



Natsume
Akatsuki

ILLUSTRATION BY
Kurone
Mishima

KONO SUBA: GOD'S 9 BLESSING ON THIS WONDERFUL WORLD!

Crimson
Fate









"I love you because
despite all your
complaining, you're
still there for us when
we need you. I love
how you're really kind,
even if you have
trouble showing it."

KONOSUBA: GOD'S BLESSING ON THIS WONDERFUL WORLD! 9



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KONOSUBA: GOD'S BLESSING ON THIS WONDERFUL WORLD! Crimson Fate!

9

NATSUME AKATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION BY
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NATSUME AKATSUKI

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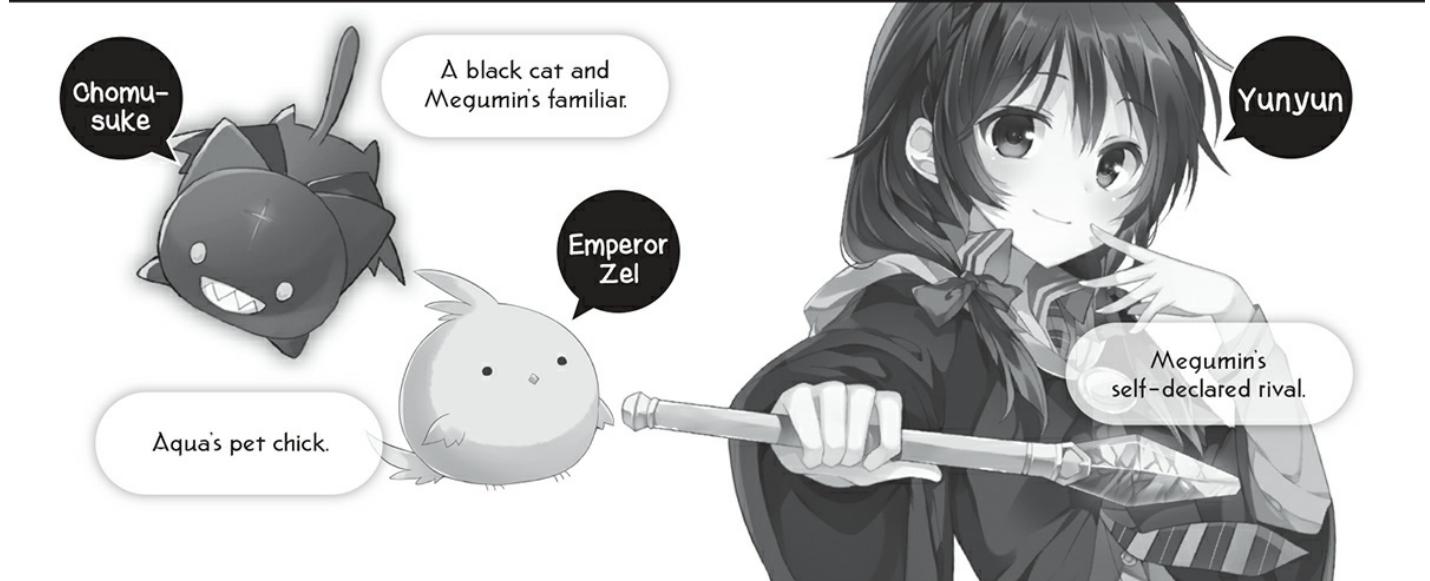
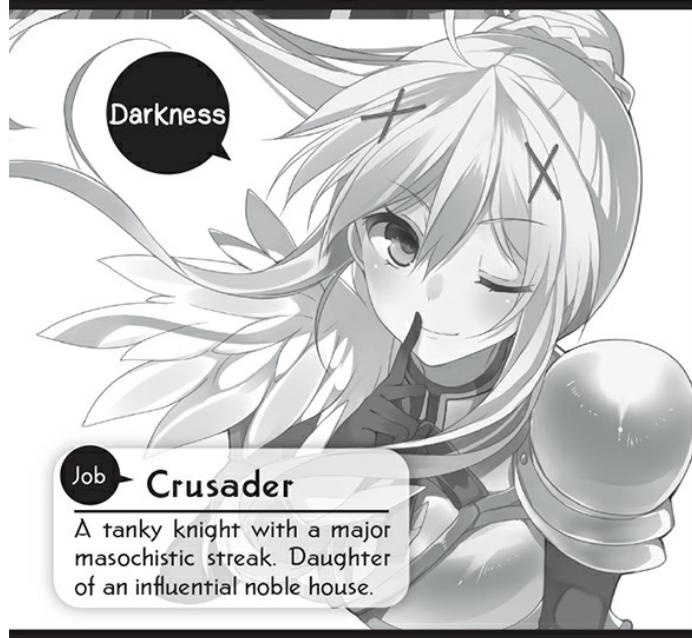
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Prologue



“Explosion!!!!”

A blast that laid waste to everything in the vicinity shook me to my core, and the field near Axel got a fresh crater.

Well, it would give the old men at the civil service something to do. Again.

Megumin, collapsed on the ground, turned her head toward me and asked simply, “How many points was that one?”

She had recently taken to calling me her “*explosier*”—like a sommelier for explosions—and I didn’t want to go too easy on her.

“Hmm. For sheer destructive force, I would say ninety points. But the blast wind didn’t have the heat it usually does. Is it fair to assume that’s because it’s a hot summer day, and you deliberately reduced the amount of heat energy you put into it?”

The edges of Megumin’s mouth turned up in a smile. “Indeed. I thought that rather than just increasing the power unchecked, it might be best today to create a pleasant breeze with my explosion. What do you think? Did I not blow away the hot, muggy air? Personally, I believe these explosions will go down as one of the distinctive features of an Axel summer.”

I didn’t follow half the things she said, but I got the general idea.

“That sort of thoughtfulness toward your audience, along with the beautiful circular shape of the crater, means today’s explosion gets ninety-seven points!”

“Thank you! I’m getting better!”

After this admittedly ridiculous conversation, I hefted the immobilized Megumin onto my back. Business as usual. She never grew even a tiny bit, so she was always light and easy to carry.

“Sorry for all the trouble.”

“If you’re really sorry, then raise your level until you have enough MP that you won’t collapse every time you do this.” Since we had a bit of a hike to town, I took the opportunity to air my grievances with Megumin.

“I expect it will be like this no matter how much my level rises,” she said. “The skill points I get by leveling up, I immediately put right into increasing Explosion’s power.”

“Huh?! I keep thinking you just never catch up to the MP requirements for the most powerful spell, and *that’s* what you’ve been doing?! You mean these piggyback rides *aren’t* just something I have to endure for a while until your level goes up? I’ve been so patient! I want my time back!”

“Oh, it is fine, I think. Developing ‘skinship’ with your friends is important sometimes.”

“Think carefully—you sure that’s how you wanna phrase that?”

I had half a mind to go a lot further than skinship with the unrepentant Megumin.

“If I had told myself when I lived in the Crimson Magic Village that I would one day have friends I valued this much, I probably wouldn’t believe me.”

“I don’t exactly feel very valued right now,” I shot back, and Megumin giggled. “What did you used to be like anyway? What the heck went so wrong that you started wanting to learn Explosion?”

“Went wrong? How rude. But as for the old me, that’s a good question...”

She went quiet for a moment. Maybe she was thinking back.

“I didn’t really have any friends before,” she said finally. “I was a genius, so I figured I could make it on my own forever.”

“So you’re saying you’ve always been trouble.”

Megumin cinched the arm she had around my neck.

“Ow, sorry, I take it back! What I mean is, you’ve always been all alone, with nobody to— Owowowow! You’re higher-level and stronger than I am, so take it easy, please!”

From my back, Megumin gave a frustrated sigh. “You bring it upon yourself with your scathing remarks... Did you not want to hear why I learned Explosion?”

“Yeah! Yeah, I do! You must have had someone to show it to you first, right? I want to know what kind of troublemaker taught *you* a spell like that.”

“It’s rude of you to call the one I admire, the one to whom I owe everything, a troublemaker... But let’s see here.”

She started to recall her past.

“You’ll find out someday. When I’m able to tell one person in particular that I finally learned Explosion,” Megumin said with a cheerful smile.

Chapter 1

May We Take Joy in These Normal Days!



1

There comes a time in a person's life when they become popular with the opposite sex, or so I'm told.

"Will you come to my room tonight? I have something important to tell you."

...I took these words of Megumin's to mean *my* time of popularity had finally come.

I'd had my suspicions. I couldn't help noticing the I-like-you aura she'd been giving off for a while now.

Look, I'm not dense, and I'm certainly not one to ignore a request like that. But I was worried enough that I definitely lost some authority as the older party.

That day.

I sat down to have dinner, just as totally cool as I always am.

"Rejoice, everyone! When I was wandering around the merchant's quarter earlier, they said I could have the leftover wine from the after-party! Here, look, this is quality stuff! I'm going to keep you guys up all night!"

Across from me was Aqua, proudly displaying a bottle of wine.

I had an important date tonight, but Aqua was, as usual, totally oblivious to what was going on. I wanted to give her hell, but I couldn't very well mention my little tryst.

Anyway, I was too cool to be moved by such things, and I knew a little fancy alcohol would never be enough to buy off the rest of the househ—

"...Huh, that *is* fancy stuff," Darkness said. "I was so busy at the Eris after-party that I didn't really get to have any fun. Maybe tonight we can have a little party of our own, just for us."

Huh?

"H-hold on, Darkness, just a minute. I say we go to bed nice and early tonight. I mean, a lot has happened, and everyone's tired, right?"

"You think?" Darkness asked, looking perplexed. "The festival is over, and I don't have to fill in as governor anymore. I can't say I've been too tired recently." She set the table as she spoke.

But I'd had a momentous rendezvous with Megumin that night! I didn't have time to hang out with these losers until the crack of dawn.

"I'm, y'know, tired from doing battle with monsters every day and stuff. I think I'll turn in early tonight."

"You didn't take one step outside the house all day. I know for a fact you sleep more than twelve hours every single night—how can you complain about being tired?"

I was trying to decide how best to respond to Darkness's all-too-accurate jab when—

"What's the harm, Kazuma? Let us all enjoy ourselves together until morning."

"Huh?!"

Megumin—the one who was supposed to see me tonight—came in, carrying a heavy-looking pot with both hands.

Does she even understand why I'm trying to turn down this invitation?!

"Look, Kazuma, it's your favorite—onion stew. And this is wild onion, not farm grown. Lots of experience points for that extra savor." Megumin set down the pot of stew with a little grin on her face. (Seriously, did she have any idea?)

"H-hey, Megumin. Are you sure about this? I mean, tonight, you know..." I whispered to her urgently, but she only giggled.

"Tomorrow or the day after would be just as good. We have plenty of time."

She didn't know! She didn't get it at all!

How could we put this off—how could she lead me on like that and then make me wait? Stupid girl, I wasn't going to be able to sleep; she was getting my hopes up and then making me wait—what was that about?!

"Kazuma, why so excited?" Aqua asked. "Your nostrils are flaring and everything. You look like when we're on a trip or something, you know?"

"It d-d-doesn't mean anything! I'm just excited because we're having onion stew tonight! These look like good onions! I'll bet I get another level from this!"

Somehow she was perceptive only at the most inconvenient times. I scrambled to make up an excuse.

Megumin, watching the whole thing, looked like she was enjoying herself.

2

With the Eris Festival over, life in town went back to normal. We'd experienced a brief boom in pilgrims coming to visit the site where the goddess Eris had come down in person. But pilgrimages had fallen off, and these days only the occasional devout traveler would pay a visit.

It was then that Megumin had invited me to her room, but one thing after another had gotten in my way ever since. It started with Aqua suggesting an all-night party, continued with Aqua insisting Megumin have a game night in her room the next day, *then* Aqua said that being one of the most distinguished women in Axel, she felt like having a girls' night (could you get any weirder?), so that was another night gone, and then *yesterday...*

...Maybe I should tie her up until dawn tonight.

Such was the thought I was entertaining after breakfast as I watched Aqua sit with Emperor Zel on her knees, looking at him with endless adoration.

Darkness was getting a teapot for some after-breakfast tea (making tea being one of the few things she was actually any good at), while Aqua petted the chick in her lap with a look of blissful satisfaction. She probably thought she was doing her best impression of some wealthy movie star with an exotic pet, but the untamable Zel diligently pecked at Aqua's fingers each time they got near him.

"By the way, Megumin," Aqua said, "what's that you're working on? I don't recognize that thing you've been fiddling with."

"...Oh, this? This is a traditional magical charm of the Crimson Magic Clan. You put the hair of a powerful magic-user inside and then give it to a companion. Admittedly, the benefit is mostly psychological, but I thought it might make a nice birthday gift for Kazuma, considering how often he dies."

She was right, I did die a lot, but I had a distinct feeling that being given an anti-death charm would only be a flag for even more deaths to come.

Darkness, with the teapot now full of boiling water, came back into the room. "That's a pretty good idea. Can it be anyone's hair? Is it like, you know, the more hair you've got in there, the more effective it is...?"

Megumin was industriously adding a strand of her own hair as she answered, "More is better, yes. The charms we give to those going on expeditions to topple the Demon King contain a clipping from every single person in the village, so much that it doesn't all fit inside. Charms like that can practically work miracles. They don't just protect the wearer; they make it so that, say, even if you leave your bag just sitting there, no one will steal it, or if you forget something, someone will bring it right back to you. Really powerful effects."

Personally, I assumed that was because nobody would want to take a bag with a gross charm full of hair, and if they did have to touch it, they'd give it right back just to make sure they didn't fall under some weird curse.

Darkness, though, pulled out a strand of her long, golden hair. "Then maybe you could add this, too. Although I don't have enough magical power to be very effective..."

She gave it to Megumin, who took it and added it to the charm, looking surprisingly happy about it.

“.....”

Eventually, everyone's gazes naturally settled on Aqua. And she, looking the worse for wear after Emperor Zel's incessant pecking, looked blankly back at us.

“...? Whaddaya want? Don't tell me you presume to beg this goddess to hand over a lock of her hair. Now, listen. A single strand of a goddess's hair is so holy and so valuable that—”

“Can't you read a room? Just shut up and hand it over! Ever since that festival, you've been leaning way too hard into the goddess thing!”

“Nooo! Okay, I give—just stop pulling my hair! Ow, it hurts! At least *cut* it; don't tear it out!”

I passed Megumin the hair I had pulled out of Aqua's head.

Back in Japan, we had a tradition of gifting charms with human hair in them, so maybe this was like that.

Darkness smirked at Aqua and me, then poured tea into everyone's cups.

“Okay, Kazuma, here,” Megumin said. “Well, as I mentioned, it's mostly to relax you, so just toss it in your bag when you go somewhere.”

“Uh, sure. Thanks.”

I took the charm from Megumin and placed it carefully not into the backpack in my room but into the pouch I carried with me.

“Take good care of that charm—it has *my* miracle-working hair in it. If anything happens to it, you'll be in for some divine punishment.”

“This thing isn't going to lower my intelligence or bring undead flocking to me, is it?”

“...Hey, Darkness. You keep promising to help me build a coop for Emperor Zel. Let's go ahead and do that, okay?”

“Listen, you, say something! This thing *is* going to get me swarmed with zombies, isn't it?!”

Aqua totally ignored my question, instead tugging on Darkness's hand, pulling her out of the room.

After they left, I heaved a great sigh. The sight of it seemed to amuse Megumin to no end.

"What are you grinning at?" I asked. "You're thinking something filthy, aren't you?"

Megumin stopped sipping her tea to object. "I am not! I don't think filthy things, and I'm not grinning! I'm just smiling!"

As for me, though, I was just registering the situation we were in.

After all the interruptions, at that moment, it was just the two of us.

I wondered what the important thing was that Megumin had promised to tell me.

"Why so quiet all of a sudden? Are you nervous to be alone with me?" Megumin asked teasingly. I felt like she had seen right through me.

What, am I the only one feeling a bit anxious here? Am I the only one a little concerned to be all alone together in this huge room?

"It's just that whatever you want to say is bugging me," I retorted. "You know, that thing you said you wanted to talk to me about? I mean, it's not bugging me a lot, you know? I don't have any, like, *weird* expectations or anything, and anyway, you know how many times already I've had my hopes raised just to have them dashed at the last minute."

I jabbered on, my voice getting a little raspy, as Megumin brought her cup to her mouth and giggled. That was all she did, but somehow it made my face hot.

What was wrong with me? Was the "love aura" I'd been feeling from her making me pay more attention to Megumin?

Damn! I never took myself for this kind of man—to think that some jailbait character could hold me in the palm of her hand like this...!

Megumin, oblivious to the turmoil within me, looked at me, her eyes shimmering. "Kazuma, what I've been wanting to tell you is..."

But that was as far as she got.

"Sorry, Megumin! C'mere a minute—Aqua's calling you! She says I'm too clumsy to be of any use, and she wants to trade...! She says, 'I didn't say help me *destroy* a coop! I said help me *build* one! You trade off with Megumin and keep Kazuma company so he doesn't come get in the way!'"

Thus Darkness appeared at the front door on the verge of tears.

...Well, how's that for bad timing?

Or was that good timing?

"Hey, isn't a little building right up my alley? I've got the Smith skill and everything—I'm practically a pro. So why does she want Megumin?"

"I said the same thing, but she said that anything you get involved in always goes south. She thinks you would build Zel's coop in the shape of an oven or something."

She knew me too well.

"Very well, I shall go and have a look. Darkness, babysit Kazuma, please."

"Hey, who's babysitting who here?"

But Megumin only smiled at my objection and left the house.

Hrm, what was going on here? I really couldn't shake the feeling that I was being toyed with.

Darkness had been watching the exchange between Megumin and me. "..... Hey, Kazuma. Did something happen between you guys?" Her question came out of nowhere.

Yeah, something happened—so far, she'd said thanks to me once and teasingly said that she loved me. *I guess that's something...*

I decided to just give Darkness the upshot. "Nothing at all."

"You expect me to believe that?! Then what's Megumin acting like that for? I heard from Aqua, you know. She says you go sneaking over to Megumin's room every night these days. I know you tried to pull something on Megumin back at Crimson Magic Village. What have you done this time?"

She was determined to shoot me down point-blank.

"You know, I keep wondering, what exactly is it you guys all take me for? I swear to God, I'm gonna use Steal on you until you really do cry. I'm not lying here. I don't know what kind of *something* you've got in mind, but whatever you're imagining, it hasn't happened."

That set Darkness back.

"...Something is, you know, *something*... You know perfectly well what I mean; are you going to make me say it? Like, you and Megumin have...have kissed, or you've touched her chest, or whatever...!"

Darkness was bright red as she recited her list of indecencies. As usual, I found it impossible to tell what her threshold for embarrassment was.

"Uh-uh, I haven't kissed her, and I haven't touched anyone's chest. Don't get me wrong on this one. Look into my eyes. Do they look like the eyes of a man who's lying?"

I stared straight at Darkness as I spoke.

Confronted with my unwavering gaze, Darkness gradually began to crumble. "...Errr. They look corrupt, but...they don't...they don't look like you're lying. I'm sorry; I know now that nothing happened. It's just, the way Megumin's been behaving, what else was I supposed to think...? Anyway, forget it. I'm really sorry..."

Her voice got smaller and smaller as she grew more and more embarrassed. Finally, she stood up straight, as if she was trying to claw back a bit of her dignity, and crossed her arms like she was hoping to emphasize her bust. "I've got to say, though, things have seemed strange between you and Megumin lately. I was starting to worry you guys had finally crossed that line." As she spoke, Darkness walked briskly over to the sofa and sat down.

She poured some tea into her cup, looking like some great burden had been lifted from her heart.

Looking for a bit of revenge after Darkness's tirade, I gave her a discreet little jab. "...Sheesh. Someone who goes for a kiss without even asking is the last person I want to get this lecture from. Compared with a pervy noble nutcase

like you, I'm practically normal."

Darkness spat out her tea.

"Aw, c'mon...! Look at this—now I'm covered in tea!" I tore off my tea-soaked shirt and started flapping it wildly.

"Hrgh! *Cough! Hack...!*" Darkness, coughing and choking, stood up, wiping at her mouth with a handkerchief. "H-how could you?! Saying something like that to me! What a rude thing to say...! What a rude...pointless thing to say..."

She'd started out pretty angry, but she seemed to get more depressed as she went along. Maybe she'd had a few ideas of her own, because even as she glared at me, the teary-eyed Darkness glanced away.

"Huh, looks like you *can* think of someone like that, you damn perv. I know you, always huffing and puffing and doing the weirdest stuff! Here you keep saying things to me that I wouldn't repeat to a child, but when it comes right down to it, you run away with your tail between your legs, you failure of a noble. Yeah, what's wrong? If you have anything to say to me, I shall hear it!"

When I started imitating a certain someone's verbal tic, Darkness sat heavily on the sofa and hid her face in her hands. Maybe it was the embarrassment making her shoulders shake.

Finally, she took her hands away, and I saw her with her usual cool expression, albeit a bit redder than usual.

Normally, that kind of withering assault would have sent her fleeing to her room in tears—maybe after all this time, Darkness had matured a bit. She poured herself more tea as if nothing had happened, took a sip, and let out an appreciative sigh.

"I was wrong," she said. "I apologize for confusing you with a man who would commit sexual harassment. And I vow to endeavor to comport myself in a more ladylike manner from now on... So please, I hope you'll find it in your heart to forgive me."

"Er, right... I guess I went a little far myself. Let's make up..."

I guess Darkness had grown up enough that she didn't just run away crying

anymore.

"Say, something came addressed to you. The box by the front door." Darkness attempted to change the subject, drinking yet another cup of tea to maintain her composure. She was acting calm, but I could tell she was still shaken.

"Ooh, so it's here, huh? See, all the experience-rich foods I've been eating lately have helped get me to a pretty decent level. I thought it was time I started wearing something more suited to a veteran adventurer... Hey, if you keep drinking all that tea, you're gonna want to go to the bathroom."

"I h-hope there's a sense of delicacy for you in that box..."

Darkness turned resentful eyes on me as I started opening my package, and soon I had produced a chest plate, a pair of greaves, and some gloves that were surprisingly light for how strong they were.

"Ooh, I like the way these feel!"

Finally, I pulled a length of wire from the box.

See, there's a skill called Bind. It's become one of my trademarks lately, and with a strong enough wire, you can render any opponent virtually powerless. The chance of successfully binding someone, I'm told, is based on the user's Luck, so I couldn't ask for a more perfect skill for me.

Until now, I'd been using some custom-made metal wire, but out of an abundance of caution, I'd ordered this really top-notch stuff. This wire, made of mithril, could even Bind incorporeal spirits.

When Darkness saw me pick it up and grin, she exclaimed, "Is that...Bind wire?! A-and that shine! Don't tell me it's made of mithril!!" Her deviant cheeks went red with excitement.

Looking at me with perverted envy, she started to squirm, still blushing.

"Ahem... Kazuma, I'm something of a connoisseur of the Bind skill. How about it—want to try your special wire on me? Come to think of it, in fact, I've never suffered your Bind, not once. And don't you think party members should know how powerful their friends' skills are?!"

The pervert kept glancing between the wire and me as she spoke.

"What happened to all that talk about acting a little more ladylike? And as you can see, this is a super-strong wire for taking down super-strong monsters. If you want to try Bind, let's go get a nice, thin rope from the closet or something..."

As I spoke, I started over to the living room closet...

"No, I want that one! ...Er, I mean, that one will be fine. I remember your claim, but if you find out it can't even Bind me, then how is it going to Bind any super-strong monsters? I'll tell you: It won't. So you'd better try it out on me first."

The pervert was blushing again, her eyes glittering expectantly.

Her argument notwithstanding, I'd successfully used Bind even on the Kowloon Hydra with wire a lot less powerful than this. I didn't think much testing was necessary.

Without waiting for my answer, though, the perv stood in the living room, looking thrilled.

"...Hang on, you said you *wanted* this one?" I asked.

"Did not."

"Yeah, you did."

"Did not... But who cares anyway? Hurry up and do it. You can't show me a sturdy, tough, heavy-looking wire like that and then just put it away, you jerk."

Apparently, she wasn't bothering to hide the perversity any longer. I stopped in my tracks.

I pulled the wire taut between my hands to test the strength again, then I turned and confronted Darkness.

It's worth mentioning that at this point, because I'd removed my soaked shirt, I was standing there in nothing but a pair of shorts.

Darkness, meanwhile, was wearing a sheer white shirt that made her curves all too obvious, along with a pencil skirt. She looked less like a noblewoman and more like a Japanese office lady.

I have to admit, we would have presented a pretty damning picture to anyone who happened to pass by. There was me, standing shirtless and holding a length of wire, while Darkness was getting redder by the minute and starting to moan a little.

"H-hey, Kazuma. Maybe you could at least change your clothes. If you Bind me looking like that, I'm afraid I'll feel like something really risqué is going on..."

"Don't give me that crap *now*." Pervert or no, it was a little late to worry about that. I thrust out the wire. "This is a pain in the neck, so I'm going to put most of my MP into it, and you're gonna be stuck for a really long time. Then you and all your stupid, ridiculous, obnoxious comments can just squirm around in the corner over there."

"Wha—?! Not satisfied tying me up with such a sturdy wire, you plan to make me squirm as well?! Do you have a gag? Don't we need a gag for this?! What will you do if I cry out in pain?!"

"I won't do anything."

Our resident degenerate was in fine form today.

I was eager to get Darkness tied up and go check on Aqua and Megumin. By which I mean, go cause trouble for them.

I held the wire toward Darkness and exclaimed, "*Bind!!!!*"

The wire jumped from my hand and flew at Darkness, wrapping itself around her body.

"Wha...?! Th-this...! Hrgh..... Hagh?!"

Darkness shouted and yelped. And I, looking at the bound Crusader, couldn't move.

I was too busy gawking. I had absolutely no other choice.

"...! *Hff... Hff...!* Y-you dirty, filthy...! How do you always, always manage to go above and beyond my expectations...?!"

Darkness, huffing in ecstasy, was tied up on the floor, and the wire had caught her just beneath her bust, pushing it way, way up. Maybe the binding really was too strong, because Darkness, her hands tied, slumped to the carpet.

Lying there wire-bound from her shoulders to her hips, and with the twin mounds of her chest ready to burst free from their own silken binding, she wouldn't have looked out of place on the cover of any men's magazine.

This was bad.

This was really, really bad.

If Aqua and Megumin saw this, they would be disgusted. And this was really crossing a line—I wasn't going to be able to make up some convenient excuse. I definitely hadn't deliberately used Bind to accentuate her boobs, but I couldn't shake the feeling my skills always seemed to go just a little bit wrong, like how every time I used Steal on a girl, I ended up with her panties or something.

I crouched down next to the panting, twitching Darkness. "Hey, are you okay? I promise I, uh, tried to go easy on you there."

"Th... This is...easy...?! Errgh, Kazuma... Next time...I'll pay you. I promise I'll pay you—just go hard on me!"

It happened just as Darkness was making this ridiculous request.

I could feel something behind me. Maybe my long-honed Sense Foe skill had alerted me.

Normally, that ability was for sensing monsters and other hostile creatures. But maybe I'd been relying on it for so long that it was now capable of warning me about more than that.

I immediately let my instincts guide me...!

I heard the front door opening.

"Phew, man I'm tired. Let's take a break. Nice work, Megumin!"

"*You're* tired? Aqua, you spent the entire time playing with Emperor Zel... Hmm?"

I also heard Aqua and Megumin talking.

"Hff... Hff... Hff..."

I could feel the hot breath of Darkness, still hog-tied, on my hand.

"I don't see Kazuma or Darkness anywhere. Where do you suppose they

went?" Megumin sounded puzzled.

"My unclouded eye perceives that they're playing a board game or something in one of their rooms."

This was followed by the sound of Aqua rushing off someplace.

I assumed she thought we'd gone to Darkness's room.

I heard ceramic-ware clacking in the living room; Megumin must have been sitting on the sofa and drinking some tea. All too aware of Darkness's body heat against me, I considered what we would do next, now that we were secreted away in the cramped closet.

Humans do the dumbest things when they're panicked.

Frankly, it would probably be worse for me if they found us now than if they'd walked in on us earlier. Why had I hidden? It wasn't like we were doing anything wrong. I was just doing what Darkness had asked me to.

...Okay, I confess. I was pretty hot and bothered by how sexy Darkness looked when she was all tied up. Maybe it was that ugly little truth that had driven me to hide.



It was fine. Megumin, she would understand. How hard was it to imagine Darkness asking to be tied up? And as for why I was half-naked, well, at this point that was practically de rigueur for me.

...Yeah, no, this was definitely a foul.

I stuck my head close to Darkness's and whispered in her ear. "Listen up, Darkness. This is all your fault, asking me to do weird stuff all the time! When they see us, this is going to turn ugly fast. You know that, right?"

Darkness nodded, her eyes brimming.

Come to think of it, hadn't we been in a situation like this before?

Oh, that's right—it was when I had snuck into Darkness's mansion and ended up in bed with her. Hey, why did I have my hand over Darkness's mouth right now, like I'd done that time?

"Okay, now we're going to figure out what to do about this," I said slowly. "I'm going to take my hand away, all right?" Then I started to take my hand off

—
"Hrk?! Eeyowowowow! Wh-what the...?! Who *bites* somebody on the hand? Let me go! That hurts! That hurts, idiot!"

She had sunk her teeth into the hand I was removing, and it was only through smacking her with my free hand a few times that I was able to get loose.

"What the hell is wrong with you?! Look at this! You left teeth marks!" I whispered fiercely, on the verge of tears.

"...I can't...hold it in... I have to bite something, have to sink my teeth into something...!" Darkness might as well have been a mad dog.

What in the world was she even talking about? *Please* tell me I wasn't about to learn about yet another weird habit.

I was starting to think she'd been driven insane by the extremity of our plight.

The blush in her cheeks wasn't from arousal anymore. Now she was just plain embarrassed.

"I have to go to the bathroom..."

"I told you! I *told* you! I said all that tea would make you wanna go!"

3

There we were in the cramped, dark closet.

Darkness, tied up beside me, was blushing. And it wasn't from her usual excitement.

"Kazuma... K-Kazuma...! What do we do? This is bad; this is so bad! This is so incriminatingly bad...!"

Darkness was whispering and fidgeting, her upper body still restrained. I was shoved up against her in the darkness.

"This is all because you ignored my advice and kept drinking that tea! You know, I've thought for a long time now that you're a pretty big idiot! What, have you got muscles for brains? There are times when you're almost as bad as Aqua!"

That caused Darkness to grind her teeth and glare at me. It looked like she wanted to retort but had decided this wasn't the time and was keeping her peace.

Actually, this wasn't the best moment for me to be making trouble, either.

"Fine... I think our only choice now is to go out there and come clean. Unlike you, Megumin isn't an excitable, short-tempered moron, so I'm sure she'll hear us out. The best way to survive a situation like this is to face it head-on."

"At some point you and I are going to have to have a serious talk about your opinion of me," Darkness said. "But hold on. Um... You probably don't realize this, but Megumin and I, we've talked about this and that when we're together... Uh, the point is, if she saw me like this, it would be bad news, so let's just wait a little longer!"

What exactly had they been talking about when I wasn't around? Well, I guess Megumin *had* mentioned talking about me with Darkness when they were together.

"...Okay, no choice. Just a little longer, though."

"Here, shove something in my mouth! Biting down on it will help me endure!"

I knew it would only make things look that much worse, but I went ahead and stuffed a balled-up handkerchief into Darkness's mouth as an impromptu gag.

Then we sat in the closet and waited.

Aqua and Megumin had talked about just taking a little break, right? That meant they would get back to work if we waited long enough.

On the other side of the closet door, I could hear someone running noisily back and forth.

"I can't find them anywhere. Ever since the festival ended, Kazuma's doubled down on his worthless NEET-itude—but I can't even find Darkness! She was supposed to be keeping him company."

You're gonna eat those words... I'm gonna do a little "renovation" on that chicken coop tonight!

Granted, I was just hanging around doing nothing every day, but calling someone worthless, that takes a lot of nerve.

"I wonder what they could be doing?" Megumin said. "With all the time on his hands, Kazuma often goes out for random walks, but for even Darkness to disappear without a word after I asked her to look after him..."

Geez, was I really such a lazy playboy in their eyes?

At that moment...

"...! ...!!"

...Darkness started grunting quietly, like she was trying to communicate something. I looked at her: Stuck in this closet and trying desperately to resist nature's call, Darkness had finally succumbed to the erotic side of it all, sweating and panting heavily.

A drop of sweat ran down the back of my neck. I would be in serious, serious trouble if they discovered me right—*Erk!*

"Th— The hell?! What are you doing? Don't thrash!" I whispered to Darkness, who had suddenly started wriggling around. I pulled the handkerchief out of her

mouth.

“...Hahhh! I—I can’t do it...! I thought I could hold out longer than this, but...!”

“Hang in there just a little longer! They said they were only on break! I’m sure they’ll go back to work soon!”

Being trapped in close quarters with Darkness struggling to hold it in had left us both hot and sweaty, making the situation even worse.

“Man, I told you! I *told* you! If we were going to go out there, we had to do it right away!”

“S-sorry...! But, but...!”

I crammed the handkerchief back in her mouth to demonstrate that I wasn’t interested in whatever else she had to say.

Earlier we might have gotten away with it, but there was no way I was letting Darkness out like this. The sweat was making her shirt stick to her skin. Even if I could somehow convince them that nothing had happened, just the fact that I had Darkness imprisoned in this condition was likely to land me in hot water.

Argh, just when I was starting to get in good with Megumin, this moron had to go and ruin everything!

It was at that moment that Darkness, apparently unable to bear it any longer, shoved violently against me and tried to make a break for it. I shoved her back down, whispering harshly in her ear, “Listen, just stay calm! If you can hold it, we can get out of this. And this is all your fault for not listening to me! So sit down and don’t move!”

Darkness closed her eyes, appearing totally resigned.

No, don’t do that! Don’t close your eyes! I remember this from when I broke into your mansion—you give up way too easily!

Panicking over the wrath I would be subjected to if we were found this way, I pulled the handkerchief out of Darkness’s mouth.

“Hey, quit it! Don’t close your eyes! Listen up, I’m gonna explain this nice and slow so that even a moron like you can understand. If you go flying out there now, I *guarantee* everyone is going to end up unhappy. Just imagine if Aqua

sees us—she'll crow about it to the entire Guild. 'I can't belieeeeve it,' she'll say! 'He was half-naked and she was tied up, and both of them were all sweaty and getting cozy in the closet! I'll leave it to you to imagine what happened!"'

"Urrrghhh....."

Darkness groaned tearfully. I used a bit of my scant remaining magic to cast Freeze on my flushed head. Darkness looked jealous as I enjoyed the cool, but she didn't deign to ask me to cast it on her, too. She seemed to understand the dangers of getting cooled off in her current circumstances.

And then, as she sat there fidgeting, she said, "...S-say, Kazuma... Would it be *weird* if I actually started to enjoy being tied up while trying not to wet myself?"

"I've got an idea: Why don't you try to be as quiet as possible? Don't talk unless it's absolutely necessary."

I leaned on the hopeless pervert as hard as I could, and meanwhile I could hear a conversation taking place on the other side of the door.

"What? Megumin, how many of those charms do you plan to make? Are you going to give Kazuma so many that his item pouch bursts?"

"No, I'm making them for everyone else. This one's for you, and this one's for me... And for Darkness, I'm making the sturdiest one. She is always shielding the rest of us with her body, after all."

Darkness stopped fidgeting when she heard Megumin's innocent words. It seemed like Darkness and I were thinking the exact same thing at that moment.

Specifically, we were thinking how desperately we wanted to avoid disappointing our dear, sweet Megumin by letting her see us like this.

Darkness whispered to me in my place above her. "...Hey, can't we do something about this situation? Isn't Luck your one talent? Surely you can figure something out, right?"

Gee, I appreciate the vote of confidence, but...

I started searching through the closet, barely big enough for both of us to sit down in, to see if there was anything I could make use of.

...And that was when I saw it.

Apparently, I really was lucky!

“Good news, Darkness, I’ve found the perfect thing! This will solve our number one problem!”

I showed it to her gleefully!

A juice bottle.

“...!!!”

“N-no, stop that! Stop head-butting me!”

I guess she didn’t like the bottle I was offering her.

“Ugh... You were the one who asked me to come up with something. Sheesh, I guess you nobles have pride if nothing else...”

I was speaking pretty nonchalantly, but Darkness’s head snapped up. “Oh, is that what you think? This has nothing to do with my pride as a noble. It’s as a woman! My pride as a woman! No one can abandon their pride! In what universe could anyone do their business in something like this, you raging pervert?!”

“In my country, some really dedicated people defending their homes used a PET bottle—something just like this.”

“?!”

While we were carrying on this ridiculous conversation, they were talking on the other side of the door, too...

“Hey, Megumin. You look pretty happy making those. It’s weirdly relaxing to watch you.” Aqua really did sound mellow.

“I am happy. These charms contain my heartfelt wish that our party members stay together forever... I’m always grateful to you, too, Aqua, you know that? I hope we never part ways.”

“M... Megumin! Aren’t you the sweetest thing?! Okay, since it looks like I’m not getting back to heaven anytime soon, maybe I’ll forget about being a goddess and just enjoy my life here! Kazuma will keep the money flowing for us somehow! It’s easy street for me! Let’s all of us just enjoy our lives in the lap of

luxury!"

"Aqua, are you still talking about being a goddess and heaven and all that? Not that I mind if it means you're going to stay with us..."

Out in the living room, it sounded like they were actually having a pretty pleasant chat.

"There's a question I've always wanted to ask you, Your Perviness! How can someone with such a hot body, who works so hard to lure in every man she passes, be so uptight?! You have these incredible curves, and then you get embarrassed over the stupidest things! What's with you? Are you a depraved sex fiend or a pure, innocent virgin? Make up your mind! I'm surprised being so lewd and so innocent at the same time doesn't tear you apart!"

"All right, I hate to use my noble privilege, but for you I'll make an exception! For the crime of slandering a noble, I sentence you to the maximum punishment—death!"

Darkness had been lying facedown, but now she shifted, hands still tied, so that she was looking up at me. (Let me remind you how cramped this closet was.) And then, while I had nowhere to go, she started kicking me viciously.

"Just you try it! Just you do it if you can, Young Lady! And when you can't beat an Adventurer, the weakest class, in a one-on-one contest, will you go running to your daddy for help? Ooh, Lady Lalatina, you're so cool!"

"You're on! When those two leave, we're stepping outside, and I'm gonna kill you!"

"You're in for it now—what kind of aristocratic education did you get, kicking a person in the face? When it comes to being a noble, you're all talk and no substance!"

"Ahhh, s-stop it! Don't push on my stomach! I won't be able to hold it in, and I promise I'm not the only one in here who'll regret it!"

We completely ignored the urgency of our situation as we set about fighting in quiet voices.

Believe me, we were all too aware of how much less civilized we were than

the two outside the closet.

"Hey, do you hear something? Kind of a tapping sound from somewhere?"

"You think so? I do not hear anything. Whatever, maybe we should get back to work soon. Maybe we can wrap up by dinnertime and have a barbecue or something. I'm sure Darkness and Kazuma will be back by then."

"Great idea! Summer is the barbecue season, after all, and I want something that'll go with a nice, cold Crimson Beer! When Kazuma and Darkness get back, let's make them do the cooking!"

Then, still chatting amiably, Aqua and Megumin left the house.

Finally...

"You stupid meat shield! The only thing you're good at is being sexy! I'll teach you just how little your life is worth!"

"I'd like to see you try, you dumb coward! You wimp out at every golden opportunity! Show me what you can do, then!"

Darkness and I, forgetting all about our original objective, continued to argue in the closet even after Aqua and Megumin left the house.

Finally, I emerged huffing and puffing, somehow dragging Darkness with me.

"Damn, I can't believe I wasted so much time in that stupid closet with you... What are we even doing...? Forget it—just go pee or whatever... I'm exhausted. I'm gonna go take a nap."

Darkness glanced at me and saw how tired I looked. "You act like you're the only one whose time got wasted. Fine, go sleep like the dead, you ass. When I get back from the bathroom, I'll be just sitting quietly in my room until the effect of your Bind wears off. And listen good: When it does, that's when I'm coming to you for a real fight. I can't let you abuse me like this and just walk away."

With that parting shot, she started walking toward the bathroom, the top half of her body still tied up.

...God, that woman.

Megumin, now *there* was a girl who knew how to use her head. Maybe I could get some of the dirt from under her fingernails to mix into Darkness's tea. Who knows, it might do her some good.

I watched Darkness wobble her way to the bathroom, then walked to my own room on the second floor. I let out a breath of relief as I lay down on my own bed, clear of danger for the time being—and just then, there was a knock at the door.

Actually, less of a knock and more of a no-holds-barred kick.

Wondering what the hell was going on, I opened the door, looking questioningly at the person who stood there.

It was Darkness, desperate and ready to cry.

I see: She was so upset about the things she'd said earlier that she'd come to apologize. That was fine. I knew how proud she was, and our little fight didn't bother me. She hardly needed to say she was sorry...

Darkness, though, was shifting her hips uncomfortably.

"I-I'm sorry, Kazuma...but, um...I can't use my hands, so I can't open the bathroom door..."

Round two!

4

The closest bathroom to my bedroom was one on the second floor. Considering the distance from the front door, we would still have some time to react if Aqua and Megumin suddenly came home again.

"Q-quick, quick, come on, hurry! I *really* can't hold out much longer!" Darkness was trying to get me to hurry up, looking like she might burst into tears.

Specifically, what she wanted me to hurry up and do was open the bathroom door.

...But in light of our little argument earlier, I wanted to make her suffer a bit

more.

"Oh, you are? And how exactly is that going to happen? Please spell it out for me."

Darkness stood fidgeting and shimmying in front of the bathroom. "Y-y-y-y-y-y-you're unbelievable...! Playing to my interests at a time like this... Will you stop at nothing to prove you're my typ—?! Argh, fine, I'm sorry! This was all my fault, so just hurry and open the door! I can't even enjoy this game right now!"

Now she *really* looked like she was going to cry, and her breaths were getting shorter and more frantic.

"Bah, fine. Hey, but you say you wanna settle this once you've done your business, huh...? Hrm, I don't really like the thought of that. Doesn't really make me want to open this door..."

Darkness glared at me as I continued to needle her.

".....*Sniff*....."

"Sorry, I'm sorry! Just don't cry! Ooh, that's no fair! You girls are such cheaters, crying like that!"

All it took was one big teardrop rolling down Darkness's cheek to get me scrambling to open the door.

But then...

"...Forget it. I'll just go in my pants and then cry to Megumin and Aqua about it."

"I'm sorry! My bad, seriously! I got carried away! I apologize, so just forgive me!"

What a thing to say! Now I was the one on the verge of tears, and I backed away from the door I'd just opened.

Darkness, hands still tied, went into the bathroom, and I closed the door behind her and let out a breath.

Okay, crisis averted.

Then I heard Darkness's weepy voice from inside. "Uh, Kazuma, my

underwear! What do I do? I can't get my underwear off like this! Oh no... Oh no, oh no... What am I gonna do...?!"

Well, now! A genuine emergency had just given me the best excuse anyone could ask for.

"Right, I hear you; just leave it to me. I'll get those underpants off for you," I said, opening the door again.

But Darkness quickly exclaimed, "Hey, wait! ...Ugh, dammit, I guess there's no choice... Listen, Kazuma, at least draw the curtain over the little window on the door! That'll make it a bit darker...!"

Fair enough.

But...

"I'm so, so sorry, but I do have the Second Sight skill..."

"Arrrrrrrgh, why do you have to be so stupid and filthy and useful?! But also thank you for always being there when I need you!"

Darkness, now in a certifiable panic, started crying on the one hand and thanking me desperately on the other.

She must really have been close to her limit.

Then, suddenly, her face lit up as if she'd had an idea.

"Steal! That's the answer! Kazuma, use Steal on me from the other side of the door! Since your Steal skill is essentially the pinnacle of sexual harassment, I'm confident you'll be able to Steal my panties! Since you're going to see them anyway, this is a lot better than having you reach under my skirt to pull them down!"

I had to hand it to her. That was a pretty good idea.

But...

"Between that full-power Bind I put on you earlier and the Freeze spell I used in the closet, I'm out of MP."

"I take back what I said about you always coming through for me! Argh, arrrgh, arrrrghhh.....!!"

In the end, I pulled her underwear down just the tiniest bit, and Darkness managed the rest in the bathroom by herself, using the wall. The scraping sound I heard coming from in there was really annoying, but I decided there was no reason for me to stick around anyway.

But then, just as I was about to leave the scene...

"K-Kazuma! Kazuma, don't go yet! I can't...! I can't get it out...!" She sounded truly pained.

Well, uh, not much I could do there. Had she screwed up her body somehow by holding it in for so long?

Wait, I knew what I could do to help...!

I started clapping out a simple rhythm. "*You can do it, Dark-ness! You can do it, Dark-ness!*" I chanted.

"Wh-what? No, you idiot! The paper! I can't get the toilet paper off the roll!"

Oh, so *that* was the problem.

In this world, old rags or rough, recycled paper were used to wipe once the deed was done. Paper as such was a valuable commodity around here, so only the richest among this world's inhabitants used real toilet paper.

I wasn't sure what she intended to do with the toilet paper considering she couldn't use her hands, but nonetheless, I called out, "Okay, I'm going to open this up!"

"Pray tell, what exactly is it that you intend to open?"

Aqua and Megumin were standing by the bathroom door. When had they gotten there?

"...Goodness, you are truly a fool... After all the time we've known one another, you think I would misunderstand what was going on in that situation?"

It turned out that a quick explanation was enough to settle any misunderstandings, and all I had to put up with was this exasperated remark from Megumin.

I wished my other housemates would learn a thing or two from her

intelligence and how quickly she understood.

Darkness, looking at Megumin and trying to make herself as small as possible, whispered, “Errgh... I can never face you again...”

“But also,” Megumin added, offering charms to Darkness and then to Aqua, “also, daily commotions like this make us feel more like...us.”

Then she smiled, apparently genuinely happy. Darkness and I couldn’t help but smile in return...

This delightful, soothing atmosphere was, as usual, shattered by Aqua, who couldn’t read a room to save her life.

“By the way,” she said, “did you make it in time, Darkness?”

You know, I’d been wondering the same thing.

5

That night.

“She’s *still* not here...”

Megumin had said she would come to my room tonight, so I was waiting with bated breath. I had splurged and gotten Aqua some expensive wine to keep her out of our hair. As for Darkness, I’d bought some especially pricey manatite, hit her with the Bind to end all Binds, and left her flopping around in her room. She had been blushing and shouting something weird about wanting to know how much she owed me for the experience; anyway, I figured she wouldn’t be going anywhere till morning.

So there I was, waiting anxiously, when a hesitant knock came at the door.

“Kazuma, you there?”

“Oh, y-yeah! I’m here—c’mon in!”

I was afraid my voice might crack with nervousness, but Megumin sounded like she was in the same boat.

She came in, gulping and clutching Chomusuke to her chest (the poor thing was totally immobilized) like a pillow.

"Th-thanks. Gee, I think this is the first time I've ever visited your room at this hour, Kazuma."

"Uh, oh yeah! And here we've been living in the same house for more than a year!"

Megumin refused to cut right to the chase; instead, she looked wonderingly around my room. It was all well and good for her to be interested in my decor, but I was afraid she might find the thing I'd stashed on the top shelf of my closet, so I hoped she would stay out of there.

Megumin, seeming restless, looked at the floor and didn't talk.

For a while, neither of us said anything, each feeling a little sour.

"The reason I'm here so late is to talk about that thing I said I wanted to tell you..." Finally, Megumin seemed to screw up her courage, hugging Chomusuke even tighter.

She was oblivious to the weary Chomusuke and red to her ears, and her crimson eyes were sparkling...!

"The thing I want to tell you is..."

"Yes? The thing you want to tell me is *what*!?" My gulp was probably downright audible, and I leaned in without quite meaning to.

"K-Kazuma, you're so close! Hang on a second; you don't have to get so worked up!"

"I'm not worked up—and anyway, who cares how close we are; just make with the confession!" I urged her.

"What I want to tell you is... Y-yes! It's a-about this creature here!" Megumin said, holding out Chomusuke...

".....What?"

"I've been dying to confess to you about what she really is!"

Now, just a...!

"You must be *kidding*, you obnoxious, deceptive little—! You guys are always calling *me* buffoonish or too stupid for my own good or Chicken Nanban or

whatever, but you aren't exactly the smoothest operator I've ever met!"

"Ch-chicken what? I never said that! And I'm telling you the truth—I really do want to confess about Chomusuke!"

"Liar! Megumin, you liar! I guarantee you came here to say something hotter than that! That's what I was expecting!"

Megumin, her face now completely red, thrust Chomusuke at me defiantly. "I've kept quiet about it all this time, but this cat is not just a cat."

"No shit! I've seen her breathing fire and flying and whatever else!"

"...What are you talking about? She isn't a cat, but she can't breathe fire or fly, I assure you."

"If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times—I've *seen* it! Stop that—don't look at me with that sort of pity in your eyes! Argh, just forget about that for now!"

Yes! The important thing wasn't the secret identity of some cat—it was what was going on in Megumin's heart.

"Look, isn't there anything *else* you want to confess?! Get your courage up now and just say it!"

"Errgh..."

Megumin was backing away toward the door, but for every step she took, I took one forward.

"Come on, out with it! Hell, you've half said it already! You *told* me you like me or love me or whatever!"

"I haven't yet said I love you! Don't put words in my mouth!!" Megumin, cornered, looked at me with her eyes flashing even redder than her face; she looked like she wanted to say something, but then she stopped.

Finally, she gave Chomusuke an extra squeeze and said, "Just think of what you did with Darkness this afternoon—you have no integrity! You can sleep with *Chomusuke* tonight!" she yelled, and then she dashed out of my room.

Geez, earlier she'd acted like it was no big deal. Had it really been bothering

her all this time?

The way she emphasized “sleep with *Chomusuke*”—could I take that to mean there’d been a possibility of sleeping with someone *other than* Chomusuke?

Hey, and for that matter...!

“There you go acting all high and mighty agaaaaaaaaiiiiinnnnn!”

Chapter 2

May There Be Growth for These Unchanging Adventurers!



1

“.....”

Aqua crouched on the fluffy carpet, watching me.

She'd been that way since this morning and didn't show any sign of getting tired of it. Was something wrong with her? In light of how things had been going with Megumin and Darkness, it wouldn't be wrong to say my time with the ladies had come—could Aqua be falling victim to my charms, too?

Could that be the fabled gaze of a woman in love?

From my place lounging on the living room sofa, I said to Aqua, "...What's with the stare? Ahhh, is this what you're after? Want a drink?"

Then I drained the champagne-like stuff I was drinking. It was strange, kind of...bubbly, or maybe fizzy. According to Aqua, this was on the fancy side when it came to wine, but personally, my alcoholic palate wasn't well developed enough to understand what was so great about it.

Even if I didn't have any special appreciation for it, though, sitting around and drinking expensive wine first thing in the morning was its own kind of victory, in

my opinion.

And there was Aqua, staring at me as I drank.

"...I've just been thinking. I know the festival is over, but I've been really surprised at what a worthless lump of human trash you've turned into, Kazuma."

Ah. So not the fabled gaze of a woman in love but the fabled gaze of a woman looking at a worthless lump of a guy.

Right at that moment, though, Aqua's verbal assault wasn't enough to make me angry or even move me. I could afford to stay calm—literally. I was living the life of a man who had become filthy rich, gotten his own mansion, and could spend his days in the lap of luxury, all from a young age.

"Listen, Aqua, I don't know what you're talking about. I'm a huge success, remember? And now I'm just living the life I've earned. Nothing wrong with that. I've got money in the bank—fat stacks, at that—and I plan to live off the interest for the rest of my life. No more working like an idiot. Maybe an adventure, when I feel like it. Just fun and fancy-free."

"Makes sense," Aqua mumbled. She took my champagne off the table. "When you put it like that, it's understandable. Well, in that case, I'm going to have a sip of this high-quality, Neroided-down stuff, okay?"

"...That's champagne, isn't it?"

"No, it's got Neroid in it. Carbonation doesn't exist in this world. Most fizzy drinks here are mixed with Neroid." She went to get a glass as she talked.

As she walked out, Darkness and Megumin walked in.

...Heck, they both looked ready to go on an adventure. Darkness was in full armor (*clank, clank*), while Megumin had a firm grip on her beloved staff.

I took a look and asked, "Off for your daily Explosion? Take care. Oh, and could you pick up dinner on the way home? I'll pay you back later. I want something nice and decadent to eat tonight." I didn't move from my place on the sofa.

Megumin and Darkness looked at me intently. These were definitely the gazes

of two women in love.

"...Darkness, what shall we do with this man who lies around drinking from the moment he wakes up, never moving?"

"...Maybe we should throw him out somewhere."

Huh?

...Wrong again, I guess. Just another example of the look of people fed up with a man.

I rolled over so I was faceup on the sofa and said, "Now listen, you two. For your information, I don't have one good reason to move. Why do people work? It's to make money so they can support themselves. But me, I already have enough money to support myself for the rest of my life. So what in the world is wrong with committing myself to a lifetime of dissolution? No one else has to be bothered by me."

I grabbed some of the peas I had put on the table as a snack, popping them into my mouth and crunching noisily.

Seeing me that way, Darkness gave a deep sigh. "Disgusting... You've got some money, so you're never going to work again? If everyone thought that way, the world would come to a standstill. People are honor bound to *contribute* something to the world, even if they don't need to work for money."

A laudable ideal. "As far as I'm concerned, I'm just living life the same way you nobles do," I said.

"Y-you uncouth—! How dare you insult the nobility! We may not look like we're doing anything to the likes of you, but we work tirelessly to ensure the citizenry can have a peaceful life. Surely *you* have it in you to give something back to the populace. Try doing it for the people you love instead of for money. Take down a monster or two that's doing people harm—it would be better than just lying around like this..."

Laudable indeed. I flopped around so my back was to Darkness, buried my face into the sofa, and yawned.

"Hey!" Darkness exclaimed, but I ignored her. This was probably the first time

in her whole pampered noble life that someone had been so rude while she was talking so passionately.

My name is Kazuma Satou.

A man who never bends to authority.

When an authority figure like Darkness said to work, it was practically my duty to stubbornly refuse.

Darkness, annoyed by my attitude, came stomping over to the sofa and grabbed me by the back of my shirt.

"All right, Kazuma, you're coming with us. You're going to become an even bigger lump than you are if you don't move sometimes. Come help us hunt— H-hey, you! Let go of that! Don't you fight me!"

I had clung tight to the sofa, so Darkness started trying to pry me off in earnest...!

It was Megumin who stopped her.

"Come now, Darkness, let me handle this." She knelt down so she was level with where I was clinging to the couch, and she smiled kindly at me. "Kazuma, please let us see you in action once in a while. Won't you show me how reliable you are in a moment of crisis?"

I glanced at her for just an instant.

"....."

Then I looked back in the direction of the sofa and clung even tighter.

"Huh?!" Megumin seemed to be slightly shocked by this.

My name is Kazuma Satou.

I am not a man to be dissuaded from my goals by a moment of sentiment.

Yes, I'd been feeling pretty good about Megumin and me recently, but it would take more than that to sway me. My schedule for today was already packed anyway: I was going to have myself a little something to drink, take a nap until evening, and then go out on the town to enjoy the nightlife.

I held fast to the sofa, still stretched out, and glanced at the two of them

without moving. "...You exterminate monsters on sight because they hurt people. And you let other creatures live because they benefit people. I hate that kind of arrogant attitude. We should be kinder to monsters. I wish you would both remember the goodness of heart you had when you were children."

Then I popped a pea into my mouth and rolled over once more toward the sofa's backrest...

"Y-you go looking for good monsters with bloodlust in your eyes when you need money! Don't you start giving us sermons *now!*"

"She's right! You're one to talk, considering how you just recently ordered an expensive Duxion to cook so you could raise your level without even trying! Grab that end, Darkness! Let's tear him off of there!"

Darkness took hold of my feet, and Megumin got a grip on my back, and then they started trying to pull me off the sofa. I could feel Megumin's body heat against my back. "Yeah," I said, "push your chest right up against my back like that. That *might* get me to loosen my grip on this couch."

"You are the worst! I knew this man was the worst! Darkness, let's get some rope and drag him to the Guild!"

"I-I'm starting to think we really should just dump this guy somewhere...!"

They didn't stop trying to get me off the couch, though.

That was when Aqua came back with a clear glass, a simple side dish, and a plate with what looked to be a lime or something on it.

"...And what kind of new game have you come up with this time? Tell me the rules, if you don't mind."

"It's not a game! Megumin and I were thinking we should all go on a hunting quest together. But Kazuma won't stop bellyaching about how he doesn't want to go... Aqua, please, please don't let yourself be poisoned by this man..." Darkness was looking at the plate Aqua was holding, appearing thoroughly distressed.

Poisoned? The nerve! Aqua had always been this way.

Aqua cocked her head, then popped a slice of lime from the plate into her

mouth, grimacing at the tartness.

"Hmm? I wouldn't mind going, but I think it'll be a tall order to get Kazuma to come along, considering how he's been a total, ridiculous NEET ever since the festival ended. How about we just leave pathetic Mr. Weakest Class there and go by ourselves?"

She just haad to go and say something I couldn't ignore.

I sat up angrily. "...Now listen here, O *Advanced Class* Aqua. Just think about it. You know I'm the strongest member of this party. And you think you can still go around calling me Mr. Weakest Class? There's no real point comparing how strong we are, considering each of us has different roles in the party, but it still pisses me off to hear talk like that from Miss Weak Advanced Class."

I couldn't have been any clearer.

Aqua, ignoring the tartness, popped another piece of lime into her mouth. "Kazuma, you've been under the impression you're the strongest one in this party? I grant that your skills are convenient. And I know you can render even Darkness powerless with Drain Touch... But have you forgotten? Stupid Lich skills like that only work on me when I'm not paying any attention to you at all. Do you really think you can win in a fair fight?"

"Hang on, since when am I the low bar around here?" Darkness said. "I've been honing some skills lately that'll help me resist Drain Touch and magical attacks and raise my defense against status conditions..."

It would be stupid to rise to Aqua's lime-mouthing provocations. Stupid, yes, but I couldn't let a line like that go unanswered.

"Aqua, listen up. Surely you don't think Drain Touch is my only weapon? I'm more versatile than someone like I'm-So-Tough-but-I-Can't-Hit-Squat Darkness would ever understand, okay? I have a whole arsenal of magic spells and skills. I can snipe from a distance or swing a sword from up close. You really think you have any chance of beating me?"

"H-hey! I may never hit anything, but I'm confident in my endurance! If the battle dragged on, I might turn out to be your equal...!"

Aqua, meanwhile, blinked slowly in surprise. Then she set down her plate on

the table. “Well now, my dear Kazuma, I think you’re missing something, don’t you? I’m an Arch-priest. But I’m also a Renaissance woman who can do a little bit of everything outside of the highest of high-stat-point offensive magic. A little sword here, a little bow there. If I buffed myself and came at you, Kazuma, you wouldn’t even last one minute. Oh, and...” She gave a casual toss of her long, blue hair and said confidently, “I guess you’ve learned the Bind skill? I hate to tell you this, but Darkness is about the only person you can expect to catch with it. Me, I have Sacred Dispel, which can forcibly negate just about any magic or skill. Plus, we’ve known each other long enough that I’m wise to all your little tricks, understand?”

“H-hey... Yes, Bind leaves me powerless. I admit that, but... Hang on, Aqua, if you could do that all along, why didn’t you free me the other day...?”

Aqua was brimming with confidence, wearing a smile that was totally uncalled for.

“...Okay,” I said flatly, “you’re on.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Darkness blushing for some reason and Megumin giving her a consoling pat on the shoulder.

2

And so I arrived at the Adventurers Guild. I wondered how long it had been since I had last shown up here.

I spotted familiar faces here and there; when people I knew spotted me, they waved and said hello.

I walked past a flaxen-haired punk grumbling into his wine cup, slumped over the table even though it wasn’t even noon, and I headed for the board where all the quests were posted.

Beside me, Aqua was having a staring contest with the quest board, trying to find prey that would serve for our contest. Far be it from us to settle our differences with an actual fight; we had decided a monster hunt would determine which of us was stronger.

Megumin would be the judge. Concerned that battle would be difficult for Aqua, who didn't carry a weapon, I stuck Darkness with her as a sort of bonus.

Though, granted, being called a "bonus" made Darkness cry.

The battle would be decided by which of us took out the most monsters, so ideally, we would find an area with a large monster population. It wasn't breeding season, so the frogs weren't out in full force, and even if they had been, other adventurers would have quickly culled their numbers.

I heard muttering from beside me.

"...‘Hunt a pair of manticores. Exterminate a powerful subspecies wyvern in the mountains before it can finish building its nest...’ None of these has quite the impact I’m looking for..."

Clearly, I had better be the one to pick the quest.

...And that was when I found it.

Beginner’s Bane & Goblin Hunt.

The Beginner's Bane, a monster we seemed to share some sort of unfortunate connection with. It was a powerful enemy more suited to mid-level parties—and one I had faced more than once.

Well, we weren't novices anymore. We'd already gone toe to toe with enemies way stronger than a Beginner's Bane.

Time for some payback.

We were practically veterans at this point, yet we had never beaten one of these things.

I tore the paper off the board. Immediately, three frowning faces turned on me.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one who had been traumatized by our experiences with this thing.

I had once briefly joined a different party, and this was the monster we had ended up running away from.

"This thing uses goblins or kobolds or other weak monsters as bait to attract

low-level adventurers, right? The winner of the contest will be whoever offs the most members of its little horde. And...how about extra points to the one who does in the Beginner's Bane? We're veteran adventurers now... Don't you think it's about time we took one of these guys out?"

That was my speech.

The others, finally convinced, all started to smile.

An eyewitness report placed the Beginner's Bane in a copse of trees a fair distance from town.

It wasn't big enough to be called a proper forest, but apparently, a troop of armed goblins had appeared there. And a Beginner's Bane was skulking around nearby, keeping an eye on them.

That was one clever monster, using as bait the kinds of weak but rewarding prey new adventurers loved to hunt—but right now, it looked like it wasn't home.

"I see those stupid goblins! My God Blow can take care of the likes of them in one shot!"

There they were, just like Aqua said, digging up potato-like things near the roots of trees or smacking the trunks to make little berries fall down. Maybe they were hungry. The goblins, these so-called major monsters, were single-mindedly focused on their hunt for food.

We watched them from the underbrush, closing the distance to them bit by bit.

There weren't very many of them, though, maybe just three.

"You couldn't even handle yourself against frogs before," I said to Aqua, who was acting all high and mighty beside me.

"Those big, soft stomachs absorb my blows. Certain things match up better against certain other things, you know. Did you not realize that? What are you, stupid?"

I gave her a good pinch on the cheek, sending her halfway to tears, and that was when the goblins seemed to notice us.

Crap! This is because we made all that noise! Idiots!

Two of the goblins, when they saw our weapons, froze in place and trembled helplessly. The third let out an earsplitting screech. Maybe he was calling his friends or something.

Our best bet would be to clean out this mess before the Beginner's Bane got here.

As I was thinking all this, Megumin said, "Very good. Begin the goblin hunt!"

That was the signal. *Someone* took a step back.

"Just you watch, Kazuma! A few goblins? I'll finish them off in no time flat!" Then Aqua charged eagerly at the monsters. She was glowing faintly; I guessed she must have cast some kind of buff on herself. Darkness, her heavy armor rattling and clanking, tried desperately to follow her.

I calmly watched them go, then readied my bow from a distance...!

Shwing!

""Oh!""

My arrow went flying ahead of the two of them, sniping the goblin Aqua was about to attack right in the head. And while she and Darkness stood there frozen with shock...!

"Brgggh?!"

"Gyagh?!"

The goblins were hardly twenty yards away. With my Deadeye skill, there was no way I could miss. So I had an early lead of three goblins on Aqua and Darkness.

"Now just a minute, Kazuma! What do you think you're doing, killing the goblin I was about to fight?!" Aqua was clearly unhappy.

"Taking out the enemies before you can get to them. Sounds like a winning strategy to me."

Aqua and Darkness exclaimed in unison: ""You lowlife!""

I continued to tramp through the underbrush.

"Over there! I just saw something over that way! You can't escape my eyes, Kazuma!" I heard someone yelling behind me.

Darkness's voice followed. "You sneak, stealing our kills from us! Now I'm mad! Come out and fight like a man!"

I was just wandering aimlessly through the forest. So far, I had eight kills, and they had zero. I was using my Ambush skill to stalk them, letting them draw out the goblins while I sniped from a safe position. A perfect, flawless, beautiful plan—which made my opponents so angry, for some reason, that now they were hunting *me*.

They couldn't win their little contest, so they were resorting to violence—and they called *me* a lowlife.

The fact that I couldn't seem to shake Darkness in spite of all the armor she was wearing must have been thanks to Aqua's strengthening buffs. I usually didn't think too much about support magic, but when your enemies were using it, it turned out to be pretty fearsome stuff.

I used Ambush to keep running away, then magically scattered some water on the ground and immediately froze it.

Then I deliberately deactivated my Ambush skill for a moment. It was about as primitive as traps got, but...

"Ooooh, now I've got you, Kazuma! It looks like you've finally accepted your inevitable f— Hrrrgh!"

"We've got you now, Kazuma! *Hff, hff...* T-today, I swear I'll finally have my reverrgh!"

Both girls took spectacular tumbles.

"Woooooooooh!"

I let out a great whoop as Aqua jumped to her feet.

"Darkness, let's surround that guy! And then let's beat the daylights out of him! He's gonna be such a mess when we're through with him!"



Darkness was dragging herself up off the frozen ground. "...We thought we were chasing *you* down, and yet you so easily left us at your mercy... I admit it's painful, and yet... Is it strange of me to think it's not bad, either...?"

Yes. Yes, *it is.*

Megumin, who had finally caught up with us, appeared from the bushes. "...Ugh, what is going on here? Please don't you all forget about the goblin hunt."

Hey, I wanted to focus on the hunt just as much as the next guy, but *they* insisted on calling me a lowlife for using my brilliant strategy.

Still, Megumin's comment prompted me to activate my Sense Foe skill to see if there were any goblins around...

"So you've finally stopped running away, Kazuma," Aqua crowed. "You can start by saying you're sorry. *Then* we'll decide what to do with you, you freeloading NEET."

"Shut up a second—we're surrounded."

Should I have expected it? Yeah, probably. With all that shouting and rushing around, we were practically begging to be attacked.

Now Aqua and Darkness realized we were in deep.

We could see goblins peering at us from here and there among the trees. Probably more than a dozen of them—certainly more than you could take on solo.

And on top of that...

"Well, well, look who it is."

The goblins had us surrounded, sure. But someone else strode among them like their protector, a black beast.

A Beginner's Bane.

It was time to get our revenge on this critter so we could finally hold our heads up high as a veteran party.

Even in the middle of our argument, it looked like we all felt the same way about that, at least.

Darkness stepped forward to draw the enemy's attention. I assumed she was setting herself up as a Decoy, an ability that would allow her to keep the enemy occupied.

"Huh. I guess I've got no choice, Kazuma—I'll buff you, too." Aqua cast some magic on me as she spoke. My body glowed for a second, and then I felt my natural abilities increase dramatically.

Awesome. That would be the leg up I needed.

Darkness to defend us, Aqua to heal. And me, orchestrating the whole operation.

Each of us had a role. There was no need to decide who was number one or anything. I started to feel a little bad about having lost my temper.

I took out an arrow, got my bow ready, and came up on Darkness's right side.

"Don't worry," I said, "I won't make a mistake and shoot you in the back or anything. I'm counting on you, Darkness."

"And I'm counting on you. Don't worry—I won't let a single enemy get behind us. You handle the offense."

Darkness stabbed her gigantic sword into the ground, gazing forward as if all that she saw was hers, never looking back. Just seeing her like that made me feel as if we could take on any enemy at all.

"And if you get hurt, Darkness, I'll heal you right up, so don't worry about that, either! Let's go! This time, we show that creature what we're made of!" Aqua puffed out her chest as if to say that with a team like this, there was nothing in the world to be afraid of.

I glanced at Megumin. "Hey, Megumin, remember back at the mansion when you were haranguing me to let you see me in action, begging me to show you how cool I could be in a crisis? Well, look closely, because you're gonna see that if we work together, no enemy can—"

"Expllosion!!!"

The whole area was filled with a roar and a rush of air. The massive blast that had cut me off before I could finish my awesome speech swallowed up all the

goblins, the Beginner's Bane, and more besides. It got all the trees nearby, and us, too.

On the very front row, Darkness, her gigantic sword, and her heavy armor got blown backward into Aqua and me, and all of us were thrown around like rag dolls.

...I landed face-first on the ground and peeked up as carefully as I could to discover the goblins and the Bane were both already gone. Darkness's eyes were rolling in her head like maybe she had been hit by some flying debris.

"Koff... U-ughhh... By—by bouth, id's full ob dirt..." Aqua, like me, had landed on the ground.

Also on the ground, right beside me, was the prostrate form of the person who had brought this catastrophe upon us.

That person said flatly, "We always take the ripest opportunities. An instinct any member of the Crimson Magic Clan cannot resist. Also, this shows that *I* am the strongest member of this party."

"You impossible, impossible woman!" I exclaimed. "And here I thought you'd been growing up a little recently!! Weren't you supposed to be the judge anyway?!"

3

That pretty much sums up how we were passing the time these days. One such day, though...

Dust was dancing in the shafts of morning light that peeked in through the window.

"Strange to see you up so early, Kazuma. What's gotten into you? Ready to go on another quest?"

Darkness was holding a saucer in one hand, drinking her after-breakfast tea, when I came into the idyllic dining area. She sounded surprised to see me.

"I'm not 'up.' I never went to sleep. It's so hot during this season, all you can do is make your room freezing cold and sit around doing nothing."

"O-oh. I'm glad to hear some things never change. Speaking of which, I thought about this on our quest the other day: You hardly ever buy weapons or armor anymore. It's like you've given up even the pretense of being an adventurer."

As a matter of fact, I *had* pretty much given up on the idea of being an adventurer.

"Eh, I'm thinking it's about time I quit adventuring. The next step is to become a businessman, make some easy money, and live a life of dissolution."

"You just have to say something idiotic every so often or you don't feel right, do you?" Megumin, sipping tea like Darkness, said with exasperation. "You haven't even been seriously injured, and you want to quit adventuring while you're still in your teens? That is simply not how it works."

I ignored her, grabbing the newspaper that was sticking through the mail slot on the front door. "Say what you like. An adventurer with my list of achievements *should* just sit around reading the newspaper, keeping an eye on the world situation. It's best for everyone if I save up my strength for moments of crisis."

I was just about to plop myself down on the sofa when—

"Aww, Kazuma, lemme read that first. I just wanna see the funnies. I really want to know what happens to General Winter. He set out on a journey to rescue his captured sprites."

"Just hold on—I want to know the same thing. That's why I even bothered to pick up this stupid newspaper."

Megumin watched Aqua and me argue over the comics, looking like maybe she had an opinion to offer herself, when a particular headline caught my eye.

"Demon King's General Turns the Tide on the Front Line. Capital in Danger—? Hey, that sounds serious. I wonder if my dear little sister Iris is all right."

"You impudent dog! How dare you arbitrarily call Lady Iris your little sister! Still, if it's true the capital is in trouble... Here, let me see that."

I handed Darkness the paper, which she studied intently. "It sounds like a

fortress on the front line is under attack by a general of the Demon King. The article says the general is a dark god who wields fearsome magic.”

“What?!”

Darkness hadn’t actually sounded very interested, but Megumin leaped to her feet.

“What’s up, Megumin? ...Ahhh, I get it. I know how you love the words *dark god*. You keep saying that crazy stuff about how you were a god of destruction in your past life or something.”

“It’s not crazy—it is, I must think, true—but that’s not what this is about! I think I have an idea who that deity might be...”

Aqua, reading the comics over Darkness’s shoulder, frowned. “I don’t know anything about any dark gods, but you could be in line for some serious divine punishment if you keep calling yourself a god.”

“Look who’s talking, Miss I’m-a-Goddess,” Megumin muttered as she picked up the newspaper Aqua had flung at her.

“The evil deity who has turned the tide of the battle goes by the name Wolbach—”

4

The next morning.

Dawn was breaking pleasantly, and I was just thinking about crawling under my blankets and going to sleep—one of my favorite moments of the day—when I was rudely interrupted.

“Kazuma, are you awake? Considering it’s only just dawn, I assume you are, yes? Come, then, let us go forth to the capital, Kazuma! The world needs us right now!”

The one who pushed open the door was Megumin, highly excitable despite the early hour.

I stuck my head out from under the blankets. “...What are you jabbering on

about now? Your name is already weird enough, and you act even weirder. Just leave it at that. Why would we even go to the capital? Not to brag, but I could get in a lot of trouble if I show my face there. I can't tell you why, but if it weren't for that, I would've moved to my little sister's home long ago, believe me."

"Still you insist on this ridiculous little-sister talk... Well, perhaps that's perfect. Yes, consider your little sister Iris! She will be in danger if this goes on! Kazuma, is your love for your little sister so shallow?!"

I sat up, caught by both Megumin's passion and her unexpected words. "I always assumed you and Iris hated each other. Was I wrong? Oh, you're talking about that newspaper article from yesterday. Eh, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried about Iris, but we're dealing with a general here. Even if I went..."

And heck, apparently there was some kind of god involved this time. That wasn't like any of the other generals of the Demon King I'd fought so far. This had *last boss* written all over it.

Then again, considering what I knew about the powers of the person closest to me who insisted on calling herself a goddess, maybe this general wouldn't be such a big deal.

Megumin, though, was practically champing at the bit. "The article said the general was a dark god, and I just cannot let that go. Look, you remember how we talked about what Chomusuke really is? This is merely my intuition, but I can't help thinking she may *be* that dark god."

"The other day, that dark god of yours was being chased around by a newborn chick."

I wasn't about to believe any of this, but Megumin looked dead serious. "Kazuma, I won't ask you to fight this general. This is a score I'll settle myself. But I'm begging you. Come with me. Be there with me."

"Absolutely not. Why in the hell should I walk right into the jaws of danger like that? Do you understand what's happening here? The front line is bad enough, and the enemy just added a *god*, get it? We aren't talking about slimes or undead anymore, okay? Gods, those are last-boss material."

In the face of my instant retort, Megumin replied, "...Yes, Kazuma, I very much imagined you might say something like that. We have certainly been living together long enough for me to expect it. The Beginner's Bane quest the other day made it abundantly clear." At that point, she blushed a little, then peered at me where I was seated on the bed and said, "My goodness, you are the most obstinate person. Then let me make you a proposition. If you go with me... I mean, after everything is said and done, I could see myself spending a night in your room..."

Her voice got smaller and smaller as she talked, and she pulled her hat farther and farther down over her eyes, embarrassed.

"Yeah, sure. Kazuma sleepy now. See you tomorrow."

"What?!"

I guess she had been feeling pretty confident about that ploy, because she looked a little shocked. My reaction had caught her off guard and left her floundering.

"N-now wait just a minute. I worked up much resolve and said something pretty incredible just now, I think."

"...How many times do you think you can fool me with a line like that? Just how easy do you think I am? Geez, I've got Darkness trying to get me to go after a bounty head for one little kiss, and now this... Both of you are way too impressed with yourselves."

"?!" Megumin froze, totally taken aback.

"I'm not your average hormone-addled virgin, okay? I'll grant that you and Darkness are nice to look at, but what's behind those pretty faces is a big, *big* minus. Maybe you could think about that and figure out how to be a little sweeter."

I remembered what had happened just the other night. I wasn't about to be duped again.

My flat declaration left Megumin shaking. "What, are you still all upset about the other night?! You've hardly looked unhappy when I've gotten closer to you recently, Kazuma, so don't play at being all cool now!"

“H-h-hardly looked unhappy’? What the hell does that even mean? I think you’re reading too much into things! When did I say anything that made me seem even remotely interested in you?!”

Let me tell you something about men: We’re creatures who’ll fall for anything that shows the slightest bit of interest in us. And that had been my downfall recently. But I could no longer be deceived so easily. Megumin was pretty, but there was nothing else good about her.

“You’re the worst! So what, then?! Have you been trying to spend the night with a girl you don’t even like?! And to think, you were expecting so much back *then!!*”

“N-no way, idiot, I didn’t *have* any expectations; I knew there had to be some kind of catch. Don’t get full of yourself, jailbait!”

Aaand that was the last straw. Megumin attacked me!

Wide-awake after a life-or-death wrestling match with Megumin, I regretfully gave up any hope of sleeping and went down to read the newspaper on the sofa again.

“Adventurer Ranking Number 3: Kyouya Mitsurugi’? Don’t make me laugh—how the hell did he get number three when I’m not even on this list?! Where’s the company that publishes this paper? I’ll set ‘em straight!”

Darkness, petting Zel with Aqua nearby, smirked. “That’s a ranking of *active* adventurers, so naturally, someone who’s just shut himself up in town wouldn’t be on it. If you want to be on the list, you’ve got to get out there and adventure, see? Want me to come with you as reinforcement? I’ve been doing nothing but paperwork recently, and it’s driving me nuts. I’d be happy to go with you.”

So Megumin had already gotten to her.

Darkness’s attempt to make me take the bait was all too transparent, but then Megumin jumped in triumphantly. “Yes, indeed, it’s just as Darkness says. Do you want to be part of the ranking? Do you want even greater fame? Then let us stand upon the battlefield together! Let us defeat another general of the Demon King!”

I ignored them and waved to Aqua, who was cooing, “Gimme your paw!

Emperor Zel, give me your paw!” as she tried to teach the chick a trick. All she was getting out of it was pecked fingers.

“Hey, Aqua,” I said, “back me up here. These two think we should go defend the fortress on the front line. I don’t think they’ve learned that every time we go farther than the front yard, something bad happens. You don’t feel like fighting any generals of any Demon King, either, do you?”

Darkness and Megumin might be full of bloodlust, but I was confident Aqua would feel the way I did.

I never expected her response.

“Me? I wouldn’t mind going. That general is causing all kinds of trouble for people, right? Surely you don’t expect the pure, upstanding Lady Aqua to ignore all those seeking salvation by her hand, do you?”

What was with her all of a sudden? Maybe it was something she ate.

Megumin and Darkness seemed as surprised as I was; they looked at Aqua with worried expressions.

“Geez, change of heart much? You’re usually the first one to cry and shout that you don’t want anything to do with something like this.”

“That’s because most of the monsters around here aren’t even worth my time. But now someone or something comes here calling themselves a god—a dark god, but still—without even the common courtesy to introduce themselves to me. As the avatar of the Axis Church, it’s my job to teach them some manners.”

She sounded like some low-level street punk defending their turf. And I realized the entire situation was going in a very bad direction.

“No way am I going. I don’t like this one bit. I hate that every battle I get into seems to be with a general of the Demon King. Anyway, there are lots of adventurers stronger than me out there, right? Let them worry about the capital. Why are you all so eager for this?”

“Quit acting like a spoiled child and just give up; you should know when you’re beat. It’s all right—I’ll finish that fiend in one blast! There’s nothing to

worry about this time. You just have to come with me on the off chance something goes horribly wrong!"

"You know this lot—and you think there's only an *off* chance something will go horribly wrong? If you can look at our history and honestly tell me you don't think anything will happen, I'll go with you! ...Hey, don't look at the ceiling—look at me!!"

I grabbed Megumin by the chin, trying to force her to look at me when she attempted to avert her eyes.

That was when a very reluctant-sounding knock came at the door.

"H-hello... I think this belongs to you..."

And there was Yunyun, carrying Chomusuke.

5

"This tea isn't much, but please enjoy."

"Th-thanks... Er, Miss Aqua. Is this...?"

"It's just some cheap tea, but it's pretty good, isn't it? I bought it with the allowance Kazuma gave me, and I've been drinking a lot of it recently."

"Oh... Yes, it's quite good..." Yunyun looked troubled as she held the cup of tea Aqua had poured for her.

I glanced over to see that the contents of the cup were translucent...

Hey, that's just hot water.

Aqua had actually been thoughtful enough to brew some tea, but it looked like she had accidentally purified it into plain hot water.

Just as thoughtfully, to spare the obviously pleased Aqua, Yunyun destroyed the evidence by quickly drinking the cup down. Chomusuke was still in Yunyun's arms and showed no sign of moving; the young wizard looked at us, concerned.

"Um, I was taking a walk in the park when I found a kid bullying Chomusuke..."

The winged cat probably looked like an attractive playmate to some

troublemaking little twerp.

I looked at the motionless Chomusuke, then whispered to Megumin beside me, “Hey, your alleged dark god wasn’t happy just being chased around by a chick—now she’s getting herself bullied by little kids, huh?”

“Y-Yunyun, you’ve come just in time! As a matter of fact, well, ahem, it’s no big deal, but a slightly terrible thing has happened!” Megumin passed Yunyun the newspaper as if in an effort to ignore me.

“S-slightly terrible?” Obviously disturbed by this, Yunyun took the proffered paper uncertainly. “Ummm... Let’s see. The daily funnies: General Winter goes on a journey. Pen Pal Classifieds Corner? Say, Megumin, if you don’t need this paper, could I have it? Just the pen pal section?”

“What are you even looking at?! This one! This article right here!” Megumin grabbed the paper and pointed.

Yunyun looked doubtfully at the headline, and her reaction was downright theatrical. “Hwwwwhhhaaaa?! J-j-j-just a second! Megumin, could this be...?”

“Th-this time you’re acting *too* surprised, Yunyun! The article isn’t *that* startling!”

“I don’t think I’m acting too surprised, and it *is* that startling! This dark god, Wolbach... She was originally sealed up in *our* village, wasn’t she?”



“Shhh! Not so loud!”

...Hold on.

“Did I hear what I think I just heard?”

“You imagined it, Kazuma. This girl says the strangest things; that’s why no one in Crimson Magic Village wants to talk to her.”

Megumin looked pointedly away from me, but Yunyun was emphatic. “Wait just a second, Megumin, you’re the one acting strange! And, Kazuma, please listen! This dark god, Wolbach, used to be sealed up in our village. One day the seal got broken somehow, and Megumin secretly went to try to make the god her familiar...”

Megumin tried desperately to cover Yunyun’s mouth. “S-stop that right now! You mustn’t expose the humiliation of the Crimson Magic Village to the entire world! We just have to go to the capital, stop the evil-god imposter rampaging around there, and then act like none of this ever happened!”

Darkness was pressing her hands to her temples.

“Hey, Darkness,” I said. “Please pay a visit to the authorities and ask them if we can borrow that bell of theirs. The one that rings when someone’s lying.”

“Y-yeah, sure. Ugh, please don’t let this get any worse...”

“I—I haven’t done anything wrong! My lawyer! I want my lawyer!”

Yunyun and Aqua had to restrain the hysterical Megumin between them, while Darkness left the house, looking like she might burst into tears herself.

Several hours later.

Armed with the lie-detecting bell, we surrounded Megumin, who had been forced into a formal sitting position, her hands tied with Bind.

“Okay. It’s time for some answers... This dark god Wolbach that the article mentions—who or what is she, exactly?”

“As it happens, Yunyun and I have had our fates entwined with this dark deity. It is for this reason that I felt compelled to learn all I could about her... Wolbach is the god who rules over sloth and violence.”

I glanced at the bell, suspicious that Megumin would be so forthcoming. But it didn't make a sound, and Yunyun didn't say anything, either, implicitly confirming the story.

"What was a threat like that doing at the Crimson Magic Village?"

"Long ago, our ancestors fought a desperate battle against this dark god and ultimately succeeded in sealing her away. Then they brought her to the village so she was never out of their sight."

Ding, ding.

The bell jingled immediately.

".....Somebody said it would sound really cool to be the place where the dark god was sealed up, so they freed a deity someone else had already sealed away, resealed it in a corner of the village, and made it a tourist attraction."

This time the bell stayed quiet.

"Hey," I muttered, drawing the attention of not just Megumin but Yunyun, too.

Darkness, who had been holding her head until that moment, said, "Th-that's enough; what's done is done. Now we understand why Crimson Magic Village has a dark god sealed away in it. So why was the seal broken? And who did it?"

"I must assume one of the deity's dark servants broke the seal in order to restore the goddess to full strength and destroy humanity—"

Ding, ding.

~~~~~ .....

We all stared intently at Megumin, and she bowed her head in resignation.

".....My little sister was playing around and released the dark god by accident."

"Wait, what?! Megumin, you never mentioned that part to me!" Yunyun sounded as surprised about this as any of us, but then...

*Ding, ding.*

"Huh?!" Megumin herself sounded startled to hear our lie detector jingle. A

moment later, though, she clapped her hands. “Oh, that’s right! The dark god’s seal has actually been broken twice in the past. The first time was when I accidentally released her, and a mysterious woman passing by saved my life. Komekko’s breaking the seal would be the second time.” She looked downright pleased to see that the bell didn’t ring.

“What in the heeeeeeeeell?!”

“H-hey, what are you doing?! St—! Stop it! I’m answering all the questions I’ve been asked, so calm down!”

“You Crimson Magic morons never come up with any *good* surprises,” I muttered in exasperation. Aqua, though, seemed weirdly excited about something; she grabbed the magic bell.

“Megumin, Megumin, do you really love the Axis Church? Or do you hate it? Cecily told me you seem to have some kind of connection with my church and that a good, strong push might get you to join.”

“Push me as hard as you like—I would never join you! Cecily never causes me anything but trouble, and I want nothing to do with a gang of problem children like the Axis Church. You ask whether I love or hate the church? I most certainly despise—”

*Ding, ding.*

Aqua looked at the jingling bell, her face aglow, while Megumin glanced away in humiliation.

“...Some members of the church have been of help to me from time to time, and, well, maybe *despise* is too strong a word...”

I had to admit, I was pretty impressed with how Aqua had decided to put the all-knowing bell to use. I’d always taken her for a garden-variety idiot, but was it possible she was actually a twisted genius?

“Say, Megumin,” I interjected, “how do you feel about us? Answer using the words *love* or *hate*.”

“Mm, I have the same question,” Darkness said. “You made charms for everyone not long ago, so how about it?”

"...G-geez, surely there's no need to ask such a thing right here and now... Hey, can everyone stop smirking at me like that?!"

As I was busy teasing Megumin with the bell, though, Yunyun spoke up. "U-um... So if the dark god behind the broken seal was really your cat, but the newspaper article still mentions the dark god Wolbach, what's going on...?" She was stroking Chomusuke innocently; she almost sounded like she was only just remembering all of this...

My eyes went wide, and I looked at the bell, but it didn't even quiver.

"Okay, hold on just a second. Let's go over that again. You're saying *this* cat is the dark god? That Chomusuke is actually an evil deity?!"

"I believe I have been telling you that for some time now. Chomusuke is a dark god and my familiar. In fact, I wonder what that general of the Demon King's army is thinking, taking Chomusuke's true name for herself."

What Megumin was saying sounded even crazier than what Yunyun had said, but still the bell didn't make a sound.

"Seriously, *this* cat? This sweet, innocent house pet is a dark god? This bell isn't broken, is it?"

Me, I like cats, and I had spent too much time brushing Chomusuke and playing with her to believe she was really something so awful.

And then in came Aqua with the non sequiturs.

"Hey, Kazuma. I've been thinking this for a while now, but you're such a kind and wonderful person. I'm really grateful to have you in my life."

"Oh? What's all this? I've been privately thinking I've gotten pretty popular with the ladies. Are you hot for me now, too? Shower me with all the compliments you want; you won't get any money out of m—"

*Ding, ding.*

Aqua nodded in satisfaction at the jingling magical instrument. "Sounds good. The bell's working fine."

"All right, let's step outside. Lately, you've been getting all your laughs at my expense. It's high time I paid you back, with interest."

I was just standing up to go after Aqua when Megumin, who had been sitting on the carpet where we put her until that moment, seemed to get an idea. She suddenly bowed her head.

"...Kazuma, I'm sorry to ask this of you, but could you come with me? There have been several occasions in the past when Chomusuke was nearly abducted, and I believe the subject of that newspaper article has something to do with them. As her owner, I feel compelled to deal with this self-proclaimed dark god calling herself Wolbach."

And then Megumin, with her short temper and her distaste for bowing to anyone, dipped her head again.

We would be facing a general of the Demon King calling herself a dark god, one who had apparently turned the tide of battle single-handedly.

Honestly, I didn't want to go. I really didn't, but...

"...Please?" Megumin looked up at me pleadingly, her red eyes wavering.

I don't like to think of myself as an easy mark, but at that moment, even I didn't have any other choice.

"Fine! Fine! I'll go!"

6

It was the day after I accepted Megumin's request. We had to get ready for what promised to be a long journey, so I told everyone we would leave tomorrow. As for me, I was seated on the living room sofa, using my Smith skill to prepare a certain item.

Darkness was seated right next to me, watching with interest, while Aqua was perched on the other side of me.

"Hey, Kazuma," she said. "Whatcha got there?"

"It's a potion I bought at Wiz's shop. It explodes if you hit it with enough impact."

"What?!"

Darkness stood up quickly at that, and she and Aqua both backed away a step.

My materials were spread out on the table in front of me. They included paper and a syringe, along with a special clay created by allowing a certain highly absorbent, readily flammable plant to rot.

For a while now I had been using the syringe to siphon up little helpings of the potion, then depositing them onto the clay sitting on the paper.

Aqua backed away slowly, anxiously saying, “H-hey... Why do you have something so dangerous here? And what in the world are you going to do with it?”

I picked up the potion and calmly carried it some distance away. Then I set it gently on the ground.

“Y’know, I’ve always assumed this potion was magic. But listen, it’ll explode if you expose it to fire, too. Just one drop of this stuff anywhere near an open flame, and *boom*. That made me think, maybe it’s closer to nitroglycerin.”

We were heading into battle with a general of the Demon King. Even one of those adventurers who’d been given a cheat might find themselves overwhelmed.

Back when Darkness was almost married off to Alderp, the former governor, I had attempted to replicate a certain something here in this world. At the time, I hadn’t had any substitute for nitroglycerin, and I’d only been able to imitate the look of the stuff.

And then, after I’d finally created my knockoff explosive, Megumin had thrown it away.

I turned to the perplexed-looking Aqua and Darkness. “This will enable us to produce something very specific. Think about what we’re facing after we leave tomorrow. If we can make this work, we’ll have an ace up our sleeves.”

Aqua looked at the stuff spread out on the table and seemed to put the pieces together.

Yes, it was the fabled explosive—

"I get it... It's summer now. The Japanese blood running through your veins is eager for some fireworks!"

"It's dynamite."

Darkness still looked confused. "Ny-troh-glisserwhat? Die-nuh-might? I've never heard of any of these things. What are they used for?"

I showed her the three sticks I'd already completed. Ever since Megumin had thrown away my work in progress, I'd been trying them out whenever I could find a few minutes, but with the start of our journey coming up the next day, it was crunch time.

I held up the dynamite-like thing I'd made; Aqua looked at it intently. Then she covered it with both her hands as if to hide it.

"Kazuma, watch this!"

...?

Aqua set my "dynamite" on the table. But wait, it was obviously about half as large as it had been a moment ago...

"It got smaller!" she announced.

"You idiot!!"

Aqua quickly swept the shrunken dynamite back up, but unlike the sleight of hand a normal stage performer might do, here it was obvious that the dynamite had actually become physically smaller.

"You...! Look what you've done, and after all the time I spent on that! What am I supposed to do with this?! Can you put it back the way it was?! Is this even usable?!"

"Of course I can't change it back," Aqua said, with no sign of remorse for her stupid, unasked-for party trick.

"Do you understand what's going on? I made this for our trip *tomorrow*. You have nimble hands. Help me make more to replace the one you just ruined."

"I could...but I should warn you. One out of three of them is probably going to shrink."

"Why?! Do you have a shrink ray inside you or something?!"

I couldn't just throw away the tiny dynamite, so I stuffed it into my pocket, still heated over the fact that it was now pocket-size.

If you could still use it at that size, there wouldn't be much to complain about, though.

Darkness, all but ignoring us as she picked up one of the completed sticks of dynamite off the table, asked with interest, "So what is it?"

"Tell you what—after we have breakfast, I'll show you. But it's pretty surprising, all right? It'll probably be extra shocking for Megumin." I let a little arrogance creep into my voice.

"Breakfast time! Come along, everyone, clear the table and wash your hands... What? Why is everyone looking at me?"

Megumin had arrived with breakfast, as if on cue.

We were among some rocky hills, well outside of town. This was where Megumin liked to go on her "explosion walks."

"How unusual. You all don't normally come with me. It makes me wish we had brought some lunches to eat while we're out."

Megumin must have been pleased that everyone had decided to come with her for her daily explosion, because pretty soon she was swinging her staff around and in high spirits.

Not long afterward, she was casting her spell...

*"Expllosion!!!"*

There was a huge blast, and the entire area shuddered. Her magic, the pinnacle of destruction, easily took out the giant boulder she was targeting. The rest of us kept our heads down, trying to protect ourselves from falling shards of rock. Well, except for Darkness, who calmly stood there covering us. I held up Megumin, who was now so low on magic, she couldn't stand on her own, and used Drain Touch to transfer enough MP that she could at least walk.

"Well, now, that's an explosion that'll earn a high score," I said.

"You think so? Well, I am rather proud of it myself. Ahhh, how satisfying. Now then, let's...go...home...? Kazuma, what is that?"

I retrieved two sticks of my pseudodynamite, quickly attracting Megumin's attention. They consisted of the explosive potion-infused clay wrapped in several layers of paper and a wick doused in the same potion. Crude, but effective. They were just prototypes, after all.

"I have only one true weapon: money," I said. "And I've wielded it to produce a little something that I think should bury our enemies without any hassle. Have a look?"

I put the dynamite next to a rock nearby with the wick facing us so it was clearly visible.

"...Just a second. I believe I recognize this thing you've made, Kazuma..."

Whatever Megumin was saying, I was too busy getting some distance to bother listening to her.

"*Kindle!*"

Once I was a safe distance away, I cast my fire magic.

A few sparks went flying...

And inspiration struck. I stuck my hand out toward the rock and shouted, "*Expllosion!*"

"Huh?!" Megumin exclaimed.

If she said anything else, though, I couldn't hear it over the sound of the blast my simple dynamite produced, cracking the rock I had set it by.

Okay, so maybe it wasn't cut out for civil engineering projects. But I figured that as a weapon, it would be more than good enough.

"Ah..... Ahhh....." Beside me, Megumin was gawking and trembling.

Darkness clenched her fist, her face red with disbelief. "Th-that's incredible, Kazuma! When in the world did you learn explosion magic?!"

"Hmph... I'm so powerful, I've been secretly leveling up while you guys were asleep." Okay, so I was just making that up, but it was hard not to get carried

away with Darkness acting the way she was.

"Ah..... Ahhh....." All Megumin could do was gibber quietly and tremble.

In the midst of all this, I felt Aqua tugging on my sleeve. "Kazuma, Kazuma, give me one, too. I want to use Explosion, too."

"These are just prototypes. You can have one when I perfect a model with a longer wick. I was using Kindle from a ways back because I wasn't sure what would happen, either."

"Ahhh..... Ahhhhhhhh....."

"Okay. But you have to promise to let me play with one when you finish them for real."

"Fine, but those potions don't come cheap, you know. And there aren't many of them. You can't use up my entire supply playing around, okay?"

"C-could even a Crusader like me use Explosion with one of those? You didn't really learn the spell, did you? C-come on, when you make a new one, let me try it, too...!"

Aqua and Darkness were pretty interested in my little show, but I was kind of annoyed by Megumin's lack of response. I'd assumed her reaction would be the most extreme of any of them, but instead she had just been quaking and muttering the entire time.

I stood in front of her and struck a pose, thrusting out my hand.

"My name is Kazuma! Greatest adventurer in Axel and wielder of Expl—"

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!"

Before I could finish, Megumin screamed and grabbed me.

"That thing! That thing is *not* Explosion! At the very most, it possesses only vague similarities to explosion magic! That thing! That... That *thing*...!"



"Wh-whoa, whoa, cool it! I used an item! It was just a little joke!" I insisted. Megumin, still howling, grabbed the other stick out of my hand. "Hey, stop! Come on, making one of those takes a lot of time and money! Give it back!"

"I will not! You have me, so you don't need this! Who cares about this stupid thing?!"

As she shouted, Megumin flung the dynamite I'd put so much work into.

*Ahhh...*

"If I ever see another one of these, I'm going to throw it away! That invention is entirely unorthodox! I cannot abide by such heresy!"

"All right, all right, no one's...*abiding by* anything... Sheesh, and to think, I made those things to indulge *you* and your explosion addiction."

"Yes, they might be helpful for that, but I don't care!"

I would have to start making the dynamite secretly, in my room, so Megumin wouldn't find it.

...I held out my hand toward the dynamite where Megumin had thrown it, a pretty good ways away. I took advantage of the fact that she was still angry to intone some magic under my breath.

*"...Kindle."*

My quiet incantation got the wick burning.

I judged my timing, and then...

*"Expllosion!!"*

*"?!"*

I wasn't going to let her just throw away my hard work. I was gonna get *something* out of it. And so I did my second faux Explosion of the day.

Megumin didn't talk to me until dinner.

I dressed myself in brand-new gear with my embarrassingly named sword at my hip. I donned the cape that was the trademark of the Adventurer class and stuffed enough food in my backpack to last me an entire day, just to be safe.

"Weapon, check! Food, check! Gear, check! Every kind of item imaginable, check!"

As a party, we had battled lots of generals of the Demon King and plenty of bounty heads, but we were doing things differently this time, unlike when we just got sucked into whatever happened. This time, we were setting out to pick a fight on purpose.

Despite one of my trump cards having been wasted the day before, I had bought a few other items at Wiz's shop that I thought would be useful. I'd made preparations and even came up with a few possible strategies.

"Gosh, Kazuma, you were so against this at first, and now you seem downright excited. What happened to you?" Aqua's rucksack was bulging; I wondered what she could possibly have crammed in there.

Incidentally, Emperor Zel was still too young to be left on his own, so Aqua had foisted him onto Wiz that morning.

"When I cooled down a little and thought seriously about this battle, I realized we actually have a pretty good chance of winning," I said.

We were heading to a fortress on the front line not far from the capital. At present, the national military strength would be focused on that fortress. From what I had heard, the ranks of the knights around here included several of the cheating bastards who had been sent here before me, and if that one particular general hadn't shown up, I don't think the battle would have been any trouble for them.

So that was the situation: *We hole up in the fortress, nice and safe behind a wall of powerful cheaters, and when the general shows up, Megumin blows them away with Explosion. Simple but effective*, I thought.

Considering how safe and easy this looked compared with the battles we'd fought in the past, the potential returns seemed terrific. And there was something else...

"This time we've got Yunyun with us, and she can use Teleport," I said, looking at Yunyun. She was over by Megumin, checking her luggage.

Yunyun, who had apparently worked hard to level up and acquire the Teleport spell, had asked to come with us. She had two registered teleport locations: Axel and the capital. It was great to know that if things got too hairy at the fortress, we could come back here anytime.

"I-I'll do my best! I can carry the bags, make meals, keep watch at night, even join the battle—I'll do anything!"

"Yeah, sounds good, thanks. I've heard there could be some pretty nasty monsters on the way over, so it's good to have you with us, Yunyun."

Apparently, Yunyun was so used to being all by herself that she was thrilled to be able to join us on this trip. She had seemed restless and eager all day.

"Is everyone ready? You're not forgetting anything? I have tissues and toilet paper, so if anyone needs them, just speak up!"

"I am begging you—please calm down. One would think you were a little girl going on her first trip."

I watched the unusual sight of Megumin trying to talk down Yunyun, then gave a nod. "Okay, Yunyun, looks like you're up. Fly us to the capital; then we'll head for the fortress on foot. They say it's about two days' walk for good, fit adventurers. But there are lodgings along the way, so we'll start by going there."

"Okay! I have board games and card games for when we stop at the hotel—new ones, old ones, games from every corner of the world. You can count on me!"

That would explain why Yunyun's bag, too, looked full to bursting. She was apparently expecting a night on the road.

Maybe this was the first time she'd ever been away from home with the group before. I was thinking it might have been nice to have invited her out with us sooner as Yunyun intoned her magic.

*"Teleport!"*

## Chapter 3

### A Night's Dream with This Red-Haired Beauty!



1

Before I knew it, I was standing in front of the gate of the capital for the first time in quite a while.

Maybe people teleporting in to the nation's capital wasn't all that unusual, because the soldiers guarding the main gate didn't so much as blink when we appeared out of thin air. They were focused past the gate, no doubt on the lookout for any monsters that had managed to get by the front line.

Showing up here made me think of my beloved little sister Iris, and I was eager to rush into the city and see her, but my understanding was that they were still searching for the mysterious, enigmatic, and very cool thief who had broken into the castle some time ago and had never been found. I would hate for my aura of incredible awesomeness to attract undue suspicion and land me in a room with another of those lie-detecting magic bells.

I put down my backpack.

"Okay. We're all set to travel already, and we can get going for the fortress anytime, but I'd like to start by pumping those guys for information. I have an idea."

I left everyone else standing at the front gate and looking at me quizzically,

and I approached the guards.

"Hello there. Fine work you're doing. Man, it's a hot one today, huh?"

"Oh, a traveling adventurer, are you? Maybe you've heard, but the capital is currently on alert for an attack by the Demon King's army. Don't just hang around out there—come on in to the city." Despite my friendliness, the guard showed no sign of letting his vigilance lapse.

"Oh, I don't need anything in the city. My friends and I heard the country was in a pinch and came running. We want to go reinforce the fortress on the front line."

"Reinforcements? You? ...We appreciate the help, but I've got to say you don't look very ready for this. Are you going to be all right? The area around the fortress is crawling with elite enemy troops, you know."

My expensive equipment was all brand-new, but it was true that it was entirely light armor. I could understand if I didn't look very powerful at first glance.

"Now, now, can't have you underestimating me. I may not look like much, but I've defeated generals of the Demon King before... That's right—my name is Kazuma Satou. I assume you've heard of me?"

One of the guards goggled at my claim. "Huh?! Give me a break; you can't possibly be—"

But the other guy interrupted him, looking over to where Aqua and the others were waiting. "H-hang on a second! I don't know about this guy, but I recognize the ones behind him!"

"You're right ! Isn't that little one the girl who blew away the Demon King's entire army with her explosion magic?!"

"Wait, and that's Lady Dustiness! Lady Dustiness, the one who can repel a whole crowd of monsters all by herself, is here!"

"I remember that blue-haired priest, too! Last time the Demon King's army attacked, she kept us going with support magic and healed the wounded!"

The soldiers ignored me, pointing to my companions.

It was true that the last time we had been here, we'd been involved in a major action to repel the Demon King's army, and apparently, they remembered us.

"Well, this ought to make things quicker. Yes, we're—"

"Just a second, now I remember you! You're the guy who got killed by those kobolds!"

.....*Um.*

"Oh yeah, that does sound familiar. Some guy got all full of himself, rushed out ahead, and ended up getting worked over by the kobolds."

"You're too weak to be hanging around here. Way, way far away from the capital, there's a town for new adventurers called Axel. I'd recommend going there and raising your level a bit."

"Yeah, there are lots of powerful monsters around here. Hey, are you working for those ladies back there? Sorry, but you don't even look strong enough to carry their bags..."

*Oh, these guys are gonna get it.*

*...No, I'd better not lose it just yet.* There was a reason I was talking to these soldiers.

"So, at the very least, you understand that we're a party of highly capable adventurers. And very balanced, too. In addition to me, the leader, we have an Arch-priest, a Crusader, and no fewer than two Arch-wizards. How's that for a lineup?"

"That's incredible! ...And you, the leader—what's your class?"

"...Now, to the point. My party and I are about to set off to reinforce the besieged fortress. But strong as we are, we don't know the way. If there are any other adventurers or soldiers heading out to the fortress, we wondered if we might be able to go along with them. Of course, since you'd be guiding us, we wouldn't charge any bodyguard fees, so don't worry."

I ignored the soldier's inconvenient question and pressed on to my goal. The fortress was supposed to be just a couple of days' walk, but there were also

supposed to be a lot of tough monsters on the way. Under the guise of asking for a guide, I was really hoping to buy us strength in numbers.

To be honest, the only one of us I could really count on in a fight was Yunyun. So we would act tough, but it was really the “guide” who would be protecting *us*.

It was a perfect strategy. Almost.

“Fraid that’s not possible,” one of the soldiers said. “That enemy general is just too much. Adventurers are coming back from that fortress in tatters, one after another. His Majesty and the prince went there to rally the troops, and even they’ve been evacuated. Believe me, no one’s crazy enough to head to that fortress on purpose.”

“Huh?”

*Okay, wait, hold on. This sounds way worse than I heard.*

While I stood frozen, the soldier went on. “We can’t guide you, but I’ll get you a map to the fortress and a breakdown of monsters in the area. I would tell an average adventuring party not to go, but I think your group can manage. Give ‘em hell! Your name was Kazuma Satou, right? I’ll be sure to let the castle and the Adventurers Guild know that Kazuma Satou and his stalwart party are headed to the front!”

“...Huh?”

*Uh, I’m starting to rethink the whole reinforce-the-fortress thing.*

“We’re counting on you! And so are all our embattled brothers at the front!”

“Yeah, I saw you guys kick the general of the Demon King’s ass last time! I’m sure you can do it! Go get ‘em!”

“Great, I’m going to go tell everyone I can find about this! The populace is going to be thrilled!”

Unable to speak, I could only watch the conversation spiral out of hand until I was left with nothing but the map and the monster guide they gave me.

“““Good luck, adventurers!”””

"Uh, sure."

Map in hand, I trudged back to where the others were waiting.

"...Check this out. I managed to finagle a map to the fortress and some info about the local monsters."

"That's pretty good going, Kazuma. We were too far away to hear what you guys were saying, but it looks like you did some serious negotiating."

"Sometimes you're surprisingly capable, Kazuma. Let's go, then!"

*...Er.*

Was it just me, or could I practically hear my escape being cut off?

2

The fortress was supposed to be two days' walk from the capital if all went well, and there were lodgings available at the halfway mark.

There were, of course, no carriages headed anywhere as dangerous as the front line, so we set out on foot with the goal of reaching the midway point.

"Um, everyone, if you get hungry, just let me know. I brought lots of snacks! And I also learned Basic Magic, so I can make good, clean water at any time. If your throat gets dry, I've got you covered! Oh, Megumin, wait! It's dangerous that way—the path isn't stable!"

"Oh, will you stop already? You continue to act like a child on her first trip! We will be walking until late tonight, and I recommend you conserve your energy."

Yunyun walked quickly at the front of our party, her crimson eyes shining with the joy of being on a big group trip. We'd already traveled together a little when we all went to Crimson Magic Village, but maybe an overnight like this was just different somehow.

She wasn't the only one who was happy, either.

"Hey, hey, I wonder what these are. I've never seen these fluffy, floaty things around Axel."

"Hrm... Hey, Aqua, those are fluff sprites called Gossamers. They're totally harmless, so just leave them alone... Hey, what did I just say?!"

Aqua's eyes were shimmering as she ran around after the mysterious floating puffballs.

"Some believe that the Gossamers are cousins of the Snow Sprites," Megumin said, "so you might want to leave them alone lest the Great Sprite leading them attacks you."

I took the opportunity to voice a question that had been bugging me. "Hey, Megumin, do you really think we should have brought her?" I pointed to Chomusuke, who was sticking close to Yunyun's heels as the wizard walked happily ahead of the group.

I hadn't seen any reason to deliberately drag the black fluffball into a war zone, but Megumin had insisted there might come a moment when she would be of help to us.

"We will only know once we arrive. But it's possible she and she alone will be all that allows us to control the Demon King's general."

No matter how much I pressed, that was all Megumin would say. Honestly, it was hard to imagine the little black ball of fluff, who was practically Yunyun's best friend after getting food from her, could in any way be described as a "dark god."

"A-Aqua, really, that's enough now; let it go..."

"I just want to pet her a little more. Her fluff reminds me of Emperor Zel."

"You only just left Zel behind this morning."

Listening to the placid conversation taking place behind Megumin and me, I found it hard to believe we were really going to the front line.

So naturally, that was when it happened.

I had completely let down my guard, until my Sense Foe skill started tingling.

I'd gotten so used to the quiet life that I was slow in responding to the alert from my skill. I was just turning to warn everyone when—

"Hold it right there, adventurers! This is the end of the line for you! Put down your money and your stuff, and *maybe* no one gets hurt!"

Our path was blocked by a group of armed men, one of whom was threatening us. Even if he did sound like he was reading from a script. When I saw the group of grimy, grizzled men, I was immediately more excited than ever.

And why not, right? For the first time since coming to this world, I was encountering an event that practically screamed *You're on your way to the top of this fantasy world!*

Aqua appeared to be having the same thought.

"Kazuma, bandits! I've never seen bandits before! I can't believe there are people who would run such an inefficient operation in a world crawling with monsters!"

Then, eyes gleaming, she looked back at the men.

Before I got here, I had assumed every "alternate world" had poor public safety, with roads and highways crawling with robbers. That was what the fantasy realms I'd known had led me to expect.

Reality, though, wasn't so accommodating: In a world teeming with monsters, you would have to be crazy to live in the hills as a bandit instead of in a well-fortified town. Heck, if you were strong enough to survive in the monster-infested wilderness, then you would never resort to banditry, waiting and hoping for your next mark to come along. It would be a lot safer and more profitable just to become an adventurer.

Okay, so adventuring wasn't the most stable of professions, but it sure beat having to stay out of town because you were public enemy number one, constantly afraid of being found by a patrol of knights—or the local wildlife.

And it looked like it wasn't just Aqua and me who were impressed by encountering this most rare of creatures, the highway robber, in his native habitat.

"Kazuma, Kazuma! We've encountered a humanoid monster said to be even rarer than the Duxion!"

"It's true! A real bandit! All the times I've traveled alone, and I've never seen one! When I get back to Crimson Magic Village, I'm going to brag to everyone I know!"

The obvious enthusiasm of the two wizards only made the men angrier—but I couldn't help noticing Darkness was uncommonly quiet.

No, it was more than that. Her body was racked with little quivers: I could tell she was shaking with joy to finally meet something she'd been dreaming of for a long time.

Confronted with our total lack of fear, the bandits finally exploded. "You think we're being cute?! Hurry up and make with the cash!" The bearded man who looked like their leader glared at us and shouted.

*Yeah, that's the stuff! He's got the part down pat!*

As we all grew ever more excited, Darkness stepped out in front of us to block off the bandits. "You men reek! You haven't even bothered to bathe! Here you live a reprobate life in the mountains, your eyes glinting with greed! You bandits, who would take advantage of even the most helpless young woman! I, Lalatina Ford Dustiness, on my honor as a knight, shall not back down from the likes of you!"

Darkness's cheeks were flushed redder than I had ever seen them.

"Dustiness...?"

"H-hey, did she just say Dustiness?"

"As in, *House* Dustiness? She does have the blond hair and the blue eyes! That's how you know she's a noble!"

Now it was the bandits' turn to be impressed. But Darkness ignored them.

"You said to hand over our money, but it's never that easy, is it? I can see it in your eyes. Once you've relieved us of our weapons, I know just what you'll say! 'Hey, on closer inspection, this one's a real find! Heh-heh, she'll fetch a pretty price...!'"

Immediately after she had announced in one breath that she was going to act like a lady, this pervert started running her mouth in the next. The men

scattered in every direction.

“And it won’t end there! ‘Chief, let us try out the goods before you put her up for market,’ you’ll say! Then the one who looks like the leader will grin and answer! Yeah, you! ‘Sure, sure. Can’t expect a gem this fine to go untouched forever...’ ...H-hey, you, where do you think you’re going? Why are you running away all of a sudden?!”

She seemed genuinely confused as she watched the bandits recede into the distance.

“A noble means the knights can’t be far behind! Everybody run!”

“And did you see those red eyes? She’s Crimson Magic Clan!”

“Y-you, wait! When faced with such nubile young women, can you really just run away?! It’s all right—there aren’t any knights! Wait, remember your honor as bandits...!”

I held back the idiotic Darkness from going after the robbers.

3

“Argh, it’s your fixation on chasing those guys that got us into this mess.”

“Erg... B-but I’m a knight! I couldn’t just let them go to continue threatening the people...”

It was pitch-dark outside, and we were sitting around the fire in the middle of the camp we had made. A certain moron had insisted on trying to hunt down those bandits, so we’d spent all our time looking for them instead of reaching the midway point of our journey.

“I was eager to hunt those bandits myself,” Megumin offered. “They are very rare monsters, and I hear that when you beat them, they drop money.”

“You, stop calling them monsters.” Yes, they were criminals, but the word was *robbers*.

“Since we’re sleeping outside, I guess we’d better post a guard, huh?” Aqua tossed a twig into the fire, then stirred the stewpot sitting over the blaze. “We

could get in real trouble if we don't watch out for monsters."

The stew smelled delicious.

"Er, I-I'm sorry. I'll be happy to stand watch. I'm confident in my stamina. You can all just get a good night's rest."

"Miss Darkness, I'm happy we're camping out! Don't worry—I'll stand guard! You can count on me!" Yunyun was exceedingly cheerful, in stark contrast to the apologetic Darkness. It didn't look like she was trying to be considerate. She was genuinely happy.

Megumin just looked at her and said, "...No more all-nighters for you. I assume you were so excited for this trip that you didn't sleep last night, either."

"H-how did you know?!"

Seriously, like a kid on a vacation.

"Okay, I'll take guard. I'm a night owl anyway. And I have the Sense Foe and Second Sight skills. Once we've eaten, we'll put out the fire so it doesn't attract monsters."

Darkness looked dejectedly at the ground. "I'm sorry, Kazuma; this is all because of my carelessness..."

"No kidding. You're a big girl now. You should know better than to go running off after every older guy you meet."

"Don't worry. It's just that those were highway bandits earlier, the archnemesis of female knights everywhere, and I sort of lost my head. I've already decided that I'll only allow myself to be exploited and tortured by certain enemies."

"I don't know what you're talking about, and I don't want to know, but good." I kept my face as serious as the one Darkness was making as she spewed her nonsense.

It was quite some time after we had finished our relatively late dinner, and everyone, tired from walking all day, had dropped off to sleep.

We had doused the fire, and I was standing watch alone, using Second Sight to help me see in the dark. I thought it might help me get a peek at what all the

girls looked like asleep.

But then, from the shadows not far away, Sense Foe alerted me to just a hint of a monster's presence.

The fire was out, and it was a cloudy night, so there were no stars to see by. I didn't think even nocturnal monsters would find us very easily, but still...

Just to be extra sure, I touched my companions and activated the Ambush skill. Yes, it looked like I was trying to cop a feel on them while they were all asleep, but this was an important emergency measure, nothing salacious.

At any rate, I figured this would keep us from being discovered.

I held on to that assumption for all of two minutes, until Sense Foe clearly indicated the monster was coming our way.

I thought it was early enough that the date hadn't even been changed yet.

And then I realized what this monster was.

It had to be an undead coming for Aqua.

I remembered being down in a dungeon with Aqua and discovering that Ambush didn't keep the undead from swarming us.

We were cornered. Should I wake everyone up? But if we were going to wake up and fight, we would need light. That would run the risk of attracting other monsters, and some undead reacted unpredictably to light.

I could handle one or two zombies or skeletons on my own, right? I had Second Sight, and when they got close enough, I could just drop them with my Deadeye skill.

It sounded easy enough. I waited for the creature to get closer.

There was a heavy, unpleasant sound.

*Shhp.*

It sounded like something wet being dragged along.

*Shhp.*

It sounded too big for a zombie. I stared intently, but for some reason, I

couldn't make out the shape of the enemy.

Getting an increasingly bad feeling, I tried to wake everyone up.

"Hey, something's coming. I think it's an undead... Hey, wake up. Aqua. Aqua!"

Three of my companions opened their eyes right away, but the one we needed most at that moment wouldn't come to. The very culprit who had brought this undead upon us seemed bent on sleeping through the entire thing.

*Shhp.*

I drew my sword and pointed it in the direction of that heavy noise.

"Somebody wake that idiot up! I don't know why, but I can't get a sense of the enemy's shape with my night vision. Get some light!"

Darkness drew her great sword and stood fast while Megumin shook Aqua.

"Aqua, Aqua! Please wake up! We think there are undead here!"

Aqua didn't even flinch. "So sleepy... Tell them I'll let them go...just for... today..."

"You damn moron, this is no time to sleep! That thing is coming for *you*, so get out of bed! *Kindle!!*"

I shouted out my fire spell, throwing more MP into it than usual.

A magical flame appeared on the ground, but with nothing to feed the fire, it would disappear quickly, no matter how much magic I had put into it.

I took one look at the creature in front of us and understood why my night vision hadn't worked on it.

I had been looking at it for a lot longer than I'd realized.

The reason I couldn't see the outline of it was because it was simply too big.

"Ah... Ohnonono... Wh— Wh-wh-wh-wh...?!" Megumin was inarticulate at the sight.

"No way... Wh-what is *that* doing *here*...?!" Yunyun had probably known some powerful opponents in her time, and even she grimaced and backed away.

Darkness, who had never met a foe she didn't like to throw herself at, gulped heavily.

"...W-wake Aqua up... W-wake her up, quick..." I said dumbly as I looked up at what was standing in front of us.

"\_\_\_\_!!!"

An indescribable sound tore through the night. It might have been trying to howl, but its vocal cords had rotted away, and it didn't manage it.

Each time it opened its huge jaws, trying to make a noise, it vomited something out. Something that hit the ground with a wet splatter: rotten bits of bodies.

"An undead, and a dragon to boot. As a paladin, there could be no greater honor! The three of you, keep back!"

Darkness moved to cover us, hefting her great sword.

"\_\_\_\_\_\_!!!"

The monster must have been able to sense her hostility, because it made that voiceless sound again, then started dragging its huge body toward us...!

"Aquaaaa! Dear, sweet Aquaaaa! It's a dragon! There's a zombie dragon here! Quick! I'm begging you—wake up and do somethiiing!"

This thing looked big enough to knock over a house with one casual shove.

The zombie dragon spread its wings, making it look like the massive creature had gotten even bigger.

I kept shouting at Aqua, feeling more hopeless with each passing second.

Aqua, the only one of us apparently not worried at all, just muttered and turned over in her sleep...

"Mnn... A zombie dragon... Emperor Zel could deal with that..."

"Get out of dreamland and help us deal with this thing before you become zombie dragon food!"

That was when the monster jumped right at Darkness.

*“Turn Undead!”*

When Aqua's magic hit the zombie dragon, it gave one of its voiceless screams and vanished in a glow of light. You could sure count on her to deal with the undead, if nothing else.

I was just about to thank her, when...

...?

*Wait a second, now that I think about it, she's the one who brought that zombie dragon here.*

I looked at Darkness, who was laid out on the ground; Yunyun and Megumin were rushing over to her.

“Darkness! Hang in there, Darkness! It's just a flesh wound—open your eyes!”

“Megumin, don't shake her! W-w-w-we have to stay calm!”

If Aqua would have just woken up and purified the darn thing, Darkness wouldn't have been knocked out trying to protect us.

“Heh-heh, it looks like even a zombie dragon is no match for me. Kazuma, I think a little praise and maybe even some worship are in orderrrghhh?!”

I wordlessly grabbed Aqua's cheeks with both hands and applied Drain Touch.

“Hey, just what do you think you're doing?! I can't fight back when you ambush me like that!” Aqua swept my hands away, her eyes full of tears.

“Well, why do you *think* I ambushed you?! Look at the state Darkness is in! You drew that zombie dragon here. The least you could do is wake up when we shout at you! I'm going to drain enough vitality from you to compensate for the sleep I lost standing guard, you hear me?”

“What?! N-no way! You caught me by surprise once, but you won't get me with a little Drain Touch next time. I've even resisted a drain from an actual Lich! Just try me. I'll show you what I can do!”

*Just how self-centered can a person be?!*

I decided to ignore Aqua and the weird pose she was striking; instead, I went over to Darkness and used Kindle to get myself some light to check on her. While I had been trying to wake Aqua up, Darkness had taken a direct hit from the monster...

"Heal!" Aqua intoned, and then she continued. "That's my Darkness. Zombie dragons can't use their breath weapons, but immortality takes the cap off their physical strength, so they hit much harder than a living dragon, see? You're lucky not to be in a million pieces after a direct hit."

Come to think of it, it *was* unusual for Darkness to just go under like that. I guess it only underlined how tough the monsters out here on the front line really were.

...And if they had zombie dragons, did that mean they had living dragons, too...?

No, no. The monster guide listed zombie dragons, but it didn't mention living ones, so we would be fine in that regard... I hoped.

Beside Darkness, her armor dented and scuffed, Megumin and Yunyun were keeping a worried watch.

...And that was when I noticed it.

"Well, great. With the magical light from that battle and Kindle and everything, a bunch of monsters are heading this way. My Sense Foe is going nuts. No choice—we've got to move. Aqua, I'll carry your and Darkness's baggage, so you carry Darkness."

"What?! Carry Darkness? But she weighs so much with all that armor! How can we even move when it's this dark anyway?!"

As I gathered up the bags, I replied, "Cast a strength buff on yourself. It wouldn't be enough for me, but for you, with your high stats in everything but Luck and Intelligence, it should do the trick. But cast one on me anyway. I'll be carrying three people's luggage; it'll be tough without help. Megumin, Yunyun, each of you take one of my hands. I can see in the dark, so I'll lead you—just try not to fall."

I hefted the luggage onto my back.

*Urrrgh... That really is heavy...!*

"Geez, Darkness, I know you're in full armor, but how can you weigh so much? And she smells weird. Kinda bitter. I bet it's 'cause that dragon chomped on her..."

"...Keep that to yourself, okay? You know how sensitive Darkness is about her muscles."

Every time Aqua took a step with the armored Darkness, there was an audible *clank*.

We worked our way through the murk of the cloudy, starless night.

Up at the front, Aqua, the only other member of the party who could see in the dark, said, "You know, walking in the dark like this reminds me of when you and I went dungeon crawling, Kazuma. I seem to remember you constantly trying to grab my butt."

"Hey, don't go spreading baseless rumors."

Megumin whispered, "Despite that encounter with the zombie dragon, and the fact that we're now fleeing through the dark from a crowd of dangerous monsters, somehow I feel very relaxed. We could hardly be called a strong party by any means, yet I can't help thinking that with all of you around, everything's going to be okay."

I felt her squeeze my hand just a little tighter.

...I was ashamed of myself for the way my heart started to race from just that one little gesture.

"That's so wonderful... I wonder if I'll be able to have a party like yours someday." Yunyun, holding my other hand, sounded downright envious...

At that moment, for some reason, Megumin squeezed my hand extra hard.

"Oh, I very much doubt it. You would need to have some friends first, Yunyun."

"?!"

"H-hey, you, don't ruin a perfectly nice moment!"

Darkness finally opened her eyes after we'd been walking for a while. And wouldn't you know it: Eventually, we saw some lights marking the midpoint of the trip.

All I'd heard was that there was a place that offered lodgings, but we discovered a building the size of a noble's mansion, surrounded by a sturdy wall. We followed the lights until we found a distinctive sign.

"It says this place is a hot-springs inn... That reminds me of the time we all went to Arcanletia together," Megumin said with a fond chuckle.

Darkness apparently felt the same way, because she said, "Mm, I remember how Kazuma tried to eavesdrop on our conversation from the men's side."

"M-Mr. Kazuma, did you really do that...?"

Uh-oh, Yunyun was looking at me like I was human garbage.

"You know, Kazuma, most of the hot springs in this area are mixed baths," Aqua said. "I'd sure appreciate it if you could bathe after the rest of us are finished. I'd be afraid for my safety otherwise..."

"Bah, you're being way, way too self-conscious. And anyway, I have the right to do what I want, too."

Aqua and I were about to get into it when Megumin gleefully said, "Let us go, then. I doubt there will be very many people in a place like this. We may practically have it to ourselves."

"I get first bath!" Aqua exclaimed. "Or do you want to go together?"

"Good by me," I said, but my little addendum went completely ignored.

"Hold on just a minute. I seem to remember you ruining the baths in Arcanletia, Aqua. You should go last."

"Well, maybe it would be fun for all of us to be together once in a while. A little something special for our trip."

"A bath together... *Together...*"

We entered the inn with the girls still jabbering.

*...Hey, how about you listen to my suggestion?*

It looked like I was going to be left on my own, but then Megumin turned back. "Maybe you'd like to join me?" she said, then giggled mischievously.

*Yeah, sure. And if I say yes, you'll just get all upset.*

I was squeaking a little inside, but then Darkness turned around, too. "We'll try to be quick, and then you can take your time. You do seem to like long baths."

*Obviously. I'm Japanese!*

"Or maybe you'd like me to wash your back, like before?" Darkness had the same look as Megumin.

"What the heck is with you two? I always heard people are more liberal on the road, but think before you speak, okay? What if you say something like that just to tease me, but then I go, 'Yeah, sure, let's...'"

"That would be fine. I would simply get in the bath with you."

"Yeah, if you had nerves like that, I'd wash your back anytime."

They both responded with taunting looks. Maybe they'd planned this ahead of time.

*...Wait, what?*

When did Darkness and Megumin get so easy? Was it like, I could just give them a little push and get whatever I wanted?

*What should I do? Should I just go for it?*

"Let us go, then, Kazuma," Megumin said, coming toward me. She looked totally relaxed. And then I understood.

Her eyes revealed her complete confidence that I was all talk and would never do anything.

What was this emotion I was feeling?

Honestly, with invitations like that, how could I *not* want to enjoy some sexy time with them? You have no idea how much I wanted to.

And yet, I hated to betray the trust implicit in those expectations.

What was with them? What did they take me for?

Megumin was who she was, and I liked her just fine, but even though she could jokingly say she loved me with a straight face, she never had actually, definitively asked me to go out with her.

Darkness was who *she* was, but even though we had practically crossed the final frontier together, after we got home, any time it looked like we were getting close to it again, she would just back off.

What *was* it with these people?! Women just don't make any sense to me. Did this mean I could make a move on them?

I kind of thought so, but if they put me off with a *Don't get the wrong idea*, I'd never be able to look them in the eye again.

Dammit, why did I have to be such a timid, cowardly man? Did I even have feelings for them at all? I was such a flip-flopper, I didn't even know that.

Actually, since I'd taken advantage of the succubus service, maybe I wouldn't even like it that much.

Even I thought I was pretty low, but standing here fretting about it didn't seem likely to get me anywhere. I'd start with a nice, long soak in the tub so I could think.

I made for the changing room so I didn't actually have to figure out what to do.

There I was, striking a pose in front of the mirror and thinking my leveled-up body actually didn't look too bad, when it happened.

We'd arrived at the inn around midnight, so not the time you would normally expect anyone in the bath. Yet, I heard someone humming happily from the direction of the bathing area.

The voice was really pleasant to listen to, and it also revealed that the singer was a woman. So there was still someone there, even though all my friends knew I was coming to bathe.

Could it be—you know—Megumin or Darkness trying to lay it on even thicker?

Did they really think I was just that cowardly and totally unable to do anything at all?

...Okay, that settled it. I was done fretting. Whoever it was in there, Megumin or Darkness, if she turned that teasing come-hither look on me, I would jump her. Even if she wept and apologized, I figured I would cross that final line.

Intraparty relations? Pfah!

With my mind made up and my conscience surprisingly clear, I suddenly realized how silly it had been to worry about all that stuff in the first place. None of it had anything to do with me. I was going to live my life the way I wanted.

I kept these revelations to myself, though, as I opened the sliding door with a clatter and—

—saw a red-haired older woman in the bathtub.

“...Oh? I wondered who it could be, and here I find out it’s someone I remember very well. Do you remember me? We met in a bath in Arcanletia...”

She smiled gently as she spoke. My reply was immediate:

“I’m gonna kill you!”

“What are you talking about?!?”

Keeping my distance from the quaking woman, I slid slowly into the bath.

“Aww, man, this is a nice hot spring. Come on, don’t act so scared. I was just disappointed after I’d worked myself up like that. I was so sure you were one of my party members.”

“Is—is that right? I have to say, I think it’s only fair to be a little scared of someone who would shout a death threat at a person they’d only just met. I

could tell you really were ready to commit murder..."

There was still a hint of fear in the woman's golden eyes, eyes that reminded me of a cat.

"I'm telling you—you're safe. And I do remember you, more or less. You're the one I reduced to tears by constantly staring at your chest in Arcanletia, right? Sure I remember you. It was a big chest, after all."

"Uh— Um... Not to be too forceful, but we've only met twice. I think saying something like that right from the start is... Would you call that sexual harassment...?"

"Not buying it. I've made up my mind: I'm going to stop hiding myself. Stop lying to myself. I'm going to live an honest life. No more holding myself back."

"That certainly sounds very noble, but under these particular circumstances, a woman can't help feeling a bit threatened by it..."

For some reason, she looked even more concerned than before; she sank into the misty spring water to hide herself.



Here I was on my best behavior, yet it seemed like she was downright suspicious of me.

I thought back to the first time this woman and I had met. She'd been in Arcanletia, talking to the Deadly Poison Slime Hans (a known general of the Demon King) about a plan to destroy the city. In other words, she was definitely related to the Demon King's army somehow, and I probably shouldn't have let down my guard...

"If I may ask, what brings you here? I seem to recall you said something about being an adventurer. You know it's all big, scary monsters around here? I hate to sound rude, but I can't say you look very strong. Are you sure you'll be all right?"

So she wasn't suspicious of me; she was just genuinely concerned. To my surprise, that threw me off.

Given that I was an adventurer (more or less), I should probably have tried to figure out who or what this woman was. But oddly enough, although I hardly knew her, I liked her.

"No worries," I said. "Yeah, I'm weak, but I've got a Crimson Magic Clan mage with me who's seriously reliable. I've gotta be honest with you—I didn't want to come here myself, but my friend insisted. What about you, miss? Why are you here?"

"Me? ...Good question. Let's just say that as a little reward for myself, after working so hard all the time, I decided to have a dip in my beloved hot springs. And I suppose you could say I'm looking for an important partner of mine, though I don't expect to find them so easily."

It made her sound oddly conscientious.

"Your partner, huh? You mean, like, a lover?"

"Hmm... No, not really a lover. A sidekick, sort of, or perhaps a second me in which power has been sealed away... I have to admit, I'm just about ready to give up, though." There was a hint of a sad smile on the woman's face.

"You're giving up? But why? One of my party members knows all about that

sort of ridiculous...I mean, *unusual* stuff. Why don't we try asking her? She's right here at this inn, even."

"Well... The person you're talking about is a member of the Crimson Magic Clan, isn't she? It's okay—I have nothing to do with the likes of them." She pulled a bit of a face, but she was still smiling.

"Oh yeah? Okay, then... I'm happy to at least be a shoulder for you to cry on, though. Don't hesitate to share your troubles with me, okay?"

I tried to sound casual, but the woman looked kind of amused. "Oh, you'll listen, will you? ...Long ago, somewhere in Crimson Magic Village, my friend, or partner, or dark god, whatever you want to call her... Well, this black cat, a sidekick of mine, was sealed away in a tomb there."

This was sounding oddly familiar. A certain pair of red-eyed no-goodniks had told me a similar story recently.

"She must have still been upset when we were both released, because she was completely out of control. I decided to have her sleep for a while longer, but...when I went to check on her, see if the time was right, I found the seal already broken and my sidekick abducted by someone or something."

This couldn't mean what I thought it meant.

"...Pardon what might seem like an impertinent question, ma'am, but this sidekick of yours doesn't by any chance fly and breathe fire, does she?"

"I'm sorry, I'm afraid I don't quite understand what you're asking." Her face conveyed sincere and total confusion at my question.

Hang on, she was the one talking about dark gods and seals and stuff, and she was looking at *me* like that?

I composed myself and said, "Oh, it's nothing. Just that my Crimson Magic friend has been describing the black cat she keeps as a dark god."

The woman's face darkened immediately. "...The black cat your Crimson Magic Clan friend is keeping? Their names may be impossibly strange—you're sure she's been saying 'dark god'?"

Caught off guard by this sudden change, I tried to backpedal. "Er, well, you

know... This is the same person who swears she used to be a deity of destruction in her past life. You can't take anything she says seriously."

"O-oh, really? Even so, do be a dear and answer one question for me. This cat... Does she, ahem, have a fondness for lazy people?"

"...I'm not really sure. She seems to like me best out of all of us, but I can't say I see myself as lazy. I did the most work to form our party, and I'm confident I'm the most sensible and grown-up out of all our members."

"R-really... And is she, er, prone to violence?" The woman sounded a tad hesitant for some reason.

"She's such a wimp that our newborn chick can chase her around the room."

"All right, thank you, that's enough. She can't be the partner I'm looking for." The woman nodded, apparently pretty sure about this, then stood up, bathwater dripping from the towel wrapped around her body. "I think I'll be off, then. This area is a hot zone in the battle with the Demon King's army, you know. And even if it weren't, security around here is so bad that I ran into that rarest of things earlier, a gang of bandits. My advice would be to get back to the capital while you still can." With that, the woman squinted her golden eyes like a happy cat and smiled kindly.

"...You know, ma'am, somehow I feel like I just can't ignore your problem. I don't know why, but I've got the strangest feeling about you. Er, not that I'm trying to pick you up or anything, okay?" I added, realizing that what I was saying sounded weird even to me.

The woman, however, didn't even give me a dirty look, but instead, for some reason, she opened her eyes in surprise.

"Well, now... How serendipitous. I feel a connection to you, too. That's what drives me to give you these little updates each time we meet... Maybe you've met my dear friend someplace and done them some good turn." It sounded like she was making a joke; she laughed lightly as she spoke.

I watched the woman go. I knew she was connected with the Demon King's army somehow, and yet for some reason, I just couldn't see her as a threat...

If I ever saw her again, I would have to ask how she'd ended up in the Demon

King's...

"...Shoot! I forgot to ask her her name!"

7

The next morning.

With a good night's sleep at an actual inn under our belts, we headed off for the fortress in high spirits.

"Kazuma, you seem especially cheery today," Megumin said as we went. "You were in the bath until quite late last night. Did something good happen?"

"Oh, y'know. When I got in there, I just happened to be reunited with the outrageously beautiful woman I met in Arcanletia," I replied just as happily, at which Megumin stopped walking.

"O-oh, you did? Well, good for you. So you did a little mixed bathing, then?"

"Sure did. Man, she was big. Maybe even bigger than Darkness."

Darkness, who had apparently been listening in, exclaimed, "How can you just say something like that?! For that matter, what have you been getting up to the moment we take our eyes off you? ...I have to say, though, don't you think it's strange for a woman to be all by herself in the middle of nowhere like this?"

Darkness, her armor still battered from last night's attack, lectured me with an expression that might have been anger or might have been embarrassment; I couldn't tell.

"Don't worry—she actually gave me a lot of helpful tips. It was the same way in Arcanletia. Yesterday, she said she'd encountered some bandits and warned me to be careful," I said casually.

Yunyun, who'd been listening to the conversation with obvious interest, cocked her head. "Um, and she made it out of that encounter okay? Those were probably the same bandits we ran into, right? I can't imagine they would have been gentle with someone as beautiful as you're describing..."

"Oh-ho," Megumin said, dodging Chomusuke as she ran along near her feet.

"You appear so adult, but your true nature reveals itself in your filthy fantasies."

Huh. Actually, Yunyun was right. How *had* that woman survived a run-in with bandits?

...Well, I guess you don't get to join the Demon King's army for no reason. Maybe she was secretly way more powerful than she looked or something.

Even when she mentioned the bandits to me, though, I hadn't thought much of it. Normally, I would have been more cautious around a woman who implied she had single-handedly defeated a gang of robbers, but for some reason, I hadn't felt she was too dangerous. Maybe because we'd bathed together twice now?

"What? Isn't that what you would normally expect from bandits?! And anyway, Megumin, you're the one person who has no right to call me filthy! After you've bathed with Kazuma and been in bed with him...!"

"Hey, it's one thing for me to mention that myself, but hearing someone else say it embarrasses me, so I must ask you to stop!"

As I watched Megumin suffer the brutal turnaround, I thought back to the woman from the night before.

"...Man, she was big."

"\"?!""

After that, nothing much eventful happened, except for when Aqua, who had been chasing the Gossamers around again, was reduced to tears by an attack from the puffballs' Great Sprite.

About the time it was getting dark, we arrived at our destination, the fortress.

"It's huge..."

We found ourselves looking up at a building every bit as big as the royal castle. It was surrounded by massive, impenetrable-looking walls, as befitted a fortress defending the front line. I'd heard that upward of a thousand people lived inside, and it was just as imposing as that number suggested.

"And one general of the Demon King by herself is supposed to be threatening this place? I don't care what rank she is. That can't be possible, can it?"

"I'd like to agree with you, but any one of the Demon King's generals is capable of destroying a city all by themselves. Frankly, the fact we've overcome so many of them is bizarre," Darkness said. Her answer made me think back on the generals we'd encountered.

There was the Dullahan Beldia, who could repel any number of attackers simultaneously with his spectacular swordplay; he boasted the unlimited strength and power of the undead and could even pronounce a curse that doomed its target to die a few days later.

There was the Deadly Poison Slime Hans, who had the power to make himself look human but boasted incredible magic resistance and could kill you at a touch, not to mention vacuum up everything in sight with his gigantic true form.

The chimera Sylvia, who took one monster after another into his body, gaining a whole catalog of powers on his path to indestructibility.

The "Duke of Hell," the demon Vanir, whose very existence seemed to defy the laws of physics and whom we had no idea how to actually kill.

And Wiz, a Lich (read: Queen of the Undead, untouchable with normal weapons, and wielder of a whole bunch of special abilities, including Drain Touch) who knew Advanced Magic, Teleport, and even Explosion.

...Considering their abilities and sheer strength, it was a wonder I had run into even one of them and lived to tell the tale. What to do? I'd expected Explosion and a nice, sturdy fortress to give me some peace of mind, but now I just wanted to go home.

Just as I was starting to feel ridiculously wimpy, the fortress guards spotted us, and a group of knights rode out to meet us.

One of them approached us, obviously cautious about five people appearing at a place like this. "You there, adventurers. This fortress stands to hold the Demon King's army at bay. What is your business here?"

"We heard our nation was in trouble and have come as reinforcements. I think we've got enough advanced classes here to be some help, don't you?"

"Advanced classes... I see. We are grateful for that. However, we'll need to see something that proves your identity. There remains the possibility that

you're agents of the Demon King attempting to infiltrate the fortress, so if you would be so kind. Ahem, let's start with..."

Megumin held out her Adventurer's Card to the knight, who took it—and froze.

"...M-Miss...Megumin... Is that right?"

"You have some problem with my name?"

"No, ma'am! It's nothing; pardon me. Very well, now you... Miss Yunyun, is it?"

"Y-yes, sir... That's my real name..."

"Hey, he's been wanting to say something about our names ever since he saw my card. We shall hear it!"

Megumin raised her staff, incensed at the way the knight was reacting to the girls' names.

"No, it's quite all right—forgive me! Next is...Kazuma Satou. Kazuma...Satou?"

The knight hurried to give Megumin and Yunyun their cards back, but when he got to the next one—mine—he looked disturbed.

Ooh. It was one thing for those bizarre Crimson Magic names to get a rise out of him, but if he was reacting to *my* name, it had to be a sign that my reputation preceded me. Yes, whatever others might say of us, we'd accumulated quite a record of—

"Kazuma Satou! The vile and despicable Kazuma Satou? The villain who gave Lady Iris the worst of ideas and caused no end of trouble for Lady Claire and Lady Lain...!"

"Now, wait just a minute..."

Was that how the knights of this country talked about me?

I mean, not that they were wrong, but come on...

"I'm very sorry. But, er, this fortress is a crucial choke point defending the front line against the Demon King's army. I'm afraid we simply can't let strangers inside..."

"Strangers? You recognized my name."

I'd teach him to treat me like some common criminal.

Just then, a man who had been hanging back came forward. He looked like the squad leader.

"So you're the disgusting piece of human filth Kazuma Satou. How dare a mere Adventurer act so important? Do you realize I could declare you potential threats and have you cut down right here and now? Run along home with your tail between your low-level legs, boy!" He didn't take his hand off his sword as he spoke.

I saw Megumin's grip on her staff tighten, and Darkness stepped forward with wrath on her face. The other knights all went for their weapons.

"What are you playing at, adventurers? You looking for a fight?!"

Geez, why did guys like this always have such short fuses? I couldn't help noticing that in this world, pretty much all the aristocrats other than Darkness had the unfortunate habit of viewing life as cheap and human rights as optional at best.

I took a step forward, looking as grim as I could, and gestured at Darkness, who had been about to say something herself.

"Get back! Do you have any idea whose presence you're in? This is the daughter of the famous House Dustiness, Lady Lalatina Ford Dustiness! Bow your heads, all of you!"

““Wha—?!”” The knights blanched and dropped to their knees.

Darkness looked almost as surprised as they did to hear this come up so suddenly, and Megumin and Yunyun, for some reason, also knelt.

"What are you guys doing?"

"S-sorry," Megumin said. "It was just so sudden, I got a bit swept away..."

"M-me, I didn't know Miss Darkness was a noble..."

Both of them got to their feet, and the captain asked hesitantly, "A-are you truly the noble Dustiness...? Please accept my most humble apologies, Lady

Dustiness. My men and I did not know your face and have committed a grave impropriety...! ...Ahem, please don't take this the wrong way—we must do our duty—but perhaps you could furnish us with some proof..."

Without a word, Darkness produced the necklace with the family crest that hung around her neck, along with her Adventurer's Card. At the sight of them, the captain's face went from pale to completely white.

"M-m-m-my most humble and sincere apologies! We have been unspeakably rude to you and your companions, Lady Dustiness!"

"It's about time! Whoo, man, here I thought we were just about to get our heads chopped off. I think I'm going to be working through this trauma for the rest of my life. Man, just thinking about that conversation makes my chest tighten..."! I put a hand to my chest and laid it on thick for the captain.

Megumin, picking up on my game, said—

"Oh, this will never do! Gracious, what an attitude you've taken with the companion of our young Miss Lalatina!" She nudged her staff against the captain's cheek to work off some of her anger about earlier.

"Apologize! Say you're sorry for almost attacking us! Come on, say it!"

Megumin was grinding her staff into his cheek, and Aqua was shaking him by the shoulders, but the captain just closed his eyes and didn't fight them. His temples were twitching, though. Instead, he bowed his head to Darkness, who was quivering and blushing.

"I-I'm sorry. I'm terribly sorry. In any other circumstances, I would end my own life for having dared to threaten the companions of Lady Dustiness. But in this case...I must..."

He couldn't quite seem to finish the sentence. I placed a friendly hand on his shoulder. "Aw, look, I'm not asking anybody to kill themselves. I know you were just doing your job. But we're awfully tired from our journey, all right? I don't need you to go nuts proving your loyalty; just prepare a room for us to stay in, all right?"

"But of course! It will be ready for you immediately! A room befitting Lady Dustiness and her companions!"

The captain managed to nod despite the staff in his cheek, and Darkness gave him a mortified nod in return.

## Chapter 4

### Prayers for These Glory-less Gods!



1

We were given a room; I put my stuff down right away and then went with Aqua, who also had too much time on her hands, to explore the fortress. All the adventurers and soldiers we passed seemed pretty on edge, maybe a sign of how bad things really were.

So the atmosphere around here wasn't exactly comfortable. Aqua and I were screwing around in an area with a placard marked CONTROL ROOM.

"Hey, Kazuma. There are a lot of mysterious levers and buttons here. These just scream 'Push me,' don't they?"

"They sure do. Frankly, I would think there was something wrong with you if you *didn't* push those buttons."

"Where in the gods' names did you wander in from?! Those buttons and levers control the fortress's drawbridge, gate, and traps, so don't you dare touch them! Hands off, do you hear me?!"

The soldier's reaction made him sound like the straight man in a comedy duo, and Aqua rose to the challenge. "Well, now I *definitely* have to push them. I think I'll start with the one under this glass lid..."

"That's the fortress's self-destruct button for in case we get overrun—*please* don't press it! Please don't... I said, don't touch that! Get out of here, you ruffians!"

The soldier lost his temper and chased us out of the room, so now we were standing outside.

"Chased out again. These people aren't very welcoming, are they?"

"We are on the front line. I guess no one has it in them to be warm and friendly."

We'd gotten ourselves chased out of one room after another (maybe it had to do with our total inability to control ourselves?), and now we were left with nowhere to go.

"Ah, well," I said. "I hear they have a mess hall where you can eat for free. Let's go score some grub."

"I like that idea. Maybe I'll bring the wine I packed."

I *wondered* what she'd put in that backpack to make it bulge like that. So she'd brought wine with her, huh?

But at that moment...

"Lady Aqua?! Lady Aqua, it's you!" shouted someone coming down the corridor.

The guy looked oddly familiar...

"Oh, Mitsuragi," I said. "Long time no see."

"It's Mitsurugi! Are you getting my name wrong on purpose?! You'd think you could remember someone's name by now!"

It was Mitsurugi, the Sword Master with the enchanted blade.

"Lady Aqua, it's been so long! You look well, as always..."

"Yes, I'm doing very well. What about you, Enchanted Sword Person? Say, where's your little harem?"

"Harem?! W-well, things were getting worse around here, so I sent the girls back to the capital to keep them out of danger... Oh, that's right!" Mitsurugi

looked from Aqua to me. “Satou, how could you bring Lady Aqua to such a dangerous place? Do you understand what’s going on here?!”

“Believe me, I do. This is the front line of the battle with the Demon King’s army, and there’s a general of the king himself attacking this place on the regular. That sound about right?”

Mitsurugi obviously wanted to know why I’d done this, but Aqua broke in. “You see, I came here to encourage all of you fighting so hard in this place. I hear your opponent is known as a dark god. So I figured, being a deity myself, I had to come and do something.” She looked and sounded as if all this was completely natural.

“Lady Aqua, you’re going to fight that woman?! Th-that’s... Well, certainly I believe you’ll be able to resist her, but she’s very dangerous. She’s brought this fortress to the brink of catastrophe all by herself.” Mitsurugi cast a worried look at Aqua.

“So this general *is* another woman... Look, I’m not really worried. I know we’re dealing with some self-proclaimed dark god, but there have to be a bunch of Japanese people with ‘cheats’ here, right? I mean, you’re here. I know you lost to me, but you’re a high-level wielder of an enchanted blade. Even if I did beat you. So what’s this about a lone enemy bottlenecking everyone?”

“S-stop with the I-beat-you business—you won’t even accept my challenges to a rematch... Look, there’s a reason we’re cornered here. You haven’t seen *it* yet, have you?”

... “It”?

I shook my head.

“I figured not, given the way you were talking. Well, you’ve got some time to kill, right? Let me show you a little something.”

Mitsurugi started walking ahead of us.

He guided us out of the fortress, and that was when I saw it for the first time.

It was part of the outer wall, the very life and death of this fortress. That wall should have been the sturdiest thing around, but part of it was practically

crumbling, apparently from the force of several extremely violent attacks.

"Hey, don't tell me..."

I recognized the scars left by those acts of destruction.

After all, I saw them every day.

I hadn't become Megumin's *explosier* for nothing.

"Uh-huh. Wolbach, general of the Demon King, uses explosion magic," Mitsurugi said, and then he smirked at me as I stood there speechless.

2

Aqua and I parted ways with Mitsurugi, and then I called everyone to our room.

"Okay. I think we need to decide what we're doing next." I looked at everyone from where I was seated on the bed.

"What we're doing next? I was talking to the fortress commander, and he said that in light of all the generals of the Demon King we've vanquished, he wanted to give overall command to us."

I wanted to slap a hand on my face. Darkness had apparently been going about making my life harder right under my nose.

To be perfectly blunt, this one was hopeless.

My initial plan had been to hole up inside the fortress, safe and sound, and then hit the enemy with a nice long-range Explosion before she could show up and do anything to us. Explosion magic could damage anything and everything, be it ghost, god, or demon. My plan was based on the assumption that that was the way to take care of just about anything, but with our enemy using the same spell, we of course lost the initiative of having the longer reach.

"Uh, wanna know something? This general of the Demon King, Wolbach... Believe it or not, she uses explosion magic."

"Hrk?!" Megumin practically knocked over her chair as she jumped up. I guess mentioning explosions really was the way to get a rise out of her.

"Did you say explosion magic?! I—I never imagined... Thanks to Megumin, I'm well aware of how destructive that can be. To be honest, I'm not sure how we could fight it..." Yunyun hung her head.

"It's okay—leave it to me!" Darkness cried. "I've survived an explosion before! Use me as bait to draw her out. Then, after the enemy launches her spell, she'll be wide-open for you to counterattack."

"You don't even have your armor right now. Even with Aqua's buffs, there's no guarantee you'd survive, right?"

Darkness's armor had been destroyed in the battle with the zombie dragon. Now her shoulders slumped.

Aqua nodded. "Well, you see how things are. I know it wasn't easy getting here, but I'm thinking maybe I can overlook someone calling themselves a dark god this one time. Not that I'm scared or anything, but you know, this Wolbach must be a minor deity. I mean, I've never heard of her—and honestly, I feel kind of bad for her."

So it was our self-proclaimed goddess who was the first to fold at the mention of explosion magic, offering excuses no one had asked for.

Then Megumin, who had been stock-still until that moment, gave her cape a dramatic flourish. "My name is Megumin! First among the magic-users of Axel and master of Explosion! A general of the Demon King, a dark god, and a user of Explosion to boot...! This person may finally be the fated rival I've been searching for all these years!"

"Whaaat?!" This declaration of rival-hood brought a yelp from Yunyun.

"Do not *whaaat* me. I am satisfied to have a fellow Explosion user for an opponent. And in the unlikely event that I am defeated, I shall be more than happy to be blown up! Indeed, were I to meet my end, I would have no regrets about my life!!"

"How can you be so ridiculous?! Anyway, Megumin, I'm your rival, aren't I?! How can you just promote some general of the Demon King—one you've never even met!—straight to rival?!"

"Wh-what are you saying?! You are a most troublesome girl indeed. If you

wish to be recognized as my true rival, go and learn Explosion. Then I will let you accompany me on my walks every day.”

“I don’t want to learn Explosion, and I don’t want to go on your stupid walks! We’ve got more important things to worry about. Is it true this enemy uses Explosion?! What can we do about it...?”

“You do not want to learn Explosion, indeed! Very well, challenge accepted! It has been a long time since we last had one of our contests. If you lose, you will have to save up skill points upon skill points and finally learn Explosion!”

“N-no way! I’m not going to make a bet that could change the entire course of my— M-Megumin, your eyes are so red! Don’t tell me you’re serious?! Come on, you’re not, are you?!”

I ignored the two dueling mages to focus on the matter at hand.

“I vote we discount Megumin’s idiocy. This enemy is just too dangerous. It sounds like she could wipe us all out in a single shot. And when your body gets reduced to ash, even Aqua’s resurrection can’t help you. So I recommend an immediate retre—”

“What is this foolishness you speak?! What do you mean, running away before an opponent no more powerful than this?! This is the foe I have been fated to face—I am sure of it!”

Megumin seemed to be heating up; her eyes burned red, and she put one foot on her chair to strike her pose.

“So the one who targets my familiar, Chomusuke, is an Explosion-wielding general of the Demon King who calls herself a dark god! I see I have no choice but to defeat this Wolbach and assume the titles of general of the Demon King and dark god myself!”

“The hell are you talking about? ...Anyway, the risk is just too high this time. It’s going to be a contest of who shoots first, and I don’t like those odds.”

“Odds have nothing to do with it. Explosion is my favorite thing. My hobby is, of course, Explosion. Explosion is practically synonymous with my very being. Speak of the Explosion Mage of Axel, and you speak of me. I have longed for this day ever since the moment I first learned Explosion. My chanting is swift

and precise! My magic boasts incredible destructive potential! I solemnly declare that there is no one in this world who is a greater user of Explosion than I!"

Finally, Megumin concluded by exhaling a confident breath.

"I'm pretty sure you lost to Wiz when you guys were wrapping up Destroyer."

"That's in the past. As my level has increased and I have learned skill after skill to heighten the power of my explosive magics, I have sought out ever greater challenges to test myself. I am, assuredly, the greatest user of Explosion in all of Axel."

What had this girl been doing when I hadn't been watching her like a hawk?

"Worry not. One who lulls herself to sleep on restless nights by reciting the incantation for Explosion, as I do, shall certainly finish her incantation before any foe!"

"Don't BS me—even you don't do anything that obnoxious!"

But just as I was about to launch into a real lecture for Megumin—

—there was an earsplitting roar, and the entire fortress shook. Bits of debris rained from the ceiling, and everyone but Megumin reflexively crouched down.

And me? After hearing Megumin's explosions every single day, I knew perfectly well what that sound was.

I could say with perfect certainty that the source of that noise and that shaking was explosion magic.

An alarm warning of an enemy attack began to sound throughout the fortress; Megumin alone looked like she was thinking clearly. "Hmm," she muttered. "That produced quite some shock. Judging by the wave of MP that directly preceded the spell, this person is a very refined user of Explosion. She did not teach herself or learn at random."

"This is no time for appreciating the finer points of a blast," I growled. But as befitting someone dubbed an *explosier*, it was clear to me how accurate that explosion had been. If I was going to rank it, I would probably have given it even higher than ninety points. "We've got to hurry, Megumin, right now. This is our

chance—we’re going to go finish off that general now that she’s on the attack!”

“Huh? B-but, Kazuma, you were so against that until a moment ago.”

I threw on my chest plate and whatever else I could scrounge up, then grabbed a weapon as I got to my feet. I looked at the rest of the party, all of them completely surprised by this. “If she just hit us with an explosion, that means she’s all out of boom for today, right?”

““““Oh!““““

Our opponent might be a general of the Demon King, but even a boss as big as that wouldn’t be able to let off more than one of an MP-hungry spell like Explosion in a single day. Even Wiz, who was a general in that same army herself, was pretty well tapped out after just one shot. With our enemy hurting for magic, then, we had nothing to fear from attacking.

I checked that everyone was with me as I rushed out of the room, then took the path Mitsurugi had shown us toward the blasted segment of wall.

We arrived at the site of the explosion out of breath, to find...

“This is awful.”

It looked like the damaged spot had been hit by a second blast; the formerly sturdy wall was now a pile of rubble sitting in a crater.

A number of other adventurers and knights, presumably drawn by the sound of the explosion just like us, were standing around and taking it in. I saw someone I recognized and went over to him.

“Hey, where’s the general we’re after? This is the time to get her, when she’s low on magic, isn’t it?”

It was Mitsurugi I was asking about the whereabouts of the perpetrator; he was standing there staring vacantly at the aftermath of the blast.

His answer wasn’t what I expected.

“Wolbach? She’s long gone... This is why this fight’s been so hard for us. The dark god Wolbach just appears, launches an explosion from a distance, and then teleports away again before we can get anywhere near her,” he explained. “There’s a squad of the Demon King’s handpicked troops camping out in the

forest nearby. We assume that's where she's retreating to restore her magic before she comes back. But there's a lot of them, and the forest is full of monsters anyway. Outside the fortress walls, on terrain the enemy knows better than we do, we're going to lose. Of course, we can only hunker down in this fort for so long before the walls are all blown away and we're sitting ducks for the Demon King's troops."

I guess this wasn't the first time this had happened. That would explain why everyone had looked so worried and downcast. If they tried to chase down the general after she'd let off her explosion, they would run into the Demon King's chosen troops, but if they tried to hide in the fortress to keep themselves safe from the troops, the general would come and hit them with explosions.

Basically, they were surrounded by superior numbers and being smoked out by magical blasts. A kind of brute strategy but an effective one.

After he had finished explaining the situation, Mitsurugi said, "If we could just get rid of either Wolbach or the elite troops, we might be able to manage something..."

He grasped the hilt of his enchanted sword and closed his eyes as if he was in pain...

"I've got it. Let's run."

"Uh-huh, definitely. Let's go right back home to Axel and make a bed for Emperor Zel. One he'll really love, better than that vile shell. It's okay. When Emperor Zel gets bigger, he'll be able to take care of any general of the Demon King in one shot."

We were back in our rooms, and Aqua and I had promptly begun making preparations to leave.

Darkness was agitated when she saw us. "W-wait, Kazuma, I told you they already foisted command of this fortress on us. I don't think we can go rushing home just because—"

"Why now? Why now, of all times, would you let them make that sort of trouble for you?!"

"You're the one who forced your way in here by telling them who I was!"

Aqua broke into our argument. “Hmm? Hey, I wonder what happened to Yunyun. I was sure she was with us until a little while ago.”

“She is helping to rebuild the wall with magic.”

“Oh, okay. I guess there’s a reason they call her one of the capable members of the Crimson Magic Clan. I should probably go see if anyone’s been hurt, myself.”

“I shall ask just who you are implying is an *incapable* member of the Crimson Magic Clan.”

Aqua’s uncharacteristically priestlike fit of compassion seemed to be motivated by Megumin’s glowing eyes. She hurried out of the room.

Darkness nodded at this. “Aqua and Yunyun are both doing what they can. It’s wonderful. They’re real veteran adventurers, huh? Kazuma, don’t you think we’re veteran adventurers by now, too?”

I was disappointed in Darkness, whose eyes were glimmering despite the dire situation. I guess she had a soft spot for heroes. It didn’t look like she was going to be willing to abandon this fortress in a crisis.

I was trying to decide how to bring my hardheaded party member around when Megumin piled on with the pathetic begging.

“Um, Kazuma... I know it’s dangerous, but won’t you give me just one chance? The rest of you may all stay safe inside this fortress. I will hide somewhere to wait for Wolbach, and the next time she appears, I’ll hit her with my Explosion before she can launch hers.” Then she looked at the ground, unusually meek.

*Oh, you’ve gotta be—* If it wasn’t one thing, it was another.

“...I know Sense Foe, Second Sight, and Ambush. Any surprise attack would be a lot more likely to work with me there. I’ll go with you, but when the enemy shows up, it’s gonna be all you.”

Megumin, caught off guard by my offer, looked at me with wide eyes. A smile slowly spread over her face.

“You can count on me!”

Her crimson eyes gleamed with joy, and she puffed out her chest; despite her

small stature, she had never looked tougher.

3

The next day.

We were in the forest near the fortress, where I had scrambled up a large tree and was having a look around.

“Geez, I can’t believe the Demon King’s forces got so close.”

I could make out what appeared to be an enemy encampment in the woods just a few miles from the fortress. I couldn’t quite see exactly what kinds of monsters they had there, but I could tell there were lots of them. If they came against our base in force, those walls and traps might be all that stood between us and total annihilation.

I climbed down again and went to fill in Megumin and the others.

“The people in the fortress say that every time Wolbach comes to drop an explosion on the place, she’s alone. That gives me an idea.” I looked around at everyone. “First, I use Ambush to hide out in this area. If it doesn’t look like she’s noticed me, I’ll signal Megumin to get one good magical hit on her. On the off chance she spots me, Yunyun will use light-bending magic to hide Megumin, while Darkness, armed with buffs from Aqua, comes up to draw the enemy’s attention. Then Aqua and I work with Darkness to make an opening. Megumin, you can hit her whenever you think the moment is right... Sound good?”

Everyone looked pretty fired up about this plan, except...

“Ooh! Kazuma, Kazuma! I have a thought. I think someone should be assigned to protect this sweet creature. Such an innocent little life shouldn’t be exposed to such danger... Hey, excuse me, but that hurts. You like everyone else so much —why do you have to sharpen your claws on me?”

Aqua grimaced as Chomusuke raked her claws across the hand Aqua was holding her with. It did look pretty painful.

Chomusuke was normally pretty docile, but she’d seemed excited ever since this morning, following us around. We’d tried to leave her in our rooms to keep

her safe, but she always seemed to find her way back to us.

I had Yunyun take over the job of holding the restless cat, then turned to Aqua and Darkness. “Okay, I think we’re ready. Now we just have to wait for this Wolbach.”

“Hey, Kazuma, I’m having second thoughts...”

“You sounded more eager than any of us before we got here.”

I didn’t know how long it had been since we’d set up our little trap in the forest.

But then we saw the infamous general of the Demon King. Her face was hidden by a hood, and a plain robe covered her body as she walked toward the fortress at a leisurely pace.

Her outfit mostly hid the contours of her body, but there was still no mistaking that she was definitely a woman. She probably appeared so calm and collected because she knew that if anyone from the fortress came out to attack her, she could just blow them away with an explosion long before they got to her, then teleport to safety.

“What a dirty trick,” I found myself muttering. “Doesn’t she have the guts to fight fair?”

“I’m betting you’re the *last* person she’d want to hear that from,” Darkness shot back at me.

While Aqua was busy buffing Darkness, the woman in the robe stopped. She was a ways off still, but she must have been close enough to land her explosion on the fortress.

“All right, Megumin, start chanting your magic, quietly. We’re not gonna wait around for her to finish her entire villainous spiel. We hit her while her guard’s down and finish this.”

“Whatever happened to fighting fair? I find this scheme rather underhanded, but very well. I would feel bad if Darkness had to endure an Explosion that could have been prevented.”

Darkness herself looked pretty eager at the prospect of taking an especially

big blast, but while I felt bad for her, I wanted to wrap this right up and go home.

That's when it happened.

The hooded woman seemed to sense something—and then she looked right at me.

Had she seen through Ambush?

I tried to stay completely still, but then she started walking toward me...

"She knows! Megumin, chant that magic like you mean it! We have to get in the first hit!"

"Leave it to me, Kazuma!" Megumin began her incantation. But at the same time—

"Eek! Wh-what's wrong, Chomusuke?! You're going berserk!"

Chomusuke was flailing around, trying to get out of Yunyun's arms. I didn't know why the little furball had suddenly gotten so agitated, but I didn't have time to worry about it. I had to get the enemy to focus on me until Megumin could finish her spell!

"Darkness, Aqua! Let's buy her some time!" I yelled, and then I rushed out of the underbrush.

The general of the Demon King had been approaching with caution, but when I came bursting out, she stopped.

"Hey, Kazuma, I'm wondering if it might be best for me to stay behind...you know, in case you need backup later. If anything happens to me, I won't be able to bring you back to life, remember?! Hey, are you listening to me?!"

"Shut up and follow me! If we get hit with Explosion, there won't be anything left to bring back to life anyway! And as much as I hate to say it, you're the only one we've got who has any hope of being a match for a self-proclaimed dark god!"

Aqua was practically crying and looked like she was on the verge of just running away, but I dragged her along to confront the general. Darkness was a step behind; she rushed up to cover us.

...But the woman, instead of attacking us, just stood there, an expression of surprise partly visible under her hood.

"...What's happening here? She looks shocked. Am I so notorious that even the ranks of the Demon King's army recognize me and tremble?"

"She's probably never seen someone with such a weird, dumb, and ridiculous face before," Aqua interjected.

There was really no need for that, and I was trying to decide how to get revenge on her when the general before us pulled back her hood, finally revealing her face.

The woman had short red hair and golden catlike eyes.

It was her: the woman I'd shared the tub with on two separate occasions.

Yunyun spoke up from behind me at the same moment; she sounded shocked for some reason. "...What are *you* doing *here*?"

"That's what I'd like to know. I thought you were just a woman who liked baths."

Though I had to admit, I may have had the slightest inkling this would happen.

I had known she was somehow connected with the Demon King's army, after all. And I had seen her chatting with Hans, a known general of the Demon King, in Arcanletia. And although it was long enough ago that I wasn't sure anymore, I could've sworn I'd heard Hans call this woman Wolbach.

In hindsight, maybe I just hadn't wanted to admit that this woman—whom I'd bathed with and whom I couldn't quite bring myself to hate—was actually our enemy.

The woman— No, the general of the Demon King said, "I never did introduce myself to you. My name is Wolbach: general of the Demon King and goddess of sloth and violence." She narrowed her feline eyes, adding to her intimidation factor.

*...Well, crap. Do I seriously have to fight her?*

"...Huh, I guess I didn't know you were connected with the Demon King's army. Truth be told, there's something I've been wanting to ask you. You really

don't strike me as a bad person, so why join up with the Demon King?" I was all innocence.

"Why, indeed. Is this what you would call chitchat?" She gave me an amused smile. "If you want to know, defeat me first."

For a brief moment, there was a hint of sadness in her smile.

*Dammit. Is fighting really the only way?*

That fleeting, lonely smile made my heart ache, and I wished there was another way out of this battle...

"Excuse me. I'm sorry to interrupt you when you're so busy acting all important and mysterious, but I object. Deity you may be, but I won't stand for this goddess-of-sloth-and-violence business. People are going to come after you for false advertising. Call yourself what you are: a dark god."

There went my ruminations. Aqua, who was supposed to be cowering in fear, jumped in with a ridiculous spiel that totally shattered this otherwise serious moment.

Wolbach looked a bit startled, maybe not expecting someone to open with that the very first time they met.

Wait... Did Aqua just agree that she was a deity? And did that mean the woman in front of me wasn't just *calling* herself a goddess but actually was a dark god?

"I grant that sloth and violence aren't the most reputable disciplines to preside over, but I myself am a perfectly upstanding goddess. No false advertising involved, dear."

"That's a lie! Kazuma, this self-proclaimed goddess just told a lie! Eris and I are the only officially recognized goddesses of this world! You apologize! You can't just go around calling yourself whatever you want, besmirching the good name of real, pure, beautiful goddesses like me! Apologize right now!"

It looked like Wolbach had gotten over her surprise. She raised an eyebrow skeptically. "Wh-what's this all of a sudden? I really was a perfectly decent goddess once. But after I joined the Demon King's army, some freaks called the

Axis Church decided I was a dark god, and yes, I've used that expression myself once or twice! But that still doesn't give some priest I've never met the right to talk to me like that!"

"You just called my dear, sweet children freaks! How can you make fun of the Axis Church, which is renowned the world over?! You're not any kind of god at all, are you? Do you even have any followers? Pfft-heh-heh-heh, 'Wolbach' is such a minor-league deity, I've never even heard of her!"

Aqua was really getting into her chiding. Meanwhile, cracks were starting to form in Wolbach's tranquil demeanor.

"Y-y-you, a mere human, dare to mock the gods? You won't get away with that! Any priest worth her salt ought to have a little respect for true deities! Even ones from other religions!"

Aqua, unimpressed by the quaking Wolbach, ran a hand through her hair. "Human? You're calling *me* a human? It's because of blind idiots like you that I get called a 'self-proclaimed' goddess!"

I wanted to add that Aqua herself was a blind enough idiot to mistake a chicken's egg for a dragon's, but then she proudly flourished her divine feather mantle and stuck out her chest. And then, acting as smug as ever, Aqua announced herself to Wolbach.

"My name is Aqua. Yes, Aqua, the very goddess of water venerated by the Axis Church! Far be it from me to heed the ramblings of some insignificant deity I've never even heard of!"

"What?!" Wolbach stared in shock at the openly gloating Aqua. "...You know you're gonna get yourself divine punishment pretending to be a god, right?"

"Apologize! Apologize for saying I'm pretending!" Enraged at her failure to get even a dark god to believe she was a real goddess, Aqua grabbed on to Wolbach.



"H-hey! Stop that, you impudent cur, or I really will call down divine punishment on you! You'll be cursed! Like, when you wake up on your day off, you won't be able to muster any motivation and shall spend the whole day lounging in bed, totally wasting your hard-earned vacation!"

"I'd like to see you try! I'll punish you. Like, you'll be using the bathroom, and there'll be someone begging you to hurry up, but the toilet just won't flush!"

"Well, goddesses don't *use* the bathroom, so that doesn't worry me!"

"Every day of my life is like a day off, so your punishment doesn't worry me!"

*Uh... Hmm. These two are goddesses, right? These supposedly adult women, at each other's throats the very first time they meet?*

I had always pictured goddesses being more august and honorable.

"Yo, Kazuma. Think we can just forget about these two?"

"I'd like to, but that's a general of the Demon King we're dealing with, so I guess we'd better not..."

While Darkness and I whispered to each other, Aqua, apparently unable to hold back any longer, thrust her hand into the air. Some kind of mist started floating around, finally cohering into little globes of water.

...That idiot. Had she forgotten we were supposed to be distracting the enemy?

Speaking of which, what was Megumin doing? How was she not done with her incantation yet?!

"It looks like I have to show you the true power of the goddess of water! You are one smart-mouthed evil deity! And here you don't even have any followers, let alone ones as cheerful and optimistic and pure and righteous and free as mine!"

"H-how could someone as stupid as you actually be the goddess of water? It's your obnoxious followers who stuck me with this evil-god label! And I do too have followers—they're just all in the Demon King's army!! You're a pretty 'minor-league' goddess yourself compared with Eris!!"

.....

*“Sacred Create Water!”*

*“T-Teleport!!”*

We were left with no general of the Demon King and one huge flood of water called down by Aqua's spell!

## Chapter 5

### An Explosion on This Fated Dark God!



1

It was the day after Wolbach's attack and Aqua's antics.

"I'll be all right today. Please, please let me do it!" Megumin cried as soon as she entered the room. She *had* hesitated to attack when she saw Wolbach yesterday, after all.

"Are you sure about that? I mean, I don't even know what happened out there... Was it, like, you saw that your enemy looked human, and you couldn't bring yourself to harm her? I get that. I've gotta admit—I'm not sure I could cut down a woman that hot."

Megumin shook her head. "As long as it is a monster that will give me loads of experience points, I can easily strike down any foe, be it humanoid or sucking babe. I simply, um..."

She looked like she wanted to say something else, but she swallowed the end of her sentence.

Megumin had been acting strange ever since yesterday. Heck, even Yunyun looked preoccupied, and she hadn't come out of her room. They both had some pretty intense reactions to the name Wolbach before we got here, too. Maybe there was something they couldn't tell me.

"Well, I'm not entirely sure what's going on with you guys, but there is one thing I'm sure of. Ambushes are out. Yesterday, some idiot forgot the plan and royally screwed up everything. That put all our enemies on the alert *and* damaged the fortress walls even without Wolbach's help."

I shouldn't have set our ambush so close to the fortress. The flood of water Aqua called down had been the last straw for the already damaged fortifications. As a gesture of good faith, I'd sent her, kicking and screaming, to help repair the wall, but that was probably about as helpful as a single mouthful of water in the desert.

I also didn't like that we had given away that there was a goddess named Aqua with us. Granted, she spent all day lazing around and eating and sleeping, and she liked to waste time playing with the neighborhood kids, and despite how long we'd been in Axel, she still got lost on a regular basis, but still. Even the worst goddess is still a goddess.

After what had happened yesterday, the enemy would be on the lookout for any ambushes.

"...I see. Still, if there is anything I can do, tell me, won't you? Though I confess, what I can do consists mostly of exploding things." Megumin gave me a wan smile.

"Eh, anyway, I guess the first thing is to come up with a strategy together. Maybe over a nice, quiet—"

*—meal*, was what I was going to say.

But that was when I heard a very familiar rumble shake the fortress.

Megumin and I rushed to the site of the attack. I expected others were heading the same way. When we got there...

"Call somebody! Get anyone who can use Create Earth and anyone who can make golems! We need to fix the wall, quick!"

Knights and adventurers were rushing around trying to repair the shattered barrier. I looked for any sign of Wolbach, but—

"I see she is already gone. She must have retreated to replenish her magic

after attacking the wall," Megumin, also looking for our assailant, murmured to me.

Let off an explosion, then run home with Teleport. A simple but effective strategy.

Oops, I couldn't just be standing here. Figuring I could at least use Create Earth to help repair the wall, I went over toward the fortification...

"Arrrgh! What's going *on* here?! This looks even worse than when I left it!"

A sudden shout.

"...Why are you dressed like that, Aqua?"

Megumin was looking at Aqua, who was coming toward us with a towel wrapped around her head like a workman. It reminded me of the fond times just after we first arrived in Axel.

"There's no *why* about it. Kazuma told me to fix the wall, and I had to look the part. But what's going on here? I'll kill whoever did this!"

"It was our friend the dark god from yesterday. Remember she told us she wants to destroy this wall? Your timing couldn't be better, costume and all. Come help us repair the damage."

As I spoke, I used Create Earth on the fresh crater.

...I guess they had been doing this sort of thing every day. Morose soldiers and adventurers gathered up the rubble and tried everything they could to plug the hole in the wall.

"Come on, now, that'll never work! Let me tell you. To get this wall up and running, you need to start with a core. Then you use earth to build out from there; then you daub on plaster to harden it. Here, watch, like this."

Aqua, behind me, sounded more than a little pleased with herself. I guess she was all excited, since we'd done some expansion work on a wall back when we were in construction. Come to think of it, she'd turned out to really enjoy physical labor.

I was letting my thoughts wander to times past when I heard a sound of surprise from behind me. I looked over, wondering what was going on, and

found Megumin watching Aqua, who had trundled up to the hole in the wall and—

“What?! She’s fast! And...really good?! Hang on a second! When did you turn into a certified bricklayer?!”

Aqua turned to me with an expression as if to ask why I was so shocked. “Who do you take me for? Have you forgotten that when I told the foreman I was going to take a break to become an adventurer, he suggested I skip adventuring and just work full-time for him?”

Damn, he never said anything like that to *me*.

Okay, no, that didn’t matter now. I had never had a free moment during our construction work to check out what Aqua was actually doing, but now I saw that her work was downright professional. I had to wonder why she was a savant at construction of all things, but at the moment, I was grateful. I had been convinced that this fortress was moments away from having its walls knocked down and then being summarily blown into a million pieces.

That’s why I’d come up with the whole dangerous ambushing-Wolbach idea in the first place. But in just minutes, Aqua had fixed the wall so well that it looked better than it ever had.

“Look, there’s no way this is for real. Do you have some kind of wall-repair cheat? It hasn’t even had time to dry yet, right?”

“You must have a very low opinion of the goddess of water. Manipulating the moisture to dry out the bricks is child’s play for me, you understand? Think of how quickly and thoroughly the clothes dry when I’m on laundry duty.”

I resolved to make Aqua handle not just the toilets but the washing from now on.

Okay, more importantly—

“...Now we can fight!”

There was a boom, and the fortress shivered.

Another day's work.

Aqua was practically quivering with excitement at the sound.

"You're up, Repair Captain," I said.

"Mission accepted! Come on, everyone! Come and see just how awesome your captain can be!"

"We're counting on you, Captain!"

"Repair Captain!"

"Another day, another job for the repair captain!"

The soldiers and adventurers behind Aqua and me were downright giddy as we headed for the site of the explosion. Darkness, temporarily in charge of the fortress, had granted Aqua the somewhat enigmatic title of repair captain.

"Repair Captain, your work will determine the fate of this fortress... So, uh, good luck."

"You can count on me, Commander! Don't worry—they don't call me a captain for nothing. I won't let some dark god beat me!"

"Captain!"

"That's our captain! Come on, everyone, the challenge awaits! Let's see what she can do!"

Darkness had the "captain" by the nose: Aqua gleefully headed off for another day of doing repairs.

It was the third day of Aqua's tenure as the repair captain, a position that was purely a formality and received zero pay and no benefits.

As if in spite of the daily explosions, the fortress walls got thicker and sturdier every day. I was starting to think Aqua could actually make a living in this line of work.

Morale had taken a complete 180 in the formerly gloomy fortress, and when added to the vast quantities of wine that a cheerful Aqua spread around (no doubt inspired by the constant calls of *Captain, Captain!*), everyone now was acting ready to do battle.

"...Um, whatever happened to the doom and gloom hanging over this fortress when we first got here?"

"I feel silly for losing sleep worrying about it."



\* \* \*

I could hear the two Crimson Magic girls talking to each other, a bit overwhelmed, as they watched Aqua go.

I could understand how they felt, but it was definitely best to err on the side of caution here. This would allow us to buy some time, and while we strengthened the fortifications, some wizards who could use Teleport headed back to the capital to let them know what was going on.

We were locked in a stalemate now; a handful of reinforcements could turn the tide. Meanwhile, a steady stream of supplies and even soldiers and adventurers arrived from the city.

Aqua's nominal subordinates adored her for her generosity with the wine, and the captain herself was more than happy to let them adore her. (It didn't hurt that the lives of everyone in the fortress pretty much depended on her.) The daily explosions no longer concerned us at all.

At last, we had gotten to a point where Aqua wasn't just expanding the walls but was even adding some playful artwork.

"Wolbach's here!"

We all looked at one another: The shout didn't sound like normal.

3

"What is going on?!"

Wolbach was standing in front of the fortress gate, shaking.

"Wh-what is what?" asked the person probably most used to talking to her by now—namely, me—as the other adventurers looked on.

I guess Wolbach didn't like my tone, because she stamped her foot. "I'm talking about your wall! Your wall was practically rubble. So how come it looks like *that* now?! It looks stronger than it did before I got here!"

"You'd have to talk to Aqua about that..."

"Her again?!"

It sounded like almost getting washed away in a huge flood was still a raw nerve for Wolbach.

At that moment...

"Well, well, if it isn't... Hmm, what was your name again?"

"It's Wolbach! ...And it looks like I have to settle things with you! ...Wait, what?"

Wolbach was readying a verbal onslaught for the smart-mouthed Aqua, but then she stopped in surprise. She noticed Darkness coming up behind us. No, wait—she was surprised by Yunyun and Megumin, with Chomusuke in her arms.

She immediately fixed her gaze on Chomusuke. The cat, meanwhile, couldn't seem to look away from Wolbach.

Aqua spoke up as the cat and the woman stared at each other. "Excuse me, could you please not look at Chomusuke like that? What, are you the kind who likes adorable stuffed animals? Are you just like our Darkness?"

"Hey, Aqua, I don't like...! I don't care about..."

Aqua ignored Darkness's attempts to interject, walking forward to stand between Wolbach and Chomusuke.

"I was *not* looking at her because she's adorable, even if she kind of...is...?" Wolbach suddenly stopped. "You, what did you just call that black cat?"

"Chomusuke? I always thought it was kind of a weird name, but it's started to grow on me lately."

"Hey, you, I shall ask you not to defame a glorious and cool name. It is not 'weird.'"

Wolbach couldn't seem to believe what she was hearing. "What *is* this?!" she shouted, and she started stalking toward us.

When she saw the adventurers behind us all focus on her, though, she stopped and gave them a resentful look.

"U-um, just so you know," she said, "that cat's a girl. So I'm not sure about

that name."

"Chomusuke is Chomusuke. My familiar and pet."

"What?! Seriously, somebody please fill me in! What in the world happened to my other half?!"

Wolbach had stopped making any sense to me. But Aqua...

"...Ahaaa. I *thought* you seemed like an awfully low-grade deity. Is it because Chomusuke here took half your power? ...Oh, oh, my all-seeing eye perceives it now. There's some kind of seal on Chomusuke."

Aqua leaned in and stared intently at Megumin's cat.

Chomusuke, perhaps in response to Aqua, started struggling to go over to Wolbach.

"Ah..."

Wolbach started to walk up slowly, reaching out her hand to her "other half."

"Don't you dare give Chomusuke to her!" I shouted. "Megumin, hold on to that cat!"

"What?!" Wolbach exclaimed, sort of crying. "That's *my* other half you're talking about! My partner who I've been searching for for years! This is a big, emotional reunion!"

"I don't know what you want with Chomusuke, but can you swear that if we give her to you, you'll stop fighting us? Do you promise to leave this fortress alone? Because if not, it would be stupid to do something that might make our enemy stronger, right?" Wolbach kept walking as I spoke. "Oops, don't come any closer, you hear? I don't have anything against you personally. That's why I'm willing to negotiate. If you want us to let Chomusuke go, listen very carefully and promise to do exactly as I say. If you really are a dark god, then swear on your own name not to stand against us anymore." I smirked as nastily as I could, leaving everyone there flabbergasted.

"""Yikes...""""

The collective gasp from the adventurers left me feeling like I was doing something really villainous. *No! This is just a ruse so she won't see through us...!*

*Fine, who cares what some adventurers I just met the other day think about me? As long as my party members understand who I truly am...*

"Hey, I guess that woman's a dark god or something. But if someone can make a dark god cry, are they even still human anymore?"

"Take it easy, Aqua. I'm sure he's negotiating the best way he can. The most respectful thing we can do for him is to try not to look."

"Mr. Kazuma, you're the worst..."

*...I think I'm gonna cry, myself.*

"...I'll withdraw for today, but don't let it go to your heads! Even if I can't destroy your walls, that only leaves us in a stalemate. As long as this fortress is here, we can't advance any farther. But if I were you, I wouldn't feel too good about all the demon forces camped out in the forest." Wolbach was on a roll. "Now it's a war of attrition! I'm going to bring down each and every stroke of the graffiti on that wall!"

She was just about to teleport out.

"U-um! Hey! Do you... Do you remember me?! I'm... My name is Yunyun, a-and..."

Yunyun and Megumin had just stood watching the entire scene, when right at the end, Yunyun burst out with a question.

"...I remember you," Wolbach replied. "I believe you're from the carriage, the one I invited to travel with me... There's something I've always wanted to ask. 'Yunyun'... Is that a nickname, too...?"

So apparently, I wasn't the only one who knew this lady. Yunyun did, too.

"It's my real name! Um... All this time, I've never forgotten your invitation! I made sure to write it down in my diary that day, and sometimes I read back over that entry!"

"O-oh, do you? You didn't have to take it quite so seriously, but if it makes you happy, then that's what matters," Wolbach said.

"Um...!" Now it was Megumin, clutching Chomusuke, who spoke, her voice strained. "And me...! Do you remember me? My name is Megumin..."

Wolbach sort of half smiled, almost sadly.

"No. I don't remember you."

It was hardly a whisper, and then she teleported away.

4

At the fortress's assembly grounds.

The knights and soldiers all looked downright excited.

Before, they had been hit with attack after attack that they couldn't respond to, ground down physically and mentally, but now their eyes sparkled, and they held their heads high with anticipation.

They didn't care that we were in a stalemate.

They were watching my every move with rapt attention. And with all eyes on me, I began to speak.

"All right, let's review the plan one more time! The three of us are going to go out there and get close to the enemy base using Ambush. Then, when we've lured the enemy within spell range, we'll hit her with Explosion and then teleport out! We can expect retaliation, so I want everyone in the fortress to get ready for it!"

The adventurers bellowed hungrily at that.

Wolbach had said it herself. This was a stalemate.

But why should we just sit and wait any more than she was?

My plan was outrageously simple, but I was confident it would work.

After all, it was the exact same plan the enemy had been using.

"Another underhanded scheme... I guess if it means we get to go on the offensive, I can't complain..."

Darkness, the only person in the fortress who could take a hit from Explosion and survive, and Aqua, who was our master of support and healing magic and who repaired a mean wall, would stay here.

Until now, the people here had been unable to do anything except coop themselves up in this fortress while the enemy pounded away at them, and they were getting pretty tired of it. As we prepared to go out and meet the foe, we got shouts of encouragement and slaps on the back from everyone around us.

Our squad consisted of three people: Yunyun, to handle teleporting and help fight in a pinch; me, to provide the quick thinking, the Ambush skill, and the ability to detect incoming enemies with Sense Foe; and Megumin, to bring the firepower.

With pretty much everyone in the fortress seeing us off, the three of us headed for the woods near the base. The enemy encampment was in there somewhere.

Monsters always seemed to like forests and other natural locations, so maybe it made sense to them to set up shop in a place like this when they knew they were going to be staying for a while. But it also provided a perfect opportunity for us. A forest meant plenty of underbrush—plenty of places to hide if you had Ambush.

As we got close to the enemy camp, we started to get a sense of what was going on with them. It was already like a big party over there, probably inspired by Wolbach's attacks virtually decimating the fortress wall.

I felt a tug on my sleeve and glanced over to see Megumin give me one firm nod.

That was the signal: We were in range for Explosion.

I caught Yunyun's eye, and she tightened her grip on her wand as if to show that she was ready, too.

*All right, time for a little revenge!*

After Wolbach's daily attacks, I guess the monsters figured victory was just a matter of time.

*"Expllosion!"*

Our ultimate-finisher magic dropped straight into the heart of the encampment of the Demon King's army.

The explosion magic blew away every single monster caught in the blast, leaving only a giant crater. The demon troops, convinced that the battle was already over and reveling in their victory, were thrown into a total panic by the unexpected attack.

"Wh-wh-whaaaat the?!"

"Wh-what just happened?! Was that explosion magic?!"

"Enemy attack! Enemy attaaaaack!"

The more intelligent-looking bipedal monsters in the camp furiously tried to raise the alarm, but Yunyun was already chanting Teleport.

"Hey! There, look over there! That's them, two Crimson Magic Clan members and—"

*"Teleport!"*

Before the monster who spotted us could finish his sentence, Yunyun got us all out of there.

"Mission accomplished!" I announced loud enough that everyone could hear as we arrived back at the fortress. All the gloom that had been building up vanished in a massive cheer. I could hear people shouting things like "Yeah! Take that!" and others exclaiming that they had seen the explosion from the guard towers. Everyone looked thrilled.

But in the middle of it all...

"You were right! Here they come!"

...an adventurer on watch was pointing to the woods and shouting.

Everyone went straight to their battle stations and prepared to meet the enemy attack.

On came the Demon King's army. I guess our little stunt had touched a nerve. I could see murderous rage in the enemies' eyes, and they advanced on the

fortress in an unruly mob, with no proper formation.

It was time for my friends and me to take a step back. Let the cheaters and the knights handle this. The bad guys had numbers on their side, but we had the advantage of defending from inside a fortress. But it wasn't my job to deal with a big, violent battle like this.

"My dear adventuring friends! I leave this in your hands!"

The other adventurers, riled up with even more bloodlust than the Demon King's army, gave a huge collective shout.

And so it went...

*"Explosion!!"*

"Huuuuuh?!"

"It's them again! Don't let them get away—catch them!"

"Look what they've done to our brothers in arms! Surround them—they'll pay with their lives!"

From all around us, we could hear the shouting of the Demon King's chosen troops, Devils and demons and all sorts of nasty creatures. But as for us?

*"Teleport!"*

We continued our attacks on the enemy encampment, a different time every day.

*"Explosion!!"*

"The food! They just blew away our stockpile of provisions!"

"Dammit, not again! I'm so sick of waking up to explosions!"

"Call Lady Wolbach and ask her to get rid of these guys!"

"She already used her explosion for today!"

"Just hold tight! If we can hang in there a little longer, their walls'll come crashing down! Then we can have our revenge!"

"Do *not* let them get away today! Don't let them use—"

*"Teleport!"*

We pestered them with attacks day and night.

“Bwah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I am Megumin, first among the Arch-wizards of Axel! Time for another harvest of experience points!”

“There they are!”

“Run! Run awaaaaay!”

“Idiots, don’t bunch together! That Crimson Magic girl always hits the densest spot! Get away from me!”

“No, not over there! Spread ou—”

“*Explosion!*”

Megumin’s level rose almost comically fast, so her explosions grew more powerful every day, a state of affairs she found deeply satisfying. At some point she started to accompany her attacks with insane laughter.

“Gya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Wa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Behold, I have come once more!”

“D-do us a favor and beat it! Here, we’ll give you candy!”

“Spare me! I have an elderly mother!”

“Hey, uh, demons love magic, just like Crimson Magic folks! I’ll bet we can be friends!”

“Let’s talk about this! Y’know, t-try to understand one another. Fighting doesn’t solve anything, right?”

“Look, I threw down my weapon! Surely a proud and honorable Crimson Magic Clan mage would never attack a poor, defenseless—”

“*Explooooooooosion!*”

It got to the point where all they had to do was look at us.

“Megumin, over there! They’re trying to look like they’re scattering, but they’re all going the same way!”

“Understood! Not one of them shall escape!”

“Arrrrgh! Oh god, oh god! Lady Wolbach!”

“When I die, I hope I’ll be reborn as a cat, not a demon... Then I can spend

every day with my beautiful lady owner, getting food and cuddles..."

"This has to be a dream. Yeah, I'm gonna wake up and go on one of my walks, and when I get back, Mom's gonna be making steaks from the Bloodfang she just caught..."

"I-I-I-I've got an in with the Demon King! If you let me live, I'm sure he'd pay a lot of money to have me back...!"

*"Expllosion!!!"*

They would scream and cry and run away.

"I won't let them escape! No, I shall certainly not... Oh, wait!"

"...Okay, I think that's enough. How about we go home for today?"

I'd lost track of how many days it had been since we started exploding the Demon King's troops. Early on, they had come in force to counterattack every time we hit them, but by now their morale was extremely low; I was shocked they hadn't just packed up and gone back to the Demon King's territory yet.

"Gosh, I can hardly tell who the bad guys are anymore..." Yunyun groaned, dragging us off.

By now, just the sight of Megumin brought on a variety of reactions: begging, rolling around on the ground, and praying. They had given up on the idea of even trying to run away. I figured it was about time for them to close up shop, but in a hierarchy like the Demon King's army, I guess you didn't ignore orders from above. They had probably threatened to kill deserters or something.

"Most troublesome. I can't level up efficiently this way."

"Just a reminder, but we aren't doing this so you can farm experience, all right?"

We had started to get away from our original objective, and it seemed like the iron was plenty hot. We had wiped out most of the Demon King's so-called handpicked troops with merciless explosions day after day. Aqua had taken over the repair of the fortress walls and done so much work that by now they were stronger than when we'd arrived. I was of the opinion that she would have done better for herself as an entertainer or an engineer than an Arch-

priest.

But anyway, by this point, we should have been okay.

"Ah, well," Megumin said. "All right, Yunyun, take us home for today. It's too bad we didn't get to let off an explosion. Let's try coming back in the middle of the night, when they've let down their guard a bit. Get ready to teleport us, please." She laid her staff casually across her shoulders, and that was when it happened.

"I've been looking all over for you lot. So we finally meet again."

The attacks on the fortress had completely stopped by now—maybe they'd given up hope of destroying the outer walls. But there was Wolbach, a pained expression on her face.

6

*Oh hell.*

Who would have thought we would end up in a situation like this at a time like now?

"Looks like your friend isn't with you today," Wolbach said, staring straight at me. Then she giggled a little.

By my "friend," she seemed to mean our useless goddess. I personally never found Aqua to be very helpful, but this dark god was apparently a little leery of her.

Wolbach's gaze shifted from me to Megumin, and then those golden eyes narrowed. "You've overplayed your hand," she said. "I can't overlook any more of your destructive antics. I do hate to fight someone I've had such nice conversations with, but so it goes..."

"H-hold it! I don't want to fight you, either! I mean, not after we've shared the bath and everything!"

"Huh?!" Megumin and Yunyun chorused.

"...Given the present circumstances, I'd prefer you didn't bring that up..."

““What?!””

*Geez, girls, I’m trying to negotiate here.*

“A-ahem, I think your young friends are getting the wrong idea...”

“The wrong idea? We’ve bathed together twice. Heck, you’ve even said you feel a connection to me...”

“I did! Yes, I did say that, and yes, we’ve bathed together! But still!!” Then Wolbach glared at us in an effort to regain the initiative. “I’ve taken the liberty of doing a little research on you, my frequently attacking foes. Beldia, Vanir, Hans, Sylvia... I assume those names ring a bell?”

She was listing the names of the generals we’d defeated.

“Wolbach, if you don’t mind my saying so, your ears are red.”

“Quiet, you!” All the bath talk must have embarrassed her, and when I pointed out the state of her ears, it only caused the rest of her face to flush, too.

“Yeah, I remember them,” I said. “But I really don’t have any motivation to fight you.”

“That may be, but I just can’t imagine what you’ve been doing. I have to get you to give back my other half. And this business about defeating four different generals, it makes you sound like the hero from that old fairy tale.”

*Hero* might be a bit much for someone from the weakest class. My most powerful ability was Steal.

Wolbach, ignoring my internal jab, continued, “And the more I found out about you, the less I could just look the other way. Tell me. Do you know the name of that hero from the fairy tale?” She grinned as if she knew some damning secret about me.

“...I don’t know about any hero. Wanna just tell me?”

“You can certainly play dumb, I’ll give you that. Or is it that it was so long ago, you’ve already forgotten? The name of that fabled hero was Satou. That’s right. Just like you. Are you going to tell me it’s just a coincidence that both of you have such an unusual name?”

*Um, it's actually just about the most common name where I come from.*

If nothing else, though, things finally made sense. Wolbach thought I was a descendant of this hero or whatever. Even though I was pretty sure this other Satou and I were totally unrelated.

At that moment...

“Um.”

...Megumin lowered the staff she had been holding.

“Are you...sure you don’t remember me?”

Her face was red, and her crimson eyes were glittering.

Wolbach hardly glanced at her. “...Don’t make me repeat myself. No, I don’t... But don’t worry. I’ll certainly remember you after this. As the one who sent so many of my subordinates to their graves!”

“?!”

No sooner had she finished speaking than she began chanting her magic!  
*Guess we aren't friends anymore.*

“Hey! Hold on; I told you, I don’t want to fight—”

I broke off, realizing our opponent wasn’t playing around. How did I know? Because that incantation was—

“Yunyun, cast Teleport!” I yelled.

“G-g-got it! Right away!”

Confronted by Wolbach suddenly chanting Explosion, Yunyun hurriedly began to recite her own spell. Megumin—perhaps from the shock of being told Wolbach didn’t remember her, or maybe for some other reason—showed no sign of chanting her magic.

Deeply regretting having left all the magical items I’d so carefully prepared back at the fortress, I looked around in hopes of coming up with something, anything—!

I searched every pocket I had and came up with one object.

*"Kindle!!!!!"*

I cast my spell on the miniaturized thing and flung it at Wolbach!

She saw it arc through the air toward her, and she froze for an instant, unsure whether to interrupt herself, dodge, or what.

We didn't stick around to see it explode: I grabbed the dumbfounded Megumin and dragged us both over to Yunyun.

*"Teleport!!!"*

I closed my eyes as Yunyun shouted the spell.

7

We instantaneously returned to the fortress, where we collapsed in a heap.

"H-hey, what happened, Kazuma?" Darkness came up to us where we were sitting on the ground. "We didn't hear much from today's explosion."

We had transported ourselves right into the gathering area in the middle of the structure. The rest of the inhabitants, sensing something was amiss, came running.

"Hey, Kazuma, what's wrong? You're all so pale. Did that Miss Whoever bully you?" Aqua, apparently genuinely bothered by all those days of being called the goddess of whatever, crouched down next to us.

"We almost ate an explosion ourselves. I flung the Tinymite in my pocket at her, and we got out of there. I think that's the first time I've ever felt as lucky as everyone says I am." I shook my head between heaving breaths. "...Hey, what's up? You've been pretty excited ever since we got here. I guess it's 'cause your other half is nearby, huh?"

Chomusuke, whom we had left with Darkness and Aqua, had climbed up onto my knees.

If what Wolbach was saying was true, then this cat was basically a part of a dark god, and that left the question of what exactly to do with her.

"Hey, Kazuma, that Tinymite...is that the stuff you made earlier? When you

blew it up, the sound carried all the way here. Does that mean you finished off that self-proclaimed goddess?"

...Actually, I had no idea what had happened after our escape. If they'd heard the blast here, then at least it hadn't been a dud. But as powerful as my little invention had proved to be, I really didn't think it had the kick to bring down a general of the Demon King.

"I'm very sorry," Megumin said, appearing at my side. "After I talked myself up, back in Axel and here at the fortress. When I was finally face-to-face with the enemy, I couldn't get my magic off, and I'm so sorry..."

She stared into my eyes.

"Do you have some kind of history with that woman?" I asked.

My question had been offhand, but Megumin, looking at the ground as if she might burst into tears at any moment, replied, "...I can't tell you."

Seeing her like that, I worried—

*I've done it now, I thought.*

I felt like I had stepped on a land mine.

But look, knowing how aggressive Megumin was, there had to be something going on to make her hesitate like that! There just *had* to be. But what was I going to do? She was practically on the verge of tears!

I looked around to the others for help, but all the other adventurers, even Aqua and Darkness, glanced away.

*I can't believe these people. Aqua is one thing, but Darkness?*

But then...

"Hey, isn't that...Wolbach?" someone said.

One of the adventurers was looking out a window, and at his words, everyone rushed over to see. Including me, obviously.

Outside, making a beeline for the fortress, was a person covered in splotches of blood here and there. It was Wolbach.

"Wolbach is wounded!"

"You said your name was Kazuma Satou? You sure know how to handle yourself...!"

"Is what I heard from Lady Aqua true? Did you really not get any special boosts like the rest of us?"

The adventurers praised me lavishly at the sight of the bleeding general, but I have to say, I didn't feel very good about it.

No. She might have been a hot woman, but she was also our enemy. She was a general of the Demon King, and that made her an enemy of humanity.

That was it. There was no need to beat myself up about it. What I'd done was justifiable self-defense.

While all this discord and doubt was running through my head, someone else spoke up.

"Hey... She looks kind of weak. You think we could take her down right now?"

When the other guys—probably all blessed with OP weapons and armor—heard that, they looked at one another.

"Yeah, let's go! We've taken out more than half the Demon King's handpicked troops, haven't we?"

"Man, she sure is hot, though. I guess that doesn't count for much right now."

"Yeah, let her get under your skin, and we'll all die. All right, everyone who can bear arms, get ready! Once we take out Wolbach, we'll go straight for the last of the Demon King's forces!"

I guess that was all to be expected from a bunch of adventurers. Pretty much everyone there went streaming out of the gathering area.

I saw Aqua follow them, probably less interested in helping to destroy Wolbach than in having a ringside seat for the fight. Darkness's face was grim.

...As she left the area, Darkness glanced back at me and nodded.

Dammit. What the hell was that supposed to mean? Was there something she wanted me to do?!

Was she telling me to snap Megumin out of it?!

Speaking of Megumin, who was left there with me, she hadn't reacted at all to the announcement that Wolbach had shown up.

*Man, I'm so bad at these serious moments. My life until now has been so upbeat!*

As I fretted to myself, Yunyun, who had kindly stayed behind with me, spoke up. "That person out there is a general of the Demon King and a dark god." Her crimson eyes flashed, and she drew her wand. "That woman invited me to travel with her. I was so happy that I wrote about it in my diary, and I've read over that entry so many times. For a while I couldn't even sleep because I regretted turning her down." (Megumin and I weren't sure how to respond to this unexpectedly intimate confession.) "But the Crimson Magic Clan was created by human hands to be the strongest wizards ever known in order to oppose the Demon King. No matter what may happen, we absolutely must not befriend a general of the Demon King."

She looked so serious. I wondered if she knew who Vanir and Wiz really were.

Yunyun, still wielding her wand, headed for the door. "I may know that woman only from a short conversation in a carriage. But rather than let a bunch of adventurers who have never even spoken to her bring her down, I would rather... I'd r-r-r-rather...!"

She was trying so hard to be cool, but she must have reached her limit, because she started trembling as if she was going to cry. Megumin, maybe still weighed down by her inability to do anything when we faced Wolbach, didn't say a word, despite her friend's obvious distress.

I couldn't tell what was in Megumin's head, but suddenly she grabbed Chomusuke off my knees, silently hugging her to herself.

We knew Chomusuke had some sort of connection to Wolbach, something that kept Wolbach from immediately attacking us.

"...What are you going to do?" I said to Megumin.

"...What?"

As gently as if I were inviting her to go play, I said, "I don't know exactly what the story is here." Megumin continued to stare at me in confusion. "But you

have some kind of history with that woman, right? Can you just let those adventurers out there finish her off?" I was as cool as if we were talking about going for a walk. "She's come looking for a fight, and since she wants Chomusuke, I doubt she'll have to think twice about killing us. So personally, I'm not going to stop them."

I took Chomusuke—who would've probably only heightened the tension had she been present at the upcoming battle—back from Megumin.

"Crimson Magic Clan members always take the ripest opportunities, right?"

Megumin's eyes were beginning to glimmer.

"If you want to finish this yourself, I'll help however I can."

8

A crowd of adventurers and knights looked on as I confronted Wolbach, with Chomusuke in my arms and Megumin by my side.

When I promised the crowd of bloodthirsty adventurers that I'd tell them about a certain incredible shop, they let us handle the battle. Apparently, they had more than cheats going for them. All of them had already saved up a general's worth of bounty money.

*Geez, color me jealous...*

I glanced back at Darkness and Aqua, who looked like they had something to say, and silenced them with just my eyes.

"Are you sure you aren't the descendant of that hero? That was quite a fearsome thing you used on me." Wolbach, her robes torn here and there and covered in streaks of blood, smirked sarcastically at me.

"Call it the fruits of civilization. But I've gotta admit—I never expected it to work so well against a general of the Demon King. I might have to start mass-producing them." Standing there holding Chomusuke, I showed her I could be just as biting as she was. "Look, why come all the way to the fortress now? We can all see who's going to win this fight. Wouldn't now be a great time for you to retreat? Tell you what. If you promise to forget about Chomusuke and never

bother us again, I think I could find it in myself to look the other way while you escape.”

I didn’t expect the woman in front of me to accept those terms, but I thought I would offer, just in case.

“What a shame. If you really are capable of mass-producing those little toys, it’s just one more reason that I can’t let you live. And I can’t forget about your pet cat, either. I need her power, or I’m going to disappear.” Wolbach held up her right hand. It was starting to become translucent.

“...Are you some kind of undead?”

“How rude. I’ve lost so much power that at this rate, I’m going to be absorbed by my other half.”

This other half she kept talking about... Was it by any chance the cat I was holding in my arms?

...Huh?

“Can I ask you something? If I do return this cat to you, how will you get your power back, exactly? Are you going to, like, merge with Chomusuke or something?”

“No,” Wolbach answered, “I’ll erase that cat with my own hands. I rule sloth, and she rules violence. Once, long ago, we were accidentally unsealed, and her nature led her to go on a rampage. I sealed her back up, after stealing a considerable amount of her power, but...”

I didn’t exactly follow. Was she threatening to attack Chomusuke? As a cat lover, I wasn’t going to let that happen.

Then Megumin finally spoke up. “Was there not a little girl nearby when the seal on you and Chomusuke was broken? A girl with crimson eyes, perhaps five or six years old?” Her hands tightened on her staff; a look of certainty entered her expression.

“I don’t remember,” Wolbach almost spat, but still Megumin fixed her with her gaze.

I didn’t like where this was going.

Desperate to change the subject, I floated another question that had been on my mind.

"...Hey, look, if you're in the Demon King's army, how come we can have such a pleasant chat?"

Wolbach let out a pained breath. "If you want to know...defeat me first." She smiled teasingly and repeated her words from earlier.

*No good, huh? I knew it.*

It was starting to look like we weren't going to get out of this without a fight.

"This girl beside me is a user of Explosion, as I think you know by now," I said. "So when this is over, you won't be around to answer my questions."

"...True enough. In that case..." Wolbach gave a little giggle. "Ask the Demon King. He'll tell you."

Again, her reply seemed to bring her pain. Then she started chanting a spell.

Here I'd been trying to buy time against a fading enemy, and I got the tables completely turned on us!

I knew how fast Megumin could chant. If she started right this second, it might be just enough to finish her spell first.

I glanced at Megumin beside me.

"...I think you *do* remember me, don't you?" she murmured, then squeezed her staff again.

I went pale when I realized she didn't seem to be chanting at all. I reached out for her so we could make our exit, when...!

"When you met Yunyun and me, you asked whether her name was a nickname, *too*." Megumin slipped away from me, still not chanting, but instead talking to Wolbach, who stood stock-still. "There is something I've wanted to say to you, and show you, for a very long time."

Wolbach, on the other hand, was obviously chanting.

"The spell you taught me. My mastery of it has surpassed that of any other, such that I can now control it without even a chant." Then I thought I heard her

whisper, "Thank you."

"*Explosioooonnnn!!!*"



The Demon King's army was in tatters, and his general had been blown away. Normally, that would have been cause for a huge victory celebration, but Megumin didn't look quite right, so we decided to take our leave quietly.

We said our farewells to the others at the fortress, and the next day, we were on our way home. We reached the inn where I'd bathed with Wolbach, and I found myself lying back in my bed, my hands under my head, staring at the ceiling.

With all that had happened the day before, I was exhausted; I wanted nothing more than to hop in the bath and then go to bed, but the girls were having their turn at that moment. I had initially tried to join them, arguing that it was a mixed bath, so there was nothing illegal about it. But I was fixed with two pairs of glowing crimson eyes, and I beat a hasty retreat.

*...The fight this time really was a close one.*

All our enemies up to this point had been— I mean, there was some hope of running away or just avoiding them. Being on the receiving end of Explosion, though... That put real fear into you.

I had learned my lesson: I would have to be careful not to really tick off Megumin in the future.

Chomusuke sat on my chest—she had been clinging to me all the way home—and I asked myself for the umpteenth time:

*...What the heck is this cat anyway?*

After that explosion, Wolbach was gone without ever answering my question. Considering that she was a full-fledged general of the Demon King, I had hoped she would've withstood the blast better than...well... There was nothing left but an empty crater. I didn't want to believe this meant the woman I'd gotten to know was dead. Was this really how it would all end?

Actually, when Megumin fired off that explosion with the words *thank you*, was it my imagination, or did Wolbach smile for just a second?

I kind of hoped I wasn't just imagining it...

Come to think of it, shouldn't this lazy furball have disappeared, too, if she was really Wolbach's "other half"?

Everything had happened so fast this time. There were too many things I didn't understand. My head felt like it was going to explode.

As I lay there trying to sort it all out, Chomusuke edged toward my nose.

*...I guess I don't care if you're a dark god or whatever. You're the only one who's tried to comfort me...*

I patted her where she had curled up again, getting a contented rumble in return.

There was a knock at my door, and I heard Megumin's voice. "Kazuma, are you still awake? We're all done in the bath."

"Great, I'll go down in a minute!"

I felt bad evicting the relaxed, purring Chomusuke from her spot, and I drew her closer as I answered.

Then the door drifted open.

"...So this is where you were. I didn't see you anywhere." As Megumin entered the room, she smiled to see Chomusuke resting on my chest. She pulled the door shut behind her, then sat on the end of the bed.

"We're having Make-Kazuma-Feel-Better time. Give us a few more minutes before you take her away."

"I don't have to take her anywhere. I was afraid she had wandered outside, but if she's with you, I don't have anything to worry about." Megumin reached out toward where Chomusuke was settled on top of me.

And then...

"...H-hey. Why so sudden?"

...Megumin went from reaching out for Chomusuke to leaning over, then lying down beside me.

Chomusuke—as if sensing her cue to leave—hopped down off the bed and

curled up on the floor.

Megumin ignored my question, pulling the blanket up to her head so I couldn't see her face. "May I sleep here tonight?" she whispered.

Back at the fortress, Megumin had barricaded herself in her room on account of what had happened yesterday. So what was going on now?

It sounded like she had known that woman somehow, and then she ended up having to drop an explosion on her. Not that I didn't sympathize, but...

"...Of course you can't. What are you talking about? Don't take me for the pushover I've been in the past, okay? ...I made myself a little promise, right here at this inn. I decided that if you or Darkness led me on with your sly looks and honeyed words ever again, I was going to just jump you." I tried to say it jokingly so it wouldn't come off too grim.

Just for an instant, Megumin's eyes flashed red under the covers. "I wouldn't really mind. In fact, that's why I came here today."

Then she giggled.

...Seriously, what was with this girl?

Er, actually, with her breathing on me from so close, my chest was starting to get a little warm from the heat.

*This is bad. My heart's gonna start beating out of my chest any minute now.*

*Heck, that's not the only reason. This is bad, bad, very bad! It's only a matter of time before my lower half starts chanting Explosion himself!*

"You know what you're dealing with, all right? A healthy young man in the prime of his adolescence. You can't joke like that with a guy like me. Listen, a guy'll get the wrong idea if you go around doing stuff like this. Especially unpopular ones. We can fall in love if someone so much as holds our hands. Seriously, be careful." My voice had gone up an octave from nervousness.

But then I felt a hand work its way around my back and pull me close.

"I've told you before as clearly as I could." I couldn't see Megumin's face, and her voice was muffled. "I love you, Kazuma."

I didn't know how this had happened.

I didn't know why things were developing so suddenly.

*No, calm down. Megumin isn't her usual self. Something's wrong.*

But I couldn't *not* let myself get swept along in what was going on here.

Let's, uh, let's change the subject. You know what I really love? Manga.

I love light novels.

Games are great, too, and watching anime is fun.

And all the time I was watching and reading and playing these things, I had one thought: *Why, when a guy is all but cornered by a beautiful woman, doesn't he lay a finger on her? Isn't he young and ravenous? What losers. If I was in their position, I thought, I would get with those ladies, no question.*

Well, now I practically *was* the main character in one of those rom-com manga.

I finally understood.

And I apologize. To all those characters I unfairly criticized in my head, I apologize. I beg you: Tell me what to do right now, when I'm in bed with a girl around my age, who's holding me close and telling me she loves me.

I felt Megumin hug me a little tighter. Not tight enough to hurt. Just enough to let me know what was in her heart.

*...Geez, this is wicked dangerous.*

If I could muster up just a bit of courage right now, I really *could* cross that line.

No, I couldn't! *I can't!*

*Think, Kazuma Satou, you have to think.* This was different from that time when I almost crossed that line with Darkness. She had been expecting to go be someone else's bride then. But now? Right now, it looked like the two of us were about to do it just because we wanted to.

*Think about what would happen with all your party members living together if you and Megumin were to cross that line!*

*This is wrong. Something's wrong here. Something's wrong with her!*

*Okay, wait, don't get ahead of yourself. Remember the situation: She's holding on to you, and she's said she loves you, but that's all.*

I could feel myself getting hotter, my voice scratching as I said, "Y-you're going to be a real troublemaker when you grow up. What's going on here? This is pushing it. Look, you know? When something like this happens to a guy, there's a lot of this and some of that, and he can't control himself. It's like, he doesn't care what's going to happen in the future as long as he can enjoy himself right now. You're lucky I've got a will of steel. Or else you..."

I kept talking faster and faster, trying to distract us both. From within the covers, her breath still dissipating against my chest, Megumin giggled. "...When I grow up? What are you talking about?"

The hug got tighter, and her voice got softer.

"I'll be turning fifteen years old soon. That's plenty grown up."

I decided not to think about anything anymore.

I slid my right arm under Megumin's head, my hand brushing her cool black hair. I ran my fingers through the strands, combing down the length of it. Megumin, still not making eye contact, moved her hand up my back until she could feel my hair.

I put my other hand behind her, too, so I was embracing her small body. I felt her sigh into my chest, silently telling me she felt safe in my arms.

...For a virgin like me, this was already about as much as I could handle. What the heck was I supposed to do next?

*Please, somebody tell me!*

Should I kiss her first, cool and calm?

*Argh! Remember your succubus simulations!*

As I lay there arguing with myself, Megumin and I ran our hands through each

other's hair. It felt nice, touching that cool, thick black hair.

I buried myself under the covers, and in the darkness under the sheets, I leaned my face toward hers. Neither of us could quite see the other. My Second Sight ability allowed me to at least see Megumin in outline, though.

Seriously. How had I gotten swept along so far, so fast?

I thought I was going to go nuts from the anxiety, but at the same time, my heart was full of emotions. And it was pounding nonstop.

So this... Was this love? Had I fallen in love with Megumin in spite of myself?

I didn't think the pounding of my heart was just pure lust.

These thoughts ran through my head as I silently prepared myself.

It was all right. We had money. We had a house. Megumin and I would make it work.

I felt Megumin squeeze me again. It brought her lips right up to my neck. Suddenly, I felt her warm breath on my skin with every exhalation.

I thought of those lips and leaned down to—!

"Megumiiin! Megumin, where are youuu?"

*...Why am I not surprised?!*

I poked my head out from under the covers when Aqua called from down the hallway. We heard somebody rushing back and forth outside the door.

I was definitely ticked that she could ruin a moment even when she didn't know she was doing it. But at the same time, it helped me get my head back, and I was able to relax a little.



That's right. I was definitely going to regret it if I let myself get swept away like this.

I was sure there was something wrong with Megumin today. If we crossed that line now, my relationship with everyone around me would change permanently. Hadn't Megumin said it herself when she made those charms for us?

*"I am happy. These charms contain my heartfelt wish that our party members stay together forever... I'm always grateful to you, too, Aqua, you know that? I hope we never part ways."*

Would we all be able to stay together if she and I crossed the line?

Megumin wanted us to stay a party; she didn't want there to be any awkwardness.

This was fine, then. I'd never even been on a date with a girl. What was I doing jumping into the deep end?

"Aqua, did you find Megumin?" we heard Darkness asking outside.

I was just about to sit up when I noticed something: Megumin was still clinging to me, showing no sign of letting go.

...Huh?

Aqua and Darkness were looking for her. Did she plan to just ignore them and keep going?

"M-Megumin, Aqua and Darkness are... I m-mean, are you okay with this?" I asked, still with just my head sticking out from under the covers. Megumin didn't answer, just hugged me tighter.

"Um, Megumin really seemed like she wanted to be alone. She must have had some connection to that Wolbach woman, just like I do..." That would be Yunyun outside.

"Huh... Well, I don't think she would leave the inn anyway. Aqua, let's go ahead and go to sleep."

"Aww, I wanted to play a four-person card game..."

Megumin and I stayed together in the bed, pretending we couldn't hear the conversation outside. We kept petting each other, unable to come up with the courage to take the big step.

But now that I'd gone this far, I didn't think I could stop.

My bonds with my party members? Difficult times ahead with us all living together?

*Forget all that, I thought.*

Oh, right. Before you kiss a girl, don't you have to say... You know? Megumin had told me how she felt about me; now it was my turn to come up with a sweet nothing.

"M-Megumin. I— You know... You know how you said you loved me? I... I think I love you, too!"

*There! Did it!*

Now I would just go wherever this took me. I was eager to get started, but Megumin—

"...Really? What do you love about me?"

She finally looked up at me, with something like hope in her eyes.

Being totally unaccustomed to chatting up girls, I didn't have any smooth lines I could just drop in.

"...I, uhhh, you know... Your explosion magic and stuff..."

"You're not just saying that because it's the obvious way to butter me up when you can't think of anything else?"

Damn, she was sharp. Argh, I didn't know what I was doing, and now I'd put my foot in my mouth. Why did I always have to spoil things when I was having a moment? Maybe I was cursed to be a virgin my entire life.

But even though I had assumed Megumin would be annoyed, she buried her face in my chest and giggled again. "That's one of the things I love about you, Kazuma. You're exactly who you say you are. You know your own strengths, and when we run into a powerful enemy, you don't make some show of trying to be

brave and protect the women or something. You're perfectly happy to hide behind Darkness. You may not have the nerve to do anything *really* bad, but you don't pretend to be a do-gooder, either. And if you do bad things sometimes when people aren't looking, when you're in a good mood, you have it in you to do good things, too. I like that you're not exactly good or evil. You're just you."

*...Wait, is she complimenting me?*

"You'll work so hard to get out of debt, but then the moment you have some money, you stop working entirely. Depending on your mood, you can either be kind or kind of a jerk. You'll make me think you really value your companions, and then you'll go and do something like trade party members without a second thought. Sometimes you have ideas that make me think you must be brilliant, and then the next moment, you'll do something so stupid that I don't know what you're thinking at all..."

Yeah, this was definitely praise.

Megumin, watching my expression get weirder and weirder as she spoke, smiled as if this was the most amusing thing in the world.

"And I love you because despite all your complaining, you're still there for us when we need you. I love how you're really kind, even if you have trouble showing it; how you can mess up a golden opportunity so badly that it's honestly impressive but then have moments like this one. I love you for how you aren't cool, how you can never quite get it together when it really matters."

She smiled as she spoke, sliding her hand from my back to my neck.

In the starlight twinkling through the window, Megumin closed her eyes. Just a little bit of the light fell on her face, and I felt myself drawn toward her.

Was this really okay?

Could I just go ahead and...do this?

I had to remember—this was another world.

At my age, I would still be a student in Japan, but around here, where the average life span was shorter, I was already an adult.

Certainly old enough to marry Megumin.

It was okay; I would take responsibility.

So I steeled myself, leaned in, and—

—saw tears pooling in the corners of Megumin's closed eyes.

"...H-hey. You're not forcing yourself, are you? Are you really in love with me? If you feel like we're going too fast, I mean, I'm a gentle guy. I can wait as long as you need! I can afford it! I mean financially and, uh, experience-wise!"

Shaken by Megumin's sudden fit of tears, I started talking too fast, saying things that didn't even really make sense to me.

Megumin didn't seem to realize she had been crying until I said something. "Oh! N-no, this..." She quickly sat up, wiping her eyes.

That finally gave me a chance to regain a cool head. "...So tell me. Why did you suddenly decide to come here tonight?"

It felt like such a belated moment to ask such an obvious question.

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I was lying back, my arms under my head, staring up at the ceiling.

"This was back when I was still about Komekko's age..." Megumin was lying beside me, also looking at the ceiling, her hands resting on her stomach. "You know the 'seal of the dark god' in Crimson Magic Village? I broke it one day, and that's how it all started."

She was telling me how she accidentally undid the seal when she was young. She had just thought she was playing with a toy.

She had immediately been confronted with a huge, pitch-black magical beast. In other words, she was attacked by Chomusuke, back before the cat's power had been sealed away. And she had been saved by someone using Explosion—Wolbach.

The magic left a major impression on her, and from that day forward, her dream in life was decided.

That woman sure had screwed everything up good.

Many years later, Megumin herself learned Explosion. Acquiring magic made her a full-fledged adult in the Crimson Magic Clan, and she set out on a journey to find the person who had saved her that day, so she could thank her—and show her what she had learned.

But—

“I really am terribly ungrateful. I destroyed the very person who saved me.”

In the dark, Megumin kept talking, almost as if to herself. Beset by her feelings of guilt, she seemed so weak, as if she might disappear at any moment.

“...Did I mention to you how back in my country, I was a *hikikomori* and a NEET?” I asked gently, and Megumin glanced over at me.

“Yes, I think I’ve heard that a few times now. Why...?”

I didn’t quite let her finish her question. “Believe me, I’m the master of being ungrateful, if nothing else. My parents paid these outrageous tuition fees to send me to a private school, but I hardly even went to class. It started with just playing hooky here and there. I’d play games all night on the weekend, and then come Monday, I was just so tired and depressed. And my parents both worked, so it was easy to skip.”

I had never told anyone about this glittering history of mine before, but I decided to tell Megumin now.

“It was only going to be one day. That turned into once a month and then every Monday. Before I knew it, I’d stopped going to school entirely.”

It was actually kind of an ugly story, now that I thought about it.

I had planned to graduate middle school and get out of the *hikikomori* lifestyle, but it was all for naught.

In the mornings, I would pretend to leave for class; then when I saw my parents go to work, I would sneak back in the house. Then I’d call the school, make up some excuse, and spend the rest of the day playing games. I would be discovered when the school finally called my parents, but no matter what they said to me, it wasn’t long before I would go back to being an inveterate shut-in.

"You call yourself ungrateful, but you're the one who freed Wolbach in the first place, right? Then her other half attacked you, and she saved you and taught you magic. She *caused* the problem, so she doesn't get credit for fixing it. I know a certain little punk of an adventurer who does that all the time."

Megumin looked at me blankly.

"*You freed her, she owed you,* and so she stopped her other half from attacking you. Like she should. You don't have to thank her for it... If you've been spending all your time worrying about that, how could someone like me ever face my parents again?"

Not that I could have, really, even if I'd wanted to.

"So, look... The point is, you know. On an Ungratefulness Scale of one to Kazuma, you're nowhere near me. If you're spending time fretting about feeling ungrateful when you don't really have anything to worry about, think how awful I must look. So, uh..."

Even I wasn't sure what I was talking about anymore. Megumin continued to watch me intently, then exhaled. She buried her face in my chest, quaking with suppressed laughter.

"...What's with you? I'm trying my best to comfort you here, and this is how you treat me? I'm revealing the most painful secrets of my past. You really are an ingrate!"

"I'm sorry. I promise I'm not laughing at you. I just felt bad for your parents having a son like you. And it was so funny, the way you looked so serious, comforting me in the strangest way possible."

*You little—!*

"Gee, sorry for trying to do something different! I know what this is, okay? You're pretending to be this tragic heroine, but I'm the real victim here. Think how a guy must feel when a girl comes to his room in desperation just to comfort herself."

But Megumin only laughed harder at my tirade, wiping tears from her eyes.

"Would you like to pick up where we left off, then?"

"H-h-h-hell no! People may call me Cad-zuma or Trash-zuma or whatever, but even I'm not low enough to take advantage of someone who's feeling as vulnerable as you are!"

I was just trying to sound tough, but I guess it helped Megumin get her head back on her shoulders, because she giggled again. "I see. That's too bad."

But then her eyes flashed red as she spoke in a way that suggested she didn't think it was too bad at all.

"...Listen here, though. If you ever feel like you're finally free of the bad feelings surrounding you and that woman, and you come to me just because you want to be with me, I won't have any reason at all to say no." I hated to think I might be throwing away a golden opportunity here, but it was too late to turn back. Megumin's shoulders were shaking again.

"Is that so? When that time comes, then, I'll visit your room again."

Then she gave me a smile of relief.

Megumin left my room, telling me how much better she felt.

But I didn't feel better. I was all hot and bothered now. I tossed and turned under the covers.

"Arrrrggghhh! I let a perfect opportunity slip through my fingers, and I said the most embarrassing stuff in the world! Arrrrrrrgh!"

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I was hardly going to sleep after that, so I decided to go try to cool my head. A nice, cold shower ought to do the trick.

To be perfectly honest, I couldn't believe I had let that chance get away. But at the same time, I felt sort of glad that I didn't get caught up in the moment and do something that might've come back to bite me.

Come to think of it, in light of what had happened, was I basically dating Megumin now?

I mean, I said some things about love and stuff, too, right?

But it turned out I did have a lot of affection for her. Enough that I wasn't sure I really minded if we were dating.

...So, wait, did I have a girlfriend now?

Were we going to be one of those happy, sappy couples everyone hates?!

"Okay, wait, calm down. Megumin's been acting weird ever since yesterday. Let's see how she feels tomorrow and then go from there," I muttered as I got to the changing room...

Then I noticed Chomusuke had joined me somewhere along the line, pattering along by my feet.

"...And just what do you think you're doing?"

"Mrrow."

She had been so sensitive to what was going on earlier. What had gotten into her now?

Well, she hated baths anyway, so I was sure she would turn back soon...

"...I'm heading for the bath. You hate those, remember? Are you sure you want to come in?"

I sat down on a stool and tried to reason with Chomusuke, who had boldly followed me in.

Then, while taking a cold shower, I considered the future. My first decision was that tomorrow, I would act like nothing had happened. But if Megumin actively approached me for some "skinship," I wouldn't turn her down. For a wimp like me, that seemed like a pretty good compromise.

Pretty soon it wasn't just my brain that was feeling cool; my skin was downright chilly, too. Time to head for the bath. A nice soak, and then I could get to sleep...

"...You really wanna come in here?"

"Mrra."

I was just stepping into the tub when I saw Chomusuke coming with me. That was weird. Still, I put a little water in a washbasin.

"When I get in, the water's gonna overflow. You can hide out in here."

I set the basin down, and Chomusuke approached it delicately, checking the temperature with her paw before climbing in and curling up.

...What was with the cat today? I mean, besides the fact that she wasn't a cat.

I didn't know why she had suddenly taken a liking to baths, but I guess it was good she was keeping herself clean.

Thinking about how that other woman had appreciated a good bath, I said offhandedly, "Well, my dear Wolbach, how's the temperature?"

The moment I said the name Wolbach, one of Chomusuke's ears twitched.

.....

Was that just a coincidence? Was I anthropomorphizing Chomusuke too much?

Was there any chance she would turn into Wolbach herself when she got bigger?

"...Yeah, right."

I sank into the water up to my shoulders, squinting with pleasure as I looked at Chomusuke.

"...Huh? By the way. You've been the same size this whole time, right? Why do you look a little bigger all of a sudden...?"

## Epilogue 1 — For a Certain Someone



I cannot believe what I did.

Yes, I was bothered by my final encounter with my idol, after I had been looking for her for so long and finally found her, but still, I let it drive me to do something totally irresponsible.

How was I going to hold my head up after that?

More importantly, if we had both said we loved each other, then were we... lovers?

I would have to be especially careful of how I spoke and acted now that—

“Hooo! Gooood morning!” The very villain who had me in such a tizzy came into the room, yawning widely and looking very tired. Kazuma didn’t even bother to fix his bedhead as he made ready for our return journey. “Yunyun, let’s teleport home already.”

...*He* was the one who had suggested that, since we had taken the time to come out here, maybe we should take a nice, slow trip back, stop at a hot spring or something, rather than going back to Axel in the blink of an eye.

“I’d be happy to, but why the sudden change of heart?” Yunyun asked, suspicious.

“N-n-no reason in particular. I’ve just been thinking about how lovely Axel is.”

“You’re right,” Aqua said, despite Kazuma’s totally unexpected rationale. “I want to hurry back and see Emperor Zel again! Then it’s decided. Let’s head

home today, and then we can have a We-Worked-Hard-to-Defeat-a-Dark-God party!" She probably just wanted any excuse for us all to celebrate together.

"Good idea. We deserve to be proud of ourselves this time. It wasn't like the other times we've defeated generals of the Demon King. This time we deliberately sought her out and then put a stop to her." Darkness, whose armor had been all but destroyed on this trip, stuck out her chest proudly.

But...

"You hardly did anything," Kazuma shot back.

"Erm..." And just like that, Darkness was near tears.

"Hey, Yunyun," Aqua said. "You're staying over, too, aren't you? Not that I would let you go home even if you wanted to."

"What?! Who, m-me?! Um, ahhh... If you don't mind having me, I would happily...!"

But just as everyone was starting to get in the partying mood, Kazuma spoke up.

"Oh, hey, guys, I'm not staying at the house tonight."

It wasn't like Kazuma to spoil a moment like that. Who did he think he was, Aqua?

"You aren't? Where in the world do you intend to go? Come to think of it, you do slip away periodically. Where is it you get off to?"

"Huh?! I j-j-j-just, you know, wanna hang out with the guys and stuff..."

My Crimson Magic Clan intuition was telling me something fishy was going on. "'With the guys,' you say? Why not simply ask them to join us, then? The more the merrier, as they say."

"Huh?!"

Kazuma looked as if the world was ending—meaning my intuition had been correct. I didn't know where he wanted to go or what he wanted to do there, but it was clear he was up to no good.

I went over to Kazuma, his shoulders slumped, and gave him an encouraging

pat on the back. “Never fear, Kazuma. You’ve worked so hard these last few days; we just want to have a little drink with you tonight.”

“Do you have any idea *why* I’m not staying at the house tonight?” he growled, but of course, I certainly didn’t.

“No idea at all. Where *did* you want to go tonight?”

“A café, Megumin. A café. One that’s open all night.”

An all-night café? There was only one establishment in Axel matching that description. As I recalled, all the staff members were attractive young women...

“...You have quite some nerve, after what happened last night.”

“Hmm? What’s wrong, Megumin? Your eyes are glowing—what’s got you so excited? You remembering last night?”

*Curse this man!*

...No, no. We may have exchanged words of love, but I hadn’t confirmed if we were technically lovers. So I had no grounds to get angry yet.

“...They say that shop is overflowing with sexy women. So, what? Are they your type, Kazuma?”

“Heck, you know about that place? I dunno if I’d say they’re my type, but... y’know?”

That was the most tepid answer he could have given.

“...May I ask what *is* your type, perchance, Kazuma?”

“My type? Hmm, I guess I’d never really thought about it, but...if I had to give an answer, maybe I’d go with someone with long, straight hair and big boobs who would baby me all the time.”

When I heard him say that with a completely straight face, I started to have serious doubts about how I could ever have had feelings for a man like this. After what had happened between us, surely a normal person would have at least made an attempt to list a few things that sounded like me.

“Ah, what’s wrong? I’ve heard if you go around sighing like that, your Luck will go down.”

Personally, I thought that if he went around acting like this, it was no wonder he never seemed to be popular with the ladies, but maybe it didn't matter.

I was the only one who needed to be in love with this most unusual person.

"Teleport is ready to go, everyone."

Once Yunyun was ready, we all gathered around, our preparations for the journey home finished.

"Awesome! I don't know what the bounty on that general was, but maybe I'll take the reward money this time and just sleep out as long as I want!"

I still didn't know exactly what he planned to do by being out of the house so long, but it was nothing good, I assumed.

Even as the thought ran through my mind, Yunyun exclaimed:

*"Teleport!"*

*Maybe I'll grow my hair out.*

## Epilogue 2 — Dear Elder Brother



It happened one day about a week after we got back to Axel. I had just put a bowl of food down for Chomusuke in the living room when Megumin said to me, "...Kazuma, I think you're feeding Chomusuke too much. You must not let her wrap you around her little paw."

"Are you kidding? Her stomach is bottomless. The more we feed her, the faster she'll grow."

*And then when she finally turns into that woman, we can all be friends again. I hope she'll forgive Megumin for dropping an explosion on her.*

"...I cannot say I follow your logic, but anyway, there's a letter for you, Kazuma."

A letter for me?

"It's probably about some new dragon egg they claim to have," Aqua put in. "Ever since I bought Emperor Zel, letters like that have been coming for me every day."

Turns out once scam artists know you're an easy mark, they come flocking to you.

"Let me see that," Darkness said. "I get a bad feeling every time there's a letter addressed to you."

"Here," Megumin said. "Actually, this envelope looks oddly familiar." She showed it to Darkness...

No sooner had she seen it than Darkness grabbed the letter and clutched it to

her chest.

"...Hey, watch how you treat a guy's mail, huh?"

"...Aqua was right. It's just someone trying to sell you a dragon egg."

"See! Aren't you lucky, Kazuma? The letter they sent me said they only contact big-shot adventurers worthy of owning dragons."

I ignored Aqua's nonsense and stared at Darkness, who was trying hard to avoid my eyes. "Let me see that."

"Uh-uh," she said immediately, curling around the letter protectively.

That tipped me off to who must have sent it. This wasn't the first time Darkness had acted this way.

"Iris! That letter is from Iris, isn't it?!"

"How did you know?! I mean, n-no, it isn't; it's—!"

I didn't think twice about grabbing at Darkness's chest for the letter.

"Gaaahhh?!"

"I knew it! It *is* from Iris!"

With the letter stolen, Darkness pressed her hands to her chest and kind of curled into herself. She had run out of luck the moment she assumed I wouldn't go for the letter if she held it there. *I've been reborn: I'm a man who no longer holds back in any way at any time.*

I savored my small victory as I glanced at the letter. I opened the envelope (complete with the seal of the royal family) and unfolded the letter within...

*Dear Elder Brother. I've received word of your accomplishments at the fortress near the capital recently. It seems you were your usual dashing self. I do worry about you, though...*

The opening alone was enough to make my heart flutter.

*Seeing as you're one of the most renowned adventurers in our nation by now, I wonder if I could make a small request of you.*

And then I got to the final sentence.

*As it happens, I shall soon be visiting a neighboring country to meet the prince to whom I am betrothed, and I very much wish for you to be my bodyguard on the journey to—*

I immediately tore the letter in half.



## Afterword

Yeeaaaaaaaaahhhh! A second anime season yeeaaaaaaaaahhhh!

Natsume Akatsuki here, disturbing the peace on a nightly basis out of an excess of joy.

Thank you so much for picking up Volume 9 of this series. As you've just learned, *Konosuba* is getting a second anime season, if you can believe it.

This is absolutely all thanks to the readers who have encouraged me and to my wonderful staff.

Thank you, thank you all so much!

That's not the only thing I have to be happy about, though. *An Explosion on This Wonderful World* is going to be getting the manga treatment in *Comic Alive*. Kasumi Morino-sensei will be handling the art duties. I hope you enjoy it alongside the main series manga already running in *Dragon Age*.

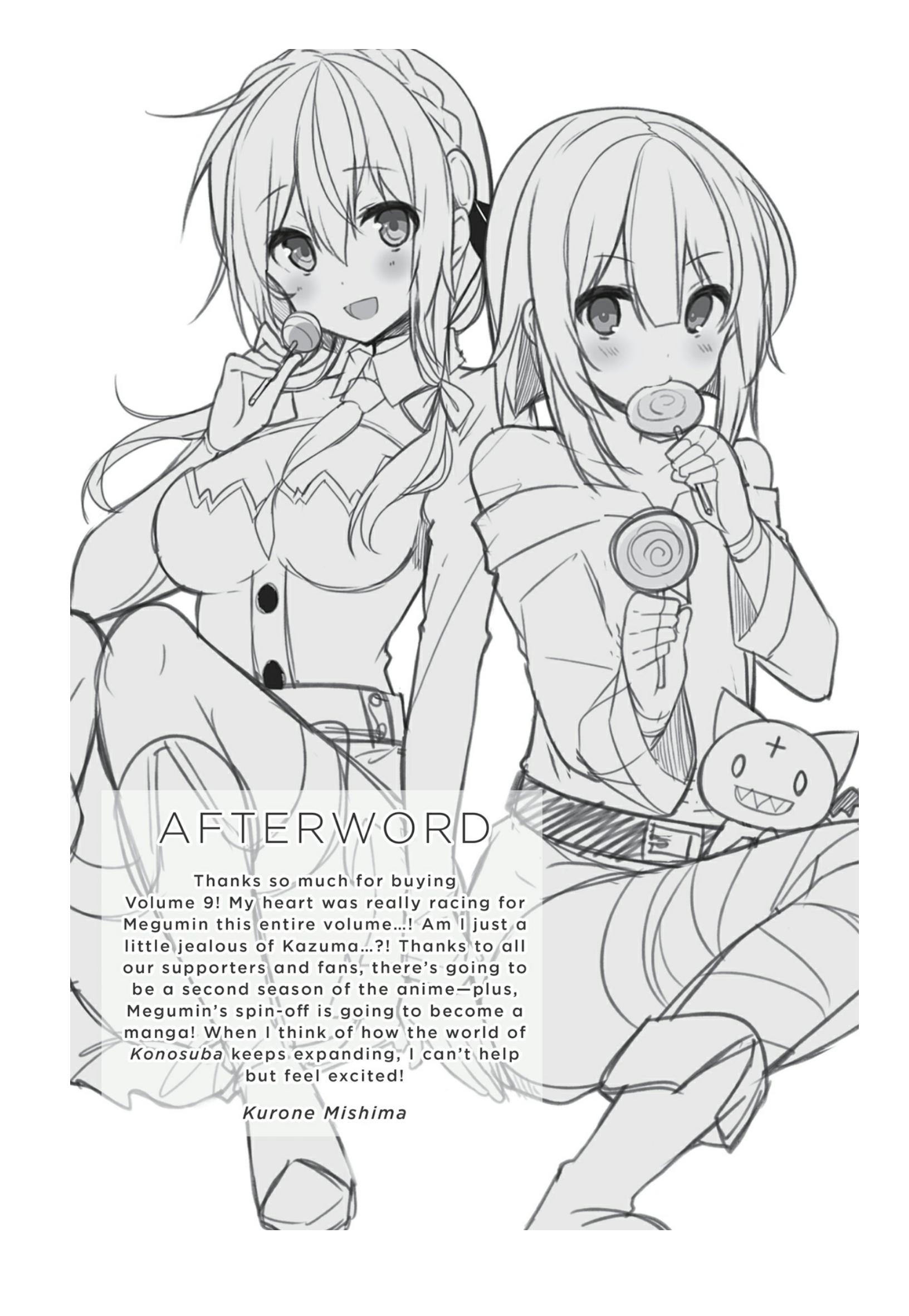
Maybe it has something to do with the anime being on TV, but the number of fan letters I'm getting seems to have grown recently, and the amount of time I spend each night offering thanks to the box where I keep those letters has grown along with it. I know—maybe you're saying, *If you've got time to worship, then you should be writing!* but this is an important ritual that sometimes blesses me with new ideas for the plot, so I'm going to keep on doing it no matter what you say.

In this volume, Megumin was at her most Megumin-esque, but I think I want to tone down the lovey-dovey stuff for a while. Not because I'm trying to be a prude, mind you, but because I have to think about what I can handle as an author. I've continually tried to take on subjects I'm not necessarily familiar with, and I'll continue to strive to bring you a few moments of laughter in the future.

Once again, my thanks go out to Kurone Mishima-sensei, my editor S-san, and everyone else who was involved in getting this book safely into print.

And above all, thank you, dear reader, for picking up this book!

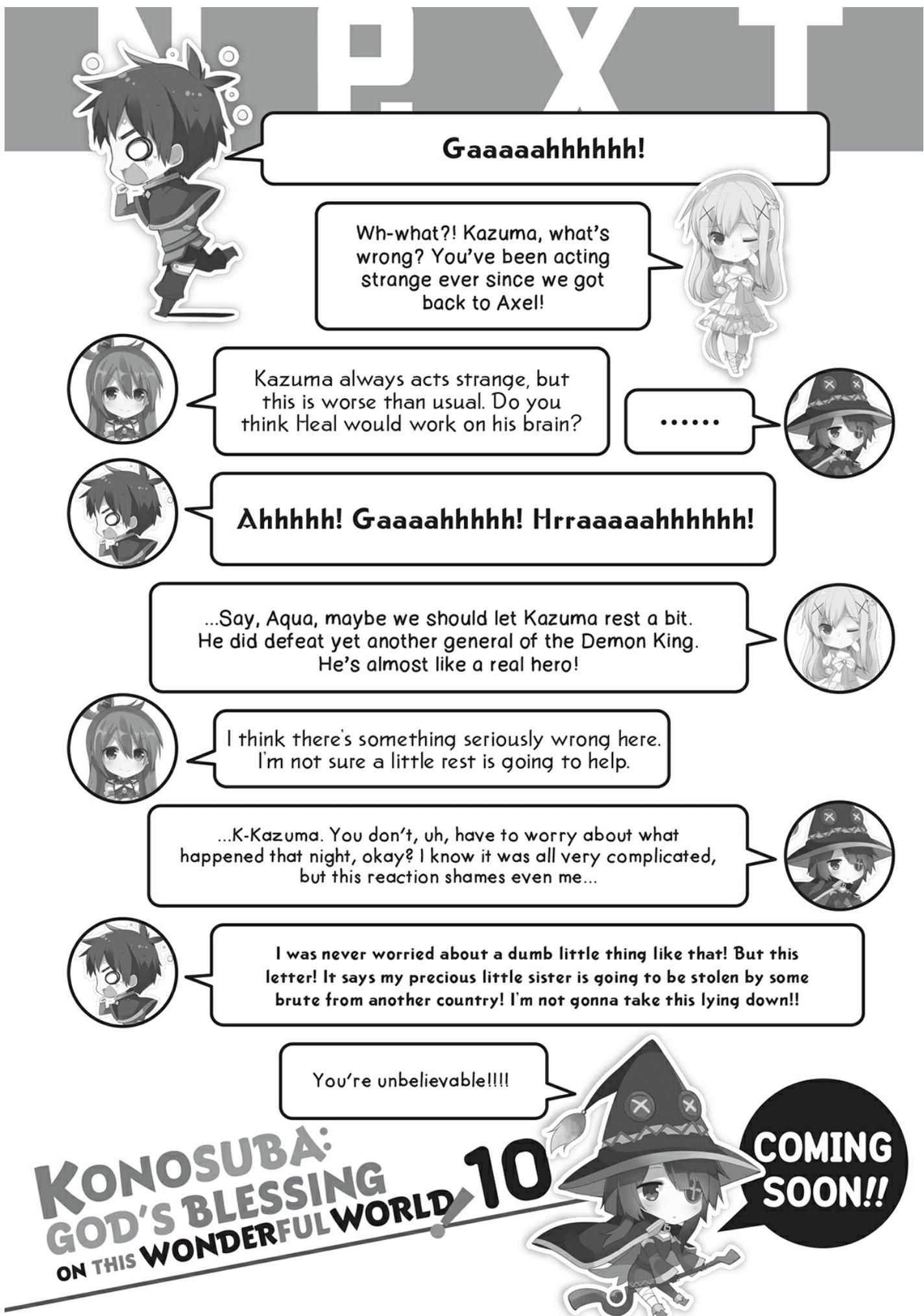
***Natsume Akatsuki***



## AFTERWORD

Thanks so much for buying Volume 9! My heart was really racing for Megumin this entire volume...! Am I just a little jealous of Kazuma...?! Thanks to all our supporters and fans, there's going to be a second season of the anime—plus, Megumin's spin-off is going to become a manga! When I think of how the world of *Konosuba* keeps expanding, I can't help but feel excited!

*Kurone Mishima*



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