



KONOSUBA: GOD'S BLESSING ON THIS WONDERFUL WORLD!

Crimson
Fate

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Here I was on my best behavior, yet it seemed like she was downright suspicious of me.

I thought back to the first time this woman and I had met. She'd been in Arcanletia, talking to the Deadly Poison Slime Hans (a known general of the Demon King) about a plan to destroy the city. In other words, she was definitely related to the Demon King's army somehow, and I probably shouldn't have let down my guard...

"If I may ask, what brings you here? I seem to recall you said something about being an adventurer. You know it's all big, scary monsters around here? I hate to sound rude, but I can't say you look very strong. Are you sure you'll be all right?"

So she wasn't suspicious of me; she was just genuinely concerned. To my surprise, that threw me off.

Given that I was an adventurer (more or less), I should probably have tried to figure out who or what this woman was. But oddly enough, although I hardly knew her, I liked her.

"No worries," I said. "Yeah, I'm weak, but I've got a Crimson Magic Clan mage with me who's seriously reliable. I've gotta be honest with you—I didn't want to come here myself, but my friend insisted. What about you, miss? Why are you here?"

"Me? ...Good question. Let's just say that as a little reward for myself, after working so hard all the time, I decided to have a dip in my beloved hot springs. And I suppose you could say I'm looking for an important partner of mine, though I don't expect to find them so easily."

It made her sound oddly conscientious.

"Your partner, huh? You mean, like, a lover?"

"Hmm... No, not really a lover. A sidekick, sort of, or perhaps a second me in which power has been sealed away... I have to admit, I'm just about ready to give up, though." There was a hint of a sad smile on the woman's face.

"You're giving up? But why? One of my party members knows all about that

sort of ridiculous...I mean, *unusual* stuff. Why don't we try asking her? She's right here at this inn, even."

"Well... The person you're talking about is a member of the Crimson Magic Clan, isn't she? It's okay—I have nothing to do with the likes of them." She pulled a bit of a face, but she was still smiling.

"Oh yeah? Okay, then... I'm happy to at least be a shoulder for you to cry on, though. Don't hesitate to share your troubles with me, okay?"

I tried to sound casual, but the woman looked kind of amused. "Oh, you'll listen, will you? ...Long ago, somewhere in Crimson Magic Village, my friend, or partner, or dark god, whatever you want to call her... Well, this black cat, a sidekick of mine, was sealed away in a tomb there."

This was sounding oddly familiar. A certain pair of red-eyed no-goodniks had told me a similar story recently.

"She must have still been upset when we were both released, because she was completely out of control. I decided to have her sleep for a while longer, but...when I went to check on her, see if the time was right, I found the seal already broken and my sidekick abducted by someone or something."

This couldn't mean what I thought it meant.

"...Pardon what might seem like an impertinent question, ma'am, but this sidekick of yours doesn't by any chance fly and breathe fire, does she?"

"I'm sorry, I'm afraid I don't quite understand what you're asking." Her face conveyed sincere and total confusion at my question.

Hang on, she was the one talking about dark gods and seals and stuff, and she was looking at *me* like that?

I composed myself and said, "Oh, it's nothing. Just that my Crimson Magic friend has been describing the black cat she keeps as a dark god."

The woman's face darkened immediately. "...The black cat your Crimson Magic Clan friend is keeping? Their names may be impossibly strange—you're sure she's been saying 'dark god'?"

Caught off guard by this sudden change, I tried to backpedal. "Er, well, you

know... This is the same person who swears she used to be a deity of destruction in her past life. You can't take anything she says seriously."

"O-oh, really? Even so, do be a dear and answer one question for me. This cat... Does she, ahem, have a fondness for lazy people?"

"...I'm not really sure. She seems to like me best out of all of us, but I can't say I see myself as lazy. I did the most work to form our party, and I'm confident I'm the most sensible and grown-up out of all our members."

"R-really... And is she, er, prone to violence?" The woman sounded a tad hesitant for some reason.

"She's such a wimp that our newborn chick can chase her around the room."

"All right, thank you, that's enough. She can't be the partner I'm looking for." The woman nodded, apparently pretty sure about this, then stood up, bathwater dripping from the towel wrapped around her body. "I think I'll be off, then. This area is a hot zone in the battle with the Demon King's army, you know. And even if it weren't, security around here is so bad that I ran into that rarest of things earlier, a gang of bandits. My advice would be to get back to the capital while you still can." With that, the woman squinted her golden eyes like a happy cat and smiled kindly.

"...You know, ma'am, somehow I feel like I just can't ignore your problem. I don't know why, but I've got the strangest feeling about you. Er, not that I'm trying to pick you up or anything, okay?" I added, realizing that what I was saying sounded weird even to me.

The woman, however, didn't even give me a dirty look, but instead, for some reason, she opened her eyes in surprise.

"Well, now... How serendipitous. I feel a connection to you, too. That's what drives me to give you these little updates each time we meet... Maybe you've met my dear friend someplace and done them some good turn." It sounded like she was making a joke; she laughed lightly as she spoke.

I watched the woman go. I knew she was connected with the Demon King's army somehow, and yet for some reason, I just couldn't see her as a threat...

If I ever saw her again, I would have to ask how she'd ended up in the Demon

King's...

"...Shoot! I forgot to ask her her name!"

7

The next morning.

With a good night's sleep at an actual inn under our belts, we headed off for the fortress in high spirits.

"Kazuma, you seem especially cheery today," Megumin said as we went. "You were in the bath until quite late last night. Did something good happen?"

"Oh, y'know. When I got in there, I just happened to be reunited with the outrageously beautiful woman I met in Arcanletia," I replied just as happily, at which Megumin stopped walking.

"O-oh, you did? Well, good for you. So you did a little mixed bathing, then?"

"Sure did. Man, she was big. Maybe even bigger than Darkness."

Darkness, who had apparently been listening in, exclaimed, "How can you just say something like that?! For that matter, what have you been getting up to the moment we take our eyes off you? ...I have to say, though, don't you think it's strange for a woman to be all by herself in the middle of nowhere like this?"

Darkness, her armor still battered from last night's attack, lectured me with an expression that might have been anger or might have been embarrassment; I couldn't tell.

"Don't worry—she actually gave me a lot of helpful tips. It was the same way in Arcanletia. Yesterday, she said she'd encountered some bandits and warned me to be careful," I said casually.

Yunyun, who'd been listening to the conversation with obvious interest, cocked her head. "Um, and she made it out of that encounter okay? Those were probably the same bandits we ran into, right? I can't imagine they would have been gentle with someone as beautiful as you're describing..."

"Oh-ho," Megumin said, dodging Chomusuke as she ran along near her feet.

“You appear so adult, but your true nature reveals itself in your filthy fantasies.”

Huh. Actually, Yunyun was right. How *had* that woman survived a run-in with bandits?

...Well, I guess you don't get to join the Demon King's army for no reason. Maybe she was secretly way more powerful than she looked or something.

Even when she mentioned the bandits to me, though, I hadn't thought much of it. Normally, I would have been more cautious around a woman who implied she had single-handedly defeated a gang of robbers, but for some reason, I hadn't felt she was too dangerous. Maybe because we'd bathed together twice now?

“What? Isn't that what you would normally expect from bandits?! And anyway, Megumin, you're the one person who has no right to call me filthy! After you've bathed with Kazuma and been in bed with him...!”

“Hey, it's one thing for me to mention that myself, but hearing someone else say it embarrasses me, so I must ask you to stop!”

As I watched Megumin suffer the brutal turnaround, I thought back to the woman from the night before.

“...Man, she was big.”

““?!””

After that, nothing much eventful happened, except for when Aqua, who had been chasing the Gossamers around again, was reduced to tears by an attack from the puffballs' Great Sprite.

About the time it was getting dark, we arrived at our destination, the fortress.

“It's huge...”

We found ourselves looking up at a building every bit as big as the royal castle. It was surrounded by massive, impenetrable-looking walls, as befitted a fortress defending the front line. I'd heard that upward of a thousand people lived inside, and it was just as imposing as that number suggested.

“And one general of the Demon King by herself is supposed to be threatening this place? I don't care what rank she is. That can't be possible, can it?”

“I’d like to agree with you, but any one of the Demon King’s generals is capable of destroying a city all by themselves. Frankly, the fact we’ve overcome so many of them is bizarre,” Darkness said. Her answer made me think back on the generals we’d encountered.

There was the Dullahan Beldia, who could repel any number of attackers simultaneously with his spectacular swordplay; he boasted the unlimited strength and power of the undead and could even pronounce a curse that doomed its target to die a few days later.

There was the Deadly Poison Slime Hans, who had the power to make himself look human but boasted incredible magic resistance and could kill you at a touch, not to mention vacuum up everything in sight with his gigantic true form.

The chimera Sylvia, who took one monster after another into his body, gaining a whole catalog of powers on his path to indestructibility.

The “Duke of Hell,” the demon Vanir, whose very existence seemed to defy the laws of physics and whom we had no idea how to actually kill.

And Wiz, a Lich (read: Queen of the Undead, untouchable with normal weapons, and wielder of a whole bunch of special abilities, including Drain Touch) who knew Advanced Magic, Teleport, and even Explosion.

...Considering their abilities and sheer strength, it was a wonder I had run into even one of them and lived to tell the tale. What to do? I’d expected Explosion and a nice, sturdy fortress to give me some peace of mind, but now I just wanted to go home.

Just as I was starting to feel ridiculously wimpy, the fortress guards spotted us, and a group of knights rode out to meet us.

One of them approached us, obviously cautious about five people appearing at a place like this. “You there, adventurers. This fortress stands to hold the Demon King’s army at bay. What is your business here?”

“We heard our nation was in trouble and have come as reinforcements. I think we’ve got enough advanced classes here to be some help, don’t you?”

“Advanced classes... I see. We are grateful for that. However, we’ll need to see something that proves your identity. There remains the possibility that

you're agents of the Demon King attempting to infiltrate the fortress, so if you would be so kind. Ahem, let's start with..."

Megumin held out her Adventurer's Card to the knight, who took it—and froze.

"...M-Miss...Megumin... Is that right?"

"You have some problem with my name?"

"No, ma'am! It's nothing; pardon me. Very well, now you... Miss Yunyun, is it?"

"Y-yes, sir... That's my real name..."

"Hey, he's been wanting to say something about our names ever since he saw my card. We shall hear it!"

Megumin raised her staff, incensed at the way the knight was reacting to the girls' names.

"No, it's quite all right—forgive me! Next is...Kazuma Satou. Kazuma...Satou?"

The knight hurried to give Megumin and Yunyun their cards back, but when he got to the next one—mine—he looked disturbed.

Ooh. It was one thing for those bizarre Crimson Magic names to get a rise out of him, but if he was reacting to *my* name, it had to be a sign that my reputation preceded me. Yes, whatever others might say of us, we'd accumulated quite a record of—

"Kazuma Satou! The vile and despicable Kazuma Satou? The villain who gave Lady Iris the worst of ideas and caused no end of trouble for Lady Claire and Lady Lain...!"

"Now, wait just a minute..."

Was that how the knights of this country talked about me?

I mean, not that they were wrong, but come on...

"I'm very sorry. But, er, this fortress is a crucial choke point defending the front line against the Demon King's army. I'm afraid we simply can't let strangers inside..."

“Strangers? You recognized my name.”

I’d teach him to treat me like some common criminal.

Just then, a man who had been hanging back came forward. He looked like the squad leader.

“So you’re the disgusting piece of human filth Kazuma Satou. How dare a mere Adventurer act so important? Do you realize I could declare you potential threats and have you cut down right here and now? Run along home with your tail between your low-level legs, boy!” He didn’t take his hand off his sword as he spoke.

I saw Megumin’s grip on her staff tighten, and Darkness stepped forward with wrath on her face. The other knights all went for their weapons.

“What are you playing at, adventurers? You looking for a fight?!”

Geez, why did guys like this always have such short fuses? I couldn’t help noticing that in this world, pretty much all the aristocrats other than Darkness had the unfortunate habit of viewing life as cheap and human rights as optional at best.

I took a step forward, looking as grim as I could, and gestured at Darkness, who had been about to say something herself.

“Get back! Do you have any idea whose presence you’re in? This is the daughter of the famous House Dustiness, Lady Lalatina Ford Dustiness! Bow your heads, all of you!”

““Wha—?!”” The knights blanched and dropped to their knees.

Darkness looked almost as surprised as they did to hear this come up so suddenly, and Megumin and Yunyun, for some reason, also knelt.

“What are *you* guys doing?”

“S-sorry,” Megumin said. “It was just so sudden, I got a bit swept away...”

“M-me, I didn’t know Miss Darkness was a noble...”

Both of them got to their feet, and the captain asked hesitantly, “A-are you truly the noble Dustiness...? Please accept my most humble apologies, Lady

Dustiness. My men and I did not know your face and have committed a grave impropriety...! ...Ahem, please don't take this the wrong way—we must do our duty—but perhaps you could furnish us with some proof...”

Without a word, Darkness produced the necklace with the family crest that hung around her neck, along with her Adventurer's Card. At the sight of them, the captain's face went from pale to completely white.

“M-m-m-my most humble and sincere apologies! We have been unspeakably rude to you and your companions, Lady Dustiness!”

“It's about time! Whoo, man, here I thought we were just about to get our heads chopped off. I think I'm going to be working through this trauma for the rest of my life. Man, just thinking about that conversation makes my chest tighten...!” I put a hand to my chest and laid it on thick for the captain.

Megumin, picking up on my game, said—

“Oh, this will never do! Gracious, what an attitude you've taken with the companion of our young Miss Lalatina!” She nudged her staff against the captain's cheek to work off some of her anger about earlier.

“Apologize! Say you're sorry for almost attacking us! Come on, say it!”

Megumin was grinding her staff into his cheek, and Aqua was shaking him by the shoulders, but the captain just closed his eyes and didn't fight them. His temples were twitching, though. Instead, he bowed his head to Darkness, who was quivering and blushing.

“I-I'm sorry. I'm terribly sorry. In any other circumstances, I would end my own life for having dared to threaten the companions of Lady Dustiness. But in this case...I must...”

He couldn't quite seem to finish the sentence. I placed a friendly hand on his shoulder. “Aw, look, I'm not asking anybody to kill themselves. I know you were just doing your job. But we're awfully tired from our journey, all right? I don't need you to go nuts proving your loyalty; just prepare a room for us to stay in, all right?”

“But of course! It will be ready for you immediately! A room befitting Lady Dustiness and her companions!”

The captain managed to nod despite the staff in his cheek, and Darkness gave him a mortified nod in return.

Chapter 4

Prayers for These Glory-less Gods!



1

We were given a room; I put my stuff down right away and then went with Aqua, who also had too much time on her hands, to explore the fortress. All the adventurers and soldiers we passed seemed pretty on edge, maybe a sign of how bad things really were.

So the atmosphere around here wasn't exactly comfortable. Aqua and I were screwing around in an area with a placard marked CONTROL ROOM.

"Hey, Kazuma. There are a lot of mysterious levers and buttons here. These just scream 'Push me,' don't they?"

"They sure do. Frankly, I would think there was something wrong with you if you *didn't* push those buttons."

"Where in the gods' names did you wander in from?! Those buttons and levers control the fortress's drawbridge, gate, and traps, so don't you dare touch them! Hands off, do you hear me?!"

The soldier's reaction made him sound like the straight man in a comedy duo, and Aqua rose to the challenge. "Well, now I *definitely* have to push them. I think I'll start with the one under this glass lid..."

“That’s the fortress’s self-destruct button for in case we get overrun—*please* don’t press it! Please don’t... I said, don’t touch that! Get out of here, you ruffians!”

The soldier lost his temper and chased us out of the room, so now we were standing outside.

“Chased out again. These people aren’t very welcoming, are they?”

“We are on the front line. I guess no one has it in them to be warm and friendly.”

We’d gotten ourselves chased out of one room after another (maybe it had to do with our total inability to control ourselves?), and now we were left with nowhere to go.

“Ah, well,” I said. “I hear they have a mess hall where you can eat for free. Let’s go score some grub.”

“I like that idea. Maybe I’ll bring the wine I packed.”

I *wondered* what she’d put in that backpack to make it bulge like that. So she’d brought wine with her, huh?

But at that moment...

“Lady Aqua?! Lady Aqua, it’s you!” shouted someone coming down the corridor.

The guy looked oddly familiar...

“Oh, Mitsuragi,” I said. “Long time no see.”

“It’s Mitsurugi! Are you getting my name wrong on purpose?! You’d think you could remember someone’s name by now!”

It was Mitsurugi, the Sword Master with the enchanted blade.

“Lady Aqua, it’s been so long! You look well, as always...”

“Yes, I’m doing very well. What about you, Enchanted Sword Person? Say, where’s your little harem?”

“Harem?! W-well, things were getting worse around here, so I sent the girls back to the capital to keep them out of danger... Oh, that’s right!” Mitsurugi

looked from Aqua to me. “Satou, how could you bring Lady Aqua to such a dangerous place? Do you understand what’s going on here?!”

“Believe me, I do. This is the front line of the battle with the Demon King’s army, and there’s a general of the king himself attacking this place on the regular. That sound about right?”

Mitsurugi obviously wanted to know why I’d done this, but Aqua broke in. “You see, I came here to encourage all of you fighting so hard in this place. I hear your opponent is known as a dark god. So I figured, being a deity myself, I had to come and do something.” She looked and sounded as if all this was completely natural.

“Lady Aqua, you’re going to fight that woman?! Th-that’s... Well, certainly I believe you’ll be able to resist her, but she’s very dangerous. She’s brought this fortress to the brink of catastrophe all by herself.” Mitsurugi cast a worried look at Aqua.

“So this general *is* another woman... Look, I’m not really worried. I know we’re dealing with some self-proclaimed dark god, but there have to be a bunch of Japanese people with ‘cheats’ here, right? I mean, you’re here. I know you lost to me, but you’re a high-level wielder of an enchanted blade. Even if I did beat you. So what’s this about a lone enemy bottlenecking everyone?”

“S-stop with the I-beat-you business—you won’t even accept my challenges to a rematch... Look, there’s a reason we’re cornered here. You haven’t seen *it* yet, have you?”

...“*It*”?

I shook my head.

“I figured not, given the way you were talking. Well, you’ve got some time to kill, right? Let me show you a little something.”

Mitsurugi started walking ahead of us.

He guided us out of the fortress, and that was when I saw it for the first time.

It was part of the outer wall, the very life and death of this fortress. That wall should have been the sturdiest thing around, but part of it was practically

crumbling, apparently from the force of several extremely violent attacks.

“Hey, don’t tell me...”

I recognized the scars left by those acts of destruction.

After all, I saw them every day.

I hadn’t become Megumin’s *explosier* for nothing.

“Uh-huh. Wolbach, general of the Demon King, uses explosion magic,” Mitsurugi said, and then he smirked at me as I stood there speechless.

2

Aqua and I parted ways with Mitsurugi, and then I called everyone to our room.

“Okay. I think we need to decide what we’re doing next.” I looked at everyone from where I was seated on the bed.

“What we’re doing next? I was talking to the fortress commander, and he said that in light of all the generals of the Demon King we’ve vanquished, he wanted to give overall command to us.”

I wanted to slap a hand on my face. Darkness had apparently been going about making my life harder right under my nose.

To be perfectly blunt, this one was hopeless.

My initial plan had been to hole up inside the fortress, safe and sound, and then hit the enemy with a nice long-range Explosion before she could show up and do anything to us. Explosion magic could damage anything and everything, be it ghost, god, or demon. My plan was based on the assumption that that was the way to take care of just about anything, but with our enemy using the same spell, we of course lost the initiative of having the longer reach.

“Uh, wanna know something? This general of the Demon King, Wolbach... Believe it or not, she uses explosion magic.”

“Hrk?!” Megumin practically knocked over her chair as she jumped up. I guess mentioning explosions really was the way to get a rise out of her.

“Did you say explosion magic?! I—I never imagined... Thanks to Megumin, I’m well aware of how destructive that can be. To be honest, I’m not sure how we could fight it...” Yunyun hung her head.

“It’s okay—leave it to me!” Darkness cried. “I’ve survived an explosion before! Use me as bait to draw her out. Then, after the enemy launches her spell, she’ll be wide-open for you to counterattack.”

“You don’t even have your armor right now. Even with Aqua’s buffs, there’s no guarantee you’d survive, right?”

Darkness’s armor had been destroyed in the battle with the zombie dragon. Now her shoulders slumped.

Aqua nodded. “Well, you see how things are. I know it wasn’t easy getting here, but I’m thinking maybe I can overlook someone calling themselves a dark god this one time. Not that I’m scared or anything, but you know, this Wolbach must be a minor deity. I mean, *I’ve* never heard of her—and honestly, I feel kind of bad for her.”

So it was our self-proclaimed goddess who was the first to fold at the mention of explosion magic, offering excuses no one had asked for.

Then Megumin, who had been stock-still until that moment, gave her cape a dramatic flourish. “My name is Megumin! First among the magic-users of Axel and master of Explosion! A general of the Demon King, a dark god, and a user of Explosion to boot...! This person may finally be the fated rival I’ve been searching for all these years!”

“Whaaat?!” This declaration of rival-hood brought a yelp from Yunyun.

“Do not *whaaat* me. I am satisfied to have a fellow Explosion user for an opponent. And in the unlikely event that I am defeated, I shall be more than happy to be blown up! Indeed, were I to meet my end, I would have no regrets about my life!!”

“How can you be so ridiculous?! Anyway, Megumin, I’m your rival, aren’t I?! How can you just promote some general of the Demon King—one you’ve never even met!—straight to rival?!”

“Wh-what are you saying?! You are a most troublesome girl indeed. If you

wish to be recognized as my true rival, go and learn Explosion. Then I will let you accompany me on my walks every day.”

“I don’t want to learn Explosion, and I don’t want to go on your stupid walks! We’ve got more important things to worry about. Is it true this enemy uses Explosion?! What can we do about it...?”

“You do not want to learn Explosion, indeed! Very well, challenge accepted! It has been a long time since we last had one of our contests. If you lose, you will have to save up skill points upon skill points and finally learn Explosion!”

“N-no way! I’m not going to make a bet that could change the entire course of my— M-Megumin, your eyes are so red! Don’t tell me you’re serious?! Come on, you’re not, are you?!”

I ignored the two dueling mages to focus on the matter at hand.

“I vote we discount Megumin’s idiocy. This enemy is just too dangerous. It sounds like she could wipe us all out in a single shot. And when your body gets reduced to ash, even Aqua’s resurrection can’t help you. So I recommend an immediate retre—”

“What is this foolishness you speak?! What do you mean, running away before an opponent no more powerful than this?! This is the foe I have been fated to face—I am sure of it!”

Megumin seemed to be heating up; her eyes burned red, and she put one foot on her chair to strike her pose.

“So the one who targets my familiar, Chomusuke, is an Explosion-wielding general of the Demon King who calls herself a dark god! I see I have no choice but to defeat this Wolbach and assume the titles of general of the Demon King and dark god myself!”

“The hell are you talking about? ...Anyway, the risk is just too high this time. It’s going to be a contest of who shoots first, and I don’t like those odds.”

“Odds have nothing to do with it. Explosion is my favorite thing. My hobby is, of course, Explosion. Explosion is practically synonymous with my very being. Speak of the Explosion Mage of Axel, and you speak of me. I have longed for this day ever since the moment I first learned Explosion. My chanting is swift

and precise! My magic boasts incredible destructive potential! I solemnly declare that there is no one in this world who is a greater user of Explosion than I!"

Finally, Megumin concluded by exhaling a confident breath.

"I'm pretty sure you lost to Wiz when you guys were wrapping up Destroyer."

"That's in the past. As my level has increased and I have learned skill after skill to heighten the power of my explosive magics, I have sought out ever greater challenges to test myself. I am, assuredly, the greatest user of Explosion in all of Axel."

What had this girl been doing when I hadn't been watching her like a hawk?

"Worry not. One who lulls herself to sleep on restless nights by reciting the incantation for Explosion, as I do, shall certainly finish her incantation before any foe!"

"Don't BS me—even you don't do anything that obnoxious!"

But just as I was about to launch into a real lecture for Megumin—

—there was an earsplitting roar, and the entire fortress shook. Bits of debris rained from the ceiling, and everyone but Megumin reflexively crouched down.

And me? After hearing Megumin's explosions every single day, I knew perfectly well what that sound was.

I could say with perfect certainty that the source of that noise and that shaking was explosion magic.

An alarm warning of an enemy attack began to sound throughout the fortress; Megumin alone looked like she was thinking clearly. "Hmm," she muttered. "That produced quite some shock. Judging by the wave of MP that directly preceded the spell, this person is a very refined user of Explosion. She did not teach herself or learn at random."

"This is no time for appreciating the finer points of a blast," I growled. But as befitting someone dubbed an *explosier*, it was clear to me how accurate that explosion had been. If I was going to rank it, I would probably have given it even higher than ninety points. "We've got to hurry, Megumin, right now. This is our

chance—we're going to go finish off that general now that she's on the attack!"

"Huh? B-but, Kazuma, you were so against that until a moment ago."

I threw on my chest plate and whatever else I could scrounge up, then grabbed a weapon as I got to my feet. I looked at the rest of the party, all of them completely surprised by this. "If she just hit us with an explosion, that means she's all out of boom for today, right?"

""""Oh!""""

Our opponent might be a general of the Demon King, but even a boss as big as that wouldn't be able to let off more than one of an MP-hungry spell like Explosion in a single day. Even Wiz, who was a general in that same army herself, was pretty well tapped out after just one shot. With our enemy hurting for magic, then, we had nothing to fear from attacking.

I checked that everyone was with me as I rushed out of the room, then took the path Mitsurugi had shown us toward the blasted segment of wall.

We arrived at the site of the explosion out of breath, to find...

"This is awful."

It looked like the damaged spot had been hit by a second blast; the formerly sturdy wall was now a pile of rubble sitting in a crater.

A number of other adventurers and knights, presumably drawn by the sound of the explosion just like us, were standing around and taking it in. I saw someone I recognized and went over to him.

"Hey, where's the general we're after? This is the time to get her, when she's low on magic, isn't it?"

It was Mitsurugi I was asking about the whereabouts of the perpetrator; he was standing there staring vacantly at the aftermath of the blast.

His answer wasn't what I expected.

"Wolbach? She's long gone... This is why this fight's been so hard for us. The dark god Wolbach just appears, launches an explosion from a distance, and then teleports away again before we can get anywhere near her," he explained. "There's a squad of the Demon King's handpicked troops camping out in the

forest nearby. We assume that's where she's retreating to restore her magic before she comes back. But there's a lot of them, and the forest is full of monsters anyway. Outside the fortress walls, on terrain the enemy knows better than we do, we're going to lose. Of course, we can only hunker down in this fort for so long before the walls are all blown away and we're sitting ducks for the Demon King's troops."

I guess this wasn't the first time this had happened. That would explain why everyone had looked so worried and downcast. If they tried to chase down the general after she'd let off her explosion, they would run into the Demon King's chosen troops, but if they tried to hide in the fortress to keep themselves safe from the troops, the general would come and hit them with explosions.

Basically, they were surrounded by superior numbers and being smoked out by magical blasts. A kind of brute strategy but an effective one.

After he had finished explaining the situation, Mitsurugi said, "If we could just get rid of either Wolbach or the elite troops, we might be able to manage something..."

He grasped the hilt of his enchanted sword and closed his eyes as if he was in pain...

"I've got it. Let's run."

"Uh-huh, definitely. Let's go right back home to Axel and make a bed for Emperor Zel. One he'll really love, better than that vile shell. It's okay. When Emperor Zel gets bigger, he'll be able to take care of any general of the Demon King in one shot."

We were back in our rooms, and Aqua and I had promptly begun making preparations to leave.

Darkness was agitated when she saw us. "W-wait, Kazuma, I told you they already foisted command of this fortress on us. I don't think we can go rushing home just because—"

"Why now? Why now, of all times, would you let them make that sort of trouble for you?!"

"You're the one who forced your way in here by telling them who I was!"

Aqua broke into our argument. “Hmm? Hey, I wonder what happened to Yunyun. I was sure she was with us until a little while ago.”

“She is helping to rebuild the wall with magic.”

“Oh, okay. I guess there’s a reason they call her one of the capable members of the Crimson Magic Clan. I should probably go see if anyone’s been hurt, myself.”

“I shall ask just who you are implying is an *incapable* member of the Crimson Magic Clan.”

Aqua’s uncharacteristically priestlike fit of compassion seemed to be motivated by Megumin’s glowing eyes. She hurried out of the room.

Darkness nodded at this. “Aqua and Yunyun are both doing what they can. It’s wonderful. They’re real veteran adventurers, huh? Kazuma, don’t you think we’re veteran adventurers by now, too?”

I was disappointed in Darkness, whose eyes were glimmering despite the dire situation. I guess she had a soft spot for heroes. It didn’t look like she was going to be willing to abandon this fortress in a crisis.

I was trying to decide how to bring my hardheaded party member around when Megumin piled on with the pathetic begging.

“Um, Kazuma... I know it’s dangerous, but won’t you give me just one chance? The rest of you may all stay safe inside this fortress. I will hide somewhere to wait for Wolbach, and the next time she appears, I’ll hit her with my Explosion before she can launch hers.” Then she looked at the ground, unusually meek.

Oh, you’ve gotta be— If it wasn’t one thing, it was another.

“...I know Sense Foe, Second Sight, and Ambush. Any surprise attack would be a lot more likely to work with me there. I’ll go with you, but when the enemy shows up, it’s gonna be all you.”

Megumin, caught off guard by my offer, looked at me with wide eyes. A smile slowly spread over her face.

“You can count on me!”

Her crimson eyes gleamed with joy, and she puffed out her chest; despite her

small stature, she had never looked tougher.

3

The next day.

We were in the forest near the fortress, where I had scrambled up a large tree and was having a look around.

“Geez, I can’t believe the Demon King’s forces got so close.”

I could make out what appeared to be an enemy encampment in the woods just a few miles from the fortress. I couldn’t quite see exactly what kinds of monsters they had there, but I could tell there were lots of them. If they came against our base in force, those walls and traps might be all that stood between us and total annihilation.

I climbed down again and went to fill in Megumin and the others.

“The people in the fortress say that every time Wolbach comes to drop an explosion on the place, she’s alone. That gives me an idea.” I looked around at everyone. “First, I use Ambush to hide out in this area. If it doesn’t look like she’s noticed me, I’ll signal Megumin to get one good magical hit on her. On the off chance she spots me, Yunyun will use light-bending magic to hide Megumin, while Darkness, armed with buffs from Aqua, comes up to draw the enemy’s attention. Then Aqua and I work with Darkness to make an opening. Megumin, you can hit her whenever you think the moment is right... Sound good?”

Everyone looked pretty fired up about this plan, except...

“Ooh! Kazuma, Kazuma! I have a thought. I think someone should be assigned to protect this sweet creature. Such an innocent little life shouldn’t be exposed to such danger... Hey, excuse me, but that hurts. You like everyone else so much—why do you have to sharpen your claws on me?”

Aqua grimaced as Chomusuke raked her claws across the hand Aqua was holding her with. It did look pretty painful.

Chomusuke was normally pretty docile, but she’d seemed excited ever since this morning, following us around. We’d tried to leave her in our rooms to keep

her safe, but she always seemed to find her way back to us.

I had Yunyun take over the job of holding the restless cat, then turned to Aqua and Darkness. “Okay, I think we’re ready. Now we just have to wait for this Wolbach.”

“Hey, Kazuma, I’m having second thoughts...”

“You sounded more eager than any of us before we got here.”

I didn’t know how long it had been since we’d set up our little trap in the forest.

But then we saw the infamous general of the Demon King. Her face was hidden by a hood, and a plain robe covered her body as she walked toward the fortress at a leisurely pace.

Her outfit mostly hid the contours of her body, but there was still no mistaking that she was definitely a woman. She probably appeared so calm and collected because she knew that if anyone from the fortress came out to attack her, she could just blow them away with an explosion long before they got to her, then teleport to safety.

“What a dirty trick,” I found myself muttering. “Doesn’t she have the guts to fight fair?”

“I’m betting you’re the *last* person she’d want to hear that from,” Darkness shot back at me.

While Aqua was busy buffing Darkness, the woman in the robe stopped. She was a ways off still, but she must have been close enough to land her explosion on the fortress.

“All right, Megumin, start chanting your magic, quietly. We’re not gonna wait around for her to finish her entire villainous spiel. We hit her while her guard’s down and finish this.”

“Whatever happened to fighting fair? I find this scheme rather underhanded, but very well. I would feel bad if Darkness had to endure an Explosion that could have been prevented.”

Darkness herself looked pretty eager at the prospect of taking an especially

big blast, but while I felt bad for her, I wanted to wrap this right up and go home.

That's when it happened.

The hooded woman seemed to sense something—and then she looked right at me.

Had she seen through Ambush?

I tried to stay completely still, but then she started walking toward me...

"She knows! Megumin, chant that magic like you mean it! We have to get in the first hit!"

"Leave it to me, Kazuma!" Megumin began her incantation. But at the same time—

"Eek! Wh-what's wrong, Chomusuke?! You're going berserk!"

Chomusuke was flailing around, trying to get out of Yunyun's arms. I didn't know why the little furball had suddenly gotten so agitated, but I didn't have time to worry about it. I had to get the enemy to focus on me until Megumin could finish her spell!

"Darkness, Aqua! Let's buy her some time!" I yelled, and then I rushed out of the underbrush.

The general of the Demon King had been approaching with caution, but when I came bursting out, she stopped.

"Hey, Kazuma, I'm wondering if it might be best for me to stay behind...you know, in case you need backup later. If anything happens to me, I won't be able to bring you back to life, remember?! Hey, are you listening to me?!"

"Shut up and follow me! If we get hit with Explosion, there won't be anything left to bring back to life anyway! And as much as I hate to say it, you're the only one we've got who has any hope of being a match for a self-proclaimed dark god!"

Aqua was practically crying and looked like she was on the verge of just running away, but I dragged her along to confront the general. Darkness was a step behind; she rushed up to cover us.

...But the woman, instead of attacking us, just stood there, an expression of surprise partly visible under her hood.

“...What’s happening here? She looks shocked. Am I so notorious that even the ranks of the Demon King’s army recognize me and tremble?”

“She’s probably never seen someone with such a weird, dumb, and ridiculous face before,” Aqua interjected.

There was really no need for that, and I was trying to decide how to get revenge on her when the general before us pulled back her hood, finally revealing her face.

The woman had short red hair and golden catlike eyes.

It was her: the woman I’d shared the tub with on two separate occasions.

Yunyun spoke up from behind me at the same moment; she sounded shocked for some reason. “...What are *you* doing *here*?”

“That’s what I’d like to know. I thought you were just a woman who liked baths.”

Though I had to admit, I may have had the slightest inkling this would happen.

I had known she was somehow connected with the Demon King’s army, after all. And I had seen her chatting with Hans, a known general of the Demon King, in Arcanletia. And although it was long enough ago that I wasn’t sure anymore, I could’ve sworn I’d heard Hans call this woman Wolbach.

In hindsight, maybe I just hadn’t wanted to admit that this woman—whom I’d bathed with and whom I couldn’t quite bring myself to hate—was actually our enemy.

The woman— No, the general of the Demon King said, “I never did introduce myself to you. My name is Wolbach: general of the Demon King and goddess of sloth and violence.” She narrowed her feline eyes, adding to her intimidation factor.

...Well, crap. Do I seriously have to fight her?

“...Huh, I guess I didn’t know you were connected with the Demon King’s army. Truth be told, there’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you. You really

don't strike me as a bad person, so why join up with the Demon King?" I was all innocence.

"Why, indeed. Is this what you would call chitchat?" She gave me an amused smile. "If you want to know, defeat me first."

For a brief moment, there was a hint of sadness in her smile.

Dammit. Is fighting really the only way?

That fleeting, lonely smile made my heart ache, and I wished there was another way out of this battle...

"Excuse me. I'm sorry to interrupt you when you're so busy acting all important and mysterious, but I object. Deity you may be, but I won't stand for this goddess-of-sloth-and-violence business. People are going to come after you for false advertising. Call yourself what you are: a dark god."

There went my ruminations. Aqua, who was supposed to be cowering in fear, jumped in with a ridiculous spiel that totally shattered this otherwise serious moment.

Wolbach looked a bit startled, maybe not expecting someone to open with that the very first time they met.

Wait... Did Aqua just agree that she was a deity? And did that mean the woman in front of me wasn't just *calling* herself a goddess but actually was a dark god?

"I grant that sloth and violence aren't the most reputable disciplines to preside over, but I myself am a perfectly upstanding goddess. No false advertising involved, dear."

"That's a lie! Kazuma, this self-proclaimed goddess just told a lie! Eris and I are the only officially recognized goddesses of this world! You apologize! You can't just go around calling yourself whatever you want, besmirching the good name of real, pure, beautiful goddesses like me! Apologize right now!"

It looked like Wolbach had gotten over her surprise. She raised an eyebrow skeptically. "Wh-what's this all of a sudden? I really was a perfectly decent goddess once. But after I joined the Demon King's army, some freaks called the

Axis Church decided I was a dark god, and yes, I've used that expression myself once or twice! But that still doesn't give some priest I've never met the right to talk to me like that!"

"You just called my dear, sweet children freaks! How can you make fun of the Axis Church, which is renowned the world over?! You're not any kind of god at all, are you? Do you even have any followers? Pfft-heh-heh-heh, 'Wolbach' is such a minor-league deity, I've never even heard of her!"

Aqua was really getting into her chiding. Meanwhile, cracks were starting to form in Wolbach's tranquil demeanor.

"Y-y-you, a mere human, dare to mock the gods? You won't get away with that! Any priest worth her salt ought to have a little respect for true deities! Even ones from other religions!"

Aqua, unimpressed by the quaking Wolbach, ran a hand through her hair. "Human? You're calling *me* a human? It's because of blind idiots like you that I get called a 'self-proclaimed' goddess!"

I wanted to add that Aqua herself was a blind enough idiot to mistake a chicken's egg for a dragon's, but then she proudly flourished her divine feather mantle and stuck out her chest. And then, acting as smug as ever, Aqua announced herself to Wolbach.

"My name is Aqua. Yes, Aqua, the very goddess of water venerated by the Axis Church! Far be it from me to heed the ramblings of some insignificant deity I've never even heard of!"

"What?!" Wolbach stared in shock at the openly gloating Aqua. "...You know you're gonna get yourself divine punishment pretending to be a god, right?"

"Apologize! Apologize for saying I'm pretending!" Enraged at her failure to get even a dark god to believe she was a real goddess, Aqua grabbed on to Wolbach.



“H-hey! Stop that, you impudent cur, or I really will call down divine punishment on you! You’ll be cursed! Like, when you wake up on your day off, you won’t be able to muster any motivation and shall spend the whole day lounging in bed, totally wasting your hard-earned vacation!”

“I’d like to see you try! I’ll punish *you*. Like, you’ll be using the bathroom, and there’ll be someone begging you to hurry up, but the toilet just won’t flush!”

“Well, goddesses don’t *use* the bathroom, so that doesn’t worry me!”

“Every day of my life is like a day off, so your punishment doesn’t worry *me*!”

Uh... Hmm. These two are goddesses, right? These supposedly adult women, at each other’s throats the very first time they meet?

I had always pictured goddesses being more august and honorable.

“Yo, Kazuma. Think we can just forget about these two?”

“I’d like to, but that’s a general of the Demon King we’re dealing with, so I guess we’d better not...”

While Darkness and I whispered to each other, Aqua, apparently unable to hold back any longer, thrust her hand into the air. Some kind of mist started floating around, finally cohering into little globes of water.

...That idiot. Had she forgotten we were supposed to be distracting the enemy?

Speaking of which, what was Megumin doing? How was she not done with her incantation yet?!

“It looks like I have to show you the true power of the goddess of water! You are one smart-mouthed evil deity! And here you don’t even have any followers, let alone ones as cheerful and optimistic and pure and righteous and free as mine!”

“H-how could someone as stupid as you actually be the goddess of water? It’s your obnoxious followers who stuck me with this evil-god label! And I do too have followers—they’re just all in the Demon King’s army!! You’re a pretty ‘minor-league’ goddess yourself compared with Eris!!”

.....

“Sacred Create Water!”

“T-Teleport!!”

We were left with no general of the Demon King and one huge flood of water called down by Aqua’s spell!

Chapter 5

An Explosion on This Fated Dark God!



1

It was the day after Wolbach's attack and Aqua's antics.

"I'll be all right today. Please, please let me do it!" Megumin cried as soon as she entered the room. She *had* hesitated to attack when she saw Wolbach yesterday, after all.

"Are you sure about that? I mean, I don't even know what happened out there... Was it, like, you saw that your enemy looked human, and you couldn't bring yourself to harm her? I get that. I've gotta admit—I'm not sure I could cut down a woman that hot."

Megumin shook her head. "As long as it is a monster that will give me loads of experience points, I can easily strike down any foe, be it humanoid or suckling babe. I simply, um..."

She looked like she wanted to say something else, but she swallowed the end of her sentence.

Megumin had been acting strange ever since yesterday. Heck, even Yunyun looked preoccupied, and she hadn't come out of her room. They both had some pretty intense reactions to the name Wolbach before we got here, too. Maybe there was something they couldn't tell me.

“Well, I’m not entirely sure what’s going on with you guys, but there is one thing I’m sure of. Ambushes are out. Yesterday, some idiot forgot the plan and royally screwed up everything. That put all our enemies on the alert *and* damaged the fortress walls even without Wolbach’s help.”

I shouldn’t have set our ambush so close to the fortress. The flood of water Aqua called down had been the last straw for the already damaged fortifications. As a gesture of good faith, I’d sent her, kicking and screaming, to help repair the wall, but that was probably about as helpful as a single mouthful of water in the desert.

I also didn’t like that we had given away that there was a goddess named Aqua with us. Granted, she spent all day lazing around and eating and sleeping, and she liked to waste time playing with the neighborhood kids, and despite how long we’d been in Axel, she still got lost on a regular basis, but still. Even the worst goddess is still a goddess.

After what had happened yesterday, the enemy would be on the lookout for any ambushes.

“...I see. Still, if there is anything I can do, tell me, won’t you? Though I confess, what I can do consists mostly of exploding things.” Megumin gave me a wan smile.

“Eh, anyway, I guess the first thing is to come up with a strategy together. Maybe over a nice, quiet—”

—*meal*, was what I was going to say.

But that was when I heard a very familiar rumble shake the fortress.

Megumin and I rushed to the site of the attack. I expected others were heading the same way. When we got there...

“Call somebody! Get anyone who can use Create Earth and anyone who can make golems! We need to fix the wall, quick!”

Knights and adventurers were rushing around trying to repair the shattered barrier. I looked for any sign of Wolbach, but—

“I see she is already gone. She must have retreated to replenish her magic

after attacking the wall,” Megumin, also looking for our assailant, murmured to me.

Let off an explosion, then run home with Teleport. A simple but effective strategy.

Oops, I couldn’t just be standing here. Figuring I could at least use Create Earth to help repair the wall, I went over toward the fortification...

“Arrrgh! What’s going *on* here?! This looks even worse than when I left it!”

A sudden shout.

“...Why are you dressed like that, Aqua?”

Megumin was looking at Aqua, who was coming toward us with a towel wrapped around her head like a workman. It reminded me of the fond times just after we first arrived in Axel.

“There’s no *why* about it. Kazuma told me to fix the wall, and I had to look the part. But what’s going on here? I’ll kill whoever did this!”

“It was our friend the dark god from yesterday. Remember she told us she wants to destroy this wall? Your timing couldn’t be better, costume and all. Come help us repair the damage.”

As I spoke, I used Create Earth on the fresh crater.

...I guess they had been doing this sort of thing every day. Morose soldiers and adventurers gathered up the rubble and tried everything they could to plug the hole in the wall.

“Come on, now, that’ll never work! Let me tell you. To get this wall up and running, you need to start with a core. Then you use earth to build out from there; then you daub on plaster to harden it. Here, watch, like this.”

Aqua, behind me, sounded more than a little pleased with herself. I guess she was all excited, since we’d done some expansion work on a wall back when we were in construction. Come to think of it, she’d turned out to really enjoy physical labor.

I was letting my thoughts wander to times past when I heard a sound of surprise from behind me. I looked over, wondering what was going on, and

found Megumin watching Aqua, who had trundled up to the hole in the wall and—

“What?! She’s fast! And...really good?! Hang on a second! When did you turn into a certified bricklayer?!”

Aqua turned to me with an expression as if to ask why I was so shocked. “Who do you take me for? Have you forgotten that when I told the foreman I was going to take a break to become an adventurer, he suggested I skip adventuring and just work full-time for him?”

Damn, he never said anything like that to *me*.

Okay, no, that didn’t matter now. I had never had a free moment during our construction work to check out what Aqua was actually doing, but now I saw that her work was downright professional. I had to wonder why she was a savant at construction of all things, but at the moment, I was grateful. I had been convinced that this fortress was moments away from having its walls knocked down and then being summarily blown into a million pieces.

That’s why I’d come up with the whole dangerous ambushing-Wolbach idea in the first place. But in just minutes, Aqua had fixed the wall so well that it looked better than it ever had.

“Look, there’s no way this is for real. Do you have some kind of wall-repair cheat? It hasn’t even had time to dry yet, right?”

“You must have a very low opinion of the goddess of water. Manipulating the moisture to dry out the bricks is child’s play for me, you understand? Think of how quickly and thoroughly the clothes dry when I’m on laundry duty.”

I resolved to make Aqua handle not just the toilets but the washing from now on.

Okay, more importantly—

“...Now we can fight!”

There was a boom, and the fortress shivered.

Another day's work.

Aqua was practically quivering with excitement at the sound.

"You're up, Repair Captain," I said.

"Mission accepted! Come on, everyone! Come and see just how awesome your captain can be!"

"We're counting on you, Captain!"

"Repair Captain!"

"Another day, another job for the repair captain!"

The soldiers and adventurers behind Aqua and me were downright giddy as we headed for the site of the explosion. Darkness, temporarily in charge of the fortress, had granted Aqua the somewhat enigmatic title of repair captain.

"Repair Captain, your work will determine the fate of this fortress... So, uh, good luck."

"You can count on me, Commander! Don't worry—they don't call me a captain for nothing. I won't let some dark god beat me!"

"Captain!"

"That's our captain! Come on, everyone, the challenge awaits! Let's see what she can do!"

Darkness had the "captain" by the nose: Aqua gleefully headed off for another day of doing repairs.

It was the third day of Aqua's tenure as the repair captain, a position that was purely a formality and received zero pay and no benefits.

As if in spite of the daily explosions, the fortress walls got thicker and sturdier every day. I was starting to think Aqua could actually make a living in this line of work.

Morale had taken a complete 180 in the formerly gloomy fortress, and when added to the vast quantities of wine that a cheerful Aqua spread around (no doubt inspired by the constant calls of *Captain, Captain!*), everyone now was acting ready to do battle.

“...Um, whatever happened to the doom and gloom hanging over this fortress when we first got here?”

“I feel silly for losing sleep worrying about it.”



I could hear the two Crimson Magic girls talking to each other, a bit overwhelmed, as they watched Aqua go.

I could understand how they felt, but it was definitely best to err on the side of caution here. This would allow us to buy some time, and while we strengthened the fortifications, some wizards who could use Teleport headed back to the capital to let them know what was going on.

We were locked in a stalemate now; a handful of reinforcements could turn the tide. Meanwhile, a steady stream of supplies and even soldiers and adventurers arrived from the city.

Aqua's nominal subordinates adored her for her generosity with the wine, and the captain herself was more than happy to let them adore her. (It didn't hurt that the lives of everyone in the fortress pretty much depended on her.) The daily explosions no longer concerned us at all.

At last, we had gotten to a point where Aqua wasn't just expanding the walls but was even adding some playful artwork.

"Wolbach's here!"

We all looked at one another: The shout didn't sound like normal.

3

"What is going on?!"

Wolbach was standing in front of the fortress gate, shaking.

"Wh-what is what?" asked the person probably most used to talking to her by now—namely, me—as the other adventurers looked on.

I guess Wolbach didn't like my tone, because she stamped her foot. "I'm talking about your wall! Your wall was practically rubble. So how come it looks like *that* now?! It looks stronger than it did before I got here!"

"You'd have to talk to Aqua about that..."

"Her again?!"

It sounded like almost getting washed away in a huge flood was still a raw nerve for Wolbach.

At that moment...

“Well, well, if it isn’t... Hmm, what was your name again?”

“It’s Wolbach! ...And it looks like I have to settle things with you! ...Wait, what?”

Wolbach was readying a verbal onslaught for the smart-mouthed Aqua, but then she stopped in surprise. She noticed Darkness coming up behind us. No, wait—she was surprised by Yunyun and Megumin, with Chomusuke in her arms.

She immediately fixed her gaze on Chomusuke. The cat, meanwhile, couldn’t seem to look away from Wolbach.

Aqua spoke up as the cat and the woman stared at each other. “Excuse me, could you please not look at Chomusuke like that? What, are you the kind who likes adorable stuffed animals? Are you just like our Darkness?”

“Hey, Aqua, I don’t like...! I don’t care about...”

Aqua ignored Darkness’s attempts to interject, walking forward to stand between Wolbach and Chomusuke.

“I was *not* looking at her because she’s adorable, even if she kind of...is...?” Wolbach suddenly stopped. “You, what did you just call that black cat?”

“Chomusuke? I always thought it was kind of a weird name, but it’s started to grow on me lately.”

“Hey, you, I shall ask you not to defame a glorious and cool name. It is not ‘weird.’”

Wolbach couldn’t seem to believe what she was hearing. “What *is* this?!” she shouted, and she started stalking toward us.

When she saw the adventurers behind us all focus on her, though, she stopped and gave them a resentful look.

“U-um, just so you know,” she said, “that cat’s a girl. So I’m not sure about

that name.”

“Chomusuke is Chomusuke. My familiar and pet.”

“*What?!* Seriously, somebody please fill me in! What in the world happened to my other half?!”

Wolbach had stopped making any sense to me. But Aqua...

“...Ahaaa. I *thought* you seemed like an awfully low-grade deity. Is it because Chomusuke here took half your power? ...Oh, oh, my all-seeing eye perceives it now. There’s some kind of seal on Chomusuke.”

Aqua leaned in and stared intently at Megumin’s cat.

Chomusuke, perhaps in response to Aqua, started struggling to go over to Wolbach.

“Ah...”

Wolbach started to walk up slowly, reaching out her hand to her “other half.”

“Don’t you dare give Chomusuke to her!” I shouted. “Megumin, hold on to that cat!”

“What?!” Wolbach exclaimed, sort of crying. “That’s *my* other half you’re talking about! My partner who I’ve been searching for for years! This is a big, emotional reunion!”

“I don’t know what you want with Chomusuke, but can you swear that if we give her to you, you’ll stop fighting us? Do you promise to leave this fortress alone? Because if not, it would be stupid to do something that might make our enemy stronger, right?” Wolbach kept walking as I spoke. “Oops, don’t come any closer, you hear? I don’t have anything against you personally. That’s why I’m willing to negotiate. If you want us to let Chomusuke go, listen very carefully and promise to do exactly as I say. If you really are a dark god, then swear on your own name not to stand against us anymore.” I smirked as nastily as I could, leaving everyone there flabbergasted.

““““Yikes...””””

The collective gasp from the adventurers left me feeling like I was doing something really villainous. *No! This is just a ruse so she won’t see through us...!*

Fine, who cares what some adventurers I just met the other day think about me? As long as my party members understand who I truly am...

“Hey, I guess that woman’s a dark god or something. But if someone can make a dark god cry, are they even still human anymore?”

“Take it easy, Aqua. I’m sure he’s negotiating the best way he can. The most respectful thing we can do for him is to try not to look.”

“Mr. Kazuma, you’re the worst...”

...I think I’m gonna cry, myself.

“...I’ll withdraw for today, but don’t let it go to your heads! Even if I can’t destroy your walls, that only leaves us in a stalemate. As long as this fortress is here, we can’t advance any farther. But if I were you, I wouldn’t feel too good about all the demon forces camped out in the forest.” Wolbach was on a roll. “Now it’s a war of attrition! I’m going to bring down each and every stroke of the graffiti on that wall!”

She was just about to teleport out.

“U-um! Hey! Do you... Do you remember me?! I’m... My name is Yunyun, a-and...”

Yunyun and Megumin had just stood watching the entire scene, when right at the end, Yunyun burst out with a question.

“...I remember you,” Wolbach replied. “I believe you’re from the carriage, the one I invited to travel with me... There’s something I’ve always wanted to ask. ‘Yunyun’... Is that a nickname, too...?”

So apparently, I wasn’t the only one who knew this lady. Yunyun did, too.

“It’s my real name! Um... All this time, I’ve never forgotten your invitation! I made sure to write it down in my diary that day, and sometimes I read back over that entry!”

“O-oh, do you? You didn’t have to take it quite so seriously, but if it makes you happy, then that’s what matters,” Wolbach said.

“Um...!” Now it was Megumin, clutching Chomusuke, who spoke, her voice strained. “And me...! Do you remember me? My name is Megumin...”

Wolbach sort of half smiled, almost sadly.

“No. I don’t remember you.”

It was hardly a whisper, and then she teleported away.

4

At the fortress’s assembly grounds.

The knights and soldiers all looked downright excited.

Before, they had been hit with attack after attack that they couldn’t respond to, ground down physically and mentally, but now their eyes sparkled, and they held their heads high with anticipation.

They didn’t care that we were in a stalemate.

They were watching my every move with rapt attention. And with all eyes on me, I began to speak.

“All right, let’s review the plan one more time! The three of us are going to go out there and get close to the enemy base using Ambush. Then, when we’ve lured the enemy within spell range, we’ll hit her with Explosion and then teleport out! We can expect retaliation, so I want everyone in the fortress to get ready for it!”

The adventurers bellowed hungrily at that.

Wolbach had said it herself. This was a stalemate.

But why should we just sit and wait any more than she was?

My plan was outrageously simple, but I was confident it would work.

After all, it was the exact same plan the enemy had been using.

“Another underhanded scheme... I guess if it means we get to go on the offensive, I can’t complain...”

Darkness, the only person in the fortress who could take a hit from Explosion and survive, and Aqua, who was our master of support and healing magic and who repaired a mean wall, would stay here.

Until now, the people here had been unable to do anything except coop themselves up in this fortress while the enemy pounded away at them, and they were getting pretty tired of it. As we prepared to go out and meet the foe, we got shouts of encouragement and slaps on the back from everyone around us.

Our squad consisted of three people: Yunyun, to handle teleporting and help fight in a pinch; me, to provide the quick thinking, the Ambush skill, and the ability to detect incoming enemies with Sense Foe; and Megumin, to bring the firepower.

With pretty much everyone in the fortress seeing us off, the three of us headed for the woods near the base. The enemy encampment was in there somewhere.

Monsters always seemed to like forests and other natural locations, so maybe it made sense to them to set up shop in a place like this when they knew they were going to be staying for a while. But it also provided a perfect opportunity for us. A forest meant plenty of underbrush—plenty of places to hide if you had Ambush.

As we got close to the enemy camp, we started to get a sense of what was going on with them. It was already like a big party over there, probably inspired by Wolbach's attacks virtually decimating the fortress wall.

I felt a tug on my sleeve and glanced over to see Megumin give me one firm nod.

That was the signal: We were in range for Explosion.

I caught Yunyun's eye, and she tightened her grip on her wand as if to show that she was ready, too.

All right, time for a little revenge!

After Wolbach's daily attacks, I guess the monsters figured victory was just a matter of time.

“Exploooosion!”

Our ultimate-finisher magic dropped straight into the heart of the encampment of the Demon King’s army.

The explosion magic blew away every single monster caught in the blast, leaving only a giant crater. The demon troops, convinced that the battle was already over and reveling in their victory, were thrown into a total panic by the unexpected attack.

“Wh-wh-whaaaat the?!”

“Wh-what just happened?! Was that explosion magic?!”

“Enemy attack! Enemy attaaaaack!”

The more intelligent-looking bipedal monsters in the camp furiously tried to raise the alarm, but Yunyun was already chanting Teleport.

“Hey! There, look over there! That’s them, two Crimson Magic Clan members and—”

“Teleport!”

Before the monster who spotted us could finish his sentence, Yunyun got us all out of there.

“Mission accomplished!” I announced loud enough that everyone could hear as we arrived back at the fortress. All the gloom that had been building up vanished in a massive cheer. I could hear people shouting things like “Yeah! Take that!” and others exclaiming that they had seen the explosion from the guard towers. Everyone looked thrilled.

But in the middle of it all...

“You were right! Here they come!”

...an adventurer on watch was pointing to the woods and shouting.

Everyone went straight to their battle stations and prepared to meet the enemy attack.

On came the Demon King’s army. I guess our little stunt had touched a nerve. I could see murderous rage in the enemies’ eyes, and they advanced on the

fortress in an unruly mob, with no proper formation.

It was time for my friends and me to take a step back. Let the cheaters and the knights handle this. The bad guys had numbers on their side, but we had the advantage of defending from inside a fortress. But it wasn't my job to deal with a big, violent battle like this.

"My dear adventuring friends! I leave this in your hands!"

The other adventurers, riled up with even more bloodlust than the Demon King's army, gave a huge collective shout.

And so it went...

"Explosion!!"

"Huuuuuh?!"

"It's them again! Don't let them get away—catch them!"

"Look what they've done to our brothers in arms! Surround them—they'll pay with their lives!"

From all around us, we could hear the shouting of the Demon King's chosen troops, Devils and demons and all sorts of nasty creatures. But as for us?

"Teleport!"

We continued our attacks on the enemy encampment, a different time every day.

"Explosion!!"

"The food! They just blew away our stockpile of provisions!"

"Dammit, not again! I'm so sick of waking up to explosions!"

"Call Lady Wolbach and ask her to get rid of these guys!"

"She already used her explosion for today!"

"Just hold tight! If we can hang in there a little longer, their walls'll come crashing down! Then we can have our revenge!"

"Do *not* let them get away today! Don't let them use—"

"Teleport!"

We pestered them with attacks day and night.

“Bwah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I am Megumin, first among the Arch-wizards of Axel! Time for another harvest of experience points!”

“There they are!”

“Run! Run awaaaaay!”

“Idiots, don’t bunch together! That Crimson Magic girl always hits the densest spot! Get away from me!”

“No, not over there! Spread ou—”

“Explosion!”

Megumin’s level rose almost comically fast, so her explosions grew more powerful every day, a state of affairs she found deeply satisfying. At some point she started to accompany her attacks with insane laughter.

“Gya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Wa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Behold, I have come once more!”

“D-do us a favor and beat it! Here, we’ll give you candy!”

“Spare me! I have an elderly mother!”

“Hey, uh, demons love magic, just like Crimson Magic folks! I’ll bet we can be friends!”

“Let’s talk about this! Y’know, t-try to understand one another. Fighting doesn’t solve anything, right?”

“Look, I threw down my weapon! Surely a proud and honorable Crimson Magic Clan mage would never attack a poor, defenseless—”

“Exploosion!”

It got to the point where all they had to do was look at us.

“Megumin, over there! They’re trying to look like they’re scattering, but they’re all going the same way!”

“Understood! Not one of them shall escape!”

“Arrrrgh! Oh god, oh god! Lady Wolbach!”

“When I die, I hope I’ll be reborn as a cat, not a demon... Then I can spend

every day with my beautiful lady owner, getting food and cuddles...”

“This has to be a dream. Yeah, I’m gonna wake up and go on one of my walks, and when I get back, Mom’s gonna be making steaks from the Bloodfang she just caught...”

“I-I-I-I’ve got an in with the Demon King! If you let me live, I’m sure he’d pay a lot of money to have me back...!”

“Exploosion!!!”

They would scream and cry and run away.

“I won’t let them escape! No, I shall certainly not... Oh, wait!”

“...Okay, I think that’s enough. How about we go home for today?”

I’d lost track of how many days it had been since we started exploding the Demon King’s troops. Early on, they had come in force to counterattack every time we hit them, but by now their morale was extremely low; I was shocked they hadn’t just packed up and gone back to the Demon King’s territory yet.

“Gosh, I can hardly tell who the bad guys are anymore...,” Yunyun groaned, dragging us off.

By now, just the sight of Megumin brought on a variety of reactions: begging, rolling around on the ground, and praying. They had given up on the idea of even trying to run away. I figured it was about time for them to close up shop, but in a hierarchy like the Demon King’s army, I guess you didn’t ignore orders from above. They had probably threatened to kill deserters or something.

“Most troublesome. I can’t level up efficiently this way.”

“Just a reminder, but we aren’t doing this so you can farm experience, all right?”

We had started to get away from our original objective, and it seemed like the iron was plenty hot. We had wiped out most of the Demon King’s so-called handpicked troops with merciless explosions day after day. Aqua had taken over the repair of the fortress walls and done so much work that by now they were stronger than when we’d arrived. I was of the opinion that she would have done better for herself as an entertainer or an engineer than an Arch-

priest.

But anyway, by this point, we should have been okay.

“Ah, well,” Megumin said. “All right, Yunyun, take us home for today. It’s too bad we didn’t get to let off an explosion. Let’s try coming back in the middle of the night, when they’ve let down their guard a bit. Get ready to teleport us, please.” She laid her staff casually across her shoulders, and that was when it happened.

“I’ve been looking all over for you lot. So we finally meet again.”

The attacks on the fortress had completely stopped by now—maybe they’d given up hope of destroying the outer walls. But there was Wolbach, a pained expression on her face.

6

Oh hell.

Who would have thought we would end up in a situation like this at a time like now?

“Looks like your friend isn’t with you today,” Wolbach said, staring straight at me. Then she giggled a little.

By my “friend,” she seemed to mean our useless goddess. I personally never found Aqua to be very helpful, but this dark god was apparently a little leery of her.

Wolbach’s gaze shifted from me to Megumin, and then those golden eyes narrowed. “You’ve overplayed your hand,” she said. “I can’t overlook any more of your destructive antics. I do hate to fight someone I’ve had such nice conversations with, but so it goes...”

“H-hold it! I don’t want to fight you, either! I mean, not after we’ve shared the bath and everything!”

““Huh?!”” Megumin and Yunyun chorused.

“...Given the present circumstances, I’d prefer you didn’t bring that up...”

““What?!””

Geez, girls, I'm trying to negotiate here.

“A-ahem, I think your young friends are getting the wrong idea...”

“The wrong idea? We’ve bathed together twice. Heck, you’ve even said you feel a connection to me...”

“I did! Yes, I did say that, and yes, we’ve bathed together! But still!!” Then Wolbach glared at us in an effort to regain the initiative. “I’ve taken the liberty of doing a little research on you, my frequently attacking foes. Beldia, Vanir, Hans, Sylvia... I assume those names ring a bell?”

She was listing the names of the generals we’d defeated.

“Wolbach, if you don’t mind my saying so, your ears are red.”

“Quiet, you!” All the bath talk must have embarrassed her, and when I pointed out the state of her ears, it only caused the rest of her face to flush, too.

“Yeah, I remember them,” I said. “But I really don’t have any motivation to fight you.”

“That may be, but I just can’t imagine what you’ve been doing. I have to get you to give back my other half. And this business about defeating four different generals, it makes you sound like the hero from that old fairy tale.”

Hero might be a bit much for someone from the weakest class. My most powerful ability was Steal.

Wolbach, ignoring my internal jab, continued, “And the more I found out about you, the less I could just look the other way. Tell me. Do you know the name of that hero from the fairy tale?” She grinned as if she knew some damning secret about me.

“...I don’t know about any hero. Wanna just tell me?”

“You can certainly play dumb, I’ll give you that. Or is it that it was so long ago, you’ve already forgotten? The name of that fabled hero was Satou. That’s right. Just like you. Are you going to tell me it’s just a coincidence that both of you have such an unusual name?”

Um, it's actually just about the most common name where I come from.

If nothing else, though, things finally made sense. Wolbach thought I was a descendant of this hero or whatever. Even though I was pretty sure this other Satou and I were totally unrelated.

At that moment...

"Um."

...Megumin lowered the staff she had been holding.

"Are you...sure you don't remember me?"

Her face was red, and her crimson eyes were glittering.

Wolbach hardly glanced at her. "...Don't make me repeat myself. No, I don't... But don't worry. I'll certainly remember you after this. As the one who sent so many of my subordinates to their graves!"

"?!"

No sooner had she finished speaking than she began chanting her magic! *Guess we aren't friends anymore.*

"Hey! Hold on; I told you, I don't want to fight—"

I broke off, realizing our opponent wasn't playing around. How did I know? Because that incantation was—

"Yunyun, cast Teleport!" I yelled.

"G-g-got it! Right away!"

Confronted by Wolbach suddenly chanting Explosion, Yunyun hurriedly began to recite her own spell. Megumin—perhaps from the shock of being told Wolbach didn't remember her, or maybe for some other reason—showed no sign of chanting her magic.

Deeply regretting having left all the magical items I'd so carefully prepared back at the fortress, I looked around in hopes of coming up with something, anything—!

I searched every pocket I had and came up with one object.

“Kindle!!!!!”

I cast my spell on the miniaturized thing and flung it at Wolbach!

She saw it arc through the air toward her, and she froze for an instant, unsure whether to interrupt herself, dodge, or what.

We didn’t stick around to see it explode: I grabbed the dumbfounded Megumin and dragged us both over to Yunyun.

“Teleport!!!”

I closed my eyes as Yunyun shouted the spell.

7

We instantaneously returned to the fortress, where we collapsed in a heap.

“H-hey, what happened, Kazuma?” Darkness came up to us where we were sitting on the ground. “We didn’t hear much from today’s explosion.”

We had transported ourselves right into the gathering area in the middle of the structure. The rest of the inhabitants, sensing something was amiss, came running.

“Hey, Kazuma, what’s wrong? You’re all so pale. Did that Miss Whoever bully you?” Aqua, apparently genuinely bothered by all those days of being called the goddess of whatever, crouched down next to us.

“We almost ate an explosion ourselves. I flung the Tinymite in my pocket at her, and we got out of there. I think that’s the first time I’ve ever felt as lucky as everyone says I am.” I shook my head between heaving breaths. “...Hey, what’s up? You’ve been pretty excited ever since we got here. I guess it’s ‘cause your other half is nearby, huh?”

Chomusuke, whom we had left with Darkness and Aqua, had climbed up onto my knees.

If what Wolbach was saying was true, then this cat was basically a part of a dark god, and that left the question of what exactly to do with her.

“Hey, Kazuma, that Tinymite...is that the stuff you made earlier? When you

blew it up, the sound carried all the way here. Does that mean you finished off that self-proclaimed goddess?”

...Actually, I had no idea what had happened after our escape. If they’d heard the blast here, then at least it hadn’t been a dud. But as powerful as my little invention had proved to be, I really didn’t think it had the kick to bring down a general of the Demon King.

“I’m very sorry,” Megumin said, appearing at my side. “After I talked myself up, back in Axel and here at the fortress. When I was finally face-to-face with the enemy, I couldn’t get my magic off, and I’m so sorry...”

She stared into my eyes.

“Do you have some kind of history with that woman?” I asked.

My question had been offhand, but Megumin, looking at the ground as if she might burst into tears at any moment, replied, “...I can’t tell you.”

Seeing her like that, I worried—

I’ve done it now, I thought.

I felt like I had stepped on a land mine.

But look, knowing how aggressive Megumin was, there had to be something going on to make her hesitate like that! There just *had* to be. But what was I going to do? She was practically on the verge of tears!

I looked around to the others for help, but all the other adventurers, even Aqua and Darkness, glanced away.

I can’t believe these people. Aqua is one thing, but Darkness?

But then...

“Hey, isn’t that...Wolbach?” someone said.

One of the adventurers was looking out a window, and at his words, everyone rushed over to see. Including me, obviously.

Outside, making a beeline for the fortress, was a person covered in splotches of blood here and there. It was Wolbach.

“Wolbach is wounded!”

“You said your name was Kazuma Satou? You sure know how to handle yourself...!”

“Is what I heard from Lady Aqua true? Did you really not get any special boosts like the rest of us?”

The adventurers praised me lavishly at the sight of the bleeding general, but I have to say, I didn’t feel very good about it.

No. She might have been a hot woman, but she was also our enemy. She was a general of the Demon King, and that made her an enemy of humanity.

That was it. There was no need to beat myself up about it. What I’d done was justifiable self-defense.

While all this discord and doubt was running through my head, someone else spoke up.

“Hey... She looks kind of weak. You think we could take her down right now?”

When the other guys—probably all blessed with OP weapons and armor—heard that, they looked at one another.

“Yeah, let’s go! We’ve taken out more than half the Demon King’s handpicked troops, haven’t we?”

“Man, she sure is hot, though. I guess that doesn’t count for much right now.”

“Yeah, let her get under your skin, and we’ll all die. All right, everyone who can bear arms, get ready! Once we take out Wolbach, we’ll go straight for the last of the Demon King’s forces!”

I guess that was all to be expected from a bunch of adventurers. Pretty much everyone there went streaming out of the gathering area.

I saw Aqua follow them, probably less interested in helping to destroy Wolbach than in having a ringside seat for the fight. Darkness’s face was grim.

...As she left the area, Darkness glanced back at me and nodded.

Dammit. What the hell was that supposed to mean? Was there something she wanted me to do?!

Was she telling me to snap Megumin out of it?!

Speaking of Megumin, who was left there with me, she hadn't reacted at all to the announcement that Wolbach had shown up.

Man, I'm so bad at these serious moments. My life until now has been so upbeat!

As I fretted to myself, Yunyun, who had kindly stayed behind with me, spoke up. "That person out there is a general of the Demon King and a dark god." Her crimson eyes flashed, and she drew her wand. "That woman invited me to travel with her. I was so happy that I wrote about it in my diary, and I've read over that entry so many times. For a while I couldn't even sleep because I regretted turning her down." (Megumin and I weren't sure how to respond to this unexpectedly intimate confession.) "But the Crimson Magic Clan was created by human hands to be the strongest wizards ever known in order to oppose the Demon King. No matter what may happen, we absolutely must not befriend a general of the Demon King."

She looked so serious. I wondered if she knew who Vanir and Wiz really were.

Yunyun, still wielding her wand, headed for the door. "I may know that woman only from a short conversation in a carriage. But rather than let a bunch of adventurers who have never even spoken to her bring her down, I would rather... I'd r-r-r-rather...!"

She was trying so hard to be cool, but she must have reached her limit, because she started trembling as if she was going to cry. Megumin, maybe still weighed down by her inability to do anything when we faced Wolbach, didn't say a word, despite her friend's obvious distress.

I couldn't tell what was in Megumin's head, but suddenly she grabbed Chomusuke off my knees, silently hugging her to herself.

We knew Chomusuke had some sort of connection to Wolbach, something that kept Wolbach from immediately attacking us.

"...What are you going to do?" I said to Megumin.

"...What?"

As gently as if I were inviting her to go play, I said, "I don't know exactly what the story is here." Megumin continued to stare at me in confusion. "But you

have some kind of history with that woman, right? Can you just let those adventurers out there finish her off?" I was as cool as if we were talking about going for a walk. "She's come looking for a fight, and since she wants Chomusuke, I doubt she'll have to think twice about killing us. So personally, I'm not going to stop them."

I took Chomusuke—who would've probably only heightened the tension had she been present at the upcoming battle—back from Megumin.

"Crimson Magic Clan members always take the ripest opportunities, right?"

Megumin's eyes were beginning to glimmer.

"If you want to finish this yourself, I'll help however I can."

8

A crowd of adventurers and knights looked on as I confronted Wolbach, with Chomusuke in my arms and Megumin by my side.

When I promised the crowd of bloodthirsty adventurers that I'd tell them about a certain incredible shop, they let us handle the battle. Apparently, they had more than cheats going for them. All of them had already saved up a general's worth of bounty money.

Geez, color me jealous...

I glanced back at Darkness and Aqua, who looked like they had something to say, and silenced them with just my eyes.

"Are you sure you aren't the descendant of that hero? That was quite a fearsome thing you used on me." Wolbach, her robes torn here and there and covered in streaks of blood, smirked sarcastically at me.

"Call it the fruits of civilization. But I've gotta admit—I never expected it to work so well against a general of the Demon King. I might have to start mass-producing them." Standing there holding Chomusuke, I showed her I could be just as biting as she was. "Look, why come all the way to the fortress now? We can all see who's going to win this fight. Wouldn't now be a great time for you to retreat? Tell you what. If you promise to forget about Chomusuke and never

bother us again, I think I could find it in myself to look the other way while you escape.”

I didn’t expect the woman in front of me to accept those terms, but I thought I would offer, just in case.

“What a shame. If you really are capable of mass-producing those little toys, it’s just one more reason that I can’t let you live. And I can’t forget about your pet cat, either. I need her power, or I’m going to disappear.” Wolbach held up her right hand. It was starting to become translucent.

“...Are you some kind of undead?”

“How rude. I’ve lost so much power that at this rate, I’m going to be absorbed by my other half.”

This other half she kept talking about... Was it by any chance the cat I was holding in my arms?

...Huh?

“Can I ask you something? If I do return this cat to you, how will you get your power back, exactly? Are you going to, like, merge with Chomusuke or something?”

“No,” Wolbach answered, “I’ll erase that cat with my own hands. I rule sloth, and she rules violence. Once, long ago, we were accidentally unsealed, and her nature led her to go on a rampage. I sealed her back up, after stealing a considerable amount of her power, but...”

I didn’t exactly follow. Was she threatening to attack Chomusuke? As a cat lover, I wasn’t going to let that happen.

Then Megumin finally spoke up. “Was there not a little girl nearby when the seal on you and Chomusuke was broken? A girl with crimson eyes, perhaps five or six years old?” Her hands tightened on her staff; a look of certainty entered her expression.

“I don’t remember,” Wolbach almost spat, but still Megumin fixed her with her gaze.

I didn’t like where this was going.

Desperate to change the subject, I floated another question that had been on my mind.

“...Hey, look, if you’re in the Demon King’s army, how come we can have such a pleasant chat?”

Wolbach let out a pained breath. “If you want to know...defeat me first.” She smiled teasingly and repeated her words from earlier.

No good, huh? I knew it.

It was starting to look like we weren’t going to get out of this without a fight.

“This girl beside me is a user of Explosion, as I think you know by now,” I said. “So when this is over, you won’t be around to answer my questions.”

“...True enough. In that case...” Wolbach gave a little giggle. “Ask the Demon King. He’ll tell you.”

Again, her reply seemed to bring her pain. Then she started chanting a spell.

Here I’d been trying to buy time against a fading enemy, and I got the tables completely turned on us!

I knew how fast Megumin could chant. If she started right this second, it might be just enough to finish her spell first.

I glanced at Megumin beside me.

“...I think you *do* remember me, don’t you?” she murmured, then squeezed her staff again.

I went pale when I realized she didn’t seem to be chanting at all. I reached out for her so we could make our exit, when...!

“When you met Yunyun and me, you asked whether her name was a nickname, *too*.” Megumin slipped away from me, still not chanting, but instead talking to Wolbach, who stood stock-still. “There is something I’ve wanted to say to you, and show you, for a very long time.”

Wolbach, on the other hand, was obviously chanting.

“The spell you taught me. My mastery of it has surpassed that of any other, such that I can now control it without even a chant.” Then I thought I heard her

whisper, “Thank you.”

“Explosioooonnnn!!!”



The Demon King's army was in tatters, and his general had been blown away. Normally, that would have been cause for a huge victory celebration, but Megumin didn't look quite right, so we decided to take our leave quietly.

We said our farewells to the others at the fortress, and the next day, we were on our way home. We reached the inn where I'd bathed with Wolbach, and I found myself lying back in my bed, my hands under my head, staring at the ceiling.

With all that had happened the day before, I was exhausted; I wanted nothing more than to hop in the bath and then go to bed, but the girls were having their turn at that moment. I had initially tried to join them, arguing that it was a mixed bath, so there was nothing illegal about it. But I was fixed with two pairs of glowing crimson eyes, and I beat a hasty retreat.

...The fight this time really was a close one.

All our enemies up to this point had been— I mean, there was some hope of running away or just avoiding them. Being on the receiving end of Explosion, though... That put real fear into you.

I had learned my lesson: I would have to be careful not to really tick off Megumin in the future.

Chomusuke sat on my chest—she had been clinging to me all the way home—and I asked myself for the umpteenth time:

...What the heck is this cat anyway?

After that explosion, Wolbach was gone without ever answering my question. Considering that she was a full-fledged general of the Demon King, I had hoped she would've withstood the blast better than...well... There was nothing left but an empty crater. I didn't want to believe this meant the woman I'd gotten to know was dead. Was this really how it would all end?

Actually, when Megumin fired off that explosion with the words *thank you*, was it my imagination, or did Wolbach smile for just a second?

I kind of hoped I wasn't just imagining it...

Come to think of it, shouldn't this lazy furball have disappeared, too, if she was really Wolbach's "other half"?

Everything had happened so fast this time. There were too many things I didn't understand. My head felt like it was going to explode.

As I lay there trying to sort it all out, Chomusuke edged toward my nose.

...I guess I don't care if you're a dark god or whatever. You're the only one who's tried to comfort me...

I patted her where she had curled up again, getting a contented rumble in return.

There was a knock at my door, and I heard Megumin's voice. "Kazuma, are you still awake? We're all done in the bath."

"Great, I'll go down in a minute!"

I felt bad evicting the relaxed, purring Chomusuke from her spot, and I drew her closer as I answered.

Then the door drifted open.

"...So this is where you were. I didn't see you anywhere." As Megumin entered the room, she smiled to see Chomusuke resting on my chest. She pulled the door shut behind her, then sat on the end of the bed.

"We're having Make-Kazuma-Feel-Better time. Give us a few more minutes before you take her away."

"I don't have to take her anywhere. I was afraid she had wandered outside, but if she's with you, I don't have anything to worry about." Megumin reached out toward where Chomusuke was settled on top of me.

And then...

"...H-hey. Why so sudden?"

...Megumin went from reaching out for Chomusuke to leaning over, then lying down beside me.

Chomusuke—as if sensing her cue to leave—hopped down off the bed and

curled up on the floor.

Megumin ignored my question, pulling the blanket up to her head so I couldn't see her face. "May I sleep here tonight?" she whispered.

Back at the fortress, Megumin had barricaded herself in her room on account of what had happened yesterday. So what was going on now?

It sounded like she had known that woman somehow, and then she ended up having to drop an explosion on her. Not that I didn't sympathize, but...

"...Of course you can't. What are you talking about? Don't take me for the pushover I've been in the past, okay? ...I made myself a little promise, right here at this inn. I decided that if you or Darkness led me on with your sly looks and honeyed words ever again, I was going to just jump you." I tried to say it jokingly so it wouldn't come off too grim.

Just for an instant, Megumin's eyes flashed red under the covers. "I wouldn't really mind. In fact, that's why I came here today."

Then she giggled.

...Seriously, what was with this girl?

Er, actually, with her breathing on me from so close, my chest was starting to get a little warm from the heat.

This is bad. My heart's gonna start beating out of my chest any minute now.

Heck, that's not the only reason. This is bad, bad, very bad! It's only a matter of time before my lower half starts chanting Explosion himself!

"You know what you're dealing with, all right? A healthy young man in the prime of his adolescence. You can't joke like that with a guy like me. Listen, a guy'll get the wrong idea if you go around doing stuff like this. Especially unpopular ones. We can fall in love if someone so much as holds our hands. Seriously, be careful." My voice had gone up an octave from nervousness.

But then I felt a hand work its way around my back and pull me close.

"I've told you before as clearly as I could." I couldn't see Megumin's face, and her voice was muffled. "I love you, Kazuma."

I didn't know how this had happened.

I didn't know why things were developing so suddenly.

No, calm down. Megumin isn't her usual self. Something's wrong.

But I couldn't *not* let myself get swept along in what was going on here.

Let's, uh, let's change the subject. You know what I really love? Manga.

I love light novels.

Games are great, too, and watching anime is fun.

And all the time I was watching and reading and playing these things, I had one thought: *Why, when a guy is all but cornered by a beautiful woman, doesn't he lay a finger on her? Isn't he young and ravenous? What losers. If I was in their position, I thought, I would get with those ladies, no question.*

Well, now I practically *was* the main character in one of those rom-com manga.

I finally understood.

And I apologize. To all those characters I unfairly criticized in my head, I apologize. I beg you: Tell me what to do right now, when I'm in bed with a girl around my age, who's holding me close and telling me she loves me.

I felt Megumin hug me a little tighter. Not tight enough to hurt. Just enough to let me know what was in her heart.

...Geez, this is wicked dangerous.

If I could muster up just a bit of courage right now, I really *could* cross that line.

No, I couldn't! *I can't!*

Think, Kazuma Satou, you have to think. This was different from that time when I almost crossed that line with Darkness. She had been expecting to go be someone else's bride then. But now? Right now, it looked like the two of us were about to do it just because we wanted to.

Think about what would happen with all your party members living together if you and Megumin were to cross that line!

This is wrong. Something's wrong here. Something's wrong with her!

Okay, wait, don't get ahead of yourself. Remember the situation: She's holding on to you, and she's said she loves you, but that's all.

I could feel myself getting hotter, my voice scratching as I said, "Y-you're going to be a real troublemaker when you grow up. What's going on here? This is pushing it. Look, you know? When something like this happens to a guy, there's a lot of this and some of that, and he can't control himself. It's like, he doesn't care what's going to happen in the future as long as he can enjoy himself right now. You're lucky I've got a will of steel. Or else you..."

I kept talking faster and faster, trying to distract us both. From within the covers, her breath still dissipating against my chest, Megumin giggled. "...When I grow up? What are you talking about?"

The hug got tighter, and her voice got softer.

"I'll be turning fifteen years old soon. That's plenty grown up."

I decided not to think about anything anymore.

I slid my right arm under Megumin's head, my hand brushing her cool black hair. I ran my fingers through the strands, combing down the length of it. Megumin, still not making eye contact, moved her hand up my back until she could feel my hair.

I put my other hand behind her, too, so I was embracing her small body. I felt her sigh into my chest, silently telling me she felt safe in my arms.

...For a virgin like me, this was already about as much as I could handle. What the heck was I supposed to do next?

Please, somebody tell me!

Should I kiss her first, cool and calm?

Argh! Remember your succubus simulations!

As I lay there arguing with myself, Megumin and I ran our hands through each

other's hair. It felt nice, touching that cool, thick black hair.

I buried myself under the covers, and in the darkness under the sheets, I leaned my face toward hers. Neither of us could quite see the other. My Second Sight ability allowed me to at least see Megumin in outline, though.

Seriously. How had I gotten swept along so far, so fast?

I thought I was going to go nuts from the anxiety, but at the same time, my heart was full of emotions. And it was pounding nonstop.

So this... Was this love? Had I fallen in love with Megumin in spite of myself?

I didn't think the pounding of my heart was just pure lust.

These thoughts ran through my head as I silently prepared myself.

It was all right. We had money. We had a house. Megumin and I would make it work.

I felt Megumin squeeze me again. It brought her lips right up to my neck. Suddenly, I felt her warm breath on my skin with every exhalation.

I thought of those lips and leaned down to—!

“Megumiiiiin! Megumin, where are youuu?”

...Why am I not surprised?!

I poked my head out from under the covers when Aqua called from down the hallway. We heard somebody rushing back and forth outside the door.

I was definitely ticked that she could ruin a moment even when she didn't know she was doing it. But at the same time, it helped me get my head back, and I was able to relax a little.



That's right. I was definitely going to regret it if I let myself get swept away like this.

I was sure there was something wrong with Megumin today. If we crossed that line now, my relationship with everyone around me would change permanently. Hadn't Megumin said it herself when she made those charms for us?

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

Would we all be able to stay together if she and I crossed the line?

Megumin wanted us to stay a party; she didn't want there to be any awkwardness.

This was fine, then. I'd never even been on a date with a girl. What was I doing jumping into the deep end?

"Aqua, did you find Megumin?" we heard Darkness asking outside.

I was just about to sit up when I noticed something: Megumin was still clinging to me, showing no sign of letting go.

...Huh?

Aqua and Darkness were looking for her. Did she plan to just ignore them and keep going?

"M-Megumin, Aqua and Darkness are... I m-mean, are you okay with this?" I asked, still with just my head sticking out from under the covers. Megumin didn't answer, just hugged me tighter.

"Um, Megumin really seemed like she wanted to be alone. She must have had some connection to that Wolbach woman, just like I do..." That would be Yunyun outside.

"Huh... Well, I don't think she would leave the inn anyway. Aqua, let's go ahead and go to sleep."

"Aww, I wanted to play a four-person card game..."

Megumin and I stayed together in the bed, pretending we couldn't hear the conversation outside. We kept petting each other, unable to come up with the courage to take the big step.

But now that I'd gone this far, I didn't think I could stop.

My bonds with my party members? Difficult times ahead with us all living together?

Forget all that, I thought.

Oh, right. Before you kiss a girl, don't you have to say... You know? Megumin had told me how she felt about me; now it was my turn to come up with a sweet nothing.

"M-Megumin. I— You know... You know how you said you loved me? I... I think I love you, too!"

There! Did it!

Now I would just go wherever this took me. I was eager to get started, but Megumin—

"...Really? What do you love about me?"

She finally looked up at me, with something like hope in her eyes.

Being totally unaccustomed to chatting up girls, I didn't have any smooth lines I could just drop in.

"...I, uh... you know... Your explosion magic and stuff..."

"You're not just saying that because it's the obvious way to butter me up when you can't think of anything else?"

Damn, she was sharp. Argh, I didn't know what I was doing, and now I'd put my foot in my mouth. Why did I always have to spoil things when I was having a moment? Maybe I was cursed to be a virgin my entire life.

But even though I had assumed Megumin would be annoyed, she buried her face in my chest and giggled again. "That's one of the things I love about you, Kazuma. You're exactly who you say you are. You know your own strengths, and when we run into a powerful enemy, you don't make some show of trying to be

brave and protect the women or something. You're perfectly happy to hide behind Darkness. You may not have the nerve to do anything *really* bad, but you don't pretend to be a do-gooder, either. And if you do bad things sometimes when people aren't looking, when you're in a good mood, you have it in you to do good things, too. I like that you're not exactly good or evil. You're just you."

...Wait, is she complimenting me?

"You'll work so hard to get out of debt, but then the moment you have some money, you stop working entirely. Depending on your mood, you can either be kind or kind of a jerk. You'll make me think you really value your companions, and then you'll go and do something like trade party members without a second thought. Sometimes you have ideas that make me think you must be brilliant, and then the next moment, you'll do something so stupid that I don't know what you're thinking at all..."

Yeah, this was definitely praise.

Megumin, watching my expression get weirder and weirder as she spoke, smiled as if this was the most amusing thing in the world.

"And I love you because despite all your complaining, you're still there for us when we need you. I love how you're really kind, even if you have trouble showing it; how you can mess up a golden opportunity so badly that it's honestly impressive but then have moments like this one. I love you for how you aren't cool, how you can never quite get it together when it really matters."

She smiled as she spoke, sliding her hand from my back to my neck.

In the starlight twinkling through the window, Megumin closed her eyes. Just a little bit of the light fell on her face, and I felt myself drawn toward her.

Was this really okay?

Could I just go ahead and...do this?

I had to remember—this was another world.

At my age, I would still be a student in Japan, but around here, where the average life span was shorter, I was already an adult.

Certainly old enough to marry Megumin.

It was okay; I would take responsibility.

So I steeled myself, leaned in, and—

—saw tears pooling in the corners of Megumin’s closed eyes.

“...H-hey. You’re not forcing yourself, are you? Are you really in love with me? If you feel like we’re going too fast, I mean, I’m a gentle guy. I can wait as long as you need! I can afford it! I mean financially and, uh, experience-wise!”

Shaken by Megumin’s sudden fit of tears, I started talking too fast, saying things that didn’t even really make sense to me.

Megumin didn’t seem to realize she had been crying until I said something. “Oh! N-no, this...!” She quickly sat up, wiping her eyes.

That finally gave me a chance to regain a cool head. “...So tell me. Why did you suddenly decide to come here tonight?”

It felt like such a belated moment to ask such an obvious question.

11

I was lying back, my arms under my head, staring up at the ceiling.

“This was back when I was still about Komekko’s age...” Megumin was lying beside me, also looking at the ceiling, her hands resting on her stomach. “You know the ‘seal of the dark god’ in Crimson Magic Village? I broke it one day, and that’s how it all started.”

She was telling me how she accidentally undid the seal when she was young. She had just thought she was playing with a toy.

She had immediately been confronted with a huge, pitch-black magical beast. In other words, she was attacked by Chomusuke, back before the cat’s power had been sealed away. And she had been saved by someone using Explosion—Wolbach.

The magic left a major impression on her, and from that day forward, her dream in life was decided.

That woman sure had screwed everything up good.

Many years later, Megumin herself learned Explosion. Acquiring magic made her a full-fledged adult in the Crimson Magic Clan, and she set out on a journey to find the person who had saved her that day, so she could thank her—and show her what she had learned.

But—

“I really am terribly ungrateful. I destroyed the very person who saved me.”

In the dark, Megumin kept talking, almost as if to herself. Beset by her feelings of guilt, she seemed so weak, as if she might disappear at any moment.

“...Did I mention to you how back in my country, I was a *hikikomori* and a NEET?” I asked gently, and Megumin glanced over at me.

“Yes, I think I’ve heard that a few times now. Why...?”

I didn’t quite let her finish her question. “Believe me, I’m the master of being ungrateful, if nothing else. My parents paid these outrageous tuition fees to send me to a private school, but I hardly even went to class. It started with just playing hooky here and there. I’d play games all night on the weekend, and then come Monday, I was just so tired and depressed. And my parents both worked, so it was easy to skip.”

I had never told anyone about this glittering history of mine before, but I decided to tell Megumin now.

“It was only going to be one day. That turned into once a month and then every Monday. Before I knew it, I’d stopped going to school entirely.”

It was actually kind of an ugly story, now that I thought about it.

I had planned to graduate middle school and get out of the *hikikomori* lifestyle, but it was all for naught.

In the mornings, I would pretend to leave for class; then when I saw my parents go to work, I would sneak back in the house. Then I’d call the school, make up some excuse, and spend the rest of the day playing games. I would be discovered when the school finally called my parents, but no matter what they said to me, it wasn’t long before I would go back to being an inveterate shut-in.

“You call yourself ungrateful, but you’re the one who freed Wolbach in the first place, right? Then her other half attacked you, and she saved you and taught you magic. She *caused* the problem, so she doesn’t get credit for fixing it. I know a certain little punk of an adventurer who does that all the time.”

Megumin looked at me blankly.

“*You freed her, she owed you*, and so she stopped her other half from attacking you. Like she should. You don’t have to thank her for it... If you’ve been spending all your time worrying about that, how could someone like me ever face my parents again?”

Not that I could have, really, even if I’d wanted to.

“So, look... The point is, you know. On an Ungratefulness Scale of one to Kazuma, you’re nowhere near me. If you’re spending time fretting about feeling ungrateful when you don’t really have anything to worry about, think how awful I must look. So, uh...”

Even I wasn’t sure what I was talking about anymore. Megumin continued to watch me intently, then exhaled. She buried her face in my chest, quaking with suppressed laughter.

“...What’s with you? I’m trying my best to comfort you here, and this is how you treat me? I’m revealing the most painful secrets of my past. You really are an ingrate!”

“I’m sorry. I promise I’m not laughing at you. I just felt bad for your parents having a son like you. And it was so funny, the way you looked so serious, comforting me in the strangest way possible.”

You little—!

“Gee, sorry for trying to do something different! I know what this is, okay? You’re pretending to be this tragic heroine, but I’m the real victim here. Think how a guy must feel when a girl comes to his room in desperation just to comfort herself.”

But Megumin only laughed harder at my tirade, wiping tears from her eyes.

“Would you like to pick up where we left off, then?”

“H-h-h-hell no! People may call me Cad-zuma or Trash-zuma or whatever, but even I’m not low enough to take advantage of someone who’s feeling as vulnerable as you are!”

I was just trying to sound tough, but I guess it helped Megumin get her head back on her shoulders, because she giggled again. “I see. That’s too bad.”

But then her eyes flashed red as she spoke in a way that suggested she didn’t think it was too bad at all.

“...Listen here, though. If you ever feel like you’re finally free of the bad feelings surrounding you and that woman, and you come to me just because you want to be with me, I won’t have any reason at all to say no.” I hated to think I might be throwing away a golden opportunity here, but it was too late to turn back. Megumin’s shoulders were shaking again.

“Is that so? When that time comes, then, I’ll visit your room again.”

Then she gave me a smile of relief.

Megumin left my room, telling me how much better she felt.

But I didn’t feel better. I was all hot and bothered now. I tossed and turned under the covers.

“Arrrrrrggghhh! I let a perfect opportunity slip through my fingers, and I said the most embarrassing stuff in the world! Arrrrrrrgh!”

12

I was hardly going to sleep after that, so I decided to go try to cool my head. A nice, cold shower ought to do the trick.

To be perfectly honest, I couldn’t believe I had let that chance get away. But at the same time, I felt sort of glad that I didn’t get caught up in the moment and do something that might’ve come back to bite me.

Come to think of it, in light of what had happened, was I basically dating Megumin now?

I mean, I said some things about love and stuff, too, right?

But it turned out I did have a lot of affection for her. Enough that I wasn't sure I really minded if we were dating.

...So, wait, did I have a girlfriend now?

Were we going to be one of those happy, sappy couples everyone hates?!

"Okay, wait, calm down. Megumin's been acting weird ever since yesterday. Let's see how she feels tomorrow and then go from there," I muttered as I got to the changing room...

Then I noticed Chomusuke had joined me somewhere along the line, pattering along by my feet.

"...And just what do you think you're doing?"

"Mrrow."

She had been so sensitive to what was going on earlier. What had gotten into her now?

Well, she hated baths anyway, so I was sure she would turn back soon...

"...I'm heading for the bath. You hate those, remember? Are you sure you want to come in?"

I sat down on a stool and tried to reason with Chomusuke, who had boldly followed me in.

Then, while taking a cold shower, I considered the future. My first decision was that tomorrow, I would act like nothing had happened. But if Megumin actively approached me for some "skinship," I wouldn't turn her down. For a wimp like me, that seemed like a pretty good compromise.

Pretty soon it wasn't just my brain that was feeling cool; my skin was downright chilly, too. Time to head for the bath. A nice soak, and then I could get to sleep...

"...You really wanna come in here?"

"Mrra."

I was just stepping into the tub when I saw Chomusuke coming with me. That was weird. Still, I put a little water in a washbasin.

“When I get in, the water’s gonna overflow. You can hide out in here.”

I set the basin down, and Chomusuke approached it delicately, checking the temperature with her paw before climbing in and curling up.

...What was with the cat today? I mean, besides the fact that she wasn’t a cat.

I didn’t know why she had suddenly taken a liking to baths, but I guess it was good she was keeping herself clean.

Thinking about how that other woman had appreciated a good bath, I said offhandedly, “Well, my dear Wolbach, how’s the temperature?”

The moment I said the name Wolbach, one of Chomusuke’s ears twitched.

.....

Was that just a coincidence? Was I anthropomorphizing Chomusuke too much?

Was there any chance she would turn into Wolbach herself when she got bigger?

“...Yeah, right.”

I sank into the water up to my shoulders, squinting with pleasure as I looked at Chomusuke.

“...Huh? By the way. You’ve been the same size this whole time, right? Why do you look a little bigger all of a sudden...?”

Epilogue 1 — For a Certain Someone



I cannot believe what I did.

Yes, I was bothered by my final encounter with my idol, after I had been looking for her for so long and finally found her, but still, I let it drive me to do something totally irresponsible.

How was I going to hold my head up after that?

More importantly, if we had both said we loved each other, then were we... lovers?

I would have to be especially careful of how I spoke and acted now that—

“Hooo! Gooood morning!” The very villain who had me in such a tizzy came into the room, yawning widely and looking very tired. Kazuma didn’t even bother to fix his bedhead as he made ready for our return journey. “Yunyun, let’s teleport home already.”

...*He* was the one who had suggested that, since we had taken the time to come out here, maybe we should take a nice, slow trip back, stop at a hot spring or something, rather than going back to Axel in the blink of an eye.

“I’d be happy to, but why the sudden change of heart?” Yunyun asked, suspicious.

“N-n-no reason in particular. I’ve just been thinking about how lovely Axel is.”

“You’re right,” Aqua said, despite Kazuma’s totally unexpected rationale. “I want to hurry back and see Emperor Zel again! Then it’s decided. Let’s head

home today, and then we can have a We-Worked-Hard-to-Defeat-a-Dark-God party!” She probably just wanted any excuse for us all to celebrate together.

“Good idea. We deserve to be proud of ourselves this time. It wasn’t like the other times we’ve defeated generals of the Demon King. This time we deliberately sought her out and then put a stop to her.” Darkness, whose armor had been all but destroyed on this trip, stuck out her chest proudly.

But...

“*You* hardly did anything,” Kazuma shot back.

“Erm...” And just like that, Darkness was near tears.

“Hey, Yunyun,” Aqua said. “You’re staying over, too, aren’t you? Not that I would let you go home even if you wanted to.”

“What?! Who, m-me?! Um, ahhh... If you don’t mind having me, I would happily...!”

But just as everyone was starting to get in the partying mood, Kazuma spoke up.

“Oh, hey, guys, I’m not staying at the house tonight.”

It wasn’t like Kazuma to spoil a moment like that. Who did he think he was, Aqua?

“You aren’t? Where in the world do you intend to go? Come to think of it, you do slip away periodically. Where is it you get off to?”

“Huh?! I j-j-j-just, you know, wanna hang out with the guys and stuff...”

My Crimson Magic Clan intuition was telling me something fishy was going on. “‘With the guys,’ you say? Why not simply ask them to join us, then? The more the merrier, as they say.”

“Huh?!”

Kazuma looked as if the world was ending—meaning my intuition had been correct. I didn’t know where he wanted to go or what he wanted to do there, but it was clear he was up to no good.

I went over to Kazuma, his shoulders slumped, and gave him an encouraging

pat on the back. “Never fear, Kazuma. You’ve worked so hard these last few days; we just want to have a little drink with you tonight.”

“Do you have any idea *why* I’m not staying at the house tonight?” he growled, but of course, I certainly didn’t.

“No idea at all. Where *did* you want to go tonight?”

“A café, Megumin. A café. One that’s open all night.”

An all-night café? There was only one establishment in Axel matching that description. As I recalled, all the staff members were attractive young women...

“...You have quite some nerve, after what happened last night.”

“Hmm? What’s wrong, Megumin? Your eyes are glowing—what’s got you so excited? You remembering last night?”

Curse this man!

...No, no. We may have exchanged words of love, but I hadn’t confirmed if we were technically lovers. So I had no grounds to get angry yet.

“...They say that shop is overflowing with sexy women. So, what? Are they your type, Kazuma?”

“Heck, you know about that place? I dunno if I’d say they’re my type, but... y’know?”

That was the most tepid answer he could have given.

“...May I ask what *is* your type, perchance, Kazuma?”

“My type? Hmm, I guess I’d never really thought about it, but...if I had to give an answer, maybe I’d go with someone with long, straight hair and big boobs who would baby me all the time.”

When I heard him say that with a completely straight face, I started to have serious doubts about how I could ever have had feelings for a man like this. After what had happened between us, surely a normal person would have at least made an attempt to list a few things that sounded like me.

“Ah, what’s wrong? I’ve heard if you go around sighing like that, your Luck will go down.”

Personally, I thought that if he went around acting like this, it was no wonder he never seemed to be popular with the ladies, but maybe it didn't matter.

I was the only one who needed to be in love with this most unusual person.

"Teleport is ready to go, everyone."

Once Yunyun was ready, we all gathered around, our preparations for the journey home finished.

"Awesome! I don't know what the bounty on that general was, but maybe I'll take the reward money this time and just sleep out as long as I want!"

I still didn't know exactly what he planned to do by being out of the house so long, but it was nothing good, I assumed.

Even as the thought ran through my mind, Yunyun exclaimed:

"Teleport!"

Maybe I'll grow my hair out.

Epilogue 2 — Dear Elder Brother



It happened one day about a week after we got back to Axel. I had just put a bowl of food down for Chomusuke in the living room when Megumin said to me, "...Kazuma, I think you're feeding Chomusuke too much. You must not let her wrap you around her little paw."

"Are you kidding? Her stomach is bottomless. The more we feed her, the faster she'll grow."

And then when she finally turns into that woman, we can all be friends again. I hope she'll forgive Megumin for dropping an explosion on her.

"...I cannot say I follow your logic, but anyway, there's a letter for you, Kazuma."

A letter for me?

"It's probably about some new dragon egg they claim to have," Aqua put in. "Ever since I bought Emperor Zel, letters like that have been coming for me every day."

Turns out once scam artists know you're an easy mark, they come flocking to you.

"Let me see that," Darkness said. "I get a bad feeling every time there's a letter addressed to you."

"Here," Megumin said. "Actually, this envelope looks oddly familiar." She showed it to Darkness...

No sooner had she seen it than Darkness grabbed the letter and clutched it to

her chest.

“...Hey, watch how you treat a guy’s mail, huh?”

“...Aqua was right. It’s just someone trying to sell you a dragon egg.”

“See! Aren’t you lucky, Kazuma? The letter they sent me said they only contact big-shot adventurers worthy of owning dragons.”

I ignored Aqua’s nonsense and stared at Darkness, who was trying hard to avoid my eyes. “Let me see that.”

“Uh-uh,” she said immediately, curling around the letter protectively.

That tipped me off to who must have sent it. This wasn’t the first time Darkness had acted this way.

“Iris! That letter is from Iris, isn’t it?!”

“How did you know?! I mean, n-no, it isn’t; it’s—!”

I didn’t think twice about grabbing at Darkness’s chest for the letter.

“Gaaahhh?!”

“I knew it! It *is* from Iris!”

With the letter stolen, Darkness pressed her hands to her chest and kind of curled into herself. She had run out of luck the moment she assumed I wouldn’t go for the letter if she held it there. *I’ve been reborn: I’m a man who no longer holds back in any way at any time.*

I savored my small victory as I glanced at the letter. I opened the envelope (complete with the seal of the royal family) and unfolded the letter within...

Dear Elder Brother. I’ve received word of your accomplishments at the fortress near the capital recently. It seems you were your usual dashing self. I do worry about you, though...

The opening alone was enough to make my heart flutter.

Seeing as you’re one of the most renowned adventurers in our nation by now, I wonder if I could make a small request of you.

And then I got to the final sentence.

As it happens, I shall soon be visiting a neighboring country to meet the prince to whom I am betrothed, and I very much wish for you to be my bodyguard on the journey to—

I immediately tore the letter in half.



Afterword

Yeeaaaaaaaahhhh! A second anime season yeeaaaaaaaahhhh!

Natsume Akatsuki here, disturbing the peace on a nightly basis out of an excess of joy.

Thank you so much for picking up Volume 9 of this series. As you've just learned, *Konosuba* is getting a second anime season, if you can believe it.

This is absolutely all thanks to the readers who have encouraged me and to my wonderful staff.

Thank you, thank you all so much!

That's not the only thing I have to be happy about, though. *An Explosion on This Wonderful World* is going to be getting the manga treatment in *Comic Alive*. Kasumi Morino-sensei will be handling the art duties. I hope you enjoy it alongside the main series manga already running in *Dragon Age*.

Maybe it has something to do with the anime being on TV, but the number of fan letters I'm getting seems to have grown recently, and the amount of time I spend each night offering thanks to the box where I keep those letters has grown along with it. I know—maybe you're saying, *If you've got time to worship, then you should be writing!* but this is an important ritual that sometimes blesses me with new ideas for the plot, so I'm going to keep on doing it no matter what you say.

In this volume, Megumin was at her most Megumin-esque, but I think I want to tone down the lovey-dovey stuff for a while. Not because I'm trying to be a prude, mind you, but because I have to think about what I can handle as an author. I've continually tried to take on subjects I'm not necessarily familiar with, and I'll continue to strive to bring you a few moments of laughter in the future.

Once again, my thanks go out to Kurone Mishima-sensei, my editor S-san, and everyone else who was involved in getting this book safely into print.

And above all, thank you, dear reader, for picking up this book!

Natsume Akatsuki



AFTERWORD

Thanks so much for buying Volume 9! My heart was really racing for Megumin this entire volume...! Am I just a little jealous of Kazuma...?! Thanks to all our supporters and fans, there's going to be a second season of the anime—plus, Megumin's spin-off is going to become a manga! When I think of how the world of *Konosuba* keeps expanding, I can't help but feel excited!

Kurone Mishima



Gaaaaahhhhhh!

Wh-what?! Kazuma, what's wrong? You've been acting strange ever since we got back to Axel!



Kazuma always acts strange, but this is worse than usual. Do you think Heal would work on his brain?

.....



Ahhhhh! Gaaaaahhhhhh! Hrraaaaahhhhhh!

...Say, Aqua, maybe we should let Kazuma rest a bit. He did defeat yet another general of the Demon King. He's almost like a real hero!



I think there's something seriously wrong here. I'm not sure a little rest is going to help.

...K-Kazuma. You don't, uh, have to worry about what happened that night, okay? I know it was all very complicated, but this reaction shames even me...



I was never worried about a dumb little thing like that! But this letter! It says my precious little sister is going to be stolen by some brute from another country! I'm not gonna take this lying down!!

You're unbelievable!!!!

**KONOSUBA:
GOD'S BLESSING
ON THIS WONDERFUL WORLD**

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