

KONOSUBA: GOD'S 14 BLESSING ON THIS WONDERFUL WORLD!

The
Crimson
Magic
Trials

Natsume
Akatsuki

ILLUSTRATION BY
Kurone
Mishima



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The
Crimson
Magic
Trials

14!





KONOSUBA: GOD'S BLESSING ON THIS WONDERFUL WORLD! 14

The Crimson Magic Trials



Prologue



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Illustrations/Kurone Mishima

Design/ Yuko Yaoya + Nanafushi Nakamura (Mushikago Graphics)





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The Crimson Magic Trials

14

NATSUME AKATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION BY
KURONE MISHIMA



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Konosuba: God's Blessing on This Wonderful World!, Vol. 14

NATSUME AKATSUKI

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KONO SUBARASHII SEKAI NI SHUKUFUKU WO!, Volume 14: KOMA NO SHIREN

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First published in Japan in 2018 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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First Yen On Edition: June 2021

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Akatsuki, Natsume, author. | Mishima, Kurone, 1991– illustrator. | Steinbach, Kevin, translator.

Title: Konosuba, God's blessing on this wonderful world! / Natsume Akatsuki ; illustration by Kurone Mishima ; translation by Kevin Steinbach.

Other titles: Kono subarashi sekai ni shukufuku wo. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2017– Identifiers: LCCN 2016052009 | ISBN 9780316553377 (v. 1 : paperback) | ISBN 9780316468701 (v. 2 : paperback) | ISBN 9780316468732 (v. 3 : paperback) | ISBN 9780316468763 (v. 4 : paperback) | ISBN 9780316468787 (v. 5 : paperback) | ISBN 9780316468800 (v. 6 : paperback) | ISBN 9780316468824 (v. 7 : paperback) | ISBN 9780316468855 (v. 8 : paperback) | ISBN 9781975385033 (v. 9 : paperback) | ISBN 9781975332341 (v. 10 : paperback) | ISBN 9781975332365 (v. 11 : paperback) | ISBN 9781975332389 (v. 12 : paperback) | ISBN 9781975332402 (v. 13 : paperback) | ISBN 9781975332426 (v. 14 : paperback) Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. | Future life—Fiction. | Adventure and adventurers—Fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Fantasy / General.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.A38 Ko 2017 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016052009>

ISBNs: 978-1-97533242-6 (paperback) 978-1-9753-3243-3 (ebook)

E3-20210528-JV-NF-ORI

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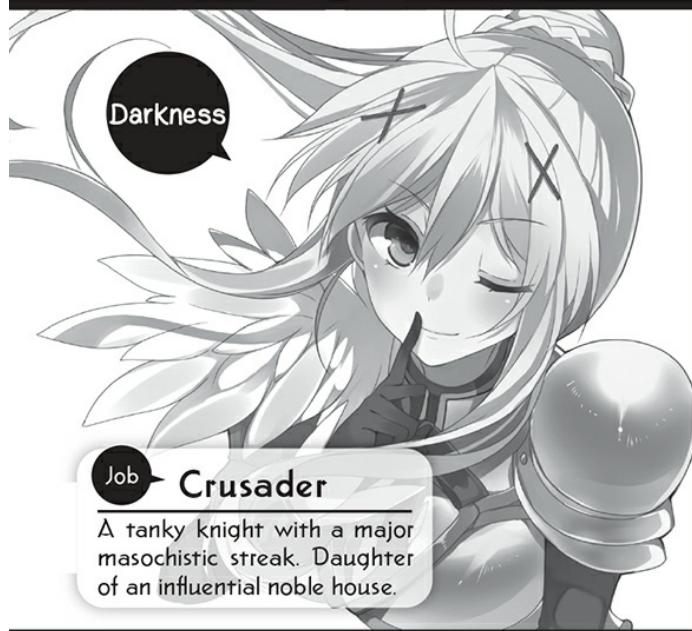
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Characters



Prologue



“Okay, everybody ready?!”

“Yeah, my armor’s been polished to a brilliant sheen! And as you can see, I’ve honed my beloved great sword. This is going to be good!” Darkness, clad in full armor and brandishing a brand-new blade, stood at attention outside our mansion. She seemed incredibly excited.

I was careful not to forget to check myself, too. In addition to my usual equipment, I had a backpack stuffed with magical items and scrolls (money talks, even here).

“Hey, Darkness. How about you give up using a sword already and just fight with your fists?” suggested Aqua, armed with a backpack like mine.

“Great idea, Aqua. Maybe I should test them on you. Get over here!” That sent Aqua scuttling for cover.

It was early morning, and most of us were excited, with the exception of Megumin, who had packed pretty light.

“...Why is it that you are all so fired up about this? As a point of fact, you may remember that Crimson Magic Village has stores, too. I don’t think you need quite so much luggage...”

“Hey, c’mon! These are the trials we’re talking about. The trials! Crimson Magic Clan wizards are the elite of the elite! When it comes to fighting for the right to lead them, there is no such thing as *overpreparing!*”

I was feeling excited, but Megumin just frowned, obviously concerned...

Chapter 1

Divine Wrath for This Holy Armor!



1

Let's rewind a few days. After she finished off the hunk of a would-be general of the Demon King's army, Wiz had shut herself up in her magic-item shop and wouldn't come out. Aqua had been visiting her almost every day, trying to make her feel better. That was where she'd been on this particular day, too, and when she came home... There was Yunyun, waiting on the front step with a gift in hand.

"I wish you would stop acting as if it was other people's fault that you failed the trials!"

"Whose fault *is* it, then? I kept telling you not to let off your Explosion, so why?! Why do you always have to do it at the worst possible moment?!"

We welcomed Yunyun inside and listened as she explained what was going on.

"Aw, calm down, Yunyun," I said. "Megumin is practically a walking fireworks display. There's no point in telling her not to use Explosion. For Megumin, being quiet and polite would be like an Axis follower showing basic common sense. It's never gonna happen."

"G-gosh, when you put it that way, it makes me feel kind of like I was the one

who made the mistake..."

"Excuse me, Kazuma, but that comparison isn't very polite to the Axis Church. I know my beloved lambs can be rowdy, but they're nowhere near as bad as Megumin."

"Very well, I shall face all three of you at once. Let me show you what happens when a member of the Crimson Magic Clan gets serious!"

At the moment, trials were being held in Crimson Magic Village to determine who would be the next chief. And among the candidates was Yunyun. She'd always described herself as "*the next chief of the Crimson Magic Clan*" in her self-introduction. And she had attempted the trials back home, but, well...

Darkness, sipping tea and listening intently, said, "So a candidate can only attempt the trials three times, and you've already blown two of your chances. I've heard a bit about the Chief's Trials. In fact, the Dustiness family and Crimson Magic Village go way back. We have a beloved suit of armor that was made in your hometown." She set down her cup elegantly. "The Crimson Magic Trials were traditionally accomplished by one Crimson Magic wizard protected by a defensive guardian-type, or so I've heard... This has to be fate. Megumin is like family to me; please allow me to clean up her mess. I shall be your tank."

"W-will you really?! With your Decoy ability, Darkness, I would feel so safe! P-please, please help me!"

Yunyun was practically glowing. Darkness picked up her tea again with a gentle smile...

"I know what's going on here, Darkness. You haven't had anything to do for a while, so you're trying to soak up the limelight. You're still stinging from being shot down by Wiz's boyfriend, aren't you?"

"Pfft!" Darkness spat out her tea at my quip.

Not letting up, I asked Yunyun: "Are you sure you need to become the chief? I know your family has held the position for generations, so are you, like, gonna be disowned if you don't do it? The chief is the number one big shot in the village, right? I bet the competition's pretty fierce." Darkness was looking at me angrily, but I was too busy sympathizing with Yunyun, who was starting to

mope.

"Not really. There's a lot of lazy bums in the Crimson Magic Clan, so actually, pretty much nobody wants to be chief, with all its restrictions and responsibilities..." Yunyun looked at me seriously. "I don't have any special skills or talents, so I'm always at a loss for what to say in my introduction..."

"I think you'd better give up on becoming chief. I'll help you think of a new intro."

"That's my Kazuma; five minutes and the problem is solved!" Aqua chirped, but Yunyun stood up in a hurry.

"No, wait, that's not all there is to this! There's no unity in the Crimson Magic Clan, so who knows what they'll do if no one is chief...? But like I said, I'm the only one who wants to undergo these difficult trials..."

I could definitely see how letting the Crimson Magic Clan members do whatever they want could turn into a serious problem. But with the generally serious, sensible, class-rep-ish Yunyun leading them...

Then Megumin, who until that moment had been sitting on the sofa with Chomusuke on her knees, scratching the cat's ears, said, "I can see there is no choice. *I shall become chief, then.*"

"You can't even use advanced magic! What, are you going to come back to the village if you become chief?! If you're just saying that because you think *chief* sounds like a cool title, I'm going to be very angry!"

I guess knowing advanced magic was a prerequisite for chieftainship in the Crimson Magic Clan.

"All right, calm down, you two," I said. "Point is, Yunyun needs a powerful partner, right? I'm the man for the job. I'll show you that I'm better in a pinch than anyone you know."

Megumin and the others froze as the words sank in. "Wh-what is wrong with you? The Kazuma I know would consider this whole affair too much trouble to be bothered with, so why are you so amenable today?" Megumin appeared to be speaking (rudely) for everyone, but Darkness clapped her hands as if it all made sense. "It's because there are so many beautiful women in Crimson Magic

Village!"

"What, you're assuming I'm some kind of sex-crazed animal just because you're a noble bimbo who got shot down? Looks like you're not taking me seriously. I'm gonna have to teach you a lesson." I seem to have gotten Darkness riled up again, though she didn't exactly look upset about it...

"I've got it! You had your name in the newspaper the other day, Kazuma, and now you want to lay low in Crimson Magic Village until this whole thing blows over! After you saw Duke come after Wiz, you're worried that some adventurer might do the same to you!" Aqua said blithely but with devastating accuracy. Why would she pick now of all times to suddenly develop razor-sharp intuition?

"Th-that's so not even it! Unlike all of you who cause me nothing but trouble, Yunyun is my rare sensible friend. If she's got a problem, of course I'm going to help her!"

"Excuse me, but I do not believe we have been nearly as much trouble to you as we used to be... Yunyun, why are you blushing?! He just said the first thing that came into his head, like he always does! You are much, much too easy!" said Megumin.

Yunyun, taken in by my talk of friends and rarity and whatever, was grinning like an idiot.

"Kazuma, are you really going to be Yunyun's partner?" asked Darkness. "You know there's nothing but powerful monsters around Crimson Magic Village, right? My attacks might not land, but I can at least shield her. You, on the other hand..."

"That's right, Kazuma—you're so weak that the only thing you could do with those monsters would be to get eaten by them. You should just stay home with me this time. The newspaper might ask you to do another interview, and anyway, I'm sure Darkness wants to redeem herself for being such a failure... Ow! Darkness, I'm backing you up here; why would you do that? Stop! Stop it!!"

Their logic sort of took the wind out of my sails. And when I really thought about it, this was a town full of novice adventurers. No one would bother coming all the way here simply for a challenge, right...? But just as I was thinking that, and as Aqua was busy eating Darkness's knuckle sandwich, the doorbell

rang, and the door opened.

It was a woman from the Adventurers Guild. “Is Mr. Kazuma Satou at home?” she asked. “Erm... A high-level adventurer from the capital wishes to meet Mr. Satou. If you have a few minutes, perhaps you could come to the Guild?”

“Sorry, but I’m just about to go to Crimson Magic Village to help a very dear friend of mine. I don’t think I’ll be back for a while, so tell them to reschedule,” I said immediately, then turned back to the others.

“K-Kazuma, thank you...!” Yunyun said, clearly moved, while I flashed a smile at the lady.

“Here’s what you should tell that adventurer: Kazuma Satou is off facing impossible trials for the sake of his friend. And since I might not come back alive, they don’t have to feel compelled to wait for me.”

“M-Mr. Satou...” Even the Guild girl, swept up in the heat of the moment, was getting emotional. I hadn’t started my day expecting to leave on an impromptu trip, but it was better than sticking around to be challenged by a high-level adventurer from the capital. I just had to put on a good show of getting out of here, and then I could come back when things had cooled down a little...

The Guild lady, her eyes sparkling, said to me, “Yes, sir! I’ll be sure to convey your message to the gorgeous woman adventurer who says she’s a fan of yours!”

“...Eh?”

2

The next morning.

“Yunyun, aren’t you ready yet?! Everything’s all set! We’re going to knock these trials out in one day flat!” I’d gotten together everything I needed the day before, so now I was just waiting to leave. I was fidgeting in the foyer in the gray predawn light.

“I can feel the call, Kazuma! It’s a knight’s job to defend! Let me help with the

trials!” Darkness was just as fidgety as I was and almost as eager.

“No way. There’s a gorgeous lady adventurer waiting for me when I come back. I have to show off and earn some style points!”

“Th—that’s a dumb reason to get in my way! Come on, Kazuma—you can afford to share the glory once in a while! This isn’t like you! Why didn’t you go meet your fan yesterday?” Maybe Darkness was really itching for a chance to feel like a real adventurer again, because she had me by the shoulders and was shaking me...

“That’s because if you rush off to meet a fan the moment they say they want to see you, it makes you look desperate, and that’s not cool. First, I’ll go solve Yunyun’s problem. Then I can stroll through the door of the Guild, saying something like, ‘Ah, another adventure in the books. That last boss sure was a pushover, just like all the others,’ loud enough for everyone to hear me. Then, when I just happen to bump into this fangirl, I say, ‘Oh, and you are...?’ All natural-like.”

“You have a whole script planned out...? I see you scrape through each day by the skin of your teeth. You sure choose the weirdest times to act conceited...”

Darkness looked so exasperated that I just *had* to come up with a quip, but what to say? “I need a good story to tell this fan of mine. That’s why I’m going to steal the show this time. You just stay here and watch the house for me.”

“I w-will not! The Chief’s Trials are spoken of in the great tales as a challenge where the vanguard and the rearguard work together to overcome adversity. Those are the stories that inspired me to become an adventurer! Kazuma, this is such a rare chance! Please, for once, listen to what I want!”

“I don’t know what inspired you to become an adventurer, but I’ll bet it was something a lot filthier than that! Don’t you lie to me! I want to play hero sometimes, too!”

“I-it’s not a lie! I won’t deny that I have some less-than-wholesome aspirations, but when I was young, it was the trials that gave me a dream! Listen to you! ‘Play hero’! If your motivation is that superficial, then let me do it!”

As we each tried to shove the other back into the house, Megumin appeared

and said, “If you are both so eager to play hero-and-wizard, then when we get home from Crimson Magic Village, I will gladly let you protect me as much as you want, so please keep it together until then.” Her voice came sleepily but with a hint of annoyance. She was dressed in a light outfit.

There was a reason Darkness and I had been at each other’s throats. There was a story they told in this world, an epic tale about a girl and boy who overcome every challenge together, until the girl finally becomes queen of her nation. The heroes of the story are a brave wizard girl and a taciturn knight boy. Once they conquer trials and tribulations and the girl achieves her dream, the last thing she does is marry the knight, and they live happily ever after. An instant classic.

The trials for the chiefdom of Crimson Magic Village were allegedly based on this story. But...

“Uh, I’m not sure protecting you would be all that...exciting, Megumin...”

“Er, he’s right... It seems a bit less like a heroic epic and more like a picaresque.”

“Very well, then I shall not be the princess who needs protecting but rather, the last boss! The evil wizard who appears at the end of the story! Now, have at me!” Megumin was flourishing her staff, already way too into this, when we heard happy humming from the yard. We looked out to see Aqua watering the garden with water she had magically created for herself.

“Watering the vegetables for our trip? We already asked Wiz to take care of Chomusuke and Zel—might as well ask her to water the garden, too, ri—?” But before I even finished my sentence, I saw what was growing there and stopped. The plant Aqua was proudly watering was a sprout about the size of the palm of your hand...and shaped like a little girl. Yes, it was a Leisure Girl.

“That’s right! Everything got so crazy for a while there that I forgot, but you said you were growing Leisure Girls out here! Darkness, Megumin! Hold Aqua back for a minute; I’m going to finish this thing off before we leave on our trip!”

I stalked closer to pull the Leisure Girl up by the roots, but Aqua crouched over it protectively, putting up a ridiculous argument. “What are you talking about?! I won’t let you, you cold-blooded NEET! You don’t have to worry—I’m

sure that if I water her with the pure holy water produced by a goddess, she'll grow up to be a good girl!"



"No way! No more pets in this house! I've got my hands full just trying to take care of Chomusuke and Emperor Zel and *you*, and now you want to add *another* burden?"

"Please! I promise I'll water her whenever she needs it and walk her every day... Wait, was I on that list just now?"

I guess the Leisure Girl sprout in front of us couldn't understand our conversation yet, because it was just smiling innocently.

...And I'm gonna kill it?

"H-hey, Darkness, it's a noble's duty to keep the town safe, right? You wanted a chance to shine, so I'll let you have this one..."

.....

No response from Darkness. "C'mon," I added, "you can't be that attached to it just because you've been watering it with Aqua the last few days! Time to step up, Governor, and protect this town from monsters!"

"You sure talk a good game—all right, this is a compulsory quest from your governor to you, an adventurer! See that Leisure Girl? I want you to...to..."

The Leisure Girl pointed playfully at Darkness. Her conviction faltered. "...I wonder what would happen if we replanted her in some corner of Crimson Magic Village, someplace no one would ever go..."

She knew it wasn't good for a governor to let a monster live; you could tell from how small her voice was.

It was almost time to meet Yunyun. With the exception of Aqua, all our pets were already with Wiz, and we were set to go.

"Now we just have to wait for Yunyun," I said. "Knowing how, uh, thoughtful she is, I sort of expected her to be super early..."

"No, I believe she will appear at precisely the right moment. You see, back in the village, she once made plans to hang out with some friends, and from sheer excitement, she arrived something like half a day in advance. I advised her that if she appeared so overeager, her friends would start to avoid her."

Yeah, I guess there was such a thing as being too excited.

Then we heard the town bell ring, signaling the very hour we had agreed to meet Yunyun. At that moment, a magic circle shimmered into view in front of our house, and Yunyun appeared in a flash of light.

"I know you are perfectly punctual, but this habit of timing your arrival down to the very second will also cause people to avoid you!"

"What?! Wh-why are you so mad at me when I just got here?!" As Yunyun teleported in, Megumin greeted her with a scolding, causing Yunyun to look at each of us, one by one... "Good morning, everyone. I look forward to taking this trip with y— Um, e-excuse me, but that thing Aqua is holding... Is that...?"

"This is Deadscream Bloody Mary, and she's going to be the chief of Crimson Magic Forest. She'll be moving in right next door to you, Yunyun, so be nice."

When Yunyun got a good look at the potted plant in Aqua's hands, she seemed very puzzled. "That's a Leisure Girl, isn't it? That name you gave her—or, well, I guess it sounds more like a nickname or something—but anyway, I think you should change it... Come to think of it, everyone in the village always warned me specifically to never get anywhere near a Leisure Girl. I wonder why..."

"Because these monsters are the natural enemies of lonely young ladies. Don't give them an inch just because they're small."

Yunyun must have known what a Leisure Girl was, and she looked at ours just a bit wistfully. But then she quickly shook her head. "All right, then, everyone, let's get going. *Teleport!*"

A magic circle appeared on the ground, carrying us off to Crimson Magic Village.

3

The Crimson Magic Clan charged themselves with keeping an eye on the Demon King's castle, and they worked day and night to churn out magical items.

“Wha—? Y-Yunyun? Megumin?!”

This village was populated entirely by paragons of wizardry, some of the most powerful fighting forces known to humankind...

“Big news! Megumin and Yunyun came back, and they’re with outsiders! Hurry and get changed, everyone!”

.....

“Hold on a second! My robes were all chewed up by moths, so I got rid of them! I have to go buy new ones!”

“Hey, I don’t have my staff! Lend me that broom!”

“My black cape! Where’d I put my black cape? Ugh, Moom! Where’s my cape?!”

Our sudden appearance in the middle of the village threw the place into an uproar. Two girls came running from the front gate. “Come on, you two! You know you’re supposed to warn us if you’re going to bring outsiders here!”

“That’s right! Thanks to you, everyone is panicking! It’s one thing if you show up on foot, but if you’re just going to teleport right into the middle of town, you have to give us a chance to get ready!”

I recognized these girls. They were classmates of Megumin’s, if I was remembering them correctly...

“Ah, Sakiberii and Nerimaki, my old classmates. It’s been quite a while,” Megumin said.

“We’re Funifura and Dodonko! You can’t even remember our names? We visited you in Axel, for crying out loud!”

“Yeah, you could at least remember our names!”

Ah yes, Funifura and Dodonko. They were wearing proper Crimson Magic-style robes and trying to stand in front of us so we wouldn’t see the Crimson Magickers racing around the village.

“Hey, girls, it’s been a while. I’m just curious: Why is everyone in the village running around like chickens with their heads cut off?” I inquired.

"We're supposed to be a village of wizards. Visitors would be disappointed if we all just dressed like normal people, right? Normally, the band of NEETs that roams the village lets us know if anyone's coming, but..."

"But they can't do that when you *teleport right into the middle of town!*"

"You all don't have to bother getting changed just for tourists like us. Save that energy for fighting the Demon King."

As we spoke, a few of the wizards who had disappeared into their houses emerged dressed all in black. It was kind of obnoxious how they tried to act nonchalant and go about their business but kept glancing at us like, *Hey, are they looking?*

Aqua trotted over to one wizard stirring a large cauldron outside his house. "Hey, Kazuma, look at this! A mystery brew! This wizard is making a mysterious potion!" It definitely did look like the black-clad wizard stirring the cauldron was making a classic magical brew.

"O girl from beyond the village, I advise you not to come too close... For I am making the forbidden—"

"Curry! Kazuma, it's curry! I can smell it!"

The wizard looked away uncomfortably. His eyes traveled everywhere but directly at Aqua.

"Look, Kazuma, that Crimson Magic Clan girl over there is drawing a magic circle. It looks like she's performing some sort of ritual..." Darkness whispered. I glanced over and saw a gorgeous young lady muttering to herself and preparing a circle. As we watched from afar, the diagram started to glow, then pulse gently. Aqua, attracted by the pretty lights, went over to have a look.

"You there, keep your distance! It's dangerous! I'm about to perform a ritual to free a great and powerful demon who was sealed long ago... The circle is already exuding a dark and terrible magic. Pay me no mind and be on your way. We Crimson Magic Clansfolk do this sort of thing all the time. Destroying an ancient evil is child's play for us."

The girl gave a fleeting smile and raised her arms resolutely. I knew there were a lot of dangerous things sealed away in this village, from evil deities to

goddesses to weapons from long ago, but they even had an ancient demon? How ridiculous!

"You need a demon vanquished? Just leave it to me! Your friendly neighborhood Aqua, high-level Arch-priest, will put that thing's lights out the moment it shows up!" Despite the young woman's warning, Aqua sounded downright heroic as she stepped forward. Her nose twitched, and she said, "That's funny—I don't *feel* any dark magic. I'm not detecting any of that demon smell yet. I don't think it's going to show up anytime soon. But it's okay—I've got time to kill. I'll wait around all day if it means I get to beat up a demon!"

And then she sat down right where she was to watch the magic circle. She looked like she was in it for the long haul, despite the fact that she was still holding her Leisure Girl sprout. Meanwhile, for some reason, the young woman was starting to sweat.

"Megumin, is it just me, or does that girl Aqua's trying to help out look like she's in trouble?"

"Ah, that would be Soketto. That magic circle doesn't do anything but glow a little. It's just a thing we do to wow tourists sometimes. Aqua's the first one to respond to it that way, and now Soketto doesn't know what to do."

Why was everyone here like this? After a few minutes, the young woman gave an exaggerated shake of her head. "Hrgh... The demon is fighting me... It seems to be terrified of your power! I'm afraid I don't think I have enough magic to break the seal. But that's just as well. You have my gratitude. Thanks to you, the village is safe..."

"Not enough magic? Just leave it to me! Hey, Kazuma, come lend this girl some of my magic! I'll happily give up tons of my sacred MP if that's what it takes to draw out a demon!" Aqua wanted me to use Drain Touch to transfer MP to the girl, but the young woman was making a face like she was trying to pass a kidney stone.

"Demon slaying? You got it. I'd be happy to help out with that."

"That's my Kazuma; you're so quick! Don't worry, young lady! My MP is inexhaustible, so you can have as much as you want!"

"Kazuma, Aqua! You're going to make Soketto cry!"

4

Having been discouraged from continuing to tease the young woman, we decided to briefly part ways with Yunyun to pay a visit to Megumin's house. Megumin sighed as she walked along with us. "I don't know what to do with you. Soketto is normally so calm and collected, and you nearly brought her to tears. That girl is the greatest fortune-teller in the Crimson Magic Clan. If you give her too much trouble, she might just tell you something about your future that you don't want to know."

"Sorry, she was just so pretty, I couldn't help myself. What wouldn't I want to hear about my future, though? I don't have anything to hide these days. You won't intimidate me that easily."

We'd been together for so long now, we were bound by deep, strong ties. I didn't have any more secrets that could embarrass me in front of my friends...

"A while back, this NEET who got on Soketto's bad side, Bukkororii, found out she had divined not only when he took a bath and went to the toilet but even his most embarrassing past secrets and sexual proclivities, plus all the many moments he spent, ahem, 'talking to himself' in the middle of the night. He didn't come out of his room for quite a while after that."

"I'm going to apologize to that young woman the moment we see her again," I said. Then I took another look around Crimson Magic Village. At first glance, it seemed a lot like any small rural town, but closer inspection revealed a number of unusual quirks. As we passed in front of one particular little shop, Darkness said, "H-hey, Megumin, what's that person doing? Their golem appears to be attacking a spinning pot. Is that some sort of ritual?"

"That person is the greatest potter in the Crimson Magic Clan. They are spinning the pot with telekinesis while also controlling the golem. They do it that way because they'd prefer not to get their hands dirty by actually touching the clay."

That person needed to apologize to all the other potters in the world.

"Hey, hey. So what are those people doing?" Aqua said, pointing to where a number of Crimson Magic Clan members were carrying baskets full of clothes.

"*Tornado!*" one Crimson Magic Clan member who looked like a housewife intoned, and a whirlwind sprang up in front of her.

"*Create Water!*" another housewife said, sending droplets into the tornado. She carefully controlled the water so it would stay within the powerful magic whirlwind...

All the other housewives started flinging clothes into the tornado.

"They are simply doing the laundry," Megumin informed us.

"You guys sure know how to waste magic," I said.

This conversation had brought us all the way to the edge of town. ".....I think this should be the place..." Megumin said. She was gazing vacantly up at a brand-new house that was by far the largest in the village. It bore some resemblance to the ramshackle old place we'd stayed in the last time we were here, but not much.

Megumin finally shook herself and took a few wobbly steps toward the front door, then rang the bell. There was a pounding of feet from inside, and then someone shouted: "Who's there?!"

"Oh-ho, who do you think?" Megumin said. She was obviously hoping to surprise her little sister, Komekko, since we'd come back so suddenly. While Megumin stood there grinning proudly, there was a *click* from the other side of the door. Locking it, apparently.

"Our house may look nice, but we don't have any money. Please go away."

"It's me! Your older sister, Megumin! I know you recognize my voice—now open up!" Megumin shouted, and finally the door opened a little bit. Not all the way: Apparently, Komekko was still suspicious.

"...I don't have an older sister. She exploded."

"The things this child says! I *am* your older sister! You can see me; I'm right here! Look!!"

No sooner had Komekko confirmed that it was indeed Megumin than she slammed the door shut.

"Anyone who comes back to the village again and again but doesn't even bother to show her face at home is no sister of mine."

"Hey! N-no, listen... I was here to help Yunyun with the trials, not for a visit... Komekko, are you sulking because I didn't come see you? I'll play lots and lots with you this evening, so don't be so upset." Megumin smiled—a little painfully, but not without a certain amount of gratification.

"I don't care if you visit me or not, Sis, but if you're going to come home, you could at least bring a gift."

"I'm going to pretend you don't mean that! You're just saying that because you're upset, right? It's quite hurtful, so please don't say that again!"

Komekko still showed no sign of letting us in, so I took a souvenir out of my backpack. "Heyo, Komekko, long time no see. You remember your big bro Kazuma, right? I brought you some treats!"

"Welcome home, Big Bro!"

"Komekko, you do not have a big brother, only a big sister! Welcome me home as well!"

Once we were finally inside, we took a look around the completely refurbished house.

"Here's tea."

"Why, thank you. You're so thoughtful, Komekko," Aqua said, pleased by the girl's assiduous nature.

"Is this for me?"

"Now, sweetheart, she's not food, and she's not your gift, either. You shouldn't try to eat things that are human-shaped anyway."

Komekko was eyeing the potted Leisure Girl on the table and drooling.

"Now then, Komekko. As your older sister who has continually been sending funds home, I think I have a right to inquire about this new house."

"The old house went *poof!* So we built this new one."

Come to think of it, we had heard something not that long ago about Megumin's house being destroyed.

"Yes, I remember hearing that. However, the furniture and everything else here is noticeably nicer than what I myself have at home..." She looked a bit conflicted.

Komekko, stuffing her face with the treats I'd given her, announced, "You're stingy, Sis."

"Where did you learn language like that? It was that NEET Bukkororii; I'm sure of it! When Mom and Dad get home, I'm going to give them a piece of my mind regarding this house!"

5

That night.

"And that's why we had to rebuild the house, but we don't have any money! If you hold any love for your mother, please don't stop sending us cash!"

"Fine, I understand, so please stop tugging on my cape! Everyone is looking! This is embarrassing—stop!" We interrogated Megumin's mom when she got home, only to discover the house had been built and furnished with borrowed money. "Hrm, well, at least the house has gotten a bit bigger. Speaking of which, Kazuma and the rest of us will be in the village for a while, so we'll stay here for a few days, all right? Now, where is my room?" Megumin asked. She sounded tired.

"...Huh? Er, Megumin, your room... Your room is..."

"Excuse me, your blood daughter asks you to guide her promptly to her room. Otherwise, there will be no more remittances for my pathetic parents."

That caused Yuiyui to fling herself down in front of Megumin. "You live in such a gorgeous mansion, we figured you would never come home again! We have a few empty rooms; pick any one you want! I recommend the one farthest back

on the second floor, okay?! It's a big room with nice, thick walls so you can sleep with Kazuma."

"If you have all these extra rooms, then we'll each take one, obviously! Please do not try to cause your nubile young daughter to share a room with a young man!"

Despite Megumin's agitation, Yuiyui looked at me seriously. "Kazuma, my good man, *you* would prefer shared quarters with my daughter, wouldn't you?"

"Damn right I would."

"Shut up! You're only making this worse!" Megumin snapped.

"Hey, you were the one asking me how many kids I wanted!"

"Don't say that in front of my mother! I was talking about the future anyway!"

Aqua beckoned Komekko over to her. "Don't listen to anything they're saying, sweetheart. Here, I'll make you some origami. Look, it's the Mad Bomber Moguninnin!"

"Wow, cool!"

I was extremely curious what a Mad Bomber was, not to mention a Moguninnin.

While Aqua had Komekko distracted, things were heating up with Darkness and Megumin.

"Megumin, why you—! You're always calling me Lewdsader and Pervy Noble, yet you've been secretly making plans to have a family?! You filthy girl!"

"Who's filthy? Forget it! Kazuma, we're going out! I haven't done my daily you-know-what yet. There has to be something good to blow up around here." She grabbed my hand and started to pull me out of the house, obviously realizing that this situation wasn't going to get any better for her.

But Yuiyui said, "Her daily...what? Darkness, just what is it that my daughter does every day?"

"All I can tell you is that it comes in a great burst that takes all her energy and leaves her unable to move."

"Darkness, don't deliberately phrase things in a way that invites misunderstanding! It sounds so dirty when you put it like that!"

I guess Darkness was getting Megumin back for calling her Lewdness or something.

"I also don't mind telling you that this thing she does every day makes such a tremendous noise that it's become famous all over Axel. Recently, people have even started coming to watch..."

"And my daughter does this in *public*!?"

"All I'm doing is using explosion magic! Darkness, if you continue to mislead my mother, you'll pay for it!"

Megumin was beet red, but Darkness said seriously, "Do you think you can get on my good side just by saying you'll make me pay for this? It's not as if I dislike you, Megumin, but I'm not really interested in doing that sort of thing with another woman."

"I'm not trying to get on your— Argh! I think being hit by too many monsters has scrambled your brains! That's enough; Kazuma, we're getting out of here! ... What? Kazuma?"

As for me, I'd activated my Ambush skill so I could escape the house before I got caught up in even more trouble.

6

As far as I was concerned, Darkness could help Megumin with her daily "thing." Out in the twilight in Crimson Magic Village, I found myself standing in front of a shop that had caught my attention when we'd been wandering around earlier.

The facade bore a prominent pink sign that read BAR SUCCUBUS LINGERIE. Okay, so the name didn't leave much to the imagination, but given there was a real "succubus service" place in Axel, it made sense that there might be similar shops in other towns. And the "lingerie" part intrigued me.

In Japan, they had these things called “lingerie pubs,” or so I was told. Places where alcohol was served by ladies wearing only their underwear—again, just what I’d heard.

A guy can dream all the filthy things he wants, but once in a while, it’s nice to be doted on in reality, too. The succubus place in Axel was almost too good, so that “adult” establishments like this hardly existed.

They say that what happens on a trip stays on a trip. It couldn’t hurt to let it all hang out every once in a while. It didn’t even matter to me if it wasn’t real succubi running the place. I knew how many pretty girls there were here in Crimson Magic Village.

I know what you’re thinking: How could I go to a place like this just when I was starting to get into it with Megumin? I’ll tell you how: A place like this doesn’t count. I was just going to enjoy a little adult refreshment with some lovely ladies around.

That, at least, was the rationalization I repeated to myself over and over as I opened the door...

“Oh-ho, welcome, outsider. All by yourself? Maybe you’d like a seat at the counter, then?”

The instant I saw the entire shop was occupied by middle-aged dudes, I knew I’d been baited. I sat down at the counter, throwing away the last of my hope. “So, uh, is this just a regular bar?”

“Even better. It’s a tavern-slash-inn, named by the most intelligent person in the Crimson Magic Clan. Every outsider who shows up here asks the same question.”

...The most intelligent person in the Crimson Magic Clan, huh?

“Would that happen to be the same person who named the public baths Mixed-Bathing Hot Springs, even though they aren’t hot springs and they definitely don’t offer mixed bathing?”

“You’re very clever, sir. It is, and the same person came up with the names of all our tourist attractions.”

I really wished they would use all this intelligence and wasted magic on fighting the Demon King.

To just turn around and leave the bar would be to admit I had fallen for the ploy hook, line, and sinker. So I decided to have a drink before I left. The drink came right away, and I sipped at it and thought about missed opportunities.

"Welcome, O visitor from outside. My name is Nerimaki, greatest barkeep's daughter of the Crimson Magic Clan! And she who shall one day be the keeper of this bar herself! You're a companion of Megumin's, and I'll be happy to grant you this dish on the house. But in return, you must tell me how she and Yunyun are doing in Axel—sound good?"

I suddenly found myself confronted by a plate of food I hadn't ordered and a girl with long black hair sitting down next to me. From the way she talked about Megumin and Yunyun, I guessed she must be their classmate or something. She was curious how her old friends were doing in a distant land. So, in a voice loud enough that not only Nerimaki but all the eavesdropping Crimson Magic Clanners around me could hear, I told tales of their adventures...

"Wh-whaaat?! Yunyun? Two boyfriends?! And? And?! What are they like?!"

"Well, one of them is this blond-haired punk. The other is a guy with the personality of a devil—heck, he might actually *be* a devil."

Nerimaki was smacking the bar with her hand, her black hair flying everywhere. Now the villagers would finally stop referring to Yunyun as "the lonely girl." It was just a nice opportunity to do a good deed, and I looked forward to how Yunyun would thank me in the coming days.

"She's two-timing! Whatever happened to the sweet, pure Yunyun who helped me research cool poses? She and Megumin were so...you know, *close* to each other, that I was sure...!"

As Nerimaki whispered in amazement to herself, I shook my glass, clinking the ice, trying to look my most adult. "It might also interest you to know that Megumin is currently building a 'grown-up' relationship with yours truly. I have nothing against girls being into girls, but when two such beautiful women get together, it's humanity's loss. I'm trying to fight the population decline caused by the Demon King with every fiber of my being."

"That sounds great and all, but you're talking about making babies, aren't you?" Nerimaki scored neatly off the opportunity I'd presented to her. Meanwhile, the bar was suddenly in an uproar. And the perpetrator was...

<Is that my bro? It is! What's up?!>

I guess the rooms were upstairs. Because all of a sudden, I was being forcibly reintroduced to a suit of armor I couldn't have forgotten if I'd tried.

<Hey, man, it's me! You remember me, right? The greatest, toughest, singingest, dancingest divine item to end all divine items! Your brother from another armorer, Aegis!>

Yes, it was the holy armor Aegis. Wasn't Eris supposed to have gotten rid of him?



<Hey, Bro, funny meeting you here! Is this what they call destiny? You and me, I think we have a good thing going. If ya ever get reborn as a gorgeous lady, Li'l Kaz, hit me up, and I'll let you wear me.>

"Who the hell is Li'l Kaz? And don't go around calling me your 'bro.' I'm not!"

Aigis sat down next to Nerimaki and gave her a thumbs-up. <Hey, girl. I'm guessing you aren't making any breast milk right now, so just give me a tall glass of milk the same temperature as your sweet, sweet body.>

"This suit of armor washes up here every night to harass me..."

So Aigis was still, um...Aigis.

<I harass 'cause I love, baby. Don't you wanna stick your fingers in me? I promise I'm all nice and warm inside.>

"You've got guts, talking like that to a member of the Crimson Magic Clan, the strongest mages on the planet. I guess the line between idiocy and heroism is paper-thin."

Nerimaki, apparently accustomed to this sort of treatment by drunken customers, stuck a finger inside Aigis's armor as if she was actually curious.

Trying not to look too interested myself by the surreal scene, I said, "So what the heck are you doing here? I thought Lady Eris got you off this plane."

<Aw, my brother, just wait till you hear my story! Lady Eris is the worst! She tried to give me, *me*, to this Sword Master guy. The worst kind of handsome hunk! Not to mention, he got all upset when I harassed these girls who were always hanging around him. So I flew the coop!>

I felt a little bad for the guy, being ditched by his own equipment.

"Okay, so you ran away. But how'd you end up here?"

<...You say, 'Crimson Magic Village,' I say, 'powerful monsters everywhere.' That's right—I set the guy a trial. To see if he could become a man worthy of

the likes of me!>

Geez, first the Crimson Magic Clan with their Chief's Trials, now this guy—what was it with people and trials around here?

"Excuse me, sir, but I seem to remember your exact words being: '*Wow, it's just like everyone says—there are chicks for miles around here! That tears it: I'm gonna live in this village the rest of my days!*' Yes?"

<Oops, that's no way to talk about a gentleman like me, baby. Here, this is for the milk. Keep the change.> Aigis gave something to Nerimaki, who had arrived with his milk.

"It's a piece of...something."

<Of my blindingly beautiful body, to be precise. I'm made of 100 percent pure orichalcum. You could sell that bit and buy yourself a nice castle... Hey, stop looking at me like that, you two; you're scaring me!>

I guess he *was* a divine item. You ought to be able to afford a castle for one of those.

<Whoa, personal space, Brother; you're a little close there. Here, here's the human-body-temperature milk Babycakes brought me. My treat—bottoms up!>

"You ordered it even though you can't drink it? Anyway, what, you plan to hang out in this village for a while?" I asked.

Aigis, having foisted the milk on me, said, <'Bout that. My plan's to stay here and spend time with the ladies for a while, then roll on over to the Eris church to see my master. Hey, girl, I paid for my room in advance, so stop scraping at me, wouldja?>

Nerimaki had a spoon and was industriously trying to loosen some flakes from the front of the armor.

I was still holding the milk as I said, "So you're gonna be around for the time being? Perfect. Truth is, we're doing the Chief's Trials here in the village. I might need a little help. Can I count on you?"

<Yeah, sure, I've got time to kill. Could you get this kid to quit it, though? She's gonna scrape me down to nothing at all,> Aigis said, increasingly

uncomfortable with Nerimaki and her spoon.

Chapter 2

The Real, True Truth for This Artificial Tribe!



1

On account of all the drinking, among other things, I decided it was too much trouble to go back to Megumin's place, so I spent the night at Succubus Lingerie. I headed back to Megumin's house in the morning...

"Hey, I'm here to pick up a couple of idiots."

I found myself at the headquarters of the village's neighborhood watch.

"Hey, good to see you. Hurry and get these two out of here," said the leader of the watch—a NEET who I think was named Bukkororii—with a tired yawn.

I turned to Megumin and Darkness, who were sitting inside a simple cell. "I'm here to take you home...although I really don't want to."

"Kazuma, wherever did you disappear to last night? If you had been here, we could have used your Ambush and Sense Foe skills to evade the neighborhood watch." Heck of a thing to say when you were still sitting in jail.

I turned to the person beside Megumin. "Aqua and Megumin are one thing, but I would have expected you to stop this madness."

"I have no excuse....." Darkness, red up to her ears, crouched there, trying to hide her face.

After I'd left for the bar, these two had gone ahead and done Megumin's "thing."

"I would like to let it be known that during my stay here, I shall be doing this on a daily basis, you understand. The simplest solution would be for the villagers to hurry up and get used to it."

"You're not making any sense," Bukkororii said, uncomfortable with what Megumin seemed to be saying.

"Aw, she claims she has to let off an explosion every day or she'll die. Heck, back in Axel, it's practically become part of the scenery."

"I swear I have no idea what you're talking about." Even this member of the Crimson Magic Clan, famous for their immovable demeanors, seemed to be sweating. It just served as proof of how much of a problem child Megumin really was, I guess.

"I can see there is no choice," Megumin said. "Starting today, I will do my best to satisfy my explosive need while it's still light out, so please tell the villagers not to be too surprised."

.....

"You think you could keep her locked up here until the trials are over? I'll pay for room and board."

"Please stop. The neighborhood watch building isn't a place for detaining troublemakers. We want a guardian to get her out of here already..."

"I shall have you stop treating me, a poor young lady, like a dangerous criminal!"

Darkness shrank even farther into the corner of the cell, humiliated, while the dangerous criminal gave us a piece of her mind...

"I guess I can't take the Chief's Trials yet. That first trial, the one we destroyed, still hasn't been repaired..."

With Megumin and Darkness in tow, I collected Aqua, and we all headed to see Yunyun, but she greeted us with a despondent apology.

"What do they mean? Is it not ready? We leave them alone for a little while

and look what happens—the people of this village!” Megumin said, sighing dramatically, as if she somehow wasn’t directly involved.

“You’re the one who destroyed that thing! Ooh, while I’m doing the trials, I wish you would go amuse yourself somewhere else... Anywhere else!”

The blood rushed to Megumin’s face. “I shall have you explain to me this impulse to make me a pariah!”

Yunyun waved her hands frantically. “N-no, no one’s trying to make you a pariah... I just know that you’re congenitally incapable of staying calm during the trials. And if there’s some juicy moment right at the end, I *know* you won’t be able to restrain yourself!”

“““Makes sense.”””

“Please do not all act so convinced at once! You treat me as if I were some sort of mad dog!”

“Have you forgotten where you were until five minutes ago? No reasonable, decent person ever ends up in a jail cell.”

Megumin refused to look at me.

“That kind of leaves us without much to do, though,” I said. “We did the tourist thing last time we were in Crimson Magic Village. So what now?”

Yunyun told us the trials would be ready for her by tomorrow. We could conceivably go back to Axel for a day...

Just as everyone was sharing a concerned look:

“I’d like to take this dear girl to the forest.”

It was Aqua, holding her Leisure Girl in its pot and sounding regretful. Oh yeah, I guess that had been on our to-do list.

“Um... As a member of the Crimson Magic Clan, I’m not sure how I feel about you planting a monster right next to our village... I’d really prefer to destroy it here and now...”

Yunyun was being perfectly reasonable, of course, but Aqua brandished the pot at her and said, “Can you truly destroy something so small and sweet? Are

you that cruel, Yunyun? Look! Look her in the eye and say it!!”

“I’m sorry; I’m sorry! I can’t do it; I’m sorry!”

2

We followed Aqua around the village as she fretted about where to plant her sprout.

“I’d like to put her on the hill up there so she can look down on the village. That way, she won’t feel lonely.”

“No, Aqua, she can’t go there. That’s Devil’s Hill, where couples go to hang out together. How about somewhere in the woods?”

“This is a pain,” I said. “Let’s just plant it by your house and be done with it, Yunyun. Nobody around here would get in any trouble with a Leisure Girl—you could make it a new tourist destination.”

“That’s great thinking, Kazuma. And then she won’t be lonely, either. Plus, Yunyun would finally have a friend! Everybody wins!”

“You’re right—it’s perfect. I’ll take such good care of her!”

“Don’t be ridiculous! And, Yunyun, don’t be so eager. Making friends with monsters is a line you must not cross!” Megumin had to shoot down our idea just when it seemed like everything was going to wrap up neatly.

“Hey, Megumin, there’s one thing I’ve been planning to do once I’m chief of the Crimson Magic Clan.”

“Wh-why the sudden change of subject? What is this thing you are planning?”

Yunyun smiled shyly at Megumin. “I’ve been thinking about this for a long time. I want to catch some intelligent monsters, the kind that can talk, and start a monster farm here in the village...”

“You mean you had the same idea as Kazuma?! And I suppose when they grow up, you will harvest them for experience points!”

Megumin had Yunyun by the lapels and was shaking her violently, but Yunyun

objected, “N-no, that’s not it at all! I think if they’re well cared for and all their needs are met, intelligent creatures will open up to us! We can find a new way forward together, instead of having to fight all the time...!”

“‘Together’... Such naïveté! You want friends so badly, you would even make NEETs out of monsters!”

“Of course I want friends! Who doesn’t?!” Yunyun said hotly.

I ignored the argument and began racking my brain for what to do about the Leisure Girl sprout. “I guess it really has to be somewhere far away from the village...”

“But then I’m afraid she’ll get lonely. You don’t see a lot of Leisure Girls, you know. Is there anywhere you find groups of them? If we could plant her by some friends, that would be great.”

“If anything this evil grew in groups, we’d have to burn them.”

“Bah, get away from us; you’ll scare her! Nasty Kazuma should go over there!” As Aqua shoved me repeatedly in the back, the Leisure Girl stretched out its little hand and giggled.

There was a massive mountain range and an equally extensive forest out behind Crimson Magic Village. And we were deep into the woods by now...

“Waaaahhh! Yunyun! Yunyuuuuun!!”

“*Light of Saber!*”

With a blast of magic, Yunyun dispatched the One-Punch Bear chasing Aqua.

“*Deadeye! Deadeye! Deadeye!! Ahhhh, Yunyun! Yunyun! Help mee!!*”

“*Lightning Strike!*”

Some treelike monsters had surrounded us by pretending to be part of the forest, but Yunyun dispatched them with lightning bolts that reduced them to charred bark.

“Ooh! This is the famous Paralyze Slime! A highly dangerous monster that paralyzes its prey before gradually dissolving it with its mildly acidic body! A normal human would be melted away, armor and all, but I’ll bet in *my* case, it

would melt off my clothes first! But don't worry, Kazuma; humiliation like that wouldn't be enough to break my—”

“Infernoooo!!”

The slime creeping up on Darkness was incinerated in an instant.

“Yunyun, may I have a moment?” said Megumin from her place at the back of the party, where she was ignoring Aqua (dousing the last bits of slime) and Darkness (looking weirdly weepy).

“Sure, Megumin, what's wrong? I'm surveying our surroundings with a Search spell right now... Oh, there's a monster diagonally ahead! Leave it to me—I'll crush that thing!”

“You don't have to do that! I swear, I don't know what has gotten into you today. You're so uncommonly eager for combat.” The monsters of Crimson Magic Village had been on us from the moment we entered the forest.

“G-gee, you think so? It's the duty of every Crimson Magic Clan member to keep monsters around the village under control, right? And I've still got MP, plus a bunch of manatite in case I need it...”

“You're too eager! Look at all that expensive manatite you are holding! Are you planning to go to war?! We are in a party together, so there is no need for any one of us to go charging ahead.”

Yunyun had pulled a bunch of magical rocks out of her pockets to make her point, but Megumin met her with a flailing of her staff. Yunyun immediately started to grin...

“A party...together... Hee-hee... Hee-hee-hee!”

“You are creeping me out! It's rude to smirk like that when a person is lecturing you!”

I guess this was the first time Yunyun had ever properly partied up with anyone, and she was enjoying the idea. “Hey, don't get so worked up. I'm glad Yunyun is taking out everything in sight. No danger, no challenge, no problems, right?”

“The slime... My slime... My Paralyze Slime...” I ignored Darkness's mumbling.

Megumin, though, said, “There are indeed problems! With Yunyun doing everything, I have no chance to shine! I want to blow away the powerful monsters here in an awesome demonstration of strength as much as the next wizard!”

“So that’s why you came home! You’re only here to grind levels!”

Aqua—who must have decided the safest place to be was right next to Yunyun, because she wouldn’t move more than a few feet away—said, “Come on, Kazuma. Megumin is getting on my nerves. Just let her fire one off over there somewhere and let’s get it over with.”



"Yeah, I guess she's less likely to cause trouble when she's deadweight. Sounds good."

"I never imagined even you would turn against me, Aqua! I shall not do it, do you hear?! I've finally come home, and I shall not waste my Explosion on small fry!"

I sighed, trying to decide how to bring Megumin's selfish ranting to heel...

There was a stinging on the back of my neck.

"Explooooooooosion!!!"

Megumin's spell, which she unleashed without an incantation, was a demonstration of utmost control, landing precisely among the trees deep in the forest. The blast blew down all the nearby timber, producing a roar and a rush of wind.

"What's wrong with youuuuuuuu?!" Yunyun cried as she was carried off by the blast wind.

3

Bukkororii showed up at the gate to Crimson Magic Village. "Hey, uh, there was this big *boom* coming from the forest..."

Aqua said promptly: "Yeah, Megumin freaked out and blew something up."

"Just a second! Yes, it was I who unleashed that blast! But as I have said repeatedly, there was a perfectly good reason for it!" Outed by her own party member, Megumin was already trying to spin the situation.

"Yeah, sure, a reason. You got upset? Or did a big ol' bug pop out and scare you?"

"Curse this man!" Megumin started to strangle me from her place perched on my back.

"He's asking what the reason was, so just tell him already!" Yunyun said.

Megumin clammed up. "Urgh... But I'm afraid no one will believe me..."

"I know you don't exaggerate, Megumin. It's all right. Even if no one else believes you, I will."

"Darkness..."

They were really starting to have a moment, but anyway, Bukkororii said, "So what the heck happened?"

Megumin got a serious look on her face...

"I saw the Mad Bomber Moguninnin."

"If you're going to make up dumb stories, I'll drop you."

I made to dump Megumin off my back, but she tightened her hold, clinging to her spot. "I told you! I said no one would believe me! Darkness, give this man a piece of your mind for me!"

"Huh? R-right... I mean, I don't know much about monsters, but you did a great job, Megumin, reacting with the Moganinnin coming right at you!"

"You can't even remember what it's called! I thought you, if no one else, would believe me!" Megumin wailed, and Bukkororii sighed.

"The Moguninnin? You honestly couldn't come up with a better excuse than that?"

"If it was any other monster, I might admit to making a mistake. But would I of all people make a mistake when it comes to a creature that produces explosions?! The Moguninnin was watching Kazuma intently from deep within the forest. The infamous Mad Bomber—I don't think even my incantationless Explosion spell is likely to have finished it off completely."

"What's this Mad Bomber business? I thought you were just teasing us."

"The Mad Bomber Moguninnin. A unique monster, proficient with explosion magic, originally said to have lain dormant within the mysterious facility here in Crimson Magic Village. It speaks a broken form of some human language, but none of us can understand it. It attacks any non-Crimson Magic Clansfolk it sees, and at night it lets off directionless bursts of detonation magic!"

"Sounds like a pain in the neck. In fact, it's probably related to you. And you think this thing was watching me?"

Detonation magic was a kind of offensive spell that ranked somewhere below Explosion. If a monster with that sort of power had really been after me...

At that moment, Bukkororii interjected: “I thought the Mad Bomber never left the forest.

“You’re just saying all this so you have an excuse to drop an explosion whenever you want, aren’t you?”

“What a thing to say! Do you suppose I need such a lame excuse to use explosion magic?!”

She wasn’t exactly convincing, and Bukkororii just shrugged. “Megumin’s always had a habit of saying pretty weird stuff. Like that she saw some mysterious, glittering object vanish into the eastern sky, or that she was a god of destruction in a past life, or that learning explosion magic can give a wizard big boobs...”

“You don’t believe a word I say, do you?! You’ve got a lot of nerve for a NEET!”

“H-hey, shut up—being a NEET has nothing to do with this! Just stop blasting things in the forest. You’ll rile up the monsters, and we’ll all have to deal with it. Do you think you could act like an adult just while the trials are going on?” And then, apparently figuring his work was done, Bukkororii left.

“I swear the Mad Bomber Moguninnin was really there. You mustn’t leave the village; you hear me, Kazuma? The Moguninnin hates all human men who are not from the Crimson Magic Clan, and especially those with black hair and dark eyes.”

“Why would it go after such a specific group of people? Anyway, that thing doesn’t come out of the forest, right? You sure you didn’t just see a gigantic beetle?”

“I would never make such a mistake! I beg you not to take part in the Chief’s Trials, Kazuma. I’ve likewise been instructed not to participate. Aqua or Darkness can be Yunyun’s partner.”

“I’m on it!” Aqua chirped.

"What?! No! Er, I mean, not that I dislike you or anything—that's not the point!" Yunyun said, sounding frantic.

With a gentle smile, Darkness said, "To protect others is the true path of the Crusader. It's all right—you can leave this to me. I swear I'll protect you."

"D-Darkness..."

"With me by your side, you won't have anything to worry about," Aqua said. "Even if a big, nasty monster gets you, Yunyun, I can bring you right back with Resurrection!"

"Aqua... Wait, I'd really prefer to avoid any scenarios where Resurrection becomes necessary..." Yunyun wasn't sure whether to be moved or terrified.

"Aw... These trials or whatever sound like some real high-fantasy stuff. I was actually starting to feel a little curious."

"You can stay behind with me, Kazuma. I'll show you around the village. I know a bar run by the parent of one of my classmates."

"I think I'd rather not. They have one particularly annoying customer."

And there it was. I'd come all the way to Crimson Magic Village, and I was still going to end up as a NEET.

"Hey... We never got to plant my sprout."

"""""Ops.""""

4

That night.

"So I guess I'm not doing what I was planning on doing tomorrow—is there anything you need help with around here?"

We were back at Megumin's house, and I was offering to help her mom with whatever she needed. Megumin, still feeling lethargic, had staked out the sunniest spot in the house and was napping there as if it was hers by right. But me, I at least knew how to show gratitude for a free room.

"Oh my, you're willing to help me? I was thinking of delving into the deepest dungeon in the land in search of components for magical items tomorrow..."

"Sorry, um, I was thinking more like the laundry or the dishes. Random chores." It was maybe a little soon to have me helping with business proper.

"In that case, Kazuma, perhaps you could accompany me to investigate the mysterious facility? I'm still rather concerned about the Moguninnin," Megumin said.

"Are you still talking about that monster with the weird name?" Yunyun would start the Chief's Trials tomorrow. Darkness was going to be her partner for the first one, on account of that stirring argument she'd made.

"Ooh, I wanna go, too! Doesn't a mysterious facility seem like just the sort of place you would find hidden treasure?" said Aqua, who was unabashedly drinking even though we were staying over at someone's house.

"Sounds like they've checked the place top to bottom. I don't think there's anything there," I said. This facility, according to the Crimson Magic Clan, had been built for purposes unknown. These days, it was another one of their tourist attractions...

"I think it would be just fine, having a proper adventure every now and again. And with your good Luck, Kazuma, who knows? We might find something," Megumin said.

"Why do you only ever go on proper adventures when I'm not around...?" Darkness mumbled sadly.

"Very well, then we should get plenty of sleep for tomorrow. Aqua, try to take it easy on the alcohol, okay? I'm going to lie down..." Megumin stood up and headed for her room.

"Yes, a nice early bedtime—that's a good idea. I'm so sorry, my dear Kazuma, that this house doesn't have more amusements... Well, I have to think that making out with my daughter in her room must be quite amusing enough, no? Hoo-hoo-hoo!"

Megumin looked downright pained at her mother's pronouncement. "What a thing for a parent to say. What are you trying to cause your daughter to do?!"

But Yuiyui was unmoved by Megumin's tirade. "There are only so many things to do out here in the sticks. Hurry up! I want to see my grandchildren!"

"Enough with spouting such indecent things to your own daughter! Kazuma, say something to her!"

"I think your daughter still isn't quite physically ready to have kids. Let her grow up a little more first..."

"I am perfectly grown up and perfectly capable of bearing children! But that is not the point. Argh, what am I to do with these people...?!"

Megumin was making enough noise to be a mob all by herself, and I tried to get her to calm down. "C'mon, shush. It's nighttime. And be careful what you're shouting. Imagine how embarrassed you'll be if the neighbors hear you exclaiming that you can have children."

"I do not wish to hear such logical arguments at a time like this. Whose fault is it that I am in this position?"

"Um, just for the record, I can also physically have children at any time."

"Darkness, that is enough idiocy out of you—go to sleep already!"

"Sleep."

With a word from Yuiyui, Megumin collapsed onto the carpet. Her mother, more than willing to subdue her own daughter with a sleeping spell, smiled broadly at us. "C'mon now—strike while the iron's hot! The night is young, so have fun!"

"Sorry, um, even I can't bring myself to do anything to someone while they're asleep..."

I pushed back gently as Yuiyui tried to foist her daughter on me, but Darkness stood up and blocked the way to the bedroom. "This sort of thing requires the consent of both partners! I won't let you cross that line like this! Not even if you are Megumin's mother!"

"Sleep." Yuiyui didn't bat an eyelash as she cast another spell.

"You may be her mother, but I can't let you do this! A Crusader's true calling is to protect! And I shall protect Megumin's chastity!"

"Y-you survived that?! But my Sleep spell is supposed to be an extra-special one..."

Darkness possessed serious endurance along with incredible magic defense and resistance to status ailments. Yuiyui was shocked to see Darkness shrug off her sleeping spell. "Grrr...! You were out like a light the last time I used that on you! You must have gained an awful lot of levels since then!"

"A Dustiness never falls for the same trick twice! Is Sleep the only spell you can use? Have at me, and just you try to incapacitate me!" With that heroic pronouncement, Darkness squared off against Yuiyui...!

"How about this, then?! *Paralyze*!"

"All too easy! The Paralyze Slime we ran into in the forest this afternoon was more powerful!"

I ignored both the thundering Darkness as well as Aqua, who had managed to drink herself under the table. Instead, I hefted the sleeping Megumin and carried her to her room.

5

Moonlight filtered in through the window, casting the face of the sleeping Megumin into sharp relief.

I, being the perfect gentleman, of course, didn't touch her. Instead, while she slept on the bed, I lay next to her, using my own arms for a pillow and gazing at her innocent, sleeping face.

"...Mm... My power... This time I'll break that forbidden seal... I'll destroy the whole world..." She tossed and turned, mumbling things that didn't sound innocent at all. Then maybe she started to notice that it didn't quite feel like a normal night, what with me being next to her, because she finally opened her eyes...

"...Excuse me, but might I ask what you are doing?"

"Basking in the sleeping visage of the woman I love."

Megumin bolted upright. “The woman you love, indeed! And why don’t you have a shirt on?!”

“Hey, normally when you wake up next to a naked member of the opposite sex, you think, *Oh God, what did I do, right?*”

It was true: I was lying there next to Megumin with nothing covering the upper half of my body. She slid away from me, patting herself here and there as if to make sure she was still in one piece. “I certainly do think that! This scene looks like we just—! Wha...?! Hold on a moment! I’m not wearing a bra!”

“Oh, I thought it might constrict your chest and make it hard to sleep. Besides, they say wearing a bra to bed can stunt your, um, growth.” I pointed to the pillow, and Megumin grabbed the bra lying there.

“Oh, how considerate of you! What a change from usual! I wonder why you would be so thoughtful in this one particular matter! I can’t believe even you, Kazuma, would take off a girl’s bra while she slept...”

“Hey, don’t worry. Being a gentleman and all, I did what any gentleman would do and used Steal to get it off.”

“You do choose the strangest moments to exercise decency... And I am starting to get awfully annoyed by that innocent grin on your face! What would you have done if you had mistakenly gotten my panties instead?” She pulled the bra into her pajamas and shuffled around, suddenly all embarrassed.



"Aw, calm down. We've pretty much got a routine by now, right? We end up in the same bed, but nothing happens. I just thought I'd give you a little scare. And you were surprised, weren't you?"

"That I was! Did we really not do anything?! I don't want to become an adult when I can't even remember it; you hear me?!" Megumin, apparently finished with her bra, stuck her hand back out the arm of her pajamas.

"Hey, don't worry—you know I don't have the guts. Trust me."

"I admit that's a highly convincing argument, but it is also pathetic coming from the person I admire!" Megumin said, but she was finally starting to calm down. "Geez. I know she is my mother, but she is also a terrible person... Casting Sleep on her own daughter in an effort to shack her up with some guy... What a bizarre idea..."

"I don't think your mother is the only one in the family who gets the occasional odd idea."

Megumin sighed and positioned herself next to me, kicking out her feet. I guess knowing each other so long was what made it possible for us to be together like this even as we complained to each other.

"I am not against our having *that* kind of relationship, you know. But I really don't want it to be thanks to my mother, in my own house..."

"You say that, but you know as well as I do that something always gets in the way. I've started to wonder recently if I'm cursed to be a virgin for the rest of my life. I keep asking Aqua to check if I'm cursed, but she swears I'm not."

How come every single time I was about to cross that line, something stopped me? Did my absurdly high Luck stat mean nothing?! Then again, if it were that, say, Lady Eris was secretly in love with me and was intervening out of jealousy, maybe I could find it in my heart to forgive her...

"Who would ever bother to place such a ridiculous curse on someone?"

"Maybe I have a fan somewhere who wants my body to remain pure. You might be surprised by how popular I've gotten with the ladies recently, hmm? A beautiful lady adventurer who said she was a fan of mine even showed up at

the Axel Guild the other day.”

That caused Megumin to raise an eyebrow. “And when we get back to Axel, are you going to see this person?” *Ooh, was that a bit of jealousy I detected in your voice? Too bad, Megumin. Sweating it a little is part of grown-up love.*

“Well, sure. It sounds like she came a long way. The least I can do is shake her hand and sign an autograph. I’ve been practicing my signature just for this sort of thing. I even quietly signed a post in the Axel Adventurers Guild, to thank them for being such a big part of my success.”

“Yes, I know. The receptionist was quite upset by that because she was the one who had to clean it up, remember? She asked me to tell you not to go scribbling graffiti wherever you wanted.”

“That sucks! I planned for that post to be worth a fortune decades from now!”

Megumin giggled in the dark room. “I would be happy to receive your autograph, then, Kazuma. Kazuma Satou...it’s quite a good name, don’t you agree?”

“I’m really conflicted about having you compliment me on my name, actually...”

“I shall have you explain what you mean by that, when someone has gone out of their way to say something nice about you!”

I did feel a little bad for Megumin, but as the eldest son of the Satou family, I didn’t think I could let it go unsaid.

Then, in spite of all her complaints, Megumin stretched out next to me where I was resting, borrowed my arms for a pillow, and rolled over to sleep, completely defenseless. I guess that just showed how much she trusted me, even though we were alone in the middle of the night. For a second, I thought maybe it was an invitation, but look, even I have the ability to learn. Not to mention, sort of like Megumin said, doing it right in the house where your partner’s parents live was... Well...

“Um, Kazuma, may I say something?”

“I’d rather you didn’t, but...”

.....

“This is very awkward to have to point out, but you’re, um, pressing against me. Quite, erm, prominently.”

“Don’t give it a second thought.” After all, what was I supposed to do? It was a biological phenomenon. When a guy my age cuddles up against a girl, it would be weirder if it *didn’t* happen. “I’m going to say this right up front: Don’t you dare attack my precious little man. He’s very shy and *very* delicate.”

“I wouldn’t attack you on account of a biological phenomenon. Especially since I was the one who cuddled up to you. How irrational a woman do you think I am?”

I seemed to remember Darkness mounting an irrational attack on me when we’d been in a similar situation.

Then I looked at Megumin and realized her gaze was fixed squarely on the area in question.

“I know you’re at that age just like me, so I don’t blame you for being interested in the body of the opposite sex, but do you think you could stare at it a little less intensely?”

“Hrk! N-no, I wasn’t! I was just thinking... We’ve been in this situation so many times, and you always have to restrain yourself... I’m starting to feel sort of bad for you...”

She should!

And here in Crimson Magic Village, I couldn’t even go to my favorite shop to find some relief. So I wished she would at least give me five minutes to myself.

“...Erm, perhaps you’d like me to help you?”

I mean, we kept getting into these will-they-won’t-they situations, and we never—

“What did you say?”

“Yikes, you look so serious! I o-offered to help you...”

Just a—!

“H-how lewd! Megumin? More like Megaperv! You *do* have a filthy mind, just like Darkness said!”

“Not so loud; it’s the middle of the night! *Who* has a filthy mind?!”

Well— But she just—

“Listen to yourself! Do you know what you’re saying? You want to help me with *this*?!”

“Don’t be so emphatic! You just always seem to be left in the lurch, and I felt bad about it, so the thought crossed my mind!”

Did she understand what it would mean to *help*?! How far did she really expect to go? Was she truly offering? Would she do, you know, *everything*?

No, wait, bigger problem...!

“When a girl is so totally inexperienced, though, I feel pretty weird asking her to do that stuff...”

“Why are you making it sound so sordid?! Anyway, since you appear to see me as a woman who only ever tempts you and never actually does anything... Well, I may not know exactly what to do, but, *ahem*, you always seem so uncomfortable after you’ve gotten all excited...” Megumin’s eyes were glowing crimson, whether from excitement or nervousness, and she couldn’t quite meet my gaze.

“Of course I do! I already think of you as Massive Disappointment Megumin!”

“I wish you would not call me that! I told you I have no objection, if you’re ready to take proper responsibility!”

What was I saying, here in a younger woman’s house at this hour? What was I about to make her do? And I was only just remembering that I was still half-naked!

“Are we going to do this or not?! I am getting embarrassed by this situation!”

“Hey, so am I! You think I’m going to make some inexperienced girl practice beginner combos with my joystick while her parents are sleeping right below

us?! I wonder how much a game like this would cost at that shop!"

"Stop spouting nonsense and do it, if you're going to! And you don't have to say *everything* you're thinking!"

"Hey, look, I need to get myself mentally prepared for this! I know it! Believe me, I know! Someone's going to come barging in right at the best moment! I'm cursed, I tell you! But I can't help hoping! I can't help the way my heart races at these bittersweet moments!"

"Fine, I see how it is. Take it off! No one has interrupted us despite the racket we're making, so I'm sure that this time—"

It happened just as Megumin was saying that.

From the direction of the forest came a distant sound of an explosion.

Megumin and I looked at each other.

"...See?"

".....Maybe you could ask Aqua to cast Sacred Dispel on you tomorrow."

6

The night, somehow both exciting and weirdly anxiety-inducing, finally ended.

"Hey! I shall have you tell me what is going on!"

"That's what we want to know, Megumin!"

We were innocently eating breakfast in the living room when Bukkororii and a whole bunch of other Crimson Magic Clan members piled into the room.

"I'm not sure what the meaning of this is, but could you at least let me go? This is no way to treat a young woman."

"...Sure, but only if you promise not to run away or get violent or anything, okay?" Bukkororii said before he would release Megumin. She nodded without a word, and he started to loosen his grip...

"Ha, you've let down your guard! Now I shall take the liberty of ending your life!!"

"Hrgh?! You liar! Megumin, you lied to me!"

The second she was free, Megumin wheeled on Bukkororii and put him in a sleeper hold.

"Do you keep your promises to monsters or members of the Demon King's army? A NEET ranks below a slime. It would be absurd for me to keep a promise to such a creature!"

"H-hey, Megumin, let go! You're gonna kill him! And don't make so much fun of NEETs!!" I pulled her away while the other Crimson Magic Clansfolk rushed to help the now-motionless Bukkororii, who was pale but still breathing.

Aqua, calmly sipping tea in spite of the commotion, said, "So what *is* this all about? Did our Megumin do something?"

All the mages looked at one another. "Are you aware that another explosion occurred near the village last night?"

"I am so sorry! I'll make certain nothing like this happens again! Come here, Megumin—you apologize, too!"

"Darkness, do not simply start apologizing! For that matter, I would have you stop immediately assuming anything to do with explosions must involve me!" Megumin refused to countenance Darkness's bowing and scraping, but her own assertion wasn't exactly convincing.

"All right, so who else would have done something like that?"

"Yeah, Megumin, let's start with your alibi. Where were you last night?"

Megumin began to blush at the Crimson Magic Clanners' questions. "I...I can't tell you..." she said in a vanishingly small voice.

"See? It was obviously you! Apologize for calling me a NEET and for strangling me! Hey, come to think of it, there was a kerfuffle about some explosions here in the village a long time ago! Were those your doing as well, Megumin? I think at the time you claimed it was some devil woman who had invaded the village and was setting off those explosions every night, didn't you?"

This seemed to spark some uncomfortable memory for Megumin, because I noticed her starting to sweat. "Hey, you reacted to that question! You can't give

them your alibi; you're sweating about that old case—it must be you...!"

"Why are you joining them, Kazuma?! I was too embarrassed to give them my alibi because I was with *you* last night!"

There was a collective gasp from the Crimson Magic Clan members, who shared knowing looks.

"So that's it... I always thought of you as a little sister, Megumin... But it seems you've grown up... I'm sorry for interrupting your meal."

"Wow, so Megumin actually... Huh. The world sure is a strange place. Never thought she would be the least bit interested in love..."

"We were together, but we haven't done anything yet! Please stop making brash assumptions!" Megumin insisted, her face red, as she attempted to chase out the NEETs.

"Hey, I just wanna be sure, but it really wasn't you, was it?" I said.

"You were right next to me when we both heard the explosion, Kazuma! Besides, I used up my magic yesterday when we went to plant the Leisure Girl, and you know it. I can't imagine why you would be suspicious of me!"

We all clapped our hands, as if that made sense... "So how do you explain this? Is there another one of you running around, Megumin?"

"She's not a slime, and I've never heard of Crimson Magic Clan members multiplying themselves. Maybe she got her hands on some super-pure manatite so powerful, it could even help produce an explosion...?" Darkness suggested.

"Just so we're clear, I'm not her accomplice, okay? Without Kazuma around, I can't transfer any MP to her, you understand?"

"How rude! I used my magic in front of all three of you, and I have an airtight alibi, so please stop trying to pin this explosion on me!" Megumin said, now thoroughly agitated. The Crimson Magic Clan members listening to us exchanged inquisitive looks.

"So that explosion..."

"It can't be... Was Megumin right...?"

“““The Mad Bomber Moguninnin...”“”

“I wish you would stop saying that name.”

But did this mean Megumin *wasn’t* crazy? Come to think of it, yesterday, just before Megumin had set off her Explosion, I thought I’d felt a prickling on the back of my neck: my Sense Foe skill activating.

The wizards surrounding Megumin looked like they were deep in thought. “That means this is no time to be holding the Chief’s Trials, right? If the Ninnin blew up any outsiders, tourism would take a hit...”

“We should ask the chief. Then we can get the whole village together and hunt down the Ninnin ourselves.”

That seemed to really unsettle Megumin. “J-just a moment. There is no real need to cancel the trials, is there?”

“We don’t have to hurry to pick the next chief, but the Ninnin is something we have to deal with right away, yes? Besides, there are two ways to become chief of the Crimson Magic Clan: do the trials as tradition dictates or complete a major hunt with just yourself and a partner. So whoever defeated the Ninnin could become the next chief, too, and that would be fine.”

“If there are no obnoxious trials involved, perhaps I should aim to become the next chief...”

This was getting weird fast. At this rate, the early bird was going to get the chiefdom. The very identity of our poor, lonely girl with no other distinguishing features was going to be snatched away from her.

At that moment...

“I’m sorry.”

“Megumin? What are you apologizing for all of a sudden?” Everyone looked at her; she had suddenly bowed her head in a show of genuine remorse.

“.....I was, after all, the perpetrator of that explosion last night. I went out for a walk in the middle of the night, only to find myself confronted with a very large stag beetle. I was so startled that I used Explosion on it before I knew what I was doing.”

"What the heck are you talking about?!" Bukkororii demanded. It did sound awfully strange. "Ha, I knew it was you! You couldn't trick me! Now apologize for calling me a NEET and strangling me!"

"I apologize for strangling you. But I will not apologize about the NEET thing."

"Why are you so set on viewing NEETs as your enemies?!"

Bukkororii and the others gave Megumin a very stern warning and finally left.

"What'd you say that for?" I asked. "You know perfectly well you and I were having fun in bed last night."

"Fun in bed?!"

"Please don't put it that way! And, Darkness, stop that—you don't have to react so dramatically!"

To be fair, I could take a pretty good guess as to why Megumin would have falsely accused herself of setting off the explosion. Meanwhile, Aqua, who hadn't budged throughout the entire scene, sipped her tea and said, "Poor *tsundere* Megumin. You did it so the Chief's Trials wouldn't be canceled for Yunyun, didn't you?"

"I get it, yeah. Yunyun is the one person she's totally soft for."

"That's enough out of both of you! I'm no *tsundere*! As I am barred from participating in the trials, I will take advantage of this loophole and hunt the Ninnin. I shall steal the chiefdom right out from under Yunyun's nose!"

Megumin definitely sounded like she was making excuses. Meanwhile, Darkness tugged on my sleeve.

"Hey, Kazuma, this fun you were having last night, what was it? I ended up not being able to match Megumin's mother, and she rendered me powerless..."

"We were sleeping in the same bed together, so my you-know-what naturally got you-know-how, and Megumin, she..." I whispered the outcome to Darkness.

"Wh-wh-wh-what?! I can't believe what you made that poor girl do...!"

"Hey, you make me sound like the villain! Unlike you, who chickens out at the first sign of a good vibe, Megumin was ready to take some responsibility when

my you-know-what got you-know-how!"

"I can hear both of you! How dare you talk about such things so early in the morning!" Megumin exclaimed, her face red, but we were interrupted by the doorbell. Komekko must have gone to answer it, because there was a lot of thumping from the direction of the door.

Our visitor was finally escorted in: It was Yunyun, looking a bit nervous about the trials. "G-good morning! Miss Darkness, I look forward to spending the day with— ...? Megumin, why is your face red?"

"Yunyun, listen to me," Darkness said. "Last night, Megumin and this man—"

"Did nothing! It's nothing! Come, Darkness, you'd better get going!"

7

"This is the mysterious facility. I believe you only saw the outside last time."

Yunyun and Darkness were on their way. Megumin, still blushing, had brought me to this facility, near the underground storage bunker we'd examined on an earlier visit. From the outside, the "mysterious facility" looked like a big concrete building. Megumin was right: We'd passed by it before, but upon closer inspection...

"Kazuma, Kazuma, this is what they call a research laboratory, isn't it?"

"Yeah, this is definitely a research laboratory."

"What is a research laboratory? Sometimes you two say the strangest things."

Now that I had a good chance to look at the place, I found there was a sign politely posted there. "It says *Noise Development Bureau*," I said.

"You can read that?" Megumin said, amazed, but the sign was just in Japanese. I seemed to remember that Noise was the name of the magically advanced country that had created the Crimson Magic Clan. From the language of the letters to the stupid name on the sign, this mysterious facility was obviously the product of some obnoxious Japanese cheater.

"Hey, Aqua. I'm starting to think this Mad Bomber was made by a Japanese

guy with an overpowered ability. I'm guessing he built it, and the Crimson Magic Clan named it. Frankly, I've been starting to wonder if most of the problems in this world are actually *your* fault."

"What a thing to say, you dumb NEET. They're not my fault; it's because those Japanese people don't have any common sense. I just give them some power and send them on their way. But they have to go and give monsters weird names and mess with nature and spread bizarre linguistic and cultural trends. I wish you Japanese people would act a little more responsibly."

I dunno; I thought the blame lay with the person who decided which people were sent to this world.

"Stop having incomprehensible arguments, you two, and let's go inside. The place is thoroughly booby-trapped, so be careful."

"Just leave it to me. This is exactly why I have that Detect Trap skill."

"Gosh, Kazuma, you never do anything really important, but you're always ready for the weird little details."

"Oh, shut up."

Maybe Aqua was trying to give me a compliment in her own twisted way, but I ignored her and got ready to enter the facility...until Megumin spoke up. "Here is the first trap. The door will spring open suddenly, but it's a ploy to get you to let down your guard. It acts very polite but then snaps shut on you after a beat."

It looked like a regular automated sliding glass door to me.

Having warned us, Megumin now took her staff and tapped it against the door.

"Excuse me, Kazuma, but I think you could leave the traps in this facility to me," Aqua said.

"Hey, that's no fair. I want Megumin to see *me* brilliantly dodging pitfalls and traps."

"I'm telling you both not to let down your guard! This next part is especially dangerous!"

Hey, it seemed that whatever earthlings considered “automated conveniences,” people from this world saw as “dangerous traps.” We started into the building, a very serious-looking Megumin in the lead...

“Clean room ahead. All personnel must be equipped with dustproof suits.”

“Kazuma, Aqua, did you hear that? It is the warning of a mysterious voice. It tells us that any who would go farther must first obtain the dustproof suit. And if you actually go into the next room, a bracing wind blows at you. These days it’s just air, but we speculate that in times past, it was poison gas, released to stop any intruders without the suit.”

“Kazuma, hey, Kazuma, Megumin just seems really cute somehow. I wish there was a TV here right now. I’d love to see her reaction!”

Megumin had her hands over the air grate in the clean room antechamber, maybe in hopes of protecting us. When we entered the clean room, we saw conveyor belts and some really big machinery...

“That is one of the most diabolical traps and has claimed many victims. It’s a terrifying device that sucks in and consumes any who ride atop it. It has finally been subdued, but you must still remain vigilant, you understand?”

“Looks like some kind of assembly device...but you broke it.”

“It says ‘Game Girl Production Line’ here on the side.”

Megumin swallowed heavily at this exchange between Aqua and me. “So you are saying that this thing produces other things with the things that it consumes... Could it be us Crimson Magic Clansfolk? Kazuma, we may have discovered a terrifying truth...”

“I think this thing just made toys.”

“Yeah, the ones that used to be in that storehouse.”

Megumin looked strangely disappointed by that. “You need not spare my feelings. We are an artificial race, created by the hand of man in defiance of the laws of the gods... I’m sure this is the very device that gave birth to my forebears...”

“In the name of Aqua, I give your silly village permission to exist, okay? I

mean, the Crimson Magic Clan is just so funny.”

“Please do not call us a ‘silly village’!”

That’s when I happened to notice a machine tucked away in a corner of the room. I went over for a closer look...

“Hey, Aqua, it’s a *gachapon* machine! They have a *gachapon* machine here!”

“Wow, you’re right. It’s empty, but that’s what it is.”

A *gachapon* machine was sitting right there.

“Do you know something about that box?” Megumin asked, perplexed.

“This is called a *gachapon* machine. You put in a coin, and a capsule comes out. Sometimes you get something really good. I don’t know what this is doing here, but it sure takes me back.”

“I do not fully understand, but it sounds like it is a source of amusement for children. In that case, I suppose it is not connected to the secret origins of the Crimson Magic Clan.”

While I was busy waxing nostalgic, Aqua had been screwing with the machine, and she seemed to have found something. “It says, ‘Limited-Edition Crimson Magic Clan Improvement Coupon inside.’”

“Wow, so it does. ‘Gold: Playscation (test model). Silver: Game Girl Color. Bronze: Crimson Magic Clan Improvement Coupon.’ Hey, what the heck are you doing?”

Megumin was silently scratching away the words. “You didn’t see anything. Understand?”

“I don’t understand at all. Unless you’re going to buy me some wine the next time you’re out.”

“Don’t destroy the history of your own village...”

We continued our exploration of the facility, but we never did find any clues to the Mad Bomber thing.

“So let’s summarize what we’ve learned: Megumin’s ancestors came from a *gachapon* machine.”

"Stop that! That phrasing will invite misunderstanding. At the very least, you should properly say that an improvement coupon came out of that machine." Megumin was riding piggyback on my shoulders, and I was ignoring the nonsense coming out of her mouth. In the end, the facility hadn't yielded anything of real interest. Megumin did her "usual thing" on the way back, and we arrived at her house in silence.

"Hello, we've returned," Megumin said. "Komekko, let's have something to eat. Has Mom come back yet?"

"Welcome back, Big Sis! Mom said she's gonna be down in the dungeon, so she won't come home today! But Golden-Haired Sis is back!" That had to mean Darkness. I wondered if they had successfully cleared Yunyun's Chief's Trial.

"Komekko, have you heard anything about Yunyun's trial?" Megumin asked.

"Yunyun said she passed the trial! But she was crying!"

Crying...? We went inside, wondering what that meant, to find Darkness sitting in Megumin's living room, clutching her knees.

"Yo, Darkness, we're back. How'd the trials go? Komekko said it worked out for you."

But our Crusader, so full of vim and vigor that morning, now sat hugging herself in the dark room.

".....No more Crimson Magic Trials... You go tomorrow..."

She sounded impossibly tired, and her eyes brimmed with tears.

Chapter 3

Some Rest During This Brief Normal Life!



1

"I'd heard the first trial is a riddle," Darkness said dejectedly. The hot tea Megumin had prepared for her seemed to calm her down a bit; she held the cup in her hands and sighed.

"I've heard the same thing. But what could possibly have happened to reduce you, of all people, to such a sorry state? The village's trials are indeed challenging, yet even so, they should be manageable for a team of just two Crimson Magic Clan members. What in the world happened...? If it is something improper, I will be happy to get angry with them on your behalf," Megumin said sweetly, patting Darkness's head like she was comforting a crying child.

"I guess you destroyed so many of their magical riddle-dispensing items, Megumin, that they ran out of them... They said you were sick of riddles, and you wanted to try some other trial—"

"So this is *your* fault!" I interjected, but Megumin refused to look at me.

"So what did they make you do instead, Darkness?"

"They said, '*What the Crimson Magic Clan needs is style! Show us your pose*

and introduction!' Then Yunyun and I had to strike cool poses and introduce ourselves over and over until they were satisfied..."

G-gee, I felt bad for them...

With Yuiyui down in the dungeon, that night passed without incident. And then...

"Let me handle today, pretty please?"

That unnerving request was the first thing out of Aqua's mouth when Yunyun showed up that day.

"I'm not really comfortable letting you handle anything, but it looks like Darkness is just about useless," I said.

"Urgh... That's not the kind of humiliation I like... That's not the kind I want..." Darkness was still mumbling unhappily to herself, and Yunyun was looking desperately for someone to partner with her.

"If you're looking for Megumin, she was arrested last night for causing all those explosions."

"What's wrong with her?! And, Kazuma, how can you be so calm about it?!"

That's right: There had been yet another explosion out in the forest.

"So she sets off an explosion and gets dragged away by the police—what else is new? More importantly, don't you have your second trial today?"

"Y-yes, I do... I don't think it should be anything like yesterday's..." Yunyun looked at the ground in embarrassment.

"May I ask what pose you ultimately had to do and what you had to say to satisfy them?"

"You absolutely may not," Yunyun said flatly, with none of her usual hesitation. "V-very well, Aqua, let's go!"

"Excellent, just wait till you see what I can do. I didn't sleep much because I spent all night practicing my cool poses and introductions, but that only means I'm going to kill this thing."

"Um, I think the second trial will be something completely different..."

Yunyun, still looking thoroughly uncomfortable about this, headed off with Aqua to see what the trials had in store for them.

“All right, how about we go get Megumin?”

“Say, Kazuma, instead of bailing Megumin out of jail every day, maybe we could think of a way for her not to wind up there in the first place?”

2

As we walked through Crimson Magic Village, I saw a guy I thought I recognized.

“Hey, Kazuma, it’s your rival,” Darkness said. Whatever that was supposed to mean.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t have any rivals; I’m undefeated and invincible. But he does look familiar somehow...”

“H-hey, you haven’t forgotten him, have you? He’s—you know—I’m sure it was...uhhh...”

“Mitsurugi! To be forgotten even by the daughter of that most stalwart of noble houses, the Dustinesses, is simply too much!”

That’s right: It was the Sword Master with the enchanted blade, Mitsurugi himself.

“Hey, it’s been a while. How ya doing? Well, we’re in a hurry...”

Mitsurugi grabbed my hand before I could make my escape. “Hold it right there! Why are you trying to ditch me?”

“Simple: You and I don’t really get along, do we? You needle me about every little thing, and it’s really annoying.”

“E-erm, well, that’s true, but... Wait, what are you even doing here? The monsters around the village are too powerful for you, aren’t they?”

“A friend of mine is taking the trials to become the next chief. And I’m here to help. Hey, why are *you* here?” He didn’t even seem to have his little girlfriends

with him.

"Um, you might think I'm crazy for saying this, but a divine item ran out on me... According to the note, at least, it was going on a journey... Ha-ha... You can feel free to laugh at me now..."

I knew that divine item and exactly which journey he was on. But Darkness, who had never met Aegis personally, looked at Mitsurugi mournfully. "You seem pretty tired," she said. "There's a hot spring here. You should take a dip and help yourself feel better. Um, don't overthink things, okay?"

"Ha-ha... Of course, I don't expect you to believe me... To tell the truth, the goddess Lady Eris came to me in a dream. She entrusted me with this precious divine item, asking me to use it to save the world. But then one day, the item left me a note: 'As long as you rely on your enchanted sword for your strength, you won't be worthy of me. There's something I have to do as a divine item. While I'm doing it, go on a journey and search for me. And let it make you stronger! I'll always be waiting for you. Now, hero, go forth!' ...That was all."

I knew what the divine item "had to do." He had to go to Crimson Magic Village to get a load of all the chicks.

"Then I heard there was a brilliant fortune-teller in Crimson Magic Village, so I came here to ask her to help me locate the divine item. But she seemed to think I was making some ridiculous joke. She only teased me, saying, '*It's right over there in that bar, harassing the waitress.*'"

I could vouch for that fortune.

"But don't worry about me. This is a trial set for me by the divine item granted to me by the goddess. I never expected it to be easy." I was just trying to decide whether to tell Mitsurugi about Aegis when his face got very serious. "There's something more important that I have to say. Since you're here, let me give you a warning. It seems like the generals of the Demon King are targeting Axel. More like the entire army, in fact. I don't know if they want to destroy the town, or you personally, or if they're after Lady Aqua... But what I do know is that you might want to lay low for a while, maybe here or at the capital." Then Mitsurugi turned to leave. "I'm the one who's going to defeat you. I can't have the Demon King getting to you first. I'll win next time. And then Lady Aqua will

be..."

There was resolution on his face as he proudly walked away.

"...Hey, Darkness, if he's really after me, that's pretty, you know, main character-like, isn't it?"

"And yet, I can't shake the sense that the guy who just walked away is the more heroic of you two."

We waited until Mitsurugi was out of sight.

"Okay, next stop, Megumin."

But Darkness replied abruptly: "...Hey, um, Kazuma. It's fine, going to get her and everything, but maybe we could take a little walk first? Remember that nice walk we took in Arcanletia?"

"I've got nothing against a walk. But there's no telling what Megumin might do to us if she finds out we left her rotting in jail while we went off on a pleasant constitutional." Besides, surely we could get Megumin first, and then the three of us could go on a walk...

"N-no, look, I was just thinking, maybe once in a while we could have a sort of...you know, date...like thing..." Her voice became quieter and quieter as she got to the end of her sentence.

A date. A date, huh...?

"Now that I think about it, I'm not sure I've ever been on a proper date."

"Y-yeah, right?! I mean, I think just walking through town is a date, but I've always had this soft spot for the sort of dates you see in romance novels. You know, getting all dressed up, showing up early...!" Darkness was growing very excited all of a sudden, starting to blush, even though she was the one who had suggested this.

"You really do act like a proper maiden sometimes. If you'd been like this from the moment I met you, maybe I'd be head over heels for you by now."

"What?! Y-you really think so? I always hid this part of myself... I thought maybe it wasn't seemly for the daughter of a noble household to have these girlish fantasies. B-but... I see..."

I wasn't talking about her girlish fantasies. I was talking about hiding her bizarre sexual proclivities and acting like a normal person...but whatever.

"H-hey, Kazuma, have you noticed the great weather today?"

"Yeah, I guess the Crimson Magic Clan uses magic so it's sunny and clear all the time around here." Perfect weather for a walk through town. The Crimson Magic Clan really had some impressive spells, even if they did tend to use them in silly ways.

"Look, Kazuma, there's a cat sleeping over there on that fence! This village is so idyllic; I love it!"

"Yeah, apparently, that cat on the fence over there is a Crimson Magic Clan familiar. It watches the village environs constantly," I said, offering the very pleased Darkness a bit of trivia I'd learned.

"And look, there's an old guy just relaxing and fishing, right in a place like that..."

"Uh-huh. They use live bait to attract monsters to the river there. That fishing rod is made of steel wire, and Crimson Magic Clansfolk run a current through it with lightning magic to raise their level."

Darkness, who had been so thrilled a moment ago, was looking increasingly despondent.



“...Kazuma, I’m starting to get the feeling this village isn’t really ideal for a date...”

“What can I say? The Crimson Magic Clan members are fighters. What, you really wanted to go on a date that badly?”

Darkness, walking alongside me, suddenly turned to face me. “Of course I did! Honestly! You lead me on like this and then can’t be bothered to keep it up!”

“Hey, I didn’t lead anyone on! I was helping you, and you got this idea that you were in love!” And as it turned out, my knee-jerk response to this attack was right on the money. Judging by Darkness’s reaction, I shouldn’t have said it.

“I ‘got this idea’?! You think it’s just *my* idea?! When I was promised in marriage to Alderp, who came and crashed my wedding?! You even threw all your money down on the ground and declared, right there in public, that you’d bought me! And I’m the one who’s ‘got this idea’?!”

“H-hey, I can’t help it! It’s not my fault if everything I do is supercool and totally awesome! Fine, I apologize for being cool and awesome all the time! I know, any normal person would fall head over heels in love with me!” I snapped back.

“Awesome, my ass! Get over yourself! Just about the only people who would fall in love with a worthless lump of a man like you are total weirdos like Megumin and me!”

“So do you love me or do you hate me?! Make up your mind! If you love me so much, then say something nice about me! I have a legitimate fangirl waiting for me back in Axel, don’t forget!”

Darkness looked awfully dubious. “Do you really believe that? I’m sure she’s just after your money or a few minutes of fame. Maybe I’m not one to talk, but I don’t think you have any actual fans.”

“S-screw you! I may not work that much, but I’m a great catch!”

“Your refusal to work is your number one flaw!”

As Darkness and I were arguing:

“If Kazuma is no longer working, I shall go labor in the fields or do some such

myself to make money.”

“Megumin, you’re too soft on this guy! That’s why he just gets worse and worse!”

“You always said a shiftless loser was your type!”

.....

Darkness and I turned around, and there was Megumin. “You two seem to be having quite a pleasant time, despite knowing that your friend is stuck in jail. Might I join you?”

Darkness and I both bowed our heads...

“I kept saying we should go get you, Megumin. But Darkness here—”

“Y-you said yourself you’d never been on an actual date! Listen, Megumin, it’s not what it looks like. But we’re finally back in Crimson Magic Village, and I wanted to do some sightseeing...!”

Megumin was watching us skeptically as we piled on the painful excuses. “So you have never been on an actual date, have you? Then let us go on a date. All three of us. I will introduce you to our very best watering holes.”

“That doesn’t really feel like a date to... You know what? Never mind.” Darkness and I hadn’t actually been doing anything wrong, but somehow we found we didn’t have a leg to stand on.

“Let us begin with a meal, then. There’s a restaurant I used to work at.”

““Sure...””

We ended up trailing around the village after Megumin, who for some reason was suddenly in a very good mood.

“Welcome, welcome! If it isn’t Megumin. Long time no see. Learn anything besides Explosion yet?”

“It has been a long time, and no, I have no interest in learning anything else. I once briefly contemplated learning advanced magic, but Kazuma here got ahold of my card and made his own decisions. I believe he said Explosion was the only spell that suited me, and he urged me to continue walking the explosive path...”

"I didn't say that. I didn't go that far," I piped up before Megumin could go any further with her stories.

"That's great!" the other Crimson Magic Clan member said. "We were asking ourselves, what would we do if Megumin learned some other spell?!"

"Oh-ho? So my Explosion has become a subject of debate in the village! I suppose it only makes sense. To chase after any other spell would be an adulterous misuse of my skill points!"

"Yeah, we were wondering what we should do about your nickname. Greatest Genius of the Crimson Magic Clan belongs to Thunder Bearer Yunyun now. So we were thinking something along the lines of Greatest Parlor-Trick Practitioner of the Crimson Magic Clan..."

Without another word, Megumin attacked him.

"Hey, Megumin, calm down! He's an Arch-wizard; he's got no endurance! Don't try to strangle him!"

"I am an Arch-wizard as well, and a girl to boot! I will show him what a parlor-trick practitioner can do!"

Various bystanders started getting in on the action.

"Ten thousand eris on the Parlor-Trick Practitioner!"

"Thirty thousand on the Loser Wizard!"

"Fifty thousand on the Explosion Wizard!"

"Hey, I do not mind you betting on me, but I shall have you stop with those nicknames! Although I shall allow 'Explosion Wizard' because it is cool! Very well, you may come at me all at once!!"

"Whatever, just take it outside!"

Having been chased out of the restaurant, we decided to eat at Megumin's house.

"Are you both okay? My goodness, to get into a fight with Crimson Magic Clan members. There's ridiculous, and then there's *ridiculous*, you understand?"

"You're the one who started that fight. But hey, this isn't so bad every once in

a while. It's sort of adventurer-y."

After Megumin decided to go after everyone betting on the fight, Darkness and I agreed that the odds weren't very fair and jumped in on Megumin's side.

"How could a knight stand by while her friend was being called Loser Wizard and Parlor-Trick Practitioner? It would be dishonorable. It was quite a good fight anyway! I really enjoyed myself!"

"The guy you were fighting quit halfway through and begged you to let him go, even if it meant he lost. Don't act like we're masochist freaks like you."

We were all thoroughly bruised, but Megumin giggled. "The word *loser* can be considered a term of encouragement in the Crimson Magic Clan. For the person so called can be galvanized by it."

"I guess I should have seen that coming by now... But I have to say, sometimes the Crimson Magic Clan's sensibilities really don't make any sense to me."

We were heading back to Megumin's house, chatting along the way, when a familiar female voice called out to us. "Well, if it isn't Megumin. It's been a while."

"Arue, is that you? How unusual to see your normally shut-in self out and about. Are you still living the NEET life under the guise of trying to become an author?"

The voice belonged to a young woman with an eye patch even more prominent than before.

"I—I told you, the word isn't *NEET*; it's *novelist*! I put out a Crimson Magic newspaper, and my book was even published recently! I'm making money, which means I'm not a NEET!"

"F-fine, I understand, just please stop pulling on my eye patch! I got this from you, and also, it hurts!"

It was Arue, a troublesome young lady who was currently pulling on Megumin's eye patch in frustration. I still remembered one of her little stories making my life very difficult a while ago.

...Yeah, now it was all coming back to me!

"Hey, Megumin, is this girl the weirdo writer whose stories screwed everything up for us? I haven't forgotten about that."

"And you're the outsider who tore up one of my novels! I haven't forgotten about *that*!" Arue glared at me, her eyes glowing red.

"The line between a novelist and a NEET is paper-thin, right?"

"Watch it. I'm a member of the Crimson Magic Clan, and if you make me angry, I'll drop some advanced magic on your head!"

"You two hardly know each other. How have you already managed to get in a fight?! Both of you, calm down!" Megumin said, tearing Arue off me when she started to attack me.

"So are you one of Megumin's classmates? My name is Darkness. Megumin and I are in a party together. I look forward to spending a few days in your village." Darkness smiled and held out her hand.

"I'm the greatest novelist in the Crimson Magic Clan. Arue's the name. At least you look halfway sane, lady. That's reassuring. Nice to meet you." She gave a pleasant smile: the exact opposite of the reaction she'd had to me.

"Hey, how come you treat her so differently than you treat me? And is that as dramatic as your introduction gets? Before you call yourself the Crimson Magic Clan's foremost author, tell me how many authors this village has."

"Of course I would treat a friend of Megumin's with a baseline level of respect, wouldn't I? If she doesn't actively seek to harm me, like *you* do, this is how I act. And the number of authors around here is a secret." The alleged novelist, Arue, clammed up.

"You know, come to think of it, I haven't heard a single really dramatic self-introduction from anyone since we came to this village."

"Yes, the full self-introduction is usually reserved for the first time we meet someone. And incidentally, I'm not going to do it for you. I might just get carried away." She was a sharp one, this Arue. "I'd heard you found a man, Megumin. Don't tell me—is it this guy? It's not too late to go the Yunyun route, you know."

"Stuff it, you eye patch-wearing witch. Those are fighting words," I told her. "You said you put out a book? If I ever see it in a bookstore, I'm gonna put another book right in front of it."

Arue's eyebrow twitched. "Megumin, this man is no good! He's absolutely worthless! I'm going to burn him up right here like the trash he is!"

"Oh, you wanna go? My Steal is the real deal. You're gonna lose your eye patch or maybe your underwear!"

"If you are both so eager to fight, then I shall be your opponent! Please do not imagine that two NEETs can stand against a powerful Arch-wizard!"

""I-I'm not a NEET!""

3

That night.

"Waaahhh! Waaaaahhhh! Ahhhh!"

We were relaxing at home when Aqua came back crying. She pounded the floor with both hands.

"What's up?" I said. "Your entire life is one giant disgrace; surely a little bit of embarrassing posing can't get you this upset. What the heck happened?"

On closer inspection, I realized Aqua was covered in mud.

"S-sniff... For today's trial, we were told, '*What the Crimson Magic Clan needs is good fortune. You're going to try this challenge again and again until you both pick the right door.*' And then they made us run toward the doors...!"

G-gosh, I felt sort of sorry for her... Maybe it was like one of those game shows on Japanese television, where the wrong door led to a pool of mud or something. And Aqua was the last person you would want on your team for a contest of luck.

"But you passed the trial, right? That's good. Now you can go take a bath. While you're getting cleaned up, I'll use my Cooking skill to whip you up some first-class snacks."

“...I want something salty...”

I watched Aqua, with her common tastes, sulk off to the bath.

“Ahem... Megumin’s mother, t-tonight, er...” Darkness kept glancing in my direction for some reason, looking fidgety.

“Oh, don’t be so formal. Just call me Yuiyui. What about tonight? You’re looking awfully *eager*, Darkness.”

“Eager?! N-no, I just thought, perhaps tonight you might not let Kazuma and Megumin sleep together...” Maybe in the afterglow of our date, she had decided to offer just a modicum of resistance.

“Why would I do that? Looking for the chance to have a little tryst, Darkness?”

“Tryst?! No, perish the thought! It’s just, after everything that happened this afternoon, I feel awfully left out, thinking of the two of them together...” She glanced at me again as if hoping I would back her up.

But Megumin cocked her head and said, “Did something happen?”

“Nothing happened; Darkness just got herself all excited.”

“What?! Kazuma, after we went on a date and everything, this is really too much...!”

Darkness was obviously out to put an end to Megumin and me, but I saw Yuiyui up behind her, intoning a magic spell...

“Whoo-hoo! It’s a fourteen-year-old girl’s bed!”

“Unbelievable! Why would you say such a thing?!”

I’d made the snacks for Aqua as promised, ignoring the snoozing Darkness while I did so, and then we’d retired promptly to our room.

“Because it is a fourteen-year-old girl’s bed, right? Not fifteen, fourteen. It’s an important point, so I wanted to make sure to spell it out.”

“I don’t know what difference you think there is; every girl’s bed is the same...”

The moment we got into the room, I dove onto Megumin’s bed and started

rolling around. “Hey, it’s all good. If we got into that argument now, we’d still be debating when the sun came up. We can worry about it another time.”

“I keep wondering, Kazuma, but you really aren’t a lolicon, are you? You don’t care for me simply because I’m small, do you?” Megumin asked, eyeing me where I lay on her bed.

“What a thing to say! I like ‘em big; don’t you worry. A chest about Darkness’s size would be ideal.”

“I didn’t want to hear any concrete examples of your ideal size, but at least you aren’t a lolicon... Considering how pleased you were to be the object of Iris’s and Komekko’s affections, I was getting a bit worried...”

Bah, that was because I love little-sister characters, but I’m not attracted to little girls.

“Ah, another war waiting to happen. Let’s just worry about that another time.”

“I-if you say so... Anyway, very well. We have nothing else to do now, so how about we just go to sleep?” Megumin said, and then she burrowed under the covers on the very edge of the large bed, making sure to keep her distance from me.

.....

“Hey, why’re you sleeping all the way over there? We’ve practically slept in each other’s arms; why act like strangers now?”

“Yes, we have, and if I cuddle up to you now, it will only mean you having to hold yourself back. I am making your life easier by saving you from having to exercise all that restraint.”

Oh, boo...

“I have to restrain myself the moment we’re sleeping in the same room. It’s too late now.”

“That really is all a man thinks about, isn’t it?! Anyway, we know for a fact that something will interrupt us, so I’m not going to do anything!”

Ah, the infamous Curse of Interruption that I labored under. Aqua swore

there was no such curse on me, but I had her cast Sacred Dispel on me a few times just to be sure. If nothing actually changed, that would mean... "Then there's a real possibility that the curse that prevents me from crossing that final frontier is a powerful magic put upon me by the Demon King or someone else who can cast a curse so powerful, even Aqua can't break it."

"How much time do you think the Demon King has on his hands? I almost feel bad for him, with you slandering him this way."

Megumin could say whatever she wanted, but if the king really had cursed me, then it was one more reason not to give up on destroying him.

Just as I was having that thought, I felt something cool and soft wrap around my right hand. Megumin seemed to be holding my hand under the covers.

"I suppose it is safe to at least hold hands? This won't get you all excited, will it?" She smiled shyly. I guess it was nice of her, given how I had complained about her sleeping on the other side of the bed, but...

"Of course it will; what the hell are you talking about?"

"What, even this?! I mean, yes, my heart is racing as well, but isn't it somehow comforting?!"

Nothing... She understood nothing!

"I'll go ahead and sleep holding your hand tonight because you get lonely so easily, Megumin, but you'd better be really careful, okay? You do something like this with any guy but me, I guarantee he'll get the wrong idea and attack you."

"I wouldn't be in this situation with any guy but you! Don't act like you're somehow doing me a favor!" In spite of her angry retort, Megumin squeezed my hand.

"Ow-ow-ow, that hurts! Be careful—your level is higher than mine! You're gonna break my poor hand!"

"Level or no level, I know my grip isn't that strong! I think it's about time we raised your level a little, Kazuma. I would be happy to go on a monster hunt with you."

Raise my level, huh? "Easy for you to say. Do you understand how painful it is to see your level go up but your stats stay the same? Lately, my Luck has been the only thing that's increased at all. It's nice to get skill points and everything, but what with my NEET lifestyle, there aren't that many skills I want. Not a lot of motivation for me to raise my level..."

"So you've almost reached the stat cap... Um, well, there's an expensive potion that can raise your stats! You could defeat a few monsters, earn some money, and then use that to get stronger..."

"Wouldn't it be better to save that sort of thing for someone who's got some real natural talent, instead of wasting it on me? There's only so many of these expensive potions out there, right?"

That set Megumin back on her heels for a second. "W-well, you could at least get better gear..."

"Not really. There's only so much gear I can use; I'm not the strongest guy around." Megumin's hand went from holding mine to sort of stroking it, as if she was comforting me. "Hey, you're feeling pity for me right now, aren't you?"

"N-not at all. If there's anything I can do, just say the word, all right? Even if someone is bullying you, okay? If there's ever an adventurer who says you're weak, I'll start a fight with them and beat them up, and then I'll finish by saying *they're* the weak one..."

"Hey, don't do that! Are you the reason adventurers I don't even know keep calling me Kazu-munchkin and teasing me about being protected by a girl?"

Megumin was acting just as nuts as ever, but I wished she would think of my feelings—I was the one who had to deal with the aftermath.

For some reason, this got a smile out of Megumin. "And yet, when I was treated like a loser this afternoon, you and Darkness got angry on my behalf. Should I alone be excluded from getting upset when someone makes fun of you?"

She almost sounded like she was teasing me herself. But she also sounded like she was kind of enjoying it. True, that stuff had happened just this afternoon, and there wasn't much I could say to that...

"When the two of you jumped into my fight, it made me happy—do you know that? Because I would certainly have been defeated by sheer numbers. And if I had lost, I would have had to go around each night to the houses of those who'd teased me to personally thank them..."

Geez, good thing we'd decided to get involved.

"So who do you think should be Yunyun's partner tomorrow? The first two trials may have been rather playful in nature, but I assure you the last one will be in earnest. What the Crimson Magic Clan, as augmented humans, needs more than anything is the ability to survive any kind of combat. The last trial is to spend one entire night in Crimson Magic Forest, wherein dwell many dangerous monsters."

"...Suddenly they're out for blood, huh? Darkness can't fight her way out of a wet paper bag, so Yunyun would be in trouble when her magic ran out. And Aqua would probably have them swarmed with undead the entire night..."

The first two trials had seemed like bad jokes, but all of a sudden, they were throwing down the gauntlet for real.

"I want to say up front that with the Ninnin in the vicinity, you with your black hair and dark eyes absolutely must not participate, Kazuma."

"...Guess we'd better hit the village and find a Crimson Magic Clanner who can be Yunyun's partner tomorrow, then..."

"Don't treat it like some kind of punishment game where the player must become her friend—Yunyun will cry, you know?"

With no other options to speak of, though, it looked like the only choice was for me to go. If I used my Sense Foe skill to keep track of any enemies and Ambush to avoid them, I thought I could probably make it through the night.

Megumin could tell from my expression that I was thinking something. "I said, no. You are dealing with the Mad Bomber here. If you stumble across each other and you get blown to smithereens, there won't even be a corpse left, and then we won't be able to resurrect you."

"Yeah, sure, but there's no one else to work with Yunyun. Even you kept your mouth shut about the Mad Bomber so they wouldn't stop the trials and prevent

her from becoming chief, right?” I mean, Megumin was getting herself thrown in prison every single day for the sake of her friend.

“...No, I did not. As I believe I told you, I wanted to keep the Ninnin for myself so that I could defeat it and take the position of chief right out from under Yunyun’s nose.”

“Ah, there it is, the classic *tsundere* ploy!”

But as I was teasing Megumin about not being more honest, she looked up at me. “Yes, I admit Yunyun is a treasured friend of mine. When I consider the best interests of our village, I know it’s better that she become chief than I, with my disinclination to leave Axel, or any of the other Crimson Magic Clan members, none of whom have any motivation. However...” Her scarlet eyes fixed me in place. “I must admit, seeing you offer to risk your life for another girl, it does make me jealous.”

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“Please say something! I am starting to get embarrassed!”

“I’m the one who’s embarrassed! What are you talking about?! Just stop it—my face is getting all hot!”

We abruptly unclasped our hands and turned away from each other.

“The point is, don’t you dare take part in that trial tomorrow, all right, Kazuma?!”

“Yeah, fine, I get it. If it’s enough to make you beg like that, I won’t. I’ll think of some other way.”

“Beg?! Fine, I suppose in some sense, I am begging! Bah! Tomorrow will be here soon, so let’s just get some sleep!” And then Megumin shoved her face in the pillow to hide her burning cheeks.

And I said...

“Hey, I thought we were going to sleep holding hands tonight. I wanna sleep a

whole night holding hands with a fourteen-year-old girl.”

“You sure know how to spoil a moment!”

4

The next morning. Megumin, who had felt such affection for her fellow Crimson Magic Clan members the evening before...

“Curse you, you foolish Crimson Magic Clansfolk! By my power, I will rain destruction upon this village!”

...was making life hell for the members of the community watch who had accosted her.

“We told you when we let you out yesterday, Megumin: If you caused another Explosion-based ruckus, we weren’t going to let you out again until the Chief’s Trials were over! And now I’m going to hold you to that! Grrr, I’m high-level, too; you can’t just keep strangling me...”

“She started chanting! Gag her! Somebody shut Megumin’s mouth!”

“Careful, she’s strong! Treat her like a vicious wild animal!”

“Ahhh, Bukkororii! Somebody get Megumin’s hands off him; he’s frothing at the mouth!”

When Megumin, with all her levels, set her mind on resisting, the whole community watching together seemed hard-pressed to bring her down. I was starting to think maybe these wizards should stick to barehanded fighting (which might work for Darkness, too).

“Yunyun! While I am imprisoned, you may attempt the final trial or whatever you want! However, do not think this means you have won! If you aren’t the next chief by the time I am released from jail, I’ll steal the title out from under your nose!”

“Megumin, *please* let go of Bukkororii! Otherwise we’re going to need a resurrection in here!”

I watched them drag Megumin off, then turned to Yunyun, who was taking in

the scene with a vacant stare. “Well, that’s your to-do list for today—the final trial.”

“Absolutely not,” Aqua said flatly.

“M-me, I... I... Urrrgh...” That was Darkness.

“Is that all the three of you have to say?! Megumin just got taken to prison again, right in front of your eyes!” Yunyun seemed to have some sort of objection, but we were used to this by now. More to the point, Aqua refused point-blank, and Darkness, though she couldn’t get the words out, wanted no part of it. Not that I really blamed either of them. The next trial was going to be exceptionally difficult, even by the infamous standards of the Crimson Magic Clan.

“I was Yunyun’s partner for the first trial. And Aqua took the second one. It only makes sense that our leader, Kazuma, would go for the third one.”

Aqua was eager to embrace Darkness’s suggestion. “How uncommonly sensible of you, Darkness. You’re right; Kazuma hasn’t been the least bit helpful yet this trip, so we should let him handle this. Otherwise, he might start to feel left out.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, ladies, but I can’t participate. The Moguninnin might get me.”

“Will somebody please tell me what this Moguninnin thing is?!” Yunyun exclaimed. Gee, and here I was hoping a Crimson Magic Clan member could explain it to *me*. I assumed they were the ones who had given it that name.

“Believe me, I’d love to tackle the trial with you. But Megumin said I couldn’t, and I’d hate to worry her. Gosh, and I was so sure we’d pass the test with me as your partner...”

“Ahhh! You’re the only one left, Kazuma! Who else am I supposed to ask?”

Yunyun was on the verge of tears, but I nodded confidently and said, “I can think of one person who’s almost guaranteed to get you through that trial.”

“Say hello to your friendly neighborhood divine item Aigis!”

<Hey, kids, like the man said, I’m Aigis, at your service. My hobby is rankin’

ladies, and my special skill is freaking people out. Howdy-doo, nice to meetcha, pleasure and a half!>

“Um, uhhh, h-hello...?”

I was introducing Yunyun to the singing, dancing divine item Aigis.

“D-divine item? Hey, Kazuma, what’s this all about? Is this suit of armor really a divine item?” Darkness asked, observing the chatterbox armor with confusion.

<Whazzat? I remember this blond bombshell. That’s right—you’re the total babe who showed up in the beauty contest! Yeah, hey, miss, name’s Aigis. That’s a fine suit of armor you have there. Wanna polish each other?>

“A suit of armor that talks like *that*?! Kazuma, is this thing really a divine item?!”

“Don’t ask me—ask Aqua. And anyway, he says he’s a divine item.”

As I tried to foist the question off on her, Aqua said uneasily, “Hold on, Kazuma. I don’t know anything about this. Stop trying to blame everything on me, okay?”

<Hmm? Now I’ve definitely seen *you* somewhere before. You’re hot, too, but you don’t even flinch at me. Say, lady, are you human? Or maybe a guy? You don’t have a little something-something down there, do ya?>

Why did both of them have to act so stupid? I was dying to remind them they’d met Aigis before.

While Aqua, who apparently didn’t set off the armor’s Lady Sense, was busy kicking Aigis in the business, Yunyun cocked her head. “You think this Mr. Aigis and I can clear the final trial together?”

“Skills and magic don’t work on this guy, plus his entire body is made of orichalcum. The last trial is to spend a night in the forest, right? This guy’s the only one around more stubborn and hardier than Darkness, so I think you’ll do great.”

Aigis was completely autonomous. They wouldn’t need a guard even in the middle of the night, and even if someone or something did get the drop on him, it would be fine.

<You want me to do what? Sorry, I'm booked today. I'm gonna go pretend to be a statue at the mixed-bathing place. I'll protect those poor, defenseless naked women, if only from the shadows.>

"Know this before going in, pal: That bathhouse definitely ain't mixed."

<Shit!>

Darkness tugged on my sleeve. "Kazuma, is this thing really going to help us? I admit it looks sturdy, but are you sure about leaving it alone with Yunyun?"

<Hey, I heard that. Do you doubt my power? Try it for yourself, then. You gotta try an item to know how it works, right? Put me on and you'll never be able to wear another suit of armor again.>

I guess Aegis had his pride as armor, and he sounded awfully confident.

"Hrm... All right, if you're so sure, then I'll give it a shot. I like to think I know a thing or two about armor myself."

<I knew you seemed like the type! But don't come crying to me later, okay? I just want you to know, I change my shape to fit anyone like a big metal glove, so I can provide the very best protection at all times.>

Things were getting out of control fast, and it sounded like we had a showdown on our hands.

"Like made-to-order stuff! That sounds perfect! Just make sure *you* don't disappoint *me*, all right?"

<Okay, first things first, off with the old. I know it's a little embarrassing, but that includes your underwear. It's the only way to give you the best performance, don't you know.>

.....

"Um, uh, it is? Er... W-well, I guess you are just a suit of armor...an inanimate object. It would be weird to feel weird... I'll just go over there..."

"When you had Lady Eris inside you, you didn't change your shape," I said.

<Hush your mouth! This chick looks like an easy mark! I just need one more push!>

"Ooh, I'll break you into a million pieces!" Darkness cried and joined Aqua in kicking Aigis.

"U-um! I have a favor to ask you, Mr. Aigis!"

<Ooh, a well-endowed young lady. Ask away!>

Yunyun, looking very serious, stood in front of Aigis, blushing at his nonchalant bout of sexual harassment. "W-would you please take the trial with me?!"

<Are you, like, asking me out on a date, pretty much? Sorry, as you can see, I'm busy. Maybe you could get these voluptuous vixens to stop?>

"Yunyun, anyone but him! We'll think of something—anything! Like, it's not exactly following the rules, but maybe Aqua and Kazuma and I could trade off helping you!"



That set Aqua to whispering to me. “You know, Kazuma, you could stand to have a little more self-respect. Do you hear what that formerly pure, sweet young lady just said?”

“Hey, don’t try to pin this on me. She’s started to discover how to throw her weight around. She’s finally learning to be a real noble.”

“Pipe down over there! We already are changing partners from trial to trial, so is there some rule that says we can’t do it in the middle of one? If not...”

As Darkness tried to persuade Yunyun, Aqua started whispering again...

“Look, Kazuma, Darkness is starting to sound as devious as you.”

“Once again: not my fault. I haven’t fallen so far.”

Yunyun looked at Aqua and me and the tearful Darkness. “No, I want to take the trials and do it right. This time, I’ll beat Megumin...!”

The Final Trial

She Who Will Be Chief of the Crimson Magic Clan



The last of the trials to become chief of the Crimson Magic Clan involved spending an entire night in our local forest, which was crawling with dangerous monsters.

<Listen, I've got a brilliant idea! You register these woods as one of your teleport locations, miss, and then we disappear to another town to spend the night. In the morning, we teleport back. We just have to be all, 'Ooh, the woods were so scary at night!' and we'll have it in the bag!>

"Kazuma suggested the same thing when he heard what the trial was. But I'm not going to cheat; I want to become chief through my own strength..."

<Y'know, I'm kind of shocked to find out that guy and I had the same idea...>

Become the chief of the Crimson Magic Clan.

Ever since I was a little girl with no particular dreams to speak of, that had been my one goal. When they would measure our MP or check our intelligence at school, they would always say, "*That's the chief's daughter for you*" or say nice things about how I was destined to be chief myself one day. Having no real friends as I did, it made me very happy. I thought it was the most natural thing in the world to aspire to the chiefship.

<Hey, girl. I wonder why pretty girls are always so soft. I wonder why pretty

girls always smell so good. I'm researching those questions, you know. Thinkin' about publishing my findings. I figure it would make this world a better place.>

"Mr. Aegis, not to say you can't do as you please, but why would you suddenly bring that up?" Aegis and I were walking through Crimson Magic Forest, heading for its deepest reaches.

<Hmm, if you don't have the answers, that's fine. Hey, girl, people ever tell you you're kinda dense? Like, not very attuned to when people are into you?>

"I don't really think so..."

Okay, so I wasn't being entirely truthful.

<You know, suits of holy armor, like myself, feel better when someone's inside us. Plus, the people around us like it, because you take off the armor and it's like, hey! It was a pretty girl all along!>

"I'm sure that's very interesting, but I don't know what kind of people you have in mind."

I was inside Aegis at that moment, since monsters might launch a surprise attack on us at any time.

"Mr. Aegis. I'm told you're a divine item. Do you really have time to be playing around with the likes of me? Weren't the divine items created by the gods to aid in the destruction of the Demon King?"

<Hrm? But that's totally boring. If a sexy girl was being sadistically tormented by the Demon King, I'd go rescue her, y'know? But I don't think that's happening right now, and the demon chicks and monster girls on the Demon King's side are pretty cute, too. I dunno which side to join.>

Aegis had been created by the gods with a specific purpose in mind. And yet, he simply wanted to indulge himself...

"They say the Demon King's army plans to destroy humanity—did you know that? Do you realize that means all the beautiful girls might die?"

<Yeah, that's true. That wouldn't be great. Okay, maybe I could get just the girls who are my type together in one place where I could keep an eye on them. Do you think Lady Eris would get mad about that? No good? I mean, my new

master is just so uptight; we totally don't work well together.>

He seemed awfully freewheeling for a divine item created for an extremely important mission.

<More important question, girl: What would you do if you became chief? How about you make a rule that says all the Crimson Magickers' robes can only go down five millimeters past their butts?>

"I'm not going to do that. They would run me out of the village on my first day!"

What would I do if and when I became chief? First, I would capture some sentient monsters and domesticate them, make friends with them...

<Huh, I can see you really want this. You must have some kind of dream you can't possibly achieve without becoming chief. Tell your friendly armor, won't ya? It's gotta be some huge Crimson Magic secret, am I right?>

.....

"There's nothing I want to do that I can't do without being chief. In fact, there's hardly anything I want to do at all..."

<Get outta town! Why go to all this trouble, then? Why not live a nice, easy life? How about you and I go on a journey together? A beautiful-girl-collecting journey!>

"That's a great idea! Not the part about girls, though. I don't care about that, but I mean going on a journey together to collect some friends..."

No, no! I was she who would be chief of the Crimson Magic Clan. It had been my goal ever since I was little...

<I didn't think you'd agree. You Crimson Magic Clan people all seem to do whatever you want. The guy who froze the lake with magic so he could go ice fishing in the middle of summer, he surprised me. Ever thought about putting your power to more meaningful uses?>

Aigis was the absolute last person I wanted to hear that from, but his remark about us just doing whatever we wanted really struck a chord with me. I thought of a dear friend of mine, someone who long ago had been called the

greatest genius of the Crimson Magic Clan and from whom great things had been expected. But she had ignored those expectations completely, chased her own dream, and as a result, now people called her a loser. My stupid, stupid friend.

And yet, she seemed to enjoy every day; she had comrades and even a boyfriend. My extremely stupid, oh-so-dear—

<Ugh, there's a monster already! Zap it with your magic! If you run out of MP, just say the word, and I, Aigis, will protect you!>

"I've got this. I am she who will be chief of the Crimson Magic Clan. Combat is my specialty."

If Megumin was really aiming to become chief herself, then what was she doing at that moment? If someone else was trying to be chief, if someone else insisted I let them have the position...

<That's the spirit! I love gals like you! First up is the One-Punch Bear. I hate those guys. Their attacks hurt!>

"I won't let them put a scratch on you, Mr. Aigis! Let me handle the battle!"

<Wow, this girl has it together. I've never had a wizard inside me before. Are we secretly a great team? Hey, girl... I mean, Yunyun, my amazing friend. When this fight is over...>

Aigis was trying to say something to me, but I had work to do first...!

"*Infernooooo!*" I thrust out one hand and unleashed my spell on the bear that appeared in front of us!

".....It turns out I can't use my magical skills when I'm wearing you, Mr. Aigis."

<Yeah, I see that now. I'm actually shocked how useless a wizard is when wearing me.>

I tried to change the subject. "S-so what were you going to say to me a few minutes ago?! You said we're a great team, right? What were you going to say after that? I think I heard something about your amazing friend!"

<Aw, sorry, it's nothing. We gotta get rid of this bear, though!>

"No, I'm sure you were saying something! You definitely said, 'amazing friend.' I'm sure I didn't mishear that!"

<Wow, this girl is turning out to be way more nuts than I expected! Seriously, do something about that bear! I know you can't use your magic, but you're a high-level Arch-wizard, right?! My Defense is off the freakin' charts, so you handle the attacking!>

I couldn't let myself be distracted; I had to focus on defeating the enemy in front of me...!

"Right, this is the moment for my beloved dagger...! Argh, but I got this on my very first shopping trip with a friend; it's such an important memento..."

<I'm starting to wonder about you! I mean I'm really starting to wonder if you're okay!! Tell you what, when this fight is over, you get out of me for a while, okay? We can take stock of things!>

When this trial was over, I would tell my rival that this time, finally, I'd won.

And I would add something else, something I'd never been able to say before...

"My name is Yunyun! Arch-wizard and wielder of advanced magic..."

I was able to push this hard because I had you for a friend. It was thanks to you that a goal my heart wasn't really in became something so important to me... I made it this far because your dream was so much bigger than mine, because you pursued it relentlessly, no matter how much people laughed.....!

Thank you for being my rival!

"...greatest magic-user of the Crimson Magic Clan and she who will be chief of our village!!"

<It's biting me! I'm literally in its mouth! Do something before it chews me to pieces!>

Chapter 4

Closure for These Lifelong Rivals!



1

Yunyun came back as dawn broke, looking exhausted. The sounds of magic we'd heard echoing through the air all night long testified to the brutality of the trial. Yunyun would take refuge inside Aigis when her MP ran low; then, when she had even a few magic points regenerated, she would rejoin the fray.

Typically, the final trial would be tackled by two Crimson Magic wizards—one fighting while the other slept—so that lots of MP and plenty of attacking would win the day. That's what the difficulty of the trial was balanced for.

Yunyun told us that she could also use intermediate magic, so she'd conserved her MP by dealing with weaker enemies using less demanding spells. That was how she had managed her amazing survival. And since Aigis had no offensive abilities, Yunyun had effectively completed the trial on her own...

"Chief! Chief!"

"We all knew you would do it one day, Thunder Bearer Yunyun!"

"Hey, Yunyun, we're friends, aren't we? Let's go hunting in Crimson Magic Forest sometime!"

"What a joyous occasion! The strongest chief has burst onto the scene!"

It was the evening of the day Yunyun had become chief of the Crimson Magic Clan. After sleeping like a log, Yunyun opened her eyes to discover the entire village gathered in the town square, throwing a huge party.

"Ahhh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Kazuma, look! Look at all the Megumins!" Aqua, already wasted, pointed at Megumin and laughed.

"There is only one of me and no more! You've had too much to drink, Aqua! Darkness, stop her...!"

Megumin, the only sober one there, turned to Darkness for help, but—

"House Dustiness never surrenders! I can endure poison as well as anything, and I'll never run from a challenge!"

"Yes, that's it! Come now, my dear Darkness, drink with me! If you can outdrink me, I'll stop trying to get Kazuma and my daughter together!"

Darkness was red in the face, Yuiyui plying her with alcohol. Darkness must have already had quite a bit, because even though she didn't look as bad as Aqua, she was clearly pretty drunk. Tonight was the last night I would be spending with Megumin. Yuiyui obviously wanted to get Darkness out of the way so there would be no one to interfere with us crossing the final frontier.

"Why don't you have a drink?" I asked Megumin. "Even Darkness is three sheets to the wind, and you know how she feels about drinking."

"Hrm... I certainly want to, but..." Darkness usually stopped Megumin from drinking on account of her age, but today Megumin seemed strangely less than eager. Even though normally, the only thing she wanted more than to grow taller was to have a drink...

That was when it happened.

"So here you are, Megumin! You're coming with us!"

Funifura and Dodonko suddenly appeared and launched themselves at Megumin.

"Wh-what are you doing?! Are you both drunk?! I have hunted many great adversaries, and my level is higher than both of yours! Have at me, if you are prepared to suffer a humiliating defeat!"

"Just come with us for a bit. You're gonna tell us exactly what you and that guy have been getting up to!"

"That's right—you're always so evasive! Trying to act all maidenly!! You never had the slightest interest in guys, and somehow you landed a boyfriend!"

I guess the two of them were curious about the relationship between Megumin and me.

"It is bad enough when you're both sober, but I won't be talked about in such terms when you're drunk! Look, Nerimaki and Arue are over there. Go play with them!"

"You're the worst! You're never around the village! You could at least spare a few minutes for us!"

"She's right, and you should introduce us to some of your guy friends, too! We can't ask Yunyun to do it—that would be mean!"

"You two are the most troublesome drunks! Yunyun would cry if she heard you!"

While Megumin was busy with Funifura and Dodonko, there was another girl in the town square who had it even rougher.

"Chief! Hey, chief!"

"Chief! Chief!"

"N-now, just a moment! I'm still only the chief-to-be! You'll hurt my dad's feelings!" Yunyun, blushing, still couldn't hide her happiness as the Crimson Magic Clansfolk swarmed her. And right there beside the chief-to-be...

<Hello, hello! Aigis here! I've worked *very* closely with your golden girl, if you know what I mean!>

The perviest armor in the village was acting like he was the star of the show.

"Mr. Aigis, please don't put it that way! I only got inside you!"

<Yeah, that's true. You got inside me and were going nonstop.>

Yunyun's dad, the current chief, went red in the face at Aigis's easily misunderstood words. "Wh-wh-what in the world are you talking about?! I

didn't raise my daughter to debauch herself with some inanimate object!"

"Daddy, what are you saying?! And, Mr. Aegis, I told you not to talk like that...!"

Yunyun could fume all she wanted; Aegis was on a roll. <Your daughter smells great, Mister. It was fantastic being with her. And her body is so warm.>

"*Lightning Strike!*!" The chief, unable to stand it anymore, let loose a magic spell. But the bolt of lightning that came hurtling out of the sky just bounced off Aegis's surface.

<'Fraid I'm invulnerable to magic. But I get it, Pops. I know why you're all upset! Go ahead and beat me with your fists; I can take it!>

"D-d-don't you dare call me 'Pops'!" The chief, now completely enraged, started bashing Aegis with his fists, but of course he was punching a suit of armor. "Agh! My h-hand...!" He fell to his knees, rubbing his knuckles.

<Hey, you okay, Pops? Sorry, I should have mentioned, I'm made of orichalcum! Also, your daughter's really soft!>

"Yaaaahhhh!"

"Mr. Aegis, please stop teasing my father!"

Funifura and Dodonko had been busy with Megumin, but they looked up when they heard Yunyun and the chief shouting.

"Hold on, Dodonko—doesn't Yunyun look like she's got a good vibe going with that armored guy?!"

"You've got to be kidding! Megumin was bad enough, but now Yunyun's got a man, too?!"

Before I could point out that the armor was actually empty, the two of them went charging off after Yunyun.

"Hey, what's going on here?! You act all demure, but look at you go!"

"You complain about not having any friends, but it looks like you don't have any trouble picking up guys! Come on, Yunyun! We're friends, aren't we?! Introduce us to some awesome guys, pleeeease?!"

<Don't worry, ladies. There's plenty of Aigis to go around.>

"I don't know what the two of you are talking about, but just calm down! And, Mr. Aegis, you're making a nuisance of yourself!"

Despite all the teasing by various people and suits of armor, Yunyun nonetheless seemed to be (bashfully) basking in the celebration.

"Aqua, Darkness, you will catch cold if you fall asleep here... And, Mother, wake up. If you're going to sleep, do it at home." Megumin, whose experience as an older sister had taught her a thing or two about taking care of people, tried to wrangle her drunken friends and family. Komekko had curled up by the bonfire. "Komekko, are you sleepy from eating so much? I'm sorry, but maybe you could help me get our mother back to the house."

"Too hard. Let's just leave her here. We can tell Daddy to come pick her up..."

"Komekko, no matter how much trouble it may be, you mustn't abandon a parent and go home!" Megumin sighed at her little sister but then started laying blankets over the drunkards, having apparently given up on getting them back to the house. Finally, she looked down at them, breathing peacefully under their covers, and flashed a wry smile before she turned to Yunyun, who was even now suffering Aegis's teasing.

I went over to Megumin and said, "Don't want to go say hi to Yunyun?"

"If I went over there now, I would certainly find myself compared with her. They may call me a parlor-trick practitioner or whatever they want, but I will not deliberately put myself in the line of fire. Anyway, it's quite a sight to see, that lonely girl surrounded by the entire village. It looks like all her hard work finally paid off." She made it sound like it hardly concerned her, but she was obviously happy as she looked at Yunyun. "I'm afraid she's far beyond me now." She said it lightly, but there was a hint of sadness behind it.

"...So this pretty much settles things between you guys, huh?"

"Oh, hardly. It merely means the distance between us two rivals has grown a little greater. In due course, I will succeed in a way that everyone in the Crimson Magic Clan shall envy. Say, for example...when our party defeats the Demon King."

"I'm not going along with that—you hear me? You can beg, you can plead, but I absolutely will not change my mind." I thought I was driving the last nail in the coffin of that idea. But Megumin turned to me and said:

"Very well. When we defeat the Demon King, I'll do *anything* you want."

.....

"You mean, like..."

"Exactly what I said. Anything means anything, does it not?"

Why did she always have to pitch these ridiculous fastballs? Were straights the only thing she had?

"I know you're a soft touch, Megumin. I don't think I have to defeat the Demon King to get you to do whatever I want."

"Do not call me 'a soft touch.' I am somewhat sensitive. I used to be a much pricklier person; I don't know what happened..." She was red up to her ears even though she was the one who had started this conversation.

"Listen, you haven't done your daily thing yet today, have you?"

"That's true. I had been considering saving it for when the celebrations began to die down, then firing it off in the sky to scare the people who weren't paying attention."

She came up with the most obnoxious pranks. "It's Yunyun's special night. Let her have this one."

"It's my rival's special night; that's exactly why I was going to do it..."

But it would probably bring the festivities to a halt, and then Yunyun would cry, right?

"No choice, I suppose," Megumin whispered and shrugged. Then she looked again at her rival standing there in the center of town.

"Hey," I said, "you wanna get out of here? Just the two of us?"

"...Are you that eager to get filthy? I swear, this man..."

"N-no, not what I had in mind!" Bah, I guess this was what I got for how I behaved all the time. More fool me, thinking a little bit of that stuff was okay.

"So what did you have in mind after we slipped away? If we disappear now, I guarantee the talk will have started by morning..." Megumin looked a little uncomfortable with the idea. But she was smiling, too.

...Okay, so I didn't think I could manage the Demon King.

But I thought maybe I could help close the gap between these rivals just a little.

"...?" Megumin looked at me curiously when I didn't say anything. Finally, I replied, "Let's go do your thing. Right now," and smiled.

2

The area around Crimson Magic Village was crawling with powerful monsters. And everyone knew that the monsters that came out at night were the most powerful of all. You might wonder why I was thinking about that right at that moment...

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Look at that, Megumin! Look at all the One-Punch Bears!"

"There's no more of them than there were before! Kazuma, don't tell me you've actually had a lot to drink!"

Megumin and I were being chased by a monster through the woods near the village.

"Yeah, I've been drinking, but I'm not drunk! Don't worry! I'm fine!"

"You don't look the least bit fine! The Kazuma I know would scream in terror if he saw a One-Punch Bear!"

Holding Megumin's hand, while using Second Sight to let me see in the dark and Flee to help us escape, I easily got us away from the monster. "Hey there, li'l bear, did I give you a scare?! My name's Kazuma! Try to catch me, if you dare!"

"You are drunk! You are completely plastered!!"

"Brrrooooarrrrrr!!"

I turned toward the fur ball rushing at us from behind. “*Deadeye!*”

“Broaaarrrr?!”

I fired backward, through the dark, while running. Not an easy shot, lemme tell ya. “See that, Megumin? That’s your hero Kazuma at work! Whatcha think? Pretty cool, huh?”

“It’s cool! It’s very cool; just please keep running! Where did you hit that bear? It’s angrier than ever!” Megumin was the picture of high-level prowess, hardly threatened at all.

“That’s a boy bear! And I hit him right in his big bear balls!”

“Don’t sound so proud of yourself! What were you thinking?!” I heard Megumin start to mumble an incantation. I guess she was going to do her “daily thing” on the One-Punch Bear. But I put my finger to her lips and said, “Whoops, it’s a little early for that. Ha, you impatient li’l thing.”

“Hrgh?! Hgh! Why would you interfere with my chant?! It’s going to catch us! Let me drop it on the stupid bear! He will be a perfect opponent for my daily practice!” She was outraged.

“That shrimp isn’t worthy of your power. Explosion is the strongest magic around. You have to make sure you use it at exactly the right moment!”

“What is wrong with you tonight, Kazuma?! Has running caused the alcohol to move through your bloodstream even faster than usual?! You’re always urging me to take care of every problem with my explosions!! Look, that *shrimp* is going to kill us if I don’t do this!”

I wagged a finger at her as we ran along. “Have you forgotten who I am? I’m Kazuma Ambush Haver!”

“It already knows we’re here! I’m begging you, Kazuma, go back to your normal self!”

Like Megumin said, Ambush didn’t serve any purpose if the enemy already knew you were there. But in that case...

“*Create Earth!*” In the dark night woods, magic that produced a flash would attract enemies. I grabbed a handful of dust and then... “*Wind Breath!*”

“?!?!”

...I blew it right in the face of the charging bear. Ah, it felt good to go back to the classics. And while it couldn't see us...!

“N-no, Kazuma...! Wait—!”

We held each other close in the darkness, shivering each time we felt each other's breath.

“Huh!” I whispered. “You were just saying you'd do anything, but look at you, frightened as a little girl!”

“Of course I'm scared! What are you, crazy?! Are you a complete and utter fool?! I am afraid for my life!”

“Hrrrf, snrrrf...!” The One-Punch Bear had lost sight of us but was sniffing around industriously.

“So, Megumin, has our little nighttime date sent your heart racing?”

“Yes, my heart is racing! It's beating harder than ever before in my life! Now please, would you just shut up?!”

The bear passed close by, sniffing. But Ambush worked on the sense of smell, too. We stayed completely still, hugging each other, and finally the bear left the area.

“In the end, it was just a wild animal... No match for me.”

“If you had that sort of confidence more often, we might have had more adventures by now...”

I ended Ambush and swept the area with Sense Foe. “All right, this way, Megumin. There's something big over here.”

“It doesn't have to be big! What has gotten into you tonight? You're acting strange, drunk or not!”

It wasn't me who was behaving strangely; it was Megumin. “You're always after the biggest target you can find.”

“Of course! I love big targets! But that's when everyone is with us and you're acting sane!”

That was when we heard it: ragged breath coming toward us from among the trees. Two glinting blue eyes came with it.

"Well, well, we got another playmate. Think *this* opponent can satisfy me?"

"Stop this ridiculous talk and run! Those blue eyes that shine in the night! It's the lone wolf, the scourge of the forest, a Fenrir!"

The big silver wolf stalked closer, its breath fogging in the dark. It didn't look the least bit intimidated by us.

"Normally, I'd hunt you for pocket change, but tonight you aren't even a part of this show. You're one lucky dog. I'm going to let you go this time..."

"Seriously, where is this confidence coming from?! That's a Fenrir! The strongest form of the already dangerous white wolf, a creature so powerful, it can wipe out parties of even veteran adventurers!"

The Fenrir snorted; maybe it knew I was provoking it. The grass froze under its feet as it charged toward us.

"Huh, so you're all about that ice, huh? What a coincidence. I can control water and ice, too. Wanna see which of us is better at it?"

"Your puny Freeze is completely outclassed here, Kazuma! Forget it—this time I *will* do something about this enemy, so try to buy me a minute..." Megumin started to chant again, but I slapped my hand down on her head.

"This isn't your moment yet. Save the big boom. C'mon, Fido—welcome to the midnight ball! Let's dance!"

"You never talk like that! Tell me what's going on! I especially hate that it actually does sound a little bit cool!"

I was relaxed and ready to go, but the Fenrir was even more relaxed than I was.

"Kazuma, it's not taking you seriously. It's not taking you seriously at all!"

The Fenrir was actually scratching its neck with its back leg. That didn't seem like the sort of thing you would do during a deadly battle...

"No, you've got it all wrong. It's trying to get me to let my guard down. Too

bad that won't work on me! *Create Water!*" I decided to introduce myself to the cunning Fenrir with a blast of magic. But the wolf didn't even try to avoid it...

"Kazuma, it seems to be *enjoying* it! Fenrir are elementally partial to ice and water! Look at it just splashing around!"

"Heh... If it likes it so much, how about a little more? *Create Water! Create Water!!*" I heaped on the spells. The Fenrir still made no move to dodge, just squinted and let itself get doused...

Then a change came over the wolf. Its paws started to intertwine with the frozen water. It might still be able to move a bit, but it was too late now.

"Underestimate me, pooch? Too bad for you—this fight is already over. *Create Earth!*"

"...?!"

The Fenrir, which had been enjoying the water so much, jumped backward, desperate to avoid the ball of dirt I flung at it. About what I expected: The wolf could easily avoid a conventional shot of magic. But I wasn't conventional...!

"I told you this fight was over! *Wind Breath!*" I flung the cape I'd been wearing at the monster and intoned my magic. The wind blew the cape along, blocking the wolf's vision. The creature must have noticed how hard it was to move when it had avoided my magic, because it didn't bother trying to dodge the cape. Instead...! "Munch!"

"*Bind!*" When the cape settled on the creature's forelegs, I used Bind to tangle them up.

"Arf! Howwwl! Frrrr!" The Fenrir, finally realizing I was dangerous, tried to intimidate me, but it was tangled up in my special wire.

"O-oh my goodness... Kazuma, I c-c-can't believe you incapacitated a Fenrir so casually...!" I heard Megumin say, shivering, as I advanced on the immobilized monster at a leisurely pace.

"Well, hey, it's been fun. But I think it's time to say good-bye..." I approached the wolf to deal the final blow.

"So cool! You are so darn cool tonight, Kazuma...! But Fenrir can be dangerous

even when they're unable to move! You should finish this one off safely at range, with your bow!" Despite how moved she was by my performance, Megumin still tried to warn me...

"Nah, I don't like to torment weaker opponents. It did its best. It just picked the wrong guy to mess with, that's all..."

"I—I thought you'd gone crazy this evening, but I'm starting to think I might fall in love with you all over again...! However, Kazuma, you don't have your sword!"

That's right. Since I'd assumed we'd be running through the woods tonight, I'd come armed only with my bow. But...

"If you don't have a sword, just make one. *Create Water!*" Water spouted from my right palm. "I'll at least do you the favor of finishing you off with your favorite element. *Freeze...!*"

"Ah... Ahhh... Ahhhh..."

The water dribbling from my hand tinkled as it turned into ice. Exactly the shape I'd been hoping for... "Doggo, *this* is how you use ice magic."

"S-s-so cool! So cool! Kazuma, you're cool beyond belief tonight!" Megumin was looking at me with a kind of admiration she'd previously reserved for my incarnation as a member of the Silver-Haired Thief Brigade. I positioned myself to deliver the killing blow to the Fenrir.

"Looks like my magic beat yours, buddy. *Requiescat in pace...!*"

We raced through the woods, my Ambush skill active.

"Give it back! Give back all my praise of your coolness tonight!"

Turned out you couldn't scratch a Fenrir with an ice sword. Guess that's a high-level monster for you.

"I suppose it makes sense. Ice is ice, magical or not. Silly to think it would hurt a boss monster."

"Stop jabbering and run faster! Wolf-type monsters have excellent senses of smell; it might find us even with Ambush active!"

After my attack had bounced off it, the Fenrir started to look like it was very close to getting out of my Bind, so we made ourselves scarce. Given the howling I could hear from behind us, I guessed it was looking for us.

"Well, it was a moral victory," I said. "Anyway, before I fought it, I told it I would let it go for today, so it wouldn't have been very fair of me to kill it."

"How can you put such a positive spin on this?! Let's go home—you're not the only one acting strange tonight. The whole forest seems off! Fenrir should be deeper in..."

Huh—so that was it. Now I understood. "They sensed a powerful opponent—namely me—and decided to show up."

"You lush!" Megumin exclaimed, but I was busy looking for another big score with Sense Foe.

"I've found something even bigger than that Fenrir. Jackpot this time?"

"Forget it! Just do what you want! I'll be with you till the bitter end! A Fenrir, a dragon, or even the Mad Bomber...!"

Megumin was sounding pretty put out, but I gave her a thumbs-up and grinned. "Attagirl! Our target tonight is the Mad Bomber Mogunin. Anything with a name that stupid deserves to be blown away!"

"Please do not abbreviate its name as Mogunin—that somehow makes it sound like my name! And I know I am not one to talk, but are you insane?!"

Insane? She was asking if I was insane? She should know better by now.

"Sorry to say, I have a companion who keeps telling me that I am!"

"There you go! Fine, let us do it! Yes, let us go ahead!! I finally understand what you're after. You should have just said so from the start!"

The condition for becoming chief was to either pass the trials or complete a big-game hunt.

No one necessarily had to find out what we were up to tonight.

Megumin and I would know she hadn't been beaten.

True, the Demon King might be out of reach, but still...!

“Gah, this is why I love you!”

“I knew that already! I’ve shown you I can beat a Fenrir! Now it’s your turn to show me what you’ve got!”

“Very well! I shall show you, Kazuma, that *I* am the one who deserves the title of Mad Bomber!”

A smile exploded onto Megumin’s face.



Sense Foe was going nuts.

"Hold up. They're close." I raised my hand to indicate to Megumin to stop.

"...Kazuma, you're supposed to be able to see in the dark, aren't you? Then why is it that every time you spot an enemy, your hand goes right to my chest?"

"Hey, no one's perfect. You can't blame me for the occasional mix-up. More importantly, look over there..." I pointed to a clearing ahead of us. And there... "I get it. That's the Ninnin, for sure." I'd thought the name was really stupid, but now that I saw it, I sort of understood where they were coming from.

"Do you have some problem with the Ninnin? Anyway, Kazuma, look at that! Look at the sparkling luster, the unique shape! I wish I could take it home after we defeat it."

Ahead of us was a two-legged robot. Simply put, it looked like a ninja. It seemed nimble, like it was adapted to spy work. Its gleaming red eye shone eerily, and I started to fret about whether Ambush would work on it. Then...

"I understand now. The Fenrir was running away from that. Let us do it, then! You've gotten me this far, Kazuma. I promise you I will finish it off!"

Megumin was getting all hyped up. "...Hey, you sure you don't want to go home for today, maybe tackle this tomorrow?"

"And then I will be the Mad... What did you say?"

I was starting to wonder what I was doing out here in the woods in the middle of the night. "All that running... I don't feel so good. I want to head home and get some sleep."

"Curse you! After we've come this far?! Where has all your vigor and motivation gone?! Don't tell me you've sobered up?! You haven't gone back to your non-drunk, sensible self, have you?!" Megumin was shaking me by both shoulders.

"Whoa, calm down. We're talking about something so badass, even the

Crimson Magic Clan is afraid of it. We should make some preparations for this fight..."

"I know what a major foe this is! I have been thoroughly warned! And preparations should be made before you start! Now you have me all excited—this is beyond the pale!"

I was feeling worse and worse from all the shaking... "Hey, now you know how I feel. You always get me excited; then it's like, 'Eh, maybe later.'"

"Yes, it is! Allow me to apologize for that! I see how painful it is, and I'm very sorry!"

We looked at the Mad Bomber. Could the robot, allegedly produced in the mysterious facility, have originally been intended to protect the Crimson Magic Clan? I didn't get the whole thing about attacking guys with black hair and dark eyes in particular; maybe there'd been some kind of trouble with people from Japan.

None of that really mattered now, though. What mattered was that the robot didn't attack Crimson Magic Clan members. In other words, Megumin alone could present herself proudly and unleash her Explosion, allowing us to safely dispatch the creature.

"Look, you can see scratches all over it. I wonder if that's damage from my Explosion the other day."

Now that Megumin mentioned it, I did notice little cracks all over the robot. It didn't seem to be in very good shape. But I could also see the damage slowly disappearing with a sort of sizzling sound, so I guess the thing was programmed to repair itself.

So we were dealing with a robot that couldn't be taken out with a single Explosion and that was programmed to run and lick its wounds if it got hurt. I couldn't help thinking about the fact that the Ninnin had never been destroyed despite living right next door to Crimson Magic Village all this time.

"Okay, let's blow that thing up and go home, get some sleep. Here's the plan. Megumin, you go out there, do your chant, then blast that thing away. Done."

"That's the least thoughtful plan I've ever heard! And what will you be doing,

Kazu—?” But before Megumin could finish...

“Blurrrrp.”

“.....Ah, all the running around has upset your drunken stomach. Just wait there quietly. I will be counting on you to get me home!” Megumin pointedly avoided looking at me; unable to hold it in anymore, I’d deposited the contents of my stomach among the bushes. “I’ll be on my way, then. Wait until you see how cool I can be.”

Then she set off toward the Mad Bomber.

“Mad Bomber Moguninnin. I’ve come to take your title from you...”

She only needed to say the chant and do the deed, but Megumin was bent on doing it all properly. This was supposed to be a serious moment, but that ridiculous name, presumably bestowed by the Crimson Magic Clan, sort of undermined it.

“My name is Megumin! Wielder of Explosion and greatest magic-user in all of Axel!” The Mad Bomber didn’t attack members of the Crimson Magic Clan, so Megumin probably felt comfortable putting on a show. I could tell because she kept glancing in my direction. She wanted to be sure I was watching. “You’ve been called the guardian of the Crimson Magic Clan, but we can’t have you attacking tourists. If you’d only led a quiet life here in the woods, I could have let you be, but now I’m afraid—”

That was as far as she got.

The Mad Bomber suddenly disappeared.

The forest fell quiet, but there in the trees above...

...it appeared, dropping silently down at me.

“Huh? Hrgh!”

“K-Kazuma!!”

I’d thought I was hidden with Ambush, but the Ninnin dropped to the ground and came straight at me. And man, was it fast! This thing was definitely designed by a Japanese person, no question! It was, like, the quintessential ninja!

"Pretty good trick, seeing through my Ambush! But you're outta luck, pal—against a robot, I'm invincible! *Staaaaal!!*"

If my opponent was an automaton, then all I had to do was steal whatever made it tick! I thrust out one hand, but the Ninnin expertly backflipped through the air. It left only a red trail of light from its monocular behind it. Seeing how awesome it looked, I felt even worse about its name. As for my outstretched hand...

"Kazuma, this is no time to be playing around! If you're that desperate for panties, I can give you some later. Thoroughly washed, of course!"

...I was looking right at Megumin's black underwear clutched in my fingers.

"Hey, there's no point if you wash them... I mean, that thing was just too fast! Dammit, and I used my Bind wire on the Fenrir..." No, wait, that was it! "The panties, that's the answer! Megumin, give me your bra, too! I can tie them together into an improvised rope..."

"Are you still drunk?! There is no way you can tie it up with those! Kazuma, behind you!"

I threw myself to the side and saw a flash where my head had been an instant before. The Ninnin had gotten behind me without me even realizing it and aimed a knife-hand strike right at my neck.

"Damn you! Don't start thinking ninjas get to have all the fun in a dark forest! The NEETs come out at night, you know. You're not the only one who gets stronger this time of the day!"

As soon as I turned around, the Ninnin was already gone again. Did it have the Ambush skill, too? It turned out that having a spy (of sorts) like myself for an enemy was no fun at all.

"I know you think you look really good, but you aren't very cool! I knew you'd sobered up! You've lost all your flair from earlier!"

"Sh-shut up and chant! I want a do-over! My name is Kazuma Satou. The man who sees in the dark, hides in the shadows, and makes off with the treasure! And my work shakes the world!"

"That's a little better, but the thing you're holding makes it worse!"

Ignoring Megumin's chatter, I worked Sense Foe as hard as I could.

"Found youuuu!"

"...?!"

The Ninnin appeared behind me, but its hand stopped before it reached me. I might not have had a sword, but I did have...

"You are the worst! For the life of me, I can't tell if you're incredibly awesome or absolutely despicable tonight, Kazuma!"

"Pipe down—I'm at the end of my rope here! I'll do whatever I have to!"

Okay, so it wasn't exactly catching a bare blade between the palms of my hands, but the Crimson Magic Panty Parry would have to do. Apparently, the Ninnin's commitment to not harming the Crimson Magic Clan extended to their possessions. When it saw the black underwear I'd held up, it stopped moving...

"Hrrrgh?!"

Metal hands and feet hit me in the stomach in a blinding flurry of kicks and punches.

"Kazuma?! The Ninnin really is a deadly opponent! It moves too fast to target, and it won't get away from you, so I can't target it anyway!"

I spat something bitter in the Ninnin's direction. Maybe it had every robot's fear of acid attacks, because it backed up just a little. "N-not bad, kid. I'm impressed that even in the middle of the night, you managed to— *Marrghhh!*"

"I think it's time we gave up on the cool act!"

It's okay; I hardly feel this attack... I'm only throwing up because I drank a bunch and then we ran all over...!

"Nope... Sorry, it turns out I can feel it... Megumin, don't use your spell. I won't be able to move for a while, so you need to get back to town... It should let you go, so go wake Aqua and get the rest of the village..."

"I'm not going to leave you here! And I'm not good at doing the reasonable thing!" Maybe she was hitting that rebellious age, even if it was a little late.

Megumin readied her staff. The Ninnin paid no attention to her but advanced on me where I had collapsed to my knees, clutching my chest. Then it stuck out a hand toward me...

Megumin threw her staff as hard as she could and flung herself in front of me to cover me.

"First Aqua, now you. Why doesn't anyone *think* around here?! A wizard shouldn't throw away their staff!"

"The Ninnin is preparing to use its special explosion magic! If it hits you, Kazuma, you won't survive! There won't even be a body left!"

Ah, now I got it. She was counting on the Ninnin's refusal to attack her to protect me.

...It happened at that moment. The Ninnin, its hand still outstretched, turned its red mechanical eye on us and spoke. "*Type confirmed: Japanese riajuu with cheat—harem. Upon departure of augmented subject: Crimson Magic Clan member, Explosion will be executed.*"

"Hey, I heard that! Cheat? Harem? Cheat harem?! So the bastard who cooked you up wanted to destroy all the cheaters and harem havers! In that case, targeting me was a huuuge mistake!"

"I don't know what has touched such a nerve with you, Kazuma, but please hold still!" Megumin was trying desperately to cover my flailing form with her little body.

My body temperature felt a little bit high as I tried to figure out how to break this stalemate. Honestly, my chest hurt. I suspected I had some fractured bones in there. Ah, the ol' cracked rib.

Why was that thing so hell-bent on using Explosion to off me, though? I knew it couldn't harm Crimson Magic Clan members, but if it just shoved Megumin aside, it could have easily finished me some other way.

"Megumin, you notice how that thing isn't moving? Even though it could kill me easily if it just jumped at us?"

"The Mad Bomber blows things up; that's why they call it that. It's a terrifying

monster who targets those with black hair and dark eyes whose parties are composed entirely of women, telling them to explode!"

"It's just a *riajuu* hunter? That's bullshit! Megumin, cover me! I'll use Steal to pick out every component that thing has!"

"That's all well and good, but don't get careless and use it on me instead, all right?! I'm not wearing panties anymore, so I don't know what might be next! If you steal my robe, I'll be naked from the waist down!"

"If that happens, I'll take responsibility! Here we gooooo! *Steal! Steal! Steal! Steal!!!*"

The Ninnin reacted immediately to my shouting: It disappeared. But I had something nice and heavy in my hand...!

"Did I do it?!"

"Oh, you did it all right! Give me my bra back! If you hit me with that again, I really will be in dire straits!"

In my right hand was a black bra and some kind of mechanical component. As I felt something pressed up against my back become a little softer, there was a whooshing noise. I guess I'd managed to steal a part of its body. The Ninnin was kneeling on the ground among the trees a short distance away, staring at us.

"Still moving, huh...? Damn, my stomach and chest really hurt... I don't know if I can carry you all the way back to the village like this..."

Megumin, ignoring my blubbering, grabbed her staff and held it aloft, beginning her incantation. The Mad Bomber started backward as if running away.

"This village is one hell of a place. I swear I'm never coming back here. Hey, Megumin, stay close. Without you right next to me, the Mad Bomber's gonna blow me up."

From directly behind me, Megumin finished her chant and exhaled. "You were so cool for so much of tonight, but now here you are, using a girl like a shield... I swear, I have no idea why I fell in love with a man such as you..." She was talking to me, but she didn't actually sound that unhappy.

Then she said softly to the Mad Bomber: “What’s wrong? I know this isn’t you. I know you took my Explosion, but even so, were your movements not somewhat hesitant tonight?” Here I’d been about to die, and that thing hadn’t even been completely serious? You’ve got to be kidding me. “...You’re a fellow lover of Explosion, so I can’t hate you. But if you’re going to target my friend, then I can’t leave you be, either.” Megumin, her staff at the ready, gazed at the Ninnin that had protected Crimson Magic Village for so long, and a small, pained smile flitted across her face.

The Ninnin seemed to be listening to her. It blinked its monocular and stopped moving. *“Most powerful Crimson Magic Clan spell detected. An individual with greater than expected magical power has appeared: augmentation project to be deemed successful. This will be the final data transmitted to headquarters in the Kingdom of Noise. Headquarters, request response. The project is successful. Let my master know of this triumph...”*

That definitely got my attention, but I didn’t have long to think about it.

“Exploooooooooooo!!!”

By the hand of the greatest loser in the Crimson Magic Clan, someone with the same color eyes as it, the Mad Bomber was sent to its maker from the long-vanished country of Noise...

4

“I’m amazed, Megumin. You never cease to amaze us.”

“Hush. NEETs should be seen and not heard. This was my way of celebrating the appointment of our next chief. You should be thanking me.”

We were in a holding cell at a very familiar detention center of the Crimson Magic Village community watch. Bukkororii was there, too, arguing with Megumin. “Shut up about NEETs already! I’m not a NEET; I’m part of the community watch! I wish you would get that through your head! Anyway, I can’t believe that even you, her guardian, would let yourself get involved in this sort of thing... I was just starting to think you seemed like someone I might

possibly be able to become friends with. What a shame.” He turned a pitying gaze on the other occupant of the cell, namely me.

“I’m real sorry, Bukkororii. I thought we could be friends, too... By way of apology, let me teach you a great way to kill time. You make ice with Freeze; then you watch it melt. Before you know it, the day’s over.”

“Hey, that’s good advice. I’ll try it out right away. I’ve got nothing but time to kill every day.”

“Enough with the mutual admiration society, you two! This is why no one likes NEETs! You should use your time for something more productive!”

Megumin was interrupting our very productive NEET conversation. Bukkororii turned to her and said, “Geez, I get being upset that your rival pulled ahead of you, but really... No matter how frustrated you were, dropping an explosion right on her big day...” He gave Megumin a reproachful look and sighed.

Megumin didn’t tell anyone that she’d defeated the Mad Bomber. She stuck to her story that she’d unleashed her Explosion the night before because she was so upset that Yunyun had beaten her to the chiefship. Even though if she’d told the truth, she could have gotten everyone to stop calling her a loser parlor-trick practitioner...

“If you insist on continuing to lecture me, I know what I’ll do. I’ll go to your dear Soketto and tell her you sexually harassed me, claiming it was a punishment.”

“What a thing to say! I knew Soketto was acting funny recently. She said she would tell my fortune, but then she just sat there in front of her crystal ball, shaking her head, and then chased me out. And when I asked if I should help her train when we were on patrol around the village recently, she attacked me.”

Bukkororii was looking his most pathetic when a visitor appeared at the detention hall. Believe it or not, it was...

“If it isn’t our next chief. Have you come to laugh at me? Go ahead—indulge your hilarity at seeing me rot in jail!”

“Ahhh-ha-ha-ha-ha! Megumin’s in jail!”

"You actually laughed! Very well, let us settle this here and now! Bukkororii, open this cell! Otherwise, I will unleash an explosion!"

Yunyun, who had been pointing and laughing triumphantly at Megumin, let out a long sigh. "Haaah... Seriously, what are you doing? Um, Bukkororii... Could Megumin and I have a few minutes to talk? I'll keep an eye on her."

"Fine by me. I know I don't look busy, but I've got lots to do."

"Yes, like stalking Soketto under the guise of protecting her or taking a walk with her and calling it patrol."

"Oh, quiet. You'd be amazed at the smarts it takes to patrol around the village! The Demon King's army has been acting weird lately. Heck, just the other day, there were red-eyed zombies and golems lurking around..."

Bukkororii passed Yunyun the key. She checked that there were no other members of the community watch nearby, then came and stood in front of our cell.

"...So what happened last night?"

"I was angry that you had pulled ahead of me, so I went to make myself feel better," Megumin said sullenly.

Yunyun crouched down and looked at her through the bars. "Hmmmm."

"What does that mean? If there's something you wish to say, then I shall hear it."

A strange expression came over Yunyun's face: a little annoyed, maybe, but also kind of happy. "It doesn't really mean anything, I guess. Maybe it's just because we've known each other for so long, but I know. I know you have a special quality, Megumin, that I don't think anyone else in this village has. When you tell a lie, your eyes turn blue. Did you know I'd noticed?"

"What, really?! Just a moment—I have never heard such a thing before! Does this mean I truly am the chosen one, specially made among all the Crimson Magic Clan?!" Megumin shook the bars violently; Yunyun opened the cell and came in.

"One thing you *could* improve about yourself: You're normally so smart, but

once in a while, you do really stupid things.”

“Why do I have to be called stupid by you, Yunyun? You entrapped me! Hoodwinked me! Kazuma, look at my eyes, please!”

“Yeah, what’s up? I mean, sure, I’ll look...”

Yunyun listened to us.

“Kazuma,” Megumin said, “Crimson Magic Clansfolk have a striped mark on their bodies called a bar code. For your information, Yunyun’s is in a most compromising location on her inner thigh... How about it? Are my eyes red? Or blue?”

“Where did that come from?! Normally, you would tell a *lie* to check that, right?!”

“Red, just like normal. So it’s true, huh?”

Yunyun, promptly repaid for her laughter, covered her bright red face. Apparently, Megumin was at her best when inspired by an argument, friendly or otherwise.

“There, I feel slightly better now. But what has brought you to this place? Don’t tell me that in a single night, you shed your transformation and returned to being a lonely girl, after which everyone abandoned you?”

“What a thing to say! I th-think it’s okay still... Probably... I hope... No, that’s not what I’m here about!” Yunyun came over to Megumin and sat beside her, hugging her knees. She wouldn’t look Megumin in the eye—I wondered where the mature, confident Yunyun I knew had gone. “Show me your Adventurer’s Card,” she said meekly and held out her hand.

“Absolutely not. Why should I show my card to my rival? Anyway, there is such a thing as being *too* lonely; I don’t think you should get in a jail cell with us just because you need a friend.”

“I’m not that twisted, and that’s not what I’m doing! Just show me the field for the monsters you’ve hunted; that would be enough. Show it to me if you don’t have anything to hide.” I guess Yunyun had the sort of insight into Megumin you can get only by being someone’s friend for a lifetime. She

seemed to know exactly what we'd been up to the night before.

"Of course I don't have anything to hide, but I still won't show it to you. I certainly *didn't* dispense with Bukkororii's lovingly raised Duxion just for the experience points, if that's what you're thinking."

"I don't believe I can overlook what you just said! Hey, did you really do that?! Did you kill the Duxion Bukkororii has been turning to lately because Soketto won't give him the time of day?!"

Come to think of it, Megumin had been proudly proclaiming her level had gone up since we got here.

"Argh, fine! It doesn't even matter; just show me your card! Let me guess. The Mad Bomber really exists, right? And you and Kazuma hunted it together, right?!"

"I don't know where you would get such an idea. We certainly couldn't hunt the likes of it! You know it never attacks Crimson Magic Clan members, don't you? If I was going to go after the Ninnin, I would do so safely, with a fellow Crimson Magic Clan member for a partner."

Megumin was insistent, but Yunyun still looked unconvinced. "Even though you've been jabbering about the Mad Bomber every single day?"

"Precisely because it is I who has been jabbering about the Mad Bomber every single day."

Megumin stubbornly refused to admit to anything. Yunyun sighed and said, "...I passed the three trials and became our next chief before you did, so I refuse to feel like I lost, okay?"

"I do not know what you're talking about. Apparently, I am our village's biggest loser, so there was no contest to begin with. Aren't you lucky? Now everyone here will love you forever, right?"

Yunyun had already earned some recognition from the Crimson Magic Clan back when we'd defeated Sylvia, and now her stock would rise even further. I was sure that her future would be bright from here on out.

".....Megumin, you're going back to Axel, right?"

"Yes, of course I am. I am the greatest magic-user in Axel, after all. Without me, how could the town go on?"

"You have an awfully high opinion of yourself for someone who just dubbed herself the biggest loser of the Crimson Magic Clan," I quipped almost before I knew what I was doing, but Megumin apparently decided to pretend she hadn't heard me.

"I presume you'll be learning how to run the village as our next chief, Yunyun? I suppose that means this is good-bye for us."

...That's right; Yunyun had challenged Megumin in order to take the title of greatest magic-user and become the next chief. Now that her succession was secure, she had no reason to ever come back to Axel.

".....Don't go around thinking I won, okay?" Yunyun said.

".....How dense you are. Is it not you who has won?" Megumin replied. I didn't know why they were suddenly trying to foist victory on each other.

Megumin acted so rough toward everyone else, and Yunyun seemed so resigned. But when adversity struck, Megumin could be surprisingly vulnerable, and Yunyun sometimes braced herself and showed unexpected resolve. Their family situations, their personalities, even their body types—these two rivals seemed completely different in every way, and maybe that just made sense.

I couldn't suppress a smile at the thought.

"Though you are lonely, without party members or even a man, Yunyun, in the end I shall cede the victory to you."

Megumin leaned her head ostentatiously on my shoulder.

"...Hey, you don't plan to wave Kazuma in my face forever until I get a boyfriend, do you? To act all triumphant with him? You aren't pretending that it's secretly your victory just because you found a boyfriend first, are you?"

"Indeed, I am content to call this my loss. I will continue to cultivate my little happiness with this person, so, Yunyun, go forth along the path of the lone wizard. I gather being chief of the clan is quite a busy job. I hope you don't end up *too* far behind on the path of life." Megumin gave an innocent smile and

pointedly took my arm.

“A lone wizard is what *you* wanted to be back in the day, Megumin! In fact, I seem to recall that whenever I started to talk about love, you called me sex-obsessed, didn’t you?!” Yunyun’s objectivity and composure had flown out the window. She looked like she was on the verge of tears.

“Kazuma, please don’t hesitate to rest your head here on my knees. I’ve done you wrong, dragging you into a jail cell like this. The least I can do is offer you my knees to rest on, instead of this hard floor.”

“Sure, sounds good.”

“Wait, how do you make that look so natural?! You guys aren’t *that* close, are you?!” Yunyun jumped to her feet when she saw me casually lean my head on Megumin’s knees.

“What is it, O victorious Yunyun? You know, perhaps I could ask you not to intrude upon us now that we finally have a moment alone together. Aren’t there any admirers of the chief around? Go chat with them if you must.”

“Mm, these are smooth and comfy. I feel like all the trouble I went through yesterday was worth it.”

“Megumin, you’re blushing. You’re blushing, aren’t you?! You don’t actually do this sort of thing all the time, do you?! You’re just trying to put up with Kazuma’s harassment, aren’t you?!”

I decided this would be a good chance to stroke Megumin’s knees, and with Yunyun right there, she didn’t even look angry about it.

“This sort of thing is perfectly normal, is it not? ...K-Kazuma, I don’t think you should have your face pointed that way when your head is resting on my knees... It’s n-not that I’m embarrassed; I’m just concerned it might be hard for you to breathe!”

“I’b fineg.”

“I see! Yes, of course! Well, this is what it means to have a man resting his head on your knees!”

“You’re struggling to keep a straight face, Megumin, and we both know it!

And, Kazuma, that's quite enough!"

5

Yunyun left, claiming she had to go see her parents. Not long after, we were safely out of jail...

"I can't believe you, Kazuma! Or you, Megumin!! Are you never satisfied until you've caused some kind of trouble? You should take a page from my book! I didn't cause any problems at all this time, just behaved in a perfectly ladylike manner the entire visit!"

"Aqua's right, Kazuma. It's too late for Megumin, but you need to stop while you still can."

I couldn't believe we were being lectured by two people who had spent the entirety of last night in a drunken stupor.

"Aw, shut up, you two! Don't act all holier-than-thou because you managed to go one evening without causing trouble! Listen up! Megumin and me? While you guys were off in dreamland, we got some *serious* exercise in! All night long!"

"Please be mindful of how you phrase things! He doesn't mean that the way it sounds! We were being chased around the woods by monsters!" Megumin hastily clarified.

"Pipe down and listen, okay? I was absolutely on my game last night. After I gave that One-Punch Bear the business, I put the fear of God into a scary beast called a Fenrir, although I let it off in the end. It's all true, right, Megumin?"

"...Erm, well, he isn't lying..."

Darkness looked at Megumin suspiciously. "A One-Punch Bear is bad enough, but a Fenrir is supposed to be on par with a natural disaster. You're saying there was one in the woods near the village?"

Come to think of it, even the Mad Bomber was supposed to live deeper in the forest.

"I know—this has to be the Demon King's doing," Aqua said. "Some general with the ability to control monsters is trying to throw the world into chaos. I guarantee it. Goddess's intuition." She had absolutely no basis for saying any of that, but I grant it was all pretty weird, up to and including the weakened Ninnin. But anyway, we'd done what we came here to do. Now we just needed to get Yunyun to teleport us back to Axel.

"Are you sure you don't want to say good-bye to anyone else in the village, Megumin? Without Yunyun around, it won't be so easy to come back here, don't forget."

Megumin harrumphed at Darkness. "There is no need to say good-bye to those who call the foremost genius of their village a loser or a parlor-trick-doer or Explosion-mad. After we have defeated the Demon King, I shall return triumphantly and make them kiss the ground before my feet."

"I'd say 'Explosion-mad' sounds pretty accurate."

And for reference, I wasn't going to defeat any Demon King.

...Oh, come to think of it...

"Yo, Aqua. What'd you do with your Leisure Girl sprout? I don't see the pot anywhere."

"I planted her. What else would I do with her?" Aqua said with exasperation. When had she had time to do that?

"Maybe I'm not one to talk, having spent all last night running around those woods, but did you really go into that dangerous forest by yourself to plant that thing?"

"Of course not! That would be impossible. I planted it in the garden at Megumin's house."

"I cannot believe you did that!" Megumin interjected, and to be honest, I couldn't, either.

"Hey, hey, hear me out. Komekko's so sweet; she said she would take good care of the cute little thing until she got big. Komekko's a smart kid; she'll raise her right. I don't think there are any other girls Komekko's age in the village,

either, so my plant will be a nice friend for her.”

“Knowing her, she’s probably planning to eat it when it gets big enough.”

“What is wrong with your family, Megumin? I’m going to go get her back right now.”

I grabbed Aqua before she could run off. “Megumin’s just joking, obviously. Yunyun will be here soon. Just hold still and wait.”

“...That’s right; it has to be a joke...yes? Gosh, Megumin, you kidder! Is it really that much fun to tease me? When we get back to Axel, I’m going to tell everyone all about your sister complex to pay you back... Hey, Megumin, you were joking, right? Why won’t you look at me or say anything?” Aqua grabbed Megumin by the shoulders and shook her.

“Megumin!”

Yunyun was out of breath; she must have run as fast as she could to get here. But she was smiling.

“What’s the matter, Yunyun? Why are you running? I know you’re happy to have friends in the village at last, but if you horse around too much, you’ll trip and fall.”

“That’s not it at all! And you should have warned me sooner! I’ve been running around for two days now!” Yunyun got her breathing under control and then coughed a few times.



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"I'm going back to Axel, too!"

Yunyun's eyes flashed a bright, clear crimson with emotion. "I'm going to defeat the Demon King—you'll see! I don't want you to just hand victory to me... Once I've defeated the Demon King, once I've done the hardest and most important thing you can do, then I'll be ready to be chief! I've already told my dad and everyone in the village!"

Megumin's rival, her sparring partner, and her best friend got a huge smile on her face.

".....Is that so?" Megumin refused to look at Yunyun, trying to seem totally unmoved. "Seeing as you've finally begun to lead a real, fulfilling life, there's no need for you to make yourself lonely again... And anyway, it is I who shall defeat the Demon King."

But we all knew Megumin was a total *tsundere* for Yunyun. She could try to play it cool, but she couldn't hide how happy she was. Her ears were twitching.

"You can never just say how you really feel, can you, Megumin?" Aqua remarked. "Your eyes are bright red."

When a Crimson Magic Clan member is feeling a strong emotion, you can see it in their eyes.

"You are as oblivious as ever, Aqua! Very well, I shall go take that Leisure Girl you planted by my house and pull it up by the roots this very moment!" Aqua grabbed Megumin's waist to stop her from going, and Megumin, maybe to cover for her embarrassment, started talking faster than normal. "Well, come on, Yunyun. If you're going to head back to Axel, you'd better get ready! You don't seem to realize it, so in this one case, I will tell you, but the adventurers of that town seem to rely on you for some strange reason. If you were to ask someone to let you into their party, I think they would agree immediately!"

"Really? You mean it?! Hey, that's really important info! Why didn't you ever tell me before?!"

"If you had a great many friends in Axel, you would have fallen in love with

that town, and then you would have given up on becoming chief, wouldn't you?!"

"Of course I would have!" Yunyun said without a moment's hesitation.

"You could at least sound conflicted! Come on—we are going back to our town!"

"F-fine, I know! Don't rush me! ...That thing you said, though... Was it true? I mean, about Axel's adventurers relying on me...?"

"As I said, I cannot fathom why. Don't let it go to your head, or you'll end up lonely again."

Megumin sounded like it was all a lot of trouble, but Yunyun couldn't hide the grin starting on her face. "Huh... I was actually able to beat you this time, Megumin, and everyone in the village knows it. It's like a dream somehow..."

"Look at you, acting as if you beat me! When you know perfectly well I will never let you win when we get to Axel!"

"Hey, it's a little late for that! I passed the Chief's Trials, and that means I win, right? You don't know when to give up!"

I'd thought the two girls were polar opposites, but I was starting to think they had more in common than I'd realized.

They squared off, bickering like children. Yunyun had her wand out. "Fine, Megumin, put your money where your mouth is! Next time, I'll make sure you have to acknowledge my victory!"

Megumin, in response, whipped out her Adventurer's Card.

"Ahem. My Adventurer's Card. I believe you wanted to see my Hunt List earlier. Well, observe the name of the Mad Bomber right here..."

"How can you turn the tables so quickly?!"

The central square of Crimson Magic Village echoed with Yunyun's wail.

Chapter 5

And So Begins Our Epic Tale of Heroism



1

When we got back to Axel, we said good-bye to Yunyun, and then we headed not for our mansion but for the Adventurers Guild.

"I can't believe you managed to defeat the Ninnin without me. But we're party members, right? And that means even if some of us were asleep, we split the reward evenly, right?" Aqua was in high spirits. She seemed to forget she'd been giving us a dressing down until not long before.

"L-look, I just didn't believe you were really '*exercising*' all night. I'm sorry about that, Kazuma, Megumin. Aqua, I've got it! How about we get some quality ingredients and have a banquet tonight to celebrate their work?"

"No objection from me. Sounds like a great idea, in fact. Not the sort of thing I'd expect from a klutz like you, Darkness!"

I guess Darkness the klutz must have really felt she owed something to Megumin and me, because she managed a smile despite the vein bulging on her forehead.

"You heard the ladies, Megumin. What do you think? Exactly whose reward is gonna pay for all that fancy food?"

"You are so right! The two of them have known me long enough that they should know perfectly well that I would never cause general mayhem just to satisfy a passing urge for an explosion!"

""""Yeah, right.""""

"Kazuma, whose side are you on?!"

I dropped Megumin before she could get too hot under the collar, hurrying over to the front desk. "Hey, miss, Big Game Hunter Kazuma Satou here."

"Oh, Mr. Satou! And how can we help you today?"

I showed her the Adventurer's Card I'd borrowed from Megumin. "Miss, we've done it again. My goodness... If we keep going at this pace, there won't be any bounties left in the world before long. We're going to end up putting all our colleagues out of business. Ha!"

"Ah—ah-ha-ha... I see, so you defeated the Mad Bomber Moguninnin. Congratulations! I'll prepare your reward immediately!"

The lady at the reception desk wasn't even surprised to see us take down big bounties anymore. But I wasn't disappointed by her lack of a reaction. And why not...?

"Excuse me... Are you, perchance, Sir Kazuma Satou...?"

Someone spoke to me as if they'd read my mind. It was a beautiful woman distinguished by the slight puffiness under her eyes and the air of maturity she exuded. She was reasonably well-endowed (although maybe not as well as Darkness), a body practically designed to entice men. Her black hair was clipped neatly at her shoulders, and she gave me a flirtatious look with her surprisingly amorous dark eyes. That alone was enough to get my heart pounding.

Maybe this woman was a priest? She wore a white robe that looked like it could have been a holy vestment, and a mace hung at her hip. And maybe it was the fullness of the space beneath her eyes that gave her that adult sex appeal. Or maybe it just went to show that none of the ladies around me had any *mature* attraction.

The woman offered me an elegant bow. "I have heard many a rumor, sir, of

your fame and glory. My name is Serena. I know it's very sudden, but could I implore you to let me join your party?"

The entire Guild went silent at that...

Well, not the *entire* Guild. Aqua exploded. "What? How can you just show up here and make a request like that? This party already has a perfectly good Arch-priest: me! And we don't need any other priests horning in. So get out of here. Go on, scram!"

I guess she saw this new priest as a threat to her sense of self. The woman who called herself Serena, though, didn't even deign to glance at Aqua.

"Sir Kazuma Satou. Could you not possibly see your way to permitting me to be one of your followers? I swear I shall never impede you or slow you down." As Serena spoke, a placid smile spread over her face.

Megumin looked like she was about to fly off the handle, but then she flinched and glanced away. Don't tell me she suddenly realized she wasn't one to talk, seeing as we were just coming home from all the trouble she'd caused in Crimson Magic Village.

Naturally, everyone's eyes settled on me. They seemed to want me to make a decision, but I knew what was going on here.

"You're obviously a servant of the Demon King or something. You just show up out of the blue and want to join my group? No one who knows the first thing about my party wants to be anywhere near it. You're clearly here to get close to me, destroyer of so many generals of the Demon King, and then assassinate me when I least expect—"



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I was interrupted by Aqua chanting a magic spell. My body glowed for a second, but nothing else happened. I knew this spell. It would heal your wounds and even get rid of any nasty stuff currently happening to your body. Powerful healing magic. But of course, I hadn't been hurt recently.

"...Hey, what'd you do that for?" I asked.

"You, Kazuma, of the weakest class and with no stats worth mentioning and not even a very high level, are completely obsessed with the idea that you're being targeted by the Demon King, so I cast Heal on your head."

Maybe I could trade her for Serena.

"Do you truly doubt me so? Sir Kazuma, I believe you sell yourself much too short. You are a truly great adventurer, having defeated so many fearsome foes and become so rich at such a young age. One even wonders if you might not be *the* hero, chosen by the gods to stand against the Demon King..." Serena closed her eyes blissfully, her hands together as if she was praying.

What could I say? She wasn't exactly wrong about anything she had said so far. I *had* been sent here by the goddess Aqua to resist the incursions of the Demon King on behalf of the populace. Heck, I could almost start to think people still didn't value me enough...

"Sacred High Heal!"

Aqua burst in again. This time it was Serena's body that glowed.

"Why do you cast healing magic on me?" she asked.

"You think our Kazuma is a genuine hero, so I cast Heal on your head," Aqua said.

.....

"Ahem. Well, listen, as much as I hate to say it, she really is our party's priest. Sorry, but we aren't looking for any new members right now. Try somewhere else."

"Ouch, that hurts! Kazuma, that hurts! I really mean it!!"

(I was pulling on Aqua's ear the whole time I was talking.)

Serena never stopped smiling. "...I see I can't persuade you. I shall withdraw for today. But, Sir Kazuma, I'm certain I can be of use to your party."

She had confidence; you had to give her that. Serena walked out of the building with her head held high.

I watched her go, then looked around at my current party members. Aqua was rubbing the ear I'd been pulling on, her eyes tearing up. Megumin was heaving a sigh of relief that Serena was gone as she finally emerged from Darkness's shadow. And.....

"...What are you fidgeting for?"

"Just watching a beautiful lady priest try to steal you away, Kazuma... Is this what it feels like to be cuckolded...?" Darkness was squirming around in her cloud of filthy thoughts, her eyes moist.

I gave them all a hard look and said...

"Is it too late to call her back?"

2

The next morning. When we got to the Adventurers Guild, something was different.

"All right, everyone participating in the hunt, please line up over here. I'll cast long-lasting support magic on you for free."

There was a line of adventurers forming inside the Guild. Serena was at the head of the line, casting support magic on each and every one of them. Apparently, she wasn't even charging for it.

As crucial as it was to have priests around, there weren't that many people who wanted to be members of the class. So a no-cost buff like this was something parties without priests would really appreciate.

Serena saw me and smiled. "Ah, Sir Kazuma, you're here. What do you say? Want some free support magic? You can receive multiple buffs if they come

from priests of different religions. And I suspect I'm of a different faith from the priest in your party, so I'm sure we could both buff you. How does that sound?"

I was impressed she could tell who belonged to what religion... Actually, was it that impressive? I guess it only took one look at Aqua to know she was part of the Axis Church. Still, free buffs. I felt like for the first time, I was seeing a real priest at work.

"Excuse me, *you*, but with you just handing out buffs for free, what are the other priests supposed to do? You'll make everyone less grateful to us, so I'm going to have to ask you to stop going rogue like this." Our party's punk...er, ahem. I mean, our party's priest (such as she was) started in on Serena.

The *real* cleric barely gave Aqua a look. "Perhaps I could suggest you refrain from speaking that way? Otherwise, you'll impugn Sir Kazuma's reputation. Don't you think you and the others have contributed to his poor repute? ...And furthermore, what's wrong with a priest providing free support? I'm extending a hand of salvation to those parties who have no priest of their own. Are you saying that's a bad thing?"

"It's not a bad thing," the goddess (such as she was) replied to Serena's very reasonable argument.

"I'm not saying you necessarily have to go around casting free buffs on people," Serena said. "I recognize you seem to have more priestly power than I do, so I also won't criticize you for never having given anyone free help before... However, my actions are an embarrassment to no one and are proper and just. As such, I don't believe you have any right to stop me, do you?"

"No, ma'am," Aqua said, completely outmaneuvered. She looked down and scuffed her foot on the ground. "...Gosh, I lost..."

How could a goddess be outtalked by a priest? We looked over at Serena, and she smiled when she saw me watching her.

...Man, she *really* seemed like the more priestly of these two. Just then...

"...I don't like it—not one bit." This abrupt offer of an opinion came from our certified true punk Dust. I wasn't sure what Dust didn't like, but he was lolling against a table, glaring in Serena's direction. "I don't like it... I've never seen

such a priestly priest... Everyone else, they get one little support spell and they stop asking questions, but she can't fool me. When it comes to priesting, I know Aqua has a leg up on this girl. She even brought me back to life once. I know which team I'm on..... Don't like it; don't like it at all..."

I guess a twisted, nasty guy like Dust just wasn't built to cope with a beautiful, purehearted, humane woman like Serena.

So how come he was such good friends with me?

At any rate, it looked like there were quite a few adventurers in this Guild who really trusted Aqua. If nothing else, they'd known her a lot longer than Serena, who'd popped up just the other day.

Then a Guild employee turned to the gathered adventurers and said: "All right, adventurers! Let's throw ourselves into this hunt! Now, today's going to be a little bit different from normal..."

I guess she had been waiting for Serena to finish buffing everyone. For some reason, the Guild employees weren't putting hunt quests up on the board like they usually did. Instead, the girl talking had just a single piece of paper.

"It so happens that since last night, the area around the communal graveyard has been crawling with undead. And today we want you to go take care of them. The graveyard is too close to town, and there's no telling when the citizens might get hurt by this invasion. We request that all available priests join this mission!"

...A bunch of undead at the communal graveyard? Darkness, Megumin, and I all naturally looked at Aqua. We thought she was supposed to be doing regular purifications at the graveyard...

"What?! Why are you looking at me like that?! I purify that graveyard once a week, just like I'm supposed to! I'm not even half-assing it anymore!"

"...You do kind of have a history..." I looked at her skeptically in spite of her vigorous defense.

"Come on, everyone—don't look at me like that! I swear I'm doing my job this time! It's true! Fine, just you watch! Today I'll show you what it looks like when an Arch-priest really gets serious! Zombies? Skeletons? I can handle them all on

my own!"

By now, she was talking loud enough for the entire Guild to hear her.

3

Somebody was shouting: "What the hell's going on here?!"

We were at the communal cemetery. The final resting place of people with no money or adventurers with no family. A big plot of land right on the edge of town...and currently home to at least a couple hundred undead. The other adventurers looked a bit freaked out; no one had been expecting this many monsters.

No, no, I wasn't scared. It was cloudy right now. But hey, why should we be scared of undead monsters at noon, even with a little cloud cover? Riiight...?

"...H-hey, can I go home?"

"No, Kazuma, you can't. I would love to go running home—they smell terrible—but I'm about to show you how cool I can be. And then when the adventurers talk about the most beautiful priestess in Axel, they'll mean me again!"

I'm pretty sure no one actually called her that. Ever.

But man, did it stink. It stank so bad. Zombies reek enough on their own; a crowd this big was bound to be stomach-churningly nasty.

"Fine, go nuts, Aqua. If you charge in there, they'll probably all race after you. Then you can hit them with your biggest purification spell."

"You've got it! I admit I'm not eager to have *this* many undead chasing me, but..."

One person watching saw how put off Aqua was by the smell. "In that case, allow me..." Megumin began quietly chanting her explosion magic, but Darkness grabbed her from behind.

"Good, Darkness, you hang on to Megumin there. Don't want her blowing up the entire cemetery. Go for it, Aqua!"

All the other adventurers were so overwhelmed by the stench that we were the only ones to get anywhere near the mob of zombies. A few of the others attacked with ranged magic or projectile weapons, but it didn't really seem to be getting them anywhere. Meanwhile, Aqua and I worked our way closer to the herd. I expected them to fixate on us and come after us in a frenzy.

"Stop it, Darkness! Let me go! It would feel so good to drop an Explosion right on them! At this rate, Aqua will purify them all first! But my Explosion could wipe them out so dramatically!"

"It would wipe out this whole cemetery! As a Crusader who serves the gods, I can't allow you to desecrate a graveyard!"

As Megumin and Darkness argued, Aqua and I made contact with the undead. The other adventurers, who knew that Aqua was a decent Arch-priest if nothing else, waved their weapons and tried to get the monsters' attention. But none of their shouting could distract the undead from their favorite target: Aqua...!

"...Uh... What?"

"They're not coming this way."

The undead were busy attacking the most conspicuous adventurers.

"Maybe it's like, you know, the last of your little bit of godliness finally trickled away, and they can sense it."

"I'll prove to them I'm still a deity by dropping some divine punishment on you right here and now, you dumb NEET. And I guarantee you'll end up in hell!" Aqua ground her teeth and glared at me.

"Hey, then I'll get to party with Vanir and everyone."

"This sucks! I hate the way you know somebody everywhere!"

Aqua finally gave up going after me and got back to business. She might not be much of a goddess, but she was still divine. I teased her about being the goddess of toilets or party tricks or whatever, but she had power to spare. All the adventurers around us looked relieved just to hear Aqua start chanting. And then her spell was ready...

"*Turn Undead!*" Her shout echoed around the cemetery, which was

enveloped in a white light. The moment the light touched the monsters...

““...Huh?”” Aqua and I said.

The undead didn’t collapse into dust. In fact, they looked fine. And they seemed to interpret Aqua’s spell as an attack, because they suddenly all turned on her...!

“Huhhhh?! Aqua, I think we can safely say that hunting undead is your one and only real talent! So use it! Use it now!”

“I don’t get it! This doesn’t make any sense! Maybe those things aren’t undead! I mean, I’ve never seen zombies with red eyes! Hey, Kazuma, where are you going?! We’re party members, right? Comrades?!”

Aqua grabbed my shirt as I tried to escape and wouldn’t let go. Seeing Aqua’s magic—our one true hope—fail so spectacularly, the other adventurers went from looking on placidly to panicking. In the middle of it all:

“*Turn Undead!*”

Serena’s voice carried across the cemetery. She generated a wind that felt like a shock wave. And the undead started collapsing like marionettes with their strings cut.

“““Ooooohhh!”””

As all the other adventurers watched, the entire crowd of undead in the graveyard turned back into inert corpses, at just the single spell of Serena’s.

So what had been shaping up to be a massive battle turned out to be over in a flash. Apparently, the Guild had been assuming the job would take us all day, so they hadn’t prepared any other hunt quests. That meant all of us had the afternoon off. And when a bunch of adventurers suddenly have time to kill...

“Hey, you’re something else! How about you join our party? We do have one Advanced Class of our own!”

“Nah, join *us*! We’re pretty famous, if I may say so myself!”

“You should party up with us! We’re all women here, so there’s nothing to worry about, if you know what I mean!”

"...Ahem, thank you, but... I only want to join Sir Kazuma's party..."

Back at the Guild, Serena was mobbed and looking a little uncomfortable. Why had her magic worked when Aqua's hadn't? That was still a mystery, but there was one thing we knew.

"Behold! I shall throw these pinewood shoes into the cup on the table from this far away. And then the cup will sprout...!"

"I think you've got entirely the wrong idea right now." Aqua was trying to do some kind of party trick, but the other adventurers were too busy convincing Serena to join them to notice her.

"...The cup will...will sprout...a beautiful, organic matsutake mushroom....." Her voice got smaller and smaller. "It'll...sprout right up...? It will!" Clearly feeling dejected that no one was paying any attention to her, Aqua tossed the shoes into the cup all the same with a splash. And when she did, something sprouted right up...

"...Hey, tell me how you did that. Organic matsutake mushrooms aren't supposed to grow this season. Heck, maybe you could make two or three..." I swiped the gorgeous mushroom from the cup and was about to demand a few more, but Aqua slumped silently across the table and didn't move.

Megumin patted her head reassuringly. Darkness remained standing beside the table, a thoughtful hand at her mouth.

"Are you sure about this, Serena?" an adventurer was asking. "You did pretty much all the work this time. You sure you're okay with us splitting the reward? You don't want anything?"

"I am a priest. If I have a place to sleep and food enough to survive, that's quite adequate for me," Serena said with a smile, earning a sigh of admiration from the others. Not only was she sexy, but her personality and abilities were pure priest.

"....." I stared at Serena for a moment, then looked at Aqua without a word, but she didn't move a muscle from her spot on the table. "...Hey, I think you're losing this one. Can you live with that as a professional priest?"

".....Leave me alone. I'm a minor goddess, the patron of the Axis Church. I

don't want or need to become a major one. I'm perfectly happy looking after my handful of maniacal followers. You heard what that punk Dust said, right? He said he backed me. There might not be many, but a few people see me for who I am. So I don't feel like a loser..."

"I knew you were different from the moment I saw you! Unlike a certain disappointing excuse for an Arch-priest, you're real decent! I love how you're not polluted by money!"

That was Dust's voice, and he was talking to Serena. Our resident punk, who always needed more cash, had been suckered in by the excellent reward and had flipped like a pancake.

"...Welp, you heard the man."

"...Kazuma, you'll be my ally to the bitter end, right?"

Aqua never looked up from the table, but I could hear her sniffling.

4

It had been a few days since Serena came to town.

"Hey, Miss Serena, I got a little boo-boo here during a hunt. Could you fix it for me?"

"Yes, of course, with pleasure. Let me see it."

"Serena! Me next, please!"

"Oh, Serena, you're an absolute goddess!"

We were at the tavern in the Adventurers Guild. One particular table had sort of turned into Serena's base of operations, and it was surrounded by injured adventurers.

"I don't like this one bit...!" Aqua, who had let herself behind the reception desk, was watching Serena's table, crouching beneath the counter so only her head was visible.

"Miss Aqua, I'm afraid we can't have you back here," one of the receptionist

ladies said, but Aqua completely ignored her. The employees looked at me. I guess they wanted me to do something.

"...Hey, Aqua, you're gonna cause trouble back there. I'm pretty sure Serena can see you anyway. Come on out."

"...She's got a lot of nerve, stealing my fans right out from under my nose. I'm usually the one over there, curing adventurers and being treated like a goddess."

You've never done that even once in your life.

Darkness had left with Megumin early in the morning, saying there was something she wanted to investigate. This wasn't the first time, either. It had been a daily occurrence ever since the priest called Serena had arrived. As for me, I'd been lounging in my room when Aqua had attacked me and dragged me out to the Guild...

"I'm telling you, no matter how closely you watch her, you're never going to find a weak point. Let's just go home and get some sleep." That was why we were here. And no matter how I tried to insist, Aqua refused to come out from behind the counter.

"No way. There's something I really don't like about that woman. She's too perfect. She's beautiful *and* sexy *and* sweet *and* kind to everybody. And on top of all that, she's a great priest. She's too perfect, I tell you. That's perfection on a level you only see in goddesses like Eris and me."

"I'm not even going to dignify that with a response," I said. I watched Serena tending to the adventurers. When she noticed me, she smiled and waved. Adventurers crowded around her like an entourage, each waiting their turn for Serena to heal them. Actually, to be perfectly honest, most of them hardly seemed injured at all—they were just hangers-on.

"Hey, Kazuma, I've got a favor to ask," Aqua said suddenly, finally standing up. Then she stuck out her pointer finger at me. "Make a tiny scratch on my finger with your dagger. I'm going to have that woman heal me."

"...You can heal yourself. What, you need a reason to go say hi? Don't. Serena's getting along with all the other adventurers right now. If you do

something to undermine her, you might make enemies of everyone here.” I tried to warn her, but she seemed to be set on not listening. She just stood there pointing her finger at me until I gave in and pulled out my knife...

“...Hey, you asked me to do this. Don’t move your hand.”

“Yeah, but I’m still a little scared. Just a tiny, tiny scratch, right? Like, maybe there won’t even be any blood. Okay?” She kept sliding her finger away from my dagger every time I got close. I was still wondering how I let myself get roped into this sort of thing as I moved the knife ever so carefully toward Aqua’s finger...

“Whoops, my pointer finger disappeared. Which one’s the real finger?” Just before my knife touched her, Aqua playfully pulled her finger back...

Without a word, I grabbed Aqua’s hand and stabbed it.

“...! ...!!” She snatched her hand back, too agonized to make a sound.

“There, now get going,” I said, and that’s what she did, shuffling over to Serena, shooting me angry, tearful glances as she went.

I watched from a distance, wondering what Aqua was up to as she stumbled over to Serena. At first, I thought maybe she was pretending to be drunk as a way of getting close to her. When she got near the front of the line, though, she started saying, “Excuse meeee. As you can see, I’m suuper hurt here. Won’t you please let a poor, weak girl through?” So she wasn’t going for drunkard after all. She was trying to pretend to be grievously injured.

The adventurer at the front of the line scowled. “Aqua, you can take care of yourself, can’t—? E-er, okay, go right ahead, okay, please just stop threatening me with your weird movements...!” The adventurer looked downright terrified and gave his place to Aqua...

“Hold it right there.”

...or was about to when Serena stopped him. She was staring right at Aqua.

“...?” Aqua looked back at her so blankly, you could practically see the question mark over her head.

“I won’t ask why you don’t simply heal yourself. But you are a priest, are you

not? It's your duty to care for the wounded. And yet, you push aside the injured so that you may be healed? Don't you think that's rather repugnant, as a priest?"

"I do," Aqua said earnestly, nodding at Serena's tongue-lashing.

Darn right you do. It is repugnant. Serena's totally in the right.

"I'm not saying I won't heal you because you're a priest. But you're not the only one here who's suffering. So won't you be so kind as to wait your turn?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry." Aqua apologized to the adventurer she had tried to shove out of the way, then went to the back of the line.

...Geez, not sure how I felt about a goddess being put in her place by a priest.

Aqua kept pressure on her wound, patiently waiting her turn until finally she was at the front of the line. She stood before Serena and held out her wounded hand. "Doctor, I was stabbed by a passing dumbass NEET. Can you heal this wound? Or am I going to die?"

The wound was little more than a scratch.

Serena took Aqua's hand, covering it with her own palm and giving a dry smile. "This is a very light wound; it will be better soon... *Heal!* There, that should do it..."

Serena removed her hand to reveal...a wound. It hadn't healed at all.

"...?!"

Serena looked at the hand, frozen in shock, while Aqua pointedly started to snuffle and sob. "Doctor, I am going to die, aren't I?! The wound is so bad, even you can't help me, isn't it? Or did you choose not to heal it because you hate me, Doctor? Answer me, Doctor!"

I guess Aqua had resisted Serena's healing magic. Come to think of it, back when Wiz tried to teach me Drain Touch, Aqua had resisted the skill as a way of harassing Wiz. And if she could stand up against a Lich, a priest's healing spell would be a piece of cake...

"Heal! Heal! ...I d-don't understand it... Why isn't it working?"

"Why aren't you making it better, Doctor? Don't tell me that out of sheer jealousy toward me, the number one priest in this Guild, you don't want to make me better?! Or is it that you *can't* do it, because you suck at healing? Ooh...I'm going to die. This wound is going to get infected, and I'm going to die...! Kazuma, Kazuma! Listen to me! This woman won't heal me!"

I went over to the wailing Aqua. Die of bacterial infection? Heck, poison didn't even work on her; she could purify it just by touching it. I kept this little quip to myself, though, as I stood behind Aqua.

"When I'm dead, I want you to build a tomb in the middle of town, bigger than the pyramids. And I want you to put little treasures from my room in it, the stuff you always call junk. Emperor Zel can be the guard. Make offerings three times a day—morning, noon, and night—of wine and delicious snacks. Carve my epitaph on the front. It should say: *The great and wonderful—*"

I smacked the jabbering moron on the back of the head with the hilt of my dagger. "It'll say, *The great and idiotic Aqua rests here*. I'm sorry, Serena. Come on—let's go!"

"...! ...!!" Aqua pressed her hands to the back of her head as I grabbed her by the collar and tried to drag her off. The looks the other adventurers were giving us were almost physically painful. We'd clearly worn out our welcome. But just then...

"Um... Sir Kazuma, I have something very important to talk to you about. Might I have a moment of your time?"

The question came from Serena before we could leave.

When Aqua heard that, she immediately healed her own hand, practically bouncing to her feet. "I've had about enough of you! Leave our Kazuma alone! Is it not enough for you to have stolen my place as the Guild's most beautiful priest? Do you have to steal Kazuma away, too? Kazuma here is a very weak-willed individual who turns into putty in the hands of a younger woman if she so much as calls him Big Brother, so please just stop, won't you?"

"Ooh, you're in for it now! Just come with me," I said, about to drag Aqua off again, when one of the other adventurers said:

"The Guild's most beautiful priest?"

““...Pfft!””

"Who laughed?! Who was it?! I heard you! Come on out! Hey, I know you! I resurrected you once! If you're going to laugh at me, then pay up! Resurrection is a superpowerful magic spell that isn't normally cheap, so cough up the cash!"

Aqua was off and running.

"H-hey, it wasn't me! I didn't laugh... Hey, stop dipping your finger in my wine! ...Hey, this is water! Why would you do a party trick with my wine?"



"It's not a trick; this is who I am! I've got your number! Say what you like! Every time you get into trouble with some big bounty or nasty enemy, you come crying to me for resurrection or healing or buffs, and I've never said no to you! Well, just you wait! I'm going to turn all the wine in this building into pure water!"

"Aqua, please stop! It's the Guild that will suffer the most from that! Please stop!" A collection of Guild employees and adventurers tried to tackle Aqua before she could make it to the wine barrels.

"Let's get out of here, Sir Kazuma. What a ruckus... Perhaps we could go somewhere a little quieter..." Serena smiled at me, looking like she could barely stand the noise in the Guild.

Epilogue



Leaving Aqua to her chaos, Serena led me out of the Guild and over to an abandoned side alley far from the middle of town. About the only shop around here was a certain magical-item place that didn't attract many customers. If she just wanted to talk to me alone, a café would have sufficed...

Serena seemed to sense my suspicion, because she smiled. "I confess, it's not the sort of thing one would wish to discuss in a café..." She glanced around, then sat down on the roadside. "Not many people come by here, and if someone does, we can just change the subject. Yes, I think this would be the best place for a nice quiet chat."

Her smile vanished, replaced by a look of total seriousness.

Her story was quite the tragedy. And not one that could be summed up in a couple of words. No one who heard it could have felt anything but pity and sorrow for her.

"...And finally, that person was swallowed up by a dark power... That was when they gained the name by which the world knows them to this day. The Demon King. The Demon King doesn't personally wish to harm the people of this world...!"

"That's a hell of a story... To think, some manga-like crap like that would actually happen...!" I was feeling a little bit shocked.

Serena looked puzzled. "'Manga'...? ...In any event, that's how a beautiful woman came to be known as the Demon King. She's under a curse that makes

her hideous and repugnant, but that curse is on the cusp of being broken... Please, Sir Kazuma, you are the one chosen by the gods. I know you must long to defeat the archfiend who torments all peoples. But the Demon King was once a pitiful young woman herself! Could I not ask you to put off destroying her? And if you say you simply cannot...! If you simply must destroy the Demon King, please let me join your party and bring me to her...!" Serena grasped my hands and looked at me beseechingly.

What a dramatic twist...! This was it! This was what I'd wanted from this world all along...! Not a goddess who gets eaten by frogs or a general of the Demon King who puts sugar on the crusts of his bread. Not having to run away from cabbages or do manual labor even though I was supposed to be an adventurer. Not cat-eared orcs or fake elves...et cetera...

Yeah...everything had been wrong up until now. But even this world had a dramatic tragedy, a genuine fantasy tale waiting in it...! Yeah! It was everyone around me who had been nuts all along...!

"Hold on a moment, though. Serena, what makes you think the gods chose me? I want to be clear here. The only real reason I was involved in defeating all those bounty heads and generals and stuff was pretty much dumb luck."

Serena closed her eyes and shook her head gently. "I had a flash of insight the moment I heard your name. Do you know something, Sir Kazuma? Every once in a great while, a person of tremendous power appears in this world. They might be immensely intelligent or physically strong. They might have exceptional magical power or an unusual weapon. The exact manifestation varies, but they share one thing. The Demon King is very afraid of all of them."

The light bulb came on. She was talking about the cheaters from Japan.

"Yeah, um, I think I know what you mean. Did you believe I was one of them just because of my kind of unusual name? I'm real sorry, but I don't have any special power..."

"No, it wasn't because of your strange name!" Serena burst out. "It's true, those with special powers frequently have unusual names. But what led me to believe you were truly special...! It was the legendary swordsman who once posed such a threat to the Demon King. The moment I heard your name, I

knew. I knew you were a descendant of that swordsman!"

What—me?!

.....

"...Wait, why is that again?"

"It's your name, Satou. That was the name of the legendary sword fighter. Could that possibly be coincidence? No, it cannot!"

Uh, Satou's one of the most common names where I come from. I bet that guy's totally unrelated to me.

But anyway.

"Look, Serena. I'm sorry, but there's one unavoidable fact: I'm an Adventurer, the weakest class. All that stuff you just said was exciting, for sure, and it sounds really cool. But look, defeating the Demon King just isn't something I'm going to do. I don't want to, and I'm not strong enough. Besides, if what you just said is true, isn't the curse on that beautiful woman about to break anyway? No way. Not happening. I don't have it in me to kill anyone. I can barely finish off humanoid monsters."

I knew I sounded pathetic, and I was sure Serena would be disappointed. But to my surprise, she looked downright relieved. "Powerless? Such humility... But I see... Very well. Heh, Sir Kazuma, you're a very kind man." She smiled at me as she spoke. Then she gave me a deep bow. "Very well, then, I shall—"

"Seresdina? Seresdina, is that you?!" someone exclaimed, interrupting our tender good-bye. It was...

"Oh, and Kazuma, too! What are you both doing here? My goodness, Kazuma, you certainly do have an affinity for generals of the Demon King! Me, Vanir, Seresdina! The two of you seem to be getting along famously."

It was the owner of the only store around here, the magical-item shop—Wiz.

"...Are you quite sure you have the right person? I'm a priest named Serena. You seem to have me confused with someone else."

"Since you've come all the way to Axel, Seresdina, won't you stop by my shop? Kazuma, you come, too. I'll make tea!"

Wiz hardly seemed to realize she was completely ignoring Serena's attempt to throw her off. Serena smiled and said to me, "Sir Kazuma, do you know this woman? Perhaps you could tell her she's got the wrong person."

"Seresdina, why won't you look at me? And why are you affecting such an elevated way of talking? You can't have forgotten me, can you? It's me, Wiz! The Demon King let me live at the castle, remember? I was your colleague!"

Wiz took Serena by the shoulders and started shaking her, but she just kept smiling. Finally, unable to take it anymore, she peeled Wiz's hands off her. "Geez... Would you stop that? I am Serena, and this Seres-whoever-she-is who you keep talking about is someone else, so won't you please leave me alone?"

Wiz gasped. "What are you saying? You're obviously Seresdina, from every angle! Seresdina, the Dark Priest! The expert strategist, the one who takes advantage of her status as the lone human among the Demon King's followers to infiltrate human towns!"

"I think I see some split ends in your hair! Let me fix them for you! *Heal!* *Heal!*"

"Ow! That hurts! S-Seresdina, what are you doing?! Ooooh, I don't like it! Fine, forget about it. I was going to show you an interesting item I just got in stock, but forget it...! Kazuma, do come visit me when you have a chance, won't you?" Wiz, remaining polite to me to the very end, stormed off back to her shop.

Serena watched her go, then brought her hands together as if trying to calm herself. "...What a very odd woman," she said. "When I cast Heal on her, she started to smoke."

"Well, she is a Lich. But I assume you already knew that, Seresdina," I said.

Serena smiled at me, hoping I wouldn't press, and I smiled back at her. She didn't flinch. I have to say, I was impressed. Eventually, Serena looked down at the ground before looking back up at me with conviction.

"I swear it's not like that!"

"Huh."

So she still wasn't going to give up. She was committed; I had to give her that.

"It's true, as she says, that I'm Seresdina, a general of the Demon King. But you must listen to me. The story I told you was true! I'm the older sister of the girl who was transformed by the curse into the Demon King. My desperate desire to rescue my beloved sister led me into the archfiend's service! Ahhh... Even now, thinking of my sister makes me—!"

That's when it happened. Smack in the middle of Serena's impassioned performance, a tall man showed up behind her.

"Thinking of your little sister? O you, man who's worried that this woman has been interrupted just at the best part and wonders if there is indeed a curse. Only moments ago, my shopkeeper who happily orders the most ridiculous junk came in disappointed, to inform me that you were nearby. In gratitude, I shall address your concern. Won't you come to our shop?"

Serena must have recognized the voice, because she flinched. It belonged to another of the Demon King's former generals, the masked demon Vanir. Slowly, ever so slowly, Serena turned around, and her eyes met Vanir's.

".....H-hello and pleased to meet you. My name is Serena. Are you an acquaintance of Sir Kazuma's? Ahem, Sir Kazuma, it seems you're quite a busy man, so I think I'll take my leave..."

"Pleased to pretend to meet you, O pure and not-remotely-suspicious-in-any-way priest. Goodness, don't be in such a hurry to leave. As a sign of goodwill, I believe I'll provide you with a most refreshing item our shopkeeper (so recently turned into a chunk of charcoal) happily got in stock."

Serena looked openly relieved at this. Vanir produced something that looked a bit like a cup of shaved ice. "Behold, today's recommendation! Perfect for the adventurer out in the field, this is Insect Choleran. Don't be fooled by the adorable name; its power is immense. It casts a potent death curse on the immediate area, effective against anything smaller than a rat. Which is to say, place it by your pillow, and you need not fear the bedbugs biting!"

"Huh?!" Serena and I both said in spite of ourselves. I guess there were mosquitoes and stuff in this world, too. It wasn't a problem for me at the moment, but that thing actually sounded pretty useful. But then again...

"There's gotta be some nasty side effect, right? Like, sometimes it kills people, too, or something?"

"Perish the thought. It doesn't work on any living being larger than a rat. Only rats and smaller creatures die," Vanir responded with unusual frankness. Geez, it was starting to seem pretty good...

"That's perfect! You mean the quick little dark-shelled Kings of Fear that run around by my pillow would die, too?! I'll take one...!"

"Pleasure doing business!"

Serena's appraisal gave me pause. "...Yo, Vanir, you mean *anything* smaller than a rat will die, not just bugs?"

"Absolutely," Vanir replied.

"...Okay, so what about the bacteria and stuff inside a human body?"

"Dead as a doornail."

What a piece of junk! I didn't know much about bacteria or mitochondria or whatever, but I was getting the feeling this thing wasn't worth my time.

Serena hesitantly tried to back out of the deal, but Vanir said, "Careful, O first-time customer. As a businessman, I guard the personal information of my customers in complete secrecy, but if you return that, you will no longer be a customer. Hmm, I see it. Yes, I see someone's future... Someone turned into a punching bag by the other adventurers after a certain masked gentleman reveals all about them..."

"I'll buy it! I'll take it immediately! How much?!"

I felt sorry for her.

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, I am in unusually high spirits today, because for once, the junk acquired by my witless shopkeeper has proven valuable! Normally I would charge you 400,000 eris for this item, but today, including a special getting-to-know-you price and a good-spirits discount, I'll make it 1,200,000 eris! That's eight hundred eris less!"

"That's *more* expensive, you bastard! How do you know exactly how much money I have anyway? Don't you go *seeing* things about me!" Serena shouted,

but nonetheless she flung her wallet at Vanir. Suddenly, she sounded like a particularly lowbrow adventurer.

Vanir caught the wallet out of the air, saying, “Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, see you then, boy! Incidentally, O short-tempered first-timer! Your bad vibes are delicious! Absolutely delectable! Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Laughing merrily, he trotted off toward the shop.

Serena, the general of the Demon King, vacantly watched him go, then said:

“...A-all my money...”

...I felt really sorry for her.

Afterword

Thanks for picking up this book!

I claimed I was working from home, but my editor figured out that I wasn't really doing much work at all, so now I have a conference room at Kadokawa to serve as my chamber of solitude, and I have to go there every day. I thought I became an author because I didn't like the idea of having to commute, so I'm not sure how this happened.

Okay, yes I am: It's because I didn't do my job, and I'm sorry. I'm a published author now, but I haven't grown out of my feelings of home security guard-ism even a little bit.

In this volume, the two rivals finally settle their differences—well...not really. They'll likely be rivals forever.

The two of them actually emerged from the concept of having two opposed personalities that nonetheless somehow resembled each other, and I suspect they'll keep fighting and loving in equal measure from here on out.

And now, the story finally starts to reach its climax. Another general of the Demon King's army has appeared, and they're after Axel for real. There goes Kazuma's peaceful life!

Obviously, nothing that serious is ever going to happen in this story, so don't sweat it—just enjoy the next volume.

Okay, that's enough talk about the current volume; let's talk about some stuff that's coming up. The latest volume of my new series, book two of *Combatants Will Be Dispatched!*, features a crossover with *Konosuba*, so I'd be pleased if interested people would check it out.

They've also decreed a theatrical *Konosuba* anime. It's such a big announcement that I almost feel like it must be for someone else—but all of

this is thanks to the readers and other supporters who have encouraged me all this time. Thank you, thank you so much...

Which leads nicely into my next topic, which is the many people I caused trouble for on the way to this volume getting published.

To Mishima, who never fails to come up with awesome illustrations even though the manuscripts are continually delayed, thank you so much!

Thanks also to my editor I, the design team, all the proofers and salespeople and everyone else—I hope you'll stick with me until the end...! To all of you, I can only say both I'm sorry and thank you so much for seeing this through to publication.

And my deepest thanks goes out to all my readers who have picked up this book!

Natsume Akatsuki

AFTERWORD



Autographed
2018.

Kurone
Mishima 2018

NEXUS



Just who exactly is
that priest?

She's a general of
the Demon King.



Look at her, trying to steal
the title of Axel's most
beautiful priest from
me—who is she?!

She's a general of
the Demon King.



Huh?! Don't tell me she's an
assassin looking for revenge
on the Dustiness family...!

She's a general of the
Demon King!

COMING
SOON!!

Next time! Danger
closes in on Axel, and
things get real serious...!

Yeah, not likely.



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

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