your party is stuffed with advanced classes, so why don't you take on some real work? You must be a real ball and chain for

them, huh, Mr. I'm-the-weakest-class?"

The guy looked like a warrior, and as he spoke, he exchanged a hearty snicker with his tablemates.

Just ignore him.

I was a grown man, and I could act like an adult. After the crap Aqua would say to me every day, I wasn't going to let some run-of-the-mill barfly get a rise out of me.

Granted, there was some logic to his words.

My companions might all have their bizarre quirks, but they were still advanced classes.

If we were a bit more effective as a group, maybe our financial outlook would be a little better.

And yes, I was an adventurer, the lowest class.

I really had no comeback for him at that moment.

But the guy seemed to take my refusal to say anything as my *inability* to say anything under his withering assault.

"Hey, why don'tcha say something, weakling? Geez, you go around with three fine ladies like you want a harem—and all of them advanced classes! I'll bet you take good care of them every day, huh!"

The whole Guild erupted in laughter.

Some of those familiar with my history, however, frowned and took on cautious looks.

I unconsciously clenched my fist, but just having around a few people like that helped me to bear it. I could endure.

As I stood there, enduring, Megumin, Darkness, and Aqua jumped in to hold me back.

"Kazuma, you must not sink to his level. I do not care, whatever he says about me."

"She's right, Kazuma. He's just some drunk. Ignore him."

"Yeah! He's just jealous 'cause you've got us with you! I don't care at all; just forget about him!"

They were right. This guy was a stereotypical punk. You saw his type in manga all the time.

There was no need to get into it with him.

I gritted my teeth and tried to bear it, but then the guy said something I couldn't ignore.

"How nice for you, piggybacking on your powerful friends! Sure wish I could be like you—never having to work for anything! Hey, how's about you and I switch places?"

"*Hey, how's about we DO!!!*" I bellowed.

The hall went silent.

"...Huh?"

The warrior who had been ridiculing me made a dumb sound, his mug still in his hand.

"I said, sure! I'll switch with you! I've been just listening to you spew BS all this time—Yes! I'm the weakest class! I admit it! But then! Tell me what you said next!"

"K...Kazuma?"

Aqua spoke with a hint of panic, alarmed by my sudden outburst.

Then the guy jumped in, as if to goad me along.

"A-after that? After that I said...I said you had three fine ladies with you and you must want a harem..."

I slammed my fist onto the table, making everyone in the hall jump.

"Fine ladies?! A harem?! What, have you got marbles for eyes?! You see any fine ladies here? Maybe I'm crazy, but I sure don't! Hey, *how about we trade crazy for blind?!*"

"Wh-what?!"

All three of my party members pointed to themselves and muttered as I spoke.

"Where are all these fine ladies you're talking about?! Huh? You wish you could be like *me*?! Isn't that what you said?!"

I had the guy by the collar when an anxious voice came from behind me: "U-um..."

Aqua was trying to squeak something out as she tremblingly raised her right hand, as if she was the spokesperson for the three of them.

I ignored her and went on:

"And what came after *that*, huh? Something about piggybacking on my powerful friends? *Never having to work for anything?*!"

"I—I'm s-sorry about that... I'm just d-drunk; I g-got carried away... B-but it's—The grass is always greener, y'know? You look downright blessed... You said you'd switch with me, right? How about one day? Change places with me for just one day, Mr. Adventurer! Hey, you guys okay with that?"



He looked to the others sitting at his table for confirmation.

"Don't make much difference to me... Today's just a goblin-hunting quest, anyway."

"I don't mind. But, Dust? Don't get so comfortable in your new party that you never come back!"

"Me neither. They're just goblins; one more kid won't matter. You'd better bring back some good stories, though."

Each of the guy's companions answered in turn.

"Hey, Kazuma," Aqua said, "that's well and good for them, but doesn't our opinion count for anything?"

"Nope," I said, turning to my new party. "Hey, I'm Kazuma. Thanks for taking me on—even if it's just for a day."

"Y-yeah," the guy's friends answered. They seemed to be at a bit of a loss.

8

A man holding a sword and shield and wearing heavy armor took stock of me and said: "I'm Taylor. I'm a Crusader with a focus on single-handed swords. I'm sort of the leader. You're a member of our party for the day—even if it was kind of an accident—so I expect you to do what I say."

"Sure thing. You know, I'm normally the one who gives the orders in my group, so it'll be a nice change of pace to let someone else handle things. Looking forward to it."

Taylor seemed a little surprised at my response.

"You're telling me you had a party full of advanced classes, and the *Adventurer* was their leader?"

"Yup."

I nodded like it was no big deal, but the three of them were speechless.

Next was a girl who still had an air of youth about her, draped in a blue

mantle.

"I'm Rin. I'm a Wizard, as you can probably guess. I've mastered Intermediate Magic. Nice to be working with you! I don't think a few goblins should be any problem. I'll protect you—our little novice!"

She giggled. She was treating me like some kid.

I was pretty sure I was older than her. But if she really was a Wizard, that was comforting. I would happily let her protect me.

"And I'm Keith. I'm an Archer, and I don't miss. Anyway, good to have you on board, I guess."

He smiled as he spoke, a bow slung over his back. He seemed the flippant type.

"Nice to meet you all. I'm Kazuma. I'm an Adventurer... Should I, uh, tell you what I'm good at or anything?"

The three of them burst out laughing.

"Eh, doesn't matter. You were looking for porter work anyway, right? Well, carry our stuff. The three of us will be plenty to take out a few goblins. And don't worry—you'll get your share of the reward."

I had a sense Taylor was teasing me, but I didn't care.

I'd been accused of riding on the coattails of my more powerful party members, but a reward just for hauling around some luggage? That was easier than anything I'd done so far. Were they sure about this?

Well, it was his idea. I wasn't going to argue.

That was when I heard a familiar voice from over by the quest board.

"What? Goblin-slaying? Why are those even showing up near town? Why not do, y'know, something big—something profitable? Kazuma's only rented out for one day; we should take it to show him how grateful he should be to have us!"

It sounded like Aqua was already making a nuisance of herself for the guy who'd switched with me.

"L-let's not. I know you guys are really powerful, but I'm nowhere close! An

Arch-priest, an Arch-wizard, and a Crusader... I'm sure the three of you could take on any opponent no problem, but let's stick to something simpler this time, all right? ...By the way, where are your weapons and armor? You're not really going out like that?"

"It's fine. I trust in my sturdiness, and even if I had a weapon, I couldn't hit anything with it."

"Couldn't hit anything? I mean, you... Hmm, a-all right..."

As I listened to him go back and forth with Darkness, I noticed him say *this time*. What, did he think there was going to be a next time?

Not that I cared. Not at all.

Taylor stood, keeping one eye on what was happening in the other party.

"We don't normally work in winter. But some nice, tasty goblin-slaying fell right into our laps, so today we're going to clear them off the mountain road. If we leave now, we can be back before midnight. All right, new kid, let's move out."

9

Goblins.

They were a major monster type. Even in my world, everyone had heard of them, so of course they had in this one.

But these goblins, apparently, weren't the small-fry creatures of video games but foes who posed a surprisingly serious threat to the populace.

Individual goblins were not that powerful, but they generally traveled in packs and used weapons.

They were a sort of wild demi-human: quick-moving, small but violent, and carrying a reputation for attacking people and livestock.

Typically they lived in the woods, but recently, for some reason, they had taken up residence along a mountain road that led to the next town.

We were wandering through a field on the way to the mountain.

"I wonder what would cause goblins to live out here, anyway? Well, it means for once we get a nice, cushy goblin-slaying job!"

Goblins were worth two hundred thousand eris each.

I had no idea how strong they were, but if Rin said it was a cushy job, then it probably was.

And I could get in on it just by trotting behind these three with the bags.

This was maybe the first time I'd ever had such easy, stress-free work.

If I had been with my normal party, the girls probably would have started squabbling or found some fresh danger before we were halfway there, but today we arrived at the mountain with no problems.

This wasn't a lush green mountain like you'd find in Japan, though. Its face was bare, brown, and rocky. A little brush was the extent of the flora here, and I wondered why goblins would settle in a place with so few resources.

With my usual companions, this was about the point where I would start wondering how things would go wrong, but today I only had a profound sense of ease.

No doubt it was because I finally had a real party with me.

Taylor came to a halt and opened a map.

"To get to where the goblins were sighted, we have to climb to the top of this mountain road, then descend a little bit. The road is lined with the kind of caves goblins love. So keep your guard up."

I actually felt a little rush of excitement at Taylor's words.

This was it! This was how being an adventurer was supposed to go!

I want to charge right into the midst of the enemy! I want to set off a magical explosion! I want to go home and drink! I knew those weren't normal things for adventurers to say!

Everyone looked wordlessly at one another and nodded.

The mountain road never branched; it was a single narrow path that wound past dangerously jagged peaks.

It was wide enough for five or six people to walk abreast, but a craggy mountainside that might as well have been a wall bordered one side, and the other side ran along a sheer cliff.

As we moved silently up the road, I suddenly noticed—

“Something’s coming this way. It set off my Sense Foe ability. But there’s only one.”

My skill had been alerted to the presence of an enemy, but only one.

Weren’t goblins supposed to travel in hordes?

The three others looked at me in surprise.

“Kazuma, you have Sense Foe? Wait—what do you mean, only one? It’s not a goblin, then. There aren’t supposed to be any monsters around here powerful enough to act alone, but... Well, there’s only one path. And it’ll spot us in a second if we try to hide in those bushes. Do we fight?”

Taylor raised his shield as he spoke, but...

“No, I think we’d be fine in those bushes. I have Ambush. Its effect extends to any party members touching the user. We’ve got this great hiding place right here, so why not use it?”

Even more surprised now, the three of them obligingly hid in the bushes.

I’d expected nothing less from an experienced party like this.

When you knew nothing about your opponent, avoiding battle and assessing the situation was Adventuring 101.

Vigilance was nothing to be ashamed of. It was the guy who threw caution to the wind and got himself killed who ought to feel bad.

As we crouched in the bushes, I was thinking to myself that my usual party would never have just hidden so readily, when...

It came.

A huge catlike creature.

Bigger than a lion or tiger, its body was covered in black fur, and it had two long fangs like a sabertooth’s.

It was sensitive enough that it had noticed the ground we'd been standing on just a moment earlier, and it was sniffing the area.

Rin took one look and covered her mouth with her hand.

Maybe she had been about to let out a terrified shriek.

I felt all three of their hands on me tighten, perhaps from fear.

If these three were this worried, that thing must be pretty dangerous.

The monster went on sniffing for a moment, then finally disappeared the way we'd come, down the road to town.

"Yiiiikes! Th-th-that was scary! That was the Beginner's Bane! The *Beginner's Bane!*" Rin said with tears in her eyes.

I guess I was right about it being a nasty enemy.

"I—I thought I was gonna have a heart attack," Keith said. "Y-you saved our skins... That's why the goblins are here. The Beginner's Bane chased them here."

"Y-yeah," said Taylor. "But this is trouble. He went back toward town. We can't run home now."

"Is that cat really that big a deal?"

The three of them gave me disbelieving looks, as if astonished I didn't already know.

"The Beginner's Bane. He hangs out near goblins and kobolds, monsters that are considered easy pickings for novice adventurers, then preys on the rookies who come to get them. He uses them as bait. And he periodically chases the goblins around so that they don't get too comfortable, and so he can change his hunting grounds. He's smart, and he's dangerous."

"Man, that is scary."

Who knew there were such intelligent monsters around here?

I wondered if it was contagious. Maybe I should boil that creature's claws and make Aqua drink them to see if there was any improvement.

"Well, let's take care of those goblins, then. The Beginner's Bane usually

protects his bait from adventurers' attacks. If we eliminate the goblins and then hide again, maybe he'll smell the blood and go past us just like he did this time. Kazuma's Sense Foe will let us know if he gets close. And it beats crouching in these bushes forever, waiting to see if he'll come back. Let's make for our objective."

At Taylor's suggestion, I stepped out of the bushes.

As I did so, Rin took some of the luggage from my back.

"If we run into the Beginner's Bane and we have to scatter, we want Kazuma to be light enough to move, too. I'll take some of the baggage. But I'll be counting on your Sense Foe and Ambush skills, okay?"

She hefted the bag onto her back as she spoke.

At Rin's words, Taylor and Keith both hurried to take their packs from me.

"We're not counting on you or whatever, though, all right?" they said.

Fancy that. I'd picked up some catty secret admirers.

10

Since the Beginner's Bane showed no sign of returning, we crept up the mountain road until we found the descent Taylor's map had indicated.

Apparently the goblins had been sighted around here.

Taylor looked back at me.

"How is it, Kazuma? Is your Sense Foe reacting?"

Oh, yeah. Plenty.

"There's a bunch of them, just down the path and around that corner. For now, I don't sense the Beginner's Bane coming back up the path from behind us."

But there were a *lot* of them. More than you could count on two hands.

So many, in fact, that I started to lose count.

"A bunch of them? That's got to be the goblins," Keith said lightly. "They're

pack animals."

"I'm not sure," I said with a touch of unease. "I've never fought goblins before, but are their hordes usually this big? How many would you say is normal? I can sense more of them than I can count."

My anxiety seemed to be infecting Rin. "H-hey, are there really that many?" she asked. "H-how about we listen to Kazuma and try to get a look at them? See how many there are, if we can really take them..."

That was as far as she'd gotten when:

"It's fine, it's fine! We can't have Kazuma doing all the work! All right, let's go!"

Even as Keith shouted, he leaped down the hill and around the corner toward what was probably a goblin infestation.

Taylor followed him at a sprint, and then we heard the two of them shout: "Yikes! Look at 'em all!"

Rin and I dived in after them.

There was a horde there, all right. Thirty goblins at least.

So these are the famous goblins! They're devil children, I see!

They were barely as tall as young grade-schoolers, but most of them had weapons and were looking right at us.

This could be a problem.

Rin grimaced at the scene. "I told you! Didn't I tell you?! Let's have a look, I said! See how many there are, I said!"

Taylor stepped past the corner to cover his Archer, Keith, and his shouting Wizard.

"A horde of goblins usually means fourteen at the most! Dammit! We can't run now; we'll get caught between these guys and the Bane! Here we go!"

At Taylor's shout, Rin and Keith began preparing to fight with the grim determination of two tragic heroes.

No sooner did the goblins see this than they ran shrieking up the hill at us.

We were on a mountain road, remember, one side of which was a cliff.

“Gigya! Giii! Gii!”

And we held the high ground.

“Eyow! Dammit, one of them shot me!” Taylor shouted. “Hey, they’ve got archers! Rin, wind defense magic!”

“She’s chanting, but there won’t be enough time,” Keith shouted back. “Brace yourselves, everyone!”

“*Wind Breath!*”

The bit of Basic Magic I shouted out blew the incoming arrows away.

“K-Kazuma! Way to go!”

As Taylor called back from between his shield and me, Rin finished her chant.

“*Wind Curtain!*”

As she shouted, a whirlwind started up around the four of us.

Now *that* was magic!

This was what it meant to have a real spell-caster in your corner!

That spell must have been for deflecting the arrows or something.

Even as I admired the abilities of a true Wizard, I shouted, “I know a trick that’ll work on terrain like this! *Create Water!*”

I poured a bunch of MP into my basic spell and produced water along a vast swath so it would roll down the hill Taylor was defending.

Even as Rin said from behind me, “Kazuma?! What’re you—?” I put everything I had into one more Basic Magic spell: “*Freeze!*”

“Whoa!”

All three of the others called out in amazement as the ground under the goblins’ feet turned to ice.

I’d used this trick on the Demon King’s general already, and it easily sent the goblins tumbling all over.

Taylor, who stood on nice, dry ground, safely dispatched the creatures as they came shambling up the hill.

We weren't even going to get a scratch!

I drew my sword and lined up next to Taylor...

"Taylor! A few of these guys think they can still make it up here. Let's handle them together! You two in the back, use your ranged attacks to get the goblins who try to keep their distance!" I called out happily, feeling a touch of wonder at how well we worked together.

"W-way to go, Kazuma! Hey you guys, you heard the man! We could take on a hundred goblins like this!"

"Whooo ha-ha-ha! Easy win! I'm gonna make mincemeat out of you!"

"Here I go! I'll let off a powerful spell right in the middle of them!"

In recklessly high spirits, we threw ourselves at the goblins.

11

We were on our way home after defeating the goblins.

"Ha-haaa! I ain't ever seen magic like that! Who knew Basic Magic would be the most useful skill we had?"

"Yeah, really! At Magic Academy, they told me Basic Magic wasn't worth the skill points it took to learn. Heh-heh ha-ha-ha! Boy, were they wrong!"

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha! Goblin-slaying has *never* been this easy! When I saw that horde, I thought we were done for!"

We reflected on our most recent encounter as we headed back to town along the mountain road.

As we discussed the battle, our adrenaline still high, I said, "Hey, now that the fight's over, how about you give me your stuff again? Isn't the weak-ass Adventurer supposed to carry the bags?"

At my touch of self-deprecating irony, the others answered:

"Hey, sorry—we're real sorry, Kazuma; we apologize! We'll never make fun of someone for being an Adventurer again!"

"Yeah, sorry, Kazuma! Hey, Adventurers are supposed to be weak—how did ours end up doing most of the work? What's the deal with that?"

"Hey, Kazuma, how about *you* give *me* your bags? You're the MVP; I'll carry 'em for you!"

Watching the three of them scurry to apologize, I sighed.

They realized I'd been joking, and they all started laughing.

Ahh, this was sweet.

This was how an adventuring party was supposed to feel.

"Hrrn... Yowch..."

Taylor pressed on his arm and grimaced.

He had pulled out an arrow that had struck him during the battle.

"Hey, you all right? I could learn some healing magic right now if you need it, but if we don't have some disinfectant or something with us, it'd be better not to close the wound until we get back to town. Then we can wash and disinfect it."

Rin and Keith gulped as I spoke nonchalantly to Taylor.

"Kazuma, y-you can even learn healing magic...?"

"Healing magic... F-finally, our party would have someone who can use healing magic—"

Taylor interrupted the both of them.

"Hey, quit it. Kazuma already has a party. One full of advanced classes... Sheesh, now I think I get why an Adventurer is the leader of a whole party of experts."

He gave me a chuckle as he spoke.

I, for one, still didn't know why I had to babysit a party full of problem children, but apparently Taylor did. Maybe he'd tell me one day.

We got off the mountain road and walked onto the plain that spread out toward town.

Then I remembered.

I remembered there was something out there we should be watching for.

“Huh? Something’s coming this way—fast.”

Count on an Archer to have superior vision: It was Keith who noticed it first.

Then my Sense Foe alerted me, too.

A black creature was barreling toward us across the twilit plain.

“The Beginner’s Bane!”

At my shout, all four of us set off pell-mell toward town.

“*Pant...pant...!* Geez! All we’ve been through, and now this?!” Keith spat, breathing raggedly.

“*Pant...pant...* O-oh no, he’s getting closer—!” Rin said as if in answer, teary-eyed and out of breath.

The Beginner’s Bane was right behind us.

The town was still a ways off. It didn’t look like we were going to make it.

That was when Taylor, who had been at the head of our column, whipped around, sword at the ready, and said: “Rin! He’ll catch us at this rate! You take Kazuma and make for town! Keith and I will slow him down! When you get there, run to the Guild and ask them to send backup!”

“Wha—?! R-right!” Keith said. “L-I-leave it to us! We let some other party’s guy do all the work today—time for us to do our part!”

Damn! That’s a good line!

But what was all that leave-it-to-us, you-go-on-ahead stuff?

“G-got it! Let’s go, Kazuma!” Rin shouted to me; she took my hand and made to run.

But be it only for the day, those guys were my party members. I couldn’t leave them there.

The Beginner's Bane was practically in front of our faces.

Its target was Taylor, who stood and blocked its way.

"H-hey, Kazuma! Weren't we getting out of here?"

I loosened Rin's hand from mine. I heard her confusion as I made no move to leave. I spoke softly so as not to attract the Bane's attention.

"Create Earth!"

I felt the little grains form in my hand.

"H-hey, Kazuma! You're in trouble—hurry up and run!"

Keith was panicked, but I closed my hand around the bit of dirt and gently stepped just behind Taylor's right side.

"Heyyy!" shouted Taylor. "Come and get us, fur ball!"

The Beginner's Bane leaped at him.

"Wind Breath!" I intoned loudly, holding my palm out toward the monster.

"Graaah!"

Since I was at Taylor's side, the Bane took my blast of sand full in the face, collapsing to the ground as hundreds of grains got in its eyes.

Even blind, it continued to charge toward us.

"Frraaarr!"

"Wait—! Wha...?! Huh?!"

Taylor and the others still didn't understand what had happened.

"Now's our chance!" I said. "Run like hell!"

There was still a ways to go to town, but there was no sign of the Beginner's Bane.

They'd told me it was intelligent—maybe it was intelligent enough to stay away.

"Did we lose him?" Taylor muttered, still breathing heavily.

"It looks like we did..." Still breathing hard herself, Rin came to a halt and

looked over her shoulder several times.

"Hoo...heh-heh... Hee-hee-hee-hee!" Keith let out a gale of laughter that seemed to well up irresistibly from inside him.

Had he gone mad with fear?

But his laughter seemed to be infectious.

"Heh-heh-heh...heh-heh!"

"Ah-ha-ha-haaa!"

Pretty soon we were all laughing at our narrow escape from the Bane, even me.

"Hey, what the hell did you do, anyway, Kazuma? Huh? Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Taylor pounded me on the back. It stung, but it didn't feel bad.

I gave his armor a jolly smack in return.

"It was just Basic Magic! I'm only an Adventurer—Basic Magic is all I have the skill points for! Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Who's ever heard of an Adventurer like you?" Keith howled. "Woo-ha-ha-ha! Oh! My sides hurt! We met the Beginner's Bane and lived to tell about it!"

"You can't be for real! There's no way! What *is* your Intelligence, anyway?" Rin demanded. "Hey, Kazuma, let me see your Adventurer's Card for a second!"

I politely handed over my card.

"Hey... What? Your Intelligence is totally normal. So are all your other stats, except... Whoa! Look at that Luck! That's ridiculous!"

Taylor and Keith crowded in to see.

"Whoa, what the heck?!"

"H-hey, you think it's Kazuma's Luck that made this quest go so well? Pay homage, everyone! Maybe you can get a blessing out of him!"

No. Luck had nothing to do with it.

Even the girl at the Guild had said Luck wasn't much use to an Adventurer.

And if I was really lucky, how did I end up with that party of losers?

But at Taylor's words, all three of them joined their hands in front of their faces.

"H-hey, knock it off, you guys. Don't pray to me... How about some coffee instead? I can make water; I can make fire..."

The three of them laughed and pulled out their mugs.

12

It was past midnight when we arrived back at the Adventurers Guild.

Besides collecting our reward, we needed to report that we'd seen the Beginner's Bane.

As Taylor had said, though, since we had destroyed its entire horde, the Bane was likely to go in search of new goblins before it bothered any more human settlements.

"W-we maaaaade it!" Rin said. "I feel like I went on the biggest adventure of my life today!"

Laughing, we opened the door of the—

"Sniff... Hrk... H-hic... Ga-Gazumaaaa!"

At the sight of the tearstained, snotty Aqua, I quietly closed the door again.

"Hey! I totally get how you feel, but *please* don't shut that door!"

Someone pried open the door, half weeping himself—it was the guy who'd gone at it with me that morning.

Dust, wasn't that his name? The new leader of Aqua & Co.

He looked awful.

Dust was carrying Megumin on his back; Aqua, still crying, was carrying Darkness, whose eyes had rolled up into her head. She was knocked out cold.

On closer inspection, Aqua appeared to have large teeth marks on her head, along with something moist—some kind of spittle?

"What the... No, don't tell me. I think I get it, and I don't want any details."

"No, listen! Please, listen! I was wrong; pleeeease hear me out! We're on our way out of town, right? And I ask what kinds of skills everyone can use, and this kid was like, *I can use explosion magic!* and I was like, *That's great!* And then she was all, *Let me show you my true power!* and let off a huge explosion right in the middle of an empty field! Why would you do that?!"

Dust pleaded with me, all but sobbing, but I covered my ears and pretended not to hear.

"Hey, listen to me! Then, the—the Beginner's Bane! I don't know if the sound of the explosion attracted him or what, but the *Beginner's Bane* showed up! And now our spell-caster, who we *need*, is floundering on the ground, and I'm going, *Let's get outta here!* but this Crusader throws herself in there *without any armor*, and—"

"Hey, guys. It looks like your friend here already reported the Beginner's Bane for us, so how about we relax and have a little meal? Let's toast the start of a new party!"

"Whoooo!"

Taylor, Keith, and Rin all cheered at my suggestion.

"No, wait! I apologize! I'll bow down to you, *anything*, just *please* let me have my party back!"

Now Dust really was crying. I knew exactly how he felt.

"Have fun with your new party," I said.

"I'm sorrrrryy! I'm sorry about this morning! Forgiive mee!!"

Chapter 2

May There Be Peace for the Master of This Maze!



1

“We’re hitting a dungeon tomorrow.”

“Don’t wanna.”

“We’re going.”

Megumin refused, I insisted, and so she tried to run, but I caught her.

It had been a week after getting my head sliced off.

I’d healed up enough to be allowed to go back into battle, so I’d brought the dungeon idea to everyone as they lounged at the Guild. But Megumin was firmly opposed.

“No way! No way! I have no value in a dungeon! I cannot use my explosions lest the place cave in, and that leaves me just an ordinary girl!”

“That’s what *I* said when you joined us! As I recall, you said you would carry our bags or do anything as long as we didn’t abandon you!”

At that, Megumin, whom I still held by the collar, hung her head as if she had finally seen sense.

"Sigh... All right. But I won't be any help, you know. Carrying your bags is the most I will be good for," she said, and a hint of unease showed through her facade of resignation.

"Don't worry," I said comfortingly. "You only have to come with us to the dungeon entrance. What if we run into some nasty monsters on the way? You can clear them out with your magic."

"What? Just to the entrance?"

She seemed confused.

"Why d'you want to go to a dungeon all of a sudden, anyway? There really should be a Thief in the party if you want to dungeon dive. I haven't seen any around the Guild lately. Where's Chris?"

Aqua spoke from her position sprawled out across the table.

While I had been trying to get well enough to go back into battle, *she* had been camped out at the warmest spot in the Guild Hall, in front of the fireplace, drinking alcohol or just lolling around.

When I asked if she was even old enough to drink, she said I shouldn't assume a world where magic was real would have the same laws as Japan.

It seemed like in this world you could drink no matter how old you were, so long as you were willing to take responsibility when something happened.

"Chris seems to have gotten busy all of a sudden. She said some mentor who'd helped her out before came to her with some outrageous, impossible thing she couldn't refuse. So she's off settling things. But she already taught me the skills you need for a dungeon, like how to spot and disarm traps. She also told me that the monsters don't change with the season. So I figure we can hit some nearby dungeon, and if we're lucky, we make some cash."

I hadn't just been sleeping in during the week since I'd gone on that quest with Taylor and the others.

I had risen up three levels from my encounters with the Snow Sprites and the goblins and had learned Detect Trap and Disarm Trap, as well as one other new skill.

The success of Detect Trap and Disarm Trap was affected by your Dexterity, as well as your Luck.

I had average Dexterity, of course, but I was hoping my exceptional Luck would carry me through.

Although sometimes, saddled with a cast of weirdos and a mountain of debt, I wondered if my Luck was really that good at all.

Darkness was smiling and polishing her armor, which had come back from the shop.

She glanced over at me.

"Hmm, I'd rather wait. General Winter shattered my great sword, remember. I've got a new one on order, but it'll be a while before it's ready. If you're counting on me in combat..."

"I really haven't been."

"?!"

Tears brimmed in her eyes and her cheeks went red, no doubt from excitement as much as disappointment.

She was at least as happy as she was hurt, and it was too much trouble to care, anyway.

I decided to forge ahead.

"Don't misunderstand me, you two. I'm the only one who'll be going into the dungeon. I just need you guys to get me there safely."

All three of them looked at me in shock.

2

We headed to a mountain about a half day from town and proceeded up an animal trail from the foot.

We walked and walked the treacherous trail, which was covered in snow and thick with overhanging branches.

Then, suddenly, we spotted a sturdy-looking log house.

The front of the house bore a sign reading EVACUATION SHELTER.

And in the rock face near it, a dungeon entrance yawned, so dark you could barely see in.

The entrance itself looked natural, but when I peeked inside, I found a neat staircase leading deeper in.

This dungeon was called Khiel's Dungeon.

It was named after an Arch-wizard from long ago, a peerless talent named Khiel, who fell in love with the daughter of a noble family.

The two happened to meet when the noblewoman was out for a walk, and Khiel, who had until then been completely absorbed by magic and had shown no inclination to love or romance, fell head over heels at first sight.

But of course, a love like theirs could never be.

In this world, differences of class were crucial.

Khiel knew that all too well. He threw himself into magical practice and study, as if to forget the seeds of love in his heart.

Day followed day, and eventually he became known as his country's greatest Arch-wizard.

He begrudged no one his magic and gave his all for his nation. He earned the praise of many.

Then came a summons to the king's castle, where a banquet was held in his honor.

The king told Khiel that he wished to reward his service. Any one wish the Arch-wizard might name, the king would grant.

And Khiel replied that he had one wish in this world that had never come true.

It is not known what the Arch-wizard Khiel asked for. The story goes on to say that the Arch-wizard kidnapped the noble daughter and built this dungeon, where he hid the two of them.

What happened to them after that wasn't passed down.

I guess if you think about it, it doesn't seem likely that a lone spell-caster could prevail holed up in a dungeon.

By now, this story of how the dungeon was created had been largely forgotten; it was just a place for beginners to get some good experience in dungeon diving—as I was about to do.

I stopped at the entrance to Khiel's Dungeon and turned back to the three women behind me.

"All right. I'll be going it alone from here, so you guys wait in that shelter. If I'm not back in a day, go back to town and get Taylor and his friends to come help...although since today is just kind of reconnaissance and experimenting, I don't think I'll be long."

The three of them got worried looks on their faces as I spoke.

Darkness folded her arms. "You're really going? I've never heard of anyone hitting a dungeon all by himself. I can see how with your plan, having someone along in noisy full armor wouldn't be very useful, but..."

True, this was unprecedented.

"I, too, would most likely only cause trouble if I were to come along... Are you sure you will not rethink this?"

Aqua jumped in at Megumin's expression of concern:

"Don't worry! I'll go with you!"

She sounded very confident, but—

"No, you don't need to. I'm telling you, it'll be easiest by myself."

I repeated what I had explained to her on the way here.

"With the Second Sight skill Keith taught me, I can see in the dark. I've already tried it out. Even in pitch-blackness I can get a sense of a space and any objects in it. So by myself, I don't need a light. Monsters who track adventurers by the torches they carry won't be able to find me."

Of course, if that were all it took to tackle a dungeon single-handedly, all the

world's Archers would already be doing it.

Still...

"You know I've got the Thief skills Sense Foe and Ambush, too. I can see well enough in the dark to figure out the terrain, and if I sense enemies, I'll just go around them. And if I can't go around them, I can use Ambush to hide up against a wall until they go by...I think."

Though I couldn't be sure, since I hadn't had a chance to test that.

I was heading into a dungeon, but without a hunting quest or anything.

Killing monsters down there wasn't going to earn me any money, so it would be best to avoid combat.

Stay away from monsters, pick up any treasure.

It was kind of cat burglar-esque, but it was something that only an Adventurer, capable of learning skills from every class, could do.

There weren't a lot of perks to my class, but this was one of them, and I intended to take advantage of it.

From my bag, I pulled out the scent-masking potion I'd bought at the Guild to use against monsters with a keen sense of smell. The creatures in this dungeon had probably adapted to life in the dark; they must be able to track foes without using their eyes.

Such as by catching their prey's scent, for example.

Some of them might have sensitive ears, but I was praying my Sense Foe skill would activate before they noticed any noise I was making.

I wouldn't be able to do anything about enemies who had heat detection, like the pit organs on a snake, or ultrasonic sonar, like a bat. But I'd heard this dungeon didn't have monsters like that.

I had studied at the Guild about the creatures in this place before I came.

I mean, I had kicked the bucket just the week before. I admit I wouldn't have minded seeing Lady Eris again, but I didn't want to die over and over.

I doused myself with the scent-masking potion. I had no idea how effective it

was, but it must have been better than nothing.

And when I had used Ambush against the Beginner's Bane, it had noticed my smell but ultimately moved on. Meaning Ambush apparently masked smells a little bit, too.

This would work. This *should* work.

Anyway, today was just an experiment. If it succeeded, I would consider that profit enough.

The dungeon I was diving in this time was actually a bit low-level for me. If my tactics worked here, I could move on to farming a more lucrative dungeon next.

After all, this place was just a half day from town. Other adventurers had probably already picked it clean.

It would be fine. I wasn't likely to have any trouble with the kinds of enemies I would find here, anyway.

"All right, I'm off. It's cold and there might be monsters out here, so just take it easy."

I waved and headed into the dungeon.

But I heard someone following me.

It was Aqua, of course.

"Didn't you hear what I said? It'll be best if I go alone. Even if you come along, you won't be able to do anything in the dark."

She chuckled at my words as a confident expression spread across her face.

Man, I wanna smack her.

"Now, Kazuma, have you forgotten who I am? I'm not really an Arch-priest. Come on, say it. Megumin and Darkness may stubbornly refuse to believe it, but you know what my real 'class' is."

"The goddess of debt, right?"

"Wrong! The goddess of water! Sheesh. Even 'goddess of party tricks' would have been better."

Frankly, I didn't care what she was goddess of. What was her point?

"Whatever. I *am* still a goddess. And the eyes of a deity can see all things. Remember just before you came to this world, I knew how you had died? My powers may be diminished here on the mortal plane, but I still have a couple of godlike tricks up my sleeve. I can't quite see *everything* anymore, but I'm sure not bothered by a little darkness!"

I got more and more concerned as Aqua's bragging dragged on.

I was worried about just what mistake she would make this time.

What to do? How to turn her down? But even as I was thinking, Aqua said: "Dungeons are usually home to undead, and they track living beings by their vitality. In other words, your Ambush skill won't work on them. Guess you need me with you after all!"

I had a really, really bad feeling about this.

3

I had lost count of how many stairs we'd walked down since entering the dungeon.

We'd been walking through the dark for a long time, but there was still no sign of any corridors.

I'd assumed the starter dungeon would be a bit smaller. This would take some time to explore.

But today, we were there only to find out whether my little cat-burglar plan would really work.

People who went in and seriously mapped out dungeons would probably consider my approach heresy.

I could feel Aqua behind me, totally unconcerned as we went down the stairs.

"Hey, Kazuma, how's your night vision working? My unclouded eyes can see you trembling and tiptoeing along no problem! If you're having any trouble seeing where you're going, just let me know, okay?"

Was she worried about me or insulting me?

"I can see fine. For example, I can see *you* jumping and cringing at every noise. Just try not to trip and fall down the stairs, *okay*?"

Aqua laughed easily. "Sure. I can see plenty well to run away, so if there are any monsters coming, just say the word. And since you can see so well, don't try to touch my butt and tell me you just made a mistake in the dark or something."

"Don't worry—I've got zero interest in touching your butt. Let me tell you what I *am* interested in. I'd love to know if I can lose you somewhere down in this dungeon and go home by myself."

Aqua and I stopped in our tracks and looked at each other.

"Oh, Kazuma, you're such a joker! Hee-hee!"

"And you're an idiot, Aqua. I would've thought after all this time, you'd know when I was being serious! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

As we spoke, we finally came to the bottom of the huge staircase.

There wasn't a single ray of light, but thanks to my skill, I could accurately see the dungeon's stone walls and how large the hallway was.

In the black space, physical objects glowed blue to my eyes, like a thermograph.

From the bottom of the stairs, the hallway split off to the left and the right.

And I noticed something there, right at the bottom of the staircase.

"What's that?"

My night vision showed me everything in a faint blue; I couldn't tell objects' actual colors.

So all I could see were the basic contours of what I took to be decaying human remains...

...

"Yiiikes!"

It was the rotting corpse of an adventurer.

Had he tried to brave this dungeon alone, as I was doing? Or had he died and his companions had left him behind?

I didn't know what had brought him here, but that was definitely a human body sprawled out in front of me.

Aqua approached the corpse.

"...He's becoming an undead. Hang on, Kazuma."

She began to mutter something like a prayer, and a soft light enveloped the corpse.

She must have given guidance to the lost soul to prevent it from becoming an undead.

Maybe if she did that sort of thing more often, more people would believe in her.

I was pretty sure finding a dead body right at the bottom of the stairs was going to completely break my resolve.

If Aqua hadn't been there, I would certainly have turned right around and gone home.

"But it's nothing to be all *yiiikes!* about, Mr. I'm-gonna-tackle-this-dungeon-alone. Pfffft heh-heh-heh!"

With that, I was determined to leave her stranded by herself in this dungeon for a while.

...Something was coming.

I stopped, my Sense Foe skill alerting me.

Maybe it had been drawn to our voices, or to the light when Aqua had guided the lost soul.

I looked at Aqua, pointed in the direction the enemy was coming from, and jerked my thumb in the opposite direction in a *let's get out of here* gesture.

"Huh? What are you doing with your hands? Is that some kind of dance? Turn on a light. You want shadow animals, forget about rabbits and dogs—I can do

Mobile Fortress Destroyer!"

"No! What's with Destroyer, anyway? I mean an enemy is coming, so we'd better run! Damn, it's found us! Back me up—I'm going in!"

I was a bit embarrassed by the shout I instinctively let out as I dove forward.

I could see a small humanoid creature rushing toward me in the dark as I drew my sword. I leaped at it and struck!

"Hrm, what's this thing? I can make out the shape but not the color, so I've got no way to tell. Do you know what it is?"

The small humanoid corpse lay at my feet.

Aqua looked at it and said, "It's a low-level devil called a gremlin. Magic clusters in dungeons more than it does on the surface, so sometimes you get minor devils like these."

I see. I did recall a monster with that name from the information about this dungeon I had gotten at the Guild.

...I had a sudden thought.

"Hey, could I ask you something? You can see pretty well in the dark, right?"

"As well as I can in the day," Aqua answered. "Why?"

She didn't seem to find that statement remarkable.

I took a long pause.

"When we're sleeping in the stable at night, have you...seen anything?"

"Uh-uh. When I hear a rustling from your direction, I just turn over and sleep facing the other way."

"...Thank you very much, Milady Aqua."

Other monsters might be attracted by the smell of the gremlin's blood.

We quietly left the body behind.

Aqua seemed somehow different today. She wasn't the frivolous Arch-priest she had always been before. She wasn't the goddess of parties or debt.

"O souls who wander lost in this cold, dark dungeon! Be at peace; be at rest!
Turn Undead!"

She let off a burst of light, turning all the wandering ghosts in a wide area. This Aqua was a true goddess, someone I wouldn't be embarrassed to be seen with anywhere.

The fact was, I had taken this dungeon too lightly. The combination of night vision and Ambush was very effective; it was enough to deal with most monsters. But as Aqua had said, the living seemed to appear like signal fires to the long-suffering undead who roamed the dark, cold halls. We had turned quite a few of them since we got here. If I had been on my own, I would have been a helpless undead punching bag by now.

I'd had no idea there would be this many zombies in the dungeon.

I wanted to kick myself for being so uninformed.

After purifying the nearby undead, Aqua let out a little sigh at a job well done.

"Nice work. You seriously saved my neck. I would've been in big trouble if I'd come down here alone."

Aqua was not displeased by my show of gratitude.

"Oh? Have you finally come to appreciate me? ...I wonder where the treasure is, though. I guess we can't hope for much from a dungeon that everyone and his adventuring brother has already been through."

By that point, we were in pretty deep.

Well, maybe *deep* wasn't the right word. The whole thing was only one floor.

It was just *huge*.

Each time we turned a corner, Aqua, who claimed she could see as clearly as daytime, marked it with chalk.

I figured normally you proceeded through a dungeon slowly and carefully, mapping it out, keeping your torch lit, on the lookout for monsters and traps.

But the two of us, perfectly capable of seeing in the dark, moved ahead at a steady pace with me in front, sensing out any enemies or booby traps.

I had demonstrated the viability of this form of dungeon diving and part of me was ready to head back, but having come so far, we were unwilling to return empty-handed.

I confirmed there were no enemies or traps in the next room and then entered gingerly so as not to make a sound.

I looked around the room...

"Feh. Nothing good."

"Hey, Kazuma, this whole sneaking-around thing, your comment just now...it kind of makes me feel like a cat burglar."

Aww, stuff it...I feel the same way.

I felt a little bad for my colleagues who had taken this dungeon seriously and crawled through it bit by bit.

"...? Hey, Kazuma, look over there. What's that?"

She seemed to have found something in one corner of the room.

When I went over to look, it was...

"Treasure! This is a treasure chest! We did it, Kazuma! We hit the jackpot on our first dungeon dive!"

I hurriedly stopped Aqua as she went toward the chest, delighted.

"Whoa, hang on. Lots of people have done this dungeon already. Don't you think it's weird that a chest would just appear here? ...Yeah. My Sense Foe skill is definitely reacting."

The reaction, of course, was coming from the treasure chest right in front of us.

I see. Is this one of those Mimics you always hear about?

"Oh... So it's a Dungeon Mimic? That's too bad, but oh well."

Aqua tossed something over near the chest.

It was the empty bottle of scent-masking potion.

The bottle arced up in the air, then came back down, landing near the treasure chest...

The instant it touched the ground, the entire wall and floor gave a groan and wrapped themselves around the bottle, swallowing it up.

Just a second ago they had looked like ordinary surfaces, but now they were moving slightly, as if chewing.

“Y-yuck! What the hell?!”

A Dungeon Mimic, was that what she’d said?

“Just like its name implies,” Aqua said, “it can’t move on its own, but it can make part of its body look like a treasure chest or a pile of gold, and when someone steps on it to reach it, it eats them. Some Mimics have even been known to make part of their bodies look human to attract monsters that normally prey on adventurers.”

It even eats other monsters? That’s nasty!

Come to think of it, the people at the Guild had warned me about something called a Dungeon Mimic.

They’d said Sense Foe would detect it easily, but...

But survival of the fittest was apparently alive and well in this dungeon.

This really was one tough world.

5

“Turn Undead!”

The zombified corpses vanished at Aqua’s spell.

How many undead had we defeated by that point?

I was glad to be navigating by the thermograph-like glow of my Second Sight skill. If I’d come across this many zombies with a regular torch in my hand, I would’ve run home crying long ago. There were so many undead, it would’ve

qualified as clinical trauma.

"Hey, don't you think this is strange? All these undead? There's just too many. You need an Arch-priest in your party just to come in here. Doesn't look like there's any treasure around, anyway. Wanna go home?"

This dungeon was basically supposed to be practice for neophyte parties. But there was no way a fledgling group could handle this many undead monsters.

Despite using her magic left and right, Aqua showed no sign of tiring.

I guess that was the upside of being a goddess of...whatever.

But Aqua or no Aqua, I figured we should be getting out of there soon.

"You're right, we didn't find any treasure, but I got to cleanse a lot of undead, so personally, I'm happy. Wait—hang on. I can still smell one from over that way."

My Sense Foe skill was silent, but this seemed to be Aqua's day.

Deep in the dungeon, Aqua went up to the wall that blocked our path and began sniffing around like a cat that was high on catnip.

None of my skills seemed to go off or alert me about anything.

But Aqua was on her game, and she seemed to think there was something ahead.

We began checking every inch of the wall with our hands. Ten minutes passed. More.

We hadn't found signs of anything, and I was about to suggest we go home, when— A part of the end of the wall suddenly rotated to one side and opened. We hadn't done anything to make it happen. It had opened from the other side.

A low, mumbling voice came from beyond:

"Do you have a Priest with you?"

chair. The chair was next to the bed, and someone was sitting in it. On top of the table—was that a lamp?

“Ah, well met, good afternoon—or is it good evening now? I’ve no idea what time it is outside...”

With my skill, I could see only the outline of the person who had greeted us.

I asked his permission, then lit the lamp using Kindle.

The lamp revealed the speaker: A robe concealed his eyes, and a bit of dried-out skin hung from his bones, but he was a skeleton.

“I am Khiel. The notorious spell-caster who created this dungeon and kidnapped the nobleman’s daughter.”

Once upon a time, an Arch-wizard named Khiel was walking through town when he chanced to see a young noblewoman and fell madly in love...

But Khiel, knowing his love could never be, threw himself into his magical studies.

Time passed, and Khiel became known as the greatest Arch-wizard in the land.

He begrudged no one his magic and gave his all for his country.

Khiel earned the praise of many, and a banquet was thrown at the castle to honor his achievements.

“I wish to reward your deeds,” the king said. “Name any one wish, and I shall grant it.”

And Khiel said:

“I have but one wish in this world that has never come true. That is for the one I love, who is oppressed, to be happy...”

“Saying that, I carried the young woman away,” Khiel concluded with a hint of pride.

“So, what? You’re saying you’re a good Wizard, not an evil one? That the girl’s parents gave her to the king as a concubine to curry favor with him, but the king didn’t care for her, and his wife and the other concubines hated her, and you took her away from that loveless place? That kind of oppressed?”

At my words, a dry clacking came from Khiel's throat.

"More or less. And when I proposed to her, she agreed immediately. During our elopement, we had a little to-do with the king's army. Oh, that was fun! Incidentally, that's my love right over there. Don't you just adore the line of her clavicle?"

I looked where Khiel was pointing. On the small bed was a collection of bleached bones, laid out neatly.

...What was the deal here?

Beside me, Aqua was glaring at Khiel with fiery eyes. She was probably desperate to send him to the afterlife.

"And so," Khiel said, "I've a request for this young woman here."

"A request?"

Khiel nodded at me...

"Would you kindly send me to the next life? You look like you've got the power for it."

7

Aqua was intoning the words of the spell slowly, deliberately, one by one.

The once-great magician had placed his hand on the arm bone of the woman he had loved as it lay on the bed.

According to Aqua, the woman had already moved on peacefully, with no regrets.

So really, we needed a magic circle big enough for only Khiel, but Aqua had put a little extra work in so that now it encompassed not just the bones of his wife but the entire room.

Apparently, Khiel had sustained a mortal wound during his battle with the king's army—but to protect the noblewoman, he was even willing to abandon his humanity and become a Lich.

I hadn't expected to find myself admiring a Lich, but it was hard not to be just

a little bit impressed.

Or maybe it was just because the only other Lich I'd met was Wiz, whom Aqua had so thoroughly abused, and this one just looked good in comparison.

When she became a concubine, the noblewoman could hardly leave her house, but then she took on the State with a dramatic flight that led her around the world, until it ended here in this dungeon.

They'd lived as fugitives, with no freedom, and yet Khiel said she had not complained even once, always ready with a laugh.

"Was I able to make her happy?" Khiel murmured. Then to us, he said, "This is a great help to me. It's rather surreal—the undead can't kill themselves. I was waiting here to simply crumble into dust, but I must have awakened from my long sleep when I felt your great holy power."

Khiel made that dry clacking sound that passed for laughter as the soft white light of the magic circle embraced him.

Aqua finished her chant.

And then, with a look of kindness I'd never seen from her before, she smiled at Khiel.

Who is this woman?

I could barely believe my own eyes, but Aqua was saying to Khiel gently:

"Khiel, Arch-wizard who abandoned the divine plan and made yourself a Lich. By the name of Aqua, goddess of water, I forgive your sin... When you awaken, you will see an unnaturally busty goddess named Eris. If you can accept that it may not be as man and woman, that your ages may be far apart—then tell her. Tell her you wish to meet your love again. I'm sure she will grant your wish."

She sounded so serious. Who was this?

As I goggled at the incredible change in Aqua, Khiel bowed his head deeply to her, there in that room full of light.



“Sacred Turn Undead!”

The Lich vanished—as, for some reason, did the woman’s bones.

That left only Aqua and me, unable to say anything.

Finally, I said quietly to her:

“Let’s go home.”

8

We were working our way back to the surface. I was babbling to the silent Aqua, heedless of the risk of attracting monsters.

“Hey, you really think that undead will be able to meet his love again?”

“...I don’t know. Well, I’m sure Eris will manage something.”

“Oh,” I murmured at Aqua’s curt answer.

In an attempt to change the subject, I said cheerily, “Well, what do you know? It turns out that Lich was a good guy after all. He gave us the treasure he had in that chest of drawers—said he didn’t need it anymore. I don’t know what it’s worth, but we can split it up when we get back to town.”

Aqua’s shoulders stiffened a little at that.

“...Right. Let’s use it carefully, for their sake,” she said, a little louder and livelier than before.

There was a long pause.

In an attempt to break the silence, I decided to ask something I had thought should maybe wait until we’d reached the surface and Aqua was feeling better.

“Hey, Aqua. You remember what he said?”

“...About what?”

She still sounded a bit subdued.

“About waking up because he felt a great holy power. Do you think we ran into all those undead in this dungeon...because you were here?”

“?!”

Aqua stopped cold at my question. In a strained voice, she said, “I-I-I really don’t...*think*...that’s the case...”

It was about as unconvincing as answers get.

“...Come to think of it, when that Dullahan attacked us, all his Undead Knights went straight for you, remember?”

“?!”

She went even stiffer. I silently put some distance between us.

She scurried up to stand close again.

“Hey, Kazuma, why’re you keeping away from me? Shouldn’t we stick near each other so we’ll be okay if any monsters attack? A-and another thing! Can you even see the chalk marks I left with your weak night vision?”

I blanched for a second.

Aqua seemed to sense her opportunity and launched a chattering verbal assault.

“Heh-heh, that’s right! You won’t get away with abandoning me that easily! We’re on equal footing here! In fact, I’m the only one who can see the markings and get rid of the undead—you’d never make it out on your own! I’d say I’m holding all the cards here! If you understand, then you’d better start calling me ‘Lady Aqua’ like a real goddess and telling everyone in town about the wonderful deeds I did today...!”

As Aqua blathered on, something howled from the darkness of the dungeon. It was probably responding to her voice, given how loudly she was declaring her superiority.

Sense Foe confirmed that something was heading straight for us.

“...”

I silently pushed myself against the wall and melted into the darkness with Ambush.

“Kazuma, wait! Hey, why are you using Ambush all by yourself? I—I’m sorry! I

was wrong! I was wrong; please let me use your Ambush, too! I'm sorry, Kazuma! Dear Kazumaaa, heyyy!"

9

When we got back to the log house, Megumin greeted us expectantly with: "I somehow figured it would turn out like this, but may I ask what happened?"

"W-waaaaah! Kazuma, he—He...!"

Megumin patted Aqua on the head comfortingly as the goddess wept behind me.

"Don't try to blame this on me! You're the one who's some kind of undead magnet! They wouldn't even leave us alone on the way out! I take back the nice things I said about you!"

"B-b-but I can't help it! I was just born with all this vitality and holiness! Or, what?! You think I should repress my holy aura until I'm basically just a hikiNEET like you? Do you *know* how the Axis followers all over this world would grieve?"

"See? She isn't even a bit sorry! Hey, you! Go back down in that dungeon and find the dirt from under the fingernails of that Lich and his wife! Then maybe a tiny bit of their sweetness will rub off on you!"

"A hikiNEET is telling a goddess to learn from a Lich?!"

As I was prying Aqua's hands off my neck, Darkness broke in: "A Lich and his wife?" she murmured, and shook her head.

I gave her and Megumin the gist while I fended off the weeping Aqua's attempts to grab me.

"Aqua said the wife moved on without any regrets, though. How well do you think she coped with the fugitive lifestyle? The Lich said something about wondering whether he'd made her happy. I wonder if she was."

I was just sort of muttering to myself, but Darkness replied: "She was. She must have been. Being on the run must have been the happiest time of her life—I'm sure of it."

Her words seemed somehow profound. And a smile, just a little sad, played across her face.

Chapter 3

May Love Reach Out to This Ghost Girl!



1

I was heading for one particular place, Aqua close behind me.

I had Darkness camped out at the Guild, the better to grab any juicy quests as soon as they came along.

Megumin had been off somewhere all morning. She had a way of disappearing once in a while, and I had no idea where she went.

Our party was *not* well-balanced.

It was pretty one-sided, at any rate.

Aqua was a decent Priest, but our main tank, Darkness, was so tough that healing magic was rarely called for.

Megumin at her most powerful could hold her chin up against any other Wizard—but she could be at her most powerful only once a day.

What we needed was reliable firepower.

Which left me to learn relevant skills, but even with a sword, I could only do so much in battle. Adventurers aren't known as the weakest class for no reason.

I'd really like a skill that could be a main weapon for us.

That was what brought me to that shop, flush with an unexpected new level-up from the dungeon crawl the other day.

"All right, we're here. Now listen up, Aqua, because I'm only saying this once. *Don't* make trouble. No fights. No magic. Understand?"

We were in front of a small shop dealing in magic items.

Aqua looked at it and shook her head at my warning.

"Honestly, Kazuma, what makes you think I'd do *any* of that? What do you take me for? I'm not some street punk or bandit or whatever. I'm a goddess. Divinity!"

With Aqua still whining behind me, I opened the door of the shop.

The little bell on the door gave a pleasant jingle, announcing our entrance to the shopkeeper.

"Welcome to—Whaaa...?!"

"Huuuh?! There you are, you stinking undead! You have a *shop* here?! I, a goddess, have been sleeping in the stables while you've been running a business?! How brazen for a Lich! In the name of the gods, I ought to burn this place to the grouwowow!"

Aqua had forgotten my instructions to not make trouble as soon as she walked through the door. I gave her a gentle smack with the hilt of my dagger.

She crouched there, rubbing the back of her head, while I greeted the cowering shopkeeper.

"Hey, Wiz, it's been a while. I told you I'd come."

2

"Hmph. It looks like you don't even get tea in this shop."

"Oh, p-pardon me, I'll b-bring some right away!"

"No, you won't! Who ever heard of a magic-item shop that served tea?"

I stopped Wiz, who was all too ready to take the bait of Aqua's malicious attempts to get her out of the way.

I'd never been in a magic-item shop before. I looked around, nonchalantly picking up something close at hand.

It was a small potion bottle.

"Er, that explodes if you hit it too hard. Please be careful."

"Erk, seriously?" I quickly put the bottle back.



When I picked up the one beside it...

"Oh, that explodes if you open the stopper..."

I set it down gently and took the next in line. "What about this one?"

"It explodes if you add water."

"A-and this one...?"

"If you heat it."

I stopped.

"Is there anything in this shop that *doesn't* explode?"

"O-o-of course! That shelf just happens to be my Explosion Line!"

Oh, so it was. Magical items weren't what I had come here for, though. I ignored Aqua, who had taken it upon herself to make the tea, and turned to business.

"Wiz, I recall you said something about teaching me Lich skills. Well, I've got a few skill points lying around now. Think you could teach me something?"

"*Pfft!*"

"Eyyaah!"

Aqua had done a spit take at my request, and her tea was now all over Wiz.

"Hold on, Kazuma, what are you thinking?! Lich skills? *Lich skills?*! I wondered what you two were talking about when you took her business card! Well, Liches don't have any skills you'd want to learn! Nothing good would come of it! You hear me? Liches love damp, dark places, you know—they're basically giant slugs!"

"H-how could you—?" Wiz was on the verge of tears after Aqua's furious tirade.

"Hey, slugs, snails, I don't care. You don't usually get a chance to learn skills from a Lich, right? And they'd have to be pretty powerful in combat. Think about our party—could we handle a crowd of powerful opponents right now?"

"Hrk... As a goddess, I cannot stand by and watch one of my followers

learn...*Lich skills...*,” Aqua muttered, but she reluctantly stepped back.

Wiz got an uneasy look and said tremblingly, “As a goddess’...? Is—is that why you were able to eliminate me so easily with Turn Undead? Are you really a goddess?”

Uh-oh.

I guess a Lich *would* recognize a goddess. Even if I personally doubted her credentials.

“Well, I guess you’re not likely to go spreading it around. I am Aqua—yes, the very goddess worshipped by the Axis Church! Stand back, Lich—!!”

“Eeeek!”

Wiz dove behind me, looking more terrified than ever.

Apparently, Liches and goddesses were age-old enemies.

“Hey, Wiz, you don’t have to be so worried. I mean, I know Liches and goddesses are like oil and water, but...”

I was trying to comfort her, but Wiz said, “N-no, it’s... There’re a lot of crazy people in the Axis Church. Everyone knows you don’t want to get involved with them...and now the goddess of the Church is *here...*”

“What did you say?!”

“I-I-I’m sorry!”

“We’ll never get anywhere at this rate...”

I dragged off the enraged Aqua and insisted she go look around the store or something. She obligingly began hunting through the shelves, picking up potions, sniffing their contents.

Wiz collected herself, keeping a wary eye on Aqua.

“Come to think of it, I heard just recently that you and your party took down Mr. Beldia. He was supposed to be quite the swordsman, even among the generals. That’s really impressive!”

A quiet smile came over my face as she spoke...

...Huh?

"Mr. Beldia, did you say? You make it sound like you knew him. Is it—? I mean, do you undead all know one another?"

As if it was the most natural thing in the world, Wiz answered, "Oh, didn't I tell you? I'm one of the Demon King's generals."

And she said it with a bright smile.

There was a long, long pause.

"You're mine!!"

Aqua ceased puttering among the shelves and dove straight at Wiz.

"Waaaait! Aqua, milady, please listen to me!" Wiz screamed, caught in Aqua's grip.

Aqua wiped the sweat from her brow as if she'd been hard at work and cried, "We did it, Kazuma! We can kiss that debt good-bye! With cash to spare! Forget an inn, we can buy a house!"

She was thrilled.

I leaned over toward the captured Wiz.

"Hey, Aqua, let's give her a chance to explain... What do you mean, general? If you're some kind of spy for the Demon King, I guess we can't very well turn you loose..."

Wiz began to talk frantically. "I'm not! I'm responsible for the spirit barrier that protects the Demon King's castle! I've never harmed a person, and I hardly even count as a general! There's not even a reward for killing me!"

Aqua and I looked at each other.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Aqua said, "but I think I'll get rid of you just for good measure."

"No, milady, wait!" Wiz wailed at her captor.

I put out a hand to stop Aqua, who had begun to chant something.

"Hmm, okay. You see this all the time in video games—you have to defeat the

lackeys to open the path to the Demon King's castle. Right? And Wiz has been tasked with maintaining the protective barrier."

"I don't know what a video game is, but yes, that's right! Mr. The Demon King knew I wouldn't quit my peaceful existence running a shop in a human village, so he asked if I could just take care of maintaining the barrier. He said it'd be a big help, and I'd be safe because no one would suspect the Demon King's general was living right in town!"

"Hmph. What you mean is, as long as you're alive, no one can attack the Demon King's castle, and we have a problem. Let's finish her, Kazuma."

Wiz burst into tears.

"Wait, please wait! Lady Aqua, with your power you could probably break through a barrier supported by two or three generals! But the Demon King had eight generals to start with! If you kill me, there will still be six left, and even you won't be able to get through the barrier. Even if you send me to the next life, you'll need to keep fighting them before you can attack the castle! So please—at least let me live until you've taken out enough of us that you'll be able to get through the barrier. I still have things to do...!"

Even Aqua looked a bit unsure at the sight of the captive, tearful Wiz.

I stared at her. It looked like it was up to me to make the call.

"Uh, looks like we can just leave her, right? I mean, even if you take her out, it's not like anything's gonna happen to that barrier. Sure, you'd usually have to defeat all the generals to get through, but with you along, Aqua, we can break down the barrier even if there's a couple left. Let's just be patient until someone takes down some of the generals besides Wiz."

An inexperienced party like ours wasn't going to be taking on those generals, let alone the Demon King—and I had no plans of getting involved in anything that dangerous, anyway.

If we just sat tight, the kids who had brought actual useful items with them—like Mitsurugi with his magic sword—would take care of the lackeys for us.

The one thing they wouldn't be able to do, as long as Wiz was here, would be to break the barrier and get at the Demon King himself.

If I wanted to go back to Earth, we would have to deal with the big guy ourselves.

We could afford to wait until we got strong enough to handle him.

Totally oblivious to my calculating thoughts, Wiz looked thrilled at my words.

"You sure you're okay with this? I mean, the generals are friends of yours, right? You're not mad that we killed Beldia or anything?"

Wiz looked just a little concerned by my question.

"...I didn't especially care for Mr. Beldia... He liked to roll his head toward me while I was walking so he could peek up my skirt. There's really only one general I'm very close to, and he... Well, he won't die easily. And..."

She added, "...I like to think my heart, at least, is still human."

And she smiled, a bit sadly.

3

"Um, all right. I'll show you every skill I have, and you can learn whatever you like. It's the least I can do to thank you for sparing my life..."

But then she gave a start, like she'd suddenly thought of something, and looked nervously at Aqua and me.

"What's up?"

Wiz answered with a frightened look at Aqua.

"My skills all require an opponent, so...I need someone to use them on..."

Ah, I get it.

"Hey, Aqua, sorry, but could you help out here?"

"Oh? And what skills does the undead propose to use on me?"

Wiz shrank back, properly intimidated by Aqua, but said, "H-how about Drain Touch? Just a little, I promise! That should be enough for him to learn it, right?"

The more intimidated she got, the faster she talked. A truly malicious smile came over Aqua's face. I knew one of these two was a Lich and one was a

goddess. But to look at them now, it was hard to say which was which.

"Fine," Aqua said, "I don't care—drain as much as you want. Go ahead!" She held out her hand, and Wiz took it tremblingly.

"All right, here goes..." There was a long, confused pause. "Huh? Wh-what?"

I couldn't tell what was happening, but apparently it took Wiz by surprise.

"Aww, what's wrong? Weren't you going to drain my HP and MP? Aww, the big, powerful undead can't even use Drain?"

Aqua seemed confident and relaxed; tears gleamed in Wiz's eyes.

"Wh-whaaaat?!"

Aqua seemed to be resisting the drain, making it impossible for Wiz.

...I wordlessly went up and smacked Aqua on the back of the head.

"Ow! Hey, Kazuma, butt out! This is a showdown between a Lich and a goddess! Mock my divinity if you will, but I won't be drained that easily!"

"Come on, we need to get on with our lives. Just let her drain you already. Sorry, Wiz, I guess she just likes her job too much. Can't abide an undead."

Wiz shook her head as I tried to apologize on Aqua's behalf.

"N-not at all! I-I'm sorry for being a Lich...!"

Once we had all composed ourselves, I had Wiz show me her skills.

She grasped Aqua's hand and performed Drain Touch again.

Drain Touch was an ability unique to undead that allowed them to absorb HP or MP from their target.

Apparently, it could also transfer some of their own HP or MP to the target.

With the right applications, this skill might help balance out our party's lack of firepower.

Once I'd seen Wiz perform the skill, I checked my Adventurer's Card.

DRAIN TOUCH was indeed listed there.

I didn't hesitate to put my skill points into it and learn it.

"Ah, um, Lady Aqua? Y-you can let go of me now... P-please let go of me... Your touch makes my hand tingle for some reason..."

Aqua was silent.

I looked over and saw that not only was Aqua holding Wiz's right hand in her left; she had placed her right hand over it as well and was holding tight.

"L-Lady Aqua? M-my hand is getting pretty warm... Actually, it—it hurts! It—hurts! Y-you're cleansing me by boiling my body from the inside, Lady Aqua! I'm going to disa—disappear! I'm going to vanish!"

"You're one hell of an opportunist, Aqua." I gave Aqua a thwack on her bullying head.

"That hurts!"

Was I imagining things, or did Wiz look slightly transparent?

At that moment—

"Pardon me, is Miss Wiz in?" The bell over the door jingled as a middle-aged man came in.

4

"Evil spirits?" we all asked in unison.

Evil spirits, apparently.

The man who had come in asking for Wiz was a real estate agent.

It seemed that vacant houses in town had become the dwelling places of evil spirits lately for some reason.

He had tried consulting the Adventurers Guild, but they had never encountered a case like his before and didn't know what to do. Even if they put out a hunt quest on the spirits, new ones would just move in as soon as the old ones were gone, the Guild said.

"I have them cast out, exorcized, but new ones just pop up to take their place. I can't even keep the house ghost-free, let alone sell it!" The man sighed, looking tired.

Fine, but what had brought him to Wiz's place?

Maybe he could see the question on my face, because he started to explain.

"Before Miss Wiz opened this store, she was a renowned magic-user. Merchants who had a problem would always go to her. I heard she was a particular expert on the undead. That's why I thought I'd try asking here."

I see. Liches *were* called the kings of the undead, after all.

This man might not know what Wiz really was, but he was right that she'd probably have something to say about this.

The man, though, was looking at Wiz with concern.

"But...Miss Wiz, you don't look well today. You've always been a bit pale, but it's worse than usual. In fact, you look...you look as if you might disappear at any moment."

"..."

I stared silently at Aqua, who just moments before had been about to send Wiz to the next life. She looked away and fidgeted uncomfortably.

Wiz smiled painfully and pounded herself on the chest. "I'm just fine, thank you. Let me handle it. You want me to deal with the evil spirits in town, is that right?"

"Oh, no—not all of them necessarily... Just the one house... You know the place."

"Oh, there?" Wiz said, nodding as if she understood. "All right, then."

She knows the place?

"I'll take care of it. Just the evil spirits lost in that house." Wiz stood, then stumbled as if she'd lost her strength.

"Oh! If you're not feeling well, Miss Wiz, then please don't worry about it! Don't overexert yourself, now!"

The man rushed to support Wiz, and Aqua strained to look anywhere else, pretending not to see what was going on. I shoved my face up close to hers and stared silently.

Finally, Aqua couldn't take it anymore. "I-I'll handle it," she said in a small voice.

5

"Is this the place?"

We were at a mansion standing on the edge of town.

According to what the man had told us, it didn't contain that many rooms for a mansion, but there were still plenty of them.

The building, which was several times the size of a one-story house in Japan, had once been the summer home of a certain noble family.

They had given up the place, but when an attempt was made to sell it, this business with the evil spirits started.

"Not bad, not bad at all! This looks just about right for me to live in!" Aqua exclaimed excitedly. She carried a small bag, as did Megumin, who seemed to be blushing faintly.

Aqua wasn't crazy: We were going to live in this house.

It was a big place filled with an equally large number of spirits, and it currently had an unfortunate reputation as a haunted house.

As a reward for our night of exorcizing haunts, we would be allowed to live there for free until it lost its bad rap.

In other words, if we pulled this off, we wouldn't have to keep saving money to get us through the winter.

I thanked my Luck that our discussions had taken that turn.

"Do you really think we can get rid of all the ghosts?" Darkness asked. She hefted a large bag over her shoulder. "The talk around town is that as soon as the spirits are driven out of a place, new ones show up instead."

She was right; it would be best to find out where the evil spirits were coming from and cut them off at the source. But we'd been asked to deal with only this one house.

And practically speaking, the longer the exorcism took, the longer we got to live indoors.

"I must say, though, this house seems to have been uninhabited for a very long time. And yet our ghost problems started only recently, yes? Perhaps there is a story here that goes back to before the town's present troubles with the restless dead."

Megumin's observation made my flesh crawl.

"W-well, whatever," I said. "This house can have all the stories it wants. We've got Aqua with us. Right? Our anti-undead expert. We'll be fine...right?"

I only freaked myself out more as I talked, but if nothing else, I knew Aqua was a qualified Arch-priest.

...Mostly.

"Leave it to me... Oh, I see it! I can see it! My spiritual sight discerns that a child lives here—the child of the nobleman and the maid he toyed with, their offspring locked up in this house! The father, always weak, died of an illness, and the maid disappeared—no one knows where! Left here alone, the girl finally succumbed to the same sickness as her father and died never knowing her parents' faces. Her name was Anna Filante Estroid. She liked stuffed animals and dolls and adventurers' stories! But don't worry—she's not a bad spirit. She means us no harm! Oh, but she does like things that make her feel grown-up. She'd like to try some sweet wine, for example. So break out the alcohol to offer her, Kazuma!"

Aqua reeled this off like one of those fake psychics you see on TV. While fixing her with a stare that let her know I smelled a rat, I asked Darkness and Megumin what they thought.

"What do you think? Where d'you think she pulled out that ridiculous name and backstory? ...You think she's really okay? Or have we bitten off more than we can chew?"

Silence.

Maybe they were wondering the same thing, because neither of them answered my question.

It was past midnight.

We'd all removed our armor and made ourselves comfortable in the mansion.

After deciding who got which room, everyone moved their luggage in.

For my part, I basically expected some kind of apparition to pop out at any moment, now that Aqua was living here.

Or maybe they'd do us the favor of congregating in her room, since she seemed to hold such a special attraction for the undead.

She was an Arch-priest *and* a goddess. Not the type to let some evil spirits run roughshod through her own house.

I was in the space I'd claimed for my own—the biggest room on the second floor—feeling relatively relaxed.

"Yaaaah! Eyyaaaaahhh!"

Until I heard screaming from our nominal protector, Aqua.

"What's wrong?! Hey, Aqua, what happened? Are you all right?!"

I dashed down to Aqua's room and pounded on the door.

No answer. Thinking she must be in dire trouble, I burst through the door.

To find...

"Hrk... Sniff... K-Kazumaaaaa!"

Aqua was in the middle of the room, clutching an empty wine bottle.

...Sheesh.

"Um...what happened? What are you doing with that bottle, anyway? And if you tell me all that yelling was just because you were drunk, I'm gonna douse you with Create Water to sober you up."

"I-it wasn't! I'm not the one who drank this bottle! This was my special reserve; it cost a *lot*! I was so looking forward to having a nice little sip when I got out of the bath! But when I came back to my room, it was—it was..."

emptyyyy!"

Time for bed.

"Oh, is that all? Okay, g'night, see you tomorrow."

"What?! Kazuma, wait! It was those evil spirits! This has to be their doing! Either it's the feral ghosts who moved in or it's the nobleman's bastard daughter who lives here! It's got to be one of them! I'm gonna go look around and sock any spirits I find!"

I wasn't sure there was even such a thing as feral ghosts, but if Aqua was going to get rid of them for us, I wasn't going to stop her.

"...What's this? What's going on?"

"It's rather late now; please keep it down. What is happening?"

Darkness and Megumin showed up, presumably drawn by Aqua's scream.

"She thinks some ghost drank her special wine. She's swearing vengeance. I've got some questions, like why a ghost would even drink alcohol, but it'd be a pain to ask, so I'm going to bed. You guys can handle the rest."

As I turned to leave, Aqua piled invective on me from behind, but I didn't care. If the worst thing these specters did was drink her precious wine, as far as I was concerned, we could just leave them be.

7

I had no idea how long I had been sleeping when my eyes opened. It was still dark out.

A deep stillness lay over the house; it must have been well into the wee hours.

I need to go to the bathroom.

I made to get out of bed...

...and found my body wouldn't move.

What was going on here? Sleep paralysis...?

I tried to speak, but only a grunt came out; I couldn't even call Aqua for help.

As I lay there, a terrible realization came over me. I *really* needed to go to the bathroom.

No! You can hold it! You're an adult!

The only times you didn't have to hold it as an adult were at some very specific business establishments or if you were a really old man!

I gritted my teeth, trying to endure, unable to move—when I heard a sound from one corner of the room.

Thunk.

The noise seemed extremely loud in the silent house.

My eyeballs, at least, could move; I looked in the direction of the noise. In the shadows in the corner of the room...

...there was a small Western-style doll. *Huh? When did that get there?*

"...!"

I swallowed involuntarily. I was covered in an unpleasant sweat.

What's going on? Why is that doll there?

I didn't remember leaving anything like that lying around. Had Aqua put it there as a prank while I was asleep?

Yeah. That had to be it.

That useless goddess. She was gonna pay for this in the morning. Once I'd concluded this was Aqua's doing, I proceeded to squeeze my eyes shut and attempt to escape reality.

Thunk.

The sound was impossible to ignore. Nonetheless, I kept my eyes shut even as my sweating intensified.

Right. Right. It was silly to blame all this on Aqua. She always worked hard. Maybe I could try being nice to her every once in a while.

Thunk.

She was a *goddess*, after all, you know? And she was living in this house now.

Evil spirits? Whatever! We could just set our dear Aqua on them and she'd blow them away like a gust of wind. Our Aqua could even send a Lich to the next life, couldn't she?

Thunk.

Thunk.

Thunk...!

You know what? In the morning, I'm going to apologize to Aqua for everything I've done until now. I've hardly treated her as a goddess deserves. But I've seen the error of my ways! Really!

Thunkthunkthunkthunk whumpwhumpwhumpwhump!

Yaaaaaaahhhh I'm so sorry for everything I've dooone!

I'm sorry, Lady Aqua, so please save meee!

...Maybe someone heard my desperate prayers and repentance, because the noise from the corner of the room stopped.

Phew. I knew there were no evil spirits.

I relaxed a little.

At the same time, a need welled up in me.

I want to open my eyes.

I had to know what had happened to that doll. It was a move my intuition opposed with all its might.

What should I do? I really wanted to know, but I was afraid to look, but I was afraid not to look...!

After arguing back and forth with myself for a minute, it occurred to me that with my eyes shut I would never be able to get to the bathroom.

So I steeled myself and ever so slightly opened one eye...

My eye met those of the doll, which was staring at me from inches away.

"Gaaaaaaaaahhhhh!!"

I screamed so loudly I thought I would scream the life right out of me, and with my suddenly mobile body, I shoved the doll away.

8

“Aqua! Milaaadyyy!”

I dashed down the hall to Aqua’s room, my feet bare.

I could hear something following behind me.

I was scared out of my wits! What was going on here? Why did this have to happen to me?

Thunk! Whuuump, thunkthunkthunk!

With that awful noise behind me, I found the door to Aqua’s room and burst in without so much as a knock.

I slammed the door shut again and locked it. A second later, something thumped against the door.

There was no sign of Aqua.

Sitting in the middle of the dark room was a girl with black hair and two glowing red eyes.

“Eyaaaaghhh!”

“Yaaaaahhh!”

At my scream, the black-haired girl let out a shriek of her own.

I recognized that voice. On closer inspection, it was Megumin, sitting there in her pajamas.

After a moment’s yelling, both of us were able to calm down a bit.

Outside, something was scratching at the door. Terrified, I tried not to think about what it might be.

“G-geez, don’t do that to me, Megumin, I almost wet myself!”

“The same to you! Why did you come storming in here? I thought you were Aqua coming back...”

Suddenly, I had a thought.

"What are you doing in Aqua's room, Megumin? And where is she?"

"Oh, uh, there's a—a doll," she said. "It's been moving around the house..."

So Megumin had run into the same thing I had.

"And so I thought...for my safety, maybe Aqua could t-take me to the...the toilet..."

"You too, huh...?"

Megumin caught my murmur and seemed to realize the same thing had happened to both of us.

"Was a doll chasing you, too, Kazuma? I think that Aqua and Darkness are likely patrolling the house to drive out the evil spirits."

"Aqua, sure, but Darkness... Well, I guess she *is* a Crusader, at the end of the day."

Darkness was a Crusader, even if she didn't always look it, and Crusaders were holy Knights, servants of the gods. As such, she was a pious follower of her religion. She was no Priest, but she had a measure of holy power.

I doubted that our Defense-nut Darkness had taken any magic skills, but at the very least she could make a show of praying to the gods.

That left Megumin and me in a tough spot, though.

I'd fled my own room in such a rush that I'd left behind any weapons. Megumin didn't seem to have her staff, either.

Even if she had, she could hardly use Explosion here.

Just as I was fretting about what to do, Megumin seemed to notice something. "Kazuma. The sound outside the door has stopped. Perhaps the doll is no longer there?"

She was right; I couldn't hear the noise anymore. But honestly, I was still scared to go out.

I was pretty sure there was no way the Lich-banishing Aqua could be done in by some doll. Which meant that if we just sat tight, eventually she and Darkness

would come back from their patrol and deal with it.

There was just one teensy problem.

"Hey, Megumin...face the door and cover your ears for a second. I'm gonna do something kind of inappropriate on the veranda..."

I put one hand on my belt, eager to solve that problem as soon as possible, and made to head outside...

...but Megumin grabbed me by the belt from behind and refused to let me leave.

"Hey, what're you doing? Let me go! Let me go, or my pants and this rug are in big trouble!"

"I will not let you go. What are you thinking, trying to go off on your own? Are we not comrades? Be it the toilet or wherever, let us go together..."

She had a strange smile on her face.

"Nah, lemme go! The bonds of friendship totally don't count when it comes to the bathroom! Didn't you say members of the Crimson Magic Clan don't use the bathroom, anyway? If you need it—there's an empty wine bottle right there!"

"What a thing to say! What are you suggesting I do with that wine bottle? I shall not let you go! At the least, I can guard your back while you are taking care of your bus...i...ness..."

I felt Megumin press up against my back. That was odd. I looked at her.

She was staring out the window to the veranda.

...I looked with her, even as I got a very bad feeling...

What I saw there was shocking, if not really unexpected.

A whole crowd of dolls was pressed up against the veranda window, looking in at us.

"Yaaaaaaahhhh!"

The two of us screamed, and then—sticking together like good comrades should—we dashed out of the room.

“Oh... Kazuma, are you still there? Please don’t leave me...!”

“I’m here, I’m here. I won’t leave you, not even if those creepy dolls show up. Just hurry.”

Megumin and I had run around the mansion until we found the nearest bathroom.



Both of our bodies were at their absolute limits.

I'd done my business first, and now I was standing by the door waiting for Megumin to come out. She'd been babbling to me nonstop since she went in there, maybe afraid I would go off someplace.

"...Um, Kazuma, I do find this somewhat embarrassing. Perhaps you could sing a song? ...Loudly?"

"Do you know how pathetic it is to stand outside a bathroom singing in the middle of the night? As if this is the last time we'll be in this situation—think of all the wildernesses and dungeons we've got ahead of us!"

Much as I teased Megumin, I was actually feeling a little awkward myself standing right there—so I started to sing.

For better or for worse, I knew only Japanese songs, though, so I just sang whatever, loudly, completely a cappella.

"...Phew. Um, you can stop now, Kazuma. What a strange song. I have never heard anything like it. I have been wondering for some time now—where is it you come from?"

"A wonderful land called Japan, where our traditional activities include singing outside of bathrooms in the middle of the night. Come on, let's go. We've got to link up with Aqua."

Megumin scampered after me and my ridiculous explanations.

As it stood, Megumin and I had no defense against any evil spirits.

I wanted to find Aqua and Darkness as soon as possible.

That was when we heard it.

Megumin and I were just about to leave the vanity room attached to the toilet when...

Thunk... Thunk... Thunk...

It was that awful sound again. I stooped down near the door to the hallway.

Megumin clenched my sleeve and drew close to me, trembling.

Those dolls were scary as heck.

They probably couldn't kill you—I figured—but being chased by them in the middle of the night was a whole new level of fear.

Quivering, Megumin let go of my sleeve. She held both hands in front of her and began quietly...

"Hey! What are you chanting? You'll blow this whole house to Kingdom Come!"

In an excess of terror, Megumin had been about to intone Explosion. I slapped one hand over her mouth to stop her, then held her back with the other to keep her from fighting me.

At some point, the *thunk-thunk* noise near the door had stopped.

Megumin, still shaking, grabbed my hand and looked up at me.

Dammit, nothing to it but to do it...!

"Megumin, when I open the door, you run! I'll use my new Drain Touch to get any magic power I can from the dolls. They might attack me, but I don't think it'll be fatal!"

Megumin, still gagged by my hand, nodded.

"Heyyy! Come and get it, you evil suckerrrrs! Just wait'll I sic my rabid goddess on youuu!"

I flung open the door as I bellowed. There was a *whack* as it hit something. It was probably one of our pursuers being thrown back.

I grabbed Megumin's hand and dashed out the door, ready to run like hell.....!

"Aqua! H-hey, Aqua, are you all right?!"

As I made to run, I discovered Aqua, crouching on the ground and clutching her face. Next to her, a doll, its power gone, had tumbled to the floor. And there was Darkness, calling out to Aqua. I stopped in my tracks.

"Phew! That ought to just about do it. There sure were enough of them. It's already morning," Aqua muttered. She looked out the brightening window as she sent the last of the evil spirits on its way.

As expected from our undead expert, she'd cleared out all the spirits from this huge mansion in a single night.

"Hmm, we should make a report to the Guild. We may not have taken a quest or anything, but this is the sort of thing they normally deal with. They might give us a reward anyway, for cleansing a haunted house. And I do want to know why the number of hauntings in this town went up so suddenly..."

We all nodded at Darkness's suggestion.

I left her and Megumin to clean up the mess in the house, while Aqua and I went to inform the Guild.

On our way there, the two of us talked about the house's ghostly residents.

"Hey, whatever happened to that story about the bastard daughter of some nobleman? Didn't you say she meant us no harm and wasn't an evil spirit?"

Aqua clapped her hands.

"Oh yeah! There *was* a little girl, wasn't there? Don't worry—the stuff we dealt with this time was all caused by feral ghosts who just wandered in. But I think it was the little girl who drank my special wine! Say, Kazuma, how about we count that wine as an expense for our ghost-busting trip..."

I ignored Aqua's babbling and put my hand on the door of the Guild...

"Good morning! I know it's a little early, but we've got something to report. Is that okay?"

Even at this hour, a receptionist was already at the desk.

"Yes, please, what is it?"

We explained the request from the real estate agent and what had happened at the mansion. The receptionist looked at Aqua's Adventurer's Card and nodded.

I'd almost forgotten that your Adventurer's Card listed the type and number

of monsters you'd killed.

"It's true there's been an outbreak of evil spirits lately, and a number of people have raised concerns with us. Since you defeated some of the monsters in town, there is a reward, albeit not a very large one. Good work!"

Aqua and I struck victory poses.

But the receptionist wasn't finished.

"Incidentally, we've learned why the number of hauntings has increased so dramatically. You know the town's common graveyard? It seems some prankster erected a huge holy barrier around it. So spirits spawned in the graveyard have nowhere to go, and instead they're settling in vacant houses around town..."

Aqua stopped cold and trembled a little at that.

...

"Excuse us for just a minute."

Taking leave of the receptionist, I silently dragged Aqua to a corner of the Guild Hall.

"Do you know what's going on? Spit it out."

"...All right. You remember how Wiz asked me to stop by the graveyard once in a while to help the spirits there reach the next life? But I totally didn't want to have to go all the way out there every time, right? So I thought, maybe if I got rid of their habitat, eventually they'd just...go away." She laid out the whole thing for me, unusually subdued.

In other words, the spirits had shown up in town because *she* was too lazy to do her job.

This goddess had caused this problem, and now we were giving her kudos for solving it? No way was that going to fly.

"We're not going to take the Guild's reward, okay?"

"...Yeah."

She nodded, looking apologetic.

"And you're coming with me to apologize to the real estate guy. We basically swindled him."

"...Right. I'm really, really sorry."

The two of us left the Guild Hall and headed for the realty shop...

Wait, I thought. First we should let Darkness and Megumin know what was going on. But when we went back to report, the real estate agent was there, too.

"Look at this! I was worried what might have happened, so I came to check on you. But it seems you've exorcized all the evil spirits!"

He greeted us with a wide smile. I felt even worse knowing he'd been worried about us.

Aqua and I explained the situation and told the real estate agent we would let him have the now-ghost-free house back.

But...

"I see. Actually, though, I'd like to have you all continue to live in this house, if possible. It's an especially large place, so it had an especially large number of spirits haunting it. And that gave it an especially bad reputation..."

"We're very sorry about that!" Aqua and I chorused, and got down on our knees in a show of contrition.

"Not at all, not at all!" the man said hurriedly. "Please get up. Erm, listen, here's what we'll do. You all go on living in this house for the time being. You must be pretty powerful to have gotten rid of so many evil spirits. And it's the duty of the citizens of this town to help take care of you adventurers. And then, if you live here long enough, the house might finally outlast its reputation for being haunted..."

Hearing the man's generous offer, Aqua and I threw ourselves on the ground again in gratitude.

"Oh! Please, don't do that! Get up—!"

There were two conditions for our living in the house.

And they were a little strange...

"When we get back from an adventure, over dinner or something, have a lively conversation about what happened... What a weird request. Not that I mind," I muttered, bent over in the garden.

The guy seemed to have a thing for unusual requests.

The other condition was...

"Hello, Mr. Kazuma! Looking after the headstone?"

A voice came from behind me as I stooped there, weeding.

I turned to see Wiz was standing there, her color considerably better than it had been the day before.

"Feeling better now? I'm sorry about yesterday. Our resident idiot sure knows how to cause trouble."

"Oh no, not at all. In fact, I'm quite happy with how things turned out. This way, she won't be lonely." Wiz smiled at me, but I didn't really get what she was talking about.

I was handling the second condition of our living here: tending to the small grave in the corner of the garden.

So I'd thought I would get right to it.

For some reason, Wiz seemed happy to see me weeding away.

I asked if she wanted to come inside, but she said she had to get back to her shop and left with a friendly nod.

I wondered what she came by for. Maybe she was worried about us?

I poured water over the little gravestone and washed it clean. I realized I could make out faded letters carved into it. Must be the name of whoever was buried here.

Parts of the inscription were worn and hard to read, but I could make out the name Anna.

Anna... Anna...?

Who was she? Hadn't I heard that name recently...?

As I crouched by the gravestone mulling it over, a voice came from the house.

"Kazuma! Lunch is ready—come inside! I worked hard on this, so don't let it get cold!"

I looked up and saw Aqua waving at me from a window.

"All right, hang on, I'll be right there!" I shouted back. Then I took a cloth and wiped the headstone dry.

It bore the name *Anna Filante Estroid*.

I was *sure* I'd heard that name just the other day...

"Kazuma! Megumin says for every minute you're late, we're taking one of your chicken nuggets! Actually, you know what? Take your time—I can always use more!"

"Hey, hold it! You think I'm gonna put up with this kind of extortion?!"

I finished tidying the grave and set off for the house at a run.

Chapter 4

God's Blessing on This Wonderful Shop!



1

And so we got a house.

Our biggest problem—how to survive the winter—was solved.

The four of us promptly moved into the new place, and although I had doubts about their personalities, in my heart of hearts I was excited to be sharing a house with three women.

"Hey, you—move it. I'm trying to work, here. If you're cold, go curl up in your bed or something."

Day one of our new lives, and already we were having trouble.

In winter the only monsters around were big, strong ones, so there was nothing to do but hole up in town.

I, however, wanted to hurry and repay the debt that was hanging over our heads, so I got some work from the Guild that I could do at home. But it was hard to make any progress with my hands going numb from the cold.

So I'd gone to set up in front of the fireplace in the mansion's first-floor living area, but Aqua, who had apparently decided this was her personal turf, was presently clinging to the sofa and putting up a fierce fight.

“No way, my bed gets cold again as soon as I step out of it! If you want me to sleep in my bed again, you’d better heat my blankets on the stove or something!”

“Moron, you know we don’t have a stove here! Stop thinking about yourself and get out of here! Just whose debt do you think I’m trying to pay off with this work? I’ve got a few ideas about what I’ll do to you if you make this any more difficult!”

“Oh, you want to start something? My stats are way better than yours! You think you can take me mano a mano? The hearth is my sanctuary! Heaven’s wrath will punish those who trespass on iiiiiit!”

I gave her a little taste of heaven’s wrath, all right, in the form of a Freeze spell right on the nape of her neck. She cried out and tumbled off the couch she had been plastered to.

I sat on the now-vacant couch and laid out on the table the materials I’d been carrying.

“Hmph. Thanks for making room for me. If you’re not going to help with the work, go play with Darkness and Megumin.”

I made a shooing motion at Aqua, who was holding her neck and squirming on the rug.

In the middle of the room, Darkness and Megumin were playing a board game —this world’s equivalent of chess or shogi.

“Hee-hee! Behold the power of my army. I teleport an orc soldier to this space.”

“Megumin, the way you used your Wizard was indecent... I move my Crusader here, and—checkmate!”

“Teleport!”

In a world with magic, the rules of chess were a bit different. I’d tried the game with Megumin once, but about the time her king teleported off the board, I resolved never to play again.

Aqua stopped holding her neck and shaking, and she jumped up as if she’d

suddenly thought of something. She pulled her Adventurer's Card out of her bag and thrust it at me.

"Have a look at *this*, Kazuma! Look at the Level space! I have the highest level in this party right now. I'm pretty much a veteran! How dare a cub like you, not even Level 20, push *me* around! You understand? Now, cede that couch to your better like a good boy!"

I looked at the card she'd shoved in my face. Her level really had jumped. The field read 21.

I reflected: She had defeated the Demon King's general, Beldia, and she had wiped out bunches of undead in the dungeon the other day, to say nothing of the Lich she had exorcized at the end of that adventure.

I was happy to see Aqua growing but also kind of disappointed that she'd passed my level...

...Huh?

"Hey, Aqua. Your level's gone up, but your stats haven't increased at all."

"Silly Kazuma. Who do you think I am? My stats are naturally at the highest possible value already. They're maxed! I also started with enough skill points to learn all the party tricks and all the Arch-priest magic, too! Don't mistake me for some run-of-the-mill adventurer!"

Aqua's card fell from my hand and I rocked back.

Aqua gave me a triumphant smile. She clearly had no idea what was going through my head.

That means no matter how high her level gets, her Intelligence will never go up!

I picked up the card and gave it back to Aqua, along with the couch.

"What's this? How unusually meek... Hey, why are you crying? Are you that shocked my level is higher than yours? ...Hey, now you're patting my shoulders? Why are you being so nice to me? What's with the pitying look?"

I left Aqua sitting on the couch. I'd lost all desire to work for today. I decided to go into town instead.

The town was blanketed in snow, and the cold seemed to have kept most people indoors.

As far as I could tell, to batten down for winter was the conventional wisdom here.

Pretty much the only ones who had it in them to armor up and take on the terrible monsters active in winter were the cheaters from Japan.

And maybe the only ones who had the time to wander around town in the cold were layabouts like me...

Well, me and the familiar, suspicious-looking figures up ahead.

They scurried along the road, checking out a shop that sat back from the street a ways. I called out to my two acquaintances.

"Keith! Dust! What are you doing out here?"

"Wha—?!"

They both jumped, startled at my voice coming from behind.

They were dressed in casual clothes that seemed kind of un-adventurer-ish.

"G geez, Kazuma, don't scare us like that," Keith said, relieved to see it was me. "Sheesh, this is what you get when a guy learns Ambush..."

Of course, I hadn't been using Ambush.

"Sup? Not with your friends?" Dust looked around as if a little worried.

Well, he had suffered considerably at their hands. I didn't blame him for being cautious.

"No, it's just me today. Calm down. Are you that scared of them? I got sick of being at home, so I came out for a walk. What are you doing here?"

Dust let out a small sigh, relieved by my words.

"Oh, we... Nah, we just, y'know? Well, I guess if your lady friends aren't here... that is, if you don't have any women with you, there's no problem."

...?

What were they up to? How would women spoil it?

Reading the look on my face, Keith smirked and explained:

"It won't matter to you, Mr. I'm-surrounded-by-beautiful-women-every-day. But Dust and I are lonely—"

"—Hey, hold on." Dust interrupted whatever Keith had been about to say. Then he gave me a sympathetic look. "Keith...it's not like that," he said earnestly. "I know he looks like he's got a harem, but he doesn't. He's one of us. He's got it tough."

Of course... Dust had learned the hard way what I was going through.

I decided. Debtor though I might be, today I was gonna treat Dust to a meal or something.

3

One of my fonder memories was from when I was a kid and I tried a sip of the beer my father had been drinking so happily. I spit it out immediately.

In my young heart, I swore I would never drink alcohol, but now here I was, in a fantasy world, drinking before noon.

It felt wrong, but then, both the laws and the customs were different here.

There was no law against underage drinking, but if you caused any trouble, you had to take complete personal responsibility.

I didn't particularly like alcohol, but I made myself drink it, and gradually I got a fuzzy, floaty feeling.

It was nice. Was this why people drank?

As the three of us made merry at the Guild bar in the middle of the day, Keith grumbled, "Aww, man. There's nothing to do in winter; it drives me nuts! Whoop, Kazuma, you can really put it away. Have s'more!"

He poured me another generous glass of wine, laughing boisterously.

Keith, apparently, was a happy drunk.

"*Sigh...* Winter means you don't get to see any skin. I know how rough things are for you, Kazuma, but still...right about now, I can't help but be a little envious," Dust said with a deep sigh.

We weren't the only ones at the tavern that morning, not by a long shot—maybe winter boredom drove everyone here.

There were plenty of adventurers who made a *hikikomori* like me look downright functional.

As that thought crossed my mind, I asked Keith and Dust about something that had been bugging me.

"Hey, what were you two doing out there, anyway?"

I was sure they'd been trying to decide whether or not to go into that one shop. I was sort of curious what it was.

The two of them looked at each other and nodded...

Keith set down his mug with a serious look.

"Kazuma. I think we can trust you. What I'm about to tell you is a shared secret among all the male adventurers in town. You must never let it out. Do you promise not to tell your lady friends?"

I nodded, the sudden gravity intimidating me a bit.

Keith gave a short nod back.

In a very quiet voice, so as not to be overheard amid the furor of the room, Dust began, "Kazuma. Did you know that in this town, some succubi run a quiet little shop where you can dream sweet dreams?"

I answered immediately with, "Tell me more."

Dust, just a bit flushed, set down his mug and explained: "There are succubi living in this town. They're demons who feed on horniness—basically, men's vitality. So naturally, they need human men."

Nod, nod.

I leaned in to hear Dust's impassioned exposition.

"So, yeah, they drain vitality, but the men and the succubi in this town have developed a sort of symbiotic relationship. Look, most of us sleep in stables, right? And we've all got certain, y'know...*urges*...but there're people sleeping right nearby. Doesn't matter how much you want it; you just can't do it."

"Y-yeah, sure." I nodded.

I felt a bead of sweat on my forehead, even though I was certainly *not* feeling guilty.

Not guilty at all.

"Heck, I dare you to try anything on one of the girls around you. You'd be a punching bag for every woman in the area in seconds. Or if the girl has a hidden dagger or something, well, you might come out missing a couple of very important things." He turned pale and shivered slightly.

Watching him, Keith said, "Still haven't recovered from the trauma of that time you tried to put the moves on Rin, huh?"

"Sh-shut up, you! Anyway, this is where the succubi come in. While we're sleeping, they give us *awesome* dreams. We get a little relief; they get to survive. They don't take so much that we get totally dried up and can't go on adventures, either. No one has ever been so drained that they got in any trouble by going there... What do you think? Win-win, huh?"

I nodded vigorously.

It was perfect! Beyond perfect!

The succubi didn't have to attack random people, and adventurers living in stables could put their worries to rest. It probably even helped curtail sex crimes.

You know, I'd noticed how peaceful this town seemed. I'd always pictured adventurers as noisy, drunken brawlers, but there was little violence in this town, and you didn't hear much about crime.

If anyone could find a moment of postcoital clarity at any time, no wonder there were no fights.

Incredible! What a wonderful system the world had come up with.

Keith looked at my rapturous expression and said, "Truth be told, we only just learned about this place recently ourselves. We were thinking we might make our first visit today. That's when we ran into you."

Dust took a quick gulp of wine.

"That's the story. So...want to join us?"

"By all means."

4

We had left the Guild Hall and were now standing before the shop from earlier with a touch of trepidation.

I would never have had it in me to go in by myself. But now I had two trusty companions. It was kind of like that weird thing where you can't bring yourself to buy a dirty magazine by yourself, but you can manage it in a crowd.

It was a small shop in an alleyway somewhere off the main street.

At first glance, it looked like nothing more than a normal eatery...

"Welcome!"

She was gorgeous. The kind of body most men saw when they dreamed of the perfect woman.

Looking past the stunning greeter, I could see there were indeed only male customers inside the shop.

Similarly lovely, busty women flitted about the store. It was enough to make my chest tighten.

This was supposed to be an eatery, but there was no sign of food or drink on any of the tables.

Instead, everyone at every table was studiously filling out what appeared to be some sort of questionnaire.

The beautiful woman took an armful of menus, led us to an empty table, and smiled.

"Is this your first time at our establishment?"

The three of us nodded.

She gave a wry smile. "Do you know what kind of shop this is and what we are?"

We nodded again, wordless.

Apparently satisfied, she put the menus on the table.

"Order whatever you like. Of course, you don't have to order anything if you don't want to. And fill out these questionnaires, please, and present them when paying the bill."

We took the questionnaires.

Maybe they used the sheets to match you up with the succubus who best fit your type.

I glanced at the questionnaire, but I didn't quite grasp what I saw.

"Um, this says to specify your preferred situation, gender, and appearance..."

Situation made sense, but gender and appearance?

"You may wish to be a king or a hero—that's your situation. As for gender and appearance, perhaps you want to try being a woman. Or some of our customers, for example, wish to be a young boy being overpowered by a strong female adventurer."

I was a little worried about the adventurers around here.

Still, I was impressed you could be that specific. I guess it was a dream after all.

Keith raised his hand solicitously to ask the woman a question. "Um...how detailed can we get with the description of our partner?"

"As detailed as you like. Personality and character traits, appearance, whether or not he or she likes you—anything at all. You can invent a partner out of your imagination, if you wish."

"You're kidding."

"Not at all, sir."

It just slipped out, but she was quick to respond.

So it could be that famous woman, that girl next door, even your two-dimensional crush?

"Um...do we have to worry about the rights to use that person's likeness or anything?"

"No, sir. It's just a dream, after all."

"Right, of course."

Her ready reply put me at ease.

A dream...no problem.

Now it was Dust's turn to raise his hand.

"So...no restrictions on the age of our partner either, right? I mean, not that I plan on... I was just wondering..."

"No, sir. Whatever you desire," the succubus replied without blinking.

"A-are you sure?" I asked before I could stop myself. "No rules or anything?"

"Yes, sir. It's just a dream, after all."

"I guess so..."

No harm, no foul.

It seemed like a pretty sweet setup these succubi had here.

The three of us silently filled out our questionnaires.

"Thank you. As you've chosen the three-hour course, that will be five thousand eris each."

What a deal!

When I opened my wallet at the register, I was pleasantly taken aback by the prices.

Of course, I'd never been to this kind of shop, so what did I know? But it seemed way cheaper than anything in Japan.

Reading my expression, the woman said, “We need only enough money to get by in this town, you see. The rest of our payment comes in the form of a little bit of our customers’ vitality.”

A smile slipped over her face.

Who knew there was a place you could literally *buy* happiness?

I was completely taken with these women’s giving and compassionate business model.

I had to become a regular here—I had to help their cause!

Almost unconsciously, I put my hands together in a gesture of worship and murmured, “O goddess...”

“P-please, sir, that’s hardly fitting! N-now, please let us know your address and when you intend to go to sleep tonight. One of our staff will be by around that time to help you have the dream you requested. Please refrain from alcohol use, as it isn’t possible to induce a dream in an inebriated customer.”

When she had finished her instructions, we left the shop.

The night was still young, but somehow we immediately found ourselves going our separate ways.

“Uh, see you next time, then!”

“Y-yeah!”

“Catch you l-later!”

The two of them seemed eager to go home early.

But then, so was I.

It was quite a while yet till I’d indicated I would be asleep, but I wanted to hurry back and get ready, then go to sleep early.

I rushed home, not stopping for anything.

"Welcome back, Kazuma! Rejoice, for tonight's dinner is going to be amazing! It's crab! Someone from Darkness's home sent them as a housewarming gift! Beautiful red crabs with white specks! And *super*-expensive wine, too! Looks like they want to thank us for looking after their girl!"

I guess crabs were a delicacy here, too.

I'd never really gotten to eat crab in Japan. Who knew my first taste of it would be in a fantasy world?

"Ahh! To think! A party of poor adventurers living on poor adventurer salaries, having speckled crab for dinner! Never have I been gladder that I joined this group...!"

"Is the stuff really that high-class?" I asked Megumin, who was busy bowing in reverence toward the food.

Megumin did an exaggerated double take at my ignorance, then thrust her fist into the air and launched into an explanation.

"Of course it is! To make a simple comparison, if you told me I had to go without exploding something today in order to eat this crab, I would gladly do it, and then explode something *after* I had eaten the crab! That is how high-class it is!"

"Well, that is something! ...Huh? What was that second thing you said?"

Darkness was setting the food on the table as we talked. Aqua was cheerily taking out glasses for each of us.

Then we all sat down and dug right in.

I pulled off a leg with a *crack*, dipped some of the pinkish-white meat in vinegar, and popped it in my mouth.

"?!"

The flavor overwhelmed me. Slightly sweet, packed with crabbiness, the taste spread through my mouth.

Everyone else savored their crab in silence.

Oh man! I can't stop myself!

I cracked open the shell and started on the brown meat inside...

“Kazuma, give me a Kindle over here. I’ll show you a great way to enjoy pricey wine.”

As she spoke, Aqua, who had already torn through the brown meat in her crab’s shell, put charcoal in a sort of small pan and stretched wire mesh over it. She’d fashioned a crude brazier.

I cast my fire spell on the charcoal as she asked, and she set her shell on the brazier, a bit of brown meat still clinging to it.

She poured a trickle of alcohol into the shell. It was clear, like Japanese sake.

In high spirits, Aqua grilled the shell until it was lightly browned, then sipped the warmed wine right out of it...

“Ah...”

She let out a contented sigh.

The whole thing reeked of some old Japanese guy nursing his drink—yet the rest of us all gulped and rushed to try it ourselves. Suddenly I realized: *It’s a trap!*

The delicious crab had made me almost completely forget about the impending succubus visit. Hadn’t the woman warned me I wouldn’t be able to get my dream if I was sozzled?

Calm down, now. I know how to buck up. Yes! I am a man of iron willpower!

“?! That’s fantastic!”

Don’t get distracted!

Don’t get distracted just because Darkness likes it!

If I tried even one sip, that would probably be the end of it.

I’d just drink to my heart’s content, succubi be damned!

That’s what had happened with the crab, and the wine looked every bit as good.

“Darkness, give me some, too! Why not? Just once? I want to try the wine,

too!"

"No. I heard if you start young, it messes you up for life."

At that, Megumin suddenly glanced at Aqua, still enjoying herself. Darkness silently looked her way, too.

"...What?"

Darkness noticed me wordlessly resisting the scene and inclined her head. "What's wrong, Kazuma? Never drank before? ...Was the crab not to your liking?" She looked just a little concerned.

Nope, nuh-uh, crab was great.

"No, the crab was really good, for sure. I just had a drink while I was out with Keith and the guys earlier. And I'm not much of a connoisseur when it comes to wine, so for tonight... Well, I'll have some tomorrow—how's that?"

My excuse seemed to satisfy her. She let out a breath and gave a carefree smile.

No, stop, don't give me that innocent look! Every other day you embarrass me and have nothing worthwhile to say—why today?

Why today?!

"Hmm? You think there'll be any of this left tomorrow? I'm going to clean it out! Imagine—not drinking *this*! Yaaaay! I get Kazuma's helping!"

Grrr. I'd never hated that idiot more.

Darkness smiled at me again. "Hmm. Well, at least eat up, then. It's a way of thanking you for all your help."

Her words made me realize I was doing something kind of underhanded, and I felt a pang of guilt.

Maybe I should just forget about it and have a drink with everyone.

Tomorrow I could apologize to the succubus for making her come all the way out here.

Yeah...enjoy a drink with my friends and get back to work tomorrow.

What were we talking about? Just a dream—albeit a realistic one—based on that questionnaire. Admittedly, they claimed you would remember the dream when you woke up. But it was still just a dream.

And look at Darkness. Look at all of them.

Which was more important?

Remember what you wrote on the questionnaire?

...Of course. There'd never been anything to worry about.

I ate all the crab I could take, then stood up.

"Welp, I know it's a little early, but I'm off to bed! Thanks for the meal, Darkness. G'night, everybody!"

And with no further hesitation, I shut myself up in my room.

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I locked the door and unlocked the window. That wasn't specifically part of the instructions, but I figured it couldn't hurt.

The succubus was already coming all the way out here. I didn't want to put her to any more trouble.

We didn't have a clock, so I didn't know the exact time, but it had to be getting near the time I'd specified. I needed to get to sleep before the hour came, but with all the excitement—and nervousness—I couldn't drift off.

Oh man, my heart is pounding.

Ahh, what am I gonna do? I'm too excited to sleep!

I didn't know how long I lay like that.



I slipped out of bed. I thought I'd do some light exercise in the yard to clear my head. And maybe it would make me sleepy.

I left the house still in my pajamas.

Everyone else was asleep; all was quiet. The moonlight and my Second Sight skill made it easy to move around the yard.

As I exercised on the snow-covered grounds, it suddenly started to bug me that the grave of whoever it was over in the corner was getting buried in snow.

I went over and brushed it off, then saw that name, Anna, again.

I was satisfied with the state of the headstone, but now I was starting to get annoyed that I was covered in a sheen of sweat.

I guess I didn't need to worry. I was just going to get a dream. But it was a matter of etiquette.

So I made my way through the silent house to the bath.

The special magical bath was a further testament to the house's previous, noble owners. In a word, it heated the bath like a gas system but with magic. Because it required only a pinch of MP to work, even average people could use it.

I activated the heater and suddenly felt sluggish, perhaps because of the drain on my MP. Couldn't help that.

I used Kindle to light the sconce in the bathing area and even put the little OCCUPIED sign on the door.

I stripped and put my clothes in the hamper so people would know who was in there.

In other words, I wanted to avoid one of those ridiculous mix-ups you see in manga all the time.

If I wanted to get into a situation like that, well, that was what the succubus shop and its dreams were for. I'd rather not get in such an untoward relationship with someone I had to live with.

When a woman walked in on a man in the bath, somehow it was always the

guy's fault.

A claim I would certainly dispute if it happened now. I'd scream even before she could: *Lady pervert! Reverse sexual harassment!*

"Ehh. I guess that sort of thing only happens in manga anyway," I said to myself. I used some MP to heat the water, then sank in up to my shoulders.

I stretched my limbs luxuriantly, bathed in the gentle glow of the changing-room lantern. I sighed a deep sigh and felt sleep stealing over me.

7

I didn't know how long I stayed like that, but I opened my eyes to a clatter from outside the changing room.

At first I thought I must have imagined it, but in a place this quiet, a noise like that was hard to miss.

Maybe the OCCUPIED sign had fallen off the door. I was pretty sure I'd hung it up securely, though...

Could it be Aqua, playing a prank by taking down the sign? Probably not at this hour; she'd be asleep.

Oh, well. It wasn't like anyone was going to wander in at this time of night. My clothes were in the hamper in there; I'd even lit the lantern. Anyone who came by would know there was someone in here.

That's what I was thinking when an unnatural wind blew in—right through the middle of the house—and doused the light.

I had the sense I wasn't alone, just as I had when ghosts had beset us here.

But I wasn't getting anything from my Sense Foe skill.

Aw, well. I could see in the dark. Who cared about the lantern? The moonlight filtering through the window of the bath was plenty bright enough.

So I lolled there, unconcerned...

...when I heard the door of the attached changing room open.

This time I really was startled.

What was with the weird timing?

Wait—whatever had come in had brought a light, so they would have noticed my clothes in the changing room.

They had a lamp. That meant it wasn't Aqua, who could see in the dark.

That left Megumin or Darkness...

Suddenly, the mysterious visitor's light blinked out.

"Wha...? Wh-what happened to my lamp...?"

From the other side of the glass, I heard what sounded like Darkness's confused voice.

"...Oh, well. The moon's out tonight; it'll be fine..."

Then I could make out her form as she began to take off her...
whoawaitwaitwait!

I was about to call out when it struck me.

It was too neat. Too improbable. Too...*perfect*. No matter how lucky I was.

Hang on.

The last thing I remembered was feeling sleepy and closing my eyes.

So this must be...!

Darkness walked into the bath area, still talking to herself and running her fingers through her long hair...

...and saw me, lounging in the tub in the dark. Our eyes met.

““.....””

Of course, we were both naked as the day we were born.

In the faint moonlight, Darkness's alabaster skin seemed to glow.

Oh man... I'd always known she was sexy, but even I hadn't realized what her proportions really were. I'd thought maybe all her training would have made her lean, but she was plump in all the right places...

Or maybe that was just the succubus, playing to my preferences?

Darkness stared openly at me, not trying to cover herself. I made a friendly gesture from the tub.

At that, Darkness sank to the floor, covering her chest, her mouth hanging open.

“Wh-wh-wh-wha...?”

“...? What’s wrong? Hurry up and come here, Darkness. Well, scrub my back first.”

“??!?!?”

I rose from the bath and sat on a round wooden stool with my back to her. Darkness didn’t seem to expect that; she just kept working her mouth open and closed.

There was something about her. Something fresh, something I liked. Guess that was what I got for having a succubus whip her up.

But...why was Darkness in my dream?

I had requested only a beautiful, slightly older woman with excellent style. Next time I’d have to be more specific.

“Wh-wh-wh-what are you saying?! What I mean is, how, er, um—How can you be so calm? A-and what do you mean, scrub your b-back? I have s-so many questions I can’t even th-think...!”

Wow! They had her personality down to a T. Way to go, succubus! Kudos!

“Oops, this is no time to be overcome with admiration. I didn’t say I wanted her to play hard to get—let’s get things moving here! ...Hmm, come to think of it, I did put down beautiful, slightly older woman, excellent style but shy and sheltered. I guess this is fine, then.”

“?!”

Darkness was getting more and more panicked as I muttered to myself.

This was refreshing in its way, but was I supposed to be taking the lead in this scene?

"I get it; I asked for the sheltered type, but come on! My back ain't gonna scrub itself!"

"?! Y-you mean anyone would know to scrub your back in this situation?!"

In the midst of her mounting panic, Darkness approached my back with great apprehension.

I let my eyes wander over her, but she crouched on the ground and covered her body.

"This is different. It's nice. But—my back! I can barely wait anymore!"

"Y-you! Think about what's going on! What would Aqua and Megumin say if they knew?"

"Well, maybe I'd ask them to join us in the tub."

"*What?!* I don't get you today...!"

"Hey, watch the racket. Do you know what time it is? You're gonna wake up the whole neighborhood. Even you ought to know better than that."

"You really want to talk about social etiquette in a situation like this? Is it just me? Is it just me who doesn't have any common sense? Am I the strange one?!"

"You're always kind of strange. Well...since this is a dream, I guess you can make all the noise you want. Now, back, please."

"Erg... H-how did this happen...? And yet he orders me so confidently... I hate being the submissive archetype!" she muttered, her cheeks flushing red as she turned toward my back.

A towel had appeared in her hand, and she knelt on the ground just behind me.

At last, she started to scrub. Not very well, but certainly wholeheartedly.

"Ahhh, that's the stuff... Normally I'm the one who's too shy. I kinda like this whole embarrassed take on you."

"Wh-why, you—! Everything you've said and done today has been so... geriatric! Th-there, that should be plenty. M-may I please go now?" she said

tremblingly, desperately trying not to look at my nakedness. Something about it just smacked of her innocence.

"Whaddaya mean, go now? I know you took some liberties with what I put down, but don't act like you don't know what comes next. How about you lose the towel?"

"No way! This is wrong! I might not be very worldly, but I know this isn't right!"

Darkness's eyes brimmed with tears and her cheeks were bright red as she shot back at me. Then we heard it: "Intruder! Everyone, watch out! There's an intruder in here!!"

It was Aqua, her voice echoing through the house.

Hey, I didn't say I wanted to be interrupted just as we were getting to the good stuff!

I grabbed the towel Darkness was holding, wrapped it around my hips, and dashed out of the bath.

I glanced back at Darkness. She sat there on the floor, covering her chest, her upturned eyes brimming with tears.

Damn! I really wanted to get on with it, but first I had to go give Aqua a piece of my mind for interrupting us like that. I didn't care if this *was* a dream!

When my towel and I got to the living area, I found Aqua holding a succubus—a girl, younger than the woman I'd met at the shop that afternoon.

Megumin, still in her pajamas, was pointing her staff at the creature threateningly.

"Kazuma, look! My spirit barrier caught this intrud—Yikes! There's another one over here!"

"It's me, you idiot! Wait, huh? What's a succubus girl doing here?"

As I argued with Aqua, still clad in only a towel, I started to think the cast of this dream was altogether too large. And then I started to wonder...

Why would a *succubus* appear in a *succubus*'s dream?

"So I put a barrier around this whole house, right? And when it detected something, I went to check, and I found this thing trying to get inside, stuck in my barrier! Succubi only attack men, so she must have been coming for you, Kazuma! But you're safe now—time for a good old-fashioned exorcism!"

The succubus gave a small yelp.

Huh?

Could things get any weirder than this?

Wait—could this mean Darkness...? The tub... Was it all...?

No! This wasn't the time. First I had to deal with the succubus.

So Aqua had set up a spirit barrier without a word to me. Sure she had. It would hardly be the first time she'd gone above and beyond the call of stupid. Aqua had taken a step back from the succubus and was pointing at her dramatically.

"All right, say your prayers! 'Cause I've got my special extra-powerful anti-demon... Huh? Kazuma? I think you'd better stay back; there's no telling what she might do to a man like..."

Wordlessly I stood between Aqua and the succubus. I took the girl's hand and led her to the entryway.

"H-h-hey, what're you doing, Kazuma? That thing's a demon—she came to suck the life out of you!" Aqua shouted shrilly.

Megumin, who had initially been stupefied by my state of undress, now leveled her weapon at the succubus again and fixed the demon with a glare.

The succubus whispered to me, "I-I'm sorry, sir! Forget about me—I'm just a monster! I admit a spirit barrier was unexpected, but we succubi pride ourselves on our ability to sneak to a customer's bedside. This situation is entirely due to my inexperience. It won't do for you to embarrass yourself, sir—please, pretend you don't know me! Let her think I'm a wild succubus and exorcize me..."

Carefully keeping the succubus behind me, I turned to Aqua and Megumin. I reached back and gave the demon a push toward the door.

Then I looked at Aqua and Megumin and put up my dukes.

“S-sir?!” the succubus whispered anxiously.

Aqua scrunched up her brow. “Um, what are you doing? As a goddess, I can hardly let some demon just walk away from me. Now, if you like that pretty face of yours, step aside!”

Was she a goddess or a street punk?

“Aqua, Kazuma might be under the influence of that succubus right now! He’s been acting strange—going on about dreams and preferences. You damnable monster—how dare you put me through that...that *humiliation!* I’ll kill you!”

There was Darkness, wearing a shirt and short skirt, her feet bare and her hair still sopping.

I took an involuntary step back at the sight of her bellowing tearfully.

“Kazuma, you are taking this much too lightly,” Megumin said with a touch of exasperation and a cold look at the girl behind me. “She may be cute, but she is a demon, a monster, and our enemy.”

That stare shook me to the core, but I didn’t back down.

I gave the succubus another shove: *Hurry up and get out of here!*

Aqua saw me. She took a step forward and settled into a crouched stance.

“Looks like you and I are gonna have to get serious here. Fine. Come and get me! Once I’ve beaten the pudding out of you, I’ll send your little friend to the next life!” Then, with a shout, she flew at me.

The succubus gave a screech in her small voice: “Siiirrr!”

There were some trusts you couldn’t betray, like a secret your friends had shared with you.

And there were some things you had to protect, like the sweet little demon whose only goal in life was to give some succor to lonely, horny men.

I clenched my fists.

“Bring it on!!”

The whole mansion was filled with our shouts, our hollers, our roars.

8

“.....”

I could feel a silent gaze on my back as I quietly crouched in the corner of the garden, working.

I was cleaning the gravestone, as I'd taken to doing regularly.

“If you've got something to say, say it already. Anyway, I can't believe you just *went along* with all that.”

“...!

Standing behind me, Darkness seemed about to say something, then stopped.

She'd been hovering there silently, arms crossed, for some time. Frankly, she was making it *very* hard to work.

I'd taken a pretty epic beating the night before—it was three against one, after all—but at least I'd managed to help the succubus girl escape.

And Darkness conveniently assumed that whole episode was due to the succubus controlling me.

“...You really don't remember anything about last night, correct? You have no memories of being under the succubus's control?”

That was what she finally said. She really wanted to be sure.

“Sadly, no,” I replied. “I just remember having a very pleasant dream.”

Far be it from me to disabuse her of her very helpful assumptions.

It was better for both of us that way.

“I—I see. That's...good. It...is what it is. Just an accident. It'd be better for me to forget it as well.” She paused. “But...well, you were so forceful, and it scared me a little, but it was also...not bad. Although I didn't appreciate your trying to do as you pleased with me just because I'm unworldly.”

“Unworldly? You can't be as sheltered as you look. Get some common sense,

already! *Nothing* that happened last night was my fault. I lit the lantern and put the sign on the door; what could you possibly have thought—?”



"S-so you *do* remember? Was a succubus *really* controlling you?!"

Darkness shook me by the shoulders, but I barely gave her a glance as I kept cleaning.

I didn't know who or what had played this ridiculous prank on us. But I was sort of grateful that they had.

Thus we finally established ourselves. We'd checked food, clothing, and shelter off the list; we'd manage the rest somehow.

I finally had a place to call my own in this world.

I expected to sleep very well that night.

And I would have, too. If it hadn't been for one little public announcement that rang out through the streets and threatened everything...

"Destroyer alert! Destroyer alert! Mobile Fortress Destroyer is in the vicinity of this town! All adventurers, please prepare your equipment and come to the Adventurers Guild! All other residents—please evacuate immediately!"

Chapter 5

May We Do Away With This Outrageous Fortress!



1

By the time I got back to the house, it was pandemonium.

“Run awaaay! Run far, far awaaay!”

Aqua was busy turning the house upside down. Megumin, it seemed, had already packed—just one small suitcase. She was sitting nearby with a cup of tea, looking philosophical.

“Flailing about now will not do any good. We are going to lose our home and everything we own anyway, so why not raid the Demon King’s castle immediately?”

Getting my stuff ready to head for the Guild, I looked at them dumbly.

“Um...what’s with you two? What’s going on around here? There was an urgent announcement. Get your gear, and let’s head to the Guild.”

Aqua and Megumin seemed to notice me for the first time.

“What are you *talking* about, Kazuma? You’re not thinking about fighting Mobile Fortress Destroyer?”

Aqua sounded like she couldn’t quite believe it. She stood at my side, clutching her pillow.

I, for one, had no idea what was happening. I’d only heard the

announcement.

True, the voice on the PA system had sounded pretty frazzled. That made me suspect things were bad.

"Kazuma," Megumin said, "Mobile Fortress Destroyer, the biggest bounty on offer, is heading for this town. By the time it leaves, we can expect not so much as a blade of grass will remain—other than the followers of the Axis Church, I suppose. Even you cannot be so reckless as to fight it."

"Hey," Aqua whined, "why does everyone talk about my cute little followers that way? Wiz did it, too. Why is everyone so afraid of them? They're all good, normal people!"

Megumin's explanation, though, didn't quite click for me.

Actually, I'd been hearing about this thing for a while now. I didn't know what a "mobile fortress" was, but it sounded awfully big.

"Can't you just handle it with an Explosion, Megumin? It sounds like it's big enough for that you'd see it coming from a mile away. One good magical blast wouldn't do it?"

"I am afraid not," she said. "Destroyer is equipped with powerful magic barriers. One or two Explosions would not harm it."

Geez, what is this Destroyer thing?

"My followers are all perfectly good people! Megumin, listen to me! Those nasty Eris followers must have started those rumors people are spreading! Everyone loves Eris so much, but she's such a pill! She's even less merciful toward demons than I am, and she's a total wild child! I wouldn't be surprised to find out she comes down to the mortal realm when she's got time to kill! Respect Axis! Respect the Axis Church! Please!"

"Aqua, is it not enough for you to constantly claim you are divine? Must you also badmouth our Lady Eris?"

"Claim? It's true! You have to believe me!"

I realized I didn't see Darkness around anywhere.

"Huh? Where'd Darkness go?" I asked Megumin. Aqua had our Arch-wizard by

the shoulders and was shaking her violently, on the verge of tears. “She should’ve gotten back before I did...”

“She is shut up in her room.”

If it’s not one of them, it’s another!

I had no idea what Destroyer was, but I’d finally gotten a house in this dang town, I’d finally become a regular at some dang shops, and above all—there was still something I had to do in Axel.

I might have failed yesterday thanks to Aqua’s spirit barrier, but *next* time...!

Without them, in fact, I might have been out of debt and out of Dodge long ago.

What if those kindhearted demons had to move their shop to some other town? Who’s to say they’d get enough business?

Well, first things first. I had to get my stuff and head to the Guild...!

“Sorry I’m late! ...Huh, what’s with you, Kazuma?” Darkness asked the moment she saw me. “Hurry up and get ready. I assume you’re going to the Guild?”

She came down from upstairs wearing a set of heavy armor I’d never seen before. Over her usual armor she’d donned a cape of chain mail, and she’d even mounted a detachable shield on her left arm.

Maybe it was some sense of herself as a woman that kept her from putting on a helmet, even with all that.

I guess she hadn’t gone to her room in order to get ready to flee. She’d gone to make sure she had on her best equipment.

She did have her Paladin-like moments.

She probably felt she couldn’t leave the townspeople to their fate.

“Hey, you two, take a lesson from her! Don’t you care about the house—the town—we’ve lived in all this time? C’mon—Guildward ho!”

“What’s with the impassioned plea, Kazuma? Your eyes are really...sparkling. And we’ve lived in this house for, like, one day.”

"Yo, Kazuma! I knew you'd come! I had faith in you, buddy!"

When we reached the Guild, equipped with everything we had, we ran into Dust, who was also heavily armored.

I knew I could count on you guys to be here, too.

Keith and Taylor were with him.

I looked around the Guild Hall.

It was filled with adventurers of every stripe, wearing whatever they thought would give them the best protection.

They must love this town, too.

Was it just me, or did it seem like men were disproportionately represented in the crowd?

Come to think of it, I knew most of the people there. A ways away, I even saw Mitsurugi, who had come here from Earth like I had, bearing a magic sword.

He hadn't noticed me yet, and I was just as happy not to have anything to do with him.

Maybe I would just keep my distance.

Finally, it seemed, enough adventurers had gathered.

"Everyone! You have our sincere thanks for responding to today's emergency announcement. We will now be offering an urgent quest for the defeat of Mobile Fortress Destroyer. We request all present to participate in this quest, regardless of class or level. If it is judged impossible, everyone will evacuate the town together. You are Axel's final bastion. Our fate is in your hands!"

The Guild employee had to shout to be heard over the din.

Employees then gathered around a table in the middle of the tavern area to create a kind of impromptu council room.

Wow, this really isn't business as usual. This is tense.

Is Destroyer as dangerous as all that?

"We will now begin an emergency strategy meeting, everyone. Please be seated!"

Each of us obediently found a seat. How many adventurers did they have here? More than a hundred bodies had to be packed into the huge Guild Hall.

When I'd gotten a table, I took a good look at the adventurers around me.

...Erk. Mitsurugi was looking this way. He was staring straight at Aqua, who was fiddling with a cup of water to pass the time.

"All right, then. First, let me explain the current state of things. Ahem, does anyone need an explanation of Mobile Fortress Destroyer itself?"

A few of us, myself included, raised our hands.

The Guild employee nodded.

"Mobile Fortress Destroyer is a colossal golem initially developed by the country of Noise, a world leader in magic technology, as a weapon to be used against the Demon King's army. It is shaped roughly like a spider, and its construction consumed a massive amount of the national budget. It is the size of a small castle, but the abundant use of magical metals means it is far lighter than it appears. It uses its eight giant legs to move at speeds exceeding those of a horse."

Most of the people in the hall were nodding along as if they already knew all this. Apparently Destroyer was just that big a deal.

"Its size and speed are its most salient characteristics. It moves with tremendous quickness, and not even a large monster would survive being stepped on by one of its eight legs. In addition, powerful magic barriers, in keeping with Noise's magic-technological standards, constantly protect it. For this reason, magical attacks against the fortress are all but meaningless."

Expressions all over the room darkened at that.

It was dawning on all of us what a losing fight we were in.

"Hence, we must rely on physical attacks; however...if you get close enough to attack it, you will be crushed to death. Ranged weapons like arrows and catapults are therefore preferable; however...due to the magical alloys used in

its construction, arrows bounce off Destroyer, and it can easily dodge any catapult that flings rocks large enough to assault it. Additionally, its torso boasts an autonomous midsized golem to defend from above against monster attacks, along with a turret to shoot down airborne objects. Further still, the upper torso is equipped with Battle Golems for offensive use.”

...Yikes.

“On the subject of why Mobile Fortress Destroyer is rampaging to begin with, its original designer is said to still be aboard, controlling the golem even now. Given its speed, the fortress and its eight legs have already decimated much of this continent. Destroyer makes no distinction between people and monsters. It is widely believed that the only feasible response to Destroyer’s approach is to abandon the town, wait until the fortress has passed, and rebuild. We may go so far as to consider it a force of nature.”

The racket in the hall had been replaced by a silence so complete you could hear a pin drop.

“At present, Mobile Fortress Destroyer is headed straight for this town from the northwest... Ideas, anyone?”

All I could think was, *This has to be, like, the ultimate difficulty level.*

One adventurer raised his hand.

“Um, what happened to Noise, this ‘world leader in magical technology’? Surely they could develop some countermeasure against the fortress? Or at least tell us its weakness?”

“Noise was annihilated. It was the first victim of Destroyer’s rampage.”

There was a pause.

“...Anyone else?” the employee said hopefully.

Someone else raised a hand.

“Could we build a gigantic moat around the town...?”

“That’s been tried. An alliance of Elemental Masters worked with the spirits of the earth to create a giant pit, into which Destroyer fell. That did go as planned. However, the fortress’s mobility was unhindered—it simply jumped out of the

hole. The plan had been to seal it in by rolling a rock over it, but they didn't have time..."

"....."

Everyone simultaneously fell silent.

"Anyone else...?"

A third hand went up.

"How is the Demon King's army resisting it? Hasn't it trampled his castle? How are they protecting themselves from Destroyer? Has it at least inconvenienced them?"

"Word is that a powerful magic barrier protects the Demon King's castle, beyond human strength to break. At the moment, the castle seems to be quite intact. It's nothing to them if some wandering monsters get run over."

Then the employee continued, "Anyone else?"

3

It was a tough meeting.

Someone suggested that we could use ropes to climb up on the fortress, but someone else pointed out that it was too fast for that.

How about a gigantic barrier, bigger than Destroyer itself? someone said, but the employee responded that walls had been tried before, and Destroyer had simply gone around them or smashed through them. At that, everyone was quiet.

Magic wouldn't work. Get too close and it'd crush you. Aerial attacks would be shot down.

And it was quick as a wink, to boot.

No wonder Aqua and Megumin had been so set on running away.

At the table next to ours, Taylor seemed to be getting tired of the futile talk.

"Hey, Kazuma," he said suddenly, "you're an idea man. Got a plan for us?"

Yeah. As if.

I appreciated the vote of confidence, but my only idea to speak of had been to have Megumin blast it from afar, so I had run out of suggestions at about the time we heard its barriers neutralized magic.

I thought for a long moment.

Its barriers neutralized magic.

I turned to Aqua, who was killing time by drawing a picture on our table with the water in her glass.

"Hey, Aqua. You remember Wiz saying that if just two or three people were maintaining it, you could probably break through even the barrier around the Demon King's castle? Maybe you could break through Destroyer's—Whoa!"

All of a sudden I noticed the picture she'd been drawing, using nothing but water, and I was transfixed.

It was an absolute masterpiece. An image of a sublime angel contemplating a flower...!

"Oh, yeah, I guess she said something like that. But we won't know if we don't try. I can't promise I can really break through the barriers."

As she spoke, Aqua slid the picture back into her glass without a hint of regret.

"Aww, what'd you do that for? What a waste!"

"What're you whining about? I finish one picture, then I erase it so I can start a new one."

Loudly enough to be heard over our bickering, the employee said, "Break the barriers?! *Destroyer's* barriers?!"

Aqua and I immediately became the focus of everyone in the room.

I waved my hands apologetically. "I mean—just maybe. No promises."

This set off a commotion in the Guild Hall.

And then...

"Perhaps we could ask you to try it? If it works, then magic attacks might... Ah, but not just anyone could hit it. A town full of novices probably doesn't have the firepower..."

The employee's fretting brought the room to silence again.

Except for one adventurer.

"Firepower? We've got firepower. Even if she is a little crazy."

Chatter again.

"Oh yeah, that weird girl—!"

"There was that one strange kid..."

"Hold it right there. If you are referring to me, I will have you stop now. Or else I shall show you just how crazy I can be."

Megumin was standing with staff in hand. The other adventurers all looked away innocently.

The Demon King's general, Beldia, was to blame for this. He had once called Megumin an insane whelp of the Crimson Magic Clan, and the nickname had stuck among the town's adventurers.

As suddenly as she had stood, Megumin blushed with the weight of anticipation she bore.

"I—I doubt if even my Explosion could take down Destroyer in one...one blow," she whispered, and sat back down.

So we needed at least one more. One more powerful magic-wielder...

Just as the Guild was being sucked down by the thought, the door opened.

"I'm sorry I'm late! Wiz, owner of Wiz's Magical Item Shoppe, reporting. I am certified as an adventurer, so I wanted to help..."

Wiz had on a black robe and the apron she wore around the shop; she must have been right in the middle of something when she rushed out to join the meeting. All she looked ready to help with was the mess hall.

But at her arrival, a cheer went up from the gathered adventurers.

"The owner's here!"

"It's the penniless proprietor!"

"I'm in your debt, Miss! I dream of your shop every night!"

"The owner's here! We can do it! We can win!"

I knew Wiz was a Lich. But I didn't know why she inspired such enthusiasm in the other adventurers.

I leaned over and whispered to Taylor, "Hey, Wiz is, like, a celebrity. Why's she so popular? And what's with 'the penniless proprietor'? That's insulting. Is her shop doing that badly?"

"You don't know? Miss Wiz used to be a renowned magic-user, a powerful Arch-wizard. She retired and dropped out of sight for a while, but then all of a sudden she showed up in this town and opened that shop. It's not doing so well because nobody needs expensive magic items in a town full of rookies. There'd probably be more demand in the Capital or somewhere. You know, someplace they actually fight big monsters and need rare herbs and super-pricey magical stuff. Everyone around here just goes to get a peek at the gorgeous shopkeeper —nobody actually buys anything."

Yeesh. If they were gonna treat the place like a peep show, at least let her make a profit.

"Th-thank you for your patronage. I hope to see you at Wiz's Magical Item Shoppe... Yes, I'm the owner. Thank you very much. The Shoppe does appear to be headed into the red again...!"

Thus Wiz greeted the welcoming adventurers, bowing repeatedly.

Maybe actually buy something next time, ya bums!

"The owner of Wiz's Magical Item Shoppe? It has been a while! On behalf of the staff, welcome! Please, this way."

The Guild employee led Wiz, who continued to bow to all and sundry, to a table in the middle of the room and seated her there.

When Wiz sat down, the adventurers looked at the employee in charge with renewed hope.

As if in response, the employee said, “Now that Miss Wiz is here, we can resume planning! Let me summarize for your benefit, ma’am. First, Miss Aqua, the Arch-priest, will bring down Destroyer’s barriers. Then, the stra—Ahem, Miss Megumin will unleash Explosion on Mobile Fortress. That’s what we have so far.”

Wiz put a hand to her mouth in thought.

“...It would probably be best to target the legs with Explosion. Destroyer has eight of them, four on each side. Perhaps Miss Megumin and I could each cover a side. If we can take out its legs, we might be able to find a way to finish it off...”

The employee nodded along with Wiz’s suggestion.

That’s a Lich for you, I guess. She can even use Explosion.

Without its legs, the mobile fortress would be a whole lot less mobile, not to mention no one would have to worry about getting trampled anymore.

We wouldn’t even have to get onto the torso, with its dangerous-sounding Battle Golems. We could just keep an eye on the immobilized Destroyer and let Megumin wear it down with an Explosion each day.

And its creator was supposed to still be aboard. Who knew? Maybe if he was subjected to a daily magical barrage, he’d give himself up.

We put together a plan based on Wiz’s suggestion.

We covered a lot of contingencies, too, in case the plan failed. People suggested traps near the town, barricades, and more.

“All right. After the barriers come down, Miss Wiz and Miss Megumin will attack Destroyer’s legs with Explosion. A front line of adventurers armed with hammers and the like will be stationed along the fortress’s predicted route. In the event the magical assault fails, they will attack the legs with their armaments and destroy them. The fortress’s creator is believed to still be aboard, and there is a chance he will try something. Against this possibility, archers will be equipped with roped arrows to allow access to the main body. Lightly armored adventurers, please be ready to assist in boarding the fortress if need be!”

The Guild employee running the meeting reviewed the plan one last time and began to give everyone their instructions.

4

The citizenry had joined the adventurers outside the town limits and set up improvised barricades as quickly as they could. I spotted among the workers the boss of the construction company that had employed Aqua and me when we first came to this world.

We planned to meet Destroyer on the field just outside the main gate. People whose classes gave them trap-laying abilities set about laying them, even though they knew it was futile.

In front of the barricade was a group of people of the Creator class debating how best to draw a magic circle on the ground.

“Come on, Darkness,” I said for the umpteenth time. “I won’t think any less of you. I know how tough you are, but this isn’t a fight you can help with. Forget your dumb kink for once and fall back to the roadside with me. Okay?”

Darkness stood in front of the barricade that fronted the town gate. Our perv Crusader insisted she wouldn’t move from that spot and refused to hear any more about it.

She had stuck her new great sword in the ground and was resting both hands on the hilt. She looked into the distance, in the direction of the as-yet-unseen Destroyer.

At long last, she broke her silence.

“Kazuma. I know it’s my usual behavior that’s making you say such things, and I don’t blame you. But do you think I am so bound by my own desires in this, an hour of great need?”

“Sure I do. Why wouldn’t you be?”

She fell silent. Then her cheeks turned slightly red, and she went on quietly: “I am a Paladin. And more than that, I have a reason to protect this town. Maybe I’ll tell you about it someday.”

She saw me nod and continued:

"I can't tell you now, but I have a duty to protect those who live here. Most people probably neither know nor care about it, but I do. So tell me how useless my struggle is. Still, I won't move one step from this spot."

"You sure can be selfish and stubborn sometimes," I said wearily. Darkness looked troubled.

"...Do you hate selfish, stubborn party members?" she asked.

"I guess when a certain Arch-priest is acting that way, I want to sock her one. But this kind of selfishness...no, I don't hate it."

I didn't think too hard about those words. But Darkness seemed somehow relieved.

"...I see."

5

"I couldn't get her to move. If we want our stubborn pervert back in one piece, we'd better make this work," I said to Megumin, who was waiting near the place we'd chosen to engage Destroyer, looking anxious.

"I-i-is that so? Th-then I must succeed! I'll surely...!"

"H-hey, if I need to, I'll just Steal away all her heavy armor and then drag her off by the hair."

More importantly...

"Hey, there's smoke coming from your head. Are you all right? What's up with that? Trying to put on a show for me?"

"N-no, Lady Aqua, this is just...what happens when I'm out in the sun too long..."

Aqua and Wiz were leaning toward each other on the far side of the engagement point, talking about something.

All around Aqua and me stood adventurers armed with hammers and other blunt instruments that looked likely to be very effective against golems. There

were Archers armed with arrows that had a hook on one end and a thin but sturdy-looking rope attached to the other. Once we'd immobilized the fortress, they would be in a position to board it at any time.

The Guild employee's magically amplified voice rang out across the field:

"All adventurers, we have visual on Mobile Fortress Destroyer! All citizens, please leave the town and move to a safe distance! Adventurers, prepare for battle!"

Mobile Fortress Destroyer.

It reminded me of General Winter: a name some power-up-wielding Japanese had probably dreamed of on a whim.

I kind of resented whoever that was—until I saw the Destroyer for myself.

The first thing I could see was its head, cresting a far hill.

Slight though they were, I could feel tremors in the earth.

"I didn't know it would be so *big*," someone murmured.

Honestly, neither did I.

I knew, from long acquaintance, just how powerful Megumin's Explosion was. And even I had to wonder: Would it really be enough to bring down this thing?

"Hey," someone nearby said in a panic, "there's no way we can fight this, is there? Can we fight this? There's no way, is there?!"

"Create Earth Golem!"

The Creators summoned golems of earth. They stood behind Darkness as she guarded the town, as if at her service.

All the Creators in Axel were novices, too. They could try to create bigger or stronger golems, but the constructs would have proportionately shorter life spans. That was why they'd waited so long to cast the spell.

"It's huge! And fast! It's way more terrifying than I expected!"

The adventurers around me were starting to waver as the massive form drew nearer.

"It's here! Heads down, everyone! Don't stand in front of it unless you want to get squished!"

Whoever was shouting, no one was really listening to the last-minute instructions.

Such was the overwhelming intimidation of the fortress that loomed over us.

"Hey, Wiz! Is this gonna work? Is this really gonna work?!"

Aqua stood at a distance from Megumin and me, desperately seeking assurance from Wiz.

"It will. Leave it to me, Lady Aqua. I may not look like much, but I am a Lich, the most powerful of the undead. Once you bring down the magic barriers, just let me do the rest! ...And if you can't bring them down, we'll all return to dust together!"

"This is no time for jokes!"

I couldn't make out everything they were saying, but as I watched the two of them jabber, I turned to Megumin, trembling next to me. "Hey, calm down already. No one's gonna blame you if this doesn't work. We'll just leave the town to its inevitable destruction. Don't overthink it!"

"I-I-I-I-I-I'll be fine! I sh-sh-shall destroy it with Explosion!"

She could hardly stop her teeth from chattering.

Not that I could fault her. This was new to everyone here.

"It's coming! Ready for battle!"

Taylor's voice, perhaps?

For some reason, I'd been entrusted to signal when and where Aqua should let loose her magic. The Guild had even given me a magical device similar to a megaphone so I could communicate.

I guess it must have been because I was the party leader of both Aqua and Megumin, two of the key figures in the plan.

I gathered Taylor had put a few good words in the ears of the Guild staff, too.

Almost before we knew what was going on, Destroyer was practically on top

of us. It dominated the scene. You could hardly do anything but stare up at it. If I hadn't been assigned to command—if Darkness hadn't been so stubborn—I would've turned and run right there.

The top of the fortress was flat, like a battleship. Atop its deck was a towering shape that resembled a hermit crab, mounted with armored turrets. The whole thing looked like the world's biggest spider.

Mobile Fortress Destroyer.

It may have been a stupid name, but it was no joke. The size of a small castle, it completely ignored our traps, the ground rumbling with its every step.

"Now, Aqua! Do it!"

It was on track to trample our town. We had it right where we wanted it.

On my signal, Aqua cast her spell.

"Sacred Dispel!"

An elaborate magic circle rose around her, and a ball of white light hovered in her hand.

She thrust out her hand and fired the ball at Destroyer.

It struck the fortress. Something like a cloak flashed all around Destroyer for an instant, then shattered like glass.

Megumin looked at me for direction. Her staff was quaking gently, and she looked profoundly uneasy.

What we saw must have been the magic barrier shattering.

That meant we should be able to hit it with spells now.

I raised the megaphone to my lips and shouted, "Wiz, you're up! Take out the legs on that side!"

Then I turned to the trembling Megumin.

"Hey, you. Do you really love Explosion magic? I sure hear you talk about it enough. Are you gonna let Wiz show you up? Is your Explosion so weak it can't even bust through a few giant metal legs?"

"Why, you—! To insult my name is bad enough, but *this*—!"

The anger seemed to burn off her nervousness. Megumin straightened up and began a clear, powerful chant.

Ruuuumble. Destroyer was nearly upon us.

One Lich, who'd left a career as a great Arch-wizard to run a struggling magical item shop.

And one crazy explosion lady, an Arch-wizard of the Crimson Magic Clan who had poured everything she had into this magic.

Together, they let off their most powerful attack on the biggest bounty around.

"Explosion!!!"

—Their spells unfurled in perfect unison, tearing every last leg off the towering enemy!

6

The suddenly legless Mobile Fortress Destroyer dropped to the ground with a resounding crash and an earth-shaking tremor, and then, succumbing to the law of gravity, it began to slide toward the town.

The giant, tumbling carapace didn't even make it to the barricade, but slid to a stop about a nose-length away from where Darkness stood holding the front line.

Bits of exploded fortress rained down on us adventurers. There didn't seem to be many bits left on Wiz's side. Maybe her explosion had simply been so powerful, it had vaporized everything on that side.

Rather large fragments of leg, however, were pelting us on Megumin's side.

Which meant...

"Hrrg... H-how shameful... Th-that is a Lich f-for you. My level simply is not high enough to match Wiz's explosive power..." Megumin muttered dejectedly from the ground.

I hefted her little body in my arms and held her up. Her face had gone white from using all her MP.

"I c-cannot bear it!" she said. "Next time... Next time, I will..."

"Right, right. You did good. Wiz is a Lich who's mastered the magical arts; it's no wonder she's more powerful. Just do your best next time. Look, you did what you were supposed to. Nice work."

As I tried to help her rest in the shade, she grabbed on to me.

"Another chance! Give me another chance! To...to prove my Explosion is strongest..."

"H-hey, leggo! Don't grab my pants like that! Fine, I get it, you're the best exploder! You just weren't on top of your game today! I promise I'll watch another explosion once your MP regenerates, so get off me and go rest somewhere safe!"

I dragged Megumin back into the shade and forced her to lie down. While the other adventurers were still busy dodging the hail of fortress pieces, Aqua and Wiz came up to me out of the crowd.

Darkness, though, hadn't moved an inch; she was totally unfazed by the leg bits. She hadn't even closed her eyes.

I looked once more at Destroyer's dismembered body. It sat still and silent.

When the rain of debris had mostly abated and the adventurers had had a chance to settle down and take in what had happened, they let out a collective *ooh* of admiration.

As if we'd ever get off this easily.

Normally, this was the point where someone would say some careless, event-flag-tripping thing like, "We did it!" Maybe for once we could avoid that—tighten our perimeter, stay sharp...

"We did it! Mobile Fortress Destroyer, my foot! Talk about overhyped! Let's head home and hit the bar, everyone! How much do you think a nation-annihilating superfortress is worth?"

"Idiot! Why would you say that?! Stop it before—"

The careless line came from Aqua, and though I tried to stop her...

...it was already too late.

"...? Wh-what's this rumbling...?"

Wiz, who had been trailing Aqua, looked up at the fortress uneasily. It was clearly the epicenter of the tremors shaking the ground. Other adventurers joined her in looking up at the thing.

And then we heard it.

"This vehicle has ceased moving. This vehicle has ceased moving. Heat venting and dispersal of kinetic energy are no longer possible. All hands, leave the vehicle immediately and evacuate to a safe location. This vehicle..."

A mechanical voice from inside the fortress looped the message over and over.

"See that?! You just aren't happy unless every time you take a step forward, you take two more back, are you?!"

"Wait—Hey, wait! This isn't my fault! I haven't done anything yet this time!"

7

As the evacuation order continued to sound from inside Destroyer, I gathered some nearby adventurers.

"Hey," one of them said, "what's with that voice? I don't think we ought to stick around here..."

I agreed with him. But then, I figured pretty much everyone did.

"My guess is that thing's about to go *boom*," I said. The others frowned.

We could only imagine how much damage would be done if something that size exploded.

We didn't even know how Destroyer moved—there didn't seem to be much more we could do. The most we could manage, maybe, was to run...

But could I get our hardheaded Crusader to dump the town and come with

us?

Hang on. We weren't *sure* it would explode or that any explosion would damage the town.

Maybe I could use that to convince her to...

"M-my store! If anything happens to Axel, my store will be gone...!"

That was Wiz, on the verge of tears. She was thinking of her magic shop.

But...

"This vehicle has ceased moving. This vehicle has ceased moving. Heat venting and dispersal of kinetic energy are no longer possible. All hands, leave the vehicle immediately and evacuate to a safe location. This vehicle..."

The announcement looped on. But over it, I could hear somebody mutter:

"I'll do it."

I wonder who said that?

"...Me too. Now I remember why I stayed in this starter town, even though I'm past Level 30 already."

W-we have a Level 30+ guy around...?

I got what he was saying, though.

"This town's given me an awful lot. Well, it's time for me to give back—or it's all over!"

There was a long silence.

Well, silent except for...

"This vehicle has ceased moving. This vehicle..."

I raised the megaphone and shouted into it.

"Everyone who wants to be part of boarding Mobile Fortress Destroyer, raise your hand!"

Every hand around shot into the air without a moment's hesitation. The Archers readied their hook-tipped arrows and let loose.

Archers had a skill called Deadeye.

It dramatically increased the distance an arrow could fly, as well as its accuracy.

The enhanced distance from this skill allowed the arrows to easily reach Destroyer's plating, despite the heavy tips and ropes attached to them.

The hooks caught on bumps and protrusions along the fortress's exoskeleton, and a tug on the ropes set them deep.

Then it was just a matter of climbing on up, one adventurer after another.

I guess by this point there was no need to explain that they somehow managed to climb in full armor, or faster than a person had any right to, or with incredible strength.

At length, the first adventurer on the rope scrambled up onto the carapace.

Person after person followed them, with morale so high it seemed they'd been training for this day all their lives.

"Get up there!" people shouted. They sounded like pirates raiding a defenseless village as they piled on to the massive fortress.

Aqua, intimidated rather than inspired by the unusually eager adventurers, tugged on my sleeve.

"Y-yikes... Kazuma, I'm kinda...kinda scared to go up there. There's plenty of them now, right? I'm sure they can handle it. Let's go home. Have a nice rest—tomorrow's another day, you know?"

But we couldn't do that.

My companions, my friends, were fighting up there.

"We're not going home, dumbass. Are you blind? Look at those heroes! Your work's only just starting. We'll need a goddess to heal them. Unless you're just pretending."

Then I followed the others toward the fortress.

Even the Archers were already on board.

I shouted:

"Darkness, you stay where you are; your armor's too heavy to climb up here, anyway! And Megumin, you rest! Wiz can do whatever she wants. Aqua, you're behind all this, so come with me!"

"I *told* you, I didn't do anything this time!"

Aqua, nearly in tears, followed me as I grabbed a rope.

And Wiz followed her.

When we got aboard, we found...

"Surround them golems! Bring 'em down with your ropes, then smash 'em with your hammers!"

You could barely tell who were the hunters and who the hunted. Various golems, small-type and battle-type, lay in pieces on the floor, victims of this town supposedly full of novice adventurers.

"Hey, you! I know you're in there! Open up! Hey, somebody take a hammer to this door!"

"Come on out! You're responsible for attacking our town—and you're gonna pay!"

I looked over. Several adventurers were trying to pry open the door of the area that presumably housed the guy behind all this, the one who was rumored to still be aboard Destroyer.

We really looked like the aggressors here.

Whoops...

"One of the big ones got away!"

I looked toward the voice and saw a single Battle Golem.

It looked like some old-timey robot: boxy and bulky and clumsy.

And it was coming our way. Other adventurers rushed to help us.

But I had a special anti-golem ace up my sleeve.

"Hey, Aqua. Wanna see a neat trick? I'm gonna show you how to really use a skill."

I flexed my hand, then thrust it out toward the advancing machine.

I was up against a golem.

That meant that if I could steal the right part, it would stop moving.

I'd done the same thing against some machine-type enemies in an RPG once while I was still in Japan.

This was simple. Use a theft skill on a machine, instant kill!

Let's face it: Even I was getting better every day.

"Steal!"

"Wha...?! Kazuma, wai—"

Aqua seemed to guess what I had in mind, and she called out to stop me...

...but I already had the golem's massive head in my outstretched hand.

The headless golem, of course, stopped dead.

Perfect!

The giant stolen head sat in my hand. It was giant and heavy...heavy... My hand was dragged to the floor.

"Arrgh! My arm! My arrrrm!"

My self-satisfied expression gave way to weeping, and the nearby adventurers hurried to roll the golem head off my hand.



“Gosh! Are you all right, Mr. Kazuma?! It’s best not to use Steal against opponents with exceptionally large pieces!”

As Wiz fretted about me, Aqua inspected my hand.

“It’s broken, Aqua, I’m sure it is!”

“Not a crack. I’ll go ahead and cast Heal on it, but don’t do anything stupid like that again, okay?”

H-how humiliating...

“We got it!”

Some adventurers had broken open the door to the towerlike structure with their hammers. Adventurers began to pour into it.

I guess nothing scared them at that point.

They didn’t even seem to mind the warning still blaring over the speakers as they rushed in with no regard for party balance or anything.

Aqua and I followed after our bold compatriots.

There were several golems inside, but they were efficiently dispatched.

Adventurers didn’t usually work together easily, but when they did, it was a sight to behold.

As we worked our way into the structure, we found a throng of fighters outside a particular room. Everyone wore subdued expressions; it was as if the adrenaline had simply vanished.

Taylor emerged from inside and said, “Oh, Kazuma. Good timing. Have a look at this.”

He seemed oddly downcast, too.

I looked. He was pointing to a bleached human skeleton.

The creator *was* on board the fortress. Sitting alone, in a chair in the middle of the room, surrounded by golems.

I called Aqua and motioned her into the room.

I pointed wordlessly to the skeleton, and she just shook her head.

"He's already moved on. He's not becoming an undead—he doesn't even have a shred of attachment to this life."

.....

Not a shred?

"You're kidding. He must have had *some* attachment. Look at this! He died by himself, alone..."

Aqua seemed to notice something as I spoke.

It was a diary, buried beneath a jumble of papers on his desk.

Aqua picked it up. Everyone else, sensing the mood, fell silent.

All the adventurers looked on. The only sound was the mechanical voice repeating its warning.

Aqua began to read the journal aloud— "Month Such-and-Such, Day So-and-So. Our nation's bigwigs are nuts. They want me to build a mobile weapon on this budget? It's impossible! And I told them so, but it fell on deaf ears. I wept, I begged, I got on my knees, but they wouldn't listen. I tried to quit, but they wouldn't accept my resignation. I tried to pretend I'd lost my mind and ran around in nothing but my underwear. But all that happened was one of the female researchers suggested I should hurry up and take off the underwear, too. I fear all may be lost for this country."

Everyone seemed to be looking at the skeleton.

"Month Such-and-Such, Day So-and-So. The blueprints are supposed to be ready today. What am I going to do? I can't tell them I still have nothing but a blank sheet! I'm desperate, and I can't give back their advance, because I already drank away everything they paid me. While I was contemplating the empty blueprint earlier, my hated nemesis, the spider, crawled across the sheet. I screamed and smashed it with some object near to hand. Right on my blueprint. Paper of that quality is immensely expensive in this day and age—yet if they demanded reimbursement, how would I pay them? The hell with it. Maybe I'll just submit the blueprints as they stand."

Uh...huh. The mood in the room had grown tense. Aqua kept reading.

"Month Such-and-Such, Day So-and-So. My blueprints were unexpectedly well received. I suppose I shouldn't tell them how impressed I am that they can bring themselves to touch a dead spider. Production, in fact, is plowing ahead. Holy moly. All I did was kill a spider—and they made me chief of production! Yahoo!"

I started to wonder if Aqua was just making this up as she went along, but her face was absolutely serious.

"Month Such-and-Such, Day So-and-So. Production somehow continues apace despite my failure to actually do anything. This project doesn't even need me! Ehh, so what? I'll just live my own life... They've been bugging me about a power source, but what of it? I've been saying from the start this couldn't be done. I told them, fine, bring me some Coronatite—a legendary, über-rare gem that can produce power endlessly. I told 'em, good! I'd like to see them try and bring me that stuff."

.....

"Month Such-and-Such, Day So-and-So. They brought it to me. What am I gonna do? The bastards actually brought it to me! We're setting it up in some sort of reactor. What do I do? I just said Coronatite because I figured there was no way they'd ever get any! And now they have! What will I do if it doesn't work? What will happen to me? The death penalty? Will I get the death penalty if this thing doesn't move? Please work, please, I'm begging you!"

It almost seemed like our collective gaze bothered him...

"Month Such-and-Such, Day So-and-So. They say the first test of the motor is tomorrow. But I haven't done anything. I smashed a spider. I guess this is the last day I'll get to lounge in this chair... Thinking about it makes me angry. Real angry. Fine! Time for a drink. It's my last meal—I'll drink all I can stand. Everyone's home for the day. It's just me here in this mobile weapon. I'll drink and I'll make merry and no one's gonna complain. Now, let's start with the expensive stuff!"

As Aqua stood there reading, the skeleton almost seemed to quaver under our eyes...

"Month Such-and-Such, Day So-and-So. I woke to a terrible shaking. What could it be? What's going on? How much did I drink? I don't know. In fact, I can't

recall anything about yesterday. The last thing I remember is going down to the reactor and lecturing the Coronatite. No, wait. I have an image of myself threatening the gem, telling it I was going to burn it good, and then pressing my cigarette to it..."

Aqua had totally ceased to look up as she read.

"Month Such-and-Such, Day So-and-So. I understand now. And it's over. This thing is on a rampage. What do I do? They're going to blame me for this. I must be on the Most Wanted list by now. A little weeping and a heartfelt apology won't be enough to get me out of this one. Darn... At this rate, they'll probably blow the mobile weapon to smithereens, drag me out, and put me to death. Dammit! Curse the bigwigs, curse the king, curse the lady researcher who depantsed me and laughed! If this country were to be annihilated, what would be the loss? Forget it. I'm going to have a drink and go to sleep. Thankfully there's plenty of food and wine on board. Maybe I'll have some new idea when I wake up."

Someone made a fist; you could hear the clench throughout the room.

"Month Such-and-Such, Day So-and-So. The country has fallen. Destroyed! Kaput! Granted, the citizens and the bigwigs all seem to have fled safely, but still—I annihilated a country. Oh, man! I feel great! I feel satisfied at long last. I've made up my mind. I'm never leaving. I'll live out my life here. Heck, I couldn't get out even if I wanted to. There's no off switch. The guy who built this thing must have been a real idiot—Oh, wait! That was me!"

Was that the end? Aqua, looking somewhat distraught, said: "Th—that's the end."

"What the hell was that?!" we all said.

Only Aqua and Wiz weren't among the chorus of voices.

"So this is Coronatite. How are you supposed to get it out of there, anyway?"

We were in the heart of the mobile fortress.

Figuring there'd be no point to all of us going in there, the task had been left to Aqua, Wiz, and me.

In the center of the room was a small stone—the Coronatite—surrounded by a metal grille.

The precious gem gave off a continual red glow, as if it were on fire.

But what was the story with this grille? We obviously couldn't get it out with that around it.

...Oh. That was the point: one last line of defense in case the fortress was attacked.

You could easily fit a cigarette through the grille, but you couldn't reach in and get the stone.

"What're we gonna do?" Aqua said. "...Oh! I've got it! Remember that guy with the magic sword? Maybe he could—"

But I broke in:

"Forget swords. We don't have to slice anything when we can just...Steal!"

"Oh! M-Mr. Kazuma!"

Even as Wiz cried out, the Coronatite jumped through the grille and into my hands, just as I'd hoped...

...still glowing red.

"Yeeeoowww!"

"Freeze! Freeze!"

"Heal! Heal! ...Geez, Kazuma, what are you, stupid? You usually seem pretty clever, but ever since that thing with the golem earlier, I'm starting to wonder if you're actually a complete idiot."

Man! To get told off by Aqua and not even be able to come back at her...that sucked.

The Coronatite had burned my right hand and nearly caught my sleeve on fire, but Wiz's quick work cooled it down in a hurry. It rolled out of my hand and came to a stop by her feet.

"Now, this is no good. I don't think we have much time... It looks like it's going to go off at any moment. Oh, what should we do..."

While Wiz fretted, the gem at her feet glowed redder and redder.

The mechanical warning voice had gone quiet, too.

Clearly, the stone had powered all the fortress's functions.

But handling something like this was way over my head. Frankly, it was beyond all the adventurers in the fortress at that moment. So I did what anyone does when they've tried everything else—I asked for some divine intervention.

"Hey, Aqua, can't you seal this thing up or something? Isn't that what goddesses do with evil forces?"

"Yeah—in video games! Wiz, come on, can't you do something about this?"

There was our self-proclaimed whatever—foisting all her dirty work on the Lich, as usual.

I expected Wiz to say it was impossible. But instead...

"I can, but...I don't have enough MP. Ahem...Mr. Kazuma, may I ask—!"

She drew closer to me, a somber expression on her face.

"Wh-what is it?"

Looking at her wits' end, Wiz placed her palms on my cheeks and touched my lips with her thumb.

Then she asked in a rush:

"May I drain some from you?"

"Gladly."

What, you thought I was gonna ask how, like a leech?

That I was hoping for a better moment?

Nah. I wasn't so dense that I didn't know to step up at a time like this.

"Thank you very much! All right, here goes..."

Wiz's full lips somehow filled my vision.



Mom! Dad! I had to go all the way to a fantasy world to do it, but I'm finally gonna be a ma—

“Forgive me, Mr. Kazuma! *Drain Touch!*”

“Yaaaaaaaghhh!”

“H-hey, ‘Mr. Kazuma’ is gonna be a dried-up husk if you take any more!”

Aqua hurried to stop the drain, and Wiz politely took her hand away before I lost consciousness.

What a letdown.

I mean, not that I hadn’t had a sense of what was coming.

“This will allow me to use my Teleport spell! But...where should I send this? The only places I can send things are Axel town, the Capital, and my dungeon. What to do, what to do...”

So she was going to teleport the stone somewhere.

“Why not just send it to that dungeon?”

“Th-the dungeon I’ve registered as a teleport location is the biggest dungeon in the world. It used to be a major center for the collection of magical items, and now it’s a famous tourist destination...!”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard! Man, this is bad! That gem’s not even red anymore—we’re into white here!”

As Aqua and Wiz dithered, I kept casting Freeze on the stone... It was like trying to keep a snowball safe in Hell.

“There is one possibility. Random Teleport sends the target to an undetermined location. The problem is, we really have no control over it—so if we’re lucky, it’ll wind up in the ocean or on top of a mountain, but if not, it may land in a populated area...!”

Wiz knitted her brow, her voice almost cracking.

Random Teleport?

“Who cares?! It’s a big world! There’s gotta be a better chance of it landing

somewhere deserted! Do it—I'll take full responsibility! I may not look like much, but I've got Luck to spare!"

Wiz nodded, then intoned loudly:

"*Random Teleport!*"

9

"So what happened? Where'd the Coronatite go? It wasn't anywhere near here, was it?"

Wiz and Aqua exchanged an uneasy look.

Whatever. The first thing we had to do was get out of here.

When we emerged from the room, we found the other adventurers had taken out every golem on the deck—and had assumed the cessation of the warning was a signal to withdraw.

We were the only ones left on board; everyone else had already made their way down the ropes.

Even the researcher's bones had abandoned ship; they were in a wooden box.

I collected Megumin from the shade of her tree and hefted her onto my back, then found Darkness among the crowd of triumphant adventurers. Still she stood, statue-like, in front of the town.

While everyone else celebrated, Darkness alone remained vigilant.

"Hey, Darkness. We managed to take out Destroyer's heart. It's over... Phewww. That really took it out of me. Let's go home, maybe treat ourselves to a nice meal for once."

Darkness, however, murmured quietly:

"It's not over. I can smell a powerful opponent from a mile away, and the fragrance of danger still hangs heavily here. Nothing's over yet!"

As if in response to her words, Mobile Fortress itself began to quake with a series of tremors.

Hey—didn't we take out that thing's power source?!

"What the heck is going on? A-anybody know what the heck's going on?"

"S-s-s-stay calm! Times like this, all you have to do is—you know! Just cut the red wire or the white wire or whatever!"

"That's a bomb, you moron! What I mean is, why is Destroyer still active when we took out its core?!"

The other adventurers had noticed something amiss, too, and promptly tried to put as much distance between themselves and Destroyer as they could.

"Wh-what are we going to do?! All the pent-up heat inside that thing is trying to get out! And I can't Teleport something that big! You see the giant crack in the front of Destroyer that our Explosions made? That's where the heat is escaping! At this rate, the town will—"

"Cram it! Nobody wants to hear it! Kazuma—Kazumaaa! Do something, quick!"

Aqua interrupted Wiz with her ridiculous demand.

Geez, you dumb... I mean, what *could* I do?!

Wiz was pleading with the nearby adventurers:

"MP! Somebody give me their MP! If I put an Explosion right in that crack, it'll cancel out Destroyer's explosion!"

I rushed up and grabbed hold of her, whispering fiercely, "H-hey, Wiz! What're you doing?! No one else knows you can drain! What do you plan to do if everyone finds out you're a Lich? It's one thing for a human like me to use Lich skills—but if they start looking too closely at you, you won't last a second!"

"B-but I'm the only one who can stop that thing! And I can only d-do it by draining...!"

I held up a hand to stop her.

"No. I can drain, too. I'll drain MP from someone here, then pass it to you. It's an extra step, but it's our only choice."

Drain Touch not only absorbed HP or MP from a target but could also grant

them to a target as well.

MP, MP...

“Come on, Darkness, don’t just stand there being stubborn—let’s go! Run far away! We can start fresh! ...Hang on a second. Our whole debt is with the Guild in this town, so if it goes up in smoke—!”

“Hey, self-proclaimed whatever, c’mere a second.”

She was busy spouting useless nonsense, but at that moment all I could see was that she was probably bursting with MP.

“What do you want? You think I have time to be messing around with you right now? I need to—Aaaaaahhhh?!”

Aqua didn’t have so much as a moment to fight back against my Drain Touch ambush.

“Hey, you hikiNEET! We have an emergency here! What do you think you’re —?!”

“Yes, it’s an emergency! That’s why I did it! Shut up and listen for a second. I’m going to give your MP to Wiz, and she’s gonna plant an Explosion in Destroyer. It *might* just work!”

“No way! You’re gonna share my MP with some undead? Yuck! Anyway, if you put too much of my holy magic power into Wiz, she’s bound to just go *poof*, disappear!”

I spun toward Wiz. She was pale and nodding.

“R-remember earlier? I only took a tiny bit of MP from Lady Aqua, and it made me feel terrible...”

Kind of like food poisoning. I guess Aqua was telling the truth.

Which left...

“Looks like today’s your big break.”

I slid Megumin off my shoulders.

"Y-you know what you're doing, right? You won't take too much, will you? Will you?!"

"Yes, I know! What do you think this is, one of your dumb party-trick performances? Just trust me."

"That's not what I meant!"

Aqua was seated in front of me, legs tucked under her, so I could drain her MP at any time.

Next to her, Megumin held her staff up toward Destroyer, standing so I could give her MP at any time.

"Mr. Kazuma, a drain is most effective where the skin is thin," Wiz explained with a serious look. "You can both absorb more and grant more in such places! Also, the heart is the source of MP, so draining from a spot near the heart is most efficient."

Where the skin is thin, huh?

So that was why she touched my lip when she drained me.

That wouldn't work. It'd totally send the wrong message.

...Hang on a second.

"I am ready at any time! To set off two Explosions in a single day... Today is a great—Yeeeeek!"

I placed my right hand on Megumin's back and felt her muscles go stiff as she shouted.

"What do you think you are doing?! Your hand is so cold; I thought I was going to have a heart attack! What is this? Sexual harassment? The world is ending, and you're trying to cop a feel?!"

"No, you idiot! Didn't you hear Wiz? I'm not trying to cop anything; I'm looking for the most efficient drain! Thin skin, near the heart—the back, obviously! H-hey, geez! Aqua, stop fighting me! We're trying to save the town here! Just be grateful I'm not using the front!"

At my pronouncement, Aqua only doubled her efforts to keep my hand off

her back.

"Th-there's no more time!"

Wiz's shout was almost a sob.

We compromised: I used Aqua's and Megumin's necks.

With that, I was able to take MP from Aqua and give it directly to Megumin.

"This is something! Aqua's MP is really something! I think I will be able to unleash my biggest Explosion ever with this!"

"M-Megumin, do you still need more MP? I feel like you've taken an awful lot..."

She was right; I'd already packed a bunch of MP into Megumin's little body.

Aqua may have been a pretty worthless goddess, but she was still a goddess: No matter how much MP I took from her, I didn't sense her supply was running low.

"A little more! I can handle a bit more... Oof! Maybe!"

"What do you mean, maybe?! What happens if you get too much? Are you gonna burst?"

No sooner had she issued that disturbing pronouncement than Megumin removed the patch from her left eye, raised her staff, and began to chant.

The now-familiar sound of the Explosion incantation echoed around the plain, around the adventurers who all watched from a safe distance.

"Let all other things be as they may! In Explosive magic alone—I shall—not—be—outdone! Here goes! My ultimate destructive magic!"

Heat flew from the tip of Megumin's staff into the great fissure in Destroyer, which seemed ready to go off, too.

Red eyes glowing, our sore loser of an Arch-wizard shouted so loudly I thought she might pop, herself.

"*EXPLOSION!!*"

Epilogue



Several days had passed since our climactic battle with Mobile Fortress Destroyer.

And now, today...

An unusual enthusiasm pervaded the Adventurers Guild.

I doubt I have to explain why.

Every eye was turned to the Guild employee in anticipation.

"Kazuma. I know it's been several days, but I wanted to thank you again. You came through and protected this town. Thank you...very much...! I do want to tell you sometime—about why I must protect Axel."

So saying, Darkness, dressed in civilian clothes today, gave a shy smile. The two of us were slightly apart from the other adventurers.

I turned to her and said, "You looked pretty cool out there yourself."

She suddenly seemed to think back to how she had acted in the face of Destroyer, not giving a single inch. "W-was I, now?" she said.

She looked away, her cheeks a faint red.

I sized up the blushing Crusader and added pointedly, "Even though you never actually did anything."

"?!"

Still not looking at me, Darkness quavered a little.

"Come to think of it, Darkness *didn't* do anything this time, did she? While I

was working my butt off! I broke the magic barrier and healed Kazuma's wounds! And I gave my MP to Megumin!"

Aqua appeared out of nowhere, but her words didn't seem especially mean-spirited.

They made Darkness quaver again, though.

"I, of course, was a key player, letting off *two* Explosions in one day! The second of which, might I add, eliminated Destroyer."

Thus said Megumin, also appearing out of nowhere and also without malice. Darkness quavered *again*.

"And don't forget, Mr. Kazuma, you were quite crucial yourself! You took command of the operation, and although there were some stumbles, in the end you defeated a large golem, pulled the Coronatite out of a steel cage, gave me your MP...!"

Thus said Wiz, who had *really* appeared out of nowhere, her words totally devoid of any mean-spiritedness whatsoever. Darkness apparently couldn't stand it anymore and covered her face with her hands.

"Aww, come on! What about you, Wiz? You set off a terrific Explosion, you cooled my hand down, then you teleported the Coronatite before it could blow up... I think you're pretty much the MVP here."

Darkness was now shaking visibly. I turned to her.

"And, uh, what about you, Miss I-will-protect-this-town? Remind us what you did."

"Wh-what is...? What is this feeling?! Arrrgh!"

I had just about sated myself on teasing Darkness, who was now slumped on the ground, covering her face and blushing furiously, when—

The Guild Hall suddenly fell silent.

When I looked up, I could see why.

A Guild employee was standing there with a surprisingly dark expression, along with a woman with black hair, flanked by two Knights.

I got it. Destroyer wasn't some Demon King's general. It had terrorized towns and nations all around this world.

Naturally, the reward wouldn't be handled by our local Guild but by knights representing the entire country.

Heck, maybe they'd come to scout us, to see if we wanted to become knights.

As all of us watched with bated breath, the woman looked straight at me. Her gaze was heavy; there was a zealous spark in her eye.

If I had to compare it to something, it would be...

Someone staring down their parents' killer.

"Adventurer Kazuma Satou! You are suspected of sedition. I will need you to come with me."

FIN.

Afterword

I'm thrilled to see Volume 2 in print.

When I was first invited to publish Volume 1, I thought maybe I was on candid camera or something. But I'm slowly starting to think this is actually real.

But you can never be too sure, so I'll be keeping my guard up.

I took a trip to Tokyo the other day.

I did once live in the city long ago, but now I typically live a hermit's existence in the country, and going to crowded places makes me panicky.

When I got to Tokyo Station, the sheer press of people made me strongly consider going right back home with my tail between my legs.

I didn't go to the city just to "get away from it all." I really had a real reason, and that reason was a meeting.

But I got to Tokyo a little early, so I combed through Akihabara, the *otaku* mecca.

My plan had been to check out some bookstores, and when they didn't have copies of my book, to exclaim loudly, "Whaaat?! You don't carry *Konosuba*? Really?!"

But all the places I went to turned out to be superior booksellers, by which I mean they stocked my novel.

Thank you! Thank you!

After that, I wandered around near the Kadokawa building, wondering if I would get past security in the clothes I was wearing, but in the end I successfully had my meeting.

After that, my lovely editor treated me to an expensive meal, and I got to enjoy the city.

The next day, a typhoon hit Tokyo head-on.

Trains were stopped everywhere. I realized this was clearly a message from Heaven telling me not to hurry home and work but rather to take a little break before I went back. So I braved the winds and checked out the local sights.

I had fun wandering around, but I got lost more than once, and each time I imagined the scenario would work itself out thusly: *Never find my way home* → *Buy a tent* → *Live here the rest of my life*.

Where I live, you're less likely to wait for a red light than you are for a wild pig to cross the street—and despite its inconveniences, I think I am definitely more suited to country life.

Now then, about the book.

At the moment, Sneaker Bunko's website is serializing a Megumin-centered spin-off series called *God's Blessings on This Wonderful Explosion!* so please feel free to check it out. I strongly encourage you, as it includes new illustrations by Mr. Kurone Mishima.

It's set before Megumin met Kazuma and the others, so her hair is shorter, she lacks her trademark eye patch, and so on. The story deals with that mysterious—you know, *thing* on Megumin's shoulder in the illustrations, so I recommend it to those who are curious about that.

In keeping with tradition, I leaned on a lot of people to make Volume 2 happen.

For me personally, the hardest thing to do is come up with the titles for each chapter. In fact, my editor, K, dreams up the subtitle for each volume.

Coming up with titles and character names is probably the thing that takes me the most time while writing. I just don't have the knack for it, and I'm sure I'll continue to need my editor's help with titles in the future—so I apologize in advance.

Actually, my afterwords are pretty much just litanies of apologies.

But, thanks to all that help, Volume 2 made it safely out the door.

Thank you all so very much!

In fact, the web version of the story wrapped up just the other day.

To those who have read the web version: That was kind of a warm-up. The book is the real deal, and starting with Volume 3, I hope to include plenty of new material.

I promise it'll be even better than the web version, so I hope you'll keep reading!

Look, I may be a bit flighty, but I wouldn't lie about my own work...would I...?

Last but not least, I'd like to thank everyone involved in the creation of this book—and especially you, my readers.

—You have my unyielding gratitude!

—***Natsume Akatsuki***

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