

KONOSUBA: GOD'S 13 BLESSING ON THIS WONDERFUL WORLD!

The
Lich's
Proposal



Natsume
Akatsuki

ILLUSTRATION BY
Kurone
Mishima



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13

NATSUME AKATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION BY
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NATSUME AKATSUKI

Translation by Kevin Steinbach

Cover art by Kurone Mishima

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CHOSENJO

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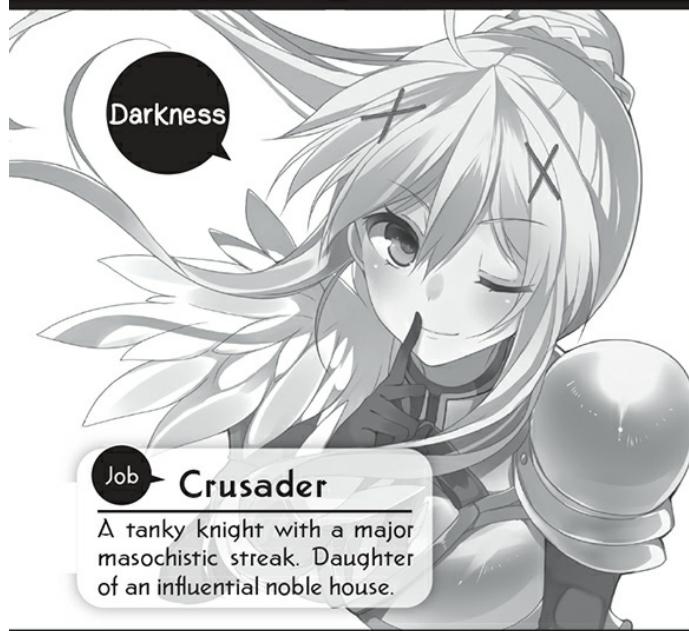
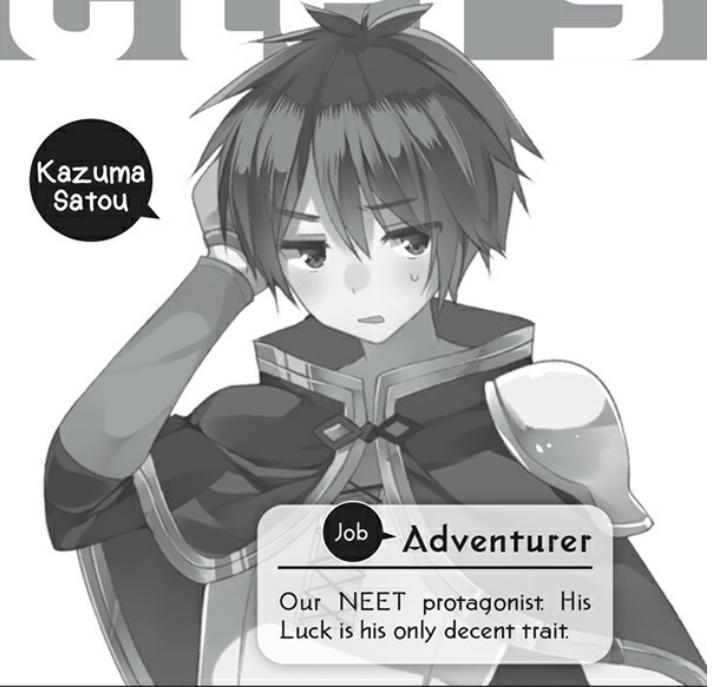
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Characters



Prologue



A voice, thick with irritation, resounded from the humble magic-item shop located on a back street in the town of Axel.

“O rarest of shopkeepers, with the unparalleled ability to turn everything she stocks into garbage! Perhaps I could ask you to explain this pile of junk before me.”

“‘Rare’? ‘Unparalleled’? Flatter me all you want, Vanir, but I’m not going to stop stocking these items.”

“O incompetent shopkeeper whom I am *not* flattering! Try, just try, to explain what is remotely beneficial about these things!”

Wiz, thoroughly intimidated by the agitated Vanir, held a stuffed toy defensively in front of her. “I got these plushies! And you know they have to be more than just cute, right? Guess what: When you register yourself as their owner, they follow you around on their own! If we give these to children, there’ll never be another lost child in the whole world!”

“I see. And what’s the downside?”

“Ah! Well, they follow you around even if you aren’t lost. I guess the worst that could happen is a kid bursting into tears when they try to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night or something!”

Vanir wordlessly marked an X on the stock sheet.

“Vanir, don’t you want to help those poor lost children?!”

“Are you so determined to traumatize the myriad children of the world who aren’t lost?!”

It was this very familiar sight that greeted us when we opened the shop door. Despite clearly feeling beaten down by Vanir, when Wiz spotted us, she mustered a smile as she said hello.

A small flower appeared before her, held out to her by Sylphina, the little girl who had been the beneficiary of so much help from the town's adventurers and other residents.

"Miss, thank you for all your help recently...!" she said with a shy smile.

Wiz looked right at her. "This is Wiz's Magical Item Shoppe. We strive to stock any and all things that can help our customers in need. If you're ever feeling unwell again or find yourself in any kind of trouble...stop by anytime!"

And then she gave the girl her kindest smile.

Chapter 1

God's Blessing on This Meeting with a Treasure Island!



1

A raucous voice boomed throughout the Adventurers Guild:

“Mamaaaa!”

“No noble could endure abuse like this and remain silent! I’m going to teach you a lesson here and now! You’re all dead!” Darkness, her face bright red, came swinging at the adventurer who had shouted “mama.”

He dodged her easily and replied, “Mama! Why you mad? Me hungee, Mama! Gimme milkrrrghhh!”

He was so preoccupied with teasing Darkness that she was able to grab him by the collar and borderline strangle him. A vein throbbed on her forehead, but she was also thrilled to finally have her hands on the guy.

And that’s when it happened.

“Stop right there, Darkness. Beating up the guests at a party isn’t very good etiquette, you know. Look how much fun everyone is having. Try to read the room, would you?” Aqua sounded completely composed.

Darkness let go of the guy who had been teasing her, defeated. “I c-can’t

believe *you* of all people are telling me to learn to read a room..."

Before Darkness had gotten over the shock, another adventurer, this time a woman, sauntered up, grinning. "Mama! I helped get the ingredients for that medicine, too! Where's my boob—? *Ow-ow-ow!*" she cried as Darkness grabbed her bodily by the chest.

"Your boobs are right here! I'm squeezing them with my famous strength!"

"Stop it, dear, sweet Lalatina! Stop, please! You'll tear them clean off!"

Darkness's daughter...er, I mean niece, Sylphina, had almost succumbed to an illness recently, until we adventurers banded together to find the ingredients for the medicine she needed. The drug really worked, though: In no time, she was out and about having picnics with us and stuff, and these days, she was feeling well enough to commute every morning to school from Darkness's family home.

Sylphina had decided she wanted to say thank you to all the adventurers. But when Darkness brought the little girl to the Guild, one adventurer had cheered upon seeing her, lifted his mug in celebration, and... Well, here we were.

"Everyone, knock off the boob talk! There's a child present! Be more considerate to poor Megumin!"

"You're the one who keeps broaching the subject, Aqua! And I'm not upset at all, so stop acting like I have some kind of complex about my chest size!"

The Guild had spontaneously turned into one big party, with people ordering rounds and toasting to Sylphina's recovery. And in the middle of it all, of course, was...

"Th-thank you very much, everyone. I'm better, thanks to all of you..." Sylphina was smiling and blushing, her voice so quiet, you could hardly hear her. But those who did catch her words of gratitude cheered for the umpteenth time that day.

"All right, everyone, it's Darkness's treat today, so drink up! Ooh, I'm feeling so good that I'm going to show you all my best party trick yet!"



“Urgh...these days, I feel like some people come to the Adventurers Guild just to tease me. Why is that?” Darkness groaned.

The friendly mockery and the cries of “Boobs! Boobs! Boobs!” continued unabated from the drunkards.

I stepped forward, determined to protect the humiliated Darkness...! “Listen up, you guys. That’s enough!”

The Guild went completely silent.

“K-Kazuma...” I could feel Darkness looking at me hopefully, and I set out to make one thing inescapably clear.

“These boobs belong to me!”

“Die!”

Darkness might have been strangling the life out of me, but at least Sylphina gave a nice, healthy smile.

2

My name is Kazuma Satou. Life has been pretty quiet for me lately. In fact, even though I came to this world because I wanted to try adventuring in an awesome fantasy land, I haven’t actually taken on an “adventure-y” quest since I got here.

But not long ago, I completed a really, truly upstanding-good-guy quest: I helped a sick little girl. I fought many fearsome foes to save the child, and then my friends and I all lived happily ever after. Not bad for a former shut-in. This might be a good time to start thinking about retiring...

Yeah, that was it. From here on out, I’d let the real heroes handle stuff, the people who got all the powerful items and skills and whatever. Me, I wasn’t the protagonist of this fantasy world. I figured my calling in life was more to pray for peace from the sidelines.

And so...

"Very good, sir. Just put your stamp or signature right here, please. Excellent! We'll make sure we bring you only the best ingredients! Thanks again!"

"Yeah, thanks a bunch! See you next time!"

...I resolved to live the most bourgeois, elegant, dissolute lifestyle I could manage.

"Hey, Kazuma. What'd you order?"

"Oh, curious, are ya? Heh, you might wanna take a seat for this. This is the one and only...dragon meat!"

Today was the day. I had just gotten a delivery from a merchant who dealt in the most exotic ingredients, and I was standing in the foyer, proudly displaying my prize to a curious-looking Darkness.

"Dragon meat?! What would possess you to purchase something so expensive?!"

The name wasn't just for effect. I had in my possession a prime cut from the strongest of monsters, the dragon. This was a super-expensive ingredient that would supposedly even raise your stats when you ate it.

"Don't insult me just because *you're* strapped for cash. It's not my fault you don't understand economics!"

"Say what?!" Darkness exclaimed, amazed to find me pointing an accusing finger at her.

"Listen up, Darkness. A guy who makes money hand over fist like I do should do more with his wealth than sit on it. Money's for spending! If all us rich folk just sat on our assets, the economy would come to a screeching halt. You should be *grateful* I bought this dragon meat." I couldn't be wrong about this. I had seen it on television somewhere.

"Y-you really think so? I was taught to be strong and tough, so I always figured I shouldn't indulge too much..."

Darkness was looking a little unsure of herself. I snapped my fingers impatiently. "Well, that's stupid. Why do you think nobles hold those fancy parties? When nobles spend as they please, the money circulates around the

town's commoners. When the commoners have money, merchants show up to take it from them. When a town has lots of merchants, life is easy, and rumors start spreading that it's a nice place to live, which attracts even more settlers. Then the population goes up, and *bam!* More taxes for the rich."

"Oh—! That makes perfect sense!" Darkness sounded downright impressed. Personally, I was just spouting something that sounded vaguely bourgeois. It seemed like the right thing to do now that I was nouveau riche and all. As for Darkness, she was actual nobility. Was it okay for her to be so gullible?

"Anyway, that's why I live the high life," I went on. "Plus, I'm genuinely interested in seeing if eating dragon meat improves my stats. I've been eating all the fancy food I can get my hands on to raise my level, but for some reason, my stats aren't improving. If I'm ever going to be ready to fight the Demon King's army, I need to use some of this cash I've got to power myself up."

"K-Kazuma...! You're thinking that far ahead...? If that's your plan, then I'll get my own family to chip in and buy you some more dragon meat!"

She was really, really gullible. Frankly, it was kind of disturbing how ready she was to assume an amateur like me knew what he was talking about.

"Well, uh, let's not go nuts here. Not to mention, I mean, I'd get sick of dragon meat eventually. It's not something you need to eat every day, you know? I just heard it was fancy and thought I'd try a little on a whim..."

"To think—you're even willing to eat dragon meat, with all its reputation for being tough and pungent, just so you can get stronger. I really misjudged you. I can't stand dragon meat, personally. I think it's disgusting... But don't worry. If this is about helping an adventurer get stronger, then I'm sure my father will understand...!"

Huh?

"Hey, what do you mean, dragon meat is tough and smelly? I thought anything this pricey would have to be delicious."

"Dragons are the world's strongest monsters, remember? They're pretty much all muscle and no fat, and carnivore meat tends to smell bad. The reason dragon meat is so expensive is because the stat boost a person gets from eating

it is supposed to be pretty significant.”

Huh?!

“Hey, uh, Megumin. Could I interest you in some expensive, fancy—?”

“Do you really think one who prides herself on being a member of the Crimson Magic Clan would need to consume dragon meat? You can keep it all to yourself, Kazuma,” Megumin said from where she lay on the carpet, giving Chomusuke a scratch on the back.

“Aqua, I know how much you love sharing fancy meals with me...”

“There wouldn’t really be any point to raising my already unbelievably high stats, so I’ll pass on the dragon meat. You’re such a puny shrimp; you’re the one who needs it anyway.” Aqua, kicking her feet where she lay on the sofa in the most unladylike manner, stabbed me right through the heart.

“Screw you! You’re *gonna* eat it! We can fill that empty head with dragon meat!”

“Whose head is empty, you jerk? Someone as brilliant as me doesn’t need your stupid dragon meat. Just look at this. Could someone with an empty head make *this*?!” Aqua proudly displayed the thing she had been working on as she hummed away over there. “It’s the second series of my clay figurines: Li’l Megumin with special exploding action. I’m pretty proud of this one. I think it’s going to sell really well.”

“Just a moment, Aqua. *That’s* what you were up to over there?! You’re far too attentive to detail! Just look under this skirt here!”

Aqua presented us with a 12:1 scale figurine of Megumin, so realistic that it could have competed with anything made on Earth. I’d seen her out in the front yard gathering clay first thing in the morning, and now she’d really come up with something somehow: It was a figure of Megumin wearing a dress, and if you flipped up the skirt, she was even wearing panties.

“What was I supposed to do? I don’t get enough allowance,” Aqua said. “That dumb demon told me he’d buy my stuff if I brought something he thought he could sell, so I decided to start making action figures of Axel’s adventurers.”

"Then make one of yourself! Hold on a second—you can even take the panties off this thing. Oh my God...!"

.....

"Um, can I have one of those, Aqua?"

"Sure, I'll even throw in a special discount just for you."

"I am going to wring both your necks! Aqua, hand that over to me! I know Kazuma gives you an allowance! What in the world do you do with it?"

Aqua fought valiantly to hold on to her figurine as Megumin tried to snatch it. As they struggled, Darkness asked hesitantly, "Hey, Aqua, I can't help wondering... You said something about this being your second series of figurines, right? Which would mean there was a first one..."

"My first clay figure was the pervy-pervy noble girl Ertina. I based it on that sexy negligee you've been wearing so often recently, Darkness, and believe me, it wasn't easy to make. But at least I could sell it for a pretty good price."

Almost before Aqua could finish, Darkness was already launching herself at her.

I would have to see if I could get Aqua to make another one of those pervy-pervy noble girl figures for me later.

That was when the door out of which Darkness had recently fled received a light knock and then gently opened. I looked over, thinking maybe she'd forgotten something, when I was greeted with:

"Um, i-is Megumin here?" It was Yunyun, standing there hesitantly—practically frozen, in fact—with an armful of fresh fruit.

"Here, have a little tea."

"Oh, thank you!"

Once Yunyun was safely seated on the sofa, Aqua prepared a hot beverage for her. Yunyun couldn't quite seem to settle down. Maybe visiting a friend's house would never feel natural for her. As thanks for the tea, she offered us the fruit she had brought along.

“I’m afraid it’s nothing much, but...”

“We’re touched by your gift,” Megumin said, inspecting the fruit critically. “But what is it that brings you here today?”

Yunyun took out a letter. “This arrived from our village...” She passed the letter to Megumin, and Aqua and I squeezed in on either side of her to read it. Yunyun, meanwhile, clasped in both hands the cup of tea Aqua had brought her but looked awfully worried about something. I glanced over to see that, as usual, it was just plain water in the cup. Maybe someday I would have to teach Aqua the right way to prepare tea.

Megumin seemed intent on reading the letter silently to herself, so I did us all the favor of reading it out loud. “O my most illustrious friends. The promised time has come. The moment for which we have honed ourselves, the time to show our sharpened fangs. Those who feel called, come ye to Crimson Magic Village within one month after receiving this letter...”

Well, it went on like that, but to summarize, the letter said that they were going to hold a test to determine the next chief of the Crimson Magic Clan, and anyone who wanted the job should come to the village. Megumin read the letter over, clenched her fist, and snorted. “I see. The fact that you brought me this letter means that I’ve been chosen as one of the potential candidates to be the next chief, yes? Very well, let us prepare to depart, Yunyun! I shall prove that I myself am fit to be the next leader of our people!”

“What?! You know that if you want to be part of the trials, you have to know advanced magic and Teleport at the very least, right? Besides, I don’t need to ‘prepare to depart’; I can just teleport there in the blink of an eye.”

Megumin gradually unclenched her fist. “Then...why did you bring me this letter?”

“I knew I had to at least show it to you. Otherwise, you’d only give me a hard time later, right? You’re my rival, so—Ow! S-stop that, Megumin! Don’t hit me just because you aren’t qualified to be part of the trials!”

Despite the fact that she was boxing Yunyun’s shoulders, Megumin gave me a suspiciously calm look. “Kazuma, it seems this girl has discharged whatever business she had here. Shall we begin preparing dinner?”

“Oh, good idea. Hey, Yunyun, it’s getting pretty late. Have dinner with us before you go. I mean, you brought us a gift and everything.”

Yunyun’s face lit up. “C-can I really?! But eating dinner together is practically like being family and I feel a little bad about that but also it’s my fault for showing up so late in the day and I’m really sorry Kazuma I just can’t help wondering if it’s really all right to impose on a friend for a meal when I was the one who dropped in so suddenly but then again believe me it’s not because I don’t think you’re a good cook or anything and I’m actually really happy you asked me...”

“That’s *enough*—it is just a meal! It is nothing to get so excited over!” Megumin said, cutting off the flood of words from Yunyun as I headed for the kitchen.

3

After that, I foisted my not-very-tasty dragon meat on Yunyun, and combined with Aqua’s so-called tea, I think she finally decided it had been a mistake to visit us and fled the house in tears. Anyway, that had all happened yesterday. I was just arriving at Wiz’s Magical Item Shoppe, with Aqua and Megumin in tow.

“Hey, Wiz, Vanir, you here? I wanna talk to—”

I pushed open the door of the shop as I spoke, only to be greeted with shouting.



“Why?! Why does it seem your mission in life is to never listen to a word I say?! I am the All-Seeing Demon! If you would only take my prophecies seriously and do as I tell you, you would never be in the red again! But instead, you are drawn to junk like a moth to a flame on a summer night!”

“If I only ever listened to you, Vanir, wouldn’t that basically make you the shopkeeper?! I want to work *with* you to make this shop thrive! We’re both immortal, so we have all the time we need, don’t we?! Besides, the things I got in stock today are most certainly not junk!”

It was Wiz and Vanir, arguing about something.

“It’s a little early for all this shouting, isn’t it? Did Wiz order something weird again?” I asked.

No sooner had Vanir seen me than he started in on the hard sell. “Ah, if it isn’t my favorite rich young man. I have something wonderful to offer you today! C-come, will you not let go of that junk?!”

Wiz, though, leaned protectively over the large box at her feet.

“Whatever it is, I don’t need it,” I said. “Looks like Darkness isn’t here yet. She said she was going to take Sylphina around town so she could say thanks to everyone who helped her.”

“One way to thank me would be to buy this worthless junk and get it off my hands. She is certainly a noble’s noble. Yesterday evening, she came and bought every single one of my Pervy-Pervy Noble Girl figurines for several times what I paid for them. Most decorous of her. But more to the point, O young man who has recently begun to get a good vibe going with his party members, I have a truly stupendous item to offer you. How about it?”

His last statement came as a whisper in my ear while Aqua and Megumin were busy checking out the box Wiz was trying to protect. Vanir slid a small bottle into my hand.

“If this turns out to be trash, I’m not buying it. Um, what *is* it anyway?”

“A contraceptive. Incidentally, the price is ten thousand eris apiece.”

.....

“Sold,” I said, surreptitiously passing him some cash so no one would see me.

“Thank you for your patronage! When a man drinks the potion, it will be effective for about a week. I can offer you special deals on some of my other products, like this highly effective vitality medicine or this incense that makes everyone feel a little friendlier when they smell it...”

“Done. I’ll take all of it.”

“Thank you very much indeed!!”

Megumin wandered over to me. “You look awfully red. What is it you have bought?”

“Just a few discreet little things to help my friends feel more comfortable. Because I value you all so highly, see. I wouldn’t want any of you to have to worry about any, you know, accidents.”

I kept my face as straight as possible. Megumin blushed. “First you help Sylphina, and now this... I wish you were always so considerate of your friends, Kazuma.”

“Oh yeah...” When she turned that innocent look on me, I tripped out the best response I could and tucked the little bottle away carefully. I wasn’t thinking anything *unseemly*. It was just on the off chance, you know?

And I hadn’t said anything particularly untrue.

That was when it happened.

The door of the shop came flying open, and something came bursting in. For a second, I thought Darkness had finally shown up, but I had never known her to make an entrance like this.

Just as I was looking over, I heard: “Vanir, sir, please help me!” The shout came from the dark form that had just flown through the door.

“*Sacred High Exorcism!*”

“Squuuaaaaawwwwkkkk!”

The penguin-like plush thing that had come racing into the shop took a full-on burst of Aqua’s purification magic.

“Ugh, what is this plush thing?” she said. “Hey, Kazuma, this penguin has the stench of a demon! And I hate things that are cute but smell bad!”

The penguin, which I thought looked oddly familiar, collapsed on the shop floor with a *floof*. It was a surprisingly light sound, revealing that whatever had been inside the penguin was no longer there.

“Y-you are one ruthless... That was that guy,” I said. “Count Whoever-It-Was, the demon we went to get the nail from for Sylphina’s medicine. Looks like he just kicked the bucket, though.”

“Oh, you mean that demon Darkness was bullying? I just fired off some magic because I had a bad feeling about him, and it looks like I was right. After everything you said about him, I had it on my to-do list to go and wipe him off the face of the planet.”

“Awww, Aqua, I wanted to be the one to get revenge for Darkness...!” Megumin complained.

Vanir, ignoring our conversation, stalked over to the penguin, sighing. Then he opened the zipper on the suit’s back ever so slightly and whispered something inside. The suit suddenly filled out and expanded...

“Huh?!” When Vanir closed the zipper again, the suit jumped up.

“Sacred High—”

“Oh, stop it already—you’ll blow him away again. Look, he’s terrified of you.”

The penguin suit was trying to hide next to one of the shelves, trembling visibly.

“V-V-Vanir, sir, c-could this violent, blue-haired woman possibly be—?”

“Indeed, she is the very archenemy of ours whom your prediction foresaw. The moment you entered this shop, she blew away all your remaining lives. Since I was right here, I managed to transfer some of my remaining lives to you, but if you ever encounter her when I am not present, it will be the end of you.”



That only caused the penguin to tremble harder. Aqua made some threatening shadowboxing motions in the penguin's direction.

"U-um, I don't recognize you, but are you an acquaintance of Vanir's? I'll bring out some tea for everyone," Wiz said, finally releasing her box.

"Oh, ahem, I have no need of food or drink, so don't mind me," the penguin said.

As Megumin and I enjoyed the tea Wiz so kindly provided for us, Vanir looked questioningly at the penguin. "So what brings you here today, Zeeleschilt? I must admit, I never expected a highly ranked (even if only barely so) demon such as yourself to be done in by a single blow. What happened to all the lives you had saved up?"

"Y-yes, about that... Truth be told, something terrible has happened..." Each time the penguin's eyes met Aqua's, she would strike an *I'm gonna blast you* pose, and he would flinch and look away again. "The goddess Eris has been coming to my castle almost every single day, attacking me and draining my lives away."

I spat out my tea. I knew Eris was no fan of demons, but what did she think she was doing? Did she have that much time to kill? Or was she paying him back for tormenting her good friend Darkness right in front of her eyes? We hadn't finished off the demon last time, when we broke into his castle—not out of the goodness of our hearts but because we had to prioritize getting Darkness first aid and bringing the medicine home.

"Hey, Kazuma, I feel a little bad for this penguin, being chased around by Eris. Not that I'm gonna go any easier on him."

"Aw, leave him be. He may not look like much, but I guess he's a big-shot noble in this country, and not *all* his policies are evil..."

Besides, yes, he had beaten up Darkness pretty good, but to be fair, he did it because we'd attacked him in an attempt to get one of his nails. It wasn't really his fault. Then again, if he wouldn't have turned down our nice, peaceful negotiations, we wouldn't have been forced to show up in the middle of the night and use violence.

Hang on...

Yes, we'd been dealing with a demon, but somehow, I couldn't shake the feeling that we were the ones who came out sounding truly evil.

Penguin Suit seemed to notice me whispering with Aqua. "You're the boy who was with Lady Dustiness, are you not? I wish you would put in a good word for me with your friend there. I'm one of the best demons. I feed only on embarrassment, humiliation, and a sense of inferiority. What's more, I have no idea how, but it seems you're an acquaintance of the goddess Eris. Please, please call her off..."

"Fraid there's only so much I can do. I don't know where she spends her time."

Okay, so there was one surefire way of meeting her, but then *my* remaining lives would decrease. And I only had the one.

"I see... I quite like that castle, but I suppose I shall have to give it up..." The penguin sat squarely down on the floor of the shop, his shoulders slumped, the picture of dejection. I couldn't help feeling a little bad for him.

"Tell us what you intend to do, then. I can't recommend you take up residence in this town, you understand? It's the territory of a mad dog who unleashes herself on all demons."

"I've heard there's a shop run by succubi in this town, and I came hoping they would hire me as both a gofer and a bodyguard. And should any customers with very particular preferences show up, I could accompany the succubi and obtain those particular negative vibes I most favor. I thought it would be an excellent place to lay low, but I see you disagree..."

"If I ever catch sight of you in this town, I'll exorcise you on the spot," Aqua said, pinning the penguin with a glare.

Whatever Aqua might have felt about the suit's occupant, the suit itself seemed to interest her and Megumin, who approached the penguin from either side.

"Aqua, did you know that this thing has a zipper on the back? I want to see inside."

“That’s a good idea—you can’t let yourself be fooled by its cute exterior. Hey, what’s with the flipper? Let us look inside, or I’ll purify you!”

“Stop that! Stop that right now!!” the penguin exclaimed, wrestling with Aqua and Megumin to keep them from undoing his zipper. Just then, there was a knock on the door. After a beat, the bell jingled, and the door opened.

“Wiz, Vanir, I’m coming in. I assume Kazuma’s told you by now, but I’m taking Sylphina around today to say...thank you... Huh?”

It was Darkness. Beside her, Sylphina hugged Darkness’s knees.

“Well, well, who should it be but Lady Dustiness, the one who recently invaded my castle and assaulted me rather extensively. Heh-heh-heh, I never imagined I would run into you again in a place like this...” Smiling incongruously, the penguin suit turned and began to shamble toward the startled Darkness when:

“Pbbbt.”

“Gyaaahhhhhhh!”

The moment Suit turned his back, Aqua unzipped the zipper just a little and blew into it. I guess even a goddess’s breath could damage a demon, because the suit gave a terrible scream and tumbled away.

“C-Count Zeeleschilt, what are you doing here?” Darkness asked, completely confused, but when Sylphina saw the tossing, shouting penguin suit, her eyes lit up.

“Listen, buddy, why don’t you just cut your losses and go home?” I said. “No one here’ll judge you for it.” I was starting to feel really bad for him.

“That’s easy to say, young man, but for your information, after having to leave my castle in the middle of the night like a fugitive, I am bereft of both money and any place to call home...” He sounded like he might cry. Was this really the same guy who had been practically a last boss back in the castle?

At that moment, I felt a tugging on my sleeve. “Young man, is that girl with Lady Dustiness the sick child of whom everyone speaks?” The penguin suit gave a surprisingly adorable cock of his head.

"Yeah, you got it. Her name is Sylphina, and she's Darkness's daughter."

"Stop that, Kazuma! Enough with the daughter busine—Oh, oh, I mean, yes, she's my daughter. You're my daughter, Sylphina, so please don't look at me like that..." Darkness was completely overcome by the despairing look Sylphina gave her.

Meanwhile, Penguin Suit was flapping his winglets busily. "Oh-ho, well, what matters is that you seem to be doing much better! Lady Dustiness, no need to look so alarmed. I recognize that it's the natural way of things for a Crusader like you to attack a demon like myself. There are no hard feelings about your assaulting me."

"I'm not sure I get it, but if you say so... But why'd you throw away your governorship, and what are you doing here?"

I explained the situation to Darkness.

"Kazuma... You said you run into Lady Eris when you die, right? Does she seem to have a lot of...free time to you?"

"Watch it, or you'll be next on the list for divine punishment. Anyway, I don't think it's about having too much time on her hands. I think she's getting revenge for you, maybe." Even if the other half of the trust was that she hunted demons for sport.

"G-gee, you think? But why would Lady Eris grace me with such favor? Well, whatever the reason, I can see I have been a bit unfair to Count Zeeleschilt. You might be a demon, Count, but it doesn't seem like you actually do that many terrible things..."

As Darkness tried to apologize, Sylphina was giving Penguin Suit a big hug. "Oh my," Suit said. "Governing was fun in its own way, but I was just thinking it was about time to try my hand at something new. Though if you're feeling softhearted, I would certainly be grateful, Lady Dustiness, were you to sponsor my residence here in Axel."

"Listen, you, don't get carried away just 'cause you saved one cute little girl. I guess I won't exorcise you right here and now, 'cause the kid's watching, and she seems to like you for some reason, but if we ever bump into each other on

some deserted street corner? *Bam. It's gonna get ugly.*"

Aqua was making it hard to tell which of them was the real demon. Suit cowered behind me even as Sylphina continued to hug him. Everything he'd done since he'd gotten here had been awfully cute, but speaking as someone who knew what he really was, I wasn't exactly comfortable with him getting anywhere near me.

Just then...

"Emergency quest! Emergency quest! Will all adventurers in town please gather at the Guild immediately?!"

Huh, I hadn't heard that announcement in a while. We all instinctively looked at one another.

"Just for the record, it wasn't me," I said.

"Kazuma, what are you looking at *me* for? I don't know what happened, either."

"I must say, I am unaware of anything myself. I have been completely respectful of the stipulated limits, usages, and locations for explosion magic."

Which had to mean...

"Hey, don't look at me! I don't have anything to do with any fights! Even that thing with the taxes the other day, the Guild came up with the whole idea...!"

As our collective gazes settled on Darkness, the Guild woman's announcement seemed to take on a hint of pleasure. *"I repeat. All adventurers in town, please gather at the Guild immediately!All adventurers, please!!"*

She sucked in a big breath.

"It's a Treasure Island!!"

At that, Vanir and Wiz went dashing out of the shop without so much as a sideways glance at me. All of a sudden, I realized Aqua was right behind them.

"Hey, can someone tell me what's going—? Geez, they're fast!" The three of them were already vanishing into the distance. "What the heck is with them?!"

Vanir and Aqua I get, but why'd even Wiz look like she was losing her mind?!"

"What are you saying, Kazuma?! It's a Treasure Island! It's right there in the name! Let's not dawdle here but go as well!" Megumin, her eyes gone red, hurried out of the store, too.

"Er, I've got Sylphina to worry about, so I think I'll stay here..." Darkness said, and Penguin Suit offered to watch the shop, so I left them behind and followed the others.

On my way to the Adventurers Guild, I spotted lots of other adventurers making a beeline for the gathering point. Most of them were wearing helmets or face masks and had big sacks over their shoulders and pickaxes in their hands. Finally, I ran into Aqua and the others. They were carrying pickaxes, too. Maybe the Guild was handing them out?

"Kazuma! I made sure to borrow one for you, too! C'mon—we're leaving. Hurry, hurry!" Aqua shoved a sack, pickax, and helmet at me while she talked. I guess there was something happening outside Axel.

"All right, I think it's time for someone to explain to me what the heck is going on! What's a Treasure Island? Between the name and the way all of you are acting, I'm assuming it must be a pretty solid quest." I followed after Aqua with my armload of equipment.

Megumin explained as she jogged alongside me: "A 'Treasure Island' is a slang term for a Genbu! It's a kind of big turtle, and one showed up right outside town! Genbu supposedly come to the surface once every ten years to dry out their shells. They live the rest of the time underground, so moss and mushrooms and nasty bugs grow all over them. Allegedly, they come to the surface to allow the sun to dry out everything that's accumulated, but no one is completely sure. What we can say is that the Genbu will be drying out its shell until sundown. They tend to live near mineral veins and eat rare gems, so they build up a layer of extremely valuable minerals on their shells!"

Huh, so that was why everyone was carrying pickaxes and running. They were hoping to dig up all the gems they could while this Genbu or whatever was busy drying itself out.

"So this giant turtle thing, it doesn't attack people when they try to mine stuff

from its shell? Heck, there's already a ton of adventurers around here. Won't all the good stuff be taken by the time we get there?"

"Treasure Islands are pretty docile. They won't attack you as long as you don't do anything stupid!" Aqua said. "And believe me, there's no danger of everything being mined out. You know why they call them Treasure *Islands*? Well...you'll get it when we see it. I've got a bigger question: Why are you even here, you freaky demon? Genbu are divine beasts, and divine beasts are the enemies of demons!"

"I am myself no fan of doing such a foolish thing! But this wastrel shopkeeper of mine went and ordered another slew of worthless items, and we are once again in the red! I'm worried about this month's rent...!"

"It's fine, Vanir! We might seem to be in the red now, but if we can just cultivate the stock, there'll be big profits in our future! So please, don't look at me so coldly; you're scaring me!"

I guess business wasn't going any better than usual. So a demon and a Lich were heading, pickaxes in hand, to do physical labor to help get their shop out of debt. This world sure was a rough place...

4

".....Unreal."

A small mountain sat before us. Maybe *small* wasn't the best word choice. Right there outside the town gate, a living creature so big, it would have been easy to mistake it for a mountain was just...sitting. I remembered how big the Tokyo Dome had looked to me when I was a kid. This was way, way bigger.

There was a huge hole in the ground nearby, probably where the creature had surfaced. Now the massive turtle, the Treasure Island, was lounging around on the ground.

Yep, definitely a creature that warranted the title "divine beast." Made it sound a lot more intimidating than *big critter that lies around eating and sleeping all day*.

The Treasure Island had its giant legs splayed out on the ground, its neck stretched luxuriously, and it was sound asleep. A bunch of adventurers were already on top of it, whacking at the rocklike shell with their pickaxes. The turtle didn't seem very upset that people were excavating its back; it was just lying there with its eyes shut, looking tranquil. Ropes hung from its shell, and adventurers scurried up them like rock climbers.

Now I understood what Aqua had meant. There was much more for the taking than could possibly run out in just a few hours.

"Let's get up there, Kazuma! We've only got until the sun sets! I'm gonna fill my bag to bursting!" Aqua grabbed one of the dangling ropes and started scaling the Treasure Island. Maybe everyone's purses were feeling a little light after the tax debacle the other day, because I saw grinning adventurers everywhere, pickaxing away.

I was already bourgeois, so to speak, but that didn't mean I would ignore free money right in front of my eyes. I didn't know how much these minerals might make me, but there was no reason for me not to get in on the action. "All right, let's give this a shot," I said, grabbing a rope and climbing up. On the way, I spotted some familiar faces. "Oh, it's Dust and the others. Didn't know they were here already."

I made sure my helmet was firmly on my head, and once I was on top of the turtle, I picked a spot and started swinging my pickax. Aqua and Wiz weren't wearing helmets; maybe they were afraid to mess up their hair. The pickax bit into the rock, scattering stones everywhere. What was the asking price for one of these things?

"...Hey, I dunno what one of these is worth, but I have to wonder: Is it really okay for us to make money *this* easily? Look, it's all adventurers around here. You'd think the townspeople would be out getting a piece of this." When I surveyed the sea, it was all colleagues of mine as far as the eye could see. But mining like this seemed like something my boss and friends from my construction job, the one I'd had right when I first came to this world, would have been really good at.

"That's because it's dangerous, obviously."

.....Huh?

That was when I heard someone yell. “Arrrgh! Bad luck! I hit some Rock Mimics!”

I looked in the direction of the shout to see an adventurer with a pickax in his hand confronting a pack of squirming octopus-like creatures.

“Yikes! What the hell are those?! Hey, this looks bad; we’d better go help—”

The creatures had bodies that blended into the rock all around. Hence Rock Mimics, I guess. But Aqua and Wiz, busy swinging their pickaxes as fast as they could, didn’t even look over at the guy.

“Forget him!” Aqua ordered. “Everyone here is some kind of adventurer or other! They’re all prepared to die at any moment! How dare you help them when they’re staring death in the face! It would be disrespectful to their professional commitment!”

“I absolutely agree!” Wiz said. “Even if you’re undone by your own lack of strength, to die on a quest is the dream of all adventurers! Besides... Besides, my debt...!!”

“I can’t believe you guys... You sound practically inhuman!” Come to think of it, I guess they *were*.

The guy being attacked by the Rock Mimics was screaming, “S-somebody help me, please!!”

“...He’s begging for help. You sure you can just ignore him, you self-proclaimed whatever?”

“Ahhh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! High-purity manatite! Flaretite, at that! I was concerned because I’d burned through my allowance, but that won’t be a problem anymore!”

I guess the self-proclaimed whatever was already done listening.

Unlike her, however, the Lich, usually considered to be one of humankind’s greatest enemies, showed that she hadn’t left her human heart *that* far behind.

“Urgh... I guess if we really need to make rent, I can swing it somehow by selling my body...! It’s all right! It won’t kill me—I can’t die...!!” Wiz, mumbling

something truly outrageous, put down her pickax and turned toward the guy being attacked by the Rock Mimics.

“H-hold on, Wiz—you keep digging! I’ll go help him!”

Sell her body?

Sell her body? But she is a—

Wiz, though, gave me a gossamer smile. “It’s all right, Kazuma. Liches’ nails and hair are made of concentrated magic power. If I bring a few of them to the Adventurers Guild as materials, they should net me a considerable profit...”

“G-geez, stop, stop already! *That’s* what you meant by selling your body? The point is, we want to beat those monsters and get back to digging as fast as possible, right? C’mon, Aqua, Megumin! The four of us together should make quick work of those things!”

The annoying part was, I’d come without any weapons or equipment today. I went along swinging my pickax, while Megumin came up beside me, brandishing whatever she had gotten out of the rocks. Apparently, even the Holy Whatever couldn’t ignore me when I specifically mentioned her: “Hrmgh, right when every second counts—but I guess there’s no choice! To think, a bunch of Rock Mimics, interfering with *my* work! They’ll pay!” Aqua shouted, then flung herself at the creatures, her pickax in her hand.

Motivated by sheer greed, she started pounding away at them. Only now, with enough money to be able to take a step back, did I understand what a terrifying visage that goddess’s smile was.

“Under most circumstances, it would make me vomit to lend a hand to the likes of *you*, but today and today only, I must make an exception! We will finish them off and move on to the next thing! Vanir Death Ray!”

As the goddess, delirious with combat, finished off one of the Rock Mimics, Vanir turned from where he was digging nearby and launched a black ray of light from his arms. It surrounded the group of Rock Mimics in a vile glow, then exploded, taking part of the nearby rock with it.

“Hey, you, why didn’t you do that in the first place?!”

"Oh, hush! I am not joking or putting on this day: For once, I am truly in danger when it comes to rent! Feel better now, O body-selling shopkeeper? Get back to work and help dig us out of debt!"

I was surprised to hear Vanir sounding panicked. He was usually so calm and collected; it was rare for him to act like this. The adventurer we'd helped was bowing madly to us. Ignoring my misgivings about Vanir, I got to digging.

About half a day later...

I'd gotten tired of digging early and gone down to wait by the town gate. Now Aqua and Megumin came up to me, their packs bulging. The fact was, my sack was plenty full of excellent gemstones itself.

It was getting toward sundown. The Treasure Island's back didn't look like one giant rock face anymore; its actual shell was showing through in places. It had a beautiful black sheen that didn't scratch even when someone hit it with a pickax.

I guess all the adventurers had dug until they'd gotten everything they wanted. Now they were all watching the shell-drying turtle from a safe distance. The turtle seemed to take a quick glance back at us standing by the town gate, almost like it was asking if we were all satisfied now. The way it looked at us left me with just one regret. There was still a giant lump of rock sticking up on the Treasure Island's back. If we could get it off there, the turtle's shell would shine clean and clear, I was sure.

The feeling I was experiencing right now was like when you stop cleaning a room halfway. "...Hey, Megumin, got a second?" I leaned down and whispered in her ear.

"...What?! You mean it?! Ahem, well, it is true that I haven't used Explosion yet today, and that as far as an opponent for my daily Explosion, this one leaves nothing to be desired..."

What was I suggesting Megumin should do? Surely, I don't have to spell it out...

"But are you certain it's all right? Treasure Islands are quite docile, but I think if you hit one with an explosion, you may well expect it to attack, no? Not to

mention, there is, if you will, an unspoken agreement that we won't make any attempts on the life of the Treasure Island..."

I assured Megumin it would be all right. "Nah, listen, this is just my intuition, but I don't think that thing will get mad. It might even appreciate it. Just do like I said and don't land a direct hit, and I think it should be fine. So go for it, Megumin."

With my encouragement, Megumin hesitantly began to prepare her magic. "I will not be held responsible for whatever happens, you understand? And you realize that even an Explosion professional like myself can have a slip of the hand, don't you?"

I thought you were an Arch-wizard. When did you become a professional exploder?

As all the other adventurers, filled with gratitude for the Treasure Island and its unexpected bounty, respectfully and quietly watched it prepare to go back underground, Megumin's incantation could be heard coming to its conclusion.

"Explooooooooooosion!!"

Light lanced away from Megumin and toward the Treasure Island, bursting in the air just above its shell. That last massive piece of rock clinging to the turtle's shell vaporized. A bunch of little gemstones, shaken loose from a few other places by the blast, came raining down. Either Megumin's aim was just that good or the Treasure Island was just that tough, because there wasn't so much as a crack on its shell.

Ignoring the murmuring crowd, the Treasure Island spared a glance toward Megumin, the unleasher of this magic, and me, standing beside her. Megumin shivered when it looked at us, but I just kept telling myself it would be all right and watched the turtle as impassively as I could. Even as I insisted to myself that everything would be fine, I was getting ready to run at any second if I had to.

The Treasure Island, which hadn't budged an inch all day, rose slowly to its feet as if it was just getting up from a nap and gave another great stretch. Then it crawled back into the hole it had come out of.

They say a Treasure Island emerges from underground only once every ten years in order to dry out its shell.

And I'm sure they're right. But there's no reason it should show up right near a town when it does, is there? What I heard was that Treasure Islands always pop up directly next to inhabited areas. You know, almost as if they *want* people to go mining on their backs. Maybe a Treasure Island's real goal is to get all that junk—I mean all those gemstones—off its back.

With its shell picked clean, the Treasure Island ambled back into its hole, never mind that the sun wasn't quite down yet. Just before it disappeared, the turtle looked back again at Megumin and me and gave a great shake of its huge body. The vibration shook loose the very last of the gems clinging to it, sending them flying into the air.

That seemed to do it for the Treasure Island: Looking somehow satisfied, it disappeared back underground.

I guess the divine beast was leaving us a parting gift. Megumin and I looked at each other, smiling ever so slightly. Working its way slowly back underground, the Treasure Island was a sight to behold. For possibly the first time since I'd come to this world, I found myself feeling like I had seen something truly worthy of a fantasy.

"Hey, Kazuma, that stuff is to thank Megumin for her Explosion, right? So that means all these gems belong to us, right?"

"W-with these gems, my debt and the rent would be...!"

My name is Kazuma Satou. And maybe the reason I can't seem to do any actual fantasy quests in this world has something to do with my party members.

Chapter 2

Divine Punishment for This Harem Protagonist!



1

“Kazuma, Kazuma! I’ve got a little favor to ask...”

It was the next morning. I’d had a late breakfast and was savoring a cup of coffee when Aqua showed up with something that looked like a shovel across her shoulders for some reason.

“What is it? If you’re angling for more allowance, I’m telling you right now that you won’t get it. I already gave you your money for the month. Plus, you should be rolling in dough from all those gemstones we got from the Treasure Island yesterday.”

“I’m not here to beg for money. The favor I’m talking about is that I want you to lend me your strength as an Adventurer.”

My strength as an Adventurer?

“First thing in the morning and this already sounds like trouble. What exactly are you facing? I’ve made up my mind: I’m going to live out my days enjoying an elegant, *quiet*, bourgeois lifestyle. I’m not interested in any dangerous foes. If

you want to go beat up some undead somewhere or settle things with a demon, post a quest with the Guild.”

“I’m not talking about monster slaying. I’m just as eager to lead an elegant, bourgeois lifestyle as you are, you know.”

I always knew we thought alike. If Aqua hadn’t felt compelled to do something stupid at every turn, if we could just hang out together, we would probably have loads of fun.

“Just come out to the front yard, all right? I need your super-amazing power, O Most Awesome Kazuma.”

“Can’t say I get it, but if it’s not too dangerous, then fine. I’ll show you the true power I have lying dormant within me.” I flexed demonstratively as Aqua and I headed to the yard.

“*Pyoing!*”

“...Huh, you really never grow a bit, do you?”

Outside, Chomusuke was basking in the sun, with Emperor Zel stuck right next to her. Maybe she was nice and warm, and he didn’t want to move. I could tell Chomusuke was growing bit by bit, but for some reason, this chick never got any bigger. I’d heard that the more magic someone had, the slower they grew, and I wondered if that had something to do with it.

Even our little black fur ball, who had been so scared of Emperor Zel at first, was starting to let down her guard and warm up to him. I had my heart set on turning Zel into fried chicken when he grew up, but I would feel bad breaking up a friendship like this.

I stood there, enjoying the sight of the two innocent buddies, but Aqua tugged on my sleeve. “You see the field over there? I need you to use your strength to spread some nice, nutrient-rich soil there.”

“.....You want me, with my practically hero-grade strength, to make a garden?”

Aqua pointed to where Megumin, wearing her only dress and a straw hat, was sweating away with a spade that was lying on the ground.

"Geez, even Megumin is in on it? What are you two doing, starting a vegetable garden?"

"Ah, Kazuma, so you're finally up. Observe this fine field. Once we fill it with magically generated soil, it will surely yield excellent vegetables." Megumin, sounding a bit like an old lady from the countryside, picked up a pinch of soil from the ground and smiled. "This house has such a nice, large yard that I have been thinking for some time that I would like to make a garden. Vegetables are expensive, you know. This will help with our household finances, plus we will be able to eat fresh vegetables whenever we wish. I shall make a delicious vegetable curry for you, Kazuma."

"Um, that's great and all, but...are you sure a couple of novices should be growing vegetables? Won't they attack you like those cabbages did?" Aqua and Megumin both refused to look at me. "Hey, you can't just go raising whatever kind of vegetables here. I'll bet you need a permit or something! Come to think of it, where's Darkness?! She's our politics person. You were trying to set up this garden before she got back, weren't you?"

"Calm down, Kazuma," Aqua said. "It's true you need certain, um, qualifications to raise vegetables, but there's a special exception for high-level adventurers making home gardens. And we are high-level. So you see, I don't think there should be any problems."

"She is right. My own level has recently surpassed 40. I certainly believe I should be allowed a vegetable patch."

When had their levels gotten so high...? Adventurer was supposed to be the easiest class to level up, but somehow, I was the only one in the party who hadn't cracked level 20 yet.

"I admit I'm a little surprised that Megumin's come so far, but anyway, that's the story. We want you to produce some high-quality soil for us, Kazuma. I know you've figured out how to use *Create Earth* to blind opponents and make mud to annoy people and stuff, but you've never used it for the one thing it was meant for: creating soil, right?"

"Now that you mention it, that does ring a bell. All right, fine: *Create Earth!*" I used my magic to sprinkle soil in the field they had marked out in the front

yard. Aqua and Megumin followed behind me, scattering seeds.

"Hey, I'm just curious, but what kind of seeds are those?" I asked, a little apprehensive.

Aqua looked at me as if she couldn't imagine what I was worried about and said, "Mustard seed, potatoes, radishes, peppers, anchovies, and spinach. An old farmer told us those were the best things to plant this time of year."

.....

"...Uh, I think one of those things isn't like the others."

"I know what you're thinking. It's almost winter, and some of those are summer vegetables. But listen, Kazuma—this isn't Japan, you understand? The vegetables here are full of life, and they'll be just fine, winter or no winter."

Not what I meant. One of those things wasn't even a vegetable.

"...Ahhh, how nice to have finished our planting. Now we need only water them regularly, give them the occasional massage, and by the time winter rolls around, we shall have a lovely harvest."

"Hey, did you say 'massage'? I thought we were raising vegetables, not livestock."

Aqua, looking very pleased with herself, ignored this latest in my series of quips. "We stuck with beginner vegetables this year, but starting next year, we're gonna tackle some really tough stuff!"

"That is true—next year, we're thinking of cabbages, tomatoes, and maybe mandrakes."

"Hold the hell up! Did you just say 'mandrakes'?! You said 'mandrakes,' didn't you?!"

Mandrakes were really dangerous plants: They emitted a screech when you pulled them out of the ground that would kill anyone who heard it.

While we were busy planting, someone had shown up at our front door. This person walked back and forth in front of the door, almost knocking, then not, reconsidering, until finally...

“Why in the world would you come all the way to someone’s front door just to turn around and go home?!”

“M-Megumin?! What are you doing over there?!”

It was Yunyun. She had just given up on the idea of knocking and had turned around to leave, so she was pretty surprised. “I was thinking how it had hardly been a few days since I sort of showed up out of the blue and forced myself on you last time, and I felt kind of bad about that, and I was thinking, maybe I should wait a few more days...”



“If you have time to kill, you are more than welcome to come every single day as far as we are concerned. Why must you be so neurotic about it every time you show up?! But anyway, I assume you have a reason you’re here?”

Yunyun (who had some sort of candy or treat in her hand, maybe as a gift) said, “E-every day? Are you sure? You really won’t get sick of me if I show up all the time? I can’t help but notice how conversation suddenly halts every time I stop by...”

“It’s not *because* you show up; it’s this attitude of yours! Whatever you came here for, hurry and spit it out!”

Yunyun, trembling a little in the face of Megumin’s preposterously short temper, said, “W-well, actually, it’s about the Chief’s Trials I mentioned the other day...”

And then the whole story came out.

“So let me see if I’ve got this straight. The trial to become chief of the Crimson Magic Clan demands that you bring a partner and face the challenge together.”

“That’s right. In the old days, I gather there were a lot of pairings of a Crimson Magic wizard, who could hold the back row, with a fighter-adventurer from outside the village who could handle the front. But, um... Well, you know how strong members of our clan can be. Two Crimson Magickers together don’t really have to worry about front and back row; they can just annihilate everything in their path and pass the trial.”

Ah, the Crimson Magic Clan. Ever subtle.

Even if it seemed like the obvious outcome of that plot arc was for the two wizards to finally fall in love.

Megumin, who had been listening intently to Yunyun’s story, heaved a sigh. “Let me guess. Unable to find anyone else to partner with, you have come to beg me to help. Huh, I suppose I have little choice. Very well, for this cause, I shall share with you my immense power!” She beamed proudly, looking quite pleased, but...

“Huh? No way, Megumin—you wouldn’t be any help even if you did come

with me. You'd have one good shot in you, and then you'd just be in the way, right? There are three separate trials."

Megumin froze. That was uncommonly cold from Yunyun.

"Believe me, I absolutely know where you're coming from," I said. "But in that case, why *are* you here?"

"W-well..." Yunyun looked nervous, but she clenched her fists where they rested on her knees. "I tried asking someone who might be able to handle the front row, a friend... Well, not a very good one... But anyway, this adventurer I know. But he was all, 'Buh? Me, I just hit the jackpot on a Treasure Island, and I don't have to work for who knows how long. Though if you could introduce me to one of those busty Crimson Magic chicks, I might not *not* think about it...' It was just the worst!"

"I dunno who you're talking about, but he sounds like real trash. I wouldn't hang around with that sort of guy. People will think you're just like him."

"Not really. He's only ever in one place, or anyway, he's usually at this one shop..." Yunyun appeared troubled for a moment, but then she turned a look of determination on me. "Ahem! Kazuma, sir! Will you go to Crimson Magic Village and undertake the Chief's Trials with—? Ow, ow, ow! Stop that, Megumin! What are you doing?!"

Megumin, who had been looking angrier with every word Yunyun said, was pulling fervently on Yunyun's braids.

"What am *I* doing?! What are *you* doing, trying to take advantage of our dear Kazuma every time you show up?! Surely, there is no need for Kazuma to get involved! I myself should be more than enough to meet the challenge of the Chief's Trials!" She grabbed her staff from where it was resting nearby as she spoke.

"Megumin, I hate to say it, but I'm really afraid you're going to cause more problems than you solve..."

"For someone who is normally so hesitant to speak her mind, you certainly know how to spell it out on occasion!" Megumin's eyes were burning red from agitation as she turned to me. "A high-level Crimson Magic wizard like myself is

far more capable in combat than a low-level vanguard. My manatite staff and I can blow away any monster we might encounter! So you stay here, Kazuma, and I will see you when we return!"

And so Megumin, who had been on the cusp of abandoning her very identity as a wizard, flourished her staff, ready to go.

2

"All right, I will be leaving now. Try not to do anything too stupid while I'm gone, okay?"

"Listen, you, you seem to be laboring under a misimpression lately that you're the only one with any sense around here. But believe you me, I think the biggest problem child in this whole city might not be Aqua. It might be you."

It was the next morning. Megumin, completely ignoring her own shortcomings, turned her worried expression on Darkness. "Darkness, while I'm gone, it will be up to you to keep these two in check. Other than your insatiable lust, you seem pretty grounded. So please keep an eye on them to make sure that Aqua doesn't do anything too ridiculous and Kazuma doesn't get himself killed."

"Wh-what do you mean, my 'insatiable lust'? You'd better watch out that your notoriously short temper doesn't lead you to pick a fight with every person in town. But yes, I'll keep an eye on Kazuma. To make sure he doesn't go wandering off after every pretty face who walks by, I mean."

Hmm, for some reason it seemed like the general level of trust in me was pretty low.

"As far as women, it is you who worries me the most, Darkness... But very well. We all know from experience that the two of you choke when you try to cross that final frontier. Aqua, I'm counting on you to make sure nothing unseemly happens between these two."

"Got it. They're a little young for kids yet anyway. If I hear any moaning or whatever, I'll be sure to remind them to use contraceptives."

"You haven't 'got it' at all! Just don't leave the two of them alone together!"

I was starting to wonder what Megumin really thought of me. "Hey, I do have my integrity. Heck, I had the chance to two-time you, but I turned Darkness down flat."

"Come to think of it, that is true. You did reject her outright. I apologize; I will have a little more faith in you, Kazuma."

".....How about you both come out to the garden, and I'll set you straight," Darkness said, clearly enraged, but Megumin ignored her and waved to me.

"Very well then, I am on my way to breeze through those trials of Crimson Magic Village or whatever they are. Everyone play nice while I'm gone!"

And then, with a smile, she left...

"Okay, now that Megumin's gone, let's decide chore duty. She said she might be back in just a few days at the quickest, but that's no reason to take chances," I said. With Megumin out of the house, the rest of us would have to decide how things were going to be around here.

"I'm getting really tired of doing nothing but cleaning toilets. Let me cook or something."

"Nah, half our ingredients would go to waste with you handling them, Aqua. Having every one of our soups turn to plain water wouldn't be very efficient." *Hmmmm.* "All right, tell you what—I'll do the cooking. Darkness's cooking is average at best, and we can't let Aqua into the kitchen. Darkness, you take over cleaning the house, and, Aqua, you're on toilet and bath duty."

"W-wait, what do you mean, 'average at best'? I did learn the basics of meal preparation..."

"I told you, I'm sick of doing toilets all the time! Besides, it doesn't seem fair that you only have to cook! We have a new chore in this house: helping in the garden. You should at least do some of that!"

Suddenly, Darkness had something better to do than object to my division of the household labor. "Did you say 'garden'? Aqua, hold on—I haven't heard anything about this! Did you make a garden in our yard?! You know

nonprofessionals aren't allowed to do farmwork!"

"You know, Darkness, for someone who looks so smart, you sure can be dumb. It turns out there's an exception to the no-farming rule for high-level adventurers! Just look at my Adventurer's Card. See what I'm talking about? You should help out, too! Then we can all share the delicious vegetables!"

Aqua proudly displayed her card to Darkness, then grabbed a sickle (I assume it was some sort of farm equipment) and headed outside.

"Wait, Aqua! I have a really bad feeling about this! Please don't try to grow vegetables at home! This can only lead to our vegetables causing trouble for everyone!"

That was something you wouldn't really hear back in Japan. I mostly tuned out Aqua and Darkness as I grabbed the newspaper that had been shoved through the mail slot, and I sat down on the sofa to relax with it.

"Hmm...?" No sooner had I opened the paper than I noticed a disturbing headline.

DEMON KING'S ARMY ON THE MOVE. IS HIS DWINDLING NUMBER OF GENERALS MAKING HIM NERVOUS?

"Dwindling number of generals"? We definitely had something to do with that. But what was this about him being on the move? As things currently stood, I was pretty sure I was at the top of his shit list...

Me, personally, I just wanted to live my nice, quiet, bourgeois lifestyle. I understood why the Demon King and his army might be concerned about me, but I really wanted nothing more than to just leave them alone. "Gotta admit, though, trouble always seems to find me... Yeesh, it's hard work being a hero." I let out a sigh and noticed Chomusuke staring at me. I sort of regretted that someone had heard what I'd just said, even if it was only a cat. I blushed and tried to nonchalantly turn the page...

"...Hngh?!"

The very next page of the newspaper had my own name right on it.

Now I remembered: Back when we had been living at the castle and knocking

out generals of the Demon King's army right and left, Megumin and I had gone to the newspaper publisher to insist they do a special article on us. The power of the Crimson Magic Clan and the authority of the Dustiness house had worked in our favor, and I guess the article had just been published.

"Oh-ho! CONQUEROR OF BOUNTY HEADS AND GENERALS: THE MYSTERIES OF KAZUMA SATOU, STRONGEST MAN OF THE WEAKEST CLASS. Hey, Chomusuke, look at this. This is called a newspaper. When you get your name in this, it means you're a really big deal. Hey, you little brat, don't claw up my paper!" I snatched the cat away before she could shred my article, setting her on my knees and then returning to my paper.

They'd written a pretty extensive rundown of our party. They started with how I'd made my base of operations in Axel, then characterized me as a mysterious adventurer who, despite being of the weakest class, had managed to take down quite a few major bounty heads and generals of the Demon King. I possessed a wide variety of skills, the article explained, and was personally close to both the royal family and the Crimson Magic Clan. Blessed with wealth, power, intelligence, strength, and luck, I was *the* adventurer to watch, the article said.

"Aqua! Aqua! C'mere—you've gotta see...this... Huh? Wait a second..."

I thought better about calling Aqua in from her argument with Darkness in the garden when I saw what else was in the article. Much as I wanted to brag about what they'd written about me, I wasn't the only one they had mentioned.

But Kazuma Satou is hardly the only amazing member of this party, the article went on. Consider the lovely young woman who is their Arch-wizard, capable of wielding Explosion, the most powerful offensive magic any human being can use; the gorgeous noblewoman and Crusader Lady Dustiness, of a noble line known for their durability; and the mysterious blue-haired beauty of an Arch-priest who completes their number...

It was all too clear who they meant by that.

Okay, okay, I liked the optics of the piece. They'd written some genuinely complimentary things about me.

Their Crusader handles front-row duties with her immense defensive abilities,

with their Arch-wizard providing the firepower and presumably a quick means of escape with the Teleport spell. They're backed up by that most uncommon of things, the all-capable Arch-priest... Meanwhile, the Adventurer supports them wherever and however he can. A wonderfully balanced party...

"Hrm," I said. "Not sure I like where this is going."

The rest of the article described Megumin, Darkness, and Aqua in loving detail but hardly mentioned my exploits. I guess that's what always happens to idea men and generals. I mean, I understood, but it was still, I dunno, kind of disappointing somehow...

I decided I wouldn't let anyone else see today's paper, lest they spend the rest of their time lording it over me.

But still...

"Just please, guys, don't come all the way out to this nowhere hamlet. If you leave me alone, I swear I won't come looking for trouble..." I mumbled, staring again at the headline: **DEMON KING'S ARMY ON THE MOVE.**

Aqua had finished working in our makeshift garden, and we had all eaten lunch.

"We're going to hunt something!" Aqua exclaimed, suddenly very excited, a bit of sauce still clinging to the corner of her mouth. What had come over her? Don't tell me the Treasure Island the other day had opened her eyes to the joy of adventuring or something.

"That's fine by me—monster hunting is an adventurer's bread and butter. But can we really do it alone? Wouldn't it be just as well to wait until Megumin comes back?" Darkness said, sipping her tea elegantly.

"That's just it! We've got Megumin. Don't get me wrong—that's a good thing, all right? But I was just thinking. Megumin is the one who finishes off most of the monsters, so the rest of us don't get to level up. Ahem, granted, I'm so perfect, my stats won't go up even if I gain more levels, but as the face of our group, I'm concerned it won't look good if I'm not the highest-leveled member."

"I don't know when you became 'the face of our group,' but I have to admit, I wouldn't mind leveling up a bit," I said. Heck, somewhere along the line,

everyone else had reached level 20-or 30-something. I was eating all the experience-rich food I could get my hands on. What was with the gap?

“Darkness and I go out to keep the cemetery clear once in a while, but stray ghosts just aren’t doing it for me. I don’t earn a shred of XP from them. So I was thinking, I want to power-level while Megumin is away. Won’t she be surprised when she gets home?!”

“I think she might be so surprised to learn we went hunting without her that things could turn violent... But I guess she is doing those Crimson Magic Trials or whatever, and I agree, I don’t think the gap between party members’ levels should get any wider than it already is.” Darkness was thinking pretty hard, but whether you came at it in terms of level, class, or stats, I was the lowest on the totem pole. Still...

“I’m all for closing the gaps while Megumin’s out. But how are we going to raise our levels? Only the person who finishes off a monster gets the XP, right? Neither of you has any way to attack anything.” Darkness could try to attack, but her hits never landed, while Aqua’s abilities only really worked on undead and demons.

Aqua, though, snorted in response to my question. “Don’t worry—I’ve thought it all through. Just leave everything to me!”

And then she smiled broadly, inspiring no confidence in me at all.

3

Aqua peeked out from a side alley somewhere in Axel.

“...There it is,” she said. “Everyone ready?”

Here I’d thought she was planning to go outside town to hunt some monsters, but Aqua had been thinking of something closer to home.

“H-hold on, Aqua—you can’t be serious...!” Darkness, fully armored and apparently under the same misimpression I had been, whispered urgently.

“First I’ll launch a quick attack to pin them down. Then, Kazuma, you come in

with your Bind skill! Then, when they can't move, we all get in there and finish them off!"

"G-geez, and you call yourself a cleric..." I whispered.

Maybe it was because she *was* a cleric. That's right—the opponents she had in mind were...

"Hmm? Ah, Lady Dustiness, what a surprise meeting you and your friends here."

"God Blow!"

The penguin suit walked over to us holding a broom (I guess he'd been sweeping), only to eat the cleric equivalent of a knuckle sandwich and go down hard. From the muffled noise the suit made as it hit the ground, I assumed it was empty again.

"Hey, Penguin Suit, hang in there! Vanir, are you around?! Your buddy got all his lives beaten out of him again!" I shouted.

Vanir came rushing from the shop. "You twice-accursed and thrice-damned woman, are you not satisfied unless you harass me every single day?!"

"Bringing this stupid penguin back to life costs you some of your extra lives, right? It's like I'm getting a two-for-one deal. Let's pit my inexhaustible holy power, gained from the devoted prayers of all my faithful disciples, against your thirty-eris-for-a-pile lives and see which runs out first!"

As Vanir breathed into the suit's back, trying to resurrect him, Darkness came up to restrain Aqua. "Aqua, don't tell me the way you planned to raise your level was—"

"To beat the crap out of this guy, obviously. He's so weak, I can take him out in a single hit, but when I purified him, I got a whole level out of it. He's a fountain of experience points, the perfect way to get stronger!"

"Pyeek!" the newly resurrected Penguin Suit squawked.

"H-here's some tea," the suit said nervously, offering Aqua a cup now that she had barged into Wiz's shop. The ends of his winglets, which had been patched with mismatched bits of cloth, trembled visibly. I assumed the patches covered

the places Chris had stabbed him earlier. It was like every time I ran into him, I felt guiltier and guiltier.

Aqua took the tea from Penguin Suit and sipped daintily. Then she said, "... You've got some nerve, serving me hot water and trying to pass it off as tea."

"Whaaa—?! No, I swear it was tea when I made it...! A-allow me to try again!"

"Argh, there's no need for you to make her any tea at all, Zeeleschilt! She's only messing with you!"

Threatened by Aqua on the one hand and berated by his boss on the other, Suit's shoulders slumped as he came over to me. "Young man, I may be a demon, but even my spirit can break. Please allow me to tell you my troubles..."

"I really think you oughta get out of this town while you still can. I won't blame you."

While I was trying to comfort Suit, Darkness looked around the shop. "Come to think of it, I don't see Wiz anywhere. Is she out?"

"After I forced that insane shopkeeper to work for a week straight without a moment's sleep, she began saying strange things about sensing a challenger or some such. Given that the Treasure Island the other day bought us some breathing room, and I was actually starting to feel somewhat bad, I decided to let her have a rest."

I kind of thought Wiz was a lost cause in any case.

"Anyway, boy, what is it that brings you all here today?"

"""Oh!"""

Vanir's prompting caused us to remember Aqua's quest to level up...

Avoiding the penguin's blank stare, I grabbed Aqua and Darkness and retreated to a corner of the shop, where we held a whispered conference.

"Hey, are you really planning to beat that guy up so you can get levels? The Crimson Magic Clansfolk told me of their practice called farming, where you have powerful friends get a monster on death's doorstep, and then a weaker person finishes it off to gain the experience. I feel as bad about this as I did about that."

Aqua: "You can't trust that adorable exterior. But when I think about it, it does kind of make my heart ache to hear him scream and cry over and over. I was behind this idea at first, but even I'm now starting to have second thoughts."

Darkness: "Why don't we just go raise our levels the normal way? I know Megumin isn't here, but we're no weaklings. This is a perfect opportunity. Normally, Megumin just blows up everything we see the moment we see it, and then we go back home."

Huh... Just a normal monster hunt, with this group? When I thought about it, I realized that even though Aqua and Megumin and I had partied up together before, Darkness and Aqua and I had never tackled anything with just the three of us.

"All right, let's take this chance to practice a bit so we can get some things done even when Megumin's spent all her magic and can't move," I said. The others nodded. This was starting to sound like an adventure.

4

After some badgering by Vanir about what we were really there for, some purifying by the short-tempered Aqua, and so on and so forth, we finally got out of town and into the field.

"All right, frogs! Time for a little ribbit revenge!"

"No way! Frogs are the one thing I don't want to see out here! It's like those things were designed just to make my life miserable!" Aqua was the only one to object. I guess she had some lingering trauma from her experience so long ago—and as a result, we were kind of stuck for what monsters to fight.

"But, Aqua, with our strength, those frogs would be the most efficient thing to hunt... Don't worry—they won't be able to eat me as long as I'm wearing my armor. So at least you can rest assured the party won't be *completely* annihilated."

"That only means the frogs are *definitely* going to come after me! I am

capable of learning, you know, and I've learned this is going to end with me in a frog's mouth!"

I hated to admit it, but she actually had learned a thing or two recently. Her Intelligence stat wasn't supposed to increase even if her level went up, so maybe this was a little bit of genuine maturity creeping in? It made me so happy to think she might be growing up a little that I decided to play along with her. "All right. Let's pick a different monster. How about we check out the forest off in the distance? There should be lots of monsters getting ready to hibernate, so they'll be out and about looking for food. When we get to those woods, it'll be like a monster buffet."

"Nuh-uh. There are lots of bug monsters in those woods. And I'm sure they'll come right for me, drawn by the wonderfully sweet aroma I give off." Aqua sounded a bit like a worried plant, but I guess she wasn't exactly wrong.

Darkness considered for a moment, then clapped her hands. "How about this, then? You remember the alligators in that lake you purified, right? After you ruined their home, they must have moved to a swamp or something. They can't have gone too far. So let's finish what we started with that quest and—"

"Not happening. I know how this is going to go. We'll get to that swamp, and then you'll tell me to purify the water to draw out the crocodiles, right? And when I do, they'll come straight for me. No way am I going anywhere like that!"

.....

"Listen, you. I can see you're wimping out on us here. You're all upset now that you can see it's not going to be as easy as just beating up that penguin suit."

"Oh, boo-hoo, you noticed. If you're willing to say that out loud, it means you're losing interest, too, right, Kazuma? Then let's call it a day for now and pick up some nice ingredients for soup on our way home."

I couldn't say Aqua's idea was unappealing, but Darkness grabbed ahold of her, and I started barking orders. "All right, frogs it is. Darkness, you draw a few out from over there."

"Got it. I'll leave the attacking to you. Of course, even I could probably hit

something that big every once in a while. Just you watch me.”

Only every once in a while?

“Nooooooooo! Why?! How?! This isn’t the Kazuma I know! When I think of a nice, easy idea, the Kazuma I know would be all, *Yeah, sounds good to me*, and come right around!”

“W-watch it! You can’t assume I’ll be a lazy good-for-nothing forever! I told you, I can do a job when I really want to! Anyway, just shut up and come with us!”

Aqua struggled and cried while I looked around the area. “You’ve been acting really weird lately, Kazuma!” she said. “You’re like some longtime NEET shut-in who works up his courage and gets his first job, and then someone gives him a half compliment, and he gets the idea that he can do it if he really tries. But he’s wrong! Wrong, I say! Where are you getting this baseless confidence?! Is it because Darkness gave you a little kiss?! Do you think that makes you an adult now?!”

“G-geez, shut up, Aqua, and forget all about that. I’m begging you!” Darkness said. “And don’t you keep glancing at me like that! Argh, Kazuma, I don’t see any frogs!” Darkness was starting to tremble, probably from the memory of the fact that she’d given me a kiss right in front of everyone. I wouldn’t say Aqua’s deduction was completely wrong, but there was another reason I was brimming with confidence.

That special article from the newspaper this morning.

Would the awesome Kazuma from that article give up and go home just because things weren’t as easy as he expected? How could I hold my head up in front of the Satou fans all over the country, let alone the other Satous still laboring away in Japan?

I took out my bow. “Okay, Darkness, I’ll start by using my dynamite-like stuff to scare some frogs up from underground. Then you use Decoy to draw them to you. They’ll come quickly, but they should give up trying to eat you when they realize you’re wearing metal armor. By the time they shift their attention to Aqua and me, I’ll have a bead on them and be ready to finish them off.”

Darkness practically grinned. “R-right...! I don’t know what’s up with you today, but you really are full of confidence! You’re like some virgin who works up his courage and goes into an adult establishment for the first time, then receives the watered-down compliment that he’s actually not half-bad, and he gets the idea that he can do it if he really tries—”

“Shaddup already! What’s with you two? Is it so wrong for a guy to have a little confidence?! Damn it all, I don’t care if Megumin isn’t here to baby me—I’ll show you a guy who can do it if he tries! *Kind!!!!e!*”

I pulled out my dynamite stuff and flung it as hard as I could. I never would have gotten away with using this item if Megumin had been here, but I had kept making them even though she had insisted I get rid of them. My homemade fuses still lit somewhat erratically, so I used Kindle to make sure the thing caught fire. Aqua pressed her hands over her ears and squeezed her eyes shut.

There was a pop of an explosion in the field outside Axel. At the same moment, the ground quaked, and a very familiar life-form appeared.

“Perfect! Here they come, Kazuma, the...frogs...?”

Yeah, they were frogs, sure enough. But not just a couple of them.

“Uh, Kazuma, why are there so many?! And what are we going to do about all of them coming this way?!” Aqua cried, with Darkness still holding her by the arm.

How the hell should I know...?!

“I told you! I *told* you! I said no frogs! I promise you, these frogs were created by demons to oppose the beautiful goddess that is me! Waaaaaaaahhhh, this is why I said we should go hoooome!”

“Shut up! If you don’t want to die, then stop crying and start dropping some buffs! Why are there so damn many of them anyway? Don’t tell me your bad luck is acting up again!”

The frogs must have been hungrier than usual, because they made an absolute beeline for us.

That seemed to give Darkness an idea. “Kazuma, I think this has to do with the

Treasure Island! They were hiding underground because they were afraid of the Genbu's magic power. It's a divine beast, remember? It was so powerful, they wouldn't come out even though they were hungry. But then your magic item gave them a fright and brought them all to the surface again."

That got Aqua going. "Apologize! Apologize for trying to blame this on my bad luck! This is all your fault this time, so take responsibility and do something about it!"

"Even I didn't think one little stick of dynamite was going to make things this bad! But I am sorry for doubting you! I apologize, so let's just get eaten together! Darkness ought to survive; she can come back to save us!"

"Noooooooooooooo! I'm so sick of getting slimy! I'm so sick of getting covered in fiiiiilth!"

"Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Come at me!" I stared down the oncoming horde of frogs. And for the first time since recruiting the members of this party, I felt like a real man.

5

"Sniff...snorrrkkk... I don't wanna go outside anymore... I don't want to leave the house all winter..." Aqua, dripping slime, was trudging along the carpet. I was pretty desperate for a bath myself, but I decided to let her go first today. Why? Well, as soon as Darkness had rescued her from the first frog, she got eaten by a second.

I wasn't sure why they had gone after Aqua when Darkness had rescued us both at the same time. I thought maybe her all-around bad luck had something to do with it, but then again, maybe there was something to her talk of frogs being the enemies of goddesses.

I took Aqua's hand as she trundled along and led her to the bath. "C'mon—I'll heat up the water for you so you can hop on in. I'll go after you."

"Hrk... *Sniff...* This was all because of your stupid dynamite, Kazuma, but now that you're being so nice to me, I have to forgive you, and I hate it..." Aqua was

still sniffling, but she let me lead her over to the tub, where I used magic to make the water nice and hot.

While Aqua cleaned herself up, I, still slimy, waited for Darkness, who had gone to report our frog hunt to the Guild.

“I’m back.” Darkness, the one member of our group who had been safe thanks to the frogs’ aversion to metal armor, was watching me from the doorway, where she stood with the money from our reward and from the sale of the frog meat.

“Awesome. If you want a bath, you’ll have to wait your turn. I’ve got dibs on it after Aqua, okay? ...Hey, why are you looking at me like that?”

“O-oh, it’s nothing. I just noticed that you guys are always getting eaten, and I can’t help imagining what it feels like...”

Ah. I’d wondered where her masochistic streak had gone recently.

“Oh, hey, Darkness, welcome back. Kazuma, I’m done with the tub. Don’t let any of the water get in your mouth, okay? I purified it, and I’m pretty sure it’s nice and clean, but if there’s any leftover frog juice in there, you could get a very upset stomach.” Aqua, fresh out of the bath, was in her pajamas and bare feet.

“What do you take me for, you slime-brained idiot? I’m still covered in goo, so if you don’t want to have to take *another* bath, you’d better apologize to me.”

“I’m sorry, Kazuma! I don’t wanna get slimy anymore, so please forgive me!”

Satisfied with Aqua’s desperate kowtowing, I went to take my bath.

It wouldn’t have been very relaxing to take a bath covered in frog slime, so I rinsed myself off as best I could first. When I had finally gotten all the gunk off me, I settled into the tub and breathed a sigh. It felt like it had been a long day, but when I thought about it, Megumin hadn’t even been gone on her trip a whole day yet. I would have thought things would get a lot easier with one problem child out of my life for a while, so why did I feel so spent?

That was when I thought I sensed someone just outside the bathing area.

“Hey, Kazuma, I’m so tired tonight, I don’t need dinner. I’m going to grab

some wine and snacks instead, okay?”

“Just a second. ‘Snacks’ doesn’t mean my precious caviar, does it? I got that stuff when I was at the castle, from that weird butler who was willing to put anything I asked for in my soup!”

My objection didn’t stop Aqua, though, who left the bath area humming. For a second, I considered chasing after her buck naked, but she wasn’t the only one who was tired. I closed my eyes and sank up to my shoulders in the water...

I didn’t know how long I had been asleep. When I woke up, the lamp had burned low, and it was dark outside. The bathwater had gone tepid, meaning I’d been in there for a long while. Just went to show how tired I was, I guess. And...

“I guess it proves how much help Megumin really is, too.”

Even with all the frogs that had been after us today, if Megumin had been there, she would have taken every single one of them out in one shot.

When I thought about it, I realized it was just like with Darkness: The first time I really appreciated her was when she had been about to become Alderp’s wife. Which made me wonder, could it be that when it came to Aqua, who right now I thought of as doing nothing but stealing my precious snacks and bringing trouble on me...

“No, uh-uh. No way!”

I announced to the dim bathing area. Okay, so maybe I could at least be grateful for her healing magic. And actually, she was really good at beating demons and undead. And the way she could bring me back to life as long as my body was still intact, it wouldn’t be unfair to call that a cheat ability...

“Nah. If I hadn’t brought Aqua along, I could’ve gotten some actual divine item or real power, and then I wouldn’t have had to die in the first place...”

Maybe I would just keep all this to myself for now. If I said any of it, she would probably burst into tears again. Besides, at this point, a nice, ridiculous life in this world seemed...

Not so bad.

It happened just as I was having that thought. I heard the door to the bathing area open.

The lamp light was out, and it was dark inside; of course someone would assume there was no one here. But Aqua had already taken her bath, and Megumin was back in her village. Which had to mean...

I heard a rustling of cloth and thought back to that day long ago. The first night I had asked a succubus to come over, I'd gotten in the bath like this. In fact, the situation was pretty much identical. The lamp had spontaneously gone out, and I'd fallen asleep in the water. Back then, I'd thought I was dreaming, but today, I knew for sure I was awake.

I saw a pale silhouette against the glass door that divided the changing area from the bath. It was exactly like it had been back then. The glass door opened, and there was Darkness standing there. She was larger in certain places than I remembered. Our eyes happened to meet immediately.

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeeekkkk!”

A high-pitched scream echoed through the bath.

“Ugh, what were you thinking?! And why were *you* the one who screamed and not me? Everything about this seems wrong!” Darkness, who had rushed up beside me after I cried out, was trying to cover my mouth and talking fast.

That's right: I was the one who had screamed. Me.

I pried Darkness's hands off my mouth and said: “I'm not going to be treated like a sexual harasser just because I got a lucky peep! You know, I don't think a woman has the right to be upset at a guy if his getting a look at her was pretty much an act of God! Tell me I'm wrong. I was here first, wasn't I? If our genders were reversed, *you* would be the pervert here! So why is the guy always the villain? You're out of order! This whole freakin' world is out of order!”

“G-geez, okay! I'm not saying you did anything wrong! I wasn't going to blame you for this or anything—”

Darkness was trying to say something, but I interrupted her. “And another thing! How come a guy can be convicted of being a pervert based solely on a woman's word? That's where the trouble starts! Say we're on a train together,

and you cop a feel of my butt! If I was to be all, *Help! Perv!* would anyone listen to me?!"

"Wait, why would I...? Cop a what? And what's a train?"

I got angrier and angrier as I blathered on. Yeah, it was the world that was wrong. If they were gonna crow about gender equality and stuff, then male and female perverts should both be guilty based solely on the victim's testimony!

"If I was the prime minister, I would arrest male and female pervs equally! And there wouldn't be any false accusations on my watch! I'd make sure there were security cameras in every train car, and anyone making a BS accusation would be punished to the fullest extent of the law, man or woman!"

"O-okay! Yes! Good idea! Just please calm down a little! Think about what will happen if Aqua shows up! But I don't have the slightest idea what you've been talking about!" Darkness, looking like she might just be about to burst into tears, put a shushing finger to her lips, but did I care? No!

"There would only be one exception," I went on. "If the perv lady was gorgeous, then she would be considered innocent as long as the victim didn't press charges! Just wait until I get back to Earth! I'll run for office on this platform...!"

And that was when I registered Darkness's body. She was naked, pretty much, except for a bikini-like swimsuit. She had a big towel wrapped around her, and in her hand was a smaller cloth for washing someone's back.



She must have noticed me staring, because she went red up to her ears, looked absolutely humiliated, and said, in a voice as small as a fly:

“I... I thought maybe I’d wash your back...”

6

A wet sound echoed around the bath area.

“Oh... Hgggh...!”

“Kazuma...”

It felt very different in there from our usual relaxed day-to-day.

“D-Darkness... Do over here next...”

“Y-yeah, okay... But, Kazuma, uh...” Darkness, who was still blushing and having a little trouble getting the words out, sounded even more confused than usual, too.

“*Pant, pant...* Darkness, I’m—I’m gonna—!”

“I can’t do it, Kazuma. I can’t take it anymore...!” And with that lurid exclamation, Darkness said...

“Why do you have to make all this noise when I’m just washing your back?! You make it sound like we’re doing the dirtiest thing in the world!”

The nice, fluffy towel that had been rubbing my back came flying at my head. I took it and started to wipe the front of my body. “Gee, I wish it was that easy. Don’t forget that the last time you washed my back, I thought it was a dream. It didn’t feel real!”

Looking back on it now, I sort of regretted it. Because I’d been convinced it was a dream, I thought I could have the same fantasy anytime I wanted, and I had been eager to hurry along to the next part.

“Frankly, I’m frightened that you thought this was a dream. It only means that you dream about ordering me around,” Darkness said as she ran some more warm water over my back, washing the bubbles away.

"Why shouldn't I? It's *my* dream. Hey, you know what? A woman I really respect once said that in your dreams, no matter how twisted, image-use rights and regulations don't apply."

"Who told you something as stupid as that?!" Darkness demanded, dumping water over my head. "I swear, I get more and more suspicious of your friends every day. Which 'woman you really respect' told you this? I haven't heard anything about her."

"Someone better than you in every way, from humanity to attractiveness."

"That's not the sort of thing you say to a woman when you're alone with her!"

It would be silly to compare Darkness to this person. This other person was even contributing to helping keep the crime rate low in Axel by bringing lonely adventurers a night's sweet dreams to make them feel better: my dear, wonderful succubus.

"By the way, what's with the special benefits all of a sudden? Don't tell me you're angling for more pocket money like Aqua? How much do I have to pay to get this kind of treatment?"

"When someone works up her nerve to do something special for you, don't dismiss it as 'benefits.' This is one way of thanking you for helping out Sylphina. I already thanked Megumin and Aqua and Vanir and Wiz and all the other adventurers, but I hadn't properly expressed my gratitude to you yet, Kazuma..." Then Darkness turned red. As if to snap herself out of it, she dumped some cold water out of the bucket by her feet.

"Yikes, that's cold! If you're gonna dump cold water on yourself, don't do it right next to me! Unlike certain masochists, I'm not a fan of very hot or very cold things!"

"You know, not everything I do is about masochism! You need to stop saying stuff that casts other people in the worst possible light!" Darkness said, looking at the floor in embarrassment before she came around in front of me.

"H-hey, are you serious? Just how far does this gratitude of yours go? Am I gonna have to pay extra?"

"All you need to do is be quiet! Argh, just make sure your towel is wrapped

good and tight, okay? Now, listen, I'm not pretending like Aqua. I'll do the front, too, so don't move!" Darkness started scrubbing my chest, even though she couldn't bring herself to actually look at my body.

"I get it; I've known you just as long as you've known me. I know perfectly well you're secretly happy to be doing this."

"You don't 'get it' at all! Just sit still already!" I guess my quips weren't reaching her. Darkness poured more warm water over me. "Sigh... I was nervous coming here, and now I really look like an idiot... Hey, I said don't move! You're doing that on purpose! You *want* me to look, don't you?!"

That really sounded portentous, and it gave me a thought. "Don't tell me you mean to stop here. You're saying you came in here dressed like that, two beautiful young people alone together, and it's going to end with a little scrubbing?"

"Hrk?! B-but I thought you and Megumin were—" Darkness looked very confused.

"That's right—we are!" I said. "Megumin and I have a good vibe going! But hey, are you really satisfied with standing by and watching? Can you live with that?! Didn't you tell me you cared more about me than you thought you did?!"

"Y-yeah, I mean... I guess I did, but..."

"It made me happy to hear that," I said, and Darkness gulped.

"W-well..."

"I was glad you would say something like that to me. And I cracked; I turned you down. But men can be a lot of trouble, you know. It would be kind of pathetic to give up completely just because a guy shot you down once. But then, it's the same with women, huh?"

Darkness gulped again, louder this time. "Y-you mean it's not Megumin you want; it's m-m-me...?"

"Oh heck, I'm not saying that. I'm a guy who finishes what he starts. Once I get into a relationship like that, I wouldn't just flip over to some other woman or two-time anyone or something like that. I consider loyalty and faithfulness

two of my guiding principles in life.”

Darkness made a sort of stupefied sound and looked at me with wide eyes. “Uh, but, but you chose Megumin, but the way things are going here, we’ll end up doing something we shouldn’t, but...?” She sounded thoroughly confused.

“Was that too hard for you to follow? Then how about this: I want to be a faithful man. But I do sympathize with your intense adoration and even desperate love for me.”

“I don’t think I ever described what I felt for you as ‘desperate love’... Erm, never mind...” I silenced Darkness with a glance before she could say something really outrageous.

“So here’s the deal: I resist adultery as wrong. I resist it firmly, but when you come in lust-crazed, with your higher level and superior stats, there’s really not much I can do. But because I do care about my party members, no matter what you do to me, I’ll never be able to hate you...”

“Y-y-y-y-y-you! Those nicknames everyone has for you, Trash-zuma and Kaz-scum-a or whatever they are, don’t go far enough! I don’t know what Megumin sees in a man like you!” Darkness was very agitated.

“H-hey, watch it! You’re talking about the guy *you* fell in love with, you know! Listen, no healthy young male could resist a girl throwing herself at him the way you do! In fact, you should be proud of me for managing not to cross that final frontier yet!”

“*Proud* of you? You moron! Forget it—this was stupid of me! I feel sick! I’m leaving! You can finish up by yourself!”

What a terribly salacious thing for such a refined young noble to say!

“Oh? So you’re just gonna leave without even washing my front? Where’d all that gratitude go? You always insult me for being incompetent or whatever, but you’re the one who doesn’t know what she’s doing! ‘House Dustiness never backs down,’ my foot! Don’t ever say cool stuff like that again! You hear me?”

Darkness’s eyebrows rose dangerously at that. “Fine, I’ll do it! But I’m only going to wash you! Nothing more, okay? I’m not so easy that you can get to me just by provoking me like that!”

"Yeah, whatever, just do it! If you have the guts, that is! Aqua's probably eating her way through my entire stash of expensive snacks, and Megumin's back at Crimson Magic Village. So there's no one to stop us! No convenient interlopers like the other times!"

Darkness grabbed the towel and started wiping violently, as if she was angry.

"Hey, that hurts! If you're here to express gratitude, then be gentle about it!"

"When the guy insists on needling me about every little thing, then I want to get it over with as quickly as possible!"

Maybe her anger was a way of hiding her embarrassment, because Darkness's face was bright red, but her eyes seemed glued to one particular part of me...

"Can't you do something about that?! I can't ignore the way the towel pokes up there!"

"This is just Sleight of Hand. We beat those frogs, remember? My level went up, and I used the points to get this skill."

"I've never seen such a stupid skill! It's not even a party trick! I swear, you make no sense to me... You're a complete mismatch for our sweet, straight-shooting Megumin. You need to break up with her!"

What a thing to say!

"Well, unfortunately for you, Megumin is head over heels for me! No way am I gonna listen to your dumb suggestions. I'm going to go get Megumin to be all nice to me instead!"

"Gods, you're almost *bracingly* awful! ...Okay, I get it. I see now what I should have done all along." Darkness smiled, looking really relieved for some reason. "I'll just cook up a compromising situation for us and then tell Megumin. I'll show her what a worthless degenerate you are, how vulnerable you are to temptation. If she genuinely hates you, then it won't hurt her to give you up. And when you can't be swayed by me anymore, then I'll acknowledge that you're right for Megumin!" And then she suddenly threw herself on top of me!

This was the most diabolical thing...!

"I-I've got Megumin...! I won't let you carry out this evil plan! Grrr, get your

hands off me!"

"You yell and shout, but if you really wanted to fight me, you would use your skills! You're not entirely unhappy about this, are you? Now, how about we try something *new* together...?!"

It happened right then, when Darkness was sounding her most villainous.

"Such as what, exactly?"

The voice was level, cold...and it belonged to Megumin. Darkness and I, tangled up in each other and both virtually naked, looked over...

And there she was, standing in the doorway, her eyes bright red and a look of thorough exasperation on her face.

Before Darkness could say anything, I blurted:

"Help! She came into the bath and attacked me!"

"Y-y-you stinking son of a—! I always knew you were the very worst man in the world!"

I cried for Megumin to help me.

Chapter 3

Salvation for This Stalking Victim!



1

“And just then, Darkness was like, ‘...I can’t help it; I really do like you...’ ”

“Eep!”

“A-and what happened then? What happened?! Oh, Kazuma, what did you say to her?!”

“I’ll tell you what I said. I said, ‘I have Megumin already. So I’m sorry, but you have to give up on me...’ ”

“Eeeeeeeeek!”

“Just a *second*! You and Megumin are an item?! Oh, Kazuma, were you always this popular?!”

After the party to celebrate Sylphina’s recovery, I had some time to kill, so I decided to head to the Adventurers Guild to hang out, where I was regaling some adventurers I knew with tales of my explosive popularity with the opposite sex.

“Well, it’s only natural. After all, I have defeated lots of powerful opponents, and they even wrote a newspaper article about me the other day! Have a look

at *this*, ladies!” And then I proudly displayed to the two female adventurers the newspaper I’d been carrying around.

Live a quiet, humble life? Pfft. I *had* beaten some genuinely tough enemies, and I didn’t see anything wrong with letting people admire me for it.

When the girls saw the article with my name, though, they gave me quizzical looks. “Hey, this paper is published in the capital, right?”

“Why are you in there, Kazuma?”

I’d been expecting more showers of praise, not puzzled questions about my article.

“What’s with the weird looks, you two? Are you worried I’ll go away somewhere now that I’m famous? Well, never fear—I won’t leave this town behind. You and me, we’ll stay friends just like we always have been...”

“Nah, we’re not worried about that.”

“Yeah, not even thinking about it.”

Wow, that took a turn in a hurry.

“What is it, then? You jealous that I’m in the newspaper and you’re not?”

The girls looked at each other. “You know it’ll put a bull’s-eye on your back for other adventurers who want to be famous, right?”

Yet again, I felt something dangerous coming on.

“So that’s what some adventurer friends told me, but it’s okay, isn’t it? I’m not going to be attacked or whatever, am I? I mean, to just jump out at someone, that would be a crime, right?”

We were in the living room of my mansion. Darkness had the newspaper clipping in her hand, and she was trembling. She seemed bothered somehow that I had leaned on the authority of her household to put pressure on the newspaper publisher.

“Wh-why, you...! You threatened someone with my name again, and for something so stupid...! Megumin, where are you going?! Lecture Kazuma with me!”

Megumin, holding Chomusuke in her arms, was trying to make an escape to the second floor. Meanwhile, Aqua looked at the newspaper clipping and then tugged on my sleeve.

“Kazuma, Kazuma, can I have this clipping, please? Here, look here—they wrote about a mysterious blue-haired beauty of an Arch-priest.”

“No way! This article talks about me, too, and I want to keep it. See how it describes me as the strongest of the weakest? It makes a guy’s edgelord heart sing. Anyway, Darkness, it’s fine, right? Public safety is great in this town; if any adventurers get to making too much trouble, the police are right on them, yeah?”

Darkness, still restraining Megumin, heaved a sigh. “The Adventurers Guild permits duels between adventurers. Remember when you fought that guy with the enchanted sword? Well, anyway, I guess even if the worst should happen, as long as Aqua is here...”

“Then it’s okay if I just drop dead?! Screw you!”

This country has laws about the weirdest little things, so what’s with the giant loopholes?!

Megumin, with Darkness still holding her by the collar, suddenly smiled reassuringly. “Goodness, there is no need for concern, Kazuma. Even if some adventurer should challenge you, I shall drive them away. So please do your bragging with complete peace of mind.”

“Don’t get too soft with this guy, Megumin! I’ve been thinking lately. You’ve been wildly overprotective! I want to know what happened between you two!” Darkness was getting more and more agitated, but Megumin turned on her, her eyes blazing red. “What happened, you ask? Are you sure you wish to pose such a question?”

“Huh?” Darkness was temporarily cowed by Megumin’s sudden show of force and let go of her collar.

“If I seem overprotective! It is because a certain *girl!* Saw an opportunity! And veritably devoured the lips of a man she knew had the attention of someone else!”

“‘D-devoured’?! Megumin, you make it sound so sordid...!” Darkness said, backing away.

Megumin looked up at her. “I thought you were just a poor, sheltered princess, so I decided to give you a chance to find closure on your feelings! And yet, not content with expressing how you feel, last night you had to try to have your way with someone else’s man with that sexy body of yours!”

“I—I w-wasn’t *having* anything...! Come on, Kazuma—say something to her!”

Personally, I was more interested in that remark about “someone else’s man.” Had I gained a new rank somewhere along the line? Gone from being more than friends and less than lovers to Megumin’s “man”?

The catfight was just getting good when Aqua slammed her fist down on the table. “You’ve changed, Kazuma. You aren’t the virgin NEET I knew and relied on! When did you fall to the position of harem protagonist?”

Some of us might say that was moving up the ladder, not down.

“Now, listen, Aqua, and listen good. There is no such thing as plain friendship between a man and a woman. And even if there were, eventually at least one of them is going to start noticing the other as a member of the opposite sex, and it’ll drive them to distraction. And if there’s a strong, reliable, economically established man with a bright future around, like me? Oh yeah. I knew this would happen from the start.” I leaned back on the couch, languorously stroking Chomusuke, who had jumped out of Megumin’s arms.

“You sound as strange as ever, Kazuma. But what’s even weirder is that I’ve been with you all this time, but for some reason, you don’t ‘distract’ me at all.”

“Funny, I was thinking the same thing. My heart beats a little faster any time I’m around a woman...but that doesn’t happen with you.”

.....

Aqua and I both struck our most threatening poses and closed the distance to each other.

“And another thing: the way you dress around the house these days, Darkness! The clothing you wear leaves so little to the imagination! Even a night

worker would blush after seeing you; are you that desperate for Kazuma to pay attention to you? You want him to see you, don't you? Like how when you get out of the bath, you always happen to wander right past him for no good reason!" Next to Aqua and me, Megumin was scolding Darkness for her provocative pajamas. Now that I thought about it, it did seem like Darkness had been getting teasingly close to me a lot lately.

"I-I-I-I'm not—! It's just hot these days!"

"It's almost winter!"

Was this, like...? Darkness had talked about giving up on me and had left me with just a kiss the other day, but was she really trying to get my attention after all?

"To display *these* so prominently! You know Kazuma is weak-willed, and you must stop trying to tempt him like a siren!"

"I'm not trying to tempt any—Ow, ow, ow! Megumin, don't grab them so hard! You're going to tear my pajamas, and then there really will be trouble!"

.....

"Hah! An opening!"

"Guh!"

With my attention momentarily arrested by Darkness, Aqua came in with a low-altitude dropkick. She landed it right in my stomach, and I doubled over.

"Take that, Harem NEET!" she exclaimed.

I'm gonna kill her!

I couldn't talk through the pain, but Chomusuke came over and looked at me. Then she shifted her attention toward one of the mansion's windows and started staring outside, not moving.

"I wonder what's wrong with her," Aqua said. "If she wants to go out, she normally scratches at the window and meows, but she's not even moving right now."

"Owww... Maybe she saw something she shouldn't? Like a ghost?" I said,

finally recovering from the pain.

Aqua pattered over to the window and looked out, where she exclaimed: "Hey! A stray ghost from the town is fumbling around! I've been cleaning out that communal cemetery just like I'm supposed to, so what's that thing doing here?!"

At that, I, along with Megumin and Darkness, their argument temporarily suspended, looked at Aqua.

"...Hey, don't assume this is my fault just because there are some ghosts out there. I didn't have anything to do with it this time! They don't actually look like stray ghosts. I think this one's been summoned!"

Summoned? But only the ultrarare Advanced Class Necromancers could do that, or maybe the "King of the Undead," a Lich. And there were no Necromancers in town right now. Which meant...

Aqua met my eyes and nodded as if to say she understood. "We let our guard down because she serves us tea and snacks every time we show up at her shop, but it turns out a Lich is still a Lich! I already took my bath and got into my jammies for tonight, so I don't want to go out, but first thing tomorrow morning, we're going to deal with this!"

Geez, just go now.

2

The next morning. As a favor to Aqua, who had been begging for fish recently, Megumin had agreed to do her daily explosion over at the lake and recruited Darkness as her piggyback person; they left early in the morning. I guess she was getting a little tired of doing all her explosions over the water. But anyway, that left Aqua and me to go to Wiz's shop.

"Comin' through!" Aqua, uncommonly excited, punched open the door with a *slam* and barged into the store.

Vanir was waiting for us. "O loser woman who is very noisy so early in the morning. What in the world has brought you to this shop? I am quite busy right

now. Please save your silly little games for later.”

“I’m here to give Wiz a piece of my mind for neglecting her duty to keep the town’s ghosts in check. Now, where is she? And what exactly do you mean by ‘loser woman’? If it means *most high and beautiful Lady Aqua*, then I might be able to see my way to praying that when your extra lives hit zero, you at least get reborn as a paramecium.”

“The expression refers to a woman who has missed out, who is such a lightweight that even the young harem man is not interested in her... S-stop that! I am more than happy to stand against you any time you wish to attack me, but don’t change my stock into water!”

And there they went fighting again, but the one person we had come to see wasn’t here.

“Hey, Vanir,” I said, “where *is* Wiz? We do need to talk to her.”

“If you’re looking for my prodigal shopkeeper, she went off somewhere yesterday evening and hasn’t come back. I have never sensed there to be a man around her. A good night with some guy somewhere might be a nice change of pace for her.”

“Wait, you must be kidding! She always looks so sweet and innocent! First Kazuma, now her—why is everyone so horny?!”

I was just feeling bad for Wiz having to endure this slander when she wasn’t here to defend herself when the floor of the shop started to glow. I looked at it curiously and saw a magic circle forming. And then someone appeared in the light...

“Vanir, help me, please!”

It was Wiz. She had used Teleport to get here, I assumed.

“*Turn Undead!*”

“Heeeeek!”

Aqua’s purification ambush got a scream out of Wiz, who turned partially transparent.

“What the hell are you doing?! Look at what’s happening to Wiz!”

“Calm down, you nosy NEET. This is just a little punishment for releasing those ghosts.”

How did that work exactly?

“O promiscuous shopkeeper, where have you been wandering that you were out until this hour? It was you who said we had a delivery coming early this morning!”

“That’s right; that’s a good question! You go around trying to look like the most innocent, sweetest little thing, and then you’re out until the crack of dawn! I know what a soft touch you are, and I’m sure some awful man has taken advantage of you! Someone just like Kazuma, for example!”

Grrr. If I didn’t put this idiot in her place every once in a while, she started to get carried away. While I contemplated what I would do to Aqua, Wiz waved her hands frantically. “W-wait just a second, both of you! First I get purified out of nowhere, and now you’re bombarding me with these terrible assumptions?!” She was on the verge of tears from the attack.

“Just forget about these two,” I said. “But what’s going on? You seem really frazzled.”

Despite that, Wiz’s face was surprisingly unruffled, considering we could almost see right through her; maybe the purification spell really was just a light punishment for her. She hugged herself protectively and said, “I have a stalker!”

“Here, have some nice tea and calm down. A warm drink is best when you’ve had a scary experience.”

Wiz took a sip of the tea and let out a breath. “Th-thank you, Lady Aqua... But this tea makes my body sort of numb when I drink it...”

“So what the heck happened? I mean, with this stalker or whatever,” I said from where I was perched on a chair now that Wiz seemed a little calmer.

“A stalker—that’s right! It happened last night...”

There was this one shop that made little side dishes to go with dinner, and around sunset every night, they threw out their vegetable scraps. Wiz had asked them to give her the scraps and was picking them up as she headed back

to her shop.

This store was in a side alley where there naturally weren't many people. But then, according to Wiz, she found her way blocked by a man whose face was covered by a hood.

"He was wearing pitch-black robes, and without ever removing his hood, he said: 'My name is Duke. I have traveled far to meet you... For years, I have studied you, have thought only about you...'"

Man, talk about obsessed. Even Aqua was looking a bit repulsed.

"He continued: 'I have focused single-mindedly on training myself. And do you know why?' Of course, I told him I had no idea. And then...!"

It must have been really scary, because Wiz hesitated for a second before she went on:

"In order to attack you!" he shouted, and just as he whipped off his robe, I started running... I was too scared to come back to my shop after that, so I summoned those ghosts to see if I could find out where the stalker had gone..."

This stalker sounded more serious than I had expected. I never would have imagined a crime like that taking place in this town, not even in a side alley late at night...

"I see. So that's why there were all those ghosts wandering around," Aqua said. "I guess that's okay, then, but make sure you put them back where you found them, all right?"

"What are they, dogs and cats? *You* should go send them back to Heaven. Anyway, so what, you're saying that stalker's been staking out the shop, and you haven't been able to come back until now?"

Wiz shook her head at my little summary. "No, I don't know for sure. I sent those ghosts all over town, but I haven't heard anything from any of them... In fact, it seems like most of them have been exorcised..."

An unrelenting stalker who could also purify spirits?

"So you think the Axis Church is behind this?"

"Mm, there is no need to avail ourselves of my all-seeing eye to solve this

mystery.”

“Hold on a second, you two! Don’t go accusing my poor, sweet lambs of criminal activity!”

As Aqua objected to Vanir’s and my speculation, Wiz said hesitantly, “Um... That being the case, could I ask you to intervene somehow...?”

Wiz was in a really tough spot right now.

“But you don’t even know where this black-robed stalker is, do you? Hey, you. You’re always bragging about how powerful you are, so lend us a hand.”

“I don’t need you to tell me that. I have been using my all-seeing powers throughout this conversation, but I can’t seem to determine the stalker’s whereabouts. It would seem he is not your garden-variety pervert. If he can go undetected against *my* vision, he must be quite the formidable opponent.”

A very powerful pervert? Things were getting dangerous around here.

Vanir seemed to be thinking about something, but then he suddenly clapped his hands. “O late-blooming shopkeeper, we are coming at this from the wrong direction. There are not so many people who care so deeply about you as this person. Depending on this man’s ‘specs,’ you may wish to consider compromising, yes?”

“N-no, I wouldn’t! Not for someone who attacked me the first time he saw me! And don’t call me a ‘late bloomer’!”

I felt like I recognized the way Vanir was acting. Yeah, it was the same way I’d acted when I was trying to get Darkness married out of the party. But just as I was realizing this...

“Is Miss Wiz here? I have mail for her!”

“Oh, thank you!”

A postman showed up at the door and gave Wiz a letter. She took it, but when she looked inside, her face darkened again.

“A letter from your stalker, I believe. If I study it with my all-seeing vision, perhaps I can determine where he is. Shall I seek him out and then attack him?” Vanir seemed uncommonly cooperative. Maybe he was worried about his co-

renter.

"I appreciate that, Vanir—I really do. But I'll handle this myself. This letter says the man will be waiting in the wilderness outside town tomorrow." She squeezed the letter in her hand, looking thoroughly determined. "I... I've never known someone to be interested in me before, and I want to give him a serious answer!" she said firmly.

"And that's how we decided Wiz was going to settle this tomorrow."

That evening, we were eating dinner in the living room of the mansion, and I was explaining what had happened. Megumin and Darkness both looked somewhat unsettled.

"A stalker, you say? My self-proclaimed rival is certainly guilty of that sort of behavior from time to time, and it makes me worry somewhat for her future... She is apt to totally forget herself when she is on the chase. I know just how scary her type can be when she loses it."

She was talking about Yunyun, of course.

"I can't believe someone that twisted would show up in our peaceful little town, though," Darkness said, growing agitated even as she delicately sliced the meat on her plate. "A ruffian who would cause such trouble to our good citizens should be ashamed!"

"I really don't think you should be talking down twisted people," I said.

"T-take that back!"

Meanwhile, Aqua had finished dinner before the rest of us and was feeding Emperor Zel where he sat on her knees. Suddenly, she said: "You know, Wiz talked about 'finishing things,' but she's so soft, I can't imagine how she intends to do it. Maybe she means to take him up on his confession of love. Megumin and Darkness have both been so lust-addled lately. If even Wiz gets a boyfriend, I won't have anyone left to hang out with..."

"I am not lust-addled, Aqua! Unlike Darkness with her sneaking around at night and wearing salacious outfits, I am a pure maiden who hasn't even been kissed yet!"

“Hey...!” said the impure Darkness, tears brimming in her eyes, but I had a thought. Wiz was fundamentally super nice to people. If this guy really pushed, she wouldn’t be able to say no to him; he could definitely talk her into starting out as friends if nothing else. Frankly, Wiz was at least as vulnerable as Yunyun to that gambit.

Was it really safe to let Wiz go by herself? Heck, I was so popular these days, it wasn’t inconceivable that Wiz might even fall in love with me and ultimately end up becoming part of my harem.

...Okay, no, no, no!

That’s not how it’s going to work, Kazuma Satou! What would you do with a harem? You already turned down Darkness anyway.

But that was that, and this was this. I wouldn’t be laughing if Wiz, a good friend of mine, followed some guy from who-knows-where off to a sketchy place.

And that meant...!

“Uh, hey, Kazuma? What’s with the nasty face?”

“Take a good look, Aqua. This is the face of a man who’s going to protect his friend.”

3

The next morning. I was waiting outside the store, and my eyes just about popped out of my head when I saw how Wiz was dressed. She looked incredibly, well, *adult*.

Maybe it was because I had only ever seen her in those shapeless robes or an apron, or maybe because everyone with me seemed like such a kid, but it was really novel and refreshing.

“Come on, Kazuma—this is no time to stand around gawking. Hurry up and use your Ambush skill.”

Darkness’s demand brought me back to my senses, and I quickly activated my

skill. Confident now that we wouldn't be noticed, we quietly trailed Wiz to the edge of town.

"Uh, Kazuma, I'm kind of feeling like a stalker myself right now," Aqua said. "Even if Wiz solves her problem today, won't we become her next stalkers?"

"Hush! You don't mean that. This isn't stalking; this is just keeping an eye on things from a distance to make sure a friend doesn't get into trouble."

"I believe that is what we call stalking."

I didn't deign to respond to Aqua's and Megumin's quips. I just continued following Wiz. Finally, we were outside of town, and just as Wiz had described, there was a dark figure standing in the middle of a vast wilderness. There was nothing in the area that would conveniently keep us hidden. If we got any closer, Wiz and her stalker might notice us. But from this distance, we wouldn't be able to hear what they were saying. I activated my Second Sight and Read Lips skills so I could follow their conversation.

"It seems you received my letter. I'm impressed you decided to come."

"After what you said, how could I not...?"

Perfect, I could still pick up what they were saying from here.

"It's been so long... You don't know how I've searched for you. When I heard you were running a magic-item shop in this town, I doubted my own ears. And yet, here we are. My long and arduous journey was worth it in the end."

"D-did you really come all this way just to see me?"

This was heavy stuff the guy in the hood was saying. Wiz responded with a drawn face.

Just as I was really getting pulled into the conversation, I felt a tug on my sleeve. "Kazuma, Kazuma, don't keep it all to yourself—tell us what they're saying. What's going on?"

"I can only tell you what I'm picking up with my Read Lips skill, so I might not be quite right about this... But it sounds like that guy came from way far away just to tell Wiz he loves her."

""""Huh?!"""

I ignored the women's astonished exclamations and activated my skill again.

"I think you know why I've called you here, yes? It's as I told you when we met the other day... I've forged myself single-mindedly, thinking of only one thing: you!"

"B-but this is all so sudden! Besides, this is the first time something like this has ever happened to me, and I don't know what to say! Besides besides, the way you behaved, right there in the middle of town, no less! I don't think much of it!" Wiz was burning red from the passionate appeal.

"Kazuma, Wiz is beet red. What the hell is going on?"

"I've only ever thought of you; I worked really hard to win you; I'm super great and whatever.' Strong guys always think they must be lady-killers."

"What passion, and on what seems virtually a first meeting!" Darkness was turning red with excitement. The man must have been getting pretty into this himself, because he was talking so loudly, we could hear him faintly even at this distance.

"I realize now that I was hasty in my actions. I tried very hard to pick an alleyway where no one would see us..."

"Not being seen isn't the only thing that matters! For something like what you did, you're supposed to wait until you know each other better, take your time..."

So this guy wasn't just some random perv. He was a lost cause. Pretty much the opposite of me, a guy who couldn't make anything happen even with Darkness and Megumin practically throwing themselves at me. But you know what? I didn't really want to be like him.

"Yes, I see... I will admit that it's not very fair when only one of us knows about the other. In that case, I suppose I must tell you about myself..."

"Y-yes, you certainly must. All I know so far is your name..."

Seeming troubled, the guy threw back his hood. The face that appeared was so handsome, you could practically have mistaken him for a woman. Maybe Wiz wasn't expecting him to be quite so pretty, either, because she blushed slightly.

“My name is Duke. I specialize in fire-type advanced magic. That makes me your polar opposite, given your focus is on ice-type advanced magic.”

“A-at least you’re not trying to hide that we aren’t very compatible that way. I appreciate your honesty... But to think you discovered even that about me...”

Wiz was naturally a little leery of this guy with his highly stalker-ish pronouncements. But Duke laughed as if he was actually proud of it. “But of course! And I know that back when you were human, you were known as the Ice Witch!”

“J-just a second! You even know I’m not human?!” Wiz was amazed by this revelation; even I was taken aback.

“Hey, Kazuma, you stopped interpreting for us! Wiz looks so surprised; what’s going on?!” Aqua asked anxiously, shaking me.

“That guy knows Wiz is a Lich and what kind of magic she specializes in. He’s done his homework. It shows how serious he is.”

“He’s not your average stalker, I see...! He takes perviness to a whole new level!”

“I am starting to feel that if I was to blow him away with Explosion to allow Wiz to escape, it would be the best thing for this world and everyone in it!”

We could be as shocked as we wanted; it didn’t stop Duke.

“I know everything about you! I understand you better than anyone in this world! Now I have told you about myself! We can continue our little conversation!”

“W-w-w-wait just a second! You’re coming on so strong! I have to emotionally prepare myself! T-tell me, you know I’m an undead, yet you’re not afraid? You even pursued me?” Wiz was backing away under the force of Duke’s enthusiasm.

“Do you seek to insult me? A Lich is not even worthy of my fear!”

“R-really...! That’s quite a claim...”

Damn him, trying to act all manly!

"Hey, Kazuma, Wiz is obviously shaken! That guy must have said he doesn't care that she's an undead or something! That he isn't afraid of Liches!" Darkness was trembling. "To confront the so-called Queen of the Undead, the one hated and feared by all, and yet be unmoved...! This is true love! Wh-what should I do, Kazuma? I sort of want to root for this man...!"

Pervs of a feather, I guess. She seemed to understand this guy on some level I didn't want to know about.

"That's the stupidest thing I ever heard! Not caring that someone is undead? If you're going to spout heresy like that, you might as well pick a fight directly with the gods! I admit that Wiz is nice and chilly to the touch and would probably be pleasant to hug while you slept on a summer night, but she's still basically a living corpse, right?! And necrophilia is beyond the pale!"

"Y-you are right, I dare say, that the expression *living corpse* would describe her... But, Aqua, you mustn't say that in front of Wiz... You'll make her cry..."

I ignored my jabbering companions and, feeling my hands start to sweat, watched the situation develop.

"Enough prattle! Face me in combat, Ice Witch!"

"What?! Wh-why would we do that?!"

Hmm?

"Why, you ask? It's obvious! So that I can demonstrate my power to you and convince you to quit your job!"

"Whaaaat?!"

What a thing.

"Come on, Kazuma—tell us what's happening! What are they saying? I have to know!" Aqua shook me violently.

I turned to her and said somberly, "That guy just challenged Wiz to fight him. And he wants her to quit her job if he wins."

Darkness seemed even more shocked than before. "One of Wiz's jobs is running that magic-item shop. But...if I recall correctly, the owner of that real-estate shop asked her to get rid of some undead and periodically send the

ghosts in the communal cemetery back to Heaven. That's one of her jobs, too!"

"So he doesn't want the person he loves to be doing dangerous work! But maybe he doesn't know that Aqua already took over for Wiz on that front, and she isn't in charge of the cemetery anymore. But what this boils down to is..."

Yes, what it meant was...

"Y-y-you want me to marry you...?!"

That was the gist of it. *I'll protect you, he was saying, so quit this dangerous business and join my family.*

It was some confession of love. Was that what a real man was like? I was starting to feel ashamed of myself, letting a burst of emotion make me think about interfering.

"I will take up the work on your behalf! Now, let us go! You..." As Duke shouted about whatever, he tossed back his cape. He was just casting it aside as Wiz, her face still red, intoned her spell.

"Teleport!"

While we were frozen with astonishment at this passionate proposal, Wiz made her move. Maybe it was all too much for someone so inexperienced in the ways of love. Whatever the reason, she teleported away and disappeared.

4

"Another day has passed, and Wiz still hasn't come back. I'm running out of places to chill. I've got lots of time on my hands now."

It had been three days now since Wiz had gone missing. People were still reporting that they had seen that guy around town, so apparently, he hadn't given up yet.

"I guess springing a proposal on someone so inexperienced at love was a pretty big reach. Truly, the path of love is a difficult one. Even a man as popular as me hasn't fully mastered it yet."

"Yeesh, you get a little popularity and you think you're such hot stuff, but

you're still just a virgin NEET."

Aqua could sass me all she wanted, but I, having changed classes to Guy in a Real, Actual Relationship, wasn't even bothered. "I'm gonna eat out tonight, so you don't have to bother making dinner for me. I probably won't be back tonight, either."

"Where *do* you go at night? If you're going drinking, take me with you!"

I had changed my clothes and now stood at the front door, Aqua looking at me expectantly. "Sorry, boys' night out. I'll leave you some spare change, so go get something to drink and share it with the others."

"Kazuma, you're the best! We'll watch the house for you while you're gone!" Aqua said as she snatched up the money I'd handed her.

It was true I was going out to drink, but that wasn't the only thing I had in mind today. It was this other, secret goal that having Aqua along would really have interfered with. And what was that goal? Oh, you know. Good vibe with Megumin or no, that was never going to be enough by itself. In fact, it was downright gentlemanly of me to make sure I wouldn't feel I had to be pushy when the moment arrived.

And so, with Aqua waving good-bye, I headed out on the town...

"Hey, Kazuma, what's wrong? You keep looking at that guy. You know him or something?"

I was at a drinking establishment—not one I went to enough to be called a regular but definitely a place I stopped by from time to time. The blond-haired punk of an adventurer Dust was asking me an annoyingly perceptive question.

"Know him? Nah, not really..."

My usual MO on nights when I was going to stay out was to kill time with the other guys at a place like this until late at night, when the succubus ladies would be plying their trade. But this time...

"Yo, new face, I see—but a handsome one. My name's Dust. People know me around these parts."

"...You showed up out of nowhere. Do you have some business with me?"

As soon as he found out the guy wasn't someone I knew, Dust went over and introduced himself.

"I told you my name. This is the part where you tell me yours. Don't you know how to be polite? Huh?"

".....My name is Duke. Again: Do you have some business with me?"

It was the very hooded man who had proposed to Wiz. I thought about trying to stop Dust, but I remembered that this Duke guy could use advanced magic. That meant he was a high-level adventurer, and he certainly didn't need my help looking out for himself. And if Dust got himself hurt in the process? Well, you might say he earned it.

"I haven't seen you around. You a new adventurer? Like I said, I've got some connections in this town. You treat me to a round of drinks, it might come back to you someday, y'know?"

"Oh-ho. You mean to help me, do you? Very well, it might be worth venturing out into society. How else could I have such interesting experiences?"

Duke stood up, radiating an almost physical pressure. Heck, he had challenged Wiz to a battle. A drunken idiot like Dust didn't stand a chance.

The blond-haired punk, though, held out a hand and smiled for some reason. "Heh, you pass. You've got it; that's perfect for an adventurer. If we don't project authority, we're finished. I like to see how newbies react to me. If they just agree to pony up, I tell 'em to go home to whatever backwater they crawled out of, because they ain't cut out to be adventurers. But when they've got balls, like you, I buy 'em a round."

"...Is that so? A most intriguing enterprise." Duke sat back down, looking genuinely interested. As for the blond-haired loser, he motioned the server to refill Duke's drink, then made his exit with a "See ya!" Finally, he worked his way back to me, looking remarkably relaxed...

"The hell is that guy's problem, Kazuma? You shoulda warned me he was gonna be trouble! I ended up having to buy *him* a drink!"

"H-hey, don't blame me... How strong did he look to you anyway?" Dust might have left something to be desired in the lifestyle and personality departments,

but he was actually a pretty sharp adventurer. If he could tell me how strong Duke looked, maybe I could set Wiz's mind at ea—

"He's trouble for sure. More dangerous than anyone I've ever met, I reckon. Like, major-bounty-head or general-of-the-Demon-King level."

"In other words... About as strong as me, you mean?" Huh, so that was not sounding great for Wiz, I figured. I left Dust where he was sitting, looking as if he wanted to make some sort of comeback at me, and went over to Duke.

"Hey, buddy, got a second? My name is Satou. Kazuma Satou, strongest adventurer in town."

"Ugh, so another one of you freaks is here to—Satou? Did you say Kazuma Satou?! *The Kazuma Satou?!*"

I was more famous than I'd thought. Not that it was much of a surprise, what with me being in the newspaper and all. Of course other powerful guys would come to check me out. Smiling with all the nonchalance I could muster, I said, "That's right, the one and only. Kazuma Satou, slayer of lots of bounty heads and defeater of the Demon King's generals."

"The Kazuma Satou, the one who does nothing but order his comrades around without contributing anything significant to the battle?! The one who was murdered by a pack of kobolds?!"

.....

I shut my mouth, feeling like I might cry, but now Duke was looking at me with real interest. "I see, yes—it seems the rumors were true. You have the reek of a small fry. I'd heard something about an ascended NEET whose party defeated one general after another under his orders, but it seems there's been some mistake..."

"Ooh, them's fighting words." Here I was trying to be friendly, and he went and said something like that!

"Hmm... I came to this town in hopes of challenging a certain woman here... I see now, yes. I'd intended to wait until it was all over, but when I think about it, there's no point waiting for *that*. I can complete my hunt as a sort of side quest, as it were."

"Stop that! You're making it sound like you're gonna drop by the store to pick up something on the way home. What, you wanna go? Just so you know, I'm stronger than you think, okay? It's no accident that I have all those high-profile kills under my belt! And I've got the Dustiness family backing me up, so you'd better know what you're getting yourself into if you pick a fight with me! You'll regret it! And I have lots of strong friends, too!"

I was trying to make sure Duke wouldn't underestimate me. The reason the second half of my threat kind of went off the rails a bit was definitely not because I was starting to get intimidated myself by the way Duke was squinting at me as I talked.

"Huh, fine. There are others I must prioritize over you at this moment anyway. I'll let you go for now."

"H-hey, I'm a man who does what he says he's gonna do, when he says he's gonna do it! Around here, they call me Mr. Amazing When He Puts His Mind to It! It's just, for your sake, I'll put my mind to it *tomorrow...or the next day!*"

Oh yeah! I sure told him!

I couldn't shake the sense that my parting shot was like the last howl of a dying dog, but at least now I could tell people I hadn't just let him make fun of me. I realized, though, how close I'd come to being challenged to a fight.

Come to think of it, a fellow adventurer had warned me that now that I'd been in the newspaper and was all famous, people would come after me. That was a close one. It might even have been too late already, but I would have to be more careful from now on.

"All right, well, I guess I'll let you—"

—go for today, I was about to say, when it hit me. That wasn't what I was here for. I was forgetting why I'd come over in the first place. "Hey, this person you say is more important than me—it's Wiz, right?"

Duke reacted immediately when I said that. Before I knew what had happened, he had a black-bladed knife at my throat, and his eyes were boring into mine. "How the hell do you know that? How are you connected to Wiz?"

"G-g-g-geez, calm down, calm down!" I said, my voice going up an octave.

"I'm just a friend! But if her friend died, Wiz would be sad, right?!"

"...I don't know how much you know about Wiz," Duke said, "but I warn you not to get too deeply involved with her. A minnow like you shouldn't swim carelessly around a shark like her." With that, Duke put away the knife. Talk about short-tempered. All I did was mention Wiz's name, and he'd damn near slit my throat. He must have been really crazy about her.

"I know you're after Wiz," I said. "And what's more, I'm rooting for you."

"What did you say?" Duke asked, taken aback. "...Aren't you supposed to be Wiz's friend?"

"It's exactly *because* I'm her friend. Wiz isn't cut out for the work she's doing right now. Besides..." I dropped my voice. "Just because she's a Lich doesn't mean she doesn't have the right to be happy. I want her to retire and enjoy her life."

".....You've been hanging around Wiz, *knowing* she's a Lich. I'm going to have to reconsider what I thought of you." That sounded important. Duke looked like he wasn't quite as guarded toward me as he had been.

Yeah, a guy this passionate? I could leave Wiz with him. To be honest, it was always a little disappointing when a female friend married some other guy. But Wiz was getting to be of a certain age, and it was time for her to settle down.

"I agree with you," Duke said. "I don't think she's cut out for what she's doing, either. Not in light of how frivolously she acts now. She was never that way back when she was called the Ice Witch."

"Yeah, well, I heard Wiz was a pretty famous adventurer in her day. She was probably a little more serious back then..."

Still, nowadays, Wiz worked hard to sympathize with adventurers and to try to stock items that would be useful to them on their quests. She had somehow gotten so incompetent at it, though, that even Vanir could only put his head in his hands.

"You don't have to challenge Wiz to a duel, though. Just talk to her, convince her it's time to quit her job. It's not that hard, is it?"

"...? I don't understand what you're saying. That would be pointless. I must show her my power in order to take over as her successor." Duke was obviously under the impression that Wiz was still doing dangerous things like purifying the cemetery and stuff. And that was fair: You would definitely need to show how strong you were to take over a purification job.

It would have been easy enough to tell him she wasn't in the purification business anymore, but I wasn't sure how I felt about trying to tell him something when he was already so well versed in Wiz Studies. Besides, the fact that he wanted to make her his wife made me think maybe he was hoping to build up the magic-item shop.

"One question, uh... Can I assume you'll be taking over *all* of Wiz's work?"

"But of course. There is no one more suited to it than I! It teeters on the brink at this moment, and I shall smash through to the other side!"

Huh, well, at least he was confident. That shop had Vanir, the all-seeing demon, working for it, and Duke here figured he was going to be the one to get it back in the black?

Huh? Wait a second...

"Hang on—there is one major hurdle between you and that job. It's Vanir. If you've really done your homework on Wiz, then I assume you know about him. If you want to take over Wiz's job specifically, you might manage it, but if you want to run the place, I think you're gonna have to go through him."

Vanir's goal was to make the magic-item shop successful enough to save up the money to build himself a special, gigantic dungeon. I had to think he would be all for Wiz getting married, but I wasn't sure he would be so eager to give up the shop. In fact, I was sure that obnoxious demon wouldn't be adult about it.

"Grrr, Master Vanir... Yes, he's trouble, all right. But this is between Wiz and me. Even Master Vanir will not stop me!"

I was more shocked than ever before by this. Duke was made of sterner stuff than I'd imagined. Even I didn't want to go up against that cheater of a demon. It was just another sign of how much he loved Wiz...

In that case, I would be just as resolute as he was. "You talk a good game, but

I guarantee he'll try to get in your way. But..." I showed Duke a mug as if we were going to share a toast.

"I'm not against a guy like you."

And then I smiled at this man among men, who didn't back down even in the face of Vanir.

5

"And so I decided to help him."

"I'm sorry, but I don't understand a thing you just said."

The next morning. I'd come home early enough to catch breakfast with everyone, talking to them about Duke as we ate.

"Look, the point is, this Duke guy is stubborn, but he's also surprisingly manly and might be a better guy than you think—at least, that's what I gathered."

Riding high from my sort-of harem (by which I meant Megumin and Darkness doting on me) recently, I felt like I had a direct line to what Duke was feeling. Like, even though I had a good thing going with Megumin, all it took was some teasing from Darkness to sweep me away. When I looked back on how I had acted recently, I had to admit that even I thought I had done some fairly terrible stuff. I was like the exact opposite of Duke, who was ready to give up everything for Wiz's sake. As a fellow man, of course I wanted to help out a guy who felt that way.

Besides, I hoped to regain my reputation as the pure, loyal Kazuma.

"Personally, I suppose I should welcome a lady friend of yours finding a boyfriend to keep her busy, Kazuma, so help him if you wish..."

"Huh, you go around calling a person your man, but you're still worried about that stuff. Cute, you're real cute."

"I do not know what you are getting at, but it makes me feel slightly sick, so I wish you would drop that act..."

Meanwhile Aqua, who was literally fighting a fried egg with her fork, nodded

to herself. “Are you sure you want Wiz to go off with this guy from who-knows-where? I know you, Kazuma, and I know you’re not likely to be satisfied with just Megumin and Darkness. You’ll want Wiz and Yunyun and Iris and Eris and Chris and Komekko all for yourself.”

“What do you take me for, you—? Hold on, wait. That last name was weird. You know perfectly well there’s a line even I won’t cross; how many times do I have to tell you I’m not a lolicon?!”

I was starting to think it was mostly Aqua who was responsible for my reputation as “Lolima.” But just as I stood up, thinking now might be the perfect time to feed her a knuckle sandwich, Darkness, her face red, slammed her fist down on the table. “I misjudged you, Kazuma! You’re right; that man’s love is a beautiful thing! To not care even when the object of your affection is a Lich—it’s a single-mindedness completely unlike a certain someone I know who’s instantly vulnerable to every temptation...!”

“I’m sorry—are you talking about me? Fancy, coming from the source of that temptation.”

Darkness didn’t even listen to me, only shouted, “Kazuma, I’m going to help you! Someone just needs to keep Vanir busy if it looks like he’s going to interfere with them, right? Where do we start? Tell me—I’ll do anything!” And then she looked at me, her eyes ablaze with expectation.

Uh, I appreciate the offer and all, but...

“Both of you need to calm down. How about we begin by verifying that they do in fact feel that way about each other? If one is dragged into such a situation forcefully enough, then if one is not a mature woman experienced with the ways of love, as I am, then one may easily become flustered. For that matter, we must begin by finding Wiz, who is currently missing.”

“When did you become experienced in the ways of love, pip-squeak?” I snorted. “A real mature adult is a man who can roll with the punches, like me.”

Megumin swallowed a mouthful of ham she was chewing and said, “Then perhaps tonight, you would like me to show you that I am indeed a mature woman? I will come to your room for a visit later.” She gave me a coquettish laugh as if to say that she knew everything I was planning.

“Nah, I’ll pass on tonight. I’m not really feeling it. Besides, I saw a *real* man just last night. I’m not going to be swept away for a while here, and I’m not going to be tempted by a sexiness the two of you don’t even have.”

“Huh?!” Megumin must have been feeling pretty confident, because she was obviously thrown by my response.

“What’s the matter? Did you think I was easy? You just assumed I’m this eternally horny guy who’s ready to get it on at any time?”

“N-no, not specifically, but... There’s been a good vibe between us of late, so I thought you might go along with it...”

As Megumin faltered, Aqua whispered in her ear. “It doesn’t matter what you say to Kazuma right now. He just got back this morning, right? Ahem, when he spends these nights out—”

“Aqua, what did you do with that allowance I gave you yesterday? Did you burn through it already? Was the wine good?” I took her hand and was about to lead her out of the room...

“The wine was good, but what are you doing with my hands? Hey, where are you taking me? I haven’t had dessert yet! Stop! Stop!! Megumin, Darkness, the truth is, this town has a succu—”

“I’ll be happy to give you more allowance today—just come with me! I have something important to talk to you about!!”

Chapter 4

A Goddess's Cheerleading for This Man's Man!



1

It rained all day, but Aqua didn't seem to mind. She was happily working in our "garden." Megumin was standing beside her, holding an umbrella and apparently giving her instructions.

"Listen, Kazuma, I want you to say something to them, too. They can't take this farmwork too lightly. Every year, there are mushroom and bamboo farmers who find themselves in serious trouble," Darkness said fretfully, watching them out the window.

"Believe me, I know how rough farmers have it. I mean, in my country, we have typhoons, and sometimes people even go missing. But those two won't listen to reason, and you know it."

"So it's the same where you come from. Yeah, during typhoons, even the vegetables get a bit agitated..."

I'd been talking about how farmers got worried about irrigation canals and fields when there was a storm, so they would go check on them and get themselves in trouble. I guess we had slightly different ideas about how the world worked.

“Just look at this, Kazuma! Something’s already popping up in our garden!” Aqua shouted. She looked perfectly happy despite the rain pounding down on her. Maybe that was the goddess of water for you.

“And the anchovies’ eyes are coming in. I admit, it is a little grotesque, but now is the perfect moment to get a look at them.”

Geez, Megumin too...

“Hey, Darkness, this stuff about getting watermelons from the ocean or anchovies from a farm field—doesn’t any of it feel weird to you?”

“Why would it feel weird? You say the strangest things sometimes.”

For the first time in a while, I felt the culture shock of being from another world. And before the feeling had passed, there was a knock at the door. When I went to see who it was, I was greeted by a very frantic-looking penguin suit flapping its winglets. While I wondered how he knew where we lived and what he had come here for, Aqua spotted him.

“Hey, you!”

“Pyeeeek!” He produced a birdlike squawk when Aqua shouted.

“You’ve got some nerve, after I told you I would purify you if I ever saw you out here! Your weird demon friend isn’t around to help you! You’re going straight back to the afterlife!”

“Wait, please! I’m here for a reason! As a matter of fact, Lord Vanir and his friend the shopkeeper, they...”

We made our way through the pouring rain to the magic-item shop.

“Wiz, you’re back! We wondered if we’d ever see you a—”

“Stupid, stupid Vanir! You never did know how to be delicate, and you don’t now!”

“You are the stupid one, shopkeeper, expecting delicacy from a demon! I thought you were wandering around, merely prodigal, and now I discover you’re addled by romance! Go, then! Go and be a wife!”

We had obviously walked right into the middle of a big argument.

“Can I?! Is it really all right if I get married?! You know that once I join someone else’s family, I’ll have to quit my job here at the store, don’t you?! It will be under new management! A demon’s contract is absolute, isn’t it? I want to know what will happen to your agreement with me to help the store prosper!”

Wiz must have come home through the rain, because she was soaking wet. But those weren’t raindrops at the corners of her eyes.

As for Vanir, he was so attentive to the detail on his handcrafted body that a blue vein even pulsed on his forehead as he shot back: “When you are gone, O late-blooming shopkeeper, and this shop has a new manager, maybe I will get someone I can work with, after which this store shall prosper, and I shall finally have the resources to build my dungeon! So go to your married life with your mind at ease, you besotted businesswoman!”

“Yaaaaahhh!” Wiz flew at Vanir and grabbed him.

I turned to the penguin suit beside me and said, “Explain.”

“Lord Vanir and Miss the Shopkeeper have been like this for some time now. When miss finally came home, Lord Vanir peppered her with questions, but she seemed so distracted that he started to get angry. I haven’t been able to break them up myself, so I came to you for help.”

I wanted to tell him not to bother us with crap like this, but if it meant Wiz was home, then I guess it was all right.

Aqua raised an eyebrow and stepped in between the two, who were now in something of a grappling match. “Excuse me, Wiz, but where have you been?! Everyone’s been worried about you! You better apologize!”

“Aqua, I believe Wiz is fairly busy right now, so rather than make things more complicated, please come over here to a corner with me.” Megumin pulled the ever-oblivious Aqua to a corner of the shop.

Darkness, meanwhile, said, “What is it you two are fighting about anyway? Look at how hard you’re making this on Count Zeeleschilt.”

Wiz wheeled on Darkness. “Listen to me, Miss Darkness! I’ve been holed up for days in a dungeon at the edge of the world that they say is the deepest

dungeon ever, just hunting monsters and fretting!"

I was definitely intrigued by this violent way of being a shut-in, but Wiz took a flower from a vase sitting there in the shop, twirling it around her fingers. "That man... This Duke, who appeared so suddenly and offered to accept me and all that I am... I just couldn't understand why he would be so passionate about me..."

Huh? This was "besotted"? Vanir looked thoroughly annoyed, but Wiz hardly seemed to notice as she went on: "I mean, I'm a Lich, right? But Duke says he doesn't care, that even as an undead, I'm beautiful, that he loves me anyway..."

"I was eavesdropping on your conversation using my Read Lips skill, and I'm not sure he actually said any of that," I put in, but Wiz seemed to ignore me, fiddling even more industriously with the flower.

"And then there's this asking me to be his wife even though we've only just met... And he claims he doesn't want someone as sweet as me to do such dangerous work and that he'll protect me..."

"He definitely didn't say that." Duke hadn't gone that far.

"Kazuma, I'm talking about something very important right now. Please don't interrupt... Anyway, he's given me this sudden proposal, but I have my contract with Vanir to consider and the shop, too. Oh, what should I do...?"

Wiz glanced sidelong out the corners of her eyes, catching a very frustrated-looking Vanir, who scowled and said, "And this is how she's been ever since she got back to the shop. What should she do? I told her that if she wanted to continue running the shop, then she should start working to make up for all the time she was away, and if she wanted to be someone's wife, then she ought to go and get married. But my response seemed to anger her for some reason."

"It's because you could stand to be a little friendlier! Aren't we any closer than that?! I thought we were partners, working together to make our dreams come true!"

Vanir frowned at the word *partners*. "A demon's contract is absolute... But even I find my spirit nearly broken by your level of idiocy of late. I've been racking my brain day and night to see if there isn't some way to take a cooling-

off period from our agreement..."

"I won't let you void our contract! Even I understand that without you, my shop is finished, Vanir. A-and anyway, no one could possibly build the world's largest dungeon but me, you understand? Could you live with yourself, Vanir, if you gave up your dream of an impregnable dungeon in whose depths you will await the greatest adventurers?!" Wiz was practically clinging to his knees now.

"So *are* you going to go out with that guy?" Aqua asked. "Or is he not your type?"

At that, Wiz looked at Vanir and fiddled with her flower again. "He's not so bad-looking, I guess, and I appreciate that he loves me so deeply... I just, you know, feel like I have a duty to help Vanir achieve his dream."

"It doesn't matter to me whether you are the one who runs this shop or not. If you will but build the dungeon when I've saved up the money, that will be quite enough."

"Vanir, are you actually one of those people who's prickly on the outside but a shrinking violet inside?! I'm not seeing enough of your sweet side. You need to show more interest in me! We've known each other for so long! Can you really bear to see me whisked away by that man?!"

Maybe she had unconsciously used Drain Touch in her anger, because the flower in her hands was wilting.

"I don't know that a genderless being such as I can be said to have a sweet side... But very well, I understand. I shall put some genuine effort into looking into the future. And if my vision reveals this Duke to be a terrible partner for you, then I will chase him off. Does that satisfy you?"

Seeing how annoyed Vanir looked, I realized that this might actually be perfect for Duke. Yeah, I'd thought his number one obstacle would be that Vanir would resist a change of ownership at the shop, but he was on board with the idea. It was the sort of disinterested thinking characteristic of a demon, and it might have just made my biggest hurdle disappear.

...But wait. What if he turned his all-seeing vision on Duke and found some new problem? As I was debating whether to try to stop Vanir, his eyes began to

glow with a strange light...

“Oh-ho... I see, yes; I can see it. This man who so adores you has been hard at work in this town, gathering information about you.”

Wiz’s mouth softened into a smile; I guess she sort of liked the sound of that.

“...Hmm? W-well, what is this...?! Wonderful, most wonderful! I *thought* he was difficult to see clearly! So that’s how it is!”

“Wh-what is it, Vanir? What’s so wonderful? I don’t know if I’ve ever heard you praise someone like that before!”

As Wiz and all of us stood amazed by the sudden change in Vanir, the self-proclaimed All-Seeing Demon crowed:

“The All-Seeing Demon makes a declaration! You shall respond to this man’s affections. And when you do, one who receives blessings and happiness beyond all measure shall be born!”

2

We were on our way home from the magic-item shop.

“Gotta say, I never expected Vanir to just go along with it like that. I knew this guy was something special.” Mumbling to myself, I wasn’t really talking to anyone in particular.

“I do wonder why this man is so ready to take the side of a stalker... Though I admit that Wiz’s suitor at least has a certain single-mindedness... Unlike a certain someone I know who will run off with any female adventurer at the drop of a hat or let himself be swept along the moment something happens in the bath...” Megumin was looking at me like she hoped I got her point, whatever it was.

“Yeah, *and* unlike a certain someone, he seems to really value the person he’s committed to. A-ahem, not that I personally abhor an adulterer, considering it’s just one more way to be a terrible human being...” Darkness was looking at me like she hoped I got *her* point, whatever that was.

“What the hell? I already apologized about the bath thing! But if you don’t mind my saying so, you two aren’t exactly blameless, either! My girl Megumin is always leading me on but never willing to cross that last line, and Darkness has that stupid, sexy body, but all she can do is tease a guy with it! She never has the nerve to do anything else...”

“I am beginning to think this man is the worst person in the world!”

“Lately, he’s been getting closer and closer to ‘my type’...”

As the two of them attacked me, Aqua, despondently bringing up the rear of our group, said finally, “I won’t have it.” I looked at her. “I can’t accept this nobody from who-knows-where! It doesn’t make any sense! This is Wiz we’re talking about, right? Why would he fall so deeply in love with her? I guarantee he’s got some evil plan in mind! Call it a goddess’s intuition! He doesn’t love her at all!”

To this sudden outburst, I responded, “You’re just upset that you won’t have anyone to have tea with.”

“Of course I am! But it’s just, I’ve also got a slightly bad feeling about this! It’s hard to explain, but it’s like I just know it’s going to lead to my archenemy being really happy...!”

I see! Wait, no, I don’t.

“Maybe that’s true, but now that Wiz is starting to come around to the idea, it would be wrong of us to try and stop her. If you want her to be happy, then we should let this play out,” Megumin said. Aqua retreated into a sulky silence.

After Vanir had given his stamp of approval to Duke...

Wiz had fretted and fretted some more but ultimately agreed to consider the idea with a hopeful attitude and got back to work. So now the matter was between her and Duke, and not for outsiders like us to interfere in. Or, it shouldn’t have been...

“I’m going to put that man to the test,” Aqua said, her eyes showing a steely resolve.

“And how are you going to do that? What in the world do you have in mind?”

I asked before I could stop myself.

"I'm going to make sure that guy is really as serious about Wiz as he claims," Aqua said. "And I'm going to do it by chatting him up. I'm going to pick him up like it's going out of style."

Huh?

"A-are you nuts? You wouldn't know love if it slapped you in the face, and you seriously think you're going to lead that guy around by the nose?" Forget Duke, I firmly believed she'd even have a hard time seducing a rando on the street.

"Just who do you think I am? I'm Lady Aqua, object of the devout worship of ten million Axis Church believers around the nation, beloved by all, remember? Even the neighborhood children like me! And just the other day, an old man gave me some candy. I'll just tell these two what to do, and that guy will be like putty in my hands."

I didn't know where she was getting this confidence. For that matter, what did she mean, "tell these two what to do"?

Aqua, though, ignored my doubts and went on with a beatific smile and further confidence: "After all, I've got a loli-killer who can deal critical damage to anyone with the slightest whiff of lolicon, plus Miss Lewdness herself, irresistible to any man with a hankering for some hanky-panky. If he can withstand their temptations without faltering or slipping, then I'll admit that he's all right for Wiz!"

"Just a second... 'Loli-killer'? Is that me?! I will not be party to something so stupid! You talk of testing his devotion, but I think of myself as a devoted woman, too! And I have Kazuma now, so I will not help with any seduction!"

"Yeah, and stop acting like I'm nothing without my sex appeal! I feel like your treatment of me gets worse every day! I don't exactly hate being abused, but even I'm starting to grow a little annoyed by this..."

Their objections went in one ear and right out the other for Aqua, who said, "I know neither of you has the least bit of experience with romance, but don't worry—I'll tell you everything you need to know! Just watch. You'll see I was right all along!"

"I said I wouldn't do it, okay? I'll have no part of this! Aqua, are you listening to me?!"

Aqua was being shaken by Megumin, but our Arch-priest was really talking to me.

3

The woman was so gorgeous, she looked out of place in such a run-down watering hole. *Bewitching*, that was the word for her as, wearing an expensive dress that looked like it might have cost more than this entire bar, she worked her way over to a robed man drinking quietly by himself.

"Excuse me, but is this seat taken?" she cooed, the most alluring smile she could muster plastered on her face.

"If you're here to offer me your services, I'm not interested."

You guessed it: The guy in the robe was Duke, and the woman talking to him was Darkness, acting on Aqua's instructions.

"Hey, Aqua, she went the whole nine yards, makeup and everything, and then he turned her down, saying he wasn't looking for her 'services'! Pfft!"

"Shhh, Kazuma, don't laugh. He'll notice us... Pfffft, hee-hee!"

Maybe Darkness heard us, because she got visibly redder.

Aqua and I were a short distance away, using my Ambush skill to blend in, ready to provide emergency assistance on the off chance that Darkness's little charade actually worked. She was going to be our first attempt on Duke...

"And here she got so upset when I said it was impossible for her. She swore nobles had learned all the ways into a man's heart, ha-ha!" I whispered.

"Listen, we don't have any choice. This is for Wiz. I thought she was pretty cool right up to the part where she said she would show us the aura of a true noblewoman!"

Darkness hadn't been eager to go along with this idea at first. She even tried to pin it on me, asking if I would really be all right with her chatting up another

guy, but I just said I heard being cuckolded was all the rage these days, and I wouldn't mind trying it myself—which, for some reason, made her swear that she completely empathized with me and would do everything she could to help. I guess my answer was a lot more perverted than I'd realized.

And what about Megumin, you ask? She ran off somewhere before Aqua could convince her to be part of the plan.

Aqua and I were busy whispering at a safe distance from Duke and Darkness when Darkness seemed to remember why she was there; she took on a look of renewed resolve. She then gave Duke her most beguiling smile and giggled softly. "Surely, you jest, sir. I assure you, I'm not selling anything. I'm the proprietor of a small shop here in town; my name is Lalati—"

"Oh, hey, Darkness! Wow, what the heck are you doing wearing a nice dress in a seedy bar like this? This ain't the kind of place nobles usually come to, y'know? But since you're here, O daughter of the Dustiness family, treat me to a round!"

There he was: the blond-haired punk who so often frequented this place. Come to think of it, I remembered running into him here the other day.

"Heavens, are you sure you don't have me confused with someone else? I'm —"

"What're you talking about, Lalatina? It's me, Dust! We partied up together that one time, and we've done lots of other stuff, too! Don't tell me you forgot!"

Darkness turned away from Duke, who was listening to their conversation intently; then she quietly but firmly shoved a small coin into the insistent punk's hand. She made a shooing motion; Dust didn't look entirely pleased, but he obliged and left.

Darkness pasted on a smile again and said, "...Those people who claim to know you are just everywhere, aren't they?"

"What does a daughter of the Dustiness household want with me?"

This was bad; he was already figuring it out. Aqua and I moved so only Darkness could see us and gave her the signal to give up and go home. She saw

us, but she only bit her lip and said: “I see my joke has gone a little too far. Allow me to introduce myself properly. My name is Lalatina Ford Dustiness. I’m the daughter of the governor of this town and an adventurer as well.”

I guess she’d decided to reveal her true identity as a noble and carry on with the game. She sat down beside Duke and smiled elegantly at the owner of the establishment. “Bring the finest wine you have for my companion and me.”

“I’m afraid a place as cheap as ours doesn’t stock wine, Lady Dustiness.”

“Stop that, Kazuma! Don’t laugh! Darkness is a noblewoman! She doesn’t know anything about cheap bars! It’s not her fault!”

“Then why are *you* trying so hard not to laugh? Stoppit—you’ll make me crack up!”

And it wasn’t just us: Some of the other customers were chuckling, too. Darkness was blushing to the tips of her ears. “Ahem, the most expensive thing on your menu, then...”

“One barrel of ice-cold Crimson Beer, coming right up. Thank you very much!” The owner offered Darkness and Duke mugs and set down a barrel.

That woman was useless; it was completely obvious by now what she was trying to do.

“I must say I’m impressed... You can drink this much?”

“I... Ahem... I just thought that in celebration of our meeting, I would treat this entire bar...,” Darkness said in a voice as loud as a mosquito.

Satisfied by a highly amusing scene, we snuck out of the bar (which was one giant party by now) after Darkness, who had already fled into the night.

“I am never, ever doing something like that again! Curse that Duke, humiliating a noble like me!” Darkness peeled off her white gloves and clenched them in her fist with anger.

“You self-destructed. That had nothing to do with Duke... Hee-hee!”

“Don’t do that, Kazuma! Darkness went to all the trouble of getting dressed up, and Duke hardly even noticed her! You should feel bad for her, not laugh at her! There, there, Darkness, I thought you did a good job! Especially that part

about celebrating your meeting, where you turned the whole thing into a party! If someone said something like that to me, I would definitely show them my best party tricks!"

"Arrrrrghhhh!" Darkness finally just put her head in her hands, tears welling up in her eyes. "But my temptations didn't move that man, and even knowing I was a noble didn't seem to influence him... I knew I was right. He *is* different from a certain someone who'll give in to any temptation. I'll have to rethink everything..."

She sounded so serious. Aqua put on a straight face for once and said, "Kazuma, did you get an aura of nobility from her?"

"Sorry to say, I didn't. I guess those are the special man-slaying techniques that nobles learn, but did you see anything new?" I replied, equally serious.

Darkness smacked me with her glove. "I'll kill you!"

She had finally snapped. Aqua and I made a break for it.

"Dumbass, you pushed her too far! Now she's really pissed!"

"Waaaaahhh! It was that last thing *you* said that set her off! Find a way to fix this!"

"You're *both* at fault for pushing me to this point! It'll only be worse for you if you run! Take your punishment before we get back to the mansion!"

4

When I returned early in the morning, I ran into Aqua working industriously in the garden.

"Look at you just sauntering up, you runaway NEET. Darkness didn't get you, but she got *me*, and I've never had my bangs pulled so hard."

Terrified of the enraged Darkness, I'd used my Flee skill to escape and then spent the rest of the night outside.

"Never mind me. Isn't there something kind of weird growing in this garden?"

"Oh, so you're just going to try to change the subject? I took the brunt of all of Darkness's anger for both of us, so the least you could do is be grateful."

I ignored Aqua's nagging, crouching down by the little plot of dirt. Tiny, figurine-size girls appeared to be popping out of the ground. "Hey, hold on—you really are growing mandrakes. If one of those things starts screaming here in town, it'll be big trouble. I thought you said you were going to do mandrakes *next year*."

"The seeds were so cheap, I went ahead and bought them, but I never expected them to grow so fast. I wonder what these things are, though? Actually, their faces look oddly familiar. They do say plant-type monsters mature in a hurry..."

When she said that, the pieces fell into place. "Dammit, these are Leisure Girls! Why the hell are you growing these?!"

"J-just a second! I only planted the seeds the guy sold me, all right?! He gave me a big, big discount, and since he was so nice, I never suspected he was selling me monster seeds!"

What an idiot!

"That's *why* they were so cheap! He was foisting them off on you! It wasn't enough for you to buy a 'dragon' egg that turned out to be a chicken egg—now you're growing deadly monsters in our front yard!"

"I keep telling you, Emperor Zel is not a chick! But listen, what are we going to do about these things? I just know Darkness is going to fly off the handle if she finds out we're raising monsters!"

I guess we had been a little too loud...

"Morning, Kazuma. You have some nerve, casually sauntering in like that!"

I turned toward the voice and discovered Darkness, who now knew I was home, just putting on her sandals so she could come out into the yard.

"Kazuma, Darkness is headed this way! Do something about her!"

"Personally, I don't much care if she finds out about your Leisure Girls and has them all destroyed..."

I was going to forget about the whole thing and run, but Aqua started beating me like a punching bag. “You monster! You’re a demon NEET! Do these tiny, vulnerable lives mean nothing to you?!”

“Hey, spare some of that sweetness for the undead and the demons you’re always purifying! Argh, dammit, here she comes!”

Aqua and I pointedly stood in front of the Leisure Girls so Darkness wouldn’t see them.

“I’m sorry, Darkness!” I pleaded. “I was wrong! I went a little too far, teasing you yesterday! See? I’m apologizing. Please let me off the hook!”

“That’s right, Darkness—haven’t we worried enough about yesterday? Look, I’ll make you some delicious breakfast, so just go wait inside!”

Darkness looked suspiciously at both of us. She might have bought my abject apology, but Aqua’s obsequious attitude must have raised a red flag. Only fair: Normally, Aqua would have been insisting on something like that Darkness should be equally mad at me as she had been at Aqua last night.

Darkness, now clearly smelling something fishy, glared at me. “What did you do?”

“Hey, don’t look at me! You could count on one hand the number of times I’ve caused trouble!”

So Darkness stared at Aqua instead, who instinctively looked away from her. You know, now that I think about it, Aqua has always been a really bad liar.

“Out with it! What have you done this time?!”

“Why am I responsible for something that’s everyone’s collective fault?! You need to stop assuming I’m always the bad guy!” Aqua yelped while giving Darkness a little shove in the chest to keep her at arm’s length.

“Hey, why are you so keen on getting me out of here?” A little scuffle started as Darkness tried to stop Aqua from trying to stop her, and somehow, in the middle of it all, she got a look over Aqua’s shoulder... “Hey.”

“It wasn’t me.” Aqua started by trying to deflect blame from herself, then immediately clung to the stone-faced Darkness.

“Aqua, are those Leisure Gir—?”

“No way, Darkness! These are just adorable little mandrakes that grew a little faster than I expected! I mean, I *did* buy mandrake seeds!”

I didn’t know which was more dangerous, mandrakes or Leisure Girls, but Darkness didn’t look happy at all.

“You thought you planted mandrakes?! Hell, those are hardly different from Leisure Girls! Get out of the way, Aqua! The greatest mercy we can give them is to destroy them before they’re conscious!” Darkness rolled up her sleeves and advanced to uproot the Leisure Girls.

Welp, I’d seen this one coming. We could hardly raise monsters right here in town, and this was the obvious outcome. I would even grant that Aqua probably didn’t mean any harm, but like Darkness said, it would be best to deal with them in one fell swoop...

“Stop it—I already named them! I gave them good, strong mandrake names like Dead Scream and Bloody Mary!”

“You idiot, those names only make it obvious that you *know* how dangerous mandrakes are!” I yelled. “It was stupid of me to feel any sympathy for you at all. Darkness, get those damn things out of here!”

I shoved Aqua out of the way face-first. Just then:



“Good morning. As ever, our household appears to be quite lively so early in the day. What did you do this time?”

There was Megumin, our supposed runaway, and for some reason, she was covered from head to toe in mud.

5

Megumin had taken a bath and was now stuffing her mouth full of breakfast to warm herself up.

“Where in the world did you go, Megumin? I didn’t realize you were so desperate to avoid chatting up that guy that you’d spend all night practicing your survival skills. I wouldn’t have forced you. So just don’t go putting yourself in any more dangerous situations, okay?”

“You’re quite mistaken. How much of a wild child do you think I am? Granted, I did leave the house because I didn’t wish to have to seduce anyone, but there is a good reason why I was so muddy when I came home.” She let out a breath (I wasn’t sure if she was annoyed or calm) and wiped the corner of her mouth.

“Oh, is there? What, did you see an experience-rich monster and go chasing after it? Or maybe some kids made fun of your name, and you went chasing after *them*?”

“I resent that remark! These days, there are no children in town who dare make fun of my name. I’ve dished out enough punishment to make sure of that.”

“Yes, and their parents have been complaining to us,” Darkness said. “I’m always the one who has to go over and apologize. Remember that, will you? You’re not going to do any more of that, are you?” She sounded a bit nervous. As for me, I encouraged Megumin to go on with her story while I made tea.

“As it happens, after I left the house last night, I had nowhere to go and wandered around town hoping I might bump into some adventurer I knew so I could freeload off them...”

Apparently, for pretty much the first time ever, she hadn't managed to find anyone she knew. She'd headed for the Adventurers Guild, assuming there would be someone there she recognized, but...

"Yunyun happened to be there desperately looking for someone to help her with those trials of hers, so I lent her my aid again."

"Forget the rest. I can see where this is going."

I tried to cut her off, but Megumin's eyes flashed, and she said, "Ah, but listen, Kazuma. I am capable of learning from past experiences. During our previous attempt, the riddle we were presented with in the first trial got on my nerves, and I sort of let my magic slip. This time, so there would not be any accidents if I got annoyed, I gave my staff to Yunyun before we arrived and simply tried to keep up with her after that."

"Huh." Megumin normally loved to be out in front, hogging the spotlight. Maybe she was growing up a little.

"But as it turns out, while they admitted Yunyun despite her earlier failure, I, who destroyed the entire testing area last time out, have been banned from participating as a partner. So, after consulting with Yunyun, we came up with a plan: We would sneak into the testing area at night, when no one was looking, complete the trial, and then demand that our achievement be recognized."

I guess all that maturity was just my imagination. Megumin still said the strangest things.

"So we trudged through the forest to reach the new testing area—hastily constructed in the wake of the destruction of the previous one—and this time, we resolved to confront the riddle properly. After all, our team consisted of the Crimson Magic Clan's greatest genius—myself—and her self-proclaimed rival, Yunyun. No test of intellect could stop us for long, or so we assumed."

"I have a bad feeling I already know how this story ends," I said.

Megumin wouldn't meet my eyes, which didn't increase my confidence.

"When we thought about it, we realized that since graduating from school, we'd both had only...practical experience. No matter how many times we attempted the riddle, the magical item refused to pass us, so I grabbed my staff

back from Yunyun and destroyed the testing facility... And it being nighttime, the noise attracted the local monsters..."

"Just tell me you weren't discovered by the villagers," I said nervously.

Megumin replied proudly: "Let me put your mind at ease. While we were running away from the monsters, the villagers, alerted by the explosion, came running in our direction, so Yunyun used Teleport to get us back to the village, where we acted like we didn't know anything about it and even got dinner! But incidentally, I seem to have underestimated the Crimson Magic Clan's knowledge of magic, for the next morning, they somehow discovered that I was the culprit and insisted I should compensate them for the magical item..."

"Of course they figured it out! You used explosion magic! 'Knowledge of magic,' my ass! No one else uses that spell! Why would they?!" I grabbed the invoice Megumin held out to me apologetically and gave her the money.

"I'm very sorry, Kazuma. Next time, I assure you, we'll be sneaky enough not to be noticed."

"You're learning the wrong lesson! Just stop!"

Megumin, sipping the tea I had made and seeming quite happy with it, said, "So what in the world happened here?" She looked innocent and puzzled.

6

"Wh-what are you going to do about this?"

"I'm not going to do anything. You're just as guilty as Aqua. You helped her plant that garden."

Megumin sounded suitably terrified when I told her about the Leisure Girls. "I swear I never imagined we'd gotten monster seeds..."

While Megumin tried to make excuses, Aqua tugged on my sleeve. "Kazuma, I promise I'll raise them right. All those other Leisure Girls have turned out evil because their *environment* was bad. But if you raise a purehearted creature with love, it'll grow up to be loyal and true."

Yeah, great...

"Aqua, you have to listen to me. Leisure Girls are *monsters*. They kill people every year. They're very dangerous, and they—"

"Raise them! Yeah, that's it! You've done it now, Aqua! You're actually acting smart today!" I interrupted Darkness's umpteenth attempt to bring Aqua around. Yeah, this was a great idea!

"What is it, Kazuma? What wonderful thing have you thought of now? I always knew you were the guy to go to when there was trouble. Let me in on it, pretty please!" She sounded thrilled.

With a big smile on my face, I explained: "Okay, Aqua, listen up and listen good, got it? First, we raise these Leisure Girls out here in the yard. Get 'em to multiply. Now, you know the story, right? Leisure Girls lure travelers to an easy death with their gift of gab. All that really means is they don't have any attacks. But they still give you all kinds of experience. So we raise them right here in our front yard, and we can just walk out and level up anytime we want! We just have to—"

"Ugh, it was so stupid of me to think you could help me at all, you dumb NEET! Did you drop your human heart somewhere, Kazuma? I didn't know you could sink so low!"

Gee, that seemed harsh.

"Hold on. I've heard the Crimson Magic Clan has a method they use to level up where more powerful clan members immobilize a monster, and then a weaker person finishes it off. 'Farming,' they call it. I admit, I thought it was kind of repellent when I heard about it the first time, but it's basically the same thing, right? You were the ones who were all gung ho about going to level up earlier!"

"Traditional Crimson Magic Clan farming involves risking grave danger against powerful opponents to immobilize the monster! It is nothing like your cheating excuse for leveling up!"

"H-hmm, I have to admit, it sounds awfully efficient but also kind of unethical..."

Uh-oh, I was losing my audience. Personally, I was able to countenance the idea because I knew that Leisure Girls were evil through and through from the moment they sprouted. Heck, these three ought to have had some lingering trauma in regard to Leisure Girls.

“Okay. Let’s just forget about my sweet little sproutlings for the time being and talk about how Darkness did her best seduction act last night and still got shot down. What happened there?”

“A-Aqua, I wish you would stop emphasizing that I got shot down...,” Darkness said gloomily, but Aqua was on a roll.

“Our head seductress, Darkness, had no effect on him, so now it’s time to send in our next agent, Lolimin. If even that doesn’t work, I’ll have no choice but to admit that he’s suitable for Wiz.”

“I believe I have made my objection to this scheme abundantly apparent, and also I wish you would stop calling me Lolimin! If this is so important to you, Aqua, do it yourself!”

Aqua clapped her hands. “You know, that’s not such a bad idea. If he can resist someone as beautiful and elegant as me, it would prove his devotion. Okay, Darkness might’ve been a wash, but I’ll definitely turn his head!”

“Listen, not to sound immodest, but I don’t think my womanly virtues are less than yours, Aqua! Hey, did you snort just now? Wait a second, Aqua—how low do I rank in your eyes?!”

7

That night. Back at the tavern for the zillionth time, we were scoping out a table near the wall.

“I still can’t believe she’s trying to seduce a guy. I mean, geez, she’s the worst at love out of any of us.”

Darkness nodded assiduously. “But to be fair, Aqua is rather easy on the eyes, so you never know. Even if her actual character as a woman is...well...”

“Perhaps, but all of us, including Aqua, have been chatted up in other cities. Our poor reputation precedes us in this town and somewhat hampers us, but beautiful women and young ladies of our level should really have men knocking down their doors... Why, Kazuma, do you keep smirking at me like you have something to say?!”

I ignored Megumin’s little objection, using my Ambush skill to help us remain inconspicuous. Then I activated my Read Lips ability so I could tell what Aqua and Duke said.

As we watched, Aqua padded up to Duke. For this evening, she had traded in her classic feather mantle for something that looked more like what an average girl on the town would wear. I was trying to figure out what she was doing with her weird half run, but from the way she kept swaying, I guess she thought she was being sexy.

“Hey, you handsome-ish man drinking over there. Looks like you have almost as much time on your hands as our NEET at home, so could I have a minute?”

That didn’t seem like a very nice way to talk to someone you’d just met, but at least Aqua had made first contact. I quickly conveyed the line to Megumin and Darkness; Duke looked annoyed until he saw Aqua and goggled. He looked like he was witnessing some strange creature, and I couldn’t really blame him.

Aqua mistook his reaction for something else—though I couldn’t tell what, exactly—and gave him a big smile as she slid into the seat beside him. “Goodness, are you that surprised to see a beautiful woman? Hee-hee, what a charming boy you are. I happen to know something very interesting. Well? Do you want to know, too?”

Maybe she thought she was acting like an experienced older woman. I guess this was what she thought a guy wanted. It was transparently a sales pitch, though, and I couldn’t believe she really thought this was going to work. But as I sounded out what Duke said next, I could hardly believe my ears.

“Oh? Something interesting, hmm? Very well, then. I’ll hear you out. Barkeep, get this woman a drink and put it on my tab.”

Was he insane? Hang on—why was this guy going along with whatever Aqua had turned herself into and whatever she thought she was offering...?

“Oh, well, thank you very much. I have a NEET at home who always wants me to treat him to everything, but I’m afraid he’s not here today.”

Ooh, she was gonna get it when we got home. In fact, she seemed to have forgotten the rest of us were listening. When I related their conversation to the others, I heard a chattering sound. I looked over to see Darkness and Megumin, both gone pale and shivering.

“Y-you’re kidding...,” Darkness said. “Kazuma, you’re kidding, right? He turned me down flat, but he buys *her* a drink... A-a-am I really less appealing than Aqua? I always thought of Aqua as this innocent girl who never gave off the slightest hint of femininity, but he’s practically dancing in the palm of her hand...”

“S-s-stay calm, Darkness! He’s only bought her a drink so far! Aqua is quite accustomed to having people treat her to things; there is nothing unusual yet!”

I ignored the two suddenly shaken women; Aqua and Duke’s conversation was getting good.

“So what is it you wanted to talk to me about?”

“Hoo-hoo, you do get straight to the point. All right, I’ll tell you. I heard this from a friend of mine who lives in the neighborhood—if you poke a wild Neroid in the butt with your finger, it goes *myeek!* an octave higher than normal. Bet you didn’t know that, did you?”

“.....Is that some kind of code for something? Or are you speaking a language I don’t understand?” Duke might have been listening seriously, but did I really have to convey this ridiculous conversation to the others?

“K-Kazuma, what are they saying? He looks exceedingly interested...!”

“Hey, Kazuma, is Aqua not only sexier than me but a better conversationalist, too? I’m not saying I look down on her, but I admit, I’m sort of shocked...”



I would have felt too stupid telling Megumin and Darkness what Aqua had just said, so I went back to focusing on the conversation.

“How about another one, then? The Pink Myurumyuru Shell has the word *shell* in its name, but it’s actually related to the sea anemone. When threatened, it wraps its feelers around its head like a shell and turns like a screw at a high speed. Oh, I’m sorry, is this all going over your head?”

What the hell was a Myurumyuru Shell? And why the hell would anyone care? For that matter, why was she saying something so ridiculous as if it was such a big deal? Was this how a goddess tried to pick up a guy?

“Sorry, I’ve never heard those words. In fact, I’ve hardly understood half of what you’ve been saying since I met you. And yet, I don’t think you’re trying to pull the wool over my eyes. I don’t sense any evil intentions from you. See, when humans tell a lie, no matter how small, a dark aura emanates from them. But in that respect, you look completely pure.”

“Oh, I never lie. You seem like a special one, though. An excellent judge of character, especially when it comes to women.”

“I do have some faith in my judgment, if nothing else.”

It was like he had holes for eyes.

I wanted to march right over to Duke and deliver this biting quip, but I also wondered what in the world was going on. Was Duke basing his judgments on what amounted to a deity’s holy aura?

This little twist must have left Aqua feeling better about herself, because she got back to the subject. “I have to say, it’s a real shame. Such a perceptive person, in love with a walking corpse. I’ve heard, you know, that you’re in love with an undead.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Me, love an undead?! That’s absurd! There’s nothing I hate more than undead and demons!”

.....Huh?

“What’s going on, Kazuma? What are they talking about?”

“Why did you suddenly turn pale? Did that man say something

unpardonable?"

Whoa, no, hang on—there has to be some mistake...

"Now, *here's* a man I can talk to! You are so right; undead and demons should all be destroyed! Demons are especially bad! The worst! Just the smell of one drives me up the wall!"

"I agree completely! I have an almost biological hatred of demons. I don't know why they even exist... What is that goddess Eris doing? She's supposed to be responsible for this world!"

Okay, this was getting really weird! My image of Duke was being torn to shreds...!

"You can't blame her—poor Eris just can't manage to do anything without her wonderful senior goddess around. At least, that's the rumor you should spread if anyone you know asks about it. Oh, and one more thing. Let me give you a very helpful bit of information. Eris pads her bra. That's a major point that's even in the Axis scriptures. Make sure everyone knows."

"Eris pads her bra... Ha-ha-ha, that *is* good to know! If I ever see her again, I'm going to tease the hell out of her with that little tidbit!"

"Hey, Kazuma, explain to us what's going on! It looks like they're really hitting it off!"

"Is it just me, or does Aqua look like she's having the time of her life? Is it safe to leave them together?"

I just wondered how the two of them could be so excited over such a stupid conversation.

"It's been a long time since I've gotten this excited talking about undead and demons! I'd love to treat you to another round, but unfortunately, I'm out of pocket change," Aqua said.

"Don't be silly—drinks are on me, of course. Now then, bottoms up!"

I could hardly believe it: Aqua getting along famously with a guy.

"Kazuma, the man just ordered a bunch of drinks for Aqua! This makes me look like a complete disaster!"

“Darkness, it seems Aqua was right. We were children. This is reality!”

We could only watch in complete disbelief.

“I’m going to drink myself silly!” Aqua exclaimed.

Chapter 5

The Impact of True Love for This Lich!



1

Aqua didn't come home until the next morning.

The first thing out of her mouth was: "That Duke is such a great guy. I had a wonderful time."

"A-A-A-Aqua, so you're an adult woman now...!"

"No, Megumin, Aqua was always an adult woman..."

Darkness and Megumin looked at her with awe and respect, while I decided to quiz her about what had actually happened. "So what exactly did you do last night? After it devolved into a normal drinking party, I got bored and went home. And here you are, returning in the early morning. Don't tell me you really...? I mean, did you have some 'adult' fun?"

"Why so shocked? I've always been an outstanding adult woman, haven't I? Of course I would enjoy some grown-up games from time to time."

She didn't!

"We played a game where you shake some dice in a cup and bet on the roll. I lost every round, but it was fine. And then after that, we played some kind of card game I didn't really understand. I lost every round, but it was fine."

She didn't.

"I didn't have any money on me, though, so I paid off all my losses with my body."

I couldn't contain myself. "You didn't!"

"Well, maybe *body* isn't quite the right word. Maybe *head*. Each time I lost, I gave Duke some interesting or useful information."

"Wh-why, you..."

Aqua counted on her fingers. "Like types of edible shellfish, which flowers have sweet nectar if you suck on them—all sorts of things—but it still wasn't enough. So, Kazuma, maybe you could fork over some money to make up the difference. Call it a necessary expense."

"Stop with the misleading word choices! You're gonna give me a heart attack." I handed Aqua a small pouch full of eris coins, which she put away with a grin. "That's purely to cover your losses," I said. "If you think you're going to go just one more round or make back what you lost, don't."

".....Now, just listen to me, Kazuma—gambling goes in cycles. I've already lost and lost big. That means I *can't* lose anymore. So don't you worry about a thing."

"All right, give the money back. I'll pay Duke myself." I went for the coin purse and ended up in a grappling match with Aqua.

"So, Aqua, what did you think of this Duke person? He hardly seems as loyal as we might have hoped."

"Good question. How do I put this? He does seem like a man who has a good eye for a real woman. He's a kid compared to someone like me, but I wonder if he might be a bit much for our poor, sweet little Wiz. Then again, he did claim to hate undead and demons, so maybe he's not such a bad guy deep down."

"Listen, I thought things went weird the moment he said he hated the

undead. Are you sure about this?"

Aqua snorted through her nose. "It's fine. Yes, Wiz is an undead, but she's so pure, she doesn't even smell bad, so it's really just a detail at this point!"

"Kazuma, for some reason, hearing Aqua approve of this guy immediately makes me suspicious..." Darkness said.

Funny. Me too.

"But we only checked out what kind of guy he is," I said. "In the end, it's Wiz's decision what to do about it. Besides, even with all Aqua's flirting, he only drank with her. Even I do that with the lady adventurers I know, and I wouldn't expect some disloyal lout to stop there."

"I might say that it is rather disloyal and loutish..." Megumin said, squinting at me.

"Actually, when I told him I knew Wiz, Duke gave me a message for her. It's all right! No one who hates demons can be a bad person! C'mon—let's go to the magic-item shop!" Aqua announced, still completely pumped.

2

When we got to the shop, we discovered that for whatever reason, Penguin Suit was behind the counter, working the store.

"Sacred High Exorcism!"

"Byaaaggghhh!"

"Stop exorcising Zeeleschilt every time you see him! It's such an inconvenience to have to bring him back!" Vanir said, fuming at how Aqua insisted on purifying Zeeleschilt the moment they met. Aqua seemed to enjoy exterminating the penguin.

"Forget about that! I have a message for Wiz, so bring her out here!"

Vanir gestured toward the back of the store as he revived Count Zeeleschilt yet again. "Wiz is out back, chatting with the flowers. Frankly, looking at you makes me feel awful, so go tell her whatever it is and let me enjoy myself."

Aqua, clutching what looked like a letter, headed outside.

"Hey, Vanir. You looked into the future regarding this Duke guy, right? What made you like him so much? I took him for a real man's man at first, but it turns out he hates demons and the undead. So tell me: What's going on?"

"If I told you, it would spoil the fun, wouldn't it? Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, I myself do not lie. As I foresaw, our love-addled shopkeeper shall answer that man's feelings. And when she does, one who receives blessings and happiness beyond all measure shall be born. That much is certain. I promise you a demon doesn't lie, so sit back and enjoy the show!"

Seeing how excited Vanir was about this only made me feel way, way worse. Aqua and a demon were both fans of Duke. Something felt very wrong about this.

Megumin watched with interest as Vanir reinflated the penguin suit breath by breath. "If I may ask, why was the penguin watching the store? Does he work here now?"

"Not at all, but in fact, our shopkeeper, already quite useless enough, has reached new levels of futility. Thus, I asked the ever-courteous Zeeleschilt to watch the store, but... Well, as you can see, he, too, is now quite useless."

Megumin tilted her head, not understanding what Vanir meant. "Come to think of it," she said, "I haven't yet properly introduced myself to you. My name is Megumin! Foremost magic-user in all of Axel and master of Explosion! Take care that Aqua doesn't purify you so many times that there's nothing left in your suit."

"Oh, a young lady of the Crimson Magic Clan. I'm Zeeleschilt. You might see me around the store now and again. I look forward to doing business with you." The suit shook hands—or flippers, I guess—with Megumin, who looked a bit weirded out.

"I'm Megumin. If you must refer to me, please do not address me as 'a young lady of the Crimson Magic Clan.' Use my name properly. Or do you have some comment to offer about my awesome name?"

"N-no, not at all... Names are especially important to us demons, and we only

call others by their names when we have acknowledged them as worthy.”

Megumin, who always had been sensitive about her name, leaned in close to the suit. “But you call Darkness ‘Lady Dustiness’—her proper name—do you not?”

“Oh, er, that—well, Lady Dustiness is to be recognized as a widely esteemed noble...”

Darkness grinned a little, as if she was actually sort of pleased to hear this demon say that, just as Aqua came in with Wiz and mumbled, “We’re...back...” She actually sounded kind of tired. And as for Wiz...

“Oh, Kazuma, hello.”

She somehow managed to look both melancholy and oddly excited at the same time.

“I’ve been thinking very hard since then. About whether I should accept Duke’s proposal or stay here and help Vanir’s dream come true...”

“As I have made abundantly clear more than once, this shop would do better with you as a homemaker rather than its proprietor.”

Vanir’s words went in one of Wiz’s ears and out the other as large tears welled in the corners of her eyes and she made a dramatic gesture like a tragic heroine. “Oh, to think that such a fate should befall me, when all I was doing was trying to run my shop in peace. Oh, Lady Aqua, whatever should I do? Vanir surely needs me. And yet...”

“What I need is your magic, not your business acumen or lack thereof.”

Still not really hearing what Vanir was saying, Wiz gazed out the window, putting a hand firmly to the glass. “And yet! Dear Duke does need me—rather, he can’t live without me. He told me he could think of no one else...”

“I, uh, don’t think he said that.”

“And now that he’s said that! Lady Aqua, what should I do? Which path should I choose...?”

I guess Wiz wasn’t hearing me, either. She clung to a rather annoyed-looking Aqua.

"Hrm... He seems like a good guy, and I would recommend him, I guess," Aqua said.

"Would you?! So he even passes muster in your eyes, Lady Aqua! And to think, he wants *me*..." Wiz started chuckling with uncharacteristic glee.

"Hey, what happened to Wiz?" I asked. "You fed her something weird, didn't you?"

"Be not so suspicious. Out of concern for the tragic state of my shopkeeper, I have been giving her only the best things to eat. And for some reason, my enervated employer came under the misapprehension that I was being kind to her in order to convince her to stay and continue running the shop."

I guess it wasn't easy being Vanir...

"And eventually, she got like this, huh?"

"Precisely. Day after day, her brain falls further into ruin. If nothing else, it has prevented her from ordering strange items, so she is less of an impediment to business than she used to be... But emotional attacks are rather more effective against us demons than half-baked magic, you see..."

Unaware that we were talking about her, Wiz was looking longingly at Vanir. He heaved a sigh (a remarkably human one, for a demon) and said to her, "O overly aroused shopkeep. You received the letter summoning you, did you not? So go and finish this. Then return to your usual self and fulfill your contract with me!"

Wiz asked, "...Is that your way of saying that you want me to continue running the shop, even though I always put us in the red?"

"I doubt you would listen to me if I told you to make me the owner instead." Vanir's mouth twisted in disdain, but it was the first time he had been clear about what he really wanted. He wanted Wiz to stay at the shop. At least, I figured that was what this meant.

"Prickly on the outside, soft on the inside..."

"A genderless demon such as myself is incapable of such things. Now, stop making these sickening remarks and get going. I am the all-seeing demon. Yet I

have known you quite long enough to guess perfectly well what you mean to do without using my powers. It will not be easy, but don't worry. You—I am confident—can emerge victorious. If you'll excuse me, I'm going to go place some wholesale orders..."

So apparently, he already knew what was going to happen and how it would turn out. This weirdo Duke of Hell, the alleged all-seeing demon, said, "At the end, I promise I shall appear. I have grown fond of you, and today, I believe I shall let you enjoy yourself. After which I shall consider your recent debts forgiven. Though you were once a human, you held your own with a demon like myself. You shall not now be defeated by the likes of him... Now, for hell's sake, go!!"

And then Vanir, of all things, smiled at Wiz.

"Yes, sir!"

3

The letter Wiz had gotten specified where she was supposed to meet Duke: the communal graveyard on the edge of town. Kind of a weird way to set the mood when you were going to confess your love for someone.

Reflecting on how Vanir had sounded like he was sending us out to a battle, I thought back again to what Duke had said. To be completely honest, I'd had a really weird feeling about things for a while now. It was like the puzzle just wouldn't come together, or like I'd pressed the wrong button.

This was what I thought I remembered Duke saying: "*Enough prattle! Face me in combat, Ice Witch!*"

And actually, I thought I remembered him then going on like this: "*Why, you ask? It's obvious! So that I can demonstrate my power to you and convince you to quit your job!*"

Yeah, that was how he'd proposed.

.....*Proposed?*

Hang on just a second.

Was that really a proposal?

Wiz, stumbling over herself, had responded: “Y-y-you want me to marry you...?!”

But no, he had never said anything about a marriage proposal. That was only what she had read into it.

And this was how it had ended up:

“I will take up the work on your behalf! Now, let us go! You...”

And then Wiz had teleported away, and there hadn’t been any combat.

What was wrong with this picture?!

I was still conflicted as we shuffled toward the cemetery.

“Hey, Wiz, y’know what? Duke treated me to a drink.”

“What?! Wh-what do you mean by that, Lady Aqua?! I thought everyone said he was single-minded and loyal...!”

He’s just proposing. He’s just confessing his love.

“Well, I thought I might find out just how loyal he really was. I guess he couldn’t resist the allure of someone overflowing with charm like myself. We drank together till dawn. But don’t worry—he never made a move on me. He never even gave off the evil vibes I get from Kazuma every single day.”

“O-oh, I see... But don’t worry, Lady Aqua—I’ve already decided on my answer.”

Vanir’s attitude bugged me, too. Here’s what he had said: *“You shall respond to this man’s affections. And when you do, one who receives blessings and happiness beyond all measure shall be born!”*

You might normally assume that meant Wiz and Duke would be happy together, right? But since when had a demon like him ever actively tried to make others happy?

“Oh yeah? To be fair, he succumbed to my charms, but he didn’t even blink when Darkness the Oversexed tried to make a move on him. So he gets some

loyalty points there.”

“O-oh, is that right...?”

“Aqua, quit dragging me into this!”

As I went along, lost in thought, Megumin tapped me on the back. “What in the world is the matter? You seem to have been in your own head ever since we left the shop.”

“...It’s just, I’ve got the worst feeling about this whole thing... I hope it’s only my imagination, but I worry we’re in for a bloodbath.”

Megumin giggled like I was overthinking the whole thing. “It’s quite all right. I do not know how strong this Duke character is, but we’ve defeated every opponent we have encountered, as you know. And besides, today we have Wiz, an unfairly powerful Lich, with us. And what’s more”—she smiled in an effort to relieve my anxiety—“we have not yet met the opponent I cannot blow away with my Explosion. You will be safe, Kazuma; have no fear.”

“Y-yeah, thanks...”

It was nice of her to say, but my personal safety wasn’t exactly what I was worried about...

4

So there we were in the communal graveyard just outside Axel. Come to think of it, this was where we’d first met Wiz. I guess that gave it a mood, sort of...

“...Nah. No it doesn’t.”

“Huh? What doesn’t what?”

When we got to the appointed place, Duke was already there waiting for us. He was wearing a weathered robe and cape, definitely not dressed like he was ready to get down on one knee. When he saw we’d come with Wiz, he looked surprised. “Kazuma Satou coming here is one thing, but I see several faces I recognize in this crowd. The Dustiness girl and...ah, my good friend who chatted with me about Myurumyuru Shells until dawn...”

Seriously, what the hell were Myurumyuru Shells? And “friend”? When the hell had he and Aqua gotten so close?

Duke gave Aqua a genuinely affectionate look, but then he snapped back to himself and turned to Wiz. Unlike Duke in his robe, Wiz was in the same fancy dress she’d worn the other day.

“Not that it behooves me to ask this, but are you sure you want to do this in that getup?”

“I’m embarrassed to say, I’m not used to being in this sort of situation, but this is my battle dress...,” Wiz said, and she did sound a bit ashamed of herself.

Duke simply nodded. “Pardon me, then. I thought perhaps you were mocking me.”

“N-not at all! You’re the first person I’ve ever dressed this way for... I’m sorry; I’m not used to wearing it...” Wiz’s shoulders slumped, and she sort of shrank down, producing an instant of surprise on Duke’s face.

“I see. Any adventurer who makes a name for themselves is likely to have their catcallers, but you... The name you made was too great. The average adventurer would quail before the mention of the Ice Witch.”

“Y-you’re right! You’re so right! Everyone’s so afraid of me...! But I’m not really that bad...!” Wiz almost had tears in her eyes.

Duke drew back. “Oh-ho?! I—I see... I’m not entirely sure what you’re saying, but it sounds like you’ve had it rough yourself...” Duke may not have understood, but I thought I did: According to Vanir, Wiz had been a little *too* famous as an adventurer, and it scared people off from trying to get together with her.

Then Duke composed himself, giving Wiz an unlikely smile. “Let us get down to it, then. We need no more words between us. Or do you mean to flee again?”



Wiz, who normally seemed grown-up but a little twitchy, said, “I won’t run away. This time, I’m going to tell you how I feel, Duke.”

“Ah!”

Now Wiz crossed her arms in front of her, looking straight at Duke as she said, “I’m not going to quit my work. I won’t budge on this point.” A shy look came over her.

“I have an agreement with a strange but long-standing friend of mine whom I refuse to abandon.”

She sounded so certain, so unshakable. Duke smiled, ready for battle, and stared straight at Wiz.

“You who were once called the Ice Witch, who led the supreme adventuring party. You, who have descended to the state of undeath yet still pursue the quintessence of the magical path. My name is Duke. I, like you, shall someday master the ways of magic. O Lich, Queen of the Undead! I challenge you to combat!”

He was shouting now.

5

“*Inferno!*”

“*Freeze Gust!*”

In an open space near the communal graveyard, a massive wall of flame met a whirlwind of mist and ice.

Duke’s fire magic slammed into Wiz’s ice magic, and believe me, it wasn’t good for the landscaping. Parts of the immediate area were covered in frost, while others were on fire.

Holy crap—this was an intense magical battle...!

“Yo, Aqua. I can’t tell you how moved I am by this. This is what I’ve wanted all along. *This is fantasy!* Not flying vegetables or anchovies growing in the ground

or sexy monsters who lure people into traps! Real, actual magic! That's what you're supposed to find in a fantasy world!"

"Just a moment, Kazuma. When you say it like that, it would seem to imply that explosion magic is not real magic. You see a spell far more incredible than these puny sparks every single day!" There was Megumin, raining on my parade.

"I don't care if it can take out every enemy in a single blast. One-hit kills aren't the kind of magical battle I'm after. It doesn't *feel* like a real magic showdown. It's completely unbalanced. It's just a gamble where you try to be the first one to land a hit."

"Excuse me?!" Megumin was just about to fly off the handle, but I didn't care about that right now. The fantasy battle I'd always wanted was unfolding right before my eyes, and I wasn't going to miss a second of it!

"Grrr, I knew this wouldn't be easy, Ice Witch! *Crimson Laser!*"

"*Crystal Prison!* Duke, wait! Please, we can talk about this!"

The red beam Duke shot was intercepted by a ball of ice that appeared in front of Wiz, the light scattering everywhere. I'd had a chance to see all kinds of advanced magic when I was at Crimson Magic Village, but there was something special about witnessing two accomplished mages really going at it. I was just marveling at how it was like something right out of an anime when I heard a familiar incantation beside me, and I jumped to stop Megumin.

"What the hell is wrong with you?! Why can't you just stand still and watch this wonderful moment?!"

"Because you insist on showing more interest in those ridiculous tricks than in Explosion, Kazuma! When I see your eyes sparkle like that at the spells of other wizards, it makes something very deep in my chest ache! I didn't even feel this way when I thought you were going to give in to Darkness's temptations!"

"*That's* what you get jealous over?! This battle is between the two of them! Stay out of it!"

She probably thought she could butt in and reap the juicy rewards with Explosion. Megumin's eyes were alright, but I managed to grab her before she

could finish her incantation and wrestled her to the ground, ignoring her struggling.

Duke and Wiz darted here and there, shielding themselves behind trees and launching their magic at each other. This was more than just them trading blows...

“Why won’t you attack me like you mean it?! Are you making fun of me? *Lava Swamp!*”

“*Freeze!* *Fire Resist!* Owww, that’s hot...! I don’t want to destroy you any more than I want to quit my job! Liches are very good at resisting magic! I’ll endure anything you can throw at me until you have no choice but to give up!”

The rocks around Wiz’s feet had turned into a molten swamp; she chilled it with *Freeze*, then used another spell to heighten her resistance to fire and help her escape. Duke was chanting spells as fast as he could form the words, but Wiz was a better strategic user of her magic.

“Hey, Kazuma, as a Crusader, I’m not sure I can just stand by and watch this. Wiz really doesn’t seem to want to be part of this battle. Maybe I should—”

“*Bind* ! Just shut up and watch! Anyway, I’m on to you. You probably want to jump into the middle of an advanced magic duel in the hopes of getting hit by a powerful spell!”

“Hrk...! To be bound in the middle of a situation like this... You always know how to get me going...!”

I used *Bind* to stop Darkness from putting the brakes on my battle, then shouted to Wiz: “Wiz, I think it’s time to get serious! It would be unfair to Duke if you didn’t!”

Plus, I want to see an even crazier battle!

“What are you talking about? What’s wrong with you?!” Aqua demanded. “We should be helping Wiz, not screwing around with Megumin and Darkness!”

I judged, though, that Wiz had the upper hand. And since she wasn’t in any danger of being defeated, I was going to burn this sight into my retinas. As a lifelong gamer, I owed it to myself!

"I hear you, Kazuma; I do! But imagine how I feel, when the person who was so bent on romancing me just a few minutes ago suddenly attacks me...!" Wiz sounded beyond despondent.

But at that moment, Duke, who had desperately been slinging spells until then, got a look of real resolve on his face. "I knew you were holding out on me! Well, I won't let you! Try this on for size! *Sanctuary!*"

With that, he unleashed a circle of holy magic large enough to encompass the entire cemetery.

"Whaaaat?! Owwww!"

Wiz didn't have time to react, and she took the full brunt of the spell. Particles of light floated gently around the circle, glowing every time they touched Wiz's body.

"A holy magic circle? Hey, Aqua, Arch-wizards can't do that, can they?"

"Well, duh. The only ones who can create holy magic circles are priests, Arch-priests, and Crusaders. But Duke was using advanced magic, too. I wonder why he can create that circle..."

While we had our little question-and-answer session, Duke glared at Wiz and held up his hands. He must have been putting more magic into the circle, because the flow of particles got stronger.

"Hrrrgh...! Duke, please remember! Remember the day we first met! How you tore off your robe and tried to present me with your naked body...!"

"Don't put it like that—people will get the wrong idea! There's an audience here, so I'm keeping my clothes on, but there was an explanation for that!"

I recalled that when Aqua had used a similar circle of holy magic on Wiz, she had started to disappear immediately. I guess Duke's magic wasn't quite as strong as Aqua's. Wiz braced herself against the light, continuing to try to appeal to Duke. "And then the next time we met, you said to me... You said, 'I have studied you, have thought only about you. I have focused single-mindedly on training myself.' And 'I know everything about you! I understand you better than anyone in this world!' No one has ever thought about me so hard for, for any reason...!"

"What are you saying?! Ahhh, forget it. Fight like you mean it already! Even you will disappear at this rate!" Duke looked a little disturbed, but he was more upset about Wiz's refusal to fight back.

Wiz sounded like she was comforting a small child. "Truthfully, I was almost happy to hear you would go so far for me. But no matter what you say, you won't convince me to quit my job. And I still don't know you very well. So...

"...perhaps we could start by being friends...?"

The whole area went silent. Duke looked like he was trying to process what in the world he had just heard.

"You did it! Way to go, Wiz! You're right; it's way too soon to be getting married!" Aqua exclaimed.

Duke just gasped. "Huh?"

Being set back on his heels seemed to drain the power out of the magic circle, which faded and disappeared.

"Hmm, I guess all's well that ends well, Duke, right? I was just, ahem, testing you when I tried to chat you up the other day. Please don't assume I'm easy. I'm glad for your sake that at least Wiz didn't completely shoot you down."

".....Huh?"

Darkness was chuckling, but Duke still sounded like he couldn't believe his ears.

"Frankly, I believe Wiz has worked even harder than you. But, Duke, was it? I shall put your mind at ease. You appear to be laboring under some sort of misapprehension, but Wiz has quit her job exorcising ghosts for the real-estate agent and no longer comes to this cemetery to comfort the spirits here. So you need not worry on that account."

".....Huh?"

Megumin sort of smiled, but Duke just looked like he didn't know what the hell we were talking about. "You keep talking about friends and marriage and concerns, but what in the world do you mean?" he said. "I swear I don't have the foggiest idea what you're saying." He did seem completely flummoxed, his

face the picture of confusion and doubt.

“What are we talking about? What are *you* talking about? I think Wiz is being pretty clear. She’s telling you she can’t just drop everything, quit her job, and marry you but that she’s happy to start by being friends. Lucky you. I guess you sort of got shot down, but there’s still hope.”

Duke seemed to take a second to process what Aqua was telling him, but then he started to tremble...! “A-are you all complete imbeciles?! Why in the world would I even contemplate marriage to a Lich, an *undead*?! It makes no sense! And *friends*?! That’s the worst joke I’ve ever heard!”

“What?!” Wiz cried, shocked, while Aqua and the others went visibly pale.

“Hey now, just because she didn’t say yes is no reason to get all mean! This is on you for trying to rush her! I mean, who in their right mind would want to jump straight into marriage?! Just accept being friends like a good boy!”

“As I said! Why would you assume I have any affection at all for this woman? Is there something wrong with you?! This is only the third time I’ve ever even seen her—do you realize that?!” Duke’s eyes were bloodshot.

Megumin gave a snorting laugh. “Says Wiz’s stalker! Says the man who demanded she quit the magic-item shop and enter his household in marriage!”

“Huh?” Duke looked at the sky as if trying to make sense of this; then he put his hands over his face. “...The work I referred to was her position as a general of the Demon King...”

“.....Huh?” Now it was Megumin’s turn to sound surprised.

Duke’s voice was as quiet as a fly. “I said, I meant her job as a general of the Demon King. I couldn’t care less about her magic-item shop...” He looked profoundly tired as he shrugged off his cape.

Everyone but Aqua and me sort of looked away from him, but suddenly, Wiz spoke up. “What?! Th-that’s the Demon King’s...!”

That was when I realized there was a sigil I didn’t recognize emblazoned on Duke’s chest. Wiz seemed pretty shocked by it, but the rest of us were looking at something else.

“Argh! You’ve been a fallen angel all this time?! Just when I thought you were one of those rare people who hated demons and undead, it turns out you’re one of those fools who turned their back on the gods!”

“C-cram it! What about *you*? I thought I’d finally found someone who hated the undead and demons and even the goddess Eris as much as I did. But look at the way you’re dressed! You were a damn priest all along?!”

On Duke’s exposed back was a pair of pitch-black wings. If Aqua was right, then I guess this guy used to be an angel. The emblem of the Demon King on his chest showed that this particular angel had fallen and was now serving the arch-fiend himself.

Aqua puffed out her chest at the enraged Duke, looking more pleased with herself than ever. “Dummy, who do you think I am? A fallen angel like you should bow before me! My name is Aqua! The very deity of the Axis Church, worshipped by twenty million followers the country over! The goddess Aqua herself!”

Duke’s eyes went wide...! “Huh. Just another mouthy broad...”

“Hold it right there!” Aqua, almost in tears, suddenly realized something. “Wait a second, you sneaky sneak! Now I get why you were able to use holy magic! So you turned your back on the gods, but you’re willing to use their incredible power to get yourself out of a pinch?! Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?!”



“I—I said shut up already! The gods think nothing of making us angels do whatever they want! If I use a bit of their power, it’s only fair! Think of it as making up for my unpaid salary! You all probably don’t know it, but every single goddess I’ve ever met is—”

But that was as far as he got.

Laughter rang out, laughter that managed to sound evil and arrogant and mocking all at once. As it echoed around the cemetery, I thought, *When did he get here?*

“Welcome to our little frontier town, O you who aspire to be a general of the Demon King without knowing your own limits. An always-pitiful errand boy of the divine has made himself more pathetic still by falling from grace!”

There he stood, a tall man dressed in an impeccable tuxedo, his face hidden by a mask. The All-Seeing Demon, Duke of Hell, the great Vanir stood on the highest ground in the cemetery, looming over us.

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"I see I'm just in time for the juiciest part! Ah, to think, I almost missed the main event!" Vanir said teasingly. Main event? What was he talking about?

“Master Vanir, this is a matter between Wiz and me. You may be a former general of the Demon King, but I urge you not to intervene.” Duke looked quite concerned; maybe he was worried about Vanir.

And then:

“...You tricked me?”

Wiz had her eyes on the ground, ignoring the intruder.

"I never tricked you. I challenged you from the start with the intention of taking your place as a general of the Demon King. I grant, I did try to take off my clothes the first time we met. I was going to display this emblem and explain my intentions."

Duke seemed willing to offer a reasonable explanation for everything, but Wiz didn't look up. "I... I thought you were proposing to me... I thought someone was saying they loved me for the first time in my life..."

"O-oh, well... I—I do feel somewhat bad about that. But if I may say so, you seem to have jumped to conclusions yourself. No one would ask someone to marry them after only meeting them three times."

He wasn't wrong.

No, he wasn't wrong, but he also wasn't reaching Wiz in her current state.

"I—I was consumed with trying to decide whether I should take a leave of absence from the shop or what I should do. I thought so hard about it...! But I felt bad for Vanir and came here intending to turn you down...! Are you happy, playing with the heart of a Lich who's just a little late to the game?! I won't forgive you! I've never been so humiliated! This is worse than when Vanir and I fought back when I was a human, and he left me practically in pieces! I w-was so sure you were proposing, and now...!"

"—! —!! Mmmm-ha! Mmmm-bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!" Wiz was extremely agitated, but Vanir seemed to find something hilarious, laughing so intensely, the sound struggled to escape his mouth at times. He was rolling on the ground, he was so overcome with mirth.

"Vanir, *what* is so funny? Don't tell me...you *knew* this would happen! Oh! Was this what you meant when you said that one who receives happiness beyond all measure would be born?! Did you mean *yourself* as you feasted on my anguish?!"

"Bwaaa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Mmmmwaaaa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! This is paradise! I haven't felt bad vibes so intense in ages! Delicious! Delectable!! Bwa-ha-ha-ha!"

"Vanir!" Wiz yelled with tears in her eyes.

"L-look, I'm sorry about amusing this demon, too! But this isn't entirely my fault! If you didn't live in the middle of a bustling city, I might have been able to show you my emblem when we first met and challenge you properly. Then this misunderstanding would never have happened. Yeah, that's right. The way

you've fled your responsibility to take up residence in a human town shows you aren't suited to be the king's general!"

Wiz looked scandalized by this invective. "It was never my choice to be the Demon King's general! His Majesty begged me to do it because there was no one else with enough magical power to sustain the barrier around his castle! And yet, you call me a coward...!"

"If the charge is unjust, then prove it to me! The Demon King's generals have been whittled down, and now the barrier of which you speak is in danger! What's more, even the fortress that stood on the front lines in the battle against humanity has fallen, and the underwater project pursued for so long has failed."

Hmm...?

"And when I dug up what information I could, I discovered that pathetic-looking young man was somehow connected to all of it. I first took him to be beneath my notice—he was murdered by kobolds, after all—but you see where it got me. Yes, I'm talking about you, Kazuma Satou."

It was starting to look like I was suddenly the center of attention.

"I seem to remember that when we met at that tavern, you said you were rooting for me. But now I see you were only trying to get me to let my guard down, and you've even brought Master Vanir to help close the net. Heh-heh, a clever plan indeed."

In other words, while I had been stumbling around, trying to figure out what the heck was going on, Duke had been dreaming up this plan he *thought* I was following. I mean, I didn't really care; it was no skin off my nose. Maybe I should even play along, say something like, *I'm impressed you figured it out.*

"I've already reported all of this to His Majesty. Before long, this town will be subject to the greatest attack the Demon King's army can muster."

"You've gotta be kidding me."

Hell of a thing for a guy to do. Just when my life was settling down and I thought I could get started on my harem...!

I was thoroughly disappointed, but Duke smiled...

Just as he was about to say something else, though, he was blown forcefully backward.

I didn't know exactly what had happened, but I saw where Duke went.

"Ouch..."

He had been slammed square into one of the tombstones. He rose unsteadily to his feet and looked over to Wiz, who was standing with her palm outstretched; she seemed to have cast the magic spell without even an incantation.

"The biggest attack the king can muster? On this town? ...He's going to target us?" Wiz sounded completely detached—cold, even. Just then, something grabbed my collar. It was Aqua, looking more than a little frightened and watching Wiz and Duke from safely over my shoulder.

"H-hey, Kazuma, does this sound as bad to you as it does to me? I think the time for enjoying our little games is over. Set me free from this Bind." Darkness was squirming under the ropes, but I couldn't deal with her right now.

I'd only seen Wiz look so composed on one other occasion.

"S-so you're finally ready to get serious, huh? I've gotta say, I knew you Liches were impressive. To unleash power like that without even an incantation, you sure haven't been wasting all that ti—" But before Duke could finish, he was hit by what must have been an invisible ball of magic and slammed into the tombstone again.

To mention Wiz's age when she was already about to lose it—maybe this guy wasn't as smart as I'd thought.

"Kazuma, I don't like the way those clouds are moving. Personally, I do not object to being all tangled up with the one I love, but as I am not Darkness, perhaps you could release me soon? I must be ready to unleash my magic at any time..."

"If I let you go, you'd just spoil the whole moment by dropping an explosion on their heads. It's all right—when Wiz gets like that, she can handle anything.

Just you watch.”

I took my own advice and looked to see what would happen next.

Like I said, I’d seen this once before, back in Arcanletia, when one of the Demon King’s generals, Hans, admitted to eating the old guy who looked after the hot springs. One of Wiz’s conditions for not attacking members of the Demon King’s army was that they not harm civilians. And when Hans broke that rule, she blew him into a million pieces.

I was clenching my hands into fists, thrilled about the huge battle I was sure was about to go down, when Vanir appeared beside me. “Young man, do not look away from what is to follow. I, the All-Seeing Demon, proclaim you shall presently see the most wonderful of wonderful things.”

Vanir sounded ecstatic, and I couldn’t help grinning. He’d been all gung ho about Wiz becoming a bride, but he considered Wiz fighting to protect Axel something even more wonderful. I was surprised to realize that maybe Vanir was a bit like me—not always completely open about how he felt.

“Grrrr! I— *Infern* —”

“*Cursed Crystal Prison!*”

Before Duke could get off the fiery blast he was aiming for, Wiz encased him in a prison of ice, her attitude as cold as her magic the entire time. Not all of him, just the top half. No longer able to talk—or breathe, for that matter—Duke started to smash himself against the ground, going pale. But it didn’t so much as scratch the magical ice, and eventually he started to get tired...

“Do you surrender?” Wiz asked. Her voice was so quiet, I wondered if it would even reach Duke under all that ice. But he turned a desperate look on Wiz and nodded as best he could, wobbling the entire time.

Freed from the ice, Duke coughed profusely, then slumped to the ground.

Aqua ran over to Wiz, obviously thrilled. “Way to go, Wiz! Pushing a guy to the brink of death because he shot you down. Now, *that’s* what I call getting even!”

“Hold on, Lady Aqua—I didn’t do it to get even!” Wiz protested.

I let out a breath, glad to see her back to her normal self. "Yo, Vanir, why didn't you let Wiz know she had it all wrong? It didn't have to get this crazy. They could've had a little duel, and that would have been the end of it," I said.

"You know what? He's right!" Darkness added. "Hey, Vanir, thanks to you, I had to try and seduce that guy!"

Vanir, though, looked perfectly amused by our complaints. "As if I care. All things I do, I do for the indulgence of my own appetites. Yes, I would say if you, O young man who has it in his head that he's going to have a harem now that a couple of young ladies like him, were to one day be run out on because you had exhausted their affections, I would consider that the utmost delicacy."

"H-hey, quit it. Seriously, I mean it... I'll buy something the next time I'm in the shop, so just..."

My voice was barely audible. Vanir cackled. "What's more... This situation is not quite resolved."

"Huh?" That made me look over at Duke... "H-hey, what the hell is he doing?!" I exclaimed, unable to believe what I was seeing. While we had been having that ridiculous conversation, Duke had constructed a hasty magic circle and for some reason was driving a black knife into his own chest.

"And he's done it! Behold, young man! He pretended to surrender to buy himself the leeway to enact one of magic's most secret rituals and become a Lich himself! Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha, to think that the lust for power would lead him to become one of the undead he himself hated and mocked so recently! Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha, this is the highest form of comedy!"

Great... We're in the middle of a crisis, and he's having the time of his life!

Duke already seemed to be giving Wiz a run for her money before he became a Lich. And now...

"You shouldn't have let your guard down, Wiz. Ngah...! Behold this burgeoning magical power... Ahhh, I feel it spreading through my body from the stab of the dark knife...! I can feel it sucking the life from my cells, transforming them into flesh imperishable! Fallen though I may have been, I was still an angel, and I hoped against hope I would not have to do this... But so be it. Let us

two immortals begin our endless war—!”

...He had become the most powerful undead around!

“Sacred Turn Undead!”

“Hgggyaaahhhhh!”

And there it was.

The instant Duke completed the transformation to Lichdom, the totally oblivious Aqua blew him away with purification magic.

Duke screamed and started to grow transparent. Wiz approached him calmly, clearly sad for him, and offered her hand.

“Wh-wh-wh-what’s happening...?! I’m supposed to be a Lich! The most powerful of the undead...!”

“I can’t believe this has happened to you, and after you only just met me... At the very least, I want to help you move on to the next life as painlessly as possible. *Drain Touch...*”

The magic started to drain out of Duke from right where Wiz was touching him, and he grew even more transparent. “Stop that! Stop that right now! No—this is a misunderstanding! You’ve got it all wrong, I tell you!” He was practically throwing himself at Wiz, who must have looked to him like his last, best hope as he realized he was fading away.

“A misunderstanding? You went so far as to make yourself a Lich... What misunderstanding could there possibly be?” Wiz was normally a soft touch, but now her eyes had a steely glint; she refused to be taken in by Duke’s chatter.

“Well, uh, the whole Lich thing, for starters! I, uh, I made myself a Lich because... I know! It wasn’t so I could get revenge on you; it was so we could walk the same path together as undying creatures!”

He had obviously come up with that on the spot in hopes of appealing to the softhearted Wiz. “G-gracious... No, you won’t fool me so easily, not even with such sweet nothings!”

Actually, it looked like he had a pretty good chance...

Even Duke seemed surprised by how well his performance was going, but then he snapped back to himself. “I-I’m not trying to fool you, I swear! My battle with you has opened my eyes to true love. Heh, I mean, of course I won’t propose marriage right away or anything; that would be silly. I just wish we could start out by being friends, just like you said!”

“S-start out as friends...?”

Crap, our late-blooming Lich friend was becoming putty in the hands of this glam-rock fallen angel. I was starting to think the smart move would be to let Megumin blow him away before Wiz completely fell for him.

Not even bothering to hide the eager twitch of his lips, Vanir shouted to Wiz: “O easily deceived soft-touch shopkeeper, I give you a word of advice. Just like demons, angels lowly enough to fall have no gender!”

At that, Wiz slammed into Duke, screaming out an incantation.

“No! Wait, I—I!” Duke was trying to get a word in edgewise when—

“Expllosion!!”

As Vanir exploded with hilarity, rolling around and laughing so hard that he could barely breathe, Wiz dropped an explosion right on Duke’s head!



Epilogue



It was a rare sight: the door of Wiz's Magical Item Shoppe had a sign on it saying **CLOSED**.

"Waaaaahhh! It's awful; it's just too muuuuch!" Inside, Wiz was bawling her eyes out, while beside her, Vanir was still trying desperately not to laugh. Come to think of it, I'd never seen Vanir as happy as he had been lately. I guess he was really enjoying the daily influx of bad vibes.

"Hey, Wiz, c'mon. Here, I brought you some vegetables from our garden, so chin up, okay? Don't worry—you're a good person deep down. I'm sure you'll find the one for you someday."

That got Wiz to look up from where she was splayed out across the counter, at least for a moment. "*Sniff...sniff...* Lady Aqua... You mean it? Right now I feel like I'm just...walking in place..."

"Well, that's fine. I mean, you're immortal. So you don't have to settle because you're afraid of growing old. That's terrific for you, isn't it?"

I thought that sounded like pretty cold comfort, but Wiz's face brightened. "Y-yes, you're right; I don't age! I don't have to worry, and I don't have to compromise!"

"You do not grow old physically, true enough, but for bureaucratic purposes, your age does continue to increase."

"Listen, you weirdo demon, you didn't have to say that!" I yelled. "You'll make

Wiz cry again!"

I felt bad for Wiz and all, but I had to admit that, there in the noisy shop, I heaved a sigh of relief. Things were finally back to normal.

Duke had claimed that the Demon King's army was going to storm this town, but at the moment, our peaceful town of novice adventurers seemed like it couldn't be quieter. No sign of an impending attack anywhere. I was really hoping I could just keep on living my life...

But right then:

"Argh, that's enough pitiful whining out of you, you lovelorn shopkeeper! Dry your tears and get back to work minding the store! Are you going to fulfill your promise to me or not? Do you realize how many centuries it will take to build my dungeon if we don't sort out this store? I may be immortal myself, but my dungeon will be pointless if humanity goes extinct before I can build it!"

"I know, I know; you don't have to tell me... The fate of a Lich is such that even if she was to be joined to another in matrimony, that person would inevitably pass away, leaving her alone... After humanity goes extinct, I'll be here, all by myself..."

Wiz was still sniffling, obviously overwhelmed by everything that had happened. "Gods." Vanir sighed. "You are not the only immortal around. Us demons, for example, do not age or die. Until that day when my dungeon is complete and some adventurers strike me down, I at least shall be around, so compose yourself, O friend of mine."

Wiz looked up at that. "...So you're saying that if your dungeon never gets built, you'll be here for me forever, Vanir?"

"Okay, I see that I'm going to have to usurp your ownership of this shop if I'm ever going to realize my goal. Very well, I suppose I haven't been taking this as seriously as I might. It's been a while since I had to apply myself to something!" Vanir grabbed Wiz by the collar and dragged her out of the store.

"Wait, Vanir, forget what I said! I'm sorry! I apologize! I'll try my hardest! I'll do my very best, so please forgive me!" Winter was on its way, and the air was crisp and clear. Wiz's tearful shout could probably be heard all over Axel...

“That’s terrific! All’s well that ends well.”

“What part of that was ‘terrific’?”

We were on our way home from the magic-item shop. We weren’t in a hurry to get back, making little detours to do some shopping and eat.

“Marriage... Darkness, as the only daughter of a noble household, you feel this is a subject that concerns you, do you not?” Megumin said.

Darkness’s eyes began to brim (most suspicious). “M-my father is wonderful and understanding, so I guess I have a little more freedom than a lot of nobles in that respect... But maybe I am getting to an age where I have to start thinking about it. Of course, if we’re going by age, maybe we should start with Aqua...”

“Hey, Kazuma, let me tell you something interesting that I learned lately. Listen to this: So in Darkness’s room is this *hilarious* diary of her time with us. But that’s not what I want to tell you about; I want to tell you about the weird little device she keeps hidden under the diary. It’s this thing she dreamed up that—”

“Aqua, uh, come here for a second! I always keep my room locked, so how’d you get in?! And how much do you know?” Darkness dragged off Aqua, never to finish her interesting story.

Just as the mansion was coming into view, Megumin said, “Kazuma, how many children do you hope to have?”

“Hrk!” I just about choked. *That* had come out of left field.

Truth be told, I don’t have anything against kids. In fact, I kind of like them. But just the other day, I’d bought a few protective items from Vanir, and I’m not talking about armor. Just in case.

While I was still trying to decide what the right answer to Megumin’s question was, we discovered there was someone standing at our front door. A Crimson Magic Clan member, holding a generous souvenir.

Of course, there was only one person who was conscientious enough to bring us a gift like that every time we helped her.

“Well, if it isn’t Yunyun. Let me guess: You came for a visit, but when you

found we were not here, you waited for us? What shall we do to amuse ourselves today? I am all fired up after seeing someone else's Explosion Magic for the first time in a very long while. Perhaps we should go to the lake and see which of us can catch the most fish..."

Yunyun, though, appeared troubled. I knew that look. This was the part where I got dragged into something dangerous. That's right—I could learn, too.

"Um, ahem... Kazuma, sir, well, I'd like to ask you—"

Yep, there it was.

But Megumin stepped forward as if to shield me. Her eyes glowed crimson, and she stood practically nose to nose with Yunyun, staring her down. "What exactly do you want with Kazuma? Out of all the people in the world, you are forever relying on this man and this man only—you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"But I've failed the trials twice and it's all because of you and I have no one left to turn tooooo!"

Yunyun's shout seemed to carry all the way up to the big blue sky...

Afterword

Thanks so much for buying Volume 13 of *Konosuba: God's Blessing on This Wonderful World!*!

Time sure flies. I made my debut as an author with this series, and now I've been in this league for four years. Now that I've joined the ranks of veteran authors, I can get away with forcing editorial to indulge some of my whims. For example, if I tell them to go to an alternate world and bring me a real, live goblin because I need it as research material to write the best possible book? They jump to it. If I asked them to rent out Shinjuku Station for a day so I could play hide-and-seek there, they'd probably go along with that, too.

Compared with that, getting them to let me go without deadlines so I can just be a total NEET for a while is... Well, it's as off-limits as stealing candy from a baby. Sorry. I'll keep working.

So anyway, this volume was mostly about Wiz and Vanir. The two of them have a relationship that seems a bit like the one between Kazuma and Aqua, but one of them has no gender, so I guess it's not exactly the stuff of a romantic comedy. And thus, our late-blooming shopkeeper will forever be (etc., etc.).

So with that, the next volume will feature the Crimson Magic Clan. Will our retiring young lady be saved, or will she have to go back on her claims that she's the rightful chief of the clan? Be sure to pick up the next book and find out!

Oh yeah, and I've got a new series out called *Combatants Will Be Dispatched!*

It's about these combatants, low-level goons in an evil organization that wants to take over the world, and how they're dispatched to other planets to find new places to invade. These surgically augmented combatants battle the Demon King with modern weaponry, so I guess it's a fantasy thing. If that sounds interesting to you, I hope you'll pick it up!

And with that, I think this volume represents my high-water mark in terms of

causing problems for everybody, but it still somehow got out the door. It's completely thanks to all my helpers and collaborators, starting with Kurone Mishima-sensei. I'm so grateful to everyone involved for making sure this book reached you, my readers.

And as ever, my deepest gratitude goes to all of you for reading this book!

Natsume Akatsuki

AFTERWORD





To take on the famously brutal trials of the Crimson Magic Clan, you need one thing in particular.



Hey, Kazuma, you think we should bring some dried snacks along?



And that thing is a companion you can count on!



That'd just dry out our throats, Aqua. Let's bring some fruit, too.



I can make water come out of my hands, so we don't even have to bring drinks!

COMING SOON!!

And, um, I could really use one of those...!



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

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