

KONOSUBA: GOD'S BLESSING ON THIS WONDERFUL WORLD! 11!

The
Arch-
Wizard's
Little
Sister



Natsume
Akatsuki

ILLUSTRATION BY
Kurone
Mishima





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The Arch-Wizard's Little Sister

11

NATSUME AKATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION BY
KURONE MISHIMA



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Konosuba: God's Blessing on This Wonderful World!, Vol. 11

NATSUME AKATSUKI

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KONO SUBARASHII SEKAI NI SHUKUFUKU WO!, Volume 11: DAI MAHOUTSUKAI NO IMOUTO

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First published in Japan in 2017 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

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New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: April 2020

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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) 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: 978-1-97533236-5 (paperback)

978-1-9753-3237-2 (ebook)

E3-20200404-JV-NF-ORI

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Characters



Prologue



So there we were. All of us in a room at Belzerg's royal castle.

"Ahhh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-haaaa-ha-ha-ha! Here, Kazuma, look at this! Look! I used the brochure from the shopping district to make a demon mask!"

"Pfffft-ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! This is unreal! Are you sure this thing used to be a brochure? It looks great! I think we've found your calling!"

We had brought Iris safely back to the castle, after which we'd accepted Claire's invitation to get crazy drunk.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Ooooh! I, the all-seeing demon, shall make a prediction. O young woman sitting there sober all by herself, looking exasperated. Alcohol requires carbohydrates to break down. If you start drinking right now, you might be able to soften up those angular muscles a bit."

"Bah-ha-ha-ha! God, you sound just like him!"

"Sh-shut your mouths, you drunks. And, Aqua, don't call my muscles 'angular'!"

Aqua was busy imitating Vanir with her handmade brochure-mask, but Darkness, blushing furiously, wasn't amused.

"I wish you would let *me* have some! I am old enough to get married, so why must I suffer being treated like a child?!" Megumin, the only one not allowed to drink, turned on Darkness.

"L-look, Megumin, it's not really a question of age. It's, you know,

proportions, right? Maybe once you develop a little more. . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Pfffft-ah-ha-ha-ha!" I chortled. "She's got your number!"

"She does not have any number at all! What do you find so funny anyway, you drunkard? Give me that wine you're holding! . . . Hey, what are you doing? Get your hand away from— Yaaaagh!"

When Megumin tried to steal the wine I was holding, I happily Drain Touched her, sending Aqua into a fresh fit of hysterics.

"Ahhh-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha! You've got her number!"

"Enough numbers! What is wrong with you, Kazuma? Thanks to you stealing my MP, I can't fire off my explosion for the day! I will have you return that magic to me later!"

She was really upset, but I just kept laughing. "Numberrrr!"

"This man!"

She lunged for me. I ignored her, looking amiably around the crowded room.

"Kazuma, hey, Kazuma! Let's drink this castle dry tonight!"

"Sounds like a plan! And then I'll be doing Create Water without using any magic at all, if you know what I mean!"

"This man is the worst! Do you hear the filth he is spewing?"

"Hey, we need some backup in here! Somebody come get these two back to their rooms!"

Aqua and I, though, were pretty much ignoring Megumin and Darkness.

"Hey, Kazuma, today was really great! I've never gotten so much recognition in my whole time here!"

"You said it! Whenever we do a good deed around this place, we get stuck with a huge debt or put through the wringer, or they send us away with a plaque or a few pennies!"

I savored the memory of the day we'd just had.

Chapter 1

An Awakening for This LoliNEET!



1

That day, a shock ran through the nation.

Belzerg, which shared a border with the Demon King's territory, had always been a martial country. And now their princess had come back from a neighboring land with the sobriquet Dragonslayer.

My party had gone to Elroad as Iris's bodyguards, and boy, had it earned us a lot of trouble. Trying to get money to help us fight the Demon King had been like pulling teeth, and then I had ended up in a gambling contest with the prince before the whole thing culminated in a dragon hunt. And then it turned out the prime minister of the place had been a doppelgänger all along—a fact we discovered, thus saving the country from peril.

And how had I contributed to all this? Mostly I had given the prince the runaround with my ridiculous gambling game, but the practical effect was to add a new chapter to my legend. Plus, I had been able to take care of the absolute most important thing while we were there, which was to scuttle Iris's engagement.

And so everyone lived happily ever after, right. . . ?

"Welcome back, Master Kazuma! I can see I misjudged you! What you've

achieved is beyond anything I could have hoped for!"

After we had brought Iris safely back to the castle and given our report in the audience chamber, we were greeted by "White Suit" herself, Claire. She was practically glowing. My friends, showing uncommon sensitivity, all stood back and watched quietly while Claire and I chatted.

"Oh, really," I said, "it was all thanks to Iris's hard work. I hardly did anything at all."

"Such humility. . . In my mind, I was prepared to give up every penny of support from that country, so long as my dear Iris was free of that betrothal. But you got her out of the marriage, *and* got us our money, *and* saved their country in a moment of crisis. They'll owe us a lot for a very long time!" Claire's voice was virtually cracking with emotion; I guess for once she was being honest with me.

"Claire! How can you believe the breaking of my engagement would be more important than the money to support our military?! Without that funding, we wouldn't be able to resist the Demon King!"

"I have my priorities, milady. As long as you're safe, dear Iris, this nation and the Demon King can both go fu— Owww, ow, ow! Milady Iris, your journey seems to have made you uncharacteristically violent!"

Iris had looked like she was going in for a hug, but she ended up strangling Claire. The bodyguard turned to us, the little girl still hanging from her neck. "In any event, you truly have acquitted yourselves with distinction. I will give you any reward in my power—just say the word." She looked completely serious, but her face was growing redder and redder as Iris cut off her oxygen supply. Nonetheless, Claire seemed quietly but unmistakably happy.

A reward, huh?

In her own way, Claire was a lot like me, at least when it came to her intense affection for Iris.

"I think the reward's already been settled, don't you?" I said. Claire looked surprised, but then she remembered the promise we'd made before I set off for Elroad. In exchange for me breaking Iris's betrothal, she was going to tell me

stories of the princess's childhood. It was the smallest of promises, but still. . .

"Yes, I daresay you're right, Master Kazuma. Tonight, let me hold a banquet in your honor. And there, I will make good on your reward." She gave me a knowing look and said, "I'm going to keep you up all night."

""What?!"

Everyone but Aqua and me sounded positively shocked, provoking a little smile from the lady in the white suit. . .

"What's with this woman? Never seen anyone do a worse job of holding her liquor!"

We were about ten minutes into our banquet, and Claire, who'd had about half a glass of wine, was already looking like she wasn't long for this world. Maybe this particular banquet hall had been designed to cater to the Japanese people who showed up here, because it had been floored with straw tatami mats, even if they weren't very convincing ones.

"Urgh. . . Master Kazuma, I'm s-sorry. . .," Claire mumbled, her face red. She might have had a weird thing for little girls, but she was also a good noble daughter. I didn't exactly object to having her lean against me to keep herself upright. You ever have one of those moments when some beautiful girl falls asleep on the train and slumps against you? It was a bit like that.

"When did you and Claire get so close, Elder Brother?" Iris came over, holding a glass of juice and sounding a little cross.

"Ooh, whatsa matter, Iris? Jealous? Don't worry—your big bro is only into gorgeous ladies with great bodies. So. . ."

"."

There was a long pause. Er, gee. . . I guess when I thought about it *that* way, Claire kind of was my type. Iris was staring me down, and I found I didn't know what to say anymore. Eventually, Iris squeezed in between Claire and me, resting her drunken bodyguard's head on her knees. Boy, was Claire ever going to regret getting so drunk later.

Iris ran a hand over Claire's head, not looking at me as she said, "Elder

Brother, what will you do when this banquet is over? Are you going to go back to Axel?" She was so quiet, she almost sounded like she was talking to herself.

"Hmm, good question. I've been so busy banishing dark gods and keeping you safe and everything. A guy likes to take it easy once in a while." Though, to be fair, "once in a while" was a better description of how often I went on adventures than how often I took it easy.

". . . If all you want is to relax, couldn't you do that here? We have many empty rooms. There's no need for you to hurry home, is there?" Iris still wouldn't make eye contact with me; she looked down as if checking on Claire. But now it was obvious what she was really after. She used to literally hide behind Claire, never say anything for herself, always speak through her attendants, and just generally seem like a very quiet girl. Now she could be quite demanding, although I couldn't imagine who she had gotten that from. As charming as it had been to see her looking around sort of nervously and trying not to upset anyone, personally, I liked this more natural Iris better.

"Well, Iris, if you insist, maybe I'll stick around a little longer."

I'd gone toe-to-toe with a lot of the castle's soldiers the time I broke in here pretending to be a thief. My face had been hidden, and I'd been trying to use a fake voice, but I could never be sure when someone might recognize my look or behavior and realize who I was. So as happy as I was that Iris adored me so much, sticking around too long would definitely be flirting with danger.

"I wish. . ."

Iris's voice broke into my thoughts. She spoke quietly, her stare still focused below eye level.

"I wish I could live with all of you. . ."

Then and there, I decided to stay at the castle.

2

"G'morning, Dragonslayer."

"Elder Brother, please stop with this 'Dragonslayer' business. . . Everyone in

the castle calls me that, and believe me, I would stop them, too, if I could. . .” Iris blushed and looked at the ground.

At Claire’s invitation, we had been given rooms in the castle. That’s right: The long, lazy days spending time with Iris that I had never stopped wishing for were finally back.

“Iris, Iris, listen. A dragonslayer isn’t something that just anyone can be. It’s the sort of thing countries throw parties to celebrate, right? Claire was practically bursting, she was so excited. Wouldn’t shut up about how she always knew you were going to be a big deal.”

“Please don’t pay Claire any mind—she’s already been to my room several times to make me repeat the story of how I slew the dragon.”

Not coincidentally, Claire had been to *my* room every day, too. Iris had killed the so-called Golden Dragon in a single blow, so there wasn’t too much to tell besides “*Iris nailed that dragon with some kind of awesome power,*” but Claire would show up every night before bed simply to hear me say that. She hadn’t been nearly so happy at first; she had spent a lot of her time muttering about me putting her precious Iris in danger. But by now, she was well and truly over the moon for the story of Iris’s exploits. She was so excited, in fact, that she didn’t seem to care that we spent day after day living the dissolute life at the castle. And she was so thrilled that we had broken Iris’s betrothal that sometimes we ended up drinking all night as she told me stories of Iris’s childhood.

“All right, your bro is going to wash his face and get changed. You wait in the courtyard. Let’s have the maids make us some tuna-mayo rice balls and have a little picnic.”

“Okay! I love tuna-mayo rice balls!”

Iris had acquired a taste for junk food on our little trip and had taken to having her staff prepare it for her. At first, I’d seen them giving me the stink eye, like *What did he feed our future queen?* but when they saw how happy Iris was digging in to this stuff, they couldn’t stay upset. As for Iris, I’d bet that after eating nothing but fancy-schmancy palace food for so long, it was a breath of fresh air to get to just enjoy eating something with her friends.

"Very well, Elder Brother. I'll see you in a few minutes!" Iris said and then went off to arrange lunch.

So passed our first three days in the castle. I had been going with Megumin on her daily explosions, but I wasn't alone.

"Surely you needn't accompany us as well?" Megumin said. "In fact, I can hardly countenance exposing the princess of our very nation to the dangers beyond the town walls."

"Don't worry so much. Earning the title of Dragonslayer seems to have gained me a bit more leeway in going out and about. And with all the powerful monsters around the capital, I'm much more concerned about Elder Brother."

Yep, Iris had started coming along with us, too. She and Megumin had seemed weirdly close ever since we returned from Elroad. The way Iris occasionally slipped into calling Megumin "Chief" or something nagged at me, but in any event, I definitely thought these were the two girls who had the highest Affection for me right now. Maybe Iris insisted on joining us because she didn't want to leave Megumin and me alone together.

Not to sound too full of myself, but with these two girls, I felt like I could get somewhere if I really wanted to. All it would take was a little push.

. . .Okay, maybe not with both of them. Megumin was one thing, but even I wasn't enough of a lolicon to try to put the moves on Iris. But in the future, when Iris, y'know, grew up? Definite possibility that she and Big Bro might get married. Come to think of it, maybe the most important thing to do right now was to stick around the capital so I could chase off any other guys who might be interested in her. Then I would gradually go from her beloved big brother to someone she thought about as a man, and then finally. . .

"Kazuma, we're here, yes? This is my favorite explosion spot. Monsters like to hide in the shadows of those boulders, so I get to let off a satisfying blast *and* collect scads of experience points." Megumin had come to a halt, and now she was looking me square in the eye.

Oops, gotta get my head out of the clouds.

"Okay, well, do your thing and let's go home. . . By the way, I've been wanting

to ask both of you: How do you feel about me?” I tried to make the question sound as natural as I could. Nice and cool, keeping eye contact.

“Well, that was very sudden. What do you mean by that? Your eccentricity has come to the fore with all the time you have had to kill recently. I think, for example, that you and Aqua might be well advised to stop going to the courtyard and taking it upon yourselves to prune the shrubbery. Aqua creates artifacts of horticultural genius, but that dog you fashioned, Kazuma, has not been well received.”

That was supposed to be a bear.

As if Megumin wasn’t bad enough, Iris piled on, too: “Elder Brother, no matter how much time you have on your hands, you must stop going to the training grounds and giving the soldiers random tips. . . It would be one thing if you had the strength to back up your instruction, but you’ve only earned a reputation among the troops as ‘*some strange visitor who talks a lot more than he wins*’ . . .”

“Let’s forget about what I’ve been doing or not doing—I have to pass the time somehow! Look, what I meant was. . .you know. Do you like me or hate me or. . .something in between? Just, you know, in general terms. I want to hear it from you personally.”

So much for acting natural. I looked at each of the girls in turn.

“As I’ve said more than once, Kazuma, I quite like you. What brought this on all of a sudden?”

“M-me too, Elder Brother. I I-I-I. . .li. . .”

“Okay, got it, Big Bro is sorry. A for effort, Iris; I’ve heard all I need to. And, Megumin, glad to know you still feel the same way.” I tried to act as nonchalant as I could.



"I must say, Kazuma, something seems a little unusual about you today. Of course, you are unusual every day, but you sound even stranger than is typical."

"Er, really, Elder Brother, you're being a little...creepy..."

"Hush, Iris! You may think such things, but you mustn't say them!"

Okay, so this wasn't quite how I'd envisioned this conversation going. My heart took some minor damage, but it wasn't that different from what I'd expected. I wondered what might happen as these two got older. If they would start fighting over me.

"Look, girls, there's room enough in my heart for both of you. I'm not going to forget about the other person, so don't you worry."

"Iris, I do not understand quite why, but I feel a flash of anger. Let us give this man a bit of a beating before I do my daily explosion."

"You are very creepy today, Elder Brother. Did you eat something you shouldn't have?"

Notwithstanding such slings and arrows, my new life resting on my laurels in the castle was mostly pretty peaceful...

My days as a castle-dwelling NEET started early.

"Heidel! Heiidel!"

Why? Because now that I had butlers and maids keeping me in the lap of luxury, I didn't want to waste one minute of my time sleeping.

"You called, Master Kazuma Satou? Would you, perhaps, like your morning coffee now? Or will you have breakfast in bed? For the first meal of the day today, we have miso soup with foie gras, just as you requested, sir."

Heidel, the same butler who had been assigned to me before, was a very quick thinker.

"Breakfast in bed sounds good. But bring me my coffee first. And—"

"Shall I summon your maid Mary, ensuring she's wearing her shorter-than-average skirt?"

Heidel, my man, it's like you're reading my mind. I wanted to slap him on the

back. I guess that's how you get to be a servant for royalty.

"That's my butler, Heidel. I love that you remember what I like."

"And for my part, sir, I could not be happier that you seem to have remembered my name. Allow me to place a flower vase somewhere precarious to make it easier for you to tease Miss Mary."

Ahhh! I loved a man who knew his business. I nodded in satisfaction, took a delicate sip from the coffee Heidel had prepared for me, opened the newspaper, and started scanning the headlines.

Now that I was living in the castle, I was practically a celebrity.

"So I see there are more Snow Sprites than usual. The Guild is even raising the bounty on them in hopes of avoiding an especially harsh winter. That won't be good for the harvest next year. Heidel, take some money from my bank account and buy some futures."

"Yes, Master Satou. And for which goods would you like to buy these futures?"

Which goods?

". . . Uh, you know, stuff that seems likely to be affected. Crops where the harvest is going to suffer if it gets cold."

"Yes, sir. I will take care of it."

That was my Heidel; he would never embarrass his master.

"Good, you do that. By the way, what's my schedule look like today?" I quickly recovered and resumed sipping my coffee; Heidel pulled out a notebook.

"Your first morning appointment is with Lady Aqua. The two of you will be looking at the treasures in the royal treasury and pretending to be an appraisal team. After that, you will execute Operation: Wild Party in the castle courtyard using Lady Aqua's party tricks. The stated goal of the operation is to interfere with Lady Iris's studies. . . Ahem." He flipped the page and continued expressionlessly. "In the afternoon, you and Lady Megumin will go outside the city for one of your 'explosion experiments.' After that, you'll be taking in the armor shop with Lady Dustiness."

I set my coffee cup on the table beside the bed, shaking my head in annoyance. “Sheesh, another busy day. And what about the evening? Any plans then?”

“None, sir. Lady Dustiness has been invited to a banquet, however; will you accompany her?”

Wow! Just how capable *was* this guy?

“Crash a party and stop Darkness from getting chatted up by any of the other guys? Better believe I’ll be there.”

“Very well, sir. I will make the arrangements.” Heidel bowed and began to remove my breakfast dishes.

“Good morning, Master Satou. For breakfast today, we have miso soup with plenty of truffles, just as you requested. How does it taste?”

“Like miso.”

“I see. I will prepare your coffee, so please enjoy your soup while you wait.”

I’d been in the castle for a week. I was good and used to the celebrity lifestyle now, my days packed but fulfilling.

“Heidel, what’s my schedule like for today?”

“This morning, you and Lady Megumin are going to the city newspaper to insist they let you write a special column. After that, Lady Aqua has invited you to help promote her Axis Church. In the afternoon, Lady Iris and Lady Dustiness have asked if you might join them in defeating monsters in the vicinity of the capital. And come evening, Lady Megumin is hosting an Explosion Appreciation Party to light up the night sky.”

Heidel managed to reel all this off without so much as breaking his stride as he got my coffee ready. I sipped my drink and shook my head. “Cancel that afternoon monster hunt. Tell Iris I’ll get serious about hunting with her starting tomorrow. Then move Megumin’s Explosion Appreciation Party up a bit. I expect Darkness will have another party tonight, and I need to be able to go with her.”

“Yes, sir, I’ll see that it’s done. Incidentally, Lady Dustiness has spoken to me

about your attendance at her social functions. She wishes you would stop. . .”

Heidel was very competent, but when it came to what women wanted, he could be a little dense. I wagged a finger at him. “You have a lot to learn, Heidel—that’s called being a *tsundere*. You pretend to hate what you really like. When she says *Don’t come*, that means *Come*.”

“I see—I have indeed been naive, sir. I admire your great experience of the world. Very well. It would not do for you to appear at the party empty-handed. Shall I arrange for a giant cake to be sent as a surprise for Lady Dustiness?”

Ahhh, this guy caught on fast. Now it was my turn to be impressed. “That’s a great idea; you do that. . . No, wait. That’s not interesting enough by itself. Let’s do this: Have them make a cake big enough for me to hide inside. We send *that* to the party and ask for Darkness by name. While she’s trying to figure out who could have sent it, the cake bursts open and I pop out from inside. What do you think?”

“I think you have the mind of a fox, Master Satou. I can practically envision the surprise on their faces now. I will see that it’s done.”

Then Heidel bowed and left the room.

Two weeks had passed since I’d become a celebrity, and I was well established at the castle by now, but there was one thing that bothered me.

“Good morning, Master Satou. For breakfast today, we have miso soup with caviar, just as you requested.” Heidel placed a tray with my breakfast beside my bed.

“Heidel, I appreciate how you go out of your way for me. Really, I do. But. . .there is one thing I don’t quite find satisfying about this life.”

Heidel looked at me in surprise, then bowed his head. “My sincere apologies, Master Satou. As a matter of fact, I have already observed this dissatisfaction in you.”

Ahhh, sweet competence. Heidel could even tell when I was unhappy.

“You are displeased with miso soup every day, are you not?”

“No! No, I’m not! I mean, now that you bring it up, there *is* something strange

about this soup! I know I ask for expensive ingredients every day, but why do you put them in the soup? Like this! When you put caviar in miso, it all ends up tasting like salty miso soup!” I looked Heidel directly in the eye. “Level with me. Am I imposing on you all?”

“.....I should hardly think so, sir.”

“Why’d it take you so long to answer? Hey, don’t look away from me—what’s going on here?!”

I had become accustomed to receiving words of thanks and praise from everyone in the castle; they were all grateful for what I had done for Iris. But after two weeks, they were starting to give me looks as if to say, *How long is this guy going to stick around?*

Heidel could barely bring himself to answer my question. “Master Satou, you have some inkling?”

“*Inkling*—there’s a butler word. You remember that cake we had for Darkness’s party? They said they were way too scared to eat any cake when they didn’t know who’d sent it, so they sent it right back with me still inside. . . As for any other ideas, maybe the only thing I can think of is Iris—”

I had been about to go on, but I was interrupted by a knock at the door, and my favorite maid, Mary, came in.

“Pardon me, Master Satou. Lady Dustiness is calling for you. She wants you to go to the reception room—she says it’s urgent.”

3

“We’re going home.”

“Nuh-uh.”

I was in the reception room, where I had found Aqua weeping and proclaiming she didn’t want to go back; Megumin looking very resigned; and Darkness keeping all of our luggage together, more than ready to leave. I’d had a pretty good guess as to what Darkness was going to say when I was told she was calling for me. She said it, and I had my answer ready to go.

Darkness heaved a sigh. Maybe she'd known all along what I was going to say. "Come on, Kazuma. I know you've enjoyed your two weeks in the castle. Everyone's been more than hospitable to you, right? At first, they were so grateful, they were happy to have you here, but I think you're wearing out your welcome. And it's no surprise, considering you spend every day lazing about and doing whatever you want. You're finally building up a little bit of credibility; do you want to let it go to waste over something like this?"

As she spoke, Darkness handed me a sheaf of papers. The seals were already broken, meaning she wanted me to see what was inside.

"Dear Mr. Kazuma Satou. When I grow up, I don't want to be like the hero with the magic sword or like Prince Jatice. I want to be like you. My mom says you're from the weakest class but that you still managed to beat all the bad guys and that you're awesome. I want to be awesome like you." I gave her a questioning look. This was just a fan letter.

But it wasn't the only one. "Dear Mr. Satou. My father was reading the newspaper. He said they wrote that you saved Lady Iris from disaster. Thank you very much for helping my beloved lady Iris. When I grow up, please let me be your bride." This one was from a young girl. The unsteady handwriting made me think of someone young and innocent, like Iris herself.

I looked at letter after letter, until I finally came to the last one. "Dear Mr. Satou," it said. "I heard you are very weak. That's what my mom and dad said. But they also said you are mysterious, because even though you're very weak, you've defeated more of the Demon King's generals than anyone else. I don't understand hard stuff like that, but if you worked *so* hard even though you're weak, then I think you deserve to take a break. Please look out for yourself and live a long time. Thank you so much for helping Lady Iris!"

I was starting to feel warmth spreading through me as I finished the letters. Darkness chuckled as she watched me. "How about it? Are you really going to merely hang around here like that kid says? Here, Aqua, stop whining and read these." She took the letters from me and shoved them at Aqua. "Kazuma, you've started to make a name for yourself—that's the guy I knew was in there all along. Just hang tight; when we get back to Axel, I'll fawn over you as much as you like." Darkness looked triumphant but also sort of . . . happy.

"Huh, and to think, you never used to have any tricks but seduction and intimidation. You've grown so much. Fine, no way I can stay here when you put it like that. But I'm an awfully selfish guy. I'm going to expect *lots* of fawning when we get back."

"Leave it to me! At the very least, I'll wash your back, eh?" she said, and we grinned at each other.

"Hey, that is quite enough flirting and making eyes at each other while the rest of us are watching. I must ask you to remember where you are. Save such shenanigans for when you are at home."

"We aren't flirting! L-look, it's like I told Kazuma when we were in Elroad: I still haven't thanked him for all the help he's given us. . . I mean, as a noble. . . Um. . ." Darkness's voice got quieter and quieter, and she seemed to shrink into herself. Megumin, her eyes flashing red, smacked her on the shoulder.

"You are older than I am, and yet, you just cannot seem to get it together! It is time for you to be clear about things, Darkness—what is this business about washing his back? You've already tried to sneak into his bed, so come out and say what must be said, as I have done! And then I will strike you down with all my strength!"

"You will strike me down?! Megumin, your feelings and mine are completely. . . Well, look, I have my position as a noble to think about; I have to find a partner from a good background. . ." The sight of Darkness twiddling her fingers and seeming to get smaller and smaller as Megumin shook harder and harder appeared to do nothing but incense the mage.

"It was only just recently that you were absolutely refusing any potential matches at all, and now you hide behind the excuse of 'background'?! Pathetic! Kazuma, say something to— Kazuma? What are you grinning about?"

As I watched the two of them, it occurred to me that I could finally and truly stand unashamed in the ranks of the great harem protagonists. I mean, a couple days back, Megumin and Iris had been pretty encouraging when I asked how they felt about me.

Look, I'm not dense. It was more than obvious that Darkness felt a little something for me, even if she couldn't bring herself to say it. I wanted to see

the two of them fight over me. In fact, throw in a grown-up Iris and make it a three-way slugfest.

Was this how popular guys felt all the time? At last, I understood why all those guys with their girlfriends said that the sweetest, the most bitter, the most joyful part of a relationship was that moment before the love really blossomed, when you were just starting to notice each other.

After all, once I committed to one of them, I wouldn't get to see them argue like this again. Normally, this might be where I tried to break in and calm things down, but...

"I could sit here and watch this all week."

"You impossible man!" Megumin exclaimed, changing her target from Darkness to me and launching herself at me.

Then it happened: "I've decided. Kazuma, I've decided!" Aqua, who had been reading the fan letters until that moment, suddenly stood up. "Remember what our original goal was here? We were going to defeat that awful Demon King and bring peace to the world! These children's letters have reminded me of what we came here to do! Now, come on, Kazuma—let's get back to Axel and grind out some levels! Turning your weak self into a bona fide hero is my duty as a goddess! And as the goddess of water, I swear to give these children a future!"

For a moment, I wondered what in the world she was talking about, but then I remembered how impressionable she had always been. But heck—right at that moment, I actually sort of almost nearly felt the same way. "Well said, Aqua. Let's head home to Axel and get back to doing quests, like real adventurers. And once we get our groove back, we can go after the Demon King. The world is watching us. Children are cheering us on. We wouldn't want to disappoint them!"

We needed to get back to basics. I had spent weeks flailing around, but now it was time to remind myself of the day I had become an adventurer. The joy I had felt at first coming to this world, the vow I had made that here I would live a productive life.

"That's my Kazuma! I knew you didn't deserve to be called Lolima like everyone's been doing!"

"Who's been calling me that?! God, I'd rather they call me Cad-zuma or Kaz-scum-a... Anything but that!"

4

Darkness and the others went back to Axel that day—without me. I meant to go with them, I really did. But when I saw how lonely Iris looked, it broke me.

I'll stay only one more day.

Iris had been so busy being feted as a hero that we hadn't gotten to spend a lot of time together, so I'd told my friends that I wanted to talk to her that night, just the two of us. Darkness and Megumin had given me wry smiles—they obviously knew what I was thinking—but they went along with it.

And so...

"It's been a while since you came to my room, Elder Brother. Come on over here. I'll get out some of the snacks Claire brought me."

After dinner, I had gone to Iris's room. I stared around her chambers in amazement: They were big enough to host a small party in there. I noticed Iris quickly shove something from her nightstand under her pillow, as if she had realized it should be out of sight.

"Ooh, what's that? Sneaking around? Ahhh, I know—hiding the royal porno, are we? Hey, I get it—you're of a certain age. Just be careful the maids don't see it, or they might throw it away on you."

"That's not what it was, Elder Brother. I don't even possess any such thing! Here—what I was hiding was this ring!" She quickly pulled the thing back out from under her pillow, revealing that it was the ring I'd bought her as a souvenir when we were in Elroad. "When I try to wear it, Claire says royalty is better than such cheap trinkets and she tries to take it off my finger. So I can only wear it when I'm asleep..."

When I saw how sweet and shy Iris looked, it nearly convinced me to stay at the castle for the foreseeable future, but I told myself not to get distracted. I'd promised everyone I would stay only one extra day, and then I would go home.

If I tried to tell them, *Oh yeah, guess I changed my mind*, those three would probably cut me out of their collective life.

With a great effort of will, I managed to avoid looking Iris in the eye as she gave me that soul-destroying frown of sadness; instead, I concentrated on the ring she was clutching in her hands.

"Yeah, I guess I should've gotten you something more expensive. It's not like I don't have the money, but that was the only thing they had in the store. Sorry about that—Claire would be singing a different tune if I could've gotten you something nicer."

"No, I like this one. Expensive rings all have those huge, gaudy rocks on them, but this one is small and ever so cute." Iris put the ring on her finger and looked at it with genuine joy.

Ugh, no! Every word she says, everything she does, threatens to shake me of my resolve. Stay strong, Kazuma Satou—this girl is your little sister. My little sister.

First of all, I'm *not* a lolicon, so while Iris might possibly be someone I could be interested in when she grew up, she was absolutely not someone I could fall in love with now. Plus, I had Megumin, whom I'd been getting a good vibe from recently. Was it really this easy for me to get swept away in one pleasant moment? I was starting to lose faith in myself.

"W-well, hey, as long as you're happy, that's what counts. Bigger question: What do you want to do today? You wanna play that board game? . . . Ooh, wait, come to think of it, I picked up a card game in Elroad. I'll lend you my B deck, so let's play that."

I was about to head off to get my cards when Iris pulled on my sleeve. "Stop, let's not play any games tonight. I finally have you to myself for once, Elder Brother. I want to hear some stories." And then she smiled shyly.

". . . So I said to him, '*If you're playing games at this time on a weekday, you and I aren't enemies. Come on—join our guild. Your true friends are waiting for you. . .*' And that's how I got this guy, known as Mr. Destruction, to switch allegiances to our side, making us the strongest guild around. After that. . . Well, a lot happened, and that guild broke up, but I'll tell you about that another

time.”

“Wait one minute, Elder Brother—you’re going home tomorrow, so we don’t know when ‘another time’ will be! At least give me some hints about what happened!”

Iris and I were sitting on her bed, and we were taking a nice long walk down memory lane. Of course, I was mostly talking about myself. Iris had spent so much of her life shut up in the castle that she hadn’t had a lot of exciting experiences, and she really liked to hear me talk about my past.

“Okay, you got me—but just a little, understand? . . . One day, a new member joined our guild. Her name was DarkAngel. And that was all it took: One girl would be the beginning of the end of our guild.”

“That’s no fair, Elder Brother. You can’t start a story that interesting and then stop! What did the girl do?! If you don’t tell me, it’ll keep me up all night wondering!”

This wasn’t a story I was exactly proud of, but for some reason, Iris had gotten fixated on it.

“I’m not eager to tell you a lot of the details, but. . . Okay, I’ll give you one word. *Princess*. ”

“*Princess*? . . . Oh! Could it be? Did this princess fall in love with one of the members of your guild. . .?”

Players of Japanese MMOs sometimes talked about “the princess play,” where a single girl shows up and throws a wrench into a group of guys—that’s what I had been talking about, but Iris picked up on it remarkably quickly. I’d been hoping to throw her off the scent, but she saw exactly what I meant.

“You’re a quick one. Yeah, that princess made life pretty awful for us.”

“I see. She certainly would, given the difference in status between you. . .”

As I was talking, though, I could see something in her hand. She noticed me looking and shyly held it out. “Here, please take this. I learned how to make it from the chief. . . I mean, from Miss Megumin. She said it’s a traditional Crimson Magic Clan charm. With all the trouble you seem to get caught up in,

Elder Brother, I thought you could use one. . .”

It was a charm just like the one Megumin had given me some time ago. She'd said something about putting a lock of magically powerful Crimson Magic Clan hair in it or something.

“Hey, thanks. Believe me, I'd love a nice, quiet life, but trouble always seems to find me. 'Course, to be fair, it's usually my friends causing it.”

I put the charm in my pocket, and Iris said happily, “Once you go home, Elder Brother, I won't be able to go on any more adventures. . . But I hope you at least let my charm go with you.”

The smile she gave me then was tinged with loneliness.

“. . .All right. It's been a good chat, but it's awfully late now. I'm going to head back to my room.”

We'd kept shooting the breeze about this and that, sort of hoping to dispel the sweet but slightly awkward mood in the room after Iris gave me that charm, and all of a sudden, I'd realized it was almost midnight. If I stuck around any longer, Claire was really going to let me have it. I was about to stand up from the bed, but. . .

“. . .I don't want you to.”

I found Iris holding tight to my sleeve, stopping me.

“S-sorry, I kind of have to. But it's okay; I'll be back. Claire might get angry and the guards might try to stop me, but I have this pendant I got from Darkness. Claire took *her* clan crest back, but the Dustiness crest should be more than enough to get me into the castle anytime I want. So—”

“No, don't. I don't want you to just be a visitor sometimes. I know I said my charm could go adventuring with you, but what I really want. . . What I really want is to go with you myself. I want to take another trip, another adventure, with you and everyone else. I want to find out what's out there!” Like a child bursting with emotion, Iris went on. “Teach me everything you can! Those few weeks traveling with you were more fun, more fulfilling than twelve years of living in this castle. Please don't leave me here. Please let me—” Then she stopped, as if she had suddenly realized what she was saying. Dejected and

curling into herself, Iris looked so much smaller than the name Dragonslayer.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm being selfish. . . You somehow make me act like a little girl, Elder Brother. But I'm a royal princess, and my duty is to my people."

She was a princess, and she had probably spent her entire life being told to control herself. Obviously, no one was exactly going to scold a person as important as Iris. Okay, maybe Claire or Darkness, but they both had an overprotective streak, and Darkness spent most of her time in Axel anyway.

"Iris, you're only twelve. You should act more like a little girl. Didn't I tell you? Royals are supposed to be selfish and demanding. Take a page from the life I've been living the last few days. Enjoy yourself, even if it means making other people miserable."

And then the princess, who was far stronger and more disciplined than I was, said, "Elder Brother, you mustn't indulge me so. If you stay here one moment longer, I'm afraid I'll be truly selfish and demand that you never leave." She was smiling, but tears brimmed at the corners of her eyes.

. . .*Damn, this doesn't look good.*

No, this wasn't going anywhere good—I wouldn't be able to stand it at this rate.

"Until the day you defeat the Demon King, Elder Brother, I swear I won't be demanding or selfish toward anyone. So. . ."

Ohhhh man, this was bad. Specifically, the way my heart was pounding over this *child* was bad, bad, bad.

"So tonight, just this one night, indulge me a little." Iris clung to me, and that was bad, too. What was worse was that she was royalty; she could have snapped her fingers and changed the legal age of—

No! Not the time! Or the point! Iris was my little sister, and I was not a lolicon!

I was seriously going to run out of excuses at this rate. Take Megumin—she might have been legal in this world, but the average Japanese person would definitely have considered her out of bounds.

Iris, oblivious to the struggle within me, hesitantly nuzzled her little body up against me. I knew her parents didn't get to spend a lot of time with her; she probably didn't know how to be close to someone like this. She realized she was stronger than average, though, so when she tightened the hands that were holding on to me, she did it ever so slowly...!

"I w-w-wouldn't mind indulging you every night, but. . .!" I was going to screw up and say something stupid from sheer nerves again! And what was I going to do about everyone waiting for me back in Axel? I couldn't just sit here with Iris hugging me forever! And what about my vibe with Megumin? If I didn't come home tonight, I bet that would go sour.

And also—

"Elder Brother. . . No, I mean. . ."

And also, think carefully, Kazuma Satou. You're going back to Axel, right? Remember the letters from those kids—that was only a few hours ago.

That's right. The Demon King. I had to defeat the Demon King—not just for them but for Iris. And for this whole w-w-world. . .!

". . .Big Bro."

.....

"I love you. . .!"

That settles it. I'm staying here.

5

It had been a week since Aqua and the others had returned to Axel. I'd sent them a letter when I decided to stay at the castle. It described how I wasn't coming back to Axel after all. How I planned to live in the castle forever, so they could dispose of my stuff and whatever was left in my room however they saw fit. I said I was sure they didn't need me, a weak-ass Adventurer, to defeat the Demon King and that I would be cheering them on, if only from the sidelines.

Within the day after I sent that letter, I got an answer from Darkness. It told me to quit with the stupid jokes—I could practically see her sneering at me

from the page. She probably really thought I was trying to squeeze out one more day because I couldn't bear to leave Iris by herself. The letter told me to let "Lady Iris" down as gently but as quickly as possible (*Don't make her cry*, I was instructed) and to come back home.

Three days passed.

The letter I got sounded a little more serious this time.

Two days after that, I got another one, worded sharply enough to cut.

And that brings us to today. There was a knock at the door to my room.
"Master Kazuma, might I speak to you for a moment?"

It was Claire. I nodded to Heidel, who was pouring my tea, and he hurried over to open the door.

"Claire. Whaddaya want?"

"Whadda' I want? What a brusque way to speak to me—surely you already know why I'm here." Claire sounded like she was trying to hold something in, choosing her words carefully as she talked to someone to whom she owed a great deal, namely me. "I'm sure you're aware of your reputation among the castle staff by this point?"

"Sure I am. I know people have been making slanderous accusations that I have no heart, but it's all right—I'm too mentally strong to let that bother me. I survived my cousins' teasing during the Festival of the Dead and my uncle's lectures at New Year's, so I think I'll be fine."

Claire kind of flinched at that, like she really had to force herself to bite her tongue. "I see; that's wonderful. Knowing how much personal fortitude you have and how much you've already contributed to our country, I have another favor to ask of you."

"Oh yeah? What have you got in mind?"

I hadn't always been Claire's biggest fan, but when it came down to it, she wasn't so bad. After all, both of us adored Iris. If there was something I could do for her, then I wanted to help.

"Something only you could possibly do!" A sneaky little smile came over her

face as she spoke.

From behind her, someone said, “It’s been quite some time, Master Kazuma.” A wizard entered the room: It was Lain, Iris’s tutor. I wondered what could have brought both her and Claire here at the same time.

Lain spoke as if in answer, but it sounded like the words genuinely pained her. “Ahem. . . I recognize that you worked very hard in Elroad to help our beloved Iris, Master Kazuma. And since you’ve been around to chat with her every night, our lady has grown ever more cheerful and seems to truly enjoy her life. . .”

Claire picked up the thread. “Yes, definitely. She seems to be having fun every day. And we’re grateful for that. In the capital, we never know when the Demon King might attack, so we can hardly let Lady Iris out of doors. I can only imagine how hard it must be for a sensitive young girl like her. . . You have no idea how grateful I am to you for helping to take that burden off her shoulders even the slightest bit. And when I thought your heart might already belong to Lady Dustiness. . . But. . . But even so. . .!”

What on earth were Claire and Lain trying to say?

At that moment, there came yet another knock on my door. It was already open—maybe they were just being polite?

The face that peeked into my room then was my little sister’s. Her melancholy look had vanished completely. I’d been teaching her some Japanese lately, and she’d been soaking it up like a sponge. Now, with perfect diction, she said happily:

“Big Bro, aren’t you going to get yourself in trouble, sleeping so late? It’s wicked gorgeous outside. I made us some packed lunches, so why don’t we go eat outside, for real, though?”

When Claire and Lain heard that, they both bowed their heads and exclaimed tearfully:

““Master Kazuma, please, please go home!””

No way. For real, though.

"He went that way! Get him!"

Several hours later, believe it or not, I was being chased around the castle by armed troops. I could hardly remember ever having thought so fast or fought so hard.

. . . Well, maybe once. And come to think of it, Iris had been involved that time, too.

"There's only one of him, but don't underestimate him! He's defeated several generals of the Demon King and some major bounty heads—there's no telling what he might do!"

The voice belonged to Claire, who was leading the chase for me. Maybe her shout was what inspired the soldiers in front of me to freeze in place.

"Sir," one of them said, "we can't let you go any farther!"

"Please stop fighting and come quietly. . .!"

Yeah, as if. I kept my hand concealed in my bag as I murmured quietly, "Create Earth."

It was the prelude to a favorite tactic of mine.

The soldiers in front of me were obviously confused. "Wh-what are you—?"

"Wind Breath!"

"Hrk?! Gaaaghhh?!"

"My eyes. . .!"

The blinded soldiers fell to their knees. *Hmm. . .* I could see one of them carried a rope, presumably for tying me up. I grabbed it—the poor guy was in no condition to stop me—and resumed running.

I had to shake these guys somehow and get to Iris. I couldn't go home, not yet. If I could just make it to Iris, I could sucker her into—er, I could persuade her to help me out here.

A soldier grabbed my arm, and I slapped my hand over his nose. "*Create Water!*"

"*Hrgh!*" He teared up as water shot into his nostrils.

"M-Master Kazuma! The way you've been fighting... Is it possible...?!"

Claire seemed to be dangerously close to putting the pieces together. And whereas I had thought I had been doing a pretty good job of running away, I suddenly discovered I was in a cul-de-sac. I registered that the alleyway I'd ducked into was a dead end at the same time as I heard Claire's familiar voice from behind me. ". . .Sheesh. It seems perhaps I'm not the fine judge of character I thought I was."

I looked back and saw Claire flanked by several soldiers, all ready for a fight. I had to get past them, had to get to Iris. With that resolve in my heart, I confronted the woman who stood in my way. "It's a real shame, Claire. That wine I drank while you told me stories of Iris's childhood tasted really good. If we'd met some other way, we might have been friends."

"Master Kazuma. . . Believe me, I regret having to say good-bye to you this way. And I do owe you my thanks for at least one thing. You saved Lady Iris from a dangerous magical item, and I'm grateful for that. However. . ."

". . .However what?"

Claire replied by drawing her sword. Ah. Someone was feeling peppy today. All right, then. . .

"The one thing I can't forgive is you stealing Lady Iris's ring," Claire went on. "I think I'll have it back now. That ring is not for you to have. If you refuse to return it, I merely need to reveal your identity to the world. Yes, it will hurt Lady Iris terribly, but in this case, I'm left with no choice. If you don't want to see that happen, then kindly give it to me. . ."

If she was so into this, it would be plain rude of me not to be just as serious myself. "You can't reveal my identity. I mean, think about it: The guy Iris loves so much that she sees him like a brother turns out to be a thief? Big black eye for the royal family. So let me tell you how it's gonna go, White Suit. You're gonna let me through there and I'm gonna walk away, or else I'm going to leave you here in tears."

Claire asked, ". . .And e-exactly how would you do that?" She had been so high-and-mighty until this moment, looking down her nose at me—but now she didn't even seem angry; in fact, she looked deeply worried, like she was on the

verge of tears already. What was with the change of heart? Was it because she had realized I was the thief who had broken into the castle? Or because today, she had finally seen me fight with her own eyes?

Well, I didn't care about the reasons. I was going to get to Iris and continue her "education." That was what I promised myself as I showed Claire the rope. "I'll tie you up with this rope using my Bind skill; then I'll start using Steal on you until you beg me to stop!"

"Eeeek! J-just a second, now! Wait, I say, Master Kazuma! You may forget it, but I am the daughter of a noble house! You would n-never do such a thing to me right here in public. . .w-would you. . .?"

I gave the rope a few threatening spins in the air. "Let me tell you a few stories, points of reference for what I would or wouldn't do to a noble girl. I once gave Darkness a good dunking in some water, and another time I tied her up and dragged her behind a carriage. Believe it or not, your call."

"Fall baaaack!" Claire exclaimed, her face screwed up in terror. But her soldiers did the opposite; they started to inch forward. With a bunch of them all coming at me at once from head-on, there wouldn't be much I could do.

"Leave this to us, Lady Claire! We'll handle this man. . .!"

There were four opponents. They had already seen me blind the other soldiers. I probably couldn't get away with doing the same thing twice.

"Now, sir, we'd like you to come with—!!"

"Bind!"

I didn't let the soldier finish, immediately using my Bind skill. The soldier brought up his sword, but it wasn't that easy to cut the rope that was flying through the air. Man and weapon both were ignominiously tied up.

I hadn't put a lot into the skill; he would be cut free sooner rather than later. But that little opening was all I needed!

"I've got you!" another soldier shouted, reaching out for me.

"Wind Breath!" The spell put him off-balance—only for a second, but I didn't need much to escape the encircling soldiers.

"Parlor tricks, that's all he's got! Don't be afraid, men—go for him all at once!" Whoever was shouting, I guess he was the captain or something.

"H-halt! Don't do it! This man—" Claire was exclaiming frantically, but it was too late. I lunged at my opponent, sticking out one hand as if reaching for a handshake. The guy gave me his hand reflexively—and I Drain Touched him dry.

"Grgh?!"

He collapsed to his knees; the other soldiers, unsure what had happened, stopped where they were, watching me carefully. That was all the invitation I needed to run past them. . .!

. . . Which was when I discovered more than a dozen soldiers waiting for me.

"That's as far as you go, Master Kazuma. We have you surrounded! Now, kindly return to Axel Town with me—I'll teleport you myself!" Lain, accompanied by the soldiers, looked a little pale. Claire emerged with two more men from behind me.

Crap! There had to be something I could do!

But it was all for nothing; I could see that Lain's people had me completely encircled.

Man, this is way too many soldiers to just get lucky against. But there were still so many things I hadn't taught Iris. . .!

"Come now, Master Kazuma," Lain said, sounding exhausted. "Quit this useless struggling and go home. . . In the last hour and change, some of our people have been injured slipping on the ice you made, several more have been tied up with Bind, and at least one appears to have had the magic sucked clean out of him and is unconscious, though I have no idea how you did it. I'm almost impressed that one person could cause such chaos. It reminds me of that thief who broke into the castle. . ."

"Hff. . . hff. . . I c-can't. . . can't believe this man. . .," Claire added (I had given her the slip more than once), sounding equally spent. "I see now why Master Mitsurugi lost to him two separate times. I see it so clearly, it hurts. . . I have no idea what skills he has, but he seems to be able to tell where we are almost before we arrive and can then disappear even when we should have him

cornered. . .”

I guess she was talking about my Sense Foe and Ambush skills. My Read Lips and Second Sight abilities let me tell from a distance what orders she was giving, and when it seemed like they had me, Flee came in handy. But now it was starting to look like all my tricks had been for naught.

Then again, if I had been the sort of normal guy who would let things end here, then I would never have defeated all those generals of the Demon King.

Claire saw that I had stopped moving and took that as an indication that I was giving myself up. With an expression of relief, she came over to me. . .

“Hey, Lain, how about a trade?”

I kept up my whole not-resisting act as I spoke to the wizard. Even so, I saw Claire’s expression tighten when I said that. Lain raised an eyebrow.

“If I remember correctly, you’re from a minor noble house, aren’t you, Lain? You know what close friends I am with Darkness—and you know I’m in good with Darkness’s dad. We’re so tight that he asked me to take good care of his daughter. In fact, the Dustinesses trust me so much, I’ve got a pendant with their crest on it.”

Lain swallowed heavily at that, but Claire was almost hysterical. “Stop it! Don’t listen to him, Lain! Don’t let that man get into your head!”

“. . .And Iris and I are such good friends, we call each other by our first names. So you can see how much she adores me—do you really want to tear us apart? Is that what Iris would want? You do me a little favor here, then in the future, Iris and House Dustiness will both remember how nice you were to me. Fortune beckons, my dear Lain.”

“Ignore him! Even if you win some favor from the Dustinesses, you’ll be in *my* bad books! And I’m a terrifying enemy, Lain! Oh, and! And! Think of Lady Iris’s future—she may like this man, but he isn’t good for her! You know that as well as anyone—so long as he’s with her, Lady Iris is going to get worse and worse! Just think of how she’s been lately!”

Caught between Claire and me, Lain looked confused. I guess the soldiers she had with her were some kind of personal guards of hers. They wouldn’t move to

arrest me until they had the word from her. And if they were frozen in place, it meant Claire and her troops couldn't move in on me, either.

Lain stood there, looking from me to Claire and back, sweating and dithering. She was obviously deeply conflicted—one more good push should do the trick.

"You're a smart girl, Lain, so think it over. Wouldn't a guy who's defeated bounty heads and generals of the Demon King be helpful to have around? You've seen how powerful I am, right? I can spend my time here at the castle being Iris's playmate, and if you guys wind up in a pinch, I can come to your rescue. I'm great at thinking up strategies and finding people's weak points and stuff. . . What do you say? There's no downside, is there? Iris is happy because she gets a playmate. I'm happy because I get to be with Iris. The whole country is happy because they get one more stalwart adventurer to keep them safe. And you, Lain, are happy because the Dustinesses and Iris love you. Sound good? What more could a person ask for?"

". . . ." She didn't say anything.

"Lain, don't you fall silent! Don't you clap your hands like, *Oh, that makes sense!* . . . F-fine, I understand! Lain, I think your house has incurred some debts, has it not? Let my family take them over! They amount to tens of millions, I believe, yes? Not a bad deal, is it?!"

I could tell I'd had Lain hooked, but Claire's offer was starting to bring her back. She bowed her head at me and whispered an apology. When Claire saw that, she finally relaxed a little, an expression of relief coming over her face.

And if I had been just any adventurer, that might have been it.

But I wanted to show them precisely how resourceful I could be.

"Listen to me, Lain. My personal fortune is better than a billion right now. You understand what I'm—"

"G-get him! Don't let him say another word!"

Before I could finish, I heard a shout from Claire, who had sneaked up behind me with her troops.

"Hey, that's no fair! You're not supposed to attack a guy during negotiations!"

Hey, Claire, you want me to grab your panties again? You're so quick to threaten Lain, but just think about what it would mean to make an enemy of me!"

"I know, Master Kazuma—believe me, I know! At this moment, I'm more scared of you than I've ever been of any political opponent or monster I've ever faced! You have real ability, you're a smooth talker, and you have powerful connections. I knew you had substantial personal wealth, too, but I never imagined. . .!"

Nonetheless, Claire gestured to her men to take my arms.

"Lain, did you bring the memory-erasing potion like I asked?"

Memory-erasing potion? The heck? I was deeply disturbed by the sound of that, but the soldiers just held my arms even tighter.

"I never wanted to have to do something quite this brutal, but you absolutely will corrupt Lady Iris if we let you stay with her. And if we simply forced you to return home, you would no doubt harbor a grudge against us. I have no idea what that might lead you to do, and as I believe I've made clear, that thought scares me. I'm very sorry, but I'll have to ask you to forget everything since the day you agreed to go home with Lady Dustiness. Yes, everything that's happened since you read those children's letters and got all fired up. . . Now, Lain!"

Whoa, hold on.

They were going to make me forget everything since the day I agreed to go home? That would have to include the part where Iris told me she loved her big bro. . .

"Y-yes, milady. You're sure? This potion has the potential side effect, if you're unlucky, of turning you into a blithering idiot. It was considered so potentially inhumane that it was outlawed. . . A-are you certain you want to do this?" Lain came up to me with the potion even as she let slip a bombshell about what it could do. . . !

"S-stoppit! Don't make me drink that bizarre crap! Remember this—you're lucky it's the middle of the day! I do my best work at night. With my Sense Foe

and Ambush skills and my ability to see in the dark, I can get into any mansion in the world, and as long as I have a bow, I can snipe you from as far away as I like! Don't you forget this! Don't forget!"

"Q-quickly! Lain, give him the potion now! Yikes! This man is terrifying! He's saying he hasn't even been operating at full capacity! Come to think of it, he didn't use that awful Freeze move that nearly suffocated Master Mitsurugi. He's been holding back on us! Quickly, Lain! Get rid of those memories, right up to this very moment!"

"I've been a bodyguard for a long time, and I've never seen anything like this man! Q-quickly, now! Come on, Master Kazuma—open your mouth. . .!"

So there I stood in a corner of the castle grounds, with soldiers holding my arms behind my back, as two noblewomen closed in on me and tried to force my mouth open. Someone just passing by might have thought I had it pretty peachy, but this was no joke!

"*Kindle!*"

"Owww! Hot, hot, hot! Oh no, he put a hole in my favorite cloak!"

"So you insist on continuing the struggle to the bitter end. . .! You are truly a man to be feared, Master Kazuma! Lain, I'll buy you a new cloak; just get your Teleport incantation ready! I'll handle getting the potion into him!"

Claire grabbed the potion and came toward me, but she looked like she was the one who was cornered. *Try to at least look like you're in charge, lady!*

Lain was quickly chanting her spell and Claire had the potion at my lips when it happened.

"Big Bro!"

Maybe all the commotion had attracted her. She was still a ways off, but Iris was running directly toward us with tears in her eyes.

You know how it goes: Something awful is about to happen to the princess when the hero shows up and rescues her in the nick of time. That's exactly what this was, except crucially, the roles were reversed.

Iris took one look at me standing there covered in guards and said, "Claire,

what do you think you're doing to Big Bro?! I am *wicked* mad right now! Stop this immediately, or I'll totally never forgive you!"

"Lady Iris, I must ask you to stop—stop using these words *wicked* and *totally* and *Big Bro*. I understand and accept your royal rebuke. I'm now going to give this man a memory-erasing potion and send him back to Axel!"

"I will *so* not forgive that!" Iris said, slapping at the soldiers in her way as if in hopes of stopping this herself.

"I will *so* not forgive you, milady, if you don't stop talking that way!"

"The tic seems to have infected you as well, Lady Claire! Teleport is ready to go; just say the word!"

Dammit, I was so close!

"Elder Brother!"

Iris realized we were out of time; she planted her feet and called my name at the top of her lungs. "Elder Brother, if ever we meet once more, I'll never let you leave my side again!"

What a heartening thing to hear from my dear little sister.

"Yeah, Big Bro's going home, Iris! But the next time I show up at the castle, believe me, I'm never gonna leave!"

"He still doesn't understand the position he's in! Now, Master Kazuma, open your mouth! Lain, the instant I give him this potion, get him out of here!"

Claire dumped the potion into my mouth. It must have been serious stuff, because my head immediately felt heavier, and everything started to go dark. . .

"When you remember me, write me a letter! I'll be waiting for you, Elder Brother—I believe you'll defeat the Demon King one day. . .!"

Chapter 2

Retribution for This Roommate!



1

When I came to, I was standing at the gate of Axel for some reason.

.....?

For the life of me, I couldn't remember what had happened. I felt like I had lost something important, but what. . .? It was like I had lost a precious family member, someone I had searched for long and hard. . .

Gosh, what was this sense of bereavement I felt?

I was sure my archenemy Claire had. . .

Claire?

Wait, why did I think of her as my archenemy? She and I were united in our love of Iris. And yet, I couldn't shake the sense that I had to get Claire back for something.

For that matter, I was sure Iris had cajoled me into staying at the castle one more night. I had seen off Darkness and the others, and then we'd had some kind of important conversation in her room. Iris had said something about me. .

What was it?

... .Huuuuuh?

I couldn't put my finger on it, but something didn't feel right. I would have to get Claire sometime, even if I didn't exactly know why. Something deep inside me, something almost instinctual, urged me on.

Ah well. Right now, I was all fired up by the letters from those kids. I was sure the rest of my party felt the same way.

For the first time in a long time, I trotted through town toward my mansion. How many days had we been in Elroad? We'd spent only a couple of weeks in the capital after that, so why did it feel like so long since I'd been home?

I was still mulling it over when I arrived at my house. I made to open the door.

..

...only to discover that it wouldn't open.

"...?"

Weird. If anyone was around, it should have been unlocked. So did that mean everyone was out? Maybe they were just so eager to make good on those letters that they had rushed off to the Adventurers Guild to find a quest.

Eh, if I waited around here, they'd come back eventually. Actually, I hoped they wouldn't be too long. I'd had Darkness take a bunch of my stuff with her, and I didn't have a lot of cash on me.

Hmm...?

"Hey, where's my wallet? Crap, did I drop it somewhere? When did I do that? It's not like I was running around or anything."

I knew there hadn't been much left in it, because I'd spent most of my funds buying souvenirs in Elroad. It was all right; I could easily get a new wallet. That was the way things went. I would just hang out by the front door for a while.

I was still clinging to that hope as day turned to night.

"Wh-what's taking them so long...?! What are they *doing*...?! Should I look for them at the Guild? No, I'd hate to miss them here. Plus, going to the Guild would sort of be like admitting defeat..."

I sat by the chicken coop in the yard, complaining to Emperor Zel. Inside the coop, the chick slept wrapped up in several fuzzy, warm-looking blankets, with nice clean water and plenty of food—a veritable VIP compared to yours truly, who was currently locked out of his own mansion.

... .That was when I noticed something.

“Hey, aren’t you a little bigger than you used to be?” I sat and stared at the sleeping Zel in his chicken coop. I thought he was supposed to be a slow grower because of all the magic in him. Eh, maybe that was what happened when you went on a long trip.

That was when I heard the shout.

“Dragon thief!”

A second-story window opened, and someone shouted down at me. I wanted to shoot back some smart-ass remark, but there was only one person in our household who referred to Emperor Zel as a dragon.

“Who’re you calling a dragon thief? It’s time for you to give up and admit he’s just a chick. If you’re home, why the hell is the door locked? I’ve been sitting outside for ages, convinced no one was here!”

Aqua looked at me intently for a long moment.

.....?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she finally said. “After consultation with Megumin and Darkness, we’ve decided this mansion belongs to the gorgeous and very beautiful goddess Lady Aqua. Darkness has a house in town, and Megumin has one in Crimson Magic Village, so they said I could have this one. This is my house now. I thought you were going to live at the castle, weren’t you? So scram. Get out of my yard!”

.....

“I always knew you were an idiot, but you’ve really stepped up your game today. I’ve never heard something so stupid in my life. You better cast some healing magic on your own brain. But it probably won’t work, so I’ll take you to the hospital.”

That caused Aqua to slam the second-floor window shut.

.....

I went around to the front and pounded on the door. “I’m hooome! Darkness, Megumin, if you’re there, let me in! That stupid Aqua locked the door!”

A window by the second-floor patio, directly above the front door, opened. I thought it might be Aqua again, but it was Megumin and Darkness who poked their heads out. Boy, was I glad to see them.

. . . Or so I thought, for about two seconds.

“Well, look who decided to show up. Enjoy your week at the castle, Kazuma?”

My how long at what?

I was still puzzling over that when Megumin, sounding uncommonly agitated, said, “Oh-ho-ho, quite a good job you did of turning your nose up at us! You put on such a good show to get us to go home, just so you could have the castle all to yourself! Even I didn’t expect you to have us going like that!” She shook her staff out the window.

Okay, we all needed to take a few steps back, here.

“All right, hold on. You’re saying I was at the castle for a week after you went home. But I don’t know what you’re talking about. I only stayed for one night—last night, right? So why. . . . ? Huh?”

I felt something nagging at me. It was very strange. There was something barely outside my mental grasp.

What I said only seemed to make Megumin more upset. “You’ve got some nerve, playing dumb at this point. Perhaps you’d like to be part of an experiment—we’ll test how far Explosion can send a person flying!”

That didn’t sound pleasant at all, but meanwhile, Darkness cocked her head at me, puzzled. “. . . Kazuma, I don’t even want to *know* what you did at the castle. But it looks like it was bad enough that they gave you an amnesia-inducing potion, one that’s normally forbidden. In the right dosage, it can totally eliminate your memories. They stopped letting people use it because sometimes it reduced the victim to a complete idiot.”

"Well, at least there was no fear of that, because in my opinion, this man is already a complete idiot. . . A memory-erasing potion, though? I grant that his behavior has been unusual these last several minutes. You don't suppose he's only pretending to have lost his memories in order to fool us, do you? If he truly does have potion-induced amnesia, though, I would feel bad blaming him for what he's doing. . ." Megumin sighed. She didn't look completely happy to have to give up on this.

I couldn't be sure, but if Darkness was right, it was possible my memories had been tampered with.

. . .*Hmm.*

"I remember seeing you guys off and then a little bit from immediately after that. I'm pretty sure Iris called me to her room, and then. . ."

It was true: I'd gone to a girl's bedroom—okay, so it was just my little sister's, but still—and yet, I didn't remember what had happened there.

Amnesia. Naturally.

Maybe my tremendous Luck had caused me to stumble onto a state secret, and then they'd argued about what to do to me. Normally, a random adventurer who learned something that crucial would be considered disposable. But when *I* was the random adventurer in question. . . They wouldn't have been able to let an outsider walk away with state secrets; that much was clear. But to just rub out an adventurer as brave and accomplished as I was wouldn't be in the country's best interests.

They must have settled on erasing my memories as a compromise. Yeah, that had to be it. I grew more convinced with each passing second.

"Listen, guys, I can't be sure, but I think my Luck may have gotten me involved with some kind of state secret. They must have spent days in emergency meetings trying to decide what to do with me—they couldn't just get rid of me, after all. They must have cooked up fake letters to send you so you wouldn't worry about why I wasn't coming home. . . After all that debate, they decided they couldn't kill me, so they chose to wipe out my memories and send me home. That's my guess—what do you think?"

Saying it aloud made me absolutely certain: That was what had happened. And I was pretty convinced I knew most or all of the people behind it.

"Hrmm. . ." Darkness said, crossing her arms and shaking her head. "I feel like he's onto something. . . maybe? But I can't think of why anyone would want to make him take an amnesia potion. . ."

Megumin was equally exercised. "I—I wonder. Knowing this man, he may have simply gotten altogether too comfortable with Iris and decided to stay forever. . . But I guess that wouldn't be a reason to erase his memories. Hmm. . ."

I offered the two of them my best guess. "I know Claire was there. I'm not sure why, but I get the feeling she's at the bottom of all this. I know she and I are on the same page about Iris. But for some reason, I feel like I have to get her back for something."

That made Darkness's expression even more grim. "I see where you're coming from. Yes, House Sinfonia would be powerful enough to have the right to use a memory-erasing potion. On top of that, Claire is a central player in this nation's government. And I know the two of you were getting closer. Hmm. . . You're starting to sound rather credible."

Megumin followed up. "I suppose we can count it as good enough that you came home at all. You can repay me by accompanying me on some Explosion walks starting tomo—"

But she never got the word out of her mouth.

"What are you two saying? Are you both idiots? That moron of a NEET has been a smooth talker all his life, and you're taking him seriously? This loliNEET—I'll bet a little '*I love you, Big Bro*' would be enough to make him say he was going to stay at the castle forever! I'm sure he simply got too comfortable having butlers and maids attending to his every need, and he decided to forget about us."

Dammit, and I'd almost had everything wrapped up neatly. I turned to Aqua, who had appeared as if on cue from the second-floor window, and said, "H-hey, watch it. There's no way I. . . I. . . What?"

Something she'd said made me feel like I was on the verge of remembering something important.

When Aqua saw me that way, she said triumphantly, "Just look at that! I forbid you from coming into this house. If you really want to come in, get down on your knees and say, 'I'm so, so sorry, Lady Aqua!' and promise to worship me three times a day from now on. Then I *might* think about letting you come inside. If you're not interested, then scram! Go on, get out of here! And don't harass my poor Darkness and Megumin anymore!" Then she slammed the window shut.

"Screw you! We're not done here!" I exclaimed, but she was gone, obviously not interested in talking to me anymore.

. . . *Ooooh, that woman!*

I went up to a first-floor window with the intention of smashing it and getting into the house by force. . . but then I stopped in my tracks.

"Wait, what the hell?"

I glanced along the facade of the house and discovered that all the first-floor windows had wooden boards over them. Getting in through the windows wouldn't be easy. Between the time it would take and the noise it would make trying to get them off there, I would probably find myself on the receiving end of something unpleasant from Aqua.

Grrr. . .

This wasn't fair; I was the victim here. And I sure as hell wasn't going to get down on my knees and apologize to that moron. I hadn't done anything wrong or even anything questionable.

As I stood there ruminating, something small dropped at my feet. I glanced down—whatever it was had come from the second story—and I thought it looked awfully familiar. . .

Ahhh, I remember.

It was Megumin's beloved purse. I guess Megumin, knowing I had used all my money in Elroad, had taken pity on me and dropped some cash down to me. I

remembered then that even my bankbook was inside the house, and I found myself flat-out grateful for Megumin's act of kindness.

Megumin herself left, though, without looking at me and in fact without looking very happy at all.

I picked up the purse and noticed a dark shadow. When I looked up, something covered in a cloth was thrown at my feet. At the window, I saw the sunlight glinting off locks of golden hair. I guess Darkness had given me something, too. I was grateful to both of them, I really was, but if they were going to do all this to help me, why not go all the way and try to bring that idiot around?

I picked up the bundle Darkness had dropped and found one of my favorite bows. It was one that had seen a lot of use: the one with an arrow with a hook on one end and a rope on the other. Immediately, I knew what Darkness was thinking. Megumin's cash would let me get something to eat, and then after it got dark, I could sneak in the second floor using the bow and arrow—it was practically an invitation.

. . . I had to admit, though, I never expected to be breaking into my own house.

2

What to do, what to do?

"That comes to nine hundred eris, please."

Break into my own house? I'd gotten into Darkness's mansion once, but I owed a lot of that to the strengthening buffs Aqua had given me. Yes, Darkness had slipped me the bow and arrow this time, but with my normal, completely non-magically-enhanced physical abilities, would it even be possible to sneak silently into the house?

I had finished my meal at the tavern and was just about to settle the check. I opened the purse Megumin had given me. . .

"....."

It was bulging with point cards and coupons. I extracted a thousand-eris bill and paid up, but. . .

"One hundred eris is your change. Thank you very much; see you again!"

For some reason, I felt a profound resistance to paying with Megumin's money. I mean, the abundance of cards and coupons suggested she would make a conscientious wife, but my conscience couldn't quite live with outright spending her cash.

Actually, she normally gave me the bulk of her income. Most of that I sent home to her family—if I got back to the mansion in one piece, I would have to be sure to give her some money, whether she wanted it or not.

. . .But speaking of getting into the mansion in one piece, this time I was going up against Aqua, which seemed like bad news. She was normally such an airhead, but she had a disconcerting habit of turning sharp at the most inconvenient times. Not to mention, she could see in the dark even better than I could.

I hoped she would drink a lot of wine and go to bed early, but another thing she was good at was failing to figure out what people wanted, a trait I was sure would be out in full force tonight. I had no proof of that, only the evidence of long acquaintance with her. If I could just get inside, I was confident Aqua would never beat me, but if she caught me while I was still climbing, that would be the end.

I passed the time until I figured Aqua and the others would be asleep by wandering around town, thinking over the best ways to get into the house.

"Well now, it has indeed been a while. O man who has filled his belly on the money he received from the girl who is infatuated with him, who is dependent on his sugar mama and is quite content with it, are you awake at this hour? And a fine hour it is, for tonight is a full moon, when magic is at its zenith. I'm considering having a little constitutional myself, during which I mean to climb to the spire atop the Axis church and replace the symbol there with an especially sexy radish I found. Want to join me?"

". . .No, no, I don't. Watch out—you know they're gonna catch you one day, and then they'll tear you limb from limb."

Who should I run into but Vanir. He was carrying a large radish that really did have a pretty suggestive shape. Demons don't sleep, so he had time to kill every night.

.....

"Hey, Vanir. You've got a few minutes, right? Mind if I ask you to help me with something?"

I was going to borrow the power of this demon to break into a mansion protected by a goddess. I had to admit, it didn't feel like the most virtuous thing. . .

"Oh-ho? Are you quite aware of what it means to ask a favor of a demon? We always have our price. And the price of a great demon like yours truly is higher than most, eh?" Vanir's lips twisted nastily, looking very demon-ish.

Normally I would have been pretty intimidated, but it was sort of hard to take him seriously with that sexy radish in his arms.

"I promise to buy lots of expensive stuff I don't need the next time I'm in Wiz's shop."

"Ah, my dear high roller, just leave everything to me! . . . Say, shall I throw in this radish as well?"

"I'll pass."

It was past midnight—not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse. But this was the hour when demons and NEETs came alive.

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Bwaaa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"H-hey! Geez, don't laugh *now!* I can't believe you're suddenly excited right at this moment, of all times!"

While everyone else in the immediate vicinity was fast asleep, Vanir and I stood in front of my mansion.



"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, I am in fine spirits this night! Attacking a goddess on the night of the full moon! It would be enough to make anyone eager!"

I was starting to think it hadn't been my best idea, turning to this guy for help.

In any event, this was the plan: First, I would try to get in the normal way. I didn't have any buffs, but if I could somehow manage it, then it was mission accomplished. If I couldn't climb up by physical strength alone, or if I was noticed in the middle of my attempt, then Vanir would begin attacking the mansion.

I was sure Aqua would have set up an anti-demon barrier, like the one that had kept my succubus out. The moment Vanir got anywhere near it, Aqua would go running to him. That would be my opening. My goal would be to get inside, then subdue Aqua. If Vanir happened to break through her defenses, that worked, too.

Phase two would be to get to my room and retrieve my bankbook. As long as I had my money, I could stay at an inn until things blew over. In fact, considering how that would allow me to spend every day just having fun, maybe it would be better that way.

Anyway, that was the plan. Vanir looked on while I fired my hooked arrow at the roof above my room...!

"...Huh?"

I was suddenly seized by the sense that something was wrong. There was a wooden board pounded over the window of my room from the inside. I was sure that hadn't been there earlier. I did a quick check, and sure enough: Every room on the second floor was the same.

I could think of only one person with the sort of free time to board up all the windows in a house this big. I was just starting to sweat with the realization that my plan was in shambles when I noticed something else.

Not all the windows were completely blocked. Not the ones that the other girls were using. Darkness and Megumin must have objected to having their windows totally closed off. What with them giving me money and a bow and arrow, I figured it was safe to think of the two as coconspirators.

“Vanir, could you look at me with your all-seeing eye for a second? I need to know which route I should take—Megumin’s room or Darkness’s.”

“Mm. As ever, I am somewhat blinded when I look at you by the repugnant light that surrounds you, but. . . Let us see here. The outcome is the same regardless of which way you enter, but I think going into the room of the girl from the bizarre clan will be luckier. There may be a little something in it for you. Go find out.”

So there I had it. Something in it for me, huh?

“Megumin’s window it is. Okay, here I go!”

3

I stood right below the window of Megumin’s room and aimed my arrow at the roof. I shot for the tip-top to minimize the noise as much as I could. At this distance, my Deadeye and Second Sight skills made it all but impossible to miss. My aim was true: The arrow hooked onto the roof, after which I gave the dangling rope a couple of tugs to be sure it was secure.

I waited for a moment, but no one showed any sign of waking up. I glanced back at Vanir, giving him a look to let him know I was going to start climbing. Then I grabbed the rope and started making my way up to Megumin’s room. . .

Megumin’s room.

“Hff. . . Hff. . . !”

Man, climbing a rope without any magical buffs is hard!

Maybe the rope was slippery, or maybe I simply didn’t have the muscles, considering I had to climb using almost entirely arm strength. Even so, I somehow managed to cling to the rope and finally got a hand on Megumin’s windowsill. I clung to the rope with my left hand and the windowsill with my right, trying to catch my breath.

When I finally managed to get my breathing under control a little, I tapped on Megumin’s window. Then again. And again. Finally, the curtain opened; Megumin smiled when she saw it was me. Was it just my imagination, or was

she actually happy to see me? I could hear the lock rattling when it happened.

“I’m on patrol! Megumin, are you staying awake? If I know that man, he’ll try to break in through your or Darkness’s room right about now! We’re going to be living the night-shift life for a while, so bear with it, okay?”

I heard Aqua outside Megumin’s door.

Curse her! Normally she couldn’t think her way out of a paper bag, so why now. . .? Did she even know how much pain it would save me if she would use that ability to think ahead on a regular basis?

Megumin quickly pulled the curtains shut. “I’m up, Aqua. Don’t worry—no problems here. How about you get a little rest? Anyway, I shouldn’t think it would matter so much if he broke in. Kazuma appears to have been forced to drink a memory-erasing potion; surely we could forgive him eventually. . .”

This was followed by the sound of the door flying open. “No, Megumin, we couldn’t! You must not baby a NEET! I know you, Megumin—you’re the type who would run herself ragged for the man she loves, even if he’s a worthless pile of crap! The type who’d forgive him for anything, even if he cheated on you again and again, just because you love him! My unclouded vision is never wrong!”

“Wh-wh-wh-what are you talking about?! I swear that’s not true. . .!” Megumin protested.

“Hmm?” Aqua responded with a knowing murmur.

Please, girls, let it go. Normally I would love to eavesdrop on this sort of talk, but right now, just let it go!

“Megumin, Megumin, don’t tell me. . .”

“Don’t tell you what?! Wh-what shouldn’t I tell you?!”

While Megumin and Aqua chatted, my hand got sweatier and sweatier and started to slip down the rope. I struggled and strained to hold on, my arms trembling and shaking. . .!

They couldn’t have picked a worse time for their little romantic-comedy routine!

"Megumin, I see now. . .! It's you and that no-account Dust, isn't it. . .?!"

"It is certainly not."

Oh, for the love of—!

With my hands sweating and slipping, I couldn't keep holding on to the rope and the windowsill at the same time. I started to lose my balance.

Arrrgh, somebody help me!

Someone heard my prayer.

Not the freak who kept insisting she was a goddess and not even the really-for-real goddess I always met when I died.

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Bwaaa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Behold, I appear, O goddess of toilets! Tonight, the blessed full moon grants me the greatest extent of my demonic powers! I, the great demon, the Duke of Hell, shall get you to cry uncle at last!"

The guy who normally spent his days as a part-timer at the magical-item shop worrying about how far in the red they were was out in front of my mansion, bellowing a challenge.

4

"Quickly, Kazuma, now is your chance! Aqua went pale and rushed off to the front door—here, grab on!"

Megumin stuck her hand out the window, and I took it with one of my own, using the other to pull myself up by the windowsill. Megumin, with a better Strength stat than I had, dragged me into the room.

I could hear shouting from a ways off.

"So you've finally shown your true colors, you weirdo demon! You're the one who's going to be crying!"

"You've been all talk so far! Show me what you've got! Take this—Vanir-style—!"

I mostly ignored them, though. "Ahhh. . . Haaah. . .!" I was too busy huffing

and puffing, slumped on the floor, still holding Megumin's hand. Megumin leaned close, as if to hug me, as she closed the window.

Having somehow managed to make it into her room, I could hardly move; I crouched there almost in her arms, breathing hard, my hand in hers.

"Hff. . . Hff. . . ! Megumin, M-Megumin— Hff. . . Hff. . . !"

"Watch it. . . ! K-Kazuma, the way you're breathing is so wrong! To pant like that and call my name when I'm holding you in my arms? It's the definition of trouble!"

I had been trying to say *Thank you* to her, but I couldn't get my breathing under control and the words wouldn't come out. But I definitely agreed that at the moment, it looked like we were having a naughty little midnight tryst.

"Aqua, what in the world is all that noise. . . ? Vanir, what are you doing here at this hour?! And when we're all so upset already. . . !"

"Oh-ho, pardon me very much. O young woman who has been racked with loneliness over being unable to see the young man who torments her at every turn for more than a week, tonight—"

"Nggghaaaaaa!"

Darkness and Vanir sounded like they were having fun out by the front door, but I didn't have time for them right now. I forced myself to breathe more evenly and sat up, moving away from Megumin. But I felt her arm around my back stiffen; she wouldn't let go.

. . . Uhh.

"Perfect! You hold him there, Darkness! *Sacred Exorcism!*"

"Grrraahhhh?! I-impossible that yours truly should. . . On this night of the full moon, when my power is at its zenith, am I defeated. . . ?!"

"“W. . . We did it. . . !”"

I could hear the commotion outside. The way Darkness and Aqua were out there screwing around as usual, while Megumin and I were in here practically embracing each other, gave me the feeling that we were doing something really, really wrong. It felt somehow as if I had cut class to sneak off with a girl

and hide in the gym supply closet or something. . .

Not, of course, that I had any idea what that was like.

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Did you really think you had struck me down? What a shame! That thing you took to be yours truly was really just a sexy radish! You can keep it as a consolation prize—it might be delicious boiled!"

"".....""

"Oops, let's refrain from silently chasing me down, shall we? I've had a taste of those wonderful, wonderful awful emotions, which I've been without for so long—and I see that my goal here is achieved, so I'll be showing myself out!"

"Darkness, go around that way! Stop him! Tonight of all nights, I'm going to make him regret the way he lives to mock people!"

"A-Aqua, what about this sexy radish I grabbed thinking it was Vanir? What. . . What do we do with it. . .?"

Completely apart from the ruckus outside:

"Welcome home. Life in the castle was all right, but what I really wanted was all of us here at the mansion, shouting and being stupid like we always are. Please don't leave us again, okay?"

Megumin patted me on the back. Somewhere deep inside my heart, I felt a flicker of warmth.

5

Once I had my breathing under control, I went to pull myself away from Megumin.

. . .But she still wouldn't let me go.

"H-hey, Megumin, I promise I'm not leaving again. I'm back now. You can let go of me."

If I just let her hug me like this, things were going to get out of hand sooner or later.

Still clinging to me, though, Megumin said, "It might have been easier for you

had you chosen to break in via Darkness's room. She would have been strong enough to pull you up so much more readily. Yet, you chose my room. Surely I may hold fast to you for a few moments."

She giggled a little; I figured now wasn't the time to tell her that I hadn't had any deep reason for choosing her room but had been following Vanir's instructions. Was this what the all-seeing demon had meant when he'd said there would be something in it for me?

I would definitely have to buy lots and lots of stuff the next time I was at his shop.

One thing I really wanted to know, though: What *was* the relationship between Megumin and me at this moment? Yeah, she'd told me...what she'd told me, but we hadn't exactly advanced a lot since then. Maybe there just hadn't been a chance—we had spent a lot of our time since then going to Elroad and generally getting ourselves in trouble—but it seemed to me like we could take another step anytime now. In the end, after all, nothing had happened with Iris; I thought that qualified me as a pretty faithful guy. It looked like Megumin figured a hug was all right, in her own way, so maybe we could go from here.

I was steeling myself to return the hug when...

"Hurry and make up with Aqua, okay? Without you around, she just spends every day sitting on the couch, asking, '*Isn't our prodigal NEET back yet? When is he coming back?*' She seems rather lonely."

.....

"She makes enough food for you at every meal. She says, '*This is for our wandering NEET who hasn't come home yet.*' And then Darkness has to finish it in your place, whether she's hungry or not."

Maybe Darkness should have run away, too.

Megumin accompanied her words with a squeeze of my shoulder. I couldn't believe what a good place I was in right at this moment, but...

"...Okay, I'm gonna go settle things with that nutjob. When I get back, let's pick up right where we left off."

"We won't. We won't, understand?" Even as she said it, Megumin sounded a little disappointed. Still, she cared about her friends enough to look happy with my decision. "See you in a few minutes!"

It was the last thing I heard from her as I left the room and headed for my reckoning with Aqua.

"Ahhh! Villain! Darkness, there's an intruder in the house of this stunningly beautiful goddess! Capture that villain for me!"

I headed for the front door but ran into Aqua along the way, and she promptly started shouting. She was barefoot, wearing some weird hat and her pajamas, so I wasn't sure where she got off claiming to be a stunningly beautiful goddess.

Darkness, meanwhile, looked from me to Aqua and back, disturbed. ". . Listen, Aqua. Maybe it's time you made up with Kazum— Aaahhh! Ow-ow-ow! S-stop that—don't pull my hair! Sheesh, Kazuma is gone for a week and you develop this weird fascination with my hair. . .!"

Aqua answered the weeping, hair-pulled Darkness: "Darkness, are you so eager to be abandoned by our betrayer of a NEET here? When he sent that letter saying he was going to live with Iris from now on, I know you panted and puffed and said something about being cuckolded, but if we all just let this go, it'll be too late to keep Kazuma from becoming a completely worthless lost cause. In fact, I have a sneaking suspicion it may be too late already!"

Why, this smart-mouthing—

"All right, I've had it up to here with arguing with you. But let me make one thing clear: I didn't betray anyone. I mean, think about it! Am I really that faithless? You really believe I would take Iris over you, whom I've known for so long? I'm not that easy, and by the way, I'm not a lolicon, either. Yes, I care a lot about Iris but only as a little sister. No way I would actually fall for a girl her age, you hear me?"

That seemed to put Aqua back on her heels for a moment, but she quickly recovered. "Listen, Mr. Man-Whose-Only-Skill-in-His-Past-Life-Was-Playing-Rock-Paper-Scissors. Think back, just think back, on why you died. You would have walked right past some old lady about to get hit by a truck, but you got

sent to this world because you were killed trying to save someone from a traffic accident. Do you remember who it was you saved? Swallow your pride and say, '*I, Kazuma Satou, am an unrepentant loliNEET.*'"

Aqua's taunting was crossing the line; I couldn't hold back any longer. "How does helping a high school girl make me a lolicon?! You've got a lot of nerve, stealing my own mansion from me—today I'm finally going to make you pay for everything you've done!"

"Darkness, save me! Save me from the dangerous intruder!"

"Huh? What?! Wait—!"

Aqua hid behind Darkness; I advanced on her, flexing my arm. "Just you wait! I'm going to Drain Touch you dry, and then I'm going to ball you up and shove you in Emperor Zel's chicken coop! Here I gooooooo!"

"Go ahead and try it, you ugly, stupid NEET! Undead skills will never work on me, and it wouldn't matter if they did, because I never let down my guard for even an instant, you hear? It's two on one—you're not going to win this!"

"Wait. . .! I haven't agreed to fight Kazuma y—!"

I was on Aqua before Darkness could finish.

"N. . . No way. . .!"

I found myself on the carpet where Aqua had grabbed my chest and shoved me to the ground. Darkness was lying there, too; I had tied her up and Drain Touched her HP clear out, and she wasn't looking so good.

I'd tried using Bind on Aqua, but her magic let her break out of it easily, and when I tried to physically restrain her, she hid behind Darkness to get away from my attacks. Finally, Aqua buffed herself with strength boosts and overpowered me.

It was partly my fault: I'd forgotten that for all her numerous, glaring flaws, her base stats were higher than anyone else's here. Not to mention, she seemed to have a knack for close-quarters fighting, what with her God Blow and Holy Squeeze or whatever she called them.

Seriously, I wished she could show this sort of competence on a daily basis.

Incidentally, Darkness was on the ground because she'd had the misfortune of getting between Aqua and me.

"Hff. . . Hff. . . ! Y-you know how to put up a fight, Kazuma. But this is over! Now, say you're sorry! Say it just once, and I'll forgive you!" Aqua crowed. She was straddling me and holding fast to my arms.

And to her, I said: ". . . This time, this one time, I haven't done anything wrong. I'm a victim whose memory got erased even though I was doing just what Iris wanted, and I have nothing to apologize for! You're not the only one with an ace up their sleeve, you hear me? I declare that tomorrow morning, you'll be the one weeping and apologizing."



I was completely innocent for once; I had nothing to be embarrassed or apologetic about.

"Huh, so that's the attitude you want to take! I thought we could settle our differences amicably, but if that's how you want it to be, then I can be stubborn, too! On my name as the water goddess, I swear I won't let you into this house until you've apologized to me! I'm going to boot you outside now! And we'll see who's weeping and apologizing tomorrow morning!"

The gauntlet was thrown down.

6

Morning arrived.

I was observing the mansion from a distance and thinking.

You know how in manga, main characters are always getting in trouble with female leads over some ridiculous misunderstanding where she thinks he's cheated on her when he totally hasn't? Or when circumstances conspire to give him a peek of a girl character in a state of undress, and he gets beaten up even though he was totally innocent? Or when a heroine takes totally unjustified revenge on him simply because some other girl shows him a little affection, and the leading lady gets all jealous even though she and the MC aren't dating?

Yeah, those are all fun and games in manga. Hilarious when they're happening to someone else.

But this was what I thought:

"Kazuma! Kazumaaaaaa!!"

If I'd been any of those MCs, I would never have put up with crap like that from a female costar. I'd get even.

"Waaaaaaaaahh! K-Kazumaaaa! Kazumaaaaaa!!"

In this world, there was a power that stood against outrageous acts of violence and injustice. It was a power that good, law-abiding citizens should have no shame in turning to; if anyone should be ashamed, I thought, it was

people like this, who believed they could do whatever obnoxious, unjustified things they wanted and that they should and would be forgiven just because they were a woman.

“Kazumaaaaaa! I’ve been thinking for a while now, Kazuma; you know, you’re truly, extremely, by far the nicest guy I know! And we’ve known each other for so long, and it’s so important that we talk to each other. . .!”

Thus, Aqua shouted between her tears from the second-story window. I pointed at her.

“That’s her, Officer.”

“We asked at the real estate office and found that the name Kazuma Satou really is the one on the deed. It seems that’s you, sir. All right, we will now commence the operation to dislodge the unauthorized occupant.”

It was my duty as a citizen to report the person who had stolen my house.

“Kazuma! Kazumaaaaaa!! Waaaaah, my dear, sweet Kazuma!!” Seeing the police preparing to attack, Aqua was properly panicked.

“M-m-m-m-me, I’m just Kazuma’s housemate, you could say. . .!”

“Is that right? It would be quite a scandal if a member of the Dustiness family was found to be consorting with criminals.”

Darkness, having been slow to get out of the house, was currently being interrogated. As for Megumin, she had smelled danger and had fled the mansion before it was surrounded. So much for my assumption that she was the one I was closest to.

And then. . .

“Waaaaaaaaahhhh! Dear, sweet Kazuma! Please, Kazuma! Forgive me! I’m sorry; I was wrong, so forgive me. I beg you! I’m begging youuuuu!” Aqua kept weeping and apologizing, obviously about to be arrested by the police.

I took a few steps closer to her. “Hey there, water goddess. Can I come back in the house even though I haven’t said I’m sorry yet?”

“I’m sorry, Kazuma! From now on, I swear I’ll take you seriously; I won’t doubt you anymore, so call them off!” Aqua cried as two officers dragged her out of

the house.

I watched her go by. “It’s out of my hands nooooowwww!” I exclaimed and fixed her with a big, triumphant grin.

7

Back in my living room for the first time in a long time, I was napping in my usual spot on the sofa.

“O most honored Kazuma, your tea is ready!”

I was sprawled out on the couch, one hand tossed over the backrest and both legs wherever was most convenient, when Aqua approached with my tea.

“Sure, thanks.” I rewarded Aqua’s obsequious delivery with two curt words. Then I went to take a sip. . . “You worthless maid! Tea, my ass—this is just hot water! I’ve already told you a million times: You know as well as I do that if you so much as dip a finger in the water, it turns pure, so you have to be careful! Do it over! Come on, chop-chop!”

“Ohhh, I’m so sorry, honored Kazuma! I’ll make you a new cup immediately. Just you relax!”

After my rebuke, Aqua rushed off to make more tea for me. Her tone was. . . weird. I wasn’t sure how she was able to act so deferential without sounding the least bit resentful about it; maybe she thought of it as some new game.

“I am very glad everything ended up so neatly,” Megumin said from beside me. “Personally, I am at my most comfortable when we are all relaxing together in the living room like this.” She took a pleasant sip of the tea Aqua had made for her. I guess Aqua was perfectly capable of making tea for everyone else: I was the only one who kept getting cups of hot, purified water. It was almost like she was doing it on purpose—almost like she wanted me to yell at her.

Darkness, looking the slightest bit jealous of Aqua, said, “In any case, you’re back safely, and I’m willing to call that a happy ending. . . Please don’t get the police involved next time. . .” She looked pleadingly at me.

Hey, if they didn’t want the cops called on them, they should stop committing

crimes, like stealing a guy's house out from under him.

"Tea's ready!"

"Sure, thanks."

Aqua appeared with a new cup, sooner than I'd expected. I put it to my lips and. . .!

"This is hot water again! Don't you ever learn?!"

"Ahhh! I'm sorry, honored Kazuma! I promise I'll make a new cup right away. . .!"

She took back my cup perfectly happily, but Darkness said, "Aqua, if you're having that much trouble, why not let me make the tea? Then you won't have to take Kazuma's abuse. Only one of us has to endure it."

She started to get up, but—

"Stop it, Darkness. I finally get to pretend to be a maid for the Dustiness family; you can't stop me now," Aqua objected.

"?!" Darkness was shocked.

"Now, wait a damn minute. Have you been deliberately sticking your finger into my tea and changing it to hot water just because you wanted to pretend to be one of Darkness's pervy maids?!"

"I haven't been sticking my finger in anything—I've been bringing you hot water all along."

"Hold on, you two. The maids in my household aren't that incompetent!"

Ignoring Darkness's objection, Aqua came over to me with an ink-laden brush. "Honored Kazuma, by way of punishment for this poor, incapable maid of the Dustiness household, please graffiti me with this!"

"My pleasure. . ."

"I'm *telling* you, none of our maids wants to be graffitied!"

Still ignoring Darkness, I took the brush from Aqua and started painting on her face—even though I knew what would happen. The moment the ink touched her skin, it all turned to water. Megumin watched us with a smile of genuine

amusement. I tried to turn to smile back at her. . .

"Eeeyow-ow-ow-ow. . ." I put a hand to my ribs, which still ached where Aqua had pinned me down the other night.

Aqua let out a little gasp and said, "That's from yesterday, isn't it? I'm so sorry, honored Kazuma; I'll fix you right up. Just for you, I'll use my most powerful healing magic. *Sacred High Heal!*"

And she cast her healing magic on me, no muss, no fuss.

Yes, her healing magic. . .

".....Huh?"

"What is it?" Aqua asked. The sound had come out of my mouth before I knew what was happening. "What's wrong, honored Kazuma? I used my very strongest spell; was it still not enough?"

"Er? Uh-uh," I said. "No, not at all. Thanks, Aqua, I feel better. And hey, look, we're all friends, right? Why don't you stop with the 'honored Kazuma' business? Just call me Kazuma like you always have. You sound so distant otherwise." I was trying my best not to arouse suspicion.

"What's gotten into you?" Darkness asked. "Not that I don't admire your display of good-heartedness. But you were the one who said, '*Since you doubted me for a week, for the whole next week you have to call me 'honored Kazuma.'*' You're right, though—we're all friends and we should act like it." Her lips tugged up into a smile. Megumin started to smile, too.

"....." Aqua was the only one not smiling; she was looking me right in the face from very close up.

"...Wh-what?"

".....Nothin'. I told you I wasn't going to be suspicious of you anymore, Kazuma." Even so, Aqua gave no sign of getting any farther away from me.

It must have been thanks to Aqua's healing magic. Every one of the memories erased by that potion had come flooding back to me, and now I couldn't look her in the eye.

What should I do?

It bothered me a little that after gloating about my innocence, it turned out that I actually had sort of, kind of, maybe been a bit of a piece of human garbage. I couldn't really blame people for calling me things like Cad-zuma and Kaz-scum-a.

Aqua kept looking at me, apparently picking up something weird from the way I was sweating and looking away from her. Trying to distract her, I brought out the letters. "Aqua, remember these? I know you read these letters a week ago, but with my memories erased and all, I feel like I just saw them. Come on—remember how they made you feel?! Remember the real reason you came back here?!" I gave her the letters, but she didn't even glance at them.

Hardly able to stand it anymore, I jumped up off the sofa.

"All right, you guys, let's hit the Adventurers Guild! Let's get us a nice hunting quest. To protect Axel and the world!"

"....."

Aqua was still staring intensely at my profile, just centimeters from my face.

I didn't last long. About five minutes later, I was prostrating myself on the ground, apologizing to everyone and begging for forgiveness.

Chapter 3

A Goddess's Mercy for This Pious Believer!



1

It was earlier than what you would call afternoon but too late for what you would call morning. I guess what I'm saying is, it was around lunchtime. I fought back a yawn, my hair still scruffy from bed, as I headed down to the living room, where everyone was setting out lunch.

"Morning, guys. What's for breakfast today? I had all kinds of weird stuff at the castle. I'd like to avoid miso soup for a while."

Darkness responded to my demand for food with a suspicious look. "You got your memory back, right? Then you should remember those letters from the children that we read at the castle. So what are you doing up so late? You've missed breakfast; it's time for lunch, and lucky you: It's lobster today. I happened to like the 'mini lobster' dish from the Crimson Magic Clan that Megumin made when we went to Elroad. I got the ingredients and begged her to make it."

Darkness sounded downright delighted, but when I glanced over at Megumin, she immediately looked away. I guess she never imagined a pampered daughter of the nobility would fall in love with crawfish. She was so embarrassed, she couldn't even look at me. You just knew that someday Darkness was going to be at a party full of nobles and would start talking about how delicious this dish of

tiny lobsters was.

I thought the polite thing to do might have been to get out ahead of that mistake, but when I saw Darkness happily carving up the fried crawfish, I didn't have the heart to tell her.

"W-well, hey, she's not wrong. It *was* tasty. But tell me, what are you going to do today? I mean. . . Are you really going to the Guild?"

Getting my memories back meant that, unfortunately, I also remembered things with Iris in the castle after Darkness and the others had left. Yes, I remembered Iris saying how much she loved her big brother. If it hadn't been for that, I would probably still have been all fired up about the letters from those kids. . .

"Can't say I really care," Aqua added. "I feel like I sort of. . . calmed down without you here. But I guess if you're that eager to go on a quest, I could be convinced to go with you."

"Hey, I don't really care, either. But if you're eager to go on a quest, I could be convinced to go with you," I said.

Aqua was probably feeling the same way I was, her passion cooled from waiting too long. Darkness watched us trying to foist responsibility on each other, her cheek twitching. Finally, she slammed her fork down on the table. "Didn't you guys feel anything reading those letters?! Kazuma, you're these kids' idol! Don't you want to set a good example for them?"

"I'm not saying I don't understand why someone would idolize me. It's just that since coming home, I've had a lot of time to think. And a cooler head tells me I don't have to go putting myself in the path of dangerous monsters to get experience. I only need to eat some nice, expensive food to raise my level. No need to risk my life. . ."

Darkness shook her head as if to say *This man is hopeless* and turned to Aqua. "Come on, Aqua—you like kids, right? I see you playing with the neighborhood children all the time. And you keep claiming to be a goddess. You even said it at the castle! So isn't it your job to deal with the Demon King?" She sounded like she was talking to a stubborn child, but Aqua went on the alert when Darkness brought up the goddess thing.

"Yeah, I'm Aqua, the goddess of water. . .but I've never known you to believe me when I said it. Do you really think I'm a goddess? If you really believe me, then I, your long-term housemate, should be more important to you than Eris, right? You'll convert to the Axis faith, right?" I guess her recent experiences with me had made her more suspicious.

Darkness must have been expecting Aqua to simply roll over when she called her a goddess; she looked a little cowed by this unexpected pushback. ". . .W-well, my family and I have long been in the service of this nation, and our public position would never allow us to convert away from the Eris Church. . . I think. . ."

"You liar, I knew you didn't believe in me! Come on, Darkness—I really am the goddess of water! Don't you ever wonder about me?! What normal person can hold their breath underwater forever or change liquids to pure water just by touching them?!"

Aqua grabbed Darkness by the shirt; the Crusader's eyes began to brim. "Yeah. . . That. . . I know you have to have crazy-high faith to be an Arch-priest, especially of the Axis sect, and I heard that gives you power. I thought maybe it wasn't that surprising if a follower of the water goddess could purify liquids or breathe underwater. . ."

"Apologize! Say you're sorry for talking about my precious children like they're inhuman freaks! . . . Besides, those letters you showed us only said nice things about Kazuma. I think it's about time people started giving the Axis Church its due. Specifically, I think I deserve some fan letters by now."

Darkness's eyes glittered.

"R-right, that's perfect! I can get some of those, too! Wait right—"

". . . Hey," I said, unable to ignore what I'd just heard. "What was that?"

Darkness slapped a hand over her mouth, but it was too late to take it back.

"Did you say, 'I can get some of those, *too*'? . . . I see it now, Darkness—you asked the kids to write those letters. Didn't you?"

Darkness smacked the table again and stood up. "So what if I did?! Yes, I paid children to write those letters! But what else was I supposed to do?! You sure

weren't going to come home on your own!"

She wasn't going to back down.

I stood up, too. "What's with the attitude? Those are the first fan letters I ever got! I've treasured them!"

"G-gee, were you that happy about them? Now I feel kind of bad. . . ."

Maybe she did, too, because Darkness trailed off. I couldn't stand the way she kept acting more and more like a noble. . . .!

"You used to be such a straight-and-narrow idiot that you wouldn't even mention your family's name to people—and now you're creeping around paying kids to write letters? It's bad enough that you started throwing your weight around, but this. . . .!"

I remembered how hard Darkness had worked to hide her family origins from us. But now that she had learned how to use her money and power, it suddenly seemed like she wasn't embarrassed at all to do it. Did that count as personal growth?

"J-just whose fault is that? This is all because of your bad influence! You're the one who corrupted me!"

Aqua and I both went on the assault against the defiant Darkness.

"Somehow this is all my fault?!" I said. "Don't try to pin this on me, lady—I found what was there all along!"

"Say you're sorry!" Aqua added. "I was so moved when I read those letters! You need to apologize, not just to Kazuma but to me!"

"More important than any of that is that we all eat before the food gets cold. I worked very hard to make it."

And somewhere in the middle of our collective descent into chaos, there was a knock on the door. I rushed to answer it, tired of trying to deal with Darkness.

"Come back here, Kazuma! We're not done talking!"

"Leave me alone, you twisted freak! Shut up and eat your crawfish!"

The word *crawfish* confused Darkness, but it gave me time to unlock the front

door.

“H-h-hello!”

“Is Magu—?! Er, is M-Megumin in?”

I found, standing there, three members of the Crimson Magic Clan. Two of them were girls who looked vaguely familiar. The other, holding their hands, was Megumin’s little sister.

2

“Here, tea.”

“Th-thanks.”

“Thank you very much!”

We sat the girls on the sofa in the living room, and Aqua brought out tea for them. Now I was sure: We’d met them back in Crimson Magic Village. I think their names were. . .

“So, Funikura, Doronko, what brings you here so suddenly, and accompanying my little sister?”

“You could at least remember a person’s name! I’m Funifura!”

“And it’s Dodonko, not Doronko! Are you upset that I almost called you Magumin earlier? I swear I just bit my tongue!”

Megumin’s comment brought it all back to me. As I recalled, these two had had something to do with Yunyun and Megumin back in the village.

“There you have it,” Megumin said. “This is Funifura and Dodonko. Highly average, not at all distinguished members of the Crimson Magic Clan, but I suppose you could be so kind as to remember their names.”

They weren’t pleased by Megumin’s half-baked introduction.

“‘Highly average’? ‘Be so kind’?!”



"I know people think we're interchangeable or that we don't stand out. But what about you, Megumin? You stood out for all the wrong reasons!"

While Megumin and I entertained Funifura and Dodonko, Aqua and Darkness were busy with Komekko.

"Here, eat up. Don't worry—we have lots. Take your time."

"Komekko, I'll give you some snacks later. So you d-don't have to wolf it down so fast; I'm scared watching you."

She must have been hungry, because she had stuffed enough food in her mouth to make her cheeks bulge. They were worried she might choke.

Funifura (the assertive-looking one with the pigtails), sounding nervous at being in an unfamiliar house, said, "So, Megumin, it's been a while. Dodonko and I brought your kid sister here because things had gotten so bad for her." She glanced uneasily at Komekko.

"Yeah, things, or. . . specifically, your house," Dodonko (the one with the ponytail) added. "We were afraid she might end up homeless. We'd heard you and Yunyun made it to Axel, so we brought her here, kind of like her bodyguards." She looked pretty proud of herself, but I said:

"How have things gotten bad? What happened to Megumin's house? I think I talked to the two of you for a bit back in the village, right?"

Both of them twitched a little; I guess they were uneasy talking to guys. "You're Megumin's boyfriend, right?" Funifura ventured. "Um, so you're living with Megumin? To be fair, it's not just her house. The whole village is in bad shape."

"Yeah, yeah. It's. . . Well, it's not easy to talk about, but. . ."

Neither of them could quite bring themselves to explain what was happening; Megumin cast a questioning look toward Komekko.

Noticing her sister's attention, Komekko swallowed the food in her mouth and said:

"Our house went *poof*, and now it's gone!"

No context, no explanation. Megumin froze. “*Poof?* What does it mean to go *poof*? I must ask you to be more descriptive.”

Funifura and Dodonko looked at each other as if unsure who should give her the news. After a moment of hesitation, Dodonko said, “The Demon King’s daughter led an army to attack Crimson Magic Village.”

Suddenly, Megumin was all seriousness. “The Demon King’s daughter. . . I see, so the village’s secret has finally come to light.”

Crimson Magic Village’s. . . secret? Like, the fact that the village was actually built on the remains of a technologically advanced nation from long ago and was populated by artificially augmented people—*that* secret? Was that why the Demon King’s army had attacked? But the nation that had produced the Crimson Magic Clan was long gone. What good would attacking do now?

Megumin mistook my look of concern for worry about her people. “Kazuma, you needn’t look so troubled. A great many people in the village can use Teleport; this would not be enough to destroy them. And even if the entire village was burned down, it would be simple enough to repair it with magic.”

“True. I’m a little worried about your mom and dad. But I’m more curious what this big secret is. You guys have a habit of filching sealed gods from elsewhere to use as tourist attractions and collecting other dangerous stuff, right? You even had a weapon lying around that you thought might destroy the world. So I was just wondering what the Demon King’s daughter would be after.”

Frankly, by this point, I wouldn’t be surprised no matter what they turned out to be hiding. I wished they would come out and tell me already.

“I see. Yes, I suppose it would be best if you knew.” Maybe Megumin understood what I was thinking. She turned and looked at me seriously. “As a matter of fact, one of the many famous tourist destinations in Crimson Magic Village is an observatory from which the Demon King’s castle can be seen.”

An observatory?

“She’s right,” Funifura added, looking just as grim as Megumin. “On top of a mountain near the village, there is a powerful magical item. Some even say it

can see all things.”

Dodonko provided the conclusion: “Our people use the item to keep a constant watch on the Demon King and his castle. I guess his daughter must have found out what was happening. . .”

I supposed I could understand how the Demon King’s army would find an observatory less than amusing. Information could mean the difference between victory and defeat in war. The Demon King’s daughter would obviously want to take out anything that let an enemy spy on them. . .

“We never imagined she would discover the secret,” Funifura said. “The whole attraction of that observatory is that (they say) you can see directly into the bedroom of the Demon King’s daughter anytime.”

“Yeah,” Dodonko agreed. “The Demon King’s intelligence network is nothing to sneeze at.”

“What did you just say?” I demanded.

“They are correct,” Megumin confirmed. “That building is crucial to us; it brings in considerable money as a tourist attraction. When it is not in use, it serves as a source of comfort for the village NEETs. To think of it now gone. . .”

“Well, of course she would want to take that out. There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you guys for a while now—why’s the Demon King so fixated on destroying humanity? Is this whole endless war because of you and the Axis Church?” The three Crimson Magickers looked away from me. “Hey, you *do* know, don’t you?”

“M-my goodness, Kazuma, you needn’t try to pin everything on us. . . All we do is have that picnic once every four years or so. . .”

Aqua, who was busy giving Komekko some post-meal snacks, looked up curiously at Megumin. “Picnic?”

Funifura explained, “Everyone in the village who can use Teleport gets together once every four years and has a picnic right by the Demon King’s castle. They have a nice barbecue; then they all cut loose with their magic against the barriers surrounding the castle. When the Demon King’s army comes out, they teleport back home.”

"You guys are bad news—stop with the childish pranks already! . . . But okay, I think I understand the situation. Thanks for bringing Komekko here. We can just keep her with us at the house, right?"

Funifura and Dodonko shared a sigh of relief at that. "That would be great. We couldn't think of anywhere else to take her. Us, we have something we need to do now."

"Yeah, Crimson Magic Clansfolk never back down from a fight."

This sounded like trouble. The two of them stood up, and even Megumin looked ready to leap into the fray. "Then the first thing we must do is find out where the Demon King's daughter is now! Leave it to me—I'll throw the first punch! Funifura, Dodonko, let us go!"

"How could you help us?! The Demon King's daughter is still in the village. We're going to link up with the rest of the clan and start a guerrilla war against her. Explosion isn't going to do anyone any good, which means you're not going to do anyone any good."

Funifura's assessment caused Megumin's eyebrow to twitch.

"She's right. We know Advanced Magic now, so they asked us to join the fight. You just sit here and suck your thumb and wait for us to get the job done."

Dodonko's little addendum caused Megumin's eyes to flash red.

"Say, we heard Yunyun was around here—do you know where she is? They want her to join the battle, but we can't find her anywhere."

"Yeah, she wrote us a letter saying she'd made some friends in town recently, and we thought we might see who they were. We wrote to her that we would be here today, but. . ."

By "friends," maybe Yunyun meant the masked demon and the street punk with whom I'd seen her recently. If they couldn't find her, it probably meant that despite her bragging about finally having friends, she wasn't eager for the likes of Funifura and Dodonko, of all people, to meet them. She was probably running all over town keeping out of sight.

"H-hey, that reminds me. Megumin, I've been wanting to ask you. . ." Funifura looked like she needed to be sure to get this off her chest before she went into battle with the Demon King's daughter. "Yunyun wrote to us that at least one of the friends she made here in Axel was a guy. But. . .she doesn't actually have any friends, does she? She's just putting on for us, isn't she?"

"Y-yeah, I want to know, too. I mean, I can't imagine Yunyun making friends besides us! Especially not. . .guy friends! It's one thing for you to get ahead of us, but even her. . .?"

As evenly as could be, Megumin answered, "I must assume that any male friends she mentions would include, first, Kazuma here. And perhaps. . .maybe Vanir, who is said to be popular among the neighborhood women. And perhaps the golden-haired adventurer whom you would have to be living under a rock not to know around here, Dust."

Funifura's and Dodonko's faces got sicker and sicker as Megumin counted off the possibilities on her fingers.

"Ha. . . Ha-ha! G-gee, not bad. I guess there are a lot more people here than in Crimson Magic Village! We shouldn't be surprised if she found one or two other weirdos to keep her company!"

Funifura was desperate to spin this situation; Dodonko piled on, too. "Y-yeah, that's right! And what about you, Megumin—you and your guy? You told us a lot of stories when you were at the village, but after you left, we started to think it sounded pretty fishy. You *never* talk about romance like that. Tell us the truth—all this stuff about bathing together and cuddling in bed—it was all basically by accident, right?"

But this was a bad time for those questions. Aqua and Darkness had taken Komekko, who had just finished dessert, into the kitchen to brush her teeth. Only the four of us were left in the living room. Meaning. . .

"Me and my. . .? I. . ." Megumin looked over at me, went red, and fell silent, staring at the ground. That was weird. She wasn't usually this modest.

"You're kidding. . . Th-this is some kind of joke, right? That girlish reaction. . .!"

"No. . . No, I don't want to lose to you, Megumin. . . Not when love was always the furthest thing from your mind, the last thing you were interested in. . .!"

The girls had gone as pale as if they had seen the end of the world, but Megumin merely gave an embarrassed scratch of her cheek. And then, a bit awkwardly, she said, "Please don't tell my parents yet."

"Ahhhhhhh, you haven't—!"

"—beaten uuuuuussssss!"

I watched the two girls run away crying. Megumin gave a satisfied sniff.

Funifura and Dodonko might have been gone, but they had left us Komekko to look after, so we went into town to grab everything a little girl might need. Then we settled back at home.

Aqua practically threw herself onto "her" spot on the sofa the moment she came in. In her arms was Chomusuke, struggling to get loose. We hadn't seen much of her, busy as we'd been with traveling and living at the castle and so on.

"Now, then," Megumin said. "Komekko, you can sleep with me in my room. It's been a while since we saw each other, and I'm sure you've been lonely—we can sleep together again at long last."

"You get lonely so easily, Sis!"

"K-Komekko!"

Komekko dispensed this burn almost disinterestedly, fixing an intense stare on Chomusuke where she flailed in Aqua's arms. "Looks tasty."

"Komekko, we have plenty of food in this house, so you must not eat either Chomusuke or Emperor Zel, who lives in the chicken coop!" Megumin sounded vaguely anxious.

Komekko wiped the drool from her mouth and nodded. "Yeah. We can't eat them till they fatten up."

"No, Komekko, we aren't going to eat them at all! They're our pets!"

Aqua held Chomusuke protectively and drew back a little in the face of

Komekko's bald ruthlessness.

"Well, since you've come all this way, Komekko, how about a welcome party? Your big bro'll make you all kinds of delicious stuff."

"You're so cool, Big Bro!" Komekko exclaimed with innocent joy. Then she produced what looked like a notepad and started writing something down.

"What are you writing there?" Megumin asked, coming over. "'Month Such-and-Such, Day So-and-So. Sis's man hand-fed me. Guess he likes me better than her now. . .' Komekko! Where are you learning words like this?!" Megumin was awfully excited.

"Bukkororii."

"That worthless NEET! Are there no good NEETs in the world at all?!"

That kind of touched a nerve—even though I guess, as an adventurer, I wasn't a NEET, so she wasn't technically talking about me.

"Anyway, what is this?" Megumin went on. "A diary?"

"Mom told me to write everything that happens between Sis and her man in this book."

So she was a spy in the house of Kazuma!

3

I got plenty of sleep the next day, by which I mean I got up around noon, and then I went downstairs for some breakfast/lunch.

"Sis, more!"

"Komekko, you can eat your fill anytime while you're in this house. So there's no need to gorge yourself at every meal, all right?"

I came down to discover Komekko jumping exuberantly as if hoping to free up some space in her stomach and Megumin giving her a worried look.

And then there were. . .

"Hey, Darkness, lunch tastes a little salty today. . ."

“Sniff... I can’t see through the tears...”

...two women looking at Komekko and weeping copiously. I guess the sight of this poor, deprived child was more than they could bear.

“But I never get to eat this much!”

“That may be true, but as your older sister, I’m somewhat embarrassed. Look, there’s pudding for dessert.”

“Yippee!”

After a moment of fretting, Aqua slid her own plate of pudding toward Komekko. I could never have imagined this from someone who made such a big deal of being a gourmand.

“Your big sister is full already,” Aqua said. “Maybe you can finish this for me.”

“Can I? Pudding is a really fancy, really expensive dessert that I only ever get on my birthday—are you sure you aren’t going to eat it?” Despite her question, Komekko didn’t take her eyes off Aqua’s pudding. Darkness and Megumin, unable to sit idly by, both slid their desserts toward Komekko, too.

“Komekko, our adventuring party is now one of the most famous in the nation. Money is no object for us, so you needn’t worry. I will treat you to a washbasin’s worth of pudding tomorrow, so for today, just say thank you to everyone and eat your dessert.”

“Thank you.” Komekko held the pudding carefully as if it were a priceless treasure and bowed deeply, causing Aqua to wipe at her eyes again.

That was when Megumin noticed me watching this touching scene. “Oh, so you are awake. Want something to eat, Kazuma?”



"Yeah, please. . . Hey, Megumin, if you needed money, you'd let me know, right? I've been keeping the majority of your quest rewards like you asked. I know you only accept enough for food, small expenses, and some pocket change each month. I have everything you've earned set aside, okay?"

Megumin showed a pretty minimal desire for money. Sometimes she would squawk about a nice robe or an awesome item she'd seen, but the most expensive thing she owned was the staff she'd bought with the reward from our long-ago cabbage hunt. Heck, when I'd seen Megumin's wallet the other day, bursting with coupons, I'd experienced a sort of indescribable emotion.

"I appreciate that," she said. "But it is all right; even on my small stipend, I am able to send something home each month. More to the point, if I sent more than I do, I know my father would only blow it making magical items."

"That guy is surprisingly shiftless," I said, getting my belated lunch.

"Sis! Now that your man is finally up, are you going to go to the Adventurers Guild today?"

"Ko—! Komekko! You must stop this 'your man' business!"

Aqua was watching the jabbering sisters with a fond smile, sipping her after-lunch tea, but then she said, "I see—would you like to go to the Adventurers Guild, sweetheart? If you're interested, who better to go with you than your very well-known 'big sister'?"

"Good point," Darkness said. "The whole reason we came back here was supposedly to revisit the basics and accept some quests. Let's take Komekko on a tour, and while we're there, we can see if there are any good quests. But, Komekko, why do you want to go to the Guild? You know it's not a playground, right?"

Komekko turned to the two women, whom she evidently had wrapped around her little finger, and said: "I wanna go to the Adventurers Guild and see Sis being awesome." As a reason to go, it didn't make a lot of sense. It caused Megumin to flinch, though.

"Sis told me in all her letters—she said how everyone at the Adventurers Guild loves her and how the moment she gets there, everyone starts bowing to

her and being real polite.”

Now, this I had to know more about. In the ensuing silence, I let a single word drop:

“Hey.”

Megumin flinched even harder. “Komekko, I think you should go play outside for a bit! Emperor Zel is in the chicken coop there. And it’s been so long since you and Chomusuke had fun together—take her and go feed the emperor together!”

“Okay! We’ll fatten him right up!”

Megumin’s expression was pinched, and she showed no hesitation in sacrificing Chomusuke, who had been doing her best impression of a sunflower on the windowsill. But she got Komekko out of there.

Megumin was being very careful not to look at me, so I repeated myself. “. . . Hey.”

“It’s not true!” She turned, immediately assumed a formal sitting position, and began with a denial. I didn’t know exactly what wasn’t true, but if she wanted to try to make excuses, I figured I would hear her out. Once we were all sitting down, Megumin got a far-off look in her eye, like she was thinking about the past, and started in. “Please listen to me, for there are complicated circumstances at work here. . . Yes, it happened when I was still in Crimson Magic Village. . .”

And then she told us the story.

“That’s not complicated at all.”

All that had happened was that she had exaggerated a little in her letters to her family. Partly, she had wanted to reassure her mom and dad, who had been worried about whether she could make her way in the world. Come to think of it, when we’d visited Crimson Magic Village, I seemed to remember her parents being given to exaggeration themselves.

“I felt I had no choice. Just imagine if, out of an excess of worry, they decided to come here. Kazuma, it would be rather inconvenient to you if they dragged

me back home, wouldn't it?" Megumin stood up defiantly, tossing her cape out behind her.

"I guess. . .? Wait, 'drag you back home'?"

Would that be a problem for me?

"Hey," Megumin said as I thought it over.

"I'd be in trouble without you, Megumin! I would have to redo our entire chore chart, and I would have to do more chores! Plus, who would play my game with me, then?" Aqua was earnestly trying to comfort Megumin, but it only caused our wizard to put a hand on the carpet in defeat.

Darkness gave her what was probably intended as a reassuring pat on the back. "W-well, look, forget about that. We'll just have to tell Komekko the truth. She's going to find out eventually—wouldn't it feel better to tell her yourself?"

Aqua and I nodded along, but Megumin said, "B-but. . .my authority as a big sister. . .! . . .No. Darkness, you are right. The whole reason I embellished my achievements was to make my parents feel better. I used to write them only the truth. But my mother got so worried. . . Yet now we live in a mansion, and I go on adventures and fight foes that need no exaggeration. They won't drag me back home now, so I can be honest with Komekko."

A smile came over Megumin's face; she looked totally relieved. . .

"Komekko. I. . .have something important to tell you."

Komekko came back into the house covered in mud (she and Chomusuke must've had some real fun out there), and Megumin sat her down on the sofa before settling across from her with a serious look on her face.

Komekko understood immediately that something big was afoot. "You mean. . .you're not going to give me that washbasin of pudding you promised?"

"Oh, there'll be pudding, trust me! No, this is something much more important!" Komekko looked deeply relieved to know the dessert was still in the works but didn't say anything, so Megumin went on. "Komekko. Remember how I wrote to you that we're possibly the most awesome adventuring party in this entire town?" She sounded resolved, set on her course.

"Yeah. You said you're an awesome wizard who can destroy any monster with a single spell and that the whole town totally loves you."

Megumin nodded. "That's right. About that. . ."

But Komekko went on just as blithely: "And you said that Golden-Haired Sis never ran away from any monster ever and that she was a great, stalwart Crusader who could withstand any attack, and you said that Blue-Haired Sis is practically a goddess, that she can stand up against any demon or any undead and even bring people back to life! And. . ."

Megumin jumped to her feet.

". . .you said that your man is an awesome guy who's quick-witted and has defeated lots of strong bad guys, and he's super nice, and even if he complains a lot, when his friends really need him, he comes through—"

Megumin slapped a hand over her sister's mouth. "Yes, Komekko, I'm aware of what I wrote; you needn't rehash it for me! In fact, that's exactly what I want to talk to you about. . ." She was starting to blush. She was just about to come to the point, but she didn't get the chance.

Aqua could barely contain her smile as she said, "That's my Megumin. *Practically* a goddess? Close. I really *am* a goddess—but you've got the right idea. Yes, what your sister told you is no lie."

Darkness was right behind her. "Er—ahem. I n-never knew you felt that way, Megumin, but, er, yes, it's all true. Heh. . . Heh-heh. . . 'A great, stalwart Crusader,' eh?"

"Wh-what is wrong with both of you?! It's all a mistake, Komekko! What I've been saying—!"

Before she could finish, I broke in.

"—is basically accurate."

We were on our way to the Adventurers Guild together. Megumin was objecting, quietly, to our having brought Komekko.

"Why must things get so thoroughly out of hand? I was more than prepared to tell Komekko the truth and let her be disappointed in me. . ."

I turned to the whispering Megumin. "Ah, calm down. Besides, all that stuff you were saying to Komekko—how do I put this? None of it sounded off. Maybe a little exaggerated."

"He's right—maybe just a little. Anyway, some things are hard to communicate in a letter—it hardly even qualifies as a mistake."

While the three of us debated, Darkness was walking happily in front of us, hand in hand with Komekko so the little girl wouldn't get lost.

"Hey, Golden-Haired Sis, is it true you're super-duper strong and can even stand up to Explosion? Is it true that even a mean ol' demon couldn't possess you?"

"Oh, I suppose so. Yes, that did. . . Hmm, so Megumin even wrote to you about that. Well, it's true enough."

"Cooool!"

Darkness seemed to be trying to coax Komekko into saying nice things about her. I guess she really didn't get enough praise on a daily basis.

I supposed she was pleased to have someone recognize her—it was easy to ignore someone who just stood around guarding things, and most people did.

"Hey, what about me? Tell me a bit more about me!" Aqua, apparently also starved for praise, wandered up to Komekko and Darkness and started fishing for compliments.



... I'll have to ask later what Megumin wrote about me...

Megumin's voice carried through the Guild Hall despite the building's large size.

"I have something to say!"

Those were the first words out of her mouth when we came inside, and everyone in the building turned to look at her. Megumin and I had gotten here first, the plan being that we would explain things to the other adventurers while Komekko stayed with Darkness and Aqua.

"Listen," I said, "there's something I'd like to ask all of you to do." And then while I still had their attention, I explained what was going on. I told them how Megumin's sister was staying with us and how our exploits might have been slightly exaggerated in the telling. In particular, I mentioned how Megumin was supposedly the object of intense respect and admiration at the Adventurers Guild. "I just want to make sure we all have our stories straight," I concluded. "As for what's in it for you—while Megumin's sister is here, I'll be picking up everyone's tabs at the bar. My treat."

That got some eyes to light up. A lot of people didn't seem really into it, though. Maybe they felt bad lying to a kid.

"I know, I know, it's an obnoxious thing to ask. But please do it for me." Hoping to win those people over, I bowed deeply.

"K-Kazuma. . .!" That brought Megumin up speechless. Then a little smile came over her face. "You needn't go so far for me. I think it is time I told Komekko the truth. My authority as an older sister is less important to me than you, Kazuma, not embarrassing yourself on my behalf. Please, everyone, let's all pretend this didn't happen. I apologize for nearly getting you dragged into something so strange." Then she bowed to everyone.

And that was when it happened.

"Aw, don't back out now, Megumin. I don't mind saying whatever. Not if Kazuma's gonna pick up my tab!" The voice belonged to an adventurer I recognized, someone we'd drunk with at the Guild a few times before.

"You know, Kazuma helped me once when I had just arrived here. He took me to lunch and taught me the basics of adventuring. This is the perfect opportunity to pay him back." That was a woman I'd found almost at random once; I'd bought her a meal pretty much so I could pretend to be a veteran adventurer.

"Heh, you guys have taken down more than a few generals of the Demon King. You're aces. This ain't exactly a request from a bunch of nobodies. Just act respectful toward Megumin? Sure, I can do that. Thanks to you guys, I made out like a bandit on that bounty." That was another adventurer I knew very well.

Megumin looked like she might burst into tears, but she seemed a little pleased, no question. "My goodness. . . Thank you very much. But it kills me to think of all you generous souls telling lies to sustain my pathetic pride. It's enough to know you feel that way. . ."

She bowed her head, but she didn't get to finish her excuse. Because the door of the Adventurers Guild flew open with a bang.

"Here it is, Axel's Adventurers Guild! This is a starter town, so it's a bunch of low-level weaklings, but they're all nice people, and if you go around looking sad and hungry, I'm sure they'll give you some treats or buy you a beer or something!"

In came Aqua, possibly praising the other adventurers or possibly not. Everyone turned to look at her—and caught sight of Komekko, who came into the Guild holding Darkness's hand.

"But my big sis said the adventurers in this town were awesome!"

Her voice carried all around the Guild Hall as she went on. "She said they didn't run away from the Demon King's general Beldia, or Destroyer, or the Kowloon Hydra, and that they're all super brave and great people!" Komekko had a gigantic smile on her face.

The collective gaze shifted back to Megumin, who had drawn her hat down to hide her beet-red ears and wasn't making eye contact with anyone. That didn't bother Komekko at all; she went up to the nearest adventurer with a look of genuine reverence. "You're awesome!"

"G-gee, you think so? Heck, maybe I am. I guess adventurers from some other town would have run away. But your big sis is even cooler than the rest of us!" the adventurer answered with a grin, causing Megumin's head to snap around to look at him.

Beside him, a female adventurer said with considerable pleasure, "Yeah, our levels aren't always high, but you know? It's heart that counts, and we have more heart than adventurers anywhere else. And Megumin has more heart than any of us!"

"So cool!"

"Huh?!" Megumin was about to try to stop the woman midsentence, but other adventurers piled on.

"Listen, little lady, everything your sister told you is absolutely true. The adventurers around here are a brave bunch. Hell, I myself charged Beldia head-on and died doing it—heh-heh, and I wasn't sorry, not if it meant protecting my town. . . Gotta say, though, Megumin has me beat when it comes to sheer recklessness. She went one-on-one with Beldia; did you know that?" This adventurer was beaming at Komekko's awe-filled gaze; Megumin looked like she wanted to say something, but she couldn't get the words out.

"When we heard Destroyer was coming to Axel—people all over the world are afraid of it, now—even I started shaking in my boots. But then I thought to myself, *This town has given me so much; the least I can do is try to keep it safe.* And even old Destroyer couldn't stand up to the power of Megumin's Explosion. Come to think of it, that's the battle that gave me this scar. . ." Komekko's eyes shimmered at this story from a man with a scar on his cheek.

"I remember the Kowloon Hydra—now, *that* was a battle. . . Normally they would have sent the royal knights to deal with a problem that big, but the capital's forces were too busy fighting the Demon King to come help. So our only choice was to do something about it ourselves. But was I scared? Ha! I left fear in my mother's belly when I was born. A hydra? Megumin put it down for the count!"

Everyone but Megumin and Komekko nodded at this tale of heroism.

"Big Sis is awesome and so are all of you!"

Komekko's innocent words of appreciation drew smiles from all the adventurers. Only Megumin wasn't grinning; instead, she shuddered and whispered something incomprehensible about a demon-ish little sister.

5

"C'mon, sweetheart, have a mouthful of this. Axel's famous fried frog." A tough-looking male adventurer set a plate in front of Komekko, who was at a table in the center of the Guild.

"You blockhead. Kids like hamburgers, right? Here, try this frogburger, dear." A female adventurer beside him set down another plate.

The tiny swindler at the table gave a huge grin. "I'll have them both!"

Perfect answer.

"What a thing this is, to be frightened by my own sister. I worry she will grow into a demon lady who plays men like musical instruments." Megumin, watching everyone dote on Komekko from a distance, whispered so that only we could hear her.

"Yeah, well, she'd be learning from the best, wouldn't she, 'Sis'? The way you always get to the tastiest part and then back off... Eeeyow-ow-ow!"

Megumin jabbed me in the side (maybe I deserved it), and we saw one of the receptionists go up to Komekko with a smile. She must have been drawn in by Komekko's charms, too: She was holding a bowl of ice cream.

Komekko was wolfing everything down, her cheeks puffed out like a squirrel's. The receptionist stood behind her. "Pardon me—may I have a moment?" Still smiling, she took out some sheets of paper. She selected one and handed it to an adventurer.

"Hunt Quest: Lucy's Ghost?" the adventurer muttered. "Huh? Hey, isn't this...?"

At that, everyone else looked at one another. The pieces of paper the receptionist was holding turned out to be monster hunt requests. The leftovers, at that: quests that had been sitting around because nobody seemed to want to

do them.

When she saw that, Aqua frowned and came over to me. "Kazuma, Kazuma. I've got a bad feeling about this. I'm sure they're going to try to foist something unpleasant on us."

"You're a sharp one, Aqua. I was thinking the same thing." Even from this distance, I could feel the danger wafting from the scene before us; I started slowly backing away.

As we prepared to beat a hasty retreat anytime it might be necessary, the receptionist went over to Komekko, who was still sitting in front of the large quantity of food—enough for two people. "Komekko—that's your name, right, sweetie? I'll give you some ice cream for dessert if you listen to what I have to say."

"I'm listening!" Komekko didn't hesitate despite all the food she had just eaten. The woman set the ice cream in front of her.

"It so happens that a woman named Lucy—she was a priest once—was turned into a monster called a ghost. It's a long story about how. . .she still wanders this world, trapped in her abandoned church. Tell me, Komekko, sweetie. Don't you feel bad for the poor lady who's stuck as a ghost?"

"I feel bad," Komekko said promptly, nodding, her face already full of the proffered ice cream.

"Of course you do. Anyone would, wouldn't they? But don't worry. Because all the amazing adventurers here are going to help Lucy!"

"Huh?!"

That came out of left field. Every person in the Guild Hall goggled.

"H-hey, Miss Luna, what're you talking ab—?"

"You *will* help her, won't you?" Luna said, interrupting the adventurer.

With Komekko sitting right there, her eyes sparkling with admiration, nobody in the building was about to say no. . .

"Okay, we're going home before we get caught up in whatever this is. Look how pleased that receptionist is. She knows she's got somebody on the hook

for a quest no one wants.”

I jerked my thumb in the direction of the adventurers, who were muttering and murmuring over the quest paper. There were no objections to my plan, so we all started inching toward the door.

Lucy’s ghost.

There was this abandoned church standing at the foot of the mountain outside Axel. It didn’t belong to the Axis sect or the Eris Church. It must have belonged to some minor deity—I had no idea which—and “Lucy” was that god’s last follower.

Gods in this world drew their power from the faith of their followers. In other words, if not a single person believed in you, your power would vanish completely and you would disappear. Lucy was such a devout follower of her deity that she stayed in this world after her own death so she could continue worshipping this god, so that they wouldn’t disappear.

Nobody liked the thought of exorcising the spirit of someone as devoted and virtuous as Lucy, who had been so profoundly faithful that she kept praying even after she became a ghost. A former cleric, Lucy retained a strong resistance to holy magic despite being a spirit. To get rid of someone like that, you would need an awfully strong priest of your own—someone with profound faith and immense virtue.

But that by itself was a sort of paradox, and so to this day, Lucy was still in her church, having never been driven out.

“You’d need one hell of a priest to get rid of Lucy. But they’d have to be a total jerk of a cleric to want to do it. Do we know anyone like that?”

“Lots of crappy priests around, but it’s the huge-power thing that gets you. Too many priests here have gone soft because they love their gold so much.”

“How about an Axis disciple? They wouldn’t object to exorcising Lucy, would they?”

As this conversation gained momentum among the adventurers, we tried to eke our way out the door without making a sound...

"K-Kazuma, Kazuma. . ." Megumin's agonized whisper gave me a very bad feeling. I slowly turned around. . .

Every single person in the room was looking at Aqua.

6

The next day, we left Axel early in the morning, heading for the mountain to the north.

"Hey, Aqua. I know this might be a weird question coming from a Crusader, but are you really going to exorcise Lucy? I honestly can't say my heart is in this. . ."

When the dust had settled the day before, we'd ended up stuck handling Lucy's ghost. The other adventurers had all been more than happy to foist the job on us, but there were plenty of other unwanted quests, so nobody got off scot-free.

Komekko, for her part, was at the Guild Hall at that very moment (despite the early hour), apparently having learned that as long as she was there, people would constantly feed her.

"What are you talking about, Darkness—you heard the story, didn't you? This isn't some lonely poltergeist who just wants to hear an adventuring story. If I thought Lucy would eventually be satisfied and go to heaven on her own, I might leave her alone, but she's stuck here forever; I'm sure of it. Meaning it's my job to send her into the next life by force."

I couldn't explain Aqua at that moment. We were all shocked by the genuinely goddess-like proclamation that came out of her mouth, so naturally she went on: "Besides, however insignificant Lucy's deity might be, the fewer rivals the better, right? I'll send her to heaven and wipe out this god's last follower—and the god with her."

"You are beyond shady. And to think I almost admired you for a second there—apologize to me!"

We walked along, arguing the point, until a tiny, dilapidated church house

came into view.

"That's it! That's the church where this dumb deity is worshipped!" Aqua said. "I don't care if she *is* the goddess of manipulation and revenge or whatever; I'm going to zap Lucy and put an end to her!"

"I'm with Darkness—I'm not really feeling this. . .," I said. "And knowing the deity we're going to wipe out is a goddess makes it even worse. I mean, I'm not against bringing eternal rest to a wandering spirit or whatever, but. . ."

Aqua completely ignored my objection, champing at the bit to get to the church. But Megumin abruptly came to a halt.

"Aqua, what did you just say? 'The goddess of manipulation and revenge'—is that what you said?"

"Yeah, so what? I heard it all from the receptionist. In life, Lucy worshipped the goddess responsible for manipulation and revenge, and even now, after her death, she's the one last worshipper of this character."

At that, Megumin tugged on my sleeve. "Kazuma, may I have a moment? I'd like to speak with you."

"What's up? Let me guess, you think a goddess of manipulation and revenge sounds pretty cool, and you feel bad getting rid of her?"

I was half joking, but Megumin shuddered. ". . .N-no. Well, I grant that she does indeed sound cool, but more importantly, this goddess and I. . . We might have a very small connection."

"Geez! Dark gods, revenge goddesses—you have the weirdest acquaintances. I'd think Aqua would fill your quota of troublemaking deities."

Exasperated, I tried to urge us on, but Megumin sort of looked into the distance and said, "Kazuma, do you remember your visit to my hometown of Crimson Magic Village?"

"Damn right I do. How could I forget it? It was the land of near misses for me. I almost slept in the same bed as you, and Sylvia nearly jumped my bones. . ."

"You can forget the part about us being in the same bed! That's not my point. Do you remember the many tourist attractions in the village?"

"Yeah, sure. Cat-Ears Shrine or whatever and some stupid rock with a sword in it. What about it?"

Megumin seemed to be trying to decide whether she should share with me. Finally...

"You may also recall that there were locations called 'The Tomb of the Sealed Evil Spirit' and 'The Place with the Sealed Unknown Goddess.'"

"I guess. But you said the seals had also been broken, right? I guess the tomb of the Dark God turned out to be the resting place of the Demon King's general Wolbach, right? What's your point?"

"Yes, I rather accidentally unsealed the Dark God when I was a girl, but I believe we've reached the statute of limitations on that, and it need not concern us. The problem has to do with the Unknown Goddess."

"I'm not sure there's a statute of limitations on releasing an evil deity into the world," I objected, but Megumin went on as if she was talking about the weather:

". . . Yes, it happened when I had first learned Explosion. I acquired the spell in order to defend Komekko and Yunyun from encroaching servants of the Dark God." She didn't even bother to look at us; it was like she was talking to herself. "To oversimplify, the spot where I learned explosion magic also happened to be the place where the Unknown Goddess was sealed away. Thus, I unwittingly released the goddess of manipulation and revenge, and she fled somewhere; I know not where."

"What the hell are you telling us? I mean, what the *hell* are you saying?"

Megumin, looking like she had really gotten something off her chest, replied, "The deity Lucy is worshipping appears to be the goddess who was sealed in Crimson Magic Village for so long. It has already been nearly two years since she fled the village. I'm sure she must have followers other than Lucy by now. So we can exorcise Lucy with clear consciences. I'm confident the goddess will not vanish!"

And exactly what was I supposed to do with this information? "What is the story with you Crimson Magic people? Do you just collect evil deities from all

over? There's such a thing as restraint, you know. You guys could use some of it!"

I really wanted to deck the guy who had created the Crimson Magic Clan. . . Still, we had learned that getting rid of Lucy wouldn't destroy this goddess. Which meant the last remaining hurdle was our opponent's uncommonly high resistance to holy magic—but I didn't think that would be a problem at all for Aqua.

All right, then. Nothing to it but to do it!

7

"Halt! Stop! Cease! Don't come any closer to me, you filthy Axis disciple!"

"Ooh, now you're in for it, you stinking undead! A Purification spell would be too good for you! I'll send you to kingdom come with my divine fist!"

It didn't take us long to find the spirit once we entered the church. But.

"O venerable Regina, great goddess of manipulation and revenge, dispense divine punishment upon this blue-haired woman! A curse upon this damnable Axis follower!"

"The nerve, trying to put a curse on a true, pure goddess! Darkness, let me borrow your sword! I'll smash this stupid church brick by brick until this ghost has nowhere *left* to haunt!"

Wasn't the spirit here supposed to be the shade of a pious and devout believer, still praying to her goddess even after her own death? The ghost bickering with Aqua was a woman in her mid-twenties, half her body kind of transparent. As Megumin and I watched wearily, Darkness tried to get between them.

"Calm down, both of you. Aqua, we both hold holy offices. Lucy, so did you when you were alive, right? Let's all calm down and talk. Don't the deities both of you worship hate fighting?"

Darkness had a sort of awkward smile on her face, but it became more awkward than smile as the goddess and the ghost both lit into her.

"Darkness, what do you mean 'the deities both of you worship'? You said just the other day that you believed I'm a real goddess! And this undead is an affront to my holiness and me, so we need to get rid of her!"

"You know I worship Regina, goddess of manipulation and revenge, right?! 'Do as is done unto you' is one of her central teachings—so I don't need some outsider barging in here pretending to know what she's talking about!"

Darkness's head was spinning from this two-pronged assault, but it wasn't over.

"Gosh, this is why no one likes Eris disciples! You're the majority, so of course you think there's no need to fight! It bugs me how you're all high and mighty just because you're the state religion. Tell me, Darkness—don't you agree that it wouldn't kill you to come pray at the Axis church every once in a while?"

"I'm so jealous of the Eris Church with all its followers! For us followers of minor gods, every day is like a war! 'Hates fighting'? As if! The have-nots don't have a choice except to keep fighting!"

Darkness quickly backed away from the ghost and the goddess.

"Forget about them," I told her. "Aqua's just gonna purify her out of sight anyway."

"I have a role in the church myself, even if a small one," Darkness said, defeated. "I only wanted to see if I couldn't bring her around. . ."

A few steps away, it looked like the purification was really getting underway. "Think you're ready?" Aqua said. "You can spend your next life regretting that you ever picked a fight with a goddess! Ahhh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, you and your minor-league goddess, Regina or whoever, are out of here with one good Holy Knuckle from me!"

"Grrrrr! This aura of absolute enmity I've been feeling—don't tell me you're really. . .?! Regina, O vaunted Regina, I still haven't repaid what I owe you! O Regina, you who cast down that man who used and abused me, down to the very depths! O Regina, who took that woman who tried to con my brother into marrying her for his money and left her penniless! On behalf of all those who have been subject to outrages and injustices, I refuse to lose you here!"

As Aqua came closer, her fist shimmering and a nasty smile on her face, Lucy offered up a tearful prayer.

And that was when it happened.

"Please don't worry. This goddess you worship escaped her seal two years ago. I'm sure she has more followers by now."

Megumin, who had been silently watching the goings-on, started talking to Lucy. She practically looked like a cleric herself at that moment.

Lucy, desperate to believe Megumin, said, "**Really. . .? And how do you know this?**"

"Because I am the one who let your beloved deity loose," Megumin said. "So please rest in peace now."

Lucy must have sensed Megumin's conviction, because she smiled gently, as if she had been freed from something that had been possessing her.

"Thank you, kind stranger. . . Normally I would want to show my appreciation for such an act, but somehow I feel no attachment to this world anymore. Hearing your words really set my heart at ease. I'm afraid that means I haven't any time left. I apologize that I'm not able to thank you properly..."

Lucy smiled, a hint of pain in her expression, and Megumin smiled back. "The tenets of the Crimson Magic Clan include 'never back down from a fight' and 'if someone gets you, get them back.' Rather like something your goddess of revenge would say. Consider that thanks enough."

Lucy, relieved, smiled again at Megumin, and—

"God Blow!"

"Eeeyargh?!"

Our actual cleric, who couldn't read the mood to save her life, blindsided Lucy with a huge punch.

"What the hell is wrong with you?!" I exclaimed. "Here we were about to have a nice, happy ending for once, and you come charging in! She was obviously about to, like, move on peacefully or whatever, right?!"

Megumin and Darkness, meanwhile, stood with their jaws open, overwhelmed by what had just happened.

"That's exactly *why* I did it! I'm not going to let some nobody follower of some nothing god give me lip and then run away!" Aqua, unable to maintain a mature attitude even in the face of a lost soul, stood there shaking with anger as the half-faded Lucy rubbed her cheek.

The spirit pointed angrily at Aqua. "**There's no way you're a goddess! And you wonder why nobody wants Axis followers anywhere near them?! Aren't you embarrassed that Eris, your junior goddess, has more followers than you do? Eris worship is the official state religion, but the Axis Church? Forget it!**"



Aqua's eyebrow started to twitch. . .

"You're one to talk! The last follower of an insignificant deity who's about to vanish!"

Aqua made to grab the smart-mouthed spirit, but Lucy, already mostly faded, just floated away.

"O great and venerable Regina. . . As a follower of the goddess of revenge, I got the last word over this goddess, who has been outdone by her own junior. . .and now I'm going to run away undefeated. May your future be bright, my lady. . ."

And that was it. The pious follower of the goddess of manipulation and revenge— "Waaaaaaaahhh! She ran away before I could get the last word in!"

—left this world with no regrets and one last victory that scarred the goddess of water.

Chapter 4

A Score to Settle with This Nasty Monster!



1

"Here, Komekko, there's a piece of rice here."

It was the morning after the day Aqua had "defeated" Lucy's ghost. Megumin was fussing over Komekko, who was having a breakfast large enough for several people. Megumin, watching her sister chow down, plucked a grain of rice off Komekko's cheek and put it in her own mouth with a thin smile.

"Sis, you stole my food!"

"K-Komekko, that's a terrible thing to say about someone when they've only taken one grain of rice! If you don't want me to take anything, make sure you chew your food and eat a little more carefully. You don't have to wolf down your breakfast quite so fast; it won't run away."

Megumin spoke gently, but Komekko, her face completely serious, set her fork and knife on the table and said, "Once, the corn you picked in the fields ran away because you didn't eat it fast enough."

"It's time to let that go, Komekko—*cooked* food doesn't flee!"

Aqua, who had already finished her meal, was watching the girls and smiling. "Seeing them together like this makes me think siblings aren't all bad. Hey,

Kazuma, I think I want a little sister now. I hear there's a magic item in this world that lets you change genders. I think you should try it out."

"I have *no* idea what you're talking about, but the yearning for a little sister—that I can sympathize with. Little sisters are the best. Especially the ones who'll call you Big Bro; they're the best of the best." I thought of Iris and felt a pang. And just then:

"Emergency! Emergency! All adventurers, grab your gear and assemble at the Adventurers Guild. I repeat. All adventurers, please bring your equipment and come to the Guild."

It had been a while since I last heard the call to arms. Almost involuntarily, I looked over at Darkness, who was sipping tea beside me.

"Kind of unusual, an emergency announcement at this time of year, isn't it?" she said. "The cabbage harvest is over, and I haven't heard about any big bounties in the area. What's this about?" The announcement droned on in the background.

Then came the kicker:

"We especially and specifically request the aid of all members of the Crimson Magic Clan in the village. I repeat. Any and all available members of the Crimson Magic Clan, please report to the Guild."

The announcement got stranger and stranger. Darkness and I exchanged glances again.

2

"What's going on here? What's happening to this town?" Darkness demanded of the row of Guild employees who were waiting for us when we got to the Guild. In response, one of them ushered her inside. I guess they wanted to wait until everyone was there before explaining things.

"Man, I really only want to live in peace," I groaned. "But an emergency announcement means stuff is about to get dangerous around here again. . ."

Megumin was nervous. "As for me, I'm more concerned about their insistence

on the participation of all Crimson Magic Clan members. Technically, that includes Komekko, even though she can't use magic yet, so I've brought her along just in case, but . . .”

I could feel the anxiety radiating off her as I looked around.

“Very sorry to keep you waiting!”

Megumin suddenly found herself accosted by a helpful Guild employee. “Hmm. . .? What’s the meaning of this? Have I been awarded VIP status at the Guild on account of the widely and frequently recognized effectiveness of my Explosion? I might argue you could have acknowledged me a little sooner, but anyway. . .”

Someone else shouted to the guy waiting on Megumin: “No, not her. You can just ignore her. *She’s* the one I told you to take care of.”

“Hey, ‘you can just ignore her’? Are you picking a fight with me?”

But the employee disregarded the furious Megumin and bowed instead to Komekko. “Welcome, miss! We have some snacks prepared over here, if you wouldn’t mind following me this way!”

Komekko was instantly stuck to the employee like glue. Megumin frantically stopped them. “Hey, I must ask you not to simply walk away with my little sister! What’s going on here? When did the Adventurers Guild become a den of lolicons? I may summon the police, depending on your answer.”

“N-no, ma’am, there’s a reason for this! Oh, Miss Luna, perfect timing!” The employee practically threw himself at the receptionist, who came over to us with a smile.

“You call for Crimson Magic Clan members, and then I find you trying to bribe people with food. What in the world is going on here?” Megumin said.

“The Adventurers Guild is always looking for talented people,” Luna responded with confidence and pride. “So what could be more natural than for us to be interested in Komekko, a child born with the very ability to become an Arch-wizard?”

“Excuse me, but I am also from the Crimson Magic Clan,” Megumin said.

The receptionist quickly looked away from her. “A-ahem, so right this way, Miss Komekko! We have lots of treats for you!”

“I said, I am *also*—”

But Luna led Komekko into the building before Megumin could finish.

Once she saw that all the adventurers were here, she announced, “Everyone, thank you for coming today! We apologize for such short notice.” She stood beside Komekko (who was stuffing her face with snacks) and smiled. “Now, to the matter at hand. First of all, I want to congratulate all our adventurers on your excellent work yesterday. We had by far our best quest completion percentage since the founding of the Axel Guild branch. And our own Aqua even exorcised Lucy’s ghost with her very hands! That’s our adventurers for you! That’s our Axel!”

She was really leaning in to the flattery. I wondered what she was plotting. Everyone looked pretty pleased about it, though; I saw lots of people giving *Aw, shucks* scratches to their noses and the backs of their heads.

“And so, on that note.” Luna’s tone changed abruptly. Great, here it came. “We have a new job for all you wonderful, accomplished adventurers!”

Yep, saw that coming from a mile away. Trouble, trouble, trouble.

“We grant that it’s just a little, *tiny* bit harder than yesterday’s quests, but we have complete confidence in our people!”

Easy for her to say. A guy with a less-than-thrilled expression spoke up. “Ey, Miss Luna, wait a minute. What say you tell us what this is about before you go charging ahead?”

“Miss Luna” didn’t appear the least bit fazed by the remark, so other adventurers joined in.

“Yeah, what’s this about being harder than yesterday’s jobs? Hell, this was an emergency summons, wasn’t it?!”

“Gimme a break!”

“I ran myself ragged yesterday! I can’t do another quest now!”

“I was just gonna hang out at the bar all day. . .”

The receptionist refused to let her smile slip in the face of the complaining adventurers. “There’s nothing to worry about. After all, Axel’s adventurers are the best in the entire nation!”

There was no way she believed that. She certainly didn’t have any proof of it.

“Aren’t they, Komekko?” Luna looked to Komekko, who was completely fixated on the pile of food on the table in front of her, for agreement. Ah. So that’s how it was going to be.

“My big sis said the adventurers of Axel are super awesome. She said they would never run away from anyone, no matter how powerful they were!”

Apparently, the previous day had given Luna a taste of how she could use Komekko to twist our arms, and she intended to get as many unwanted quests off the books as she could while the little girl was here. I wasn’t the only one who seemed to have figured out what was on the Guild employee’s mind. All the adventurers in the room were going pale...

Finally, one desperate voice rose up from among us.

“. . . Dammit, fine, I’ll do it. That’s all you want, right?! Bring on the nastiest, toughest quest you have!”

That opened the floodgates.

“Y-yeah, just watch me—I’ll show you what happens when an Axel magic-user gets serious!”

I guess everyone was raring to go—again. Megumin, a drop of sweat beading on her forehead, reached out as if to stop them. “Um, everyone, you don’t need to exert yourselves so much. . .” But her voice was too soft for them to hear, and her hand just hung there.

“H-hrmm,” Darkness mused from beside me. “I’m not sure I agree with her methods, but I have heard the adventurers around here have been exceptionally apathetic of late. It’s not only the quests nobody wants—they won’t even do normal quests. . . But, well, here we are.” I thought I saw her steal a glance at me. “It’s because of all those huge bounty heads we’ve toppled with you—everyone’s purses are getting heavier, and nobody wants to work. It sounds like there’s a direct correlation between how much time someone

spends with you, Kazuma, and how much of a no-good NEET they become. Maybe this sort of gimmick was necessary to help keep Axel safe.”

Listen to her spouting that BS. But she wasn’t wrong that it would be an issue if nobody hunted the monsters around town. . . .

“Okay, why don’t we pick some random quest? Gotta show Komekko our best side, right, Megumin?” I gave her a half smile.

“That is true enough. Only Aqua got anything to do yesterday; I must show her that her big sister can hold her own, or I’ll lose her respect.”

When we were going to look for some random quest, though, Luna turned to us with a huge smile. “Don’t worry, Mr. Satou. I already have something for you, a quest worthy of such a powerful party!”

Well, that sure didn’t inspire confidence.

Heck, we had just finished getting rid of Lucy’s ghost, one of those things nobody else wanted to do. And now she was foisting something else big and dangerous on us? I took her by the arm, this woman I knew well by now, and pulled her over to a corner where Komekko wouldn’t hear us. “Listen, Miss, you know exactly what my party is like, right? Cut us some slack here—normally you wouldn’t touch us with a ten-foot pole, but now you get all friendly? Just because you’re pretty and cute and sort of my type doesn’t mean you can go bossing me around.”

She smiled, not completely upset—maybe she’d heard the whole pretty-girl thing before—and said, “Oh, ah-ha-ha, ‘pretty’? You’re a smooth talker, Mr. Satou. . . All right, let’s do this. If you complete this quest successfully, then you and I can go on a date when I get off work today—how’s that?”

“That’s not what I’m angling for here. And for that matter, every adventurer in town knows the rumor that you’re afraid you’re getting past your prime.”

She looked very serious. “Excuse me, Mr. Satou, but perhaps I could ask you who’s spreading that rumor?”

“Anyway, thanks but no thanks. We’re off to hunt some frogs or something.”

I made to leave, but I felt an iron grip on my arm. “I won’t let you get away,

Mr. Satou—everything else aside, this particular quest must be done by you specifically. That's one thing I'm sure of. The quest I'm asking you to complete would be absolutely impossible for anyone in Axel except for you."

I found myself frozen in place by the woman's suddenly grim demeanor. It was definitely her demeanor that did it and not the fact that I was enjoying the way she was holding my arm, which caused me to press up against a certain part of her anatomy.

Something she said sparked a memory. "This particular quest."

"It seems you think very highly of me. Maybe I shouldn't be saying this, but let's be honest with each other: When I actually have to legitimately fight, I'm just a small fry."

"I know that, of course."

What, she wasn't going to try to argue it?

Everyone in the Guild was running around, getting ready to take on this or that quest. Luna stared straight at me and said:

"The quest only you can handle is. . ."

3

A little forest to the west of Axel was home to one gigantic tree. This tree was well-known to our adventurers and Guild employees, and although supposedly no one was allowed near it, there was no end of travelers from other towns.

Why would people come from so far away? It had to do with the monster living under that tree. A character called the Leisure Queen. Think of it as a higher form of the Leisure Girl I'd slain a long time ago. . .

"Hey, Kazuma, I think we should take a pass on this quest. We're dealing with the *Leisure Queen*, right? She's been there for ages—do you know why no one has gotten rid of her?" We were on our way to the forest. Aqua, behind me, had been lecturing us for some time on the wisdom of this job.

"Kazuma, Kazuma. You know, I myself am not very eager to have to deal with this Leisure Queen. . ." So even Megumin wasn't feeling it.

"I wish both of you would leave Kazuma alone. I grant that the Leisure Queen is a boon to certain people. Like those who are suffering from a terminal illness—some might ask what's wrong with them going to the Queen to expire peacefully. But for exactly that reason, that forest has become the go-to place to commit suicide. That's what that is. As a servant of the gods, I can't countenance killing oneself. And I can't let a creature that murders live, even if her victims go to her willingly."

Darkness was trying to stick up for me, but I didn't think she really got it, either. I set down the backpack I was carrying and turned to the three of them. "Listen, we haven't decided we're going to kill her yet. Do any of you really believe that I'm out to defeat the Leisure Queen for money or fame?"

"Sure we do. For a few experience points or some cash, you'd be happy to destroy even the sweetest fairy, wouldn't you? Like those Snow Sprites of mine you secretly killed—I haven't forgotten, you know. I'd even given them names!"

Geez, was she still upset about something from that long ago? I heaved a sigh and said, "I've told you again and again, I didn't have anything to do with that. They melted because you put them by the fireplace."

Once upon a time, when we'd gone to hunt some monsters called Snow Sprites, Aqua had decided to capture and raise them instead. When she couldn't find them the next day, she arbitrarily decided I must have done it.

"I told you when we ran into that Leisure Girl on our way to Crimson Magic Village. Those aren't good monsters; they're evil, evil, evil." My party members had called me *monster* and *demon* and all sorts of other names, but I'd kept trying to explain it to them. I really thought I had brought them around. . .

"Well, I've thought about it since then, and it seems fishy to me. If she was so awful, then my unclouded eye should have seen through her."

"Your unclouded eye is blind!" I shot back, causing Aqua to puff out her cheeks. I pulled something from my backpack.

"Hrk. . .! Kazuma, is that. . .?"

It was a magical item that had helped (and hurt) us more than once in the past: a bell that rang when someone told a lie.

I knew if we just went straight to exterminate the Queen, Aqua and the others would try to stop me. Hence the bell. It would help us establish once and for all how awful this creature was and prove that I had been right all along.

"Watch and learn, girls. Specifically, learn that I've been telling the truth."

I was feeling pretty confident, but Aqua eyed me doubtfully.

We trudged through the dark forest, on our way to the tree. There weren't many monsters in these woods. From what I'd heard, earlier adventurers had proactively gotten rid of all the other enemies in the area so that none of them would harm the Leisure Queen.

I had no idea how long we had been working our way through the woods. I was even starting to doubt we were going in the right direction at all when:

"Hey, Kazuma, is that her? Something's sparkling over there."

I looked where Aqua was pointing and saw what seemed to be the one bright spot in this gloomy forest. We headed toward it and discovered a massive tree along with a small spring of water. No trees grew beside the spring, so it caught the sunlight, glittering with the reflection.

That was when someone called out to us. "Have you adventurers come in search of relief? Or are you simply lost?" The voice was gentle and musical; it was relaxing just to hear it. I turned toward the speaker, who said, "Or...have you come specifically to see me?"

There she was: a beautiful woman, the lower half of her body basically made of vegetation. She looked friendly—downright pleased to see us.

4

Uh-oh. I hadn't been expecting this.

"So are you the Leisure Queen?" Aqua demanded.

The woman cocked her head. "Leisure Queen? Is that me? I see—you humans do like your names. You gave one to me as well—is that it?" Then she happily repeated the name to herself several times. "Thank you so much—may I personally express my gratitude to the one who gave me this name? I'm afraid

they'll have to come to me, as I can't leave this spot."

The Leisure Queen was so friendly, so earnestly *fun*, that I knew then and there, things were much worse than I had ever thought they would be. We had exchanged only a few words, and I could already see that not only Aqua and Megumin but even Darkness was starting to feel some affection for this creature. The Leisure Girl we'd taken out in Crimson Magic Village had played on people's desires to protect small, weak things. But this lady's strategy was to outright make friends, pleasant and fluent from the start.

"Huh. I see your roots have become completely fixed to the ground. I guess that makes you different from the Leisure Girl—she looked completely human," Aqua said, heedlessly getting closer to the creature to touch the roots.

"No, don't do that!" the Leisure Queen exclaimed, all pretense of friendship forgotten. Aqua flinched with surprise, and Darkness stepped forward to cover Megumin and me. "You must not touch my roots," the Queen said. "They might harm you, whether I want them to or not." She looked sadly at the ground.

". . . Hey, what's going on here? If there's anything that's bothering you, I'd be happy to talk about it."

Aqua sounded worried, and I was thrown for a loop by the Leisure Queen's words. I'd sure never thought she would deliberately tell us she was dangerous. What was the story here? Was this creature really a higher form of the Leisure Girl? She wasn't quite what I'd been expecting. . .

I whispered all this to Darkness, who looked amazed that this was just occurring to me now. "You've always insisted that the Leisure Girl was a blackhearted monster, right? But this Queen has always been known as a creature of integrity. Enough so that every adventurer sent from our town has agreed about it. Ultimately, even the Adventurers Guild argued about whether or not to destroy her. They couldn't agree whether she was really a monster who harmed people and therefore the valid object of a hunting quest."

"So that's why it came to me, huh? Come to think of it, Luna did say something about an investigation quest. I guess she knows that with my experience with the Leisure Girl, I won't let down my guard around this one—that I'll be able to take a good, objective look at things."

"I think that might be giving both of you a bit too much credit, but one thing that's for sure is that people did appreciate your willingness to destroy that Leisure Girl."

The practical problem with having a Leisure Queen around was that everybody wanted to be the object of her affections. Adventurers would leave everything behind, even family and friends. For them to find their final rest in the arms of a monster was deeply ironic.

"It was a serious argument," Darkness continued. "Which is really better: to die alone and lonely or, after a difficult life, to live out your last days with a beautiful woman—even if she is a monster?"

So you could die by yourself, unremembered, or you could go to your rest with a beautiful woman smiling upon you—even if you knew you would be monster food after that. I had to admit, that argument made it hard to think of this creature as wholly evil.

. . . At least, not if this Leisure Queen didn't also turn out to have a real dark side. Without ever taking my eyes off her, I said, "I want to ask you something. What happened to everyone else who's come here? What kind of end did they meet?"

"A very easy one," the Leisure Queen said. "Faces peaceful and relaxed." She sounded matter-of-fact, yet as if she might burst into tears. "But it seems you are not like the others who have come here, are you?" She smiled fleetingly at me. "The only way I can continue to exist in this world is by killing you humans." She didn't even try to conceal the nature of her existence. "You look to be very strong of heart. . . Listen, it pains me deeply to ask such a thing, but. . ." The slightest tremble passed through her body. "For the sake of my beloved humans. . . would you exterminate me?"

That smile was sort of awkward.

Damn, what's this about?

Could it be this monster had a legitimately pure and decent heart?

I remembered the time Aqua had exorcised a Lich named Khiel. He'd asked for it himself, saying something about wanting to go to the person he loved.

This Leisure Queen was asking me to get rid of her so she wouldn't hurt any more humans.

But wait, think back to the Leisure Girl. I'd been taken in by her at first. The only thing that had allowed me to exterminate her was dumb luck. If I'd left her alone, I was sure she would have been feasting on some unfortunate traveler right about now.

"You can't!" Aqua exclaimed. She took the Leisure Queen's hand. "You mustn't throw your life away when you aren't even suffering from a terrible illness or anything! Listen to me. In this world, no one and nothing is useless. The only things that should vanish from this world are the undead and demons! Even monsters—there are delicious ones, and cute ones, and even kind ones like you! Even NEETs should go on living, so a good-hearted creature like you should live so much more!"

The Leisure Queen looked moved almost to tears.

"She's right—you haven't done anything wrong. In fact, people widely consider Leisure Girls to be a place of final respite for retired adventurers. Everyone agrees that it's better to meet your end in someone's loving arms than to die a slow, painful death from illness and old age. When they come to you, an even higher form of Leisure Girl, it is their own choice. You don't need to worry." Now Megumin was holding the Queen's other hand and even giving her a sort of hug.

"So it. . . It's all right for me to exist in this world. . .?" The Queen gazed at them with something like confusion.

Only Darkness didn't seem convinced; she looked from me to the Leisure Queen and back again.

This was virtually a re-creation of the scene outside of Crimson Magic Village. Ugh. I was probably going to get myself chewed out for even thinking about using this, but. . .

"Say, Kazuma. This Leisure Queen, do you think. . .?" Darkness stopped when she saw the object in my hand. "H-hey, that's. . ."

The magical object I had gone out of my way to borrow for this trip. The lie-

detecting bell. I'd seen it used on me time and time again—now it was my turn. I took it toward the Leisure Queen; Darkness backed away a little. Why did she have to look at me like that? I was just an adventurer trying to be sure of what I was dealing with.

"Quit staring at me like that; I'm going to feel hurt. I'm not made of stone, you know."

That got Aqua and Megumin to turn and look at us.

"H-hey, Kazuma, what's that in your hand? It's not that, you know, ringing thing, is it? I know all about that."

"K-Kazuma? Surely you don't doubt her? Surely you don't need to use that thing. . ."

Both of them looked as freaked out as Darkness, as if they couldn't believe I was really doing this. Meanwhile, the Leisure Queen cocked her head intently and said, "What do you have there?"

"Oh, this is a magical item that knows when you're lying," I told her. "If you say something untrue, it jingles."

The forest was completely silent as the Leisure Queen and I stared at each other. Aqua, Megumin, and Darkness were all glaring at me, incredulous that this was happening. Hardly able to bear it myself, I approached the Leisure Queen. "Look, don't worry. If this thing doesn't make a sound, it'll mean we can completely believe you. The Adventurers Guild might even rethink wanting to get rid of you."

Yeah, all of us here would be witnesses. *But. . .*

"You're right, of course. I'm a monster; what right do I have to expect you to trust me?"

But please don't look at me so sadly. You're killing me, here.

"Hey, Kazuma, the way you look right now—it's totally like a woman who announces happily that she's pregnant, but she's been sleeping with other people, and it shows on her face so much that even her husband starts to wonder if it's his kid."

"That is going a little far, Aqua. Although I certainly recognize this person's penchant for infidelity and his tendency to constantly doubt everyone around him. . ." Megumin trailed off; maybe she realized that what she was saying was a bit of a non sequitur.

"Thank you, both of you. But it's all right—I'm a monster. I'm used to not being trusted. I beg you not to think twice about it. And you, sir, please don't look so sad. Don't blame yourself. . ."

The only one who actually seemed to have something to contribute to this conversation was the Leisure Queen, a fact that practically made me cry. Dammit, why did the Guild lady have to stick *me* with this job? Did people really think I was that unfeeling? It was enough to hurt a guy. . .

As I stood there stupidly with the bell in my hand, Darkness said gently, "There's nothing wrong with what you're doing. I think this is the right thing. Why don't you give me the magic bell? I don't want you to always have to be the villain."

No, no—my instincts were still telling me not to just naively trust her. The Leisure Queen hadn't taken her eyes off the bell since I'd brought it out. She had pretended not to recognize it, but I thought she knew exactly what it could do.

Darkness, oblivious to what I was thinking, took the item. "Leisure Queen, let me ask you something. What do you think of us humans?"

". . . You humans are immensely important to me. It's not an exaggeration to say that without you, I could not exist."

Aqua and Megumin watched the bell closely, but it didn't ring.

Darkness let out a profoundly relieved sigh and said, "There—I'm sorry for doubting you. Please forgive us. But that's enough to clear your name. . . See, Kazuma? Come on—cheer up. Things went weirdly smoothly today, don't you think?" Darkness sounded like there was a huge load off her shoulders.

But I didn't look at her as I said, "What happened to the adventurers and travelers who came to you, after they died? You used them for their nutrients, right?"

The air froze.

"G-geez, you can't—"

I ignored Aqua's astonishment, looking directly at the motionless Leisure Queen. "You said humans are immensely important to you. But you meant immensely important as food, right?"

The Queen looked at me, hurt, as if she might cry. Crap, this was really bugging my conscience right now. But there was something weird going on here. I was sure of it. She knew how the bell worked and was choosing her words carefully so as not to set it off.

It's okay, Kazuma. Believe in yourself.

I had the instincts of an eternally cautious NEET. I didn't have the proof yet, but I knew this creature had a dark heart.

"Let me ask again. What happened to the bodies of the adventurers after you attended to them? Answer truthfully."

The Leisure Queen's expression went from sad to lonely as she said, "They became my food. They're a part of me, even now. . . They'll live on forever inside me. I'm sure I shall never forget them. . . Does that satisfy you?" She glanced at me, her eyes suddenly hard. What was going on here—why was I being treated like the bad guy?

"You're a real monster, Kazuma. Did you drop your human heart somewhere? I'll go find it for you if you just tell me where it is. Come on—out with it! Or did that amnesia potion make you forget how to be a decent human being?!"

"Kazuma, I must say, your inquiries, the way you ask those questions. . . When Aqua went to touch this creature's roots not long ago, did she not stop her? Surely she would have drained Aqua dry of her own volition."

Geez, everyone was piling on at once. But with the Queen's last answer, I was finally sure. She was working a con job here. She understood exactly what this bell did and was treading lightly. She wouldn't outright lie.

". . . Listen, guys, I've got a favor to ask. Would you leave me alone with her for a moment?"

I needed them all out of there. Just the Queen and me.

“And why would a monstrous NEET like you want to be alone with a sweet, innocent creature like her?”

“Do not tell me you plan to gleefully exterminate her when we have our backs turned, like you did the Leisure Girl in Crimson Magic Village.”

“Geez, don’t you trust me at all? Fine, I won’t slice her up while you aren’t looking. See, the bell didn’t ring, did it?”

The silent magical item convinced Aqua and Megumin to leave the area.

“Kazuma, I know monster hunting is an adventurer’s duty, that someone has to do it. But don’t paint yourself into a corner, okay?” Darkness alone, as usual, seemed slightly confused about what was going on—but at least I had everyone out of there now. I watched them go, then turned to the Leisure Queen.

“Time to put all our cards on the table. I know exactly what you and your kind are. Tell me everything—no games, no hiding.”

“. . . Oy, you,” the Leisure Queen said. “Doesn’t a body get tired, being suspicious of everyone all the time?”

She was trying to give me a life lesson—almost as if she were human!

5

“*There* it is. This is rich, a plant lecturing a human.”

“Talk about your small men. And you wonder why you’re still a virgin.”

...

“Listen, I don’t need an oversize vegetable telling me about my virginity. How does a monster like you even know a word like that? Some adventurer must have taught it to you.”

“When you live as long as I have, you learn a few things. . . So what’s the story? Which of those three are you looking to get with?” The monster had dropped all pretense—and it turned out to be a *lot* of pretense.

“This is why I hate wild monsters—no sense of discretion. And anyway, those

three are my adventuring companions, so get your mind out of the gutter. I'm going to pull you up by the roots."

The Leisure Queen smiled indulgently at my threat. "Try it, and your 'adventuring companions' would come running. You really okay, seeing your Affection plummet with them? And you can drop the facade—human males are in heat basically year-round, right?"

"In heat? Human males? I told you to have some decency when you pick your vocabulary! Us humans have a lot of steps to go through before we get to, you know, that stage. Humans are sensitive creatures—don't act like we're just another breed of monster."

The Leisure Queen cocked her head at that. "But from the moment we met, you haven't taken your eyes off these." She lifted her big, cushy-looking boobs, which were covered by thin cloth that hardly looked like it was made of leaves.

"I've got a man's intuition about these things. That's simply a biological phenomenon—like photosynthesis or the way you plants spread your seeds in spring."

"I'll cop to photosynthesis, but I'm above spraying my seeds everywhere. Don't lump me in with lower forms of plant life. We manipulate humans, bend them to our will, and get them to move us over great distances. Long ago, when I was growing in a different spot, I begged to be moved somewhere the adventurers and the monsters weren't so strong, and now here I am."

These things knew how to survive; I had to give them that.

"Furthermore, unlike you humans or, say. . . goblins, we aren't prepared to get our freak on all year long. We undergo root division only once every hundred years. You reproduce without even meaning to, but we seek harmony with nature."

"I object to your goblin analogy. You're pissing me off here, plant." I was getting lectures on ecology now? From a monster?

". . . So now you know exactly what I am. And what are you planning to do with that knowledge?" The Leisure Queen looked at me with respect but also vigilance, a complete change from earlier.

"Oh, I think you already know. I'm an adventurer, and you're a monster. That makes us mortal enemies, and that means there's only one way out of this."

"What have I done wrong?" the Leisure Queen demanded. "Everyone who came to me did so of their own free will! Because passing away in my arms was so much better than just dropping dead with nobody to know or care! All I asked in return was to be able to put their corpses to good use. Those adventurers got to meet their ends peacefully and easily—no pain, no sadness. And I got my food. Everybody's happy, so where is the problem, Mr. Hypocrite?"

I was getting seriously sick of this plant. A little knowledge really was a dangerous thing, especially when a monster had it. "You think I'm going to let you get away with mouthing off to me like that? It's extermination for you. According to the lady at the Guild, thanks to you, people have started coming to this forest specifically to commit suicide. It's hurting the town's image. Just to make sure that sort of thing never happens again, I'm going to put up a sign at the entrance to these woods with a nice, happy name on it."

"Well, hold on there—don't be hasty. Anyway, I know perfectly well you don't intend any harm." The Leisure Queen gave me a nasty little smile.

I didn't intend any harm? What did that mean?

"It's been very nearly a century since I put down roots here. You think no one else ever caught on in all that time? And what do you think happened to those perspicacious souls?"

I was starting to wish I hadn't sent everyone else away. I'd been forgetting: This was no small-fry monster. The last Leisure Girl I'd run into had been living outside of Crimson Magic Village, an area crawling with powerful creatures. No run-of-the-mill opponent would have made it through the struggle for survival in that area.

I reached for the sword at my hip, but she said, "Now, now, let's keep our heads. Don't get me wrong—I'm not here to bury you in an unmarked grave. In fact, I have a proposal I think you'll like very much." Then she pointed at her feet.

"What are you playing at?"

"Dig here. You'll find something very valuable to you buried in this spot."

That was when I got it.

The Leisure Queen used adventurers' bodies for nutrition. But the metal objects those adventurers were wearing, the gear, the personal effects—where did those go? The answer was literally at her feet. She was saying. . .

"You act awfully human for a monster. Trying to buy me off?"

"It works out for both of us, doesn't it? You make a little cash; I come away with my life. It's win-win. I told you: We seek harmony with nature."

So she made sure to keep some money around for times like this. Ugh, I didn't know about a monster who literally saved up to buy off bloodthirsty adventurers. But. . .

"Sorry, you got the wrong opponent. My name is Kazuma Satou, Axel adventurer and vanquisher of a whole bunch of generals of the Demon King. If I'd been any normal adventurer, I think your little plan would've worked. But don't imagine I'm like the rest of them, okay? All my great exploits have left me with more than enough money."

I set down my backpack, and for the first time, the Leisure Queen looked like she was starting to sweat. "H-hold on there. Just relax. I see now that you're a man of exemplary integrity who can't be moved by money. Yes, I was taking you too lightly. No question you're the cleverest of all the adventurers I've ever run into. And rightfully proud, too—a true adventurer in every sense."

That got me to slow down for a moment. "You figure if bribery doesn't work, you'll try flattery? Too bad for you that the immense acclaim I've received has left me immune to just any old compliment. Why, until recently, I was forcing the maids in a castle to list ten or more good things about me every single day."

"And you can live with yourself that way? I'm a monster, and even I can tell there's something wrong with you." The Leisure Queen looked genuinely baffled. ". . . Hey now, what's that? Hold on. What have you got in mind?" She went pale when she saw what I had pulled out of my backpack. I wasn't exactly sure how a plant could "go pale," but I let the question slide as I displayed my prize to her.

"As you can see, it's herbicide."

"Okay, I get it—let's talk! I—you know—if you really hate my being here so much, I don't mind if you transplant me to some distant mountain someplace. . . I'm begging you. Think about it: I swear I've never entrapped a human or taken them before their time. In fact, I only ever cared for elderly adventurers, and let it be said that I've been very good to them, really—you don't know how many times I've heard the same stories; I've done everything—at least let me go out on a high note!"

I can't say I wasn't touched by what she said, but I still didn't stop. "Transplant you? But that giant tree is your real body, isn't it?"

"This entire forest is my real body. My roots are everywhere in these woods; if you uprooted the entire thing. . ."

"As if! How much time do you think I have?" I opened the lid of the herbicide and set it on the ground.

"I'm begging you—let me go! You want money? I'll give you money. You want everything here? Take it! If you leave me be now, I'll remember you for the rest of my life. You know, I remember every single adventurer I've ever cared for. You humans don't live very long, but at least in my memory, you can live for ages. How about that? Even those with no offspring have someone to keep their memory alive. Isn't that worth something? Come on. Let me gooo!"

This thing was awfully talkative for a vegetable. But it was time to put an end to this chat. I took the bottle of herbicide in one hand and advanced on the Queen.

"You're kidding me, right? You said you wouldn't hurt me. That lie-detecting bell didn't even ring. What, did you have a change of heart? This is messed up! I know—this is just an attempt at intimidation!"

"I didn't say I wouldn't hurt you. Two can play word games with this bell. I said, 'I won't slice her up while you aren't looking.' And I'm not slicing you up, am I? No lie."

Now the Leisure Queen was *really* scared. "You're kidding me, right? L-look, I get it—let's talk! I'll do anything in my power! Like—what about these? You've

been eyeing them since you got here! You can do anything you like with them!" She grabbed her chest and jiggled it pointedly. "I mean, really, what am I supposed to do? Using the bodies of dead humans is just recycling, isn't it? I'm eco-friendly! I'm green! If you leave them lying around, they turn to dirt—what's it matter if I absorb them instead?" Then all that chatter suddenly paused. ". . .Heeey, are you starting to come around after a good look at these?"



“...No.”

Just because I stole a peek at her bouncing bust, I wouldn’t say I was coming around. I knew I completely lacked any honor or integrity, but even I wasn’t so far gone that I would get hot for a plant monster. (The only monster I needed was a succubus.)

“Come on! I’ve put *everything* on the table, so why don’t you do the same? No one has to know, eh? Be honest—you’re curious, aren’t you?”

So this was the Leisure Queen, the subject of a quest renowned for its difficulty even among all the tasks nobody wanted to take on. *What a wily and dangerous opponent—be strong, Kazuma Satou. You’re dealing with a plant, here. It’s literally the same thing as that sexy radish Vanir had the other day.*

“I’m a plant, and I draw nutrients from the earth—it’s practically instinctive for me. And you want to touch these—as a male, that’s your instinct. What’s wrong with instinct? Monsters are living things—I’m alive; you’re alive! Let’s follow our instincts and let nature take its course!”

Instincts? Nature? I guess a plant monster would know a thing or two about nature.

I was reaching out toward that chest, sort of vacantly, when I abruptly stopped myself. “What the hell am I doing?! You’re too dangerous—I was about to cross a line no human being should cross!”

I snapped back to myself, and that was when the Leisure Queen realized that even sex wouldn’t work on me.

“Eeeeeeeeeekkkkk!”

The forest filled with a high-pitched scream.

6

“What? What happened?! Kazuma, what are you doing?!”

“Kazuma, what is this you are about to scatter all over? Is this herbicide?!”

The Leisure Queen’s scream had brought Aqua and the others running.

"Good timing, you guys! Help me out here—I knew this thing was bad news!" I was feeling triumphant, but for some reason, the girls all gave me troubled looks.

"I turn my back on you for a minute and look what happens. You obviously found some way to cheat that bell. Tell me what's going on here!"

"Aqua is right. Explain this situation."

I tried to recount my conversation with the plant, but the Leisure Queen, a glint in her eye, broke in. "This man suddenly tried to do something horrible to me. . .!"

"Butt out!" I said, brandishing the herbicide at the mouthy weed.

Darkness put a hand on my shoulder, clearly feeling awkward. "Kazuma, I have no idea what's going on here. Why don't you start by explaining it to us?"

"I knew this thing was a blackhearted monster—the moment we were alone, she started talking; smoothest operator you've ever seen. Here, tell the bell. Tell everyone how the moment they left, your attitude changed completely. Just try pretending it didn't with this thing here." Cornered by the magical bell, the Leisure Queen didn't say anything at all but only looked at us dejectedly. "Hey, drop the act. You're gonna make everyone think I'm the villain here! Give it up and spit it out!"

But I had been underestimating my opponent, forgetting that these monsters' ecological niche basically consisted of entrapping people. Instead of answering me, the Leisure Queen dropped the biggest bombshell of all.

"This man has been deeply interested in my chest all along. . ."

"Hey, don't change the subject." I could feel Aqua and the others all looking at me. Then they looked at the bell—silent—and the air grew tense. "You know how to play the game; I'll give you that. I didn't think things would go this far. But you're not the only one who knows how to put this bell to good use. All right, girls, watch closely. Take a good look at just what this 'Leisure Queen' is! After you guys left, she turned into the nastiest, filthiest creature you ever saw!"

No jingle from the lie-detecting bell, of course. Aqua and the others looked a

little confused.

"I—I recognize that I didn't speak in the most refined manner. But please, I have an excuse!"

Seeing the bell remain silent, the girls backed away, clearly wondering what exactly we had talked about. They were trying to decide which of us to believe. The Leisure Queen, realizing she was at a disadvantage, went on the offensive. "Wh-why, only a moment ago, you were reaching out for my chest—you were going to touch it!"

Bell? Not a sound.

"Oh, you wanna go there? Well, you were offering to let me squeeze your boobs if I spared your life!"

"I never said anything so crude; don't put words in my mouth!"

The bell still didn't ring, and the looks from the three women got colder and colder.

"Damn, this isn't getting us anywhere! I should never have bothered trying to talk to you—I should have gone right to brute force! This is what you get! Take this!" I grabbed the herbicide and sprinkled it on the Leisure Queen's roots.

"N-nooo, stop! A contest of power when I can't even move? That's not fair! You know you can't win a contest of words with me, so you're trying to overpower me instead—that's dirty!"

"Pipe down! What does a monster know about fighting fair? Ooh, you gonna throw down with me? Take your medicine! I've got plenty!"

The creature was grabbing my arm in the hopes of stopping me from sprinkling any more plant killer on her.

"Stop! Don't do something so cruel! Don't sprinkle such filth on me! I'll be polluted! Somebody save me! Don't let him put that dirty stuff on my lower half..."

"You choose the worst possible way to word everything! I'm just sprinkling some herbicide at your feet!"

So we argued and I sprinkled. The herbicide worked a lot faster than I

expected, and finally....

"Ugh, I think I'm gonna throw up. Even though there's nothing in my stomach. . . Even though I don't *have* a stomach. . . I feel awful. . ."

The Leisure Queen, having absorbed ample herbicide, lolled back and forth, her eyes unfocused. She was pale and unsteady, as if she were very, very drunk.

"All right, guys, now's our chance. Help me spread this plant killer!" I was gleefully tossing the stuff around, but everyone else stared at me in horror. "Hey, stop that. Everything I said was true. I mean, this thing didn't lie, either, but she wasn't exactly *right*. Look, even I wouldn't get hot over a monster's chest."

Riiiiing.

The girls appeared even more horrified than before.

"Heh-heh-heh." The Leisure Queen still obviously wasn't feeling well, but she managed a triumphant chuckle. "How about that, you damnable adventurer? For the rest of your life, you'll be marked as the man who was aroused by a monster! That's what you get for spreading this disgusting crap on me—see you in hell, you stupid virgin!"

I guess the Leisure Queen had reverted to her true colors.

"Drunk on herbicide, huh? Well, if you see me in hell, it's because you're going there first!"

I stalked over to the creature with the bottle in my hand, causing the monster to start rambling desperately. "Aren't you embarrassed, beating me with strength just because you couldn't out-talk me? I see you—you're beet red! Earlier, you wouldn't shut up about what a great adventurer you are, but isn't it humiliating to be a virgin if you're so damn great?! You have three females around you, and not one of them has popped your cherry yet—adventuring *companions*? Looks like you're the only one who thinks so. I'd say they barely consider you more than an acquaintance, you—"

Before the creature could go any further, I dumped the herbicide right in front of her.

"Ugh! Gross! Dammit, you filthy virgin! My roots extend all through this forest! It would take decades to uproot all of them! You think you can destroy me in the space of your piddling life span? I don't think it'd be worth whatever you got out of it, but hey, go ahead and try!"

To the bitter end, the Leisure Queen insisted on leaving a scar on my heart.

7

"That must have been quite a challenge, Mr. Satou. Excellent work defeating the Leisure Queen!"

"You're telling me—it was awful! It was the worst!" We had come back to Axel and immediately reported to Luna. Beside me, Aqua was crying her eyes out and had been for some time. "That Leisure Queen was soooooo scary; I don't want to go anywhere near that forest ever again. . . ."

Once the tables had been decisively turned, the Leisure Queen had let it all hang out, enacting her wrath on everyone there.

"Listen, Kazuma. . . Am I, you know, sort of a wallflower? Do I not seem to really *be* here? Now that I think about it, I feel like this sort of thing happens a lot. . . Take yesterday. Aqua and Megumin did all the work. And then today, you took out the Leisure Queen by yourself. Am I really a third wheel, like she said? Is she right that you could bring an Adamanmoise along instead of me and get pretty much the same result?"

Darkness, thoroughly depressed, looked like she was hardly staying on her feet. I guess the stuff the plant said had really gotten to her.

"My name is Megumin, greatest genius of the Crimson Magic Clan and first among the spell-casters of Axel Town. Worry not; I am strong, I am amazing, I am certainly not some castoff of the Crimson Magic Clan. One need not lend an ear to anything a monster says, least of all such remarks as that one is merely pretending to be a tough, lone-wolf wizard because one is unable to make any friends. It's okay—I have friends right here, precious adventuring companions. Nothing to worry about, nothing at all. . . ."

I looked over at Megumin, who had been mumbling to herself for a while, and

saw the Leisure Queen had hurt her more deeply than I'd realized at first.

"I knew you could do it, Mr. Satou! You know all about this Leisure Queen now, right? Every adventurer who went to destroy her came back saying they wouldn't lay a finger on her! Sure, enough people say she's harmless that the reward is minimal. . . But the Adventurers Guild can't have a monster living near town; it's bad for our reputation! I only asked you to investigate the matter, but you went right ahead and destroyed her. Thank you so much for your help!"

Notwithstanding the profound scars on our hearts, Luna had a bright smile on her face. Beside her, Komekko was looking at us with eyes full of respect.

. . . And that was when I realized something.

"I only took out her torso, really. You'll have to get someone else to take care of all the roots she put down in that forest. By the way, maybe I can take this opportunity to ask you something. Why were you so sure I could defeat this Leisure Queen?"

The woman across from me froze.

It wasn't actually difficult to defeat a Leisure Queen; they couldn't move. Anyone who wanted to could do it. The only real danger was that one would leave you with a prickling conscience.

"Don't tell me. . . It wouldn't happen to be because you assumed I was the sort of fiend who would happily destroy even a Leisure Queen, was it?"

Luna didn't answer, just handed us the pouch with the reward. "Well then, Mr. Satou, excellent work today! See you later, Komekko, sweetheart! Come back tomorrow!"

"Hang on a damn minute! We aren't done! I'm never bringing Komekko back here again—heck, I'm never coming back here again! I've already done plenty of work, and now I've done the hardest quest from the leftovers, too! What else could you possibly want from me?"

The woman listened to me rant for a second, then said, "Tomorrow we'll have a nice, big cake for you, okay?"

"Okay!"

She had stopped even trying to hide how ruthlessly she was using Komekko against us.

8

We wrapped things up at the Adventurers Guild, then went home, where we had a good, hard rest to heal the brutal damage to our spirits. Aqua and Darkness, for their part, went out to the chicken coop to be healed by Emperor Zel.

"Komekko, come here," Megumin said. "I want to talk to you." She was sitting on the sofa across from where I was sprawled out; she had recovered a bit quicker than the rest of us. She patted the spot next to her invitingly.

"I dunno why, but I feel like you're gonna get mad, Sis, so I don't think so."

"Komekko!" I guess Megumin's little sister was pretty perceptive, but anyway, Megumin went on. "Listen, okay? I have told you many times not to take food from strangers. And as far as the events of yesterday and today, it doesn't befit a member of the Crimson Magic Clan to let themselves be used as bait so easily. . ."

Megumin, who had begged *us* for food when we first met, claiming she didn't have anything to eat, apparently had an entire lecture in store.

"Back at the village, you told me to hit people up for food when I saw them, Sis."

"Hey. . .," I quipped almost involuntarily, but Megumin wouldn't look at me.

"That was then; this is now. The village is so small that there really aren't any strangers. But in a town like this, you mustn't accept food from people you don't know. You have no idea what price they may ask later."

"Don't care," Komekko said without missing a beat.

"Komekko! You should care! They may tempt you with food, but what will they do to you after that? I'm saying this for your own good—you seem so likely to simply follow after anyone with a treat in their hand."

"Of course I would, and then they could raise me," Komekko said blithely.

Megumin pounded the table. “Don’t be an idiot! Listen to what I’m saying!”

“Sis, you have an anger problem.”

Megumin jumped to her feet, which sent Komekko scuttling out of the room. “Stop right there, Komekko; you can’t run from me! Today I’ll make sure you finally listen to me!”

Komekko had gone running. . .directly into the mansion’s kitchen. We heard a *click* that suggested she had locked the door from the inside.

“Come out this instant, Komekko! Or you won’t get any dinner tonight!”

“I’ll come out when all the food in here is gone.”

Huh, so she hadn’t run in there by accident.

“Komekko, quit your foolish joking! Anyway, if you don’t open that door, the rest of us won’t be able to eat dinner. It’s almost time to start getting the meal ready, so hurry and open up. . . Komekko, what are you eating in there?! Don’t be so selfish—come out! Come out, or I’ll break down this door!”

“Don’t smash my door because of a little sibling rivalry,” I said, coming up behind Megumin. But if I let the kid stay in there, we would never get to eat.

“Yes, but, Kazuma. . . This is the time at which to discipline her properly, lest we regret it later. It will not do to try to tame her after it is already too late.”

If I remembered correctly, the Axis priest Cecily had told me Megumin had obediently followed her out of sheer hunger the first time they had met.

“Not very convincing coming from you—*speaking* of already too late. . .”

“Hey! If you’re picking a fight with me, you shall have it!”

“Knock ’er dead, Big Bro!”

“Komekko! It is below the belt to throw out taunts while locked up in another room! Come on out here already!”

I really couldn’t tell whether these two sisters were the best of friends or the worst.

. . .Well, maybe it’s being close that makes sibling rivalry possible.

"I found a big ol' chocolate in the cupboard!" we heard Komekko exclaim from the kitchen.

The blood drained from Megumin's face. "Komekko?! You must not eat that. I specially prepared it for— Fine, Komekko, all right! I won't be angry anymore. Just please come out! Let's all be friends again!"

Ah, loving sisterly conversation.

"I'm gonna eat this. I'll come out after."

"Komekkooooo!"

I was reminded of how great it seemed to have a sister.

Chapter 5

Back to Basics with These Adventurers!



1

The next day. . .

“Komekko! Where is Komekko?!”

I could hear Megumin running around and shouting about something. First thing in the morning, too.

“What’s wrong with you, being that loud this early?”

Since the kid had shown up, I’d gotten in the habit of being an early riser myself. I guess Komekko was partly there as an informant for Megumin’s parents, so I couldn’t afford to look like too much of a slob.

“Kazuma, good morning. I am looking for Komekko. It seems she couldn’t wait for breakfast—she had her way with the kitchen and then disappeared somewhere.”

“Geez, your sister is no joke.”

Maybe that was what happened when you were raised by an older sister who specialized in crawfish dishes.

“I must say, I do not recall raising such a wild child. Where *does* she get it?”

I wanted to point out that Megumin was the only possible influence, but I bit my tongue. “Eh, she’s never been outside the village—maybe she’s curious about Axel? I bet she’s just taking a walk around the neighborhood. She’ll be back before you know it.”

“True, I remember when I first came to this town and how easily distracted I was...” Megumin didn’t sound very convinced, though.

If this town had nothing else going for it, at least public safety was decent. Even a little girl walking around by herself would probably be fine. So we decided to have breakfast before anything else.

“Hey, Megumin, what happened to Komekko? She beat me at our board game last night, and I want to get some revenge.” Aqua came in with a game under her arm, like a kid looking for someone to play with.

“You lost to a little girl? Not sure that says much for your qualifications as a grown-up.”

Aqua had become fast friends with Komekko over the last couple of days. They seemed to get along really well; maybe it was because they were mentally about the same age.

“You’re so dumb, Kazuma; don’t you know the word *handicap*? I went too easy on her because she was a kid, and that’s why I lost. I played without my Adventurer, which is the weakest piece.”

“So you basically played without a handicap.” Darkness, who had shown a surprising soft spot for children since Komekko’s arrival, had also gotten close to the little tyke. “Still, I’m surprised she’s not back yet. Maybe she’s playing with some other kids at the park or something—or maybe the Guild tempted her with treats again?”

“Highly plausible. At least the part about the Guild—that girl doesn’t get along much with other children her own age. Come to think of it, didn’t the woman at the Guild say they would have a cake for her today?”

It was kind of terrifying to realize that pint-size girl was spending her days hanging out in a den of scum and villainy like our Adventurers Guild. Normally, if you were a little girl in a strange town, you’d think you wouldn’t leave your

big sister's side, but Komekko seemed like she had well and truly left the nest already. I was starting to get the feeling she was going to be an even bigger deal than Megumin in the future.

Darkness chimed in. "Well, I think the Guild pretty much mopped up all the unwanted quests, so maybe this time they're thanking Komekko for helping to motivate all the adventurers. She at least has the right to ask for some sweets."

Like she said, apparently not a lot of quests had been getting done in Axel lately. So maybe this was all for the best. Though I had to admit, I had the distinct feeling that once Komekko was gone, things would quickly go back to normal...

"Well then, seeing as we have had breakfast, perhaps we should go to the Guild as well," Megumin said. Her little sister may have left the nest, but Megumin seemed desperate to drag her back in.

When we arrived at the Adventurers Guild, we were met with the strangest sight.

"Here, don't you want one of these? I made them myself!"

Komekko was there, sure enough. But solicitously feeding her were the succubus escorts.

"Here, sweetheart, have some more of these."

"Thanks a lot!"

I had no idea what the ladies were doing here, but Komekko was more than happy to eat the treats they offered her. I beckoned over one of the girls I recognized and whispered, "You're from, y'know, the *place*, right? You know this is the Adventurers Guild? It's dangerous for you here."

"My, if it isn't one of our best customers. Thank you, but we know what we are and we know very well how dangerous this place is." Then she smiled fondly at Komekko, who was stuffing her face with sweets. "But somehow, for the life of us, we just can't leave that girl alone. I think she must have an incredible talent for controlling demons. She'll be big, big, big in the future; I'm sure of it. . . Now's the perfect time to suck up a little. . ."

Weird. I looked at Komekko. It was true—the succubi doting on her had unusual looks in their eyes.



What's with this sense of defeat?

Aqua was half-hidden behind a post, staring fixedly at the succubi. There had actually been an incident when Aqua had discovered the existence of a shop run by succubi. She had been on the warpath to exterminate them, and I had ended up completely exploding at her. I guess the experience had traumatized her so badly that even now, she couldn't bring herself to do anything to them. I might also have informed her in no uncertain terms that if she exorcised the succubi, every male adventurer in town would be out for her blood. So I didn't think anything really bad would happen, but . . .

"Er, I see Lady Aqua is here as well. I think we'll be going now."

"Give our regards to Lady Aqua and Lord Vanir, sir! All right, Komekko, dear, we'll see you later, okay?"

The succubi kept glancing uneasily in Aqua's direction. With several backward glances at Komekko, the ladies made their way out of the Guild.

". . . So, Kazuma," Darkness said. "What exactly is your relationship with those people? I never knew you had such beautiful friends. . ."

"They run a café that has nothing *but* beautiful people," Megumin said. "The food is pretty mediocre, and I've always wondered why it seems so popular. What in the world would they want with my little sister?"

The adventurers remained deferential to Megumin today.

"G'day, Megumin!"

"Not much to do today, eh, Megumin? We've pretty much cleaned up all the quests over the last couple of days."

All the adventurers had become more than accustomed to speaking politely to her.

"I see, I see. In that case, perhaps we won't be ambushed by any more difficult quests. Everyone has been exerting themselves so much these past few days. I've been so worried about you all." Megumin smiled in relief at the other adventurers.

Komekko, imitating her expression, said, "Sis, the adventurers in this town

were awesome.”

“Oh, I very much agree. I wouldn’t live in a town without awesome adventurers.”

All the sisters’ listeners looked away shyly. But they were unmistakably pleased.

“Blue-Haired Sis was awesome, too!”

“I agree again. I wouldn’t have a companion who isn’t awesome, after all. She was able to purify a ghost who had been in this world for much too long. She might not show it at every moment, but I think Aqua is distinctly underrated.”

All of this went directly to Aqua’s head, and she stood there grinning.

“Big Bro was awesome, too, wasn’t he?”

“Well, he is my party leader. He could hardly *not* be awesome. . . Though I’m not completely sure his methods constitute real victory. . .”

Hang on, was she taking a shot at my exemplary defeat of the Leisure Queen?

“. . .Huh? Wh-what about how I did?” Darkness said timidly.

“You *didn’t* do,” I shot back, leaving her despondent.

“What do you think, Komekko? Awesome companions, are they not? Cool adventurers all over town. When you get back to Crimson Magic Village. . .well, feel free to brag to everyone.” Megumin smiled at all the obviously touched adventurers.

“Hey, Kazuma, was it true what the Leisure Queen said? Is it true that an Adamanmoise would be more useful than me because you wouldn’t have to do anything but feed it?”

“She’s just a plant; don’t let her get to you. Forget everything she said.”

Darkness was the only one of us not in pretty good spirits, and I tried to offer her some sort of comfort.

Then Komekko dropped a bombshell.

“But you weren’t all that awesome, Sis.”

“. . .K-Komekko, what did you just say? Are you saying that I, your very sister, was not awesome?”

You could have heard a pin drop inside the Guild Hall.

Komekko responded to Megumin’s trembling question. “Uh-huh. You were the only one who wasn’t awesome, Sis.”

“K-Komekko! Have you suddenly entered your rebellious phase?! All the terrible things that have come out of your mouth, the way you won’t do as you’re told—as your sister, I must say I’m thoroughly shocked!”

Megumin was obviously deeply shaken, but Komekko ignored her and toddled over to the receptionist. “I’ve got a favor to ask you, Busty Sis.”

“Komekko, sweetheart, maybe you could not call me that.”

But Komekko, inventor of the wildest nickname for the receptionist, said, “Could you give my not-awesome big sis a quest that’ll help make her awesome?” I wasn’t sure if that was really thoughtful of her or. . .not.

“Komekko, we’re going home! My power is only to be used when it’s truly necessary. At normal times I am, well, much like you see here. Come on—let’s go home, and tonight I’ll show you more Explosion fireworks.”

Megumin, talking a little too fast from embarrassment, took Komekko’s hand and made to leave. Even as her older sister dragged her out of the building, though, Komekko kept looking at the receptionist.

“Hmmmm,” said Luna. “I’m afraid I’m all out of really big quests right now. All I have left is Giant Toad hunting. . . This town doesn’t have much animal husbandry to speak of, and toad meat is delicious and always in demand, so that one quest is almost always available.”

“That’s perfect,” Komekko said immediately, leaving the woman unsure of what to say.

“You’re sure? But Giant Toads are very weak monsters; they’re really only good for food. . .”

“That’s perfect.”

Megumin grabbed Komekko as the girl tried to get a quest assigned to her.

"You cannot accept a quest on my behalf. And anyway, there is nothing awesome about slaying Giant Toads. I know the sound of frog meat is appealing to you, but you ought to see a really, truly awesome side of your sister. It's not as if there are no other quests, right? Come, now—I don't mind a moderately impossible one. I am practically pulsating with power today. I feel I could take on a dragon or even a general of the Demon King!"

Luna received this announcement with some uncertainty. "A dragon or general of the Demon King. . .? In that case, I do have one more unfinished quest. . ." She seemed to be asking herself if she should really be talking about this.

Suddenly, a chorus of adventurers spoke up.

"Hey, don't embarrass our Megumin!"

"Yeah, she said she'd do it, didn't she?"

"That's right! These people come through when it counts, so why not trust her?"

Megumin smiled shyly. "As they say, I have said I will do it, so I will do it. I can defeat any monster that might appear in the vicinity of Axel. Or are you saying this opponent is even stronger than a general of the Demon King?"

Despite the crowing of the other adventurers, Luna shook her head. Megumin was right; this was a starter town, and nothing that showed up around here was going to be more dangerous than a general of the Demon King.

"You're awesome, Sis!" Komekko, her eyes glittering with anticipation of her sister's performance, was the final push. Megumin half smiled and took the quest paper.

"Very well," Luna said. "Miss Megumin, you are hereby entrusted with this last unfinished quest."

In a voice that filled the entire Guild Hall, Megumin announced, "My name is Megumin! First among the magic-users of Axel and wielder of Explosion! Before the might of my explosion magic, none shall stand in a one-on-one contest, be they a dragon or even a general of the Demon King!"

“Whoooooo!”

“Do it! Go, Megumin, take ‘em out!”

“You need any help, just ask!”

Megumin’s eyes shone crimson under this shower of praise; she flung back her cape and struck a pose. . .!

“The final unfinished quest. . . It isn’t a hunt for a single monster. It involves the slaying of two creatures that have been fighting over territory for years—a griffin and a manticore.”

Luna’s words cast the entire room into silence. Megumin stood there, still posing.

2

A griffin and a manticore. It was two years ago that these very un-Axel-like, huge monsters had moved into the area.

The monster called a manticore doesn’t occur in nature; it’s a magical beast created with enchantments. Who knew if some wizard somewhere had produced it (probably to amuse themselves) or if it had escaped from some nearby dungeon or ruins. The point was, one day a manticore had suddenly taken up residence in the mountains near Axel.

Which might have been terrible, except not long after, someone spotted a griffin in the same mountains. There were large scars on its wings, and in fact, it was in a pretty sorry state overall. Considering the severity of its injuries, the Adventurers Guild declared the mountains off-limits. Approaching an injured griffin was simply too dangerous; they decided to wait until it died of its wounds. And if that didn’t work, we could have always hoped that the two monsters, now fighting over territory, would eventually take each other out. . .

Unfortunately, I guess the griffin hadn’t gotten the memo about the Guild’s plans, because instead, it battled with the manticore over territory on an almost daily basis, until the chaos spilled over into the surrounding area. Because they were now dealing with not one but two formidable monsters, the Guild had

issued a quest, for form's sake, but they were offering a minimal reward to help make sure no one actually took it, and until today, that had worked nicely.

So now we and the other adventurers found ourselves walking onto the turf of these two famous creatures. Aqua, unhappily bringing up the rear, said, "A manticore and a griffin. You know, I seem to remember seeing this quest around a long time ago."

What was she saying? "Of course you remember it. Back when you and I were deep in debt, you tried to get us to take it."

That had been back when we had only just arrived. Aqua, hurting for money, had picked up this quest, which no one else had been willing to touch.

"Oh, is that what happened? I'm a woman who never looks back on the past. As far as I'm concerned, if it's over, it's forgotten."

"Gee, that sounds so cool, I'd expect it to come from a way more popular and frankly overall better woman."

Of all the unfinished quests that had been getting finished lately, this was one even the Guild seemed to think it was best to let lie. But it had been two years since we'd first thought of taking on this quest. This was practically a sort of revenge. This wasn't like the usual stuff, the things we stumbled into and then somehow managed to work our way out of. This quest would be the proof that we had shed our newbie skins and become veteran adventurers who couldn't be pushed around.

"I guess we've really made it in the world, believe it or not. Back when we were new at this, I could never have imagined I would actually be taking this quest on purpose."

"You are so right," Megumin said fondly. "We were doing every quest in sight to repay our debts back then. It's hard to imagine, but looking back, I almost feel like living every day on the edge, hounded by debts, was more fun than this luxurious lifestyle, where money is no object. . ."

"That's just nostalgia talking," I said. "Most people look at the past through rose-colored glasses." Megumin sounded ready to return to those days, but I remembered how much we had struggled to make money, and I had no desire

to live that life again.

"Sure, Kazuma, but I sort of agree with Megumin," Darkness said. "We were novices then, and every monster we met, from Giant Toads onward, did the most awful things to us. But now. . ." She was red and fidgety. I didn't want to know what part of the past *she* was remembering.

"Nah, you're all about the same as you always were," remarked a nearby adventurer. "Sure, I know you've taken down a few of the Demon King's generals and some big whatevers. But Aqua there. . . Just the other day, she chased a Neroid down an alleyway in an attempt to catch it, only for it to turn the tables on her and send her home crying."

Aqua lit into the loudmouthed adventurer. "Hey, you said you wouldn't tell anyone about that! Now I don't know why I spent some of my pitiful allowance treating you to ice cream! That was supposed to shut you up—but if you can't keep a secret, then give me my ice cream back!"

"I chased off that Neroid. The ice cream was to thank me."

Nice dodge. I thought I heard Aqua mutter, "If you ever get hurt, I'm gonna charge you for healing," but she let the matter drop. We never used to get along with strangers very well, but now we were able to banter with the other adventurers like this. It just went to show that our time in this world had bred some real intimacy.

Although I didn't look back on it as fondly as Megumin and Darkness evidently did, I had to admit that our days struggling under a burden of debt could have been worse.

. . .In fact, the same went for this whole world. I'd assumed it was a worthless, no-good pit, but I had started to realize it wasn't all bad. Axel looked tiny when you saw it from up in the mountains, inspiring a fresh wave of emotion in me. Maybe, at long last, this world had started to grow on me. . .

I was sparing a smile for the idea when it happened.

A shadow passed over my head. I glanced up. . .

. . .and discovered the head of a bird of prey, complete with a sharp beak and a pair of gigantic, flapping wings.

It belonged to a massive creature with the head of an eagle and the body of a lion.

We'd found our griffin.

3

"It's the griffin!"

The adventurers accompanying us, who had tried to look strong as we started out so as to bolster Megumin in her pursuit of this impossible quest, changed their tune at the first sight of the gigantic griffin.

"Kazuma!" Aqua exclaimed. "It's much bigger than I thought it would be! See that gorgeous beak? I wonder if it's related to Emperor Zel!"

"Quit babbling and get out of its way! M-M-Megumin, chant your magic! I don't see the manticore anywhere, so let's deal with the griffin while we still can! This is the bigger monster anyway!"

"R-r-r-right, of course—leave it to me!"

It wasn't only the other adventurers who were overwhelmed—it was us, too. Megumin started chanting, and her voice brought everyone else back to reality; they grabbed their weapons.

"Okay, I'll be your shield! This time, I'm really going to do my part so Komekko can rightfully say, 'Armored Sis, you're awesome!' We might be facing a griffin, but there's only one of it! With all of us together, we can prevail!" Darkness, the only one who didn't look the least bit afraid, faced down the beast.

Evidently encouraged by her example, the front-row adventurers lined up behind her, and the spell-casters began readying their best spells.

And then, as if Darkness's challenge was its cue, another shadow drifted between us and the spot where Darkness was confronting the griffin.

"Oops, can't have that. Griffin, I don't like that guy one bit, but without him, I just know you humans would attack my mountain."

This new creature had a human head attached to a lion's body, along with a

scorpion's tail and the wings of a bat. The manticore: a chimera-like beast that looked nasty because it *was* nasty. Darkness and the other front-row fighters were caught between two awful monsters, and the spell-casters, who had let the beasts get this close to them, fell into a panic.

Darkness drew her sword and turned toward the manticore as if to say *I've got this*, but the monster hardly spared her a glance. . .

Instead, it flapped its wings and launched into the sky, and its target was—!

"I-it's looking this way! Hey, Megumin, it's totally looking at us! Cut the magic—we've gotta run while we're still around to do it!"

"K-Kazuma, stop shaking me, please! Manticores are highly intelligent. It knows I'm trying to use powerful magic and has made me its priority—aaah, here it comes!"

Crap! I wanted to shout for help, but all the other adventurers were busy helping Darkness keep the griffin under control.

Okay, I knew better than to panic in a situation like this! I pulled the bow from my back and took aim—no muss, no fuss. "Try this on for size! Deadeye!" I slammed an arrow into my bow and let loose at the manticore. My shot flew straight and true—!

"...Pffft, whatever."

The creature simply batted my arrow out of the sky with a lazy flick of its tail.

"Megumiiin! It deflected my arrow; what's going on here?!"

"Your shot isn't powerful enough! A manticore is such a strong monster—you would never normally see one around here! Novice adventurers' attacks just—well, you saw for yourself!" Even as Megumin shouted to me, she resumed chanting Explosion. This time I would be sure not to interrupt—*Crap!*

"Ooh, hah! Quite a manly man, you man! How about you have a go at big ol' me!"

"Heeek!"

The manticore, spouting lines that were disturbing in more ways than one, presented its massive scorpion tail, then dove out of the sky at me. I stood in

front of Megumin, hoping to keep her safe, and intoned some magic of my own. “*Create Earth!*”

Even the strongest enemy was vulnerable if you blinded it. Once the manticore couldn’t see what was going on, I could buy Megumin some time. . .

Until Aqua barged in. “Leave this to me, Kazuma! Let me tell you something about big monsters like manticores and griffins—they fly using magic! So if you can neutralize the magic, they come crashing down!”

“Hey, stop! Whenever you try to help, things only get worse! I’m about to take this thing down with my trademark blinding combo. . .!”

But I never got the chance.

“*Sacred Dispel!*”

The light from Aqua’s spell rocketed into the air and slammed into the manticore. Maybe she had been right about it using magic, because it suddenly lost its lift and plummeted to the earth as gravity took over—!

“Eeeeeyahhh?!”

“Eeeeeyowww?!”

The manticore crashed into me. I probably had the defensive buffs Aqua had put on me before the battle to thank for the fact that I came out with minimal damage. I tried to get to my feet, but. . .

“Hey, little man, this ain’t so bad, is it? Not so bad at all!”

“Not so bad?! First Sylvia, and now you—are all you chimera types like this?!”

The manticore wasn’t getting off me—it had my hands pinned with its forelegs. . .!

“What do you say, boy? Want to give it a sho—? Owwww, ow, ow, ow! Aggghhh, wh-what are you doing?!”

I used Drain Touch on the manticore to suck the magic right out of its body!

“Somebody, anybody, help me!” I screamed. “Otherwise I might lose any number of very important things!”

Like my virginity or maybe even my life!

"?!" The manticore hardly even made a sound as a Thief adventurer attacked it from behind; it spontaneously let go of me, and I made tracks. The monster managed to dodge the strike, but now it was focused on the adventurer who had attacked it. It looked downright surprised. It had probably never expected my Drain Touch attack.

The spell-casters had already put some distance between themselves and the manticore and me and begun to focus on the griffin. I didn't have any time to see how things were going, but if they had decided they all needed to prioritize that monster, then my guess was things weren't going well.

Drain Touch must have really worked, because the manticore was looking cautious now; I took the opportunity to draw my beloved sword. But it wasn't so I could fight the thing head-on. No, someone of the weakest class, like me, wasn't here to win any battles. My job was to buy time.

"Hey, you, the disturbingly ambiguous monster! I've got some serious trauma related to the likes of you! Maybe it'll give me some closure if I wipe you off the face of the earth!" I taunted the manticore as hard as I could, trying to keep its attention on me. I had the other adventurers for backup, after all; if I could just gain us some time—

"Aaah! Another manticore! It's a female! A lady manticore!"

"So it had a mate! Manticore females are stronger than the males! Let's go!"

The adventurers who had been heading in my direction turned around to deal with a new manticore that was approaching the mages, who were supposed to have been far enough away to be safe.

.....

"You've got some guts, little man. So it's just the two of us! I see you want to do it with me! I'll give it to you, all right; I'll give it to you good!"

"Oh, for— Give me a break! Give me a breaaaaak!!"

Talk about trouble everywhere you turned!

"Kazuma, my preparations are complete! Allow me to handle this!" said Megumin from behind me, finally done with her incantation. But this space was

too tight for me to get the distance I needed from the manticore; if we were going to finish this thing, I had to lead it out of here. . .!

"That spell'll be wasted on the manticore! The griffin is way stronger; don't use your magic on this shrimp!"

"U-understood! They did say the griffin was by far the more powerful enemy!"

I was taunting the manticore—and Megumin, holding her spell at the end of her staff, fell naturally into the game of dissing the monster.

"What's that? I, the great manticore, have battled with that thing all these years, and you say I'm *not* as strong as that griffin?"

My job was to buy time. If I could keep the manticore busy long enough for everyone else to finish off the griffin, maybe we could unite our forces to deal with this thing.

"Lalatina!"

"Hey, is she okay over there?!"

"Lalatina's getting pecked to pieces by the griffin! No, hold on, she looks kind of happy about it—I don't think it's actually bothering her that much. . .!"

. . . I could buy all the time I wanted, and I wasn't sure things were actually going to get any better. *Please, Axel adventurers, show how awesome you are!*

Maybe my wish reached somebody, because as I stood there facing down the manticore, I heard a distant voice. "Great, it's working! Hey, Kazuma! Once we deal with this manticore, we'll come help you as soon as we can!"

Of course, the manticore I was facing heard the voice, too. And where before it had been acting like it had all the time in the world, now it suddenly looked tense.

"Oh, you wanna go help your blushing bride? Be my guest. This mage standing behind me with a spell at the ready? She's the greatest magic-user in Axel. And we're happy to do this right here or to let you go help your friend."

I watched its reaction carefully. . . .

"I guess I'm not quite feeling myself today! I'll have to do it with you another time. That means I choose rescuing. . ."

With that, the manticore whipped around and dashed off. A fast charge from a high-level magical beast was never going to be something novice adventurers were prepared for; the adventurers surrounding the female manticore took the body blow and went flying into the air.

"Lalatina's being carried off!"

I looked over and discovered the griffin with Darkness in its beak, preparing to launch itself into the air. Darkness was empty-handed (had she dropped her giant sword?) and was punching the creature repeatedly in the beak. But the beak was too hard for it to have any effect. . .

"Kazuma, you have to do something! That thing's going to make off with Darkness! This morning, Emperor Zel caught a worm, and right now Darkness kind of reminds me of the worm!"

"Don't jinx us! Can't you ever do anything that doesn't cause trouble?!"

While we argued, the two manticores broke through the line of adventurers and headed for the griffin. They probably meant to put the monster between themselves and their pursuers, forcing the adventurers to deal with the griffin. I guess those human heads weren't just for show; they had some brains in there.

..

"Darkness, brace yourself! Megumin, get ready to use your magic!" I pulled back my bow again and took aim at the griffin's face. "Now, there's a target that's too big to miss! Try this on for size, for real this time!" I activated my Deadeye skill and let loose an arrow directly at the griffin's gigantic eyeball. The creature must have been distracted by Darkness, who was flailing around trying to keep it on the ground, because it didn't react to my projectile.

"Piggggyaaahhhh!" It screeched as an arrow lodged in its right eye. Darkness gave the protruding butt of the arrow a good smack to drive it in. That was the last straw; it dropped Darkness from its beak, and she fell with a *Suck on that* look on her face.

"Megumin, do it! Take everything the greatest magic-user in Axel can muster

and drop it on those three!"

I hardly had to tell her; Megumin already had her staff pointed at the griffin. "When we get back to Axel, I hope you will regale my younger sister with stories of my deeds. . . My name is Megumin! First among the magic-users of Axel and wielder of Explosion! Behold my most profound technique, which I have saved for this moment! Eat this! *Explooooosionnn!!!*"

That explosion Megumin let off? It got the griffin. It got the two manticores. It got half the mountain range near Axel.

4

". . .No more. Kazuma, I don't wanna go on any more quests for a long time."

We had emerged from our battle with the griffin and the manticores, if only by the skin of our teeth.

"Uh, Kazuma. I keep wondering, have we really grown at all? I can't help thinking we've hardly changed since we formed this party."

"Don't ask me. That's what I want to know."

I walked beside Darkness, trudging along despite being thoroughly battered, with Megumin riding on my back. We and the rest of the adventurers were heading for Axel. As we walked along with the sun setting on the horizon, Megumin said, "There is one thing for which I must apologize to you, Kazuma. . . I admit, I do not really want to go back to those days."

Well, there you have it.

"Excellent work! And congratulations! As of now, all the unfinished quests in this town have been cleared. All of us at the Adventurers Guild express our heartfelt thanks to you adventurers!"

A row of Guild staff members greeted us when we arrived, muddy and filthy, back at the Guild in Axel. Every adventurer who had gone on the quest looked as pleased as if they had slain the griffin themselves.

And there she was, right in the middle of the line of staff, like she was already a part of this Guild. Luna pushed her forward a little.

"You were awesome. You were all awesome!" Komekko said, her eyes shining.

A rough-and-ready warrior answered with a big grin. "Yeah, I sure think so! We're Axel adventurers, after all! But your big sister is the most awesome of us all. Today, she took down a griffin and two manticores all at once!" He no longer sounded like he was saying that as a favor to Megumin. This was real, heartfelt praise.

When Komekko heard how sincere he was, she looked happier than ever.

"Big Sis, you're awesome!" she said.

And then she beamed her biggest smile.



Epilogue



That night.

Having done our first big job in a while, we'd split the modicum of a reward for the griffin hunt with the other adventurers, then partied to our hearts' content at the Guild, and we had only recently arrived home. Komekko, blissfully full, had fallen sound asleep on the way; Darkness had carried her on her back, and now she was asleep in Megumin's room.

We'd had a serious hike and an even more serious battle. It had been a long day, but it had been ages since I had felt this pleasantly satisfied with myself. I snuggled into bed, and with the wine coursing comfortably through my body, I closed my eyes, looking forward to a good night's sleep. . .

"Kazuma, are you still awake? If you're awake, could I have a moment?"

It was Megumin, just outside the door.

"I'm awake, but not for long."

"I went out of my way to come here, so don't fall asleep yet!" she shot back, opening the door and coming into my room.

I didn't sit up but lay there with my head poking out from under the blankets. "What do you want at this hour? Don't you want to sleep with Komekko for the first time in ages? She's not going to be here forever, you know—you can never be sure when someone will come from Crimson Magic Village to pick her up."

Though personally, I wouldn't have minded if she stayed forever. Not that I

was feeling like a lolicon or anything. I was still getting my memories back of my time at the castle with Iris. Come to think of it, I'd promised her that if I remembered her, I would write her a letter. I decided to write it the next day; even if I went to the Adventurers Guild, it sounded like there wouldn't be much to do but kill frogs.

While I was mentally making my to-do list, Megumin gave a small smile. "Ahem, it's funny you should mention. . . As a matter of fact, Yunyun came by just earlier."

Now that I reflected on the last few days, we really hadn't seen that girl around—I wondered what had happened to her. Those other girls, Funifura and Dodonko—they'd said they couldn't find Yunyun. Maybe she really had run and hid.

"So what about her? She come to see Komekko?"

"No, no. She had a message from the village. It seems the unit of the Demon King's army that had taken up residence in the village was successfully driven out."

Geez, those were some martial mages. I guess the Crimson Magic Clan members weren't known as the world's most powerful wizards for nothing. It had been only a few days! I wondered if they could ever be convinced to turn all that energy to something more productive.

"Hey, that's great news. But that means. . ."

"Yes. Tomorrow, my mother will come to pick up Komekko." Megumin sounded just the slightest bit sad.

"All the more reason you should be with her tonight, right?"

"No, it's fine. That child is very strong. Frankly, I am afraid I am the one who would be damaged if I was with her all the time."

Oh yeah, I'd forgotten Megumin had a bit of a sister complex.

Megumin bowed her head. "Kazuma, for helping me with a great many things these last several days—thank you."

Gratitude? That came out of the blue.

"Little late for all this bowing and thanking. Anyway, I know it was a struggle, and I know I came close to losing some very important things, but it did sort of remind me of the old days, and I enjoyed that. . .just a little." I half smiled, and Megumin did the same.

"True, today's battle did indeed bring to mind the way we used to be. . . It makes one wonder if indeed we have grown at all."

Darkness had said something similar on the way back to Axel; I would have been pleasantly happy not to hear that comment again. Actually, I had noticed recently that even when my level increased, my stats didn't improve as much as I expected. I didn't like to think about it, but maybe I was getting close to maxing out my numbers. I didn't even have any cheat powers, and I was hitting a point where raising my level didn't make me any stronger—that was not cool.

Megumin, unaware of my little fit of depression, went on talking happily, nostalgically. "Come to think of it, do you remember? The time we first met."

"Of course I do. I mean, you spat out this name that made no sense to me, and then next thing I knew, you'd collapsed. Not to mention, the first thing you said to me was actually that you hadn't eaten in three days. Nobody would forget an introduction like that."

"Hey, I have lost count of the number of times I have said this, but if you have a problem with my name, then I shall hear it." When I saw Megumin's eyes flash crimson, I realized I felt a certain fondness for this familiar banter.

Megumin must have seen it on my face, or maybe she wasn't really angry at all, because she dissolved into giggles, until I was laughing along with her. . .

"Kazuma. I knew about you before any of that."

That was sudden.

"You and Aqua may not realize it, but I was aware of you before I ever joined your party."

"Oh you were, eh?" So Aqua and I had really been getting that much attention right from the beginning?

". . .Just to be clear, it's because the two of you strangely stood out. I would

often see you in the strangest places, being yelled at, getting angry and weeping —be it at your job at the Guild tavern or selling vegetables. I saw you being shouted at so often that you quickly lodged yourselves in my memory.”

“That’s not a very nice way to remember someone,” I said, but Megumin just giggled again.

“Perhaps, but even so, the two of you seemed to be genuinely enjoying yourselves. The real reason I wanted to join your party was because of the thought of the fun adventures we might all have together.”

Gosh, when she put it that way, I could hardly be angry with her.

“Though it must be said that if you had told me then that I would fall in love with you, Kazuma, I would never have believed it.”

“Huh? Did I make that bad a first impression? You know even I have feelings, right?”

Megumin laughed again, from the heart. “Kazuma, Kazuma.”

“What is it? I’m trying to sleep here; leave me alone. I want to enjoy being a little tipsy while I can.”

I was pointedly acting a bit sullen, but Megumin said:

“Sooner or later, I would like to move to the point where we are more than friends but less than lovers.”

No context, no warning, just that sudden curveball.

※

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Kazuma. Making you take care of both my daughters. . .”

“Nah, I don’t mind at all. Both your girls have done so much for me.”

It was the next morning. After springing her little revelation on me, Megumin hadn’t actually *done* anything at all, simply said good night and left my room. When I saw her this morning, she greeted me casually, as if nothing had happened.

Maybe, with Komekko in the same house, she’d felt saying it was the most she could manage. Thanks to her, though, I hadn’t slept at all. You could see the

resemblance between the older and younger sisters: They were both from a family of demons.

"When you say they've done so much for you—may I ask what exactly they've done? I mean, it could be anything, and I don't mind if it is, but those girls are both getting to an age where they'll be needing to find partners. . . ."

Those distinctly uncomfortable words came from Megumin's mom, Yuiyui. When the talk of "finding partners" came up, Darkness, who was in the foyer saying good-bye to Komekko, flinched. Come to think of it, as a noble, it was high time for her to become a bride, too.

"I mean they helped me with adventuring. Nothing weird, okay?"

"Yes, of course, I know; my daughter told me everything, so I understand perfectly, Mr. Kazuma. Everything is fine so long as you're ready to take responsibility."

That caused me to involuntarily glance back at Megumin, but I found her shaking her head vigorously. So the daughter Yuiyui was referring to must be. . . .

Yuiyui looked Megumin and me in the eyes and produced a small notebook. It was the one Komekko had occasionally been writing things down in.

"Blue-Haired Sis was awesome; she got rid of a ghost with a punch. Armored Sis was awesome; she got eaten by a big bird. Big Sis's man was awesome, too; he put plant killer on a lady and got rid of her. Big Sis was awesome. Don't really know why, but she was."

Hey.

What was with that last part? Megumin had explained what she'd done in detail to Komekko, but the pip-squeak hadn't understood a bit of it. Megumin fell weakly to the carpet when she heard that, but Yuiyui kept reading from the notebook.

"When Sis wasn't around at night, I thought she must be in her man's room and went to look, and she was saying something about being more than friends but less than lovers."

Megumin jumped up. "Komekko! You were awake for that?! And you were

eavesdropping?! Just how much did you hear?!” Her face was red, and she was furious.

“You don’t need to hide it now,” Yuiyui said. “Your mother approves, as long as you’re happy.”

With her mother’s kindly gaze upon her, Megumin slumped to the carpet again, clutching her head and tossing it back and forth. Yuiyui completely ignored her daughter’s antics and said, “Well then, Mr. Kazuma, I’ll show myself out. . . My, though, what a wonderful house you have—I’d heard you talk about it, but it’s incredible to see it for myself. I know now that I won’t have to worry about my daughter. I’m entrusting her to you.”

“See you, Big Bro. I wanna eat frog the next time I come.”

And that was it: Yuiyui intoned some sort of magic, probably Teleport.

“Yuiyui, my mother! It has been ages since you saw your precious daughter, and have you nothing more to talk about than that?!” Megumin exclaimed.

“Hurry up and make me some grandkids.”

What a thing to say to your barely teenage daughter.

“W-wait, Moth—!”

Megumin was about to fire something back, but Yuiyui grabbed Komekko in her arms and said, “Live happily, you two. I’ll name my grandchildren for you when they arrive.”

She really was like a one-woman storm.

“Teleport!”

And just like that, she was gone.

“G’morning! Hey, I feel like chicken for breakfast for some reason. . . Huh? Where’d Komekko go?”

Yuiyui had left moments ago. We were still standing there, stunned by her outrageous departure, when Aqua appeared, as usual both late and unable to sense the mood.

“How long did you plan on sleeping? Komekko’s gone already.”

"What? Why?! She and I were going to go Neroid hunting today!"

You mean Neroids like the one that worked you over the other day?

Neroids were not strong creatures—kids could deal with them. Please tell me she hadn't meant to have Komekko hunt them down for her.

In any event, Aqua's idiotic blathering brought Megumin back to herself. "I really made everyone's lives difficult this time. I truly apologize for my mother and sister..."

"Well, it all started because you had to go bragging to them," I quipped, and Megumin looked away, embarrassed.

"I enjoyed myself, so I don't mind," Aqua said happily. "Komekko can come back anytime. Then we can finally hunt those Neroids."

"Say, Kazuma. . ." Darkness was wringing her hands, as if she was trying to decide whether to say this or not. "That stuff Megumin's mom said. . ." She had just gotten her nerve together when—

—there was a knock at our door. We were still standing in the foyer, where we had watched Yuiyui and Komekko leave. Thinking maybe Komekko had forgotten something, I opened the door to find a young girl with golden hair and blue eyes. She was about Komekko's age—but maybe a little smaller? She seemed familiar, though.

She looked at us uneasily, but then she spotted Darkness beside me.

"Mamaaaaaa!"

She cried out and grabbed ahold of Darkness.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up Volume 11! I think we're long past "nice to meet you," but once again, I'm Natsume Akatsuki, your writer(-ish).

For health reasons, I recently bought a standing speed bag and have come to dream of adding the title of "boxer" alongside that of "former author." For the moment, it's sitting in my room. I'm happy enough to have opened it. I haven't touched it yet, but by the time the next book comes out, expect me to be setting the boxing world on fire under the ring name Explosion Natsume.

And so, this volume. I wanted to try to get back to the early days, when the characters were flailing around a bit. What did you think?

I find that when I try to move the story forward, I get fewer gags, and when I try to emphasize the comedy, the story grinds to a halt. It's a real dilemma, and I spent my days rolling around on the floor in my room, wishing there was some way I could write a little better.

I think I'm finally starting to pick up some bits of foreshadowing that I planted in the past, and I hope you'll join me for the rest of the ride.

The second season of the anime has successfully concluded. My purely personal opinion is that it was fantastic, but I did feel like it went by in the blink of an eye. Maybe it's just because I was so busy with all the special stuff and everything.

I can only feel utter gratitude for the entire staff involved in the anime. If we ever get the chance, I would love to work together again.

I have that lonely feeling you get after a festival is over, but the *Konosuba* content isn't about to stop coming: We've got the game coming out, these novels obviously, not to mention the manga running in *Monthly Dragon Age* and *Monthly Comic Alive*, so there's plenty for you to enjoy!

Speaking of manga, I've decided to try my hand at an original serial, a series called *Kemono Michi* that's being published in *Monthly Shonen Ace*. It's a very mysterious story about a masked wrestler who loves living things and is called to another world, puts a German suplex on a princess, and finally opens a pet shop with a wolf girl, a freeloading vampire, a half-dragon girl, and an ant.

Okay, so maybe the summary doesn't make much sense. Don't worry—I don't understand it, either.

But anyway, the first volume of that series should be coming out about the time this book goes on sale, so if it sounds interesting to you, I urge you to pick it up.

Maybe you'll want to grab some of the many *Konosuba* spin-off comics while you're at it!

Okay, time for another round of gratitude, starting as always with my illustrator Kurone Mishima-sensei and including my editor S-san, my designer, proofer, salespeople, and everyone else involved in getting this book into your hands.

And speaking of your hands . . .

My deepest thanks goes out to all my readers who have picked up a copy of this book!

Natsume Akatsuki

AFTERWORD



THE DEMON-ish KOMEKKO AT PLAY...!

NEXO



Ohhh man, I gotta tell everybody!

I GOTTA TELL THE ENTIRE GUILD...!

Wait, Aqua, listen to me!



W-W-WELL, I GUESS IT'S PRACTICALLY A NOBLE'S DUTY TO HAVE CHILDREN EARLY!

Megumin, I can explain...! Please hear what I have to say!



Another fetish?
THIS ONE LOOKS LIKE BAD NEWS...

Th-th-that's
not what this is!



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

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