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Author: SkyFarm
Artist: teffish



8TH LOOP FOR THE WIN!

With *7 Lives' Worth of XP* and the Third Princess's *Appraisal Skill*,
My Behemoth and I Are *Unstoppable!*

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8th Loop for the Win! With Seven Lives' Worth of XP and the Third Princess's Appraisal Skill, My Behemoth and I Are Unstoppable! Volume 1 [Complete]

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Prologue: The Seventh Death

“Am I...dead?” My voice was small against the pitch-black world. “Again?”

You’d think that by the seventh time I ended up here, like it or not I’d at least be able to see it coming. But...

“So this is it, huh? The seventh time already?”

I could accept dying a seventh time. What I couldn’t accept were my friends—or rather, my former friends. “How could they...?” There was some kind of mistake, there had to be. But try as I might, I couldn’t escape from the looks on their faces in those last moments. I couldn’t escape from those expressions—that tableau of my dying moments.

❖

“Get it through your thick skull. I told you, we don’t need you anymore.” Margus, the party leader, leered at me as I cowered there, in the depths of the forest untouched by any except the highest-ranking adventurers. Margus was the fourth son of the Earl of Argus. As a magic swordsman and aspiring hero, he led our party.

Of course, being a fourth son, even of an earl, meant he had to earn his own keep. Through blood, sweat, and tears, he’d pushed himself to excel at both swordsmanship and sorcery, and won his fame as a magic swordsman. He was a man to look up to.

“Look, when it comes down to it, a poor country noble like you was never going to fit in with us,” Rui the sorceress chimed in. As the third daughter of Viscount Rutus, she would typically be nothing but a game piece for a political marriage; strong-willed and unconventional as she was, however, she had made a name for herself as an adventurer. She had poured her determination not to be a pawn to her family’s desires into nurturing her magical talent and became a brilliant sorceress, leaving a trail of great victories in her wake.

But all of that strength of will hid a deeply anxious nature. In truth she was a bit of a crybaby, and I’d often found myself in the role of comforting and

protecting her.

“All this time you really never realized. Pathetic.” This came from Aman the lady knight, clad in full armor. She was the fifth daughter of Baron Kyle. Unlike Rui, she wasn’t destined for marriage, but rather for the arduous task of service to the realm as a mounted knight. Fearless even in the face of death, she’d carved her path as an adventurer.

The cold brusqueness of her words reflected how strict she always was with herself. That same strictness was sometimes pointed at others as well, but I found her unrelenting standards for herself and refusal to tolerate nonsense appealing.

These were the three people I had come to trust and rely on more than anyone. I couldn’t believe they, of all people, were speaking to me like this. It felt like everything I was—everything from all seven of my lives up until this moment—was a lie. I could not, absolutely could not accept it.

Margus leaned in close as I shrank away. “There’s no way we’re strong enough to beat that horror, y’know.”

That would be the grotesque, evil creature we’d just encountered. A horror truly worthy of the name. A horror of such overwhelming dark power that it would make a giant dragon capable of bringing down a company of fifty royal knights look like a cute puppy.

“Y-Yeah...”

“So. Since you’re the most disposable, you’ll be the bait. We can make our escape while it eats you.”

“What the...how could...?” I stammered.

I had already died many times.

Somehow or another, right when I was eighteen years old, our party would be caught in some dire dilemma. Every time, I would volunteer to sacrifice myself for the sake of the party.

And every time, I would loop back to that day when I was fifteen, the day we first formed our party.

“We will cast aside our selfishness! We will fight together, become top-ranking adventurers, and with our noble deeds we shall rise above even the houses of our birth!”

“I’m with you...yeah! We can do it! We will rise above, no matter what! We’ll show them all!”

“I will make them see... By my own deeds I will make them acknowledge my power!”

I’d gone through that scene seven times so far.

And now, for such vicious words to come from none other than the very comrades with whom I had sworn an oath at fifteen years old to fight together as one...that was even harder to swallow than my imminent death.

“Knights are nobles in name alone. And worse, you’re just a third son, good for nothing but supporting your poor family. Did you really think you could be our equal?”

“You really ought to know your place...”

“At least you’ll serve some purpose in the end. Be proud.”

As I listened to their words I didn’t feel angry, or even sad. I was just desperately hoping to wake up from this nightmare.

The horror loomed ever closer.

The first time around, it was a dragon. Knowing that I wasn’t fast enough to keep up with the others, I willingly offered myself as a decoy, and died.

The second time, it was a minotaur that had somehow escaped its dungeon.

The third time it was a cerberus, a three-headed wolf.

And the fourth time—that’s when shit started getting really weird. It was like every monster and demon had been fused together into a grotesque and horrifying chimera. With each loop, it gradually gained strength. By this time around, it seemed like after chewing through me, this terrible being would go on to destroy the entire world.

Anyway, the point was: no matter where I went or what I did, in the end I’d

always be killed by some unfathomably powerful monster. Every time, I chose to give my life for their sakes.

But this time... “You, you all—”

“We were always planning to dump you at some point. We’ll just tell your lowly family you got yourself killed,” Margus sneered.

This time, it was their betrayal that got me into this fix.

“Hmm, maybe my family will send them something too, on the occasion of your inevitable death. That’s good, right? At least your family will be taken care of,” Rui added.

“Ugh...” I couldn’t easily fight back, having been conked on the head by the flat of Margus’s blade.

To make matters worse, Rui started chanting some spell. There was nothing more I could do. Rui’s magic was too strong—I was finished. But at least I could let my companion who’d fought by my side all this time escape. With that thought, I looked around for my companion.

Instead, I was met with a sight beyond my comprehension.

“Oh yeah, just to be totally safe in case the impossible happens, we’re gonna kill your useless familiar too.”

“No, s-stop...”

I couldn’t get the words out.

Stop it. Please, stop this!

“Honestly, lugging around a gross little monster has got to be the most annoying and pathetic magical art.”

“Fitting for someone of such low birth, don’tcha think?”

One last glimpse of my companion. My gentle, fluffy, cat-like flying companion. I never even knew the true name of its species...for two whole loops, we...

“STOOOPPPP!!!”

“Oh, shut it. Fine, we’ll kill you first.”

—*Slash.*

Fade to black.

And that’s how my life ended for the seventh time. And the very last thing I heard...

“Ugh, his stuff is all damp. Well, at least we can sell the familiar’s pelt, I guess.”

Of everything my ex-friends had said, that was absolutely the most despicable.



The Eighth Loop Begins

“We will cast aside our selfishness! We will fight together, become top-ranking adventurers, and with our noble deeds we shall rise above even the houses of our birth!”

“I’m with you...yeah! We can do it! We will rise above, no matter what! We’ll show them all!”

“I will make them see...by my own deeds I will make them acknowledge my power!”

“Hey, Remille, aren’tcha gonna say anything?”

“Oh, yeah, sorry,” I muttered. “I just, uh...”

I guess I’m back here again. Back to just after graduation from Adventurer Preparatory School, to the day we formed our party.

On the first loop I was a swordsman, but I failed to keep up with my friends’ progression and ended up sacrificing my life for them.

On the second loop, I was determined to draw on my experience from the last time and give it my all, but nevertheless when I was eighteen I died protecting my friends just the same.

On the third loop, I gave up on fighting in the vanguard. I tried my hand at magic rather than swordsmanship, but it made no difference and I died anyway.

On the fourth loop, I switched the focus of my magic to be entirely on support spells. And I died.

On the fifth loop, really more for my own sake than for my friends, I buffed my defensive abilities, aiming to become a mounted knight like Aman...and I died.

On the sixth loop I completely avoided the front lines. The best way I could think of to keep myself out of battle was to learn alchemy and beast taming, but still...I died.

And the seventh loop, well... That was my greatest hits compilation. I armed

myself with my alchemical skills, used my beast taming magic to bolster our ranks, and fought with both magic and the sword. I contributed more to the party than I ever had.

And that led to...well, you saw how that went.

“I just, um, can’t really hope to keep up with you all. But I’ll try my best, I guess.”

“What are you talking about? If anything happens we’ve got your back,” Margus assured me.

“That’s right!” Rui broke in. “I can use my magic just fine with or without you. Ah, I mean, that’s not to say we don’t need you or anything, just...um...anyway, I’ll protect you!”

“Defense is my domain,” Aman added. “You just stick to your own skills and do what you can.”

“Thanks.” *Could these three really end up so awful? How could that be...?*

Out of habit I formed the question, then jolted with sudden realization. *Oh. Right. I don’t have a companion yet in this loop.*

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I broke away from the others and slipped into a quiet side alley. Finally alone, I thought through it all again—every one of my previous lives, and where to go from here. The conclusion was inescapable. “I’ve gotta split up from them as soon as I can.”

Sure, I wouldn’t have thought there was any ill will lurking under the surface just from talking to them today. But I knew how this would play out. And let’s be real—I had spent seven entire lives with those three without seeing through their facade. I didn’t exactly have a lot of confidence in my own judgment. Even now, I couldn’t quite bring myself to believe they truly felt that way about me.

“Hmm, I guess I’ll go for being a master tamer...” Skills from the immediately previous life were always sharpest. My body retained some memory of skills I’d learned over my lifetimes, so by now I was starting out with at least some knowledge of swordsmanship, magic, taming, and alchemy. Technically

speaking I was exploiting the fact that I already knew the techniques, but the way I saw it I had worked hard to make that much progress in three years. This time around should be no different.

"So assuming I'm right, even on my own I should be able to get at least C rank. Maybe. I hope." I had never actually tried this before, so I couldn't be sure, but it should work. If I was really lucky, I might even make B rank. With all the experience I had under my belt, I should be able to land on my feet quickly enough.

"When it comes down to it, the only reason I've stuck with them through seven whole loops was that I trusted them..." But every time, no matter what, I died at eighteen years old. That was the end I was signing up for each time I teamed up with them. The only reason that I kept trying and trying to find a way to make it work was that I liked them. As hard as it was to accept at the moment, if I continued to cling to that feeling, I was dooming myself to repeat the exact same death. And who knew how many loops I'd be able to go through? I had to do whatever I could to survive.

"But the party's already been formed. That's where the loop begins. I couldn't avoid it." If I couldn't find a way out by that fateful day, I would definitely die. "So the first thing I have to do is break off from the party, and then I'll..."

And then... Then what? My thoughts turned to the future. "Uh...hmm." And then what would I do? I'd never actually had to consider my own desired path. Now that I thought about it, I'd spent seven whole loops giving my life to them. Literally sacrificing my own life...

"I'll show them...somehow." At the end of my last life, they had mocked me for coming from a family of knights. They must have been harboring that prejudice the whole time. "I mean, it's true that my family are lower nobility, outside the line of succession..." But that shouldn't have made any difference. None of us were in line to inherit a title.

I *would* show them. But how? Performing deeds glorious enough to earn myself my own noble title, maybe? Could I make myself known to someone of higher societal standing than they'd ever imagine? "If somehow I could team up with a princess or something, that would definitely show them, right?"

As I absentmindedly grumbled my thoughts up to the sky, I locked eyes with a girl who was staring down at me. Her robe wrapped her whole body and hid most of her face, but she spoke in a clear voice.

“Sounds good to me. Let’s do it!”

“Huh?” I was certain I’d checked to make sure no one else was around when I entered this alley. I thought I had been on the alert for approaching enemies or breaches of my perimeter. And yet I hadn’t noticed her at all until she was close enough to talk to me...

“I’m Ciel,” she told me. “Or I guess I should say, the third princess of the Elton royal line.” As she spoke, she lowered her hood. Her eyes sparkled with determination. Her long golden hair was pinned up, framing a pale face that still retained the smooth curves of girlhood.

Between her appearance and her introduction, there was really no denying it. With that combo of youth, beauty, and tomboyish guise, she could be none other than the lovely girl known throughout the kingdom, for multiple reasons, as the “uncut gem.”

“Are you really...?” I wondered aloud.

“Who else would I be? Sheesh... Oh, maybe this will convince you?”

“What are—” Before I could get the words out, her right eye turned from gold to a gleaming aquamarine, shining like a gem. “Oh...!” Suddenly I knew. This was the other reason for her “uncut gem” nickname. Or really, I guess it was the main reason: the power to detect hidden veins of ore and gemstone deposits—the greatest treasure of our kingdom, the Eye of Appraisal. Using that ability would cause your eye to gleam like a gem.

“Oooh,” she breathed as she looked at me. “I knew it. You, dear sir, are quite fascinating.”

“What...what did you see?”

“You have an absolutely unreal amount of XP. And even stranger, your skills are so all over the place, I could see tons of different paths before you.”

“Paths...?” I repeated.

“This power lets me glimpse the general direction of the path someone is best suited for. But in your case, there are so many diverging branches I can’t get a clear picture.”

Branches, huh? It made sense, with all the different things I’d tried over seven loops. With that thought, the reality of my present situation finally came crashing back into my mind. It’s all well and good to mutter to myself about princesses, but this was beyond reckless. Even if this girl really was the princess—no, *especially* if she really was—I wanted nothing more to do with her. Making contact with someone so far above my station could only make things worse for me. I had enough on my plate trying to figure out how to change my fate of dying in three years’ time. I did *not* need any more trouble.

That’s what I told myself, anyway, until her next words.

“So tell me, you’ve been through several loops by now, right?”

“Wh—” I stammered in shock. “How did you know?!”

“Aha! So it is true. That’s incredible!”

“Damn it...” It was too late to take back my admission. Well, the Eye of Appraisal was said to be able to discern the truth. No doubt remained in my mind about the identity of the girl who stood before me. There was no getting out of this now...

“Okay, so,” she continued. “What are we gonna do? Go adventuring? Enroll in some academy of higher learning?”

“For real? I mean...Do you speak in earnest? Your...highness?”

“Oh, cut that out. You and I are beyond such formalities.”

“We...we are?” This was bad. My brain couldn’t keep up with my mouth. It’s funny; in the whole seven loops I’d been through, I’d never once actually met a princess. I had assumed that whatever choices I made, the basic outline of events would be the same. But already it seemed I had deviated from that cycle.

“All because I decided I wanted to split from the party...?” I wondered aloud.

“Hmm? I don’t quite know what you mean...form a party?”

“Shush, I’m thinking, could you be quiet for a sec?”

“Oi! What a way to talk to a princess! Well, so be it. I am magnanimous enough to let it slide. Take your time.”

As the alley fell silent I gathered my thoughts. *Think back.* After this, the next step would be to go complete the party formation application together. Typically newbies would start from F rank, but since we’d completed Adventurer Prep School, we’d be allowed to start from E rank. Before we even finished celebrating, we’d suddenly be challenged to a battle quest. Full of overeager confidence, we would head deep into the forest, only to be absolutely trounced by a demon that could take on D rankers.

And I remembered, too, our breathless laughter as we fled from our defeat, lost in pure elation...that’s how this should have gone.

“Oi.”

What next? Ah, yeah, Rui the sorceress would faint in the middle of a swarm of bug demons ten days later. Rui being Rui, she did her best to put it behind her, but for the next two years she couldn’t stand bugs.

“Oooiii!”

After that...in the first year alone, we must have gotten into at least ten different scrapes. Like when Aman stepped on a phase trap and fell to the lowest floor of the dungeon. Or when Margus pissed off a top-rank adventurer and was almost roped into dueling him. *Man, it really was quite an adventurous life I got to lead, that first time through,* I reflected.

“Hellooooooo! Stop ignoring me!”

“What the—” The princess’s words finally broke through my thoughts. “What? What are you crying for?”

“How dare you abandon me like that. Rude!”

“Abandon...? That was like, a few seconds.” Well, she was quite the emotional roller coaster. “Okay then, what did you want to say?”

“Umm, so...can I be your party?”

“Uh...”

“What’s wrong?” she demanded. “I don’t meet your standards?”

“No no, it’s just I, um, already have a party.”

“What?! What do you mean? You don’t exactly strike me as the friend type, over here all by yourself.”

“Now who’s being rude?!” I snapped. *What’s “friend type” supposed to mean anyway*? If anyone was giving off an aura of loneliness right now, I’d say it was the princess.

“You jerk! You led me on!” she yelled, tears overflowing down her cheeks.

“Shh, someone could overhear you!” *How can I get out of this?* If I tried to escape now, I could be signing my own warrant for execution. The man who deceived the third-born princess... And now that I thought about it, I’d spoken pretty rudely to her right from the start. Coming from the rural nobility like I did, speaking to royalty seemed as alien as speaking to a heavenly being. My brain couldn’t really process it. I mean, she herself had said I shouldn’t be so formal, so I guess it was okay? But...no, it still felt wrong. Maybe? At the same time, though, if I suddenly started talking in a manner more appropriate to the social distance between us, there was no doubt it would just make her cry more.

So be it. “Actually,” I began, “I was planning to split from those guys anyway, so sure, why not?”

“What?! Why didn’t you say so?” She glared at me as she scrubbed the tears from her eyes.

“Right. Uh...how should I address you?” I asked.

“Ciel is fine. And, um...”

“Remille.”

“Well, Remille, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Yeah, pleasure.”

Meanwhile, the former friends...

“Can you believe him? He really thinks he can team up with us!”

“Some people seriously need to learn their place, jeez.”

In the back room of a tavern, reserved for the use of wealthy VIPs, three people sat and talked. The very same three people who, just a few moments before, had sworn oaths binding their future to Remille’s.

Rui swirled her glass as she spoke. “Does that fool honestly believe things can just go on this way forever?”

Margus speared a piece of meat with his fork. “With no brains and no pedigree, it’s not like anyone else would team up with him. I say we keep him around for a little while, long as we can squeeze any use out of him. And he should damn well thank us for it, that freeloader.”

Aman nodded in agreement. “And as soon as he can’t keep up, we dump him.”

From the start, Remille had been nothing but a disposable tool to the three of them. Or to put it another way, you could say he was basically their slave. They didn’t see Remille as deserving of the status of true nobility, as he came from a family of the rank of knights. The noble title of “knight” was, by definition, not passed down by inheritance. Sure, none of the three of them were actually in line to inherit a title either, but there’s still a difference between a theoretical possibility and no possibility at all. Or so their fragile pride made them believe.

And anyway, it’s not like slaves were unusual. Nobility often kept slaves instead of servants. To them, that’s all that Remille was.

“We can push the annoying stuff onto him. He’s always been best at, like, guard duty and chores,” Aman suggested.

“Better him than hiring some commoner, right? At least, a bit better,” Rui agreed.

“Exactly,” Margus said. “Imagine the disgrace to our families if we joined up

with a random commoner. If that's what it's come to, at least Remille has a bit of blue blood in his veins. That's at least something."

"It's something," Aman conceded. "But it's not much."

From the very start, Remille was nothing but a convenient person to delegate chores to. On that fateful day three years in the future, Remille thought that he died in a tragic, unforeseen accident—but that was wrong. The three of them had lured him to a zone where monsters of terrible power spawned, to get him killed for their own amusement. Sure, the horrors that appeared were powerful beyond their imaginations, and they couldn't avoid some damage to themselves as well. But expelling him from the party or murdering him directly would have left a stain on their good names. If he chose to give his own life in an act of valor, well, that was another story. Remille thought that he'd sacrificed his life to protect his friends, but in reality it was just this scenario playing out seven times over.

"So that's settled. We'll run him ragged. Better than nothing, I guess."

"I hope we can meet up with royalty before too long..." Rui said.

"I'm gonna make A rank and earn myself a noble title," Margus declared.

"And I will..." Aman began. "I'll make the chivalric order regret turning me away!"

Their goals were that simple: to be part of the world of the nobility, or at least of children of nobility. Nothing more. The highest they dreamed was to somehow form ties with the royal family. Even short of that, if they could prove themselves with their deeds, there was the possibility of being granted a title. That's why they had chosen to become adventurers.

"Man, I can't wait."

"Same."

"Hear! Hear!"

They continued their meal in cheerful ignorance, never imagining that this very conversation could be the thing that closed the door on their dreams.

They had heard about the Eye of Appraisal possessed by the so-called "uncut

gem," but the extent of common knowledge was that its power was limited to detecting skills and talents. As such, they had no idea. They never suspected that it could be a power capable of seeing clearly into the depths of people's hearts. They had no idea that such a power resided with a member of the very royal family they dreamed of meeting.

And they had no idea that without Remille, whom they deemed so disposable, all their plans of noble life would come crumbling down around them...

Parting of Ways

“Okay,” I said, “I’d better go give my current party some reason I’m splitting from them.”

“Good point. I’ll go and explain it to them for you,” Ciel proposed.

What a shock that would give them, if the third-born princess of the land suddenly appeared before them... I didn’t know how much they already hated me at this point in time, but given that sooner or later they would have me killed, I needn’t try to spare them.

“I’m not letting you go,” she warned me.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m not going anywhere.” Oh, I really should tell her the truth, shouldn’t I? “When I’m eighteen,” I told her, “I get attacked and killed by some monster. It’s happened seven times so far.”

“Wow...seven times.”

“If things get dire, get out of there.”

“Dummy,” Ciel said with a fearless smile. “Didn’t I just say I’m not letting you go?”

“No, but...”

The next words out of Ciel’s mouth crashed through each and every one of my seven lives with an impact that completely shattered my understanding. “So, uh, have you really come so far never knowing about experience points?”

“Experience points...?” Well, sure, I knew about them. They were how adventurers boosted proficiency and gained levels—both player levels and individual skill levels. That was how I had gained strength in each of my lives.

“Remille. You have the accumulated experience points of seven whole loops.”

“What?!”

“I thought something was odd. The skill paths I could see in front of you aren’t ones that require much XP. Have you really just let your accumulated XP go

completely to waste for all these lives?”

“How can that...” I stammered. In each loop I had done my best to build up experience within that lifetime. Each time, I started from square one, building proficiency in my arts over those three years.

“With this much XP to work with, with my help you could become anything you wanted,” she said.

“Anything I wanted...?”

“Master swordsman, sage, dragon knight... Seriously, anything.”

Top-tier classes out of legend, all of them. Could a mid-level screwup like me really become such a thing? “For real?” I asked aloud.

“Yep. That’s what the Eye of Appraisal is for.”

Rumor had it that a high-level Appraisal skill could illuminate the path toward a person’s future. It could let you see how to take the next step to move toward your goal. That’s why a master of Appraisal was so highly valued. To randomly bump into one like this was an incredible bit of luck. Come to think of it... “Uh, Ciel, why are you here in the first place?”

“Why am I here? I dunno, I had nowhere else to be?”

“No, I mean...you’re the third-born princess. More importantly, that Eye is a treasure of the kingdom...”

“*More* importantly? Rude! But yeah, this Eye is a huge pain, so I ran away.”

“Ran away...” *Jeez, if I get caught I’m in* major *trouble, huh?*

“But now that I’ve found a purpose, I can attain my freedom. As long as you’re with me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Master swordsman, sage, dragon knight,” she repeated. “Any one of those would be a huge asset to the kingdom’s military strength, right?”

“You mean...”

“Yes. For me to find such a gemstone to polish up—a gem of such extreme power—should make my father very happy.”

This can't be real...

"I see you don't believe me. Okay, for starters, how about you stand over there and take five practice swings?"

"Practice? Right here?"

"Here's fine," she said dismissively.

As I battled my reluctance to draw my sword in the middle of the city, she abruptly flung me a tree branch. "Well, here goes nothing," I muttered. As instructed, I took a practice swing.

"Awful. The angle should be like this."

"Ack!" I exclaimed. "Don't sneak up on me like that!" Childlike as she seemed, she was still quite a beautiful girl. Actually, she probably wasn't that much younger than me at this point in time. Worse and worse.

"Focus," she commanded. "Grip it like this. Keep your center of gravity here."

"You're quite the expert."

She continued giving various pointers until I finally met her satisfaction and could actually begin my practice swings.

"Wow. Your advice was right on the money." Swinging was so easy, and the simple tree branch felt natural in my hands. It felt like it had in the second half of my previous life, after I had worked to raise my abilities... *Wait, is that possible?*

"Yup. Congrats on becoming an intermediate-level swordsman."

"No way..." I hadn't mastered this technique until my second loop. In other words, this was a skill that should normally take over three years to acquire. Even after I'd gotten the knack of it during my second loop, it still always took at least a year of practicing every day with the sword to attain that level. To do it in just a few minutes...

"That's the power of Appraisal," Ciel said. "If you stick with me, there's no doubt you will attain great strength."

My heart pounded with the possibilities. Could I really do this?

“This wouldn’t work with just anyone, you know. This path was already open for you, so in this case it didn’t take much. It won’t be this simple to become just anything,” she continued.

“Mm, sure...”

“Are you actually listening to me?”

As her suspicious glare seemed to correctly discern, I was really only half listening. I was still distracted by absorbing the shock of this new knowledge.

“Well, I’ll let it go for now. This gives me a perfect justification for my excursion into the world. All that’s left is to deal with your party. Let’s go.”

“Huh?” Before I could stop her, Ciel pulled me along after her.

“I can’t come here too often, so I’d like to get your withdrawal from your party all settled today.”

“But I already split up with them for the day. I dunno where they went off to.”

“No problem. Lemme just show you another new skill real quick.”

“Um...okay.” As though new skills were something you could just pick up on a moment’s notice...

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“Huh? Who is—is that Remille? Who’s that with him?”

To my surprise, Ciel helped me learn the Detection skill almost instantly. Using that, it was a piece of cake to find Margus. Fortunately, Rui and Aman were with him.

“Was he following us?” Rui wondered.

“What a creep...”

Okay, so it seems like they did feel this way from the beginning, I guess. While learning Detection I also picked up the skill of Interception, so I could hear everything they said. Presumably the three of them were together so that they could talk about things they didn’t want me to hear. My heart sank a bit. *No, don’t think like that.* I’d come too far to hold back now.

“What’s going on?” Margus demanded. “I thought the meeting was

tomorrow.”

“Oh, uh, sorry,” I replied. “I wanted to talk about something that couldn’t wait. I’m glad you’re all here. Please follow me.”

“Why are you being all formal-like? Well, whatever. The girls too?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, okay.”

We couldn’t risk Ciel being seen in any crowded area, so we’d decided to lead them down a winding alley to have this discussion.

“So, Remille, what’s going on?”

Deep breath. In all my seven lives, this was the first time I’d ever told them I wanted out of the party. “Margus. I hate to say this, but please let me leave the party.”

“Huh?”

“What?!”

“You’re kidding...”

All three of them immediately looked like they’d been caught doing something—the kind of expression that can only mean some sort of guilty conscience. Anyone with an ounce of perception would know just from those looks that something was up. For me to have suspected nothing throughout seven whole lives...I really was an idiot.

Margus recovered quickly and wiped the momentary betrayal of guilt from his face before he spoke. “Hey now... Didn’t you just say all that stuff about fighting by our side? Where is this coming from all of a sudden?”

“I...had second thoughts.”

“If you split up from us, where would you go from here?”

In other words, someone like me has no place to go, is what he meant to say. To be fair, from their point of view, they only knew me as a bit of a dunce.

“I have been invited to a different party.”

“Idiot. Don’t be so gullible. You’re being played.”

Yeah, but by whom...? I kept that thought to myself.

Margus continued. “At best, anyone who’s trying to recruit you at this point just wants you to do chores or carry their stuff. Sure, you may be a bit less powerful than the rest of us, but that just means that as part of our party you’ll be able to do whatever you want, right?”

“Chores, huh?” That description fit all of my previous lives. Doing chores and lugging baggage—that was really how they had seen me. Since I was technically part of the nobility, I was the perfect person for them to use that way. That was the cold hard truth.

“Anyway, who on earth tried to con you into teaming up? I wanna have a word with this guy. Introduce us.”

“Sure thing. I’ll introduce you.”

“Good. I’ll take care of this for you,” Margus assured me.

I signaled to Ciel. She lowered her hood, revealing her face.

“What the...”

“No way...”

“—!”

Aman was the first to move. Margus and Rui quickly followed her lead, kneeling and bowing their heads.

“Oh, get up,” Ciel told them. “You there, swordsman. You wanted to talk to me?”

“F-F-F-F-Forgive me, Your Highness! Never did I dare to imagine that I had the honor of addressing someone of your royal magnificence...” Margus’s whole body trembled as he stammered out his apology.

“Heh. It’s fine, it’s fine. However, this man will be coming with me.”

“Yes, of course, absolutely! B-But, if, if I may be so bold, Your Highness...would not the three of us be of greater use to you...?” Margus spoke stiffly through clenched teeth, working to keep his shaking body under control.

Of course he would think that. But Ciel's next words were not what Margus was hoping for. In a voice cold enough to freeze your heart, Ciel spoke bluntly. "I have no need for any of you. You're cheap goods. Not even worth Appraising."

"Wh..."

Rui and Aman, lumped into her evaluation, impulsively looked up and stiffened.

"You know of my abilities, I assume?" Ciel continued. "I'll give you the basic rundown. I have the skill of Appraisal. As you probably know, it gives me the ability to see a person's skill set and growth potential. But this Eye also has the power to see through to the truth of someone's character, to tell good from evil." All three of them winced. Up until this moment, it had probably never occurred to them that they might come down on the *evil* side of that divide. "If you promise to stay out of our lives from now on, I am willing to let your earlier rudeness slide. However, if you intend to interfere with us..." Ciel paused for dramatic effect. "You'll have to contend with him."

"What the—?!" By that point, Margus and the others could no longer keep the irritation from their faces.

"Hmm? You object?"

"No, no..." Margus replied quickly. "That is, do you mean to suggest that were we to best this man in combat, you would see fit to acknowledge our worth?"

"Hmm... Okay, deal. Not that you have any shot against him."

Margus turned and fixed his gaze on me, with Rui and Aman quickly following suit. Their eyes glittered with the joy of a predator that had just spotted its prey.

Ciel saw their expressions and sighed. "Okay then, tomorrow. Colosseum. Be there."

"Ciel, wait—" I stammered.

"Don't worry. This is the perfect chance to prove yourself to my father as well."

“But...” At my current level, I did not think I had any chance to win three against one. I would die without reaching my potential or bringing any glory to the kingdom. Nevertheless...

“Remille.” Ciel addressed me earnestly. “I will personally guarantee your victory.” Her smile was fearless. I instinctively shied away from the savage glint in her eyes.

“Fascinating...” Margus said. “Remille. I accept this challenge.”

“A chance to prove myself to a princess...I will not squander it,” Rui chimed in.

“Although against such a weak opponent, it hardly seems fair,” Aman added.

Their predatory gazes pierced through me like a blade. And thus, without any input from me, were the plans for our showdown formed.

❖

We arrived at the inn. It bore so little resemblance to the inns I was used to frequenting, though, that I wasn’t sure that “inn” was even the proper word. For one thing, the rooms were ludicrously large. Each single room could have fit ten of the rooms I usually stayed in. Ciel assured me that as tomorrow’s events had been announced publicly, this amount of pomp and circumstance was to be expected. Such was the awesome power of royalty.

My head spun with the surreality of the whole situation. I had to force myself to actually pay attention to my conversation with Ciel. “So, what are you planning?”

“Planning?”

“Yeah, it’s not like I can beat the three of them as is.”

“What are you talking about?” she replied. “Those guys can’t stand up to an intermediate swordsman.”

“No no, that’s...” Margus was a master magic swordsman, and Rui could take down a foe with a single spell. As for Aman, if there even *was* a way to break through her impregnable defenses, I sure didn’t know it. There was no way around the conclusion that I was a goner.

Nevertheless, Ciel seemed completely undaunted. “Well, if you’re so nervous

about it, I guess I could teach you one more skill.”

“Can you?” I asked eagerly.

“Of course I can. Let’s see...would you look the other way for a bit?”

“Sure.”

Ciel went about some sort of preparations, muttering things like “not like you really need it...” all the while.

“Hey,” she said to me after a minute.

“Yeah?”

“Oi! Don’t look over here!”

“Huh?” I didn’t mean to look. I really didn’t mean to look, but come on, who wouldn’t take a peek in this situation, right?



“Did you see anything...?”

“Nothing.”

“Okay, good. I wore the yellow ones today, and they’re really not that flattering.”

“Huh? Weren’t they red?” *...Oops.*

“You *were* peeking, you idiot!!!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! Hey now, get dressed first, then yell at me.”

“You already saw, so what difference does it make?! You, you little...!”

“I said sorry! Chill out!”

For those words, I received the rare honor of being slapped in the face by a half-naked princess. *Oh please, grant me forgiveness...* Thanks to my new Detection skill, I knew that a high-ranking royal steward was waiting in the wings just outside the door. *What will become of me now...?*

“Whew... Okay... Ready?” Ciel began. “What I’m about to teach you is the skill of Disarmament.”

It seemed that having sated her anger by slapping me, Ciel was ready to begin the lesson. Her eyes, however, still betrayed her disgust.

“I want you to try to undress me,” she said.

“Wh-What...?”

“Dummy! Stop picturing it! This is why I made preparations so that you wouldn’t see my undergarments! You perv!” So much for her anger being sated. Her tirade left her out of breath and panting for a few moments.

“Are you done?”

“Why am I the one exerting myself while you just stand there calmly? Fine, whatever. These clothes are specially designed to be difficult to remove, so it should just take a few times for you to get the hang of Disarmament.”

“Just like that?”

“It’s only ‘just like that’ because of this Eye of mine. Show the proper

gratitude!”

Oh, I was grateful. They say that you can’t acquire skills that you don’t have a natural aptitude for; in this case, it seemed I must have had aptitude aplenty. “Okay, done.”

“Wow, that was fast. Wait a sec! How did you strip me completely?!”

“Was I not supposed to...?” I hadn’t been sure how far down the “difficult to remove” qualifier went, so I’d just stripped everything. Well, not quite; of course I left her undergarments. I did leave them, but...

“Oooh... Now I can never be a bride...” she moaned.

“It’s fine. I didn’t touch your underwear.”

“How can you just stand there while I’m dressed like this?! Is that all you have to say?!”

“I’m not sure what else I—”

“Sheesh! What’s wrong with you?! Take some responsibility for your actions!” As she spoke I watched her put her clothing back on, until she screeched “STOP LOOKINNNGGG!!!” and started slapping at me again. I didn’t mind; half-dressed as she was, that much vigorous movement was bound to reveal some things. Naturally, I didn’t voice that particular observation aloud.

❖

The next day arrived, and the colosseum was filled to capacity. As it was the main public venue of the royal capital, it was a common destination for nobles and royalty alike. It was rare, however, for the king himself to be in attendance, so the chatter of the crowd was louder than normal.

I couldn’t believe I’d even made it to the next day. I could only pray that Ciel’s confidence in me wasn’t misplaced.

“Okay, let’s see...” Ciel said. “It looks like you’ve been put on the schedule as a special event during a break between the normal gladiator battles. Makes sense.”

The colosseum made most of its revenue from bets placed on fights between animals or professional gladiators. Forcing slaves to fight was forbidden, so all

of the gladiators were people who had chosen to be there. Fighters were divided into ranks based on their abilities, and some precautions were taken to keep fighters from being killed if their weapons were destroyed. Accidents still happened, though, and the gladiators lived constantly in the shadow of danger. Despite that danger, there were clearly many people who found this life preferable to becoming an adventurer.

"So, uh, why exactly do I have to face those guys three against one?" I asked Ciel.

"One against one, three against one, it's all the same," she replied confidently.

"It's not even close to the same!" I felt my panic starting to rise.

Ciel let out a sigh as she spoke. "Ummm, I think you might be putting too much weight on your previous lives. With just your intermediate swordsman status, plus the Detection and Disarmament skills, you should have no problem one-shotting those three. I don't know how strong they may become in the future, but right now they're nothing special. With your monstrous tangle of divergent potential paths and ridiculous amount of XP, you're much more formidable than they are."

"Okay, but," I objected, "Margus is a magic swordsman. Rui is a sorceress. And I don't know a single combat spell..."

"You don't need that! Come to think of it, have you really not realized...?"

"Realized what?"

Ciel shook her head in frustration. "Some of your experience points have already been used to raise your stats."

"What? When?!" I exclaimed.

"It comes along with learning each new skill. Okay, got it? Then get going!" With that, she shoved me forward hard enough to send me flying.

In the center of the colosseum, I locked eyes with Margus.

"Sorry about this, Remille. With your death, I will earn the princess's recognition." He sized me up with his eyes, like I was easy prey.

Seeing his expression, I couldn't help remembering that look on his face in the last loop, at that fateful moment.

"Will we truly be acknowledged just for beating Remille?" Rui wondered. "Just to be safe, I should probably use some nice flashy spells..." In her eyes, I saw the same predatory look.

"I'll go out in front so the two of you can focus on offense," Aman offered. She also clearly no longer saw me as a comrade.

That was just as well, really. Easier to go all out against them this way.

"And now, let the duel to determine the next true hero of the Elton monarchy commence!"

So that was the pretext for all of this, huh? Margus grinned, exuding confidence as though he already owned that title.

"Ready, and..."

I raised my sword.

"Begin!"

Three against one. And the enemy could employ magic. If possible, I wanted to start by taking out their rear defenses.

"You're done for!" I shouted as I charged.

—Clank!

Aman's sword should have risen to block my attack...or so one would assume. But I had linked the Disarmament skill to my attack. That skill shouldn't work without a certain gap in our abilities, but nonetheless...

"What the—?!" Aman exclaimed, as with just one blow, her sword went flying through the air.

"Damn it, Aman!" Margus yelled. "Get your head in the game!"

"Shit..." Aman muttered. "Well at least I have my armor!"

As Aman lunged to take me out with a full body attack, I raised my hand toward her, once again activating the Disarmament skill.

“Wh—”

At my touch, her armor broke apart at the seams, crumbling away from her body. It clattered to the ground and wedged into the earth—no longer a suit of armor, but just a bunch of scattered metal scraps.

“You nitwit!” Margus yelled. “Even against Remille, you’ve gotta at least take care of your equipment!” Muttering curses, he charged at me with his sword raised. “Y’know, Remille,” he sneered, “I really, *sincerely,* despise you.”

“Oh, I know,” I replied.

“No, you don’t get it. I hate you so much I dream of ending your life.”

“Yeah, I know that. Like I said.” *After all, you’ve ended it before.*

We exchanged blows as we exchanged words, and I was surprised to find that I held my own. It seemed Ciel truly had elevated my stats.

Perhaps sensing that I was distracted, Margus’s face flashed with fury. “Well I don’t give a shit if you know or not!”

—*Clang!*

As our swords clashed, flames danced along Margus’s blade; his was a specialized weapon for a magic swordsman.

“You know what pisses me off more than anything else in the world?” he snarled at me. “When miserable, pathetic excuses for nobility like you don’t know your damn place.”

“Oh, is this not my place...?”

“You know damn well it’s not. Trying to copy everything we do, going everywhere we go. Don’t you get it? We are elite. You are not. Your place is not by our side. So yes, you obviously don’t know your place. Can you cram that through your thick skull?”

A double-crested wave of shock washed through me. Of course, hearing such words from him was a bit shocking. But more than that... “I gave my own life seven times over...for this idiot?!” *I really am pathetic.* And along with that shock came my anger.

“Huh? What nonsense are you mumbling about now?” Margus said.

“That’s enough.” I loaded my blade with Disarmament and sent Margus’s sword flying.

“Hey now. Just because you blasted my sword away doesn’t mean you’ve w—”

As Margus conjured flame in his hands and yelled taunts at me, I slashed in with my sword.

“Ha, come on! A clumsy lunge like that’s never gonna hit me!” he proclaimed.

My sword sliced through empty air. That was fine; in fact, it was what I had intended. Even used carefully, a sword always carries some risk of dealing a fatal blow, and I wanted to avoid that.

Instead...

“Pssh, where’s the sport in fighting such a lame, insignific—gwaah!”

I hit him in the gut with all my strength—the strength of seven loops’ worth of anger.

“You little...gaah!”

Again.

“What the hell do you... ngh...”

Again.

“...think you’re...uggggh!”

Again.

“Oh... Ahh...”

Again.

“S—Sto... Ughhh...”

Again.

“I get it al—augh...”

Again. I beat him black and blue all over.

“I get it! You can hang out with us again! Just stop!” Margus yelled through swelling lips.

“Um...”

“You idiot!” he cried. “You let down your guard!”

“In the end...” I muttered, “you were really never worth anything.”

“What the...?”

I caught Margus’s weak attempt at a punch, and thrust him toward Rui.

“Eek! Watch it!” she squealed.

“Ugh, sorry,” Margus muttered, “I—huh?”

“Gyaaaaaahh!” Rui screeched.

I had enhanced each of my blows with Disarmament. When I thrust him away, he didn’t just lose his weapons—he was stripped of everything, underwear and all. And now, completely stark naked, he stood clinging desperately to Rui.

“Eww! Get off of me!”

“Rui, calm down! Wait a sec!”

“Get OOOFFF!”

I knew that Rui was a bit naive and squeamish about this sort of thing. I had exploited that. Now Rui turned her strongest spells against Margus, her supposed ally.

“Gaaaaahhhh!” Aman’s sudden battle cry caught my attention.

“Oh yeah, Aman...”

“Wha—?!”

While I was distracted watching Rui and Margus’s battle, Aman—still bereft of most of her gear—took the opportunity to charge at me. She intended to take me by surprise, but with my Detection skill that was impossible. Still dressed only in simple garments without her armor, she had picked up her sword and charged at me with it.

“Aman...feeling left out, huh?” As I spoke I met her blade with mine, locking

our swords together, and with my free hand gestured toward Margus, still naked and now even more battered and bruised as a result of Rui's magic.

"Y-You..." Aman lowered her sword.

Rui took up the offensive in her place, beginning some sort of chant. "You...will pay for this!"



But without her vanguard shielding her, Rui could not employ her full power. I quickly closed in on her and sent her sorcerer's staff flying, halting her attack.

"H-How?!" Rui's eyes widened in astonishment.

"Just checking," I said to her, "do you really want to be stripped naked right here?"

"Wh-Why would I want that?! What is your problem?!"

Squeal in protest as she might, there was nothing Rui could do against me.

All three of my foes had lost their weapons, and one bore serious injuries from his own ally's assault. They were completely battered, in both body and ego.

Naturally, the verdict was...

"Enough! Remille is the victor!"

Phew. I truly had gotten strong, huh?

"How could... This isn't possible..."

"Was I...was I really outmatched by...*him*?!"

"You'll pay for this! You'll pay! You'll pay!!!"

Each of them grumbled in disbelief and shock, but they remained frozen in place. A lone figure came bursting into the colosseum.

"Father! I intend to cultivate this man as a military asset for our kingdom!" Ciel spoke loudly, stepping forward into the center of the arena.

"Hmm...I can only imagine what you've been getting up to. Ever the little scamp, aren't you?"

As soon as the man who spoke those words stood up, everyone around us bowed low in unison. Obviously this man was the king of the realm himself, Alchris V. Elton.

"And where did you find such an outstanding specimen?" the king continued.

"He just fell into my lap. In a back alley," Ciel told him. *As though I were some sort of stray dog...* Naturally, I had also bowed low to the king, so I wasn't in a

position to deliver a comeback. “And then,” she continued, “I did have one night to get him into shape.”

“Hmph. So your Eye truly shows you that this man could be...”

“Master swordsman, sage, dragon knight...” Ciel confirmed. “Anything you wish.”

“That powerful, eh? Well then, young man, you may rise.” The king finally addressed me. “What is your name?”

“I am Remille, of the house of Wildt of the noble rank of knight.”

“Hmph. And where did you acquire such extraordinary skills?”

“Last night, with the princess...”

“Enough. That is not what I wish to know. I am asking about the original source of your power that caused the ‘uncut gem’ to speak so highly of you.”

“Oh, well, uh...” I grasped for how to explain without just saying that it was because I’d died seven times already.

“You can’t explain? Well, so be it. You may come to the castle for now.” With those words, the king departed. The tension that had hung in the air seemed to dissipate, and a sense of relief fell over the colosseum.

After a minute, Ciel finally approached me. “Nicely done.”

“Yeah...” I had never imagined I could best them this easily. *Thank you, Eye of Appraisal.*

“With your XP put to good use, you’ll be unbeatable,” Ciel continued. “Nothing will hold you back. Don’t you worry—I am going to make you extremely powerful.”

I forced a wry smile at Ciel’s confident assertion, and together we exited the colosseum, leaving my three opponents to wallow in their public humiliation alone.

A New Life

“Hmph, so you made it.”

I knelt in front of the throne of King Alchris inside the royal palace, surrounded by imposing ranks of cabinet ministers and knights of the Imperial Guard. In that august setting, the first words that the king spoke took me by surprise.

“First off, I must apologize. I know without asking that my daughter has been causing you trouble.”

“What?! Father!” Ciel objected.

“Come now. Have you any idea of how difficult you’ve made things for Crow?” Crow was Ciel’s personal chamberlain—or put more bluntly, her butler. He was the guy waiting in attendance on the other side of the door when Ciel was teaching me Disarmament. “So, can you tell me whatever it was you couldn’t say in the arena?”

What the king wanted to know was why I had caught Ciel’s attention in the first place. The problem was, well... “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you, Your Majesty...”

“Never mind that. Just spit it out. Remember who you’re standing next to—a member of my household who is in possession of the most powerful Eye. If you’re telling the truth, I’ll know it.”

Oh yeah, good point. Glancing around the room, I saw nods of agreement. “Um, okay, well... Those three I fought at the colosseum? I used to travel in their group, until I was killed as a result of their betrayal. The experience points that I accumulated over seven loops of that are what caught the princess’s eye.”

The king listened in silence, but around us others began chattering noisily.

“That’s impossible. Simply impossible...”

“Could it be... If the princess herself believes...?”

“Is it true?”

“Even if it is true, would it really make him *that* powerful?”

“Did you *see* how he fought?”

“But really, master swordsman? Sage? Dragon knight? Isn’t that a bit...extreme?”

I mean, fair enough. It’s not like I didn’t share their doubts.

“Father,” Ciel began, “this man has seven times the amount of experience as a normal person. For comparison, the head of your royal order of chivalry has maybe two or three times the average. That’s how exceptional this man is.”

“Fascinating.”

“And what’s more, he has the potential to follow skill trees for swordsmanship, sorcery, *and* beast taming. When I say he could be a master swordsman, or a sage, or a dragon knight, it’s not an exaggeration.”

“You’re really serious about this, eh?”

“Yes. I swear to you that I will hone him into the crown jewel of the kingdom’s mighty forces.”

The king and the rest of the audience nodded thoughtfully at Ciel’s brazenly confident assertion. “Very well,” he said. “Ciel, I leave this matter in your capable hands.”

“Yes, sir. I won’t disappoint you.”

Although the royal audience wasn’t over yet, it seemed the main matter at hand had been handled without much of a fuss. *So far, so good.*

“Now then,” the king continued, “as for those duplicitous comrades of yours. At this point in time, there’s no crime we can actually charge them with. However, the humiliation of being utterly annihilated in a three-on-one battle without so much as landing a single blow will be a serious stain on each of their noble houses. I believe that constitutes an appropriate punishment for now.”

“They’re monsters with hearts of rotting garbage. That alone seems like enough of a crime to charge them,” Ciel said.

“Ciel, don’t say such things,” the king scolded. “Still, if the two of you are

teaming up to bear the weight of the kingdom's future strength, then as far as I'm concerned, this young man is like family to me. If any of those three appear to pose a real threat, I will officially label them a traitor to the crown. And for the moment, I will let the heads of each of their houses know of my intentions."

That should stop them from making trouble, I thought.

"Even if they try something, they're just too weak compared to him," Ciel said. "According to Remille, in his previous seven lives their party managed to reach hero candidate status. Of course, who knows if they'll even make it that far without Remille's support."

"Hmph. Well, in any case, it seems we've covered everything we can for right now. Ciel, I don't suppose you're planning to carry out his training here in the capital?"

"Nope. We'll definitely need to venture out into the world."

"I was afraid you'd say that. Limbdt!"

"Yes, right here." An old man who had been standing at the king's side stepped forward.

"Help these two with whatever preparations they need for their journey. Let them pick whatever equipment they like from the royal treasure house and see that they obtain any funds they need."

"Understood, Your Majesty."

"Excellent. Then go forth, for the glory of the kingdom."

"Yessir." *Sure, no pressure.* It seemed like with that, the audience was over. Following the lead of the people around me, I bowed my head to the king.

It wasn't too long before the old man, Limbdt, sent for us.

❖

"Hrm, you've got a real hero's face, eh? Nice chiseled features."

"Ignore him," Ciel said. "He says that to everyone."

Such was the banter as he led us to the royal treasure house.

"Ah, Princess, you are too harsh with an old man. Now then, weapons are

over here. As for armor, you will need to consider whether you plan to fight at the vanguard or stay in the rear."

He displayed a parade of the most dazzling equipment I'd ever seen, one after another. *Is this really okay...?* Each piece was of a finer quality than anything I'd encountered in any of my previous seven lives.

"Don't be shy," Ciel said. "I'm happy to see these things actually used rather than sitting here collecting dust."

"Precisely so," Limbdt agreed. "As the one who crafted them, nothing could bring me more joy."

"You made these?!"

"That he did. Old Limbdt here is a dwarf. He's served as master smith for the royal family for generations, since my great-grandfather's time. And now he's the, uh... What was it again?"

"The state minister of the treasury, Your Highness."

"Right. Now he's that."

Wow, whaddaya know... Being in the royal palace, I expected to be surrounded by impressive people, but already my expectations had been totally surpassed.

"Of course," Limbdt went on, "it is not as though I created all of these pieces myself. There have been many talented royal smiths over the years. Some of the dark magic artifacts from the dungeons cannot be crafted with current knowledge."

"Well anyway, don't worry about that; just pick whatever you want. Personally I'd like you to train as a rear guard, though."

"Rear guard?" I repeated. "How come?"

"So you're not wasted. Being in the rear guard is the best way to take full advantage of your XP and let your variety of different skills shine. You could, like, shoot attack spells while riding on the back of a dragon or whatever."

"Whoa..." *What a dream that would be!*

Limbdt seemed to sense from my expression that my enthusiasm had been sparked, and he started gathering a bunch of items from the treasure house. “For fighting on dragonback, something light and nimble is best, I’d say. I recommend mythril. It’s a light material and also has a high level of magical resistance.”

“Wait wait wait. Mythril? The metal of legend?!”

“Hmm, I suppose it is seen that way by humans, yes.”

“I’m pretty sure Limbdt is hundreds of years old,” Ciel said. “This sort of thing is old hat to him.”

“I bask humbly in the glow of your words of praise, Your Highness.”

The royal family really is something, huh? In my previous seven lives, I had never once so much as seen any mythril.

“If you find something that suits you, go ahead and take it,” Ciel said to me. “Limbdt, while I’m here, I’d like to review my own equipment as well.”

“As you wish, Princess.” With that, the two of them vanished deeper into the armory, leaving me alone in the room. I felt my anxiety rising—there were more precious artifacts in here than I could have ever dreamt of possessing after seven whole lifetimes. I wished they hadn’t left.

“I guess being surrounded by treasures like these is a double-edged sword, so to speak... Oh, what’s this?” One singular item among the hoard caught my attention. “I didn’t know they made such a thing...”

The object I’d pulled out was a piece of armor way too big to be designed for human use. It was more like a claw or talon—armor for a beast tamer’s animal companion. This being the royal family, presumably that meant a dragon. And scattered around it were sets of armor and saddles for the dragon riders. “I wonder if I’m gonna be able to use these when I’m older...”

My thoughts turned to my beloved companion, as yet unmet in my current life. To that last memory... “Better not to think about that, huh?” *The moment before my own death, murdered so cruelly right before my eyes.*

I knew she was some sort of catlike demon, but in my short time with her it

was hopeless to try to fully understand everything about her species. “Catra...”

Before I could investigate whether there was gear that would fit smaller claws too, Ciel and Limbdt returned.

“Ooh,” Ciel exclaimed, “so that’s what you picked out? Seems like you’re into the dragon knight idea then, huh?”

“Uh, no, actually. I was thinking first I’d like to tame a cat, if that’s okay.”

“What?!”

And so I stood in the royal treasure house, awkwardly racking my brains for how to explain this to a very shocked princess.

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Ultimately we left the treasure house without talking about it further, and Ciel proceeded to organize our departure from the castle with whirlwind speed.

“Um, Ciel, are you really sure this is okay?”

“Oi, chill out! I already told you it’s fine!”

With my thoughts full of my plans with Catra, I hadn’t really cared to pick out any further equipment, but Ciel had her own ideas and had forced us to take anything and everything that she thought might ever possibly be useful. Swords used by legendary heroes, staves of great sages, dragon knight saddles and stirrups of every possible size... Basically, if you could imagine it, she’d thrown it in.

And when I say “threw it in,” I mean literally: all of those items were stuffed into an incredible magic bag. It was enchanted to let you store items in a magical realm—truly the ultimate in luxury goods. And this one was the maximum size. Really, in a way, the most valuable item in that room was the bag we stuffed everything else into. And now that very same magic bag was fastened around my waist.

“It freaks me out to think that this bag I’m carrying, and all the stuff inside it, could somehow become the kingdom’s downfall...”

“Don’t worry,” Ciel replied. “Upon your death, ownership of that bag will automatically revert back to the royal family. No one else will be able to use it.”

“Somehow I don’t find that very reassuring...” *Doesn’t that just mean someone would have to find a way to use it without killing me?* That might actually be scarier.

“If it bothers you so much, hurry up and get stronger. Your time is limited enough as it is, and yet here we are doing some sort of side quest...”

I knew that three years from now I’d be thrown into some sort of crisis. Ciel did have a point. “Yeah, um, sorry about this...”

“You should be.”

It said a lot about Ciel that despite her grumbling she had still come along with me. Together we made our way up the winding mountain roads. Putting aside how ludicrous it must have appeared to be using a mythril dagger to clear a path through the brush, I had to say that the finely honed blade did a fantastic job as a weeding tool. Even so, it was slow going.

“So this is where the behemoth is, huh?”

“Yeah.” After I’d declared to Ciel that I wanted to tame a cat, she’d had me describe Catra to her, and it turned out that Catra was likely a behemoth cub. Of course, with a time frame of just three years to work with, her military prowess wouldn’t be much to speak of. We were wagering a lot on Ciel’s guess about Catra being a behemoth, and Ciel had only reluctantly acceded to this plan, being ever conscious of our need to hurry. Although, if it did turn out that Catra was a behemoth, I was pretty sure Ciel would also be quite pleased, honestly.

“In any case, if you’re aiming to become a dragon knight, this will be a good place to work on obtaining skills related to beast taming.”

“Thank you, Ciel.” As we cut a path through the difficult terrain, I felt grateful that despite her complaints, Ciel was right here at my side.

To find the behemoth cub—that is, Catra—it was crucial to enter this forest at exactly the right time. Now that I thought about it, the first time I came here it was a really close battle. *I guess the others weren’t very strong yet either...*

By now, I had a good idea of what sorts of demons would appear where, so there wasn’t really any danger. Still, the truth was that I found it difficult to go

forward. And...

“Phew, we finally made it,” Ciel said.

“Yeah.”

“Hey, are these uncharted ruins? Don’t you think that’s something you should maybe tell me *before* we come here?”

“Oh...is it?” I felt a surge of guilt at her exasperated expression, but there was something I had to take care of before I could focus on apologizing to her. Catra should be right around here, next to the hidden dungeon, asleep and injured...

“Meep...”

“Catra!”

“Meee...?” She lay splayed on the ground, covered in wounds. Normally if a strange human came this close to her she’d run away, but right now she was in no shape to flee or to fight.

“Wow, whaddaya know. It is a behemoth,” Ciel said, eyes wide with wonder. And more importantly: “Poor thing. Can she be saved?”

“I’ll save her.” I remembered it all perfectly. This was where I always came across Catra. And every time, I was shocked by her strength and fortitude. “Let’s see, bandages for the wounds...disinfectant...” As I rummaged through the medical supplies I had brought, Ciel once again sighed in exasperation.

“Honestly, Remille. Healing magic exists, you know. Or at the very least, if you knew she would be in this condition, you could have brought a healing potion.”

“Er...” Okay, so she had a point. I couldn’t think of a good comeback to that.

“Meep...” Somehow even Catra’s stare seemed accusatory.

Well, all I could do was make do with what I did have. In the end, I had to rely on good old-fashioned first aid techniques. Despite Ciel’s needling, I prepared cloth for bandages, fetched water, and worked to clean the wounds and lower her temperature.

At some point while I was absorbed in all that, Ciel vanished.

“Heart of ice, that girl,” I commented to Catra.

“Meep...” she agreed.

At first she had weakly resisted my ministrations, but pretty soon she seemed to realize that I was trying to help her and calmed down. Her injuries would not be quick to heal. In the past, I had to tend her for three whole days—and she still just barely made it through.

And while I did that, the rest of the party had killed time by exploring the nearby ruins, I think... Although, now that I thought about it, they never told me the whole story of what happened in those ruins.

“Meeeep.”

“Shh, it’s okay. You’re going to be okay.”

As I murmured to Catra to comfort her, Ciel suddenly reappeared and held something out to me.

“Here. Use this.”

“What is it?”

“A healing herb that grows around here. You said you also know alchemy, right?”

“I do...” I stared at her, startled by her effort to help.

“I didn’t do it for your sake!” she said, blushing. “Anything to hurry this whole ordeal along. That’s all.”

“I see. Well, thank you.”

“Hmph!” She turned haughtily away from me, her face still flushed.

She’s such an open book once you know her. I was grateful for it.

Thanks to Ciel’s aid, Catra recovered before the day was done. Or really, I should say, it was a confluence of several things: a miracle created by Ciel’s choice of healing herb, my knowledge of alchemy from previous lives, and Catra’s incredible strength and vitality.

❖

“Meep!”

“I know I’ve already asked this, but are you sure this little kitten is really a behemoth?” I asked Ciel.

“Yup. According to my Appraisal skill, there’s no question. Well, at least no question for someone who’s already quite knowledgeable about animals.”

“If you say so.”

“Meep.”

This little cutie, licking my cheek like a spoiled child trying to get attention... It was rather hard to see her as a legendary monster. But if Ciel said it was true, then I couldn’t doubt it.

“Once she reaches her potential, she’ll surpass even a dragon in fighting strength.”

“Amazing.”

“Meeep!” Catra somehow, adorably, seemed to puff with pride.

“Hmm, but how many years will it take to reach that potential?” I asked. Even if she was a behemoth, I didn’t think she’d become such a mighty military asset before that fated day three years from now.

But Ciel’s next comment made me completely rethink that. “No, that’s not how it works. Behemoths—or really, any demons or magical beasts—don’t grow linearly with age. They grow in proportion to strength.”

“In proportion? What do you mean?”

“Goblins are a good example. All goblins are basically a fixed size, right?”

“I guess, now that you mention it, yeah.”

“Newborn goblins are too weak to be called goblins. As they grow up, they become ‘true’ goblins. Even if they never get stronger, a goblin is still a goblin. But there’s an exception—know what it is?”

“Hobgoblins?” It was like a sort of evolution. Goblins that are exceptionally large and powerful are called hobgoblins. They’re seen as a distinct species, but could this just be how growth works for magical creatures?

“Any goblin who gets large enough to be considered a hobgoblin *becomes* a

hobgoblin, and if they get even stronger they become a goblin king. Or if they're skilled at magic they become a magic goblin, or if they learn to use a sword they'd be a sword goblin. This cub may look like a little kitten right now, but as soon as she levels up enough, she'll suddenly be a full-fledged behemoth. That's what I mean when I talk about reaching her potential."

"So you're saying..."

"Of course, as always, it's not going to be instantaneous. But with my guidance she'll be powerful within a year."

At Ciel's confident claim, Catra tilted her head quizzically.

"Anyway, let's go conquer this uncharted dungeon!"

"Right, uncharted... But they told me there wasn't anything in there."

"What, you still trust those guys?"

"Good point." My spirits fell at facing that bitter truth, and Catra nuzzled at me as though to comfort me. *So cuuute.* I felt instantly healed.

"There could be something there. And in any case, going through this dungeon will also give her some XP. It's a perfect opportunity to help her grow into a behemoth."

"Another good point." The dungeon was certainly a great opportunity to earn experience points efficiently. Especially since a whole bunch of demons would come surging out whether we entered it or not.

Of course, there's the small matter of having to survive.

"First thing's first; I'll explain my training plan to you. Things will go smoothest if you understand the whole plan."

I took a seat on a nearby boulder to listen obediently to Ciel's explanation. Catra came to sit in my lap, and we both looked up at Ciel while she talked.

"For now, you'll be focusing on enhancing your skills as a trainer. That will include obtaining and mastering the skills of Familiar Enhancement and Ability Absorption."

"Familiar Enhancement and Ability Absorption?" Those weren't terms that I

was familiar with.

“Do you mean to say that you don’t even know the other skills involved in being a tamer?”

“Huh? There are skills for tamers other than...Tame?”

“You know how there are things that vary with the ability level of a trainer, like the success rate of the Tame skill, or how many beasts can be tamed at once, or how much of your familiar’s power you can draw on?”

“Sure.” That was taming 101. The higher your proficiency as a trainer, the more those abilities improved.

“All of those are actually subskills of Tame, and each can be leveled individually.”

“Subskills?”

“Yes. On their own they’re useless, but for a person who knows the Tame skill, these subskills help raise their abilities as a tamer.” Seeing the lingering confusion on my face, Ciel explained further. “Familiar Enhancement is a subskill that lets your familiar become stronger in proportion to your strength. And Ability Absorption allows *you* to gain strength by drawing on your familiar’s. So the first step is to use Familiar Enhancement to help this kitten of yours reach the strength to awaken her potential to become a behemoth. After that, she’ll be powerful without you having to do anything special.”

“Really? Just like that?”

“Historically, every single dragon tamer was extremely strong themselves. A full-fledged behemoth is even more powerful than a dragon, so you’ll have to power up accordingly or this won’t work at all.”

She seemed so confident. Even Catra seemed to look up at me with pride.

“Okay then. I know it’s short notice, but I would like to take advantage of this dungeon to start leveling her up.”

“Meeep!” Ciel had reached a hand out toward Catra, but Catra struck out with her front paw as though to ward her off.

“Hey now, what’s that about?” I asked Catra. She’d had no problem with my

absentminded petting as she sat in my lap.

“It’s fine, whatever. Anyway, it’s characteristic of behemoths to have skill trees that spread infinitely in any direction. She could become powerful along any path. From flying through the sky to digging beneath the earth, there are many different types of behemoth.”

“Really? They have that much individuality?”

“Yup. The common threads between all behemoths are that they have skill trees as broad as humans’, and that they acquire new skills more easily than humans do. Beyond that, each individual’s path is different.”

Now that she mentioned it, I’d heard it said that the main strength of humans, compared to most species of demons or other animals, is that our paths aren’t predetermined by our species. Humans can become whatever we set out to become. Ciel’s litany of “master swordsman, sage, dragon knight” was a perfect example. No matter how hard a goblin tried, they couldn’t become a dragon rider.

...Or could they, if they had something like Ciel’s Appraisal guiding them? Well, anyway, goblins don’t have trainers or whatever.

I turned my attention back to the conversation. “So what path will Catra grow along?”

“Meep?” Catra tilted her head at my question.

Too cute.

“I’d say that can wait until after the dungeon. Ideally, it would be determined by what she wants to become.”

“Meep!” Catra clung tightly to me. Just as I was wondering what was going on in her head, Ciel let out a sigh.

“Well, she’s easy to read, isn’t she?”

“Huh?”

“She’s saying as long as she can be helpful to you, she’s fine with anything.”

“Meeeeep.” As though to confirm Ciel’s words, Catra purred and nuzzled

against me.

❖

“Okey doke. We’ll take on this dungeon, but first I want you to tame ten of the monsters that live around here.”

“Any ten I want?”

“Yup. Slime, goblin, heck, you could tame a pigeon if you want.” *And don’t question my orders*, her tone seemed to add.

Taming ten beasts, even if they could be anything, was no small feat. If it was all the same to her, I’d just as soon start with common, low-maintenance creatures. “So...even bugs?”

“Sure. If you can handle ten of them.”

“Okay. Gotcha.” I knew what she was up to: she was trying to expand my Tame skill. In my seven lives so far, I’d never tamed ten things at once. Eager to test my skills, I scanned the area around us for bugs. Flinging my arms wide, I commanded, “Tame!”

At my call, a dozen bugs came zipping through the trees right to me.

“Whoa.” Ciel regarded me with surprise.

“What’s wrong?” I didn’t see what there was for her to be so surprised by.

“If you already know how to use Multi Tame or Area Tame you should have told me that up front!”

“But...it only works on bugs.”

“Even so. Well, this is good, actually. You can jump forward in your skill tree now. You tamed more than I expected, so the subskills Familiar Enhancement and Ability Absorption have reached intermediate level. Congratulations. You’ve already left the realm of what’s possible for an ordinary tamer.”

“Wow, just like that?” *This doesn’t seem real...* No, seriously, I couldn’t perceive any real difference from my previous lives.

“Even if you technically knew how, did you ever actually manage to tame that many at once in any of your past lives?”

“No, I guess not.” The most I’d ever done at once was like two or three creatures, whether I was dealing with bugs or birds. This time, since I’d been

told to tame at least ten, I had used my Tame command on all of the few dozen bugs in the vicinity. From both my conversations with Ciel and my own past lives, I knew that one of the keys to obtaining and leveling skills was to have the specific knowledge of how much experience was necessary and the correct way to obtain it. In this case, since I had so much XP already, really only the second of those was relevant.

"Oh, could I have used up more XP than I had to with that Tame just now?" I asked.

"Hmm? Nah, don't worry about that. I'm pretty sure that you've banked so much that it doesn't matter."

Only pretty sure, huh? Great...

"Listen. When do you think experience points are usually built up?"

"When? Like, when you're training, or when you bring down an enemy?"

"Right. But that's weird, isn't it? Building up your strength by training is one thing, but why do you get XP from killing a monster?"

I'd never thought about it before. One way to get stronger was by defeating enemies and gaining XP that way. Everyone knew that. I'd never considered the logic behind it, but... "That's a good point; your physical condition doesn't actually change from beating an enemy." I guess you might gain a bit of strength just from the act of fighting, but that didn't really account for the amount of experience gained.

"Exactly. Experience points are actually based more on mental experience than on physical strength or training. So actually fighting a monster levels you up better than rote drilling."

"Oh. I guess that makes sense."

"And that experience isn't conditional on actually winning the battle either."

"Oh..." The implication of Ciel's words hit me. "So that means, all those times..."

"That's right. You've faced the fear of death head-on. Every time, you confronted a horror so terrifying that a normal person would have died from

fright alone. Even at a conservative estimate, the mental experience you've gained just from that is more than it would normally be possible to obtain in an entire lifetime."

"Wow." So I guess when Ciel said back at the palace that I had seven times the XP of an average person, that wasn't an exaggeration. In fact, even that "seven times" was an oversimplification. It sounded like it could be even more than that.

"And this time through, you know that Catra is a behemoth. That makes a huge difference. Even before she's a full-fledged behemoth, you'll be able to strengthen your own skills way more. Enough that it wouldn't be crazy to aim to tame a dragon."

"Meep!" Catra's chirp seemed to protest Ciel's statement.

"Yeah, I know you don't like that," Ciel said to her. "If you don't want to deal with a rival, hurry up and get stronger. When we're in the dungeon, make sure you eat at least one of every new creature we find, okay? Behemoths absorb the abilities of whatever they've eaten. That will help you get nice and tough."

"Meep." Catra still didn't seem to like Ciel, but at least she was listening to her now. Like a delicate truce had been reached.

"You don't have to stress about experience points. I can make you strong using what you already have. And in the process, you'll build up an even bigger excess of XP."

That sounded like a good deal to me.

"And the first step is this dungeon. The stage is set perfectly. The goal of this mission is to get Catra to come into her own, so you should stay out of her way as much as possible. Remember—once she reaches full strength, you will be able to draw on that to get stronger without doing anything else yourself."

"I...guess that makes sense."

"For this mission, the behemoth will take the role of vanguard. I am in command. You will protect me. Leave the task of conquering the dungeon to her. We'll let her progress until she gets stuck."

“Meep!”

“Understood,” I said. *Familiar Enhancement and Ability Absorption.* It was incredible how powerful those skills became in combination. “Let’s do this.”

“Meeeep!” As I carried Catra in my arms, she purred adorably and nuzzled against my cheek.

❖

“Wow, it seems even bigger on the inside.”

“Those three clowns spent a good two or three days messing around in here while you were nursing Catra back to health, didn’t they? Stands to reason that it’s big enough for them to spend that much time here.”

“Good point.” Of course, seeing as how I’d come to find Catra without even bringing along a healing potion for her, it goes without saying that I hadn’t done a single bit of preparation for taking on a dungeon either. But while I was caring for Catra, Ciel had taken care of some of those preparations for us. The magical item that lit our way now was a light we made by applying my alchemy skills to materials that Ciel had scavenged.

“Alchemy is pretty sweet, huh? If nothing actually happens to you three years from now, I’d advise you to pursue it further.”

“At least that way I’d never go wanting for anything as long as I lived, I guess.” Alchemy was an extremely lucrative talent. After I realized that, my lives had always been quite comfortable. Thanks to me, we had been able to afford lodgings two ranks higher than we would have otherwise.

“Eh, even if you make it through the next three years, it’s not like that will be the end of your troubles. Best to get as strong as you can.”

“Hey, what do you mean *if* I make it...?”

“Ooh, look. The first enemy has appeared. Think she can take it?”

I was still bothered by what she’d said, but suddenly we had bigger problems. Ciel signaled to Catra. Catra acknowledged her command with a small dip of her head.

“Meep!”

In that instant, a bat swooped out of the darkness. Catra dodged the attack, then pivoted her body in midair to knock the enemy down. And just as Ciel had commanded, she bit off a chunk of its corpse and gulped it down.

“Whoa...”

“Do you get it now?” Ciel asked.

Sure enough, tiny wings immediately sprouted on Catra’s back. And, even weirder, I suddenly felt an odd lightness spread through my own body.

“That’s about all you’re gonna be able to absorb from something as weak as a bat. You can kill the rest of them without bothering to eat any.”

“Meeeeeep!” In response, Catra sprang at the approaching flock of bats. With each one she killed, her wings grew slightly larger, and I felt my body grow ever lighter.

“How...?” I began.

“She’s activated the seed of the Skill Eater ability that grown behemoths have. As she battles and gains XP, that skill is strengthened too. And that strength, in turn, is reflected back to her tamer, raising your stats as well.”

“That’s...kind of overpowered, isn’t it?”

“Are you finally beginning to understand why a full-grown behemoth is considered more fearsome than a dragon?”

It seemed Catra’s potential power was indeed far beyond what I’d imagined. But more to the point at the moment... “Uh, how many bats are there?”

“Good question.”

No matter how many Catra took down, that many more seemed to swarm to take their place. It seemed she’d absorbed what she could out of them for now. “I should help her.”

“Meeeep.” Catra came flying over to me at my words. I held out my arm to receive her, and she gracefully scampered onto my shoulder.

“Can I?” I asked.

“Sure. This is the perfect chance to practice extending your Tame skill.”

“Right.” I raised my hand high, focused my awareness on the swarming flock of bats, and... “Tame!” My intention was to tame every single creature in a straight line extending ahead of me.

As she watched me, Ciel asked, “Do you ever feel that if you’d focused on taming from the very beginning, you would have had more success in your lives?”

“All the time.”

My attempt went even better than I’d expected. It seemed the practice with the bugs had paid off. Even I could tell that the Area Tame and Multi Tame subskills had activated effortlessly. My taming extended out in a long line through every creature in front of me.

“I’ll Appraise you now.”

“Uh, sure.” As Ciel fixed her gaze on me, her eye changed color. It seemed her plan was to perform periodic Appraisals to keep track of my condition. And the verdict was...

“Oh, wow. Better than I thought.”

“Hmm? What do you see?”

“You’ve unlocked pretty much every main skill for taming. All that remains is to make use of strong familiars to continue expanding each of those skills.”

“So not just quantity over quality?” *And here I’d been hoping to power up just by taming a ton of bugs and bats...*

“Quantity isn’t irrelevant, but it’s not the most efficient method. Obviously if you tame many creatures at once you’ll reach your capacity, so you have to release them as you go. So it stands to reason that it’s best for each individual to be pretty strong. Of course, if you ask her, I’m sure she’d say she’s enough to fill your capacity on her own.”

“That makes sense.”

“Meep!” Catra agreed, fixing me with an almost cocky gaze.

In terms of my current limits, I could keep a hold of this many bats as long as they stayed within a fixed range; I had to release any that were too far away.

And it sounded like the stronger Catra got, the more she alone would tax my capacity...

“I’m not sure which will happen first as you level up—your being able to tame other strong beasts, or Catra getting strong enough that she takes up all your strength. As far as I’m concerned either is fine, as long as you’re getting stronger.”

“Meeeeep!” Catra chimed in enthusiastically.

“I’m just happy to see her growing up,” I said.

“Meeep.” She chirped in contentment as I reached up to pet her where she perched on my shoulder.

“A grown behemoth’s combat skills are impressive in their own right, but their greatest strength is in the ability to reflect that power back to you. Her growth automatically makes you stronger.”

“With Ability Absorption, right? But I’ve never felt any particular benefits from taming her in previous lives.”

“Well, sure. In those lives, she was basically a rather impressive cat. And you weren’t consciously focusing on Absorption. This time will be totally different—just you wait.”

The adorable way Ciel seemed to swell with pride was so like Catra that without thinking I reached out and patted her on the head.

“Ah! What are you doing?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I just... I wasn’t...”

“I don’t mind. But be more gentle, and run your fingers all the way through my hair. There, like that.”

To my surprise, she seemed to quite enjoy that and let me stroke her hair for a bit. Jealous of the competition, Catra butted me with her head, and so I found myself continuing the trek through the dungeon alternately petting both Catra and Ciel. Not your typical adventuring party, but the two of them seemed happy enough, so who was I to complain?

❖

“So I guess there are different enemy types on each level?”

“Perfect,” Ciel said.

“Meeeep!”

We’d only encountered bats and other similarly weak foes on the first level, but on the second we had our first encounter with demons actually deserving of the name when we were accosted by a horde of goblins.

“Wonder what Catra’ll gain from eating a goblin.”

“Getting those wings was a stroke of luck. She won’t always get something so useful.”

“Oh?” As we chatted, Catra had flown into the midst of the goblins and was engaged in tearing them limb from limb.

“The skill she gained from this has to do with wielding a club, which means nothing to her. So the effect on her stats is pretty small. Still, it’s a more efficient way to level up than just using normal experience points. That’s the beauty of the Skill Eater ability.”

“Incredible.”

“As I keep telling you. The truth is, I’m not even sure how many tamers there have been throughout history who’ve commanded a full-fledged behemoth.”

“I’m excited to try it.”

“Yeah. But for that, we need Catra to actually mature.”

Right. At the moment, she looked like a cat that sprouted wings. And apparently the wings were retractable, so most of the time she would just look like a normal cat. Considering that at the very end of my last life she still looked like a slightly oversized cat, I guess there must be lots of behemoth cubs that die before ever reaching full maturity. If I hadn’t saved her and nursed her back to health in those previous loops, who knows what would have become of her?

“Meep!”

“If she keeps up like this we should be fine, right?”

“Maybe. Let’s hope... Hey now, you have to check each one carefully! Make

sure you get just one of each goblin subtype. It'll be fastest to just kill the rest normally." Ciel continued to relay detailed instructions to Catra.

Goblins are able to evolve along a variety of different paths, although to a lesser extent than humans. That meant that Catra was steadily continuing to gain strength.

"Magic goblins! Lucky! Eat as many of those as you want," Ciel instructed, before explaining further at my confused look. "Depending on exactly what sorcery they've learned, magic goblins can be so different from each other that they might as well be different species. Look."

There were three magic goblins in the horde. Sure enough, each seemed completely different from the others in both physical appearance and style of magic. "Hey wait, isn't this too much for her to take on by herself?!" Magic goblins were typically only defeated by whole parties of adventurers once they'd reached C rank—and we were facing a whole group of them at once. Catra, still in her kitten form, hardly seemed a match for them. However...

"Meeeeeeep!" With a cry that seemed to say *don't worry about me*, Catra dashed toward them. The other goblins swarmed in as though to protect their magical brethren, and she rammed right into them, sending one goblin flying through his comrades and knocking them down like bowling pins.

"Wow."

"Looks like she just learned the hobgoblins' Shield Bash ability."

"What did that have to do with shields?"

"That's just how it is with skills. It might take on a different name as she masters it."

"Oh. Huh."

And so we progressed easily through the dungeon, watching Catra's steady progress, with nothing to do except deal with the occasional shot that made it past her.

❖

"Has she doubled in size?"

“Meep!” She barely fit anymore, but nonetheless Catra flapped her way up to perch on my shoulder.

“In terms of stats, I’d say she matches up favorably against a higher B rank demon.”

“That’s wild.” If a demon of that level spawned, it wouldn’t be unusual to round up an S rank adventurer party to deal with it.

“She hasn’t mastered everything she’s learned yet, but still, none of the enemies in this dungeon could put up much of a fight.”

“Yeah.” We’d traversed through a few more floors, and Catra had pretty much taken care of everything on her own.

“I was just thinking that it’d be good for her to have an opponent she could really learn an appropriate fighting style from, and it looks like this floor is just what we needed.”

“Another cat?”

“An earth tiger.”

The cat-beast that appeared was bigger than Catra—bigger even than a human, if it were to stand up on its hind legs. I called it a cat, but its expression was pure savagery, and its body seemed entirely made of muscle. Its power was obvious at just a glance.

“They’re about equal in terms of stats, but because she gained her strength in such an unnatural way, she hasn’t had the chance to learn to use her skills organically. If she can absorb the earth tiger’s movements, that will be a big help for the next floor.”

“We must be almost at the boss, huh?”

“Yeah. I bet this earth tiger is the guardian.”

Guardians. The elite monsters that guard the passage to the floor boss. The creature that stood before us sure looked like it could be something like that. “I don’t think I could take it...”

“What are you talking about? You could take that thing in one hit.”

“Yeah, right,” I laughed. But the look she gave me had no hint of humor. “Huh? Are you serious?”

“Sheesh, could you please learn to judge your own strength better? Thanks to Catra’s progress, your stats have just about tripled since we entered this dungeon. If you just waved your sword around a bit, you’d be ready to obtain the Advanced Swordsmanship skill.”

“You’re kidding.” Skeptical, I grasped my sword tightly and swung. Amazingly, the sword moved in a smooth arc that made all of my previous attempts at swordplay seem like a child waving a stick.

“Holy...”

“Congratulations! You are now an advanced swordsman.”

“Just like that?”

“And not only that—thanks to those magic goblins, you can now use pretty much any kind of magic you want. Although we’ll need to keep raising your proficiency.”

I tried to wrap my mind around that statement. Sure enough, when I delved into the depths of my awareness, I could sense the magical energy coursing through my body. All of the types of magic I had worked so hard to obtain in the past now hummed effortlessly at my fingertips. “Incredible...”

“The beauty of Ability Absorption.”

“What will happen when Catra comes into her own as a behemoth?”

“You’ll be able to take down a dragon single-handed.”

“No way.” *If that’s true...I might even be able to take down the horror I have a date with in three years.*

“Isn’t my training plan brilliant?” The smug grin she flashed at me was super cute.

“Extremely.”

While we’d been talking, Catra’s battle with the earth tiger had come to an end. Literal instant victory.

“Meep.”

“Well, that was fast.” It seemed that when facing off against the earth tiger, Catra somehow had learned how to use her power just from staring at her opponent. She’d finished off the tiger more easily than even Ciel expected, and successfully used Skill Eater to raise her stats. It didn’t look like she’d absorbed any new skills, though.

“Well, the enemies weren’t much to speak of, but at least we finally found a chamber worthy of a dungeon,” Ciel observed.

I guess she was right about the earth tiger playing the part of guardian. Just past the battle arena, we came upon a room completely blanketed in keyholes.

“Uh... Do we need to have the keys to all of these in order to progress?”

“I don’t think so,” Ciel said. “Have you seen a single key anywhere so far?”

“No...” With this many keyholes, typically you’d expect to find at least one key somewhere nearby. “So then...what?”

“The keyholes are letters. And the keys are corresponding words.” As she spoke, she squinted at the keyholes, brow furrowed in concentration. Her Eye glinted gold. “To offer thine heart’s dearest desire...”

The instant Ciel muttered those words—

“Whoa...!”

Every keyhole in the room radiated light, and the whole thing began to spin wildly. It seemed as though the whole room, down to the floor we stood on, came alive with light, and then...

“RAAAAWWWRRR!”

With a ferocious roar that rent the air all around the dungeon, a legendary beast appeared before us.

“What the... It looks just like a huge version of Catra.” *In other words...*

“That’s right, this is what Catra will become—if she never matures into a behemoth.”

“Wait, if she *doesn’t* mature...?”

Ciel was using her Eye of Appraisal to analyze the creature's abilities. "It's also a catlike beast that happens to have a skill similar to Skill Eater."

"Similar?" Okay, so maybe it wasn't technically a behemoth. That didn't seem to make it much less of a threat.

"This is a sort of...failed prototype, a creature who tried to become a behemoth but didn't make it. If I had to give it a name, I'd say it's a fake behemoth."

"It still looks pretty strong."

"It's more dangerous than the earth tiger. Maybe A rank. It looks similar to a behemoth cub, but it's fully grown. It doesn't realize that, however. It still thinks that if it eats other beasts it will get stronger."

"So that means..."

"Look out!"

"RAAAAWWWRRR!!!"

The fake behemoth charged with an earsplitting roar. Ciel didn't have combat abilities of her own, but her Eye allowed her to anticipate its movements and dodge. Before I could even worry about her, she had evaded its attack.

"Catra!" I yelled.

"Meeeep!"

Catra instantly understood my intent and flew toward me. The fake behemoth may have been ferocious, but an advanced swordsman like me could fend off its attacks. I placed myself between Catra and the beast.

"My turn, Ciel?" Throughout the main dungeon Catra's growth had taken priority, but up against a boss I figured it was time I jumped in the fray myself.

"You're up," she confirmed. "Show him what you're made of."

"Let's gooo!" As I drew my sword, the fake behemoth gave an answering howl.

"GRAAAWWWR!"

"Hmm. Now that we're face-to-face, you're not so scary, are you?" Ciel had

told me I should get better at gauging my own strength. *Let's see, I think this calls for Repel...*

"You will fall." I swung my sword three times toward the oncoming fake behemoth. Like a true advanced swordsman, my strokes sliced the air in a precise flurry of motion.

One stroke to halt its attack.

The second stroke to sweep upward and expose its weak spot.

And finally...

"Hiyaah!"

...The third stroke to slice the fake behemoth's head clean off its body.

"Nice work. Let's call it at that for today," Ciel said, as though I hadn't just insta-killed a dungeon boss.

"This isn't the end of the dungeon, then?"

"No. But I think if we go just a bit further, we'll be able to get the full picture."

Seeing as I had no idea how she could know that, I supposed it must be another part of the Appraisal skill.

"Meep!" With the defeat of the fake behemoth, Catra seemed to have grown another notch. Despite her increasing size, she seemed determined to ride on my shoulder, where she currently clung with fluttering wings. Cute, yes, but it was getting a little silly. Well, whatever made her happy.

"So, will we sleep here?"

"Yeah," Ciel replied. "Seems like a good place, since other than that fake behemoth, this floor should be clear of enemies." She rummaged around in the magic bag as she spoke. And from inside it she pulled out...

"Is that a bed?!"

"Yup! If we're gonna rest in comfort, we might as well go all the way, right?"

I couldn't argue with that, but this seemed rather excessive. This magic bag made things too easy. Typically, adventurers had to be content with sleeping bags. This was...out of the ordinary.

“It’s not an everyday thing, but today we happen to have the space for it. The bed’s pretty wide, so do you mind sharing it?”

“No, no, I mean, wait, I—”

“It’s pretty likely that some contact will happen accidentally, since we’re sleeping next to each other. I’m not bothered by that, but since I’ll be leaving all the battling to you tomorrow, it’d be in your own best interest to focus on getting rest.”

“That’s true, but—”

“Meee!” Before I could continue, Catra thrust her face angrily toward me with a howl.

“You can sleep with us too,” Ciel told her.

“Meep.” At that invitation, she leapt onto the bed.

“If you don’t join us, she’s gonna be super grumpy.”

“Meep,” Catra agreed.

I was trapped. “Well... How about we eat something!” I attempted an unsubtle change of topic.

“He’s a scaredy-cat, huh?”

“Meeep.” Somehow even Catra’s gaze seemed scornful.

It was true that I should get used to going along with Ciel’s plans, but...sometimes she was a bit too willing to do whatever it took to achieve her ends.

“Fine, be that way,” Ciel said. “Oh, before you cook, you should perform some alchemy. It’s a perfect chance to show off your skills.”

“Don’t get your hopes too high. Although, I guess with you here it’s another story.”

“That’s right. For starters, prepare the ingredients exactly as I tell you.” She started pulling things from the bag one after another.

“You collected all those ingredients?”

“Mmhmm. Do you know what these are used for?”

“I don’t know the exact formulas, but they all seem like strengthening agents.” The ingredients she laid out included medicinal herbs, tree nuts, and mushrooms that she must have collected back in the forest, as well as various viscera of the monsters we’d defeated in the dungeon. Doping agents, all of them. Substances that give you a temporary surge of strength or passion, or that instantly clear your head.

“If you create everything you can think of with these, your power as an alchemist should return to the level of your previous life.”

“Really?”

“You seem to be drawn more to the behind-the-scenes support role than to swordsmanship or sorcery, so your taming and alchemy skills are easiest to level up.”

I had a sudden thought. *But also...*

“Also,” Ciel continued, seeming to echo my thoughts, “you’re good at assisting the tactics of your allies on the front line. But that task is best left to a familiar. I’ve pretty much settled on your training program.”

“So for now, a tamer who can wield a sword?”

“Alchemy is more than just a convenience. I’ve thought of a way to make full use of your alchemy, taming, and some amount of combat ability, so just prepare yourself and follow me,” Ciel said confidently.

I’ll follow her anywhere.

“But first, food! Hurry up and finish mixing, and maybe you’ll earn yourself the Advanced Cooking skill.”

“Is that skill really necessary?”

“Of course it’s necessary! I’m a very picky eater.”

And so the three of us—two humans and one behemoth cub—passed a pleasant evening meal together.

❖

Dungeon assault, day two.

“So...sleepy...”

“Hmmm, guess you’re not used to such a nice bed, huh?” Ciel said, giggling.

I could guess the cause of her amusement.

“Meep.” Even Catra seemed to be laughing.

As it turned out, we’d been too busy fooling around last night to actually get any sleep. But ah, the memory of how Ciel squealed when I saw her underwear...

“It’ll be fine,” she continued. “That tonic you brewed will ward off any fatigue.”

“I guess.” It turned out that the potion she’d had me make in order to obtain the cooking skill was actually extremely useful. I seemed to be able to make many advanced potions that had been beyond my abilities in the past. I guess I really was stronger than I’d been in my previous lives. With this level of doping tonic, I could push myself a full thirty percent more than I’d ever been able to.

“Now, on to the sixth level. We’re truly in unexplored territory now—it’s unlikely your former party made it past here.”

If they even made it this far, her tone seemed to imply. That was fair enough. In those days we—or I guess I should say they—weren’t at a level to tussle with a fake behemoth.

“I think I understand the layout of this dungeon, at least in broad terms,” Ciel said.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. This Eye’s pretty handy, y’know.”

I keep forgetting I’m talking to the wielder of the Eye of Appraisal—the jewel of our kingdom.

“What I’ve realized is that there are at least thirty levels to this dungeon. The tenth, twentieth, and thirtieth each have their own floor boss. At our current power, I’d say we can make it to floor fifteen, maybe nineteen at best.”

“So a pretty standard dungeon, then?”

“Yup. There’s no especially strong magic to contend with or riddles to solve—just progressively stronger enemies as we move through the levels. Plus matters of affinity, of course.”

“So you’re saying the boss of the twentieth floor is too strong for us?”

“For now. Maybe after Catra grows into a real behemoth.”

“Hang on a sec. What does that mean about the boss on the thirtieth floor?!”

“No idea.”

“*You* don’t know?” At that moment it suddenly occurred to me that Ciel wasn’t acting like her usual self. In place of her usual brazen self-confidence, her eyes held a glint of uncertainty.

“I...can’t see it,” she said. “That’s partly due to the distance, but it’s not just that. My power is supposed to let me get a complete picture of an opponent’s skill set—strengths, weaknesses, everything—but beyond the thirtieth floor, that picture is completely black. I wonder...if it might just be too massive for even my powers to comprehend.”

I knew I should say something, but as I groped for words Ciel quickly changed the subject.

“Well, that really just means I also have to work to get stronger. We’ll advance as far as the tenth floor for now, and leave the rest for another time.”

“Okay, if you think we can make it.”

“The tenth floor boss will be yummy. It’s not anything you can’t handle.”

Yummy? Any enemy with especially good skills could be considered “yummy” for us right now, I supposed.

❖

“Well, so far so good, huh?”

“It’d be a bad sign if we’d already started having trouble,” Ciel replied.

We’d made it up to the tenth floor without encountering any real resistance.

It was almost as if floors six through nine were just devoid of enemies. “I guess Catra leveling up really is making me stronger too.”

“It’s been a fruitful dungeon. Whaddaya think, have you surpassed the level of your previous seven lives?”

“I might have.” Honestly, I’d always had only a vague sense of my own stats and arsenal of skills. It was only through Ciel’s abilities that I had any precise reference points for quantifying such things. And even then, those reference points were just arbitrary. I had no way to compare accurately to my past lives. All I really knew was that the speed I was progressing at right now was not normal.

“You’ve obtained over ten new skills. Your stats are higher than those of a B rank adventurer. And of course, you’ll have to get used to drawing even more power off of Catra.”

“Just how strong has she gotten, anyway?” She was already way too big to look like a normal cat anymore, not to mention the bulging muscles, wings, and horns she’d grown. It was no longer possible to ignore the fact that she was indeed a fledgling behemoth. Nevertheless, she persisted in yelping “meep!” and trying to climb up on my shoulder. Ciel had taken pity on me, and helped Catra to learn a new skill that allowed her to resume her catlike form. My shoulder was extremely grateful.

“Hmm...maybe mid A rank? But not quite enough to take on a whole A rank party.”

“She needs more experience for that?”

“That’s part of it. But right now you’ve both got a bit of a ‘jack of all trades, master of none’ deal going on. Your powers were all absorbed from different sources and haphazardly cobbled together.”

That was definitely true. There was no rhyme or reason to how we’d been gobbling up different skills and increased stats.

“A monster who grew to this strength more naturally would have the ability to focus all of their power in one concentrated attack, but she can’t do that. So while weaker enemies are a cinch, she isn’t capable of taking down high-level

foes.”

“So then, to be the best weapon—”

“No.” Ciel cut me off. “I intend to continue developing you as a jack of all trades as long as possible. As long as it’s not necessary to fight any high-level enemies just yet, it’s the best path to take.”

“If you say so...”

“The important thing to remember is that if your concentrated attack doesn’t match up well against your opponent, you’re a goner. I want to make sure you two are equipped to handle anything and everything you might come up against.”

Ciel spoke these laughably impossible plans with such firm confidence that I couldn’t help believing that she would somehow make it happen.

“It never even occurred to me that the key was helping Catra to get stronger,” I said. I had always thought that I would be the one protecting her. Looking at her now, I had to admit how wrong that had been.

“Meeeep!”

“Patience, patience. We’re not there yet.” Ciel grinned mischievously.

Thinking of the legends passed down of true full-grown behemoths, I had an idea what she might mean by “not there yet,” but something in her expression made me think there was something further behind her words.

“Even compared to other monsters, behemoths have tremendous power,” she continued.

“Yeah, so you’ve said.” *Stronger even than dragons, I know that already.*

Seeing my confusion, Ciel explained. “True monsters possess such overwhelming power that just standing before them is enough to bend your will to theirs. It’s exactly the same as when you tamed Catra.”

“Well sure, that’s how monsters like goblin kings extend their influence. But that’s just... Wait, do you mean...?”

“Yes. Someday, this kitten of yours will rule over all of the monsters as their

queen. And as her tamer, you will be able to use Ability Absorption on all of them."

"What... What are you trying to say?"

"Two years. Just give me two years, and—yeah, I'll say it—you'll become the Demon King."

Demon King.

Well, what else would you call one who commands all of the demonic beasts? But really, the behemoth would be the true ruler. I would just be...a random guy who happened to be along for the ride and sitting above her on the totem pole. The idea felt awkward to me, somehow.

"I mean, it's not like I'm gonna bring you back to the palace and introduce you as the Demon King. But this is just so you get a sense of the power level we're talking about here."

"Just thinking about that kind of power is...a little terrifying."

"Then don't just think about it. I intend for you to experience it firsthand," Ciel replied with a grin. "We need to power you up. For the sake of my freedom."

The uncut gem. The precious treasure of our kingdom, with sharp, jagged edges that cannot be smoothed. In that moment, I felt I got a glimpse of the princess's true nature.

"By the way, Remille, what did you do after saving Catra in your previous lives?"

"Uhhh..." I searched my memories. *Oh, duh!* "The battle with the lord of Margus's house." How could I have been forgetting such an important event?

"Ooh, intriguing."

And so I explained the details as Ciel's grin grew wider. Margus was our party leader and the fourth son of the Earl of Argus. The House of Argus maintained territory in the west of the kingdom. Margus's elder brothers, down to the third son of the house, had been granted work managing the family estates.

"There was no place for Margus there, so he became an adventurer. But if

you ask me, he had more potential than all three of his older brothers combined.”

“Despite everything, you still speak so kindly of him.”

“Yeah... I don’t know why.” It was strange even to me. It was like all my memories had been turned upside-down and shaken, and my emotions regarding my three former companions were all tangled up. But one thing I knew for certain was that there was no path that led toward reconciliation. I had watched them murder Catra right before my eyes. There was no forgiving that.

“It’s just...in my memories, they hadn’t done anything to me.”

“Yeah. I get it.” Ciel smiled. “My eye is said to be able to see into the future, but your strength is in seeing your own past. There’s no need for you to harden your heart.”

“I guess...”

“It’s a good thing,” Ciel said, still smiling at me. “It’s what makes you you.”

An Unwelcome Homecoming

“Fool! How dare you show your face here?!”

“I...”

In the lands of the House Argus, both shouts and fists flew through the manor house.

“I beg your forgiveness, Father... Please...”

“You’ve really stepped in it this time! An official match before the court, three against one, fighting some random worthless bumpkin, and you lost without landing a single blow—do I have that right? How could you screw up that badly?!”

“That is what happened, but he—”

“No excuses!!!”

“Gaaah...!” Lord Argus’s fists pounded Margus relentlessly.

“And even worse, that ‘uncut gem’ girl had already attached herself to your opponent, hadn’t she? What on earth possessed you to set yourself against the royal family?!”

“But that was the whole point! If I won, she would confer that honor onto me!”

“And instead you earned nothing but shame!”

Margus hung his head, unable to reply. Everything had been going so well since he’d left home. He’d been training hard, and had found worthy companions as well as a useful slave. It was supposed to be smooth sailing from here.

Until one single moment had ruined everything. “We thought... That guy was just supposed to be our errand boy and servant! We never imagined he could be that strong...”

“It was obvious! How could you be this oblivious?! The uncut gem may be just

a girl, but she possesses our national treasure. Did you not stop to consider that at all?! How the hell did you manage to get this stupid? I should have just had you killed before you could leave home."

Margus ground his teeth at his father's harsh words, but the lecture continued before he had a chance to speak.

"The uncut gem and her Eye of Appraisal—under its guidance, even a random peasant could be taught to gain skills in just a few days. That power has traditionally been used within the royal order of chivalry or other facets of the kingdom's military forces. But now it's been used on this single man, a simple country bumpkin no less...This is a national disgrace. If you were dumb enough to accept the challenge, you had to put a stop to the whole thing then and there!"

Hearing those words, Margus finally understood. He knew why he had lost. Or he thought he did, at least—his mind was so warped that he fixated on his mistaken idea. "So that's why he got so strong so fast."

"As your disgrace brings shame upon the entire house, it cannot be allowed to stand. You must find a way to clear your name, or else..."

"You can't be serious!"

"You brought this all upon yourself, you fool!"

Margus was the fourth son of a noble house. His whole life had been one long exercise in schooling himself to patience. He'd received none of his family's lands to manage. He'd been unlucky literally from birth.

At least, that's how he himself saw it; the truth was rather different. As the baby of the family, he had been cherished and spoiled rotten, and was really the only member of the household who had any real freedom. And yet Margus had done nothing but complain about his lot, completely oblivious to the privilege he'd been given. That obliviousness was all the more reason that Margus had failed to grasp the reality of his current situation. Surely someone would come to his rescue, he thought. Surely if he returned home, his powerful father would find some way to punish Remille. He had been so certain.

"What do I do now...?" It wasn't until he saw the pitying looks from his

brothers and the household staff, and endured his father's blows, and finally had it spelled out for him in so many words, that the reality dawned on him. He was in *serious* trouble.

"What do you do? The treasure of our kingdom cannot be allowed to spend all her time with some nobody from who-knows-where, can she?" Lord Argus smirked meaningfully.

Margus felt a wave of relief at his father's expression. That smirk suggested that there was a way to fix things and earn his forgiveness.

"Get her back. Return the kingdom's jewel to its proper place."

"Get her back...how?"

"It won't be easy. And there are things that must be done to prepare."

"Like what?"

"Just getting her back won't confer any special advantage on our house. First I must insinuate myself in the royal capital. Then when you bring the princess back, *you* will be the one benefitting from her powers."

"So you're saying...?"

"You stay here for the time being, to recover and continue training. And get your head screwed on straight while you're at it."

"Yessir," Margus agreed enthusiastically. He'd been forgiven and given something to do on his family's lands. That seemed like a good deal to him. He had no idea that not only was he far from the path of redemption, but the path he now faced was only going to get worse and worse.

And the Earl of Argus himself, so sure that as long as he took care of things himself it would all go smoothly, had no idea that he was making exactly the same mistake as his son.

Jack of All Trades

We were taking a bit of a break from assaulting the dungeon. After we got through the ninth floor, normal enemies had stopped spawning—there was just a clear path to the floor boss's chamber. Resting a bit before facing the boss gave us some time to talk, so I was continuing to tell Ciel about the war that Margus's family was going to start.

"The Earl of Argus—that is, Margus's father—is extremely ambitious. He was always looking for any chance to establish himself in the royal capital."

"Yeah, we talked about that some among the royal family, for better or worse."

"Makes sense. I heard he was always trying to make gifts to royal cabinet ministers and such."

"A pretty foolish way to try to get ahead."

Exactly. Ciel was right; the Earl of Argus was a fool. Indiscriminately handing out money might make you some friends, but it would also make you plenty of unnecessary enemies.

"So who did he challenge?"

"The Earl of Gitelle. In the capital, he's, ummm..."

"He's in the faction of the Minister of the Judiciary, Rostel."

"Right, right." Ciel knew much more than me about all of that stuff.

"I can pretty much guess the rest of what happens without you telling me," she said. With only a few moments to ponder what I'd told her, Ciel laid out her theory. "Argus offered aid to an opposing faction that was in financial trouble, and Gitelle retaliated somehow."

"Pretty much. We were never totally clear on all the details. But in the end it was Lord Argus's side that actually invaded. He raised an army and marched on Lord Gitelle's lands."

"So, Margus fought for his father?"

“Ha, no. Margus sensed a chance to advance his own career, and immediately betrayed his father.”

“Ah, of course.”

The results were instantaneous. Margus had gained the trust of the Earl of Gitelle, a key player in the Minister of the Judiciary’s faction—quite possibly the most powerful group within the royal capital. He was suddenly on the express route to success.

“But this time will go differently,” Ciel said.

“Yeah, this time he’s already returned to his own family lands. There’s no pretext for him to attach himself to Lord Gitelle. If he tried, he’d surely be turned away.” To approach Lord Gitelle at this point in time would be basically just announcing “Hi, I’m here to spy on you!”

“Seems like his path to success has been conveniently blocked.”

“I guess so... It’s just...”

“In any case, it’s likely that they will raise an army, and this time there’s someone among the enemy who knows their every move in advance.”

“Yeah.” I had no idea how things would play out in this loop.

“This is great!” Ciel grinned. “Let’s crush them into oblivion.”

Her smile was brighter than I’d ever seen it before. “Fight against Margus, huh...?”

“You’ve already beaten him once, right? Should be no problem.”

“Yeah, but...” To be honest, I felt uneasy. Having gone through seven loops watching Margus rise up to hero candidacy, it was hard to shake my deep belief in his strength.

“It’ll be okay,” Ciel said. “It will take years before he gets that tough, and meanwhile I will make *you* stronger and stronger.”

“I’m counting on it.”

Ciel stood up. “All righty, time to clear this level and get out of here for now.”

The tenth floor of the dungeon—unexplored territory. The floor was empty

except for the boss chamber, which just made the boss seem all the more intimidating. There was no gatekeeper miniboss, no gimmick or puzzle. Just a straight up contest of strength.

"Do you know what we're about to face?" I asked.

"Duh. Didn't I say it would be yummy?" Ciel smirked mysteriously. "Remember those magic goblins? You could say this is like...an enhanced version of those."

"What do you mean enhanced?" Magic goblins, as the name suggests, are goblins that wield magic. They're easily distinguished from normal goblins by the staves they carry or cloaks they wear. Generally, each one could only use one variety of magic, and you could often tell which variety by their color. *What would an enhanced version of that be...?*

"Magic chiefs. Imagine a goblin, but smaller and cleverer and wearing a pointy hat and a cloak, and you've got the basic idea."

"That's what a magic chief is?"

"Yeah. They still each have one attribute, but their magic is more diverse than goblins. They're also much more agile."

"Gotcha."

"So? Don't you agree it'll be yummy?" Ciel's lips quirked into a triumphant smile. "With Skill Eater and Ability Absorption, you two will obtain every magical attribute."

"You're kidding." *Fire. Water. Wind. Earth. Light. Darkness.* Those were the six attributes of magical affinity. A typical sorcerer would master one, maybe two if they're high-level. There were a few sorcerers who were able to use three varieties, and they were acknowledged as masters and brought into service for the crown. Beyond that, it was extremely difficult to add more attributes, as they interfere with each other. People who break that barrier are known as...well, sages.

"Only a handful of people throughout history have achieved aptitude in all six magical attributes. Even among sages, it's a high-level ability."

“It’s typically impossible to acquire conflicting attributes, isn’t it?”

“You’re acquiring them in a roundabout way, so that’s not a problem. And the way magic works, once you learn the trick of it, you can use it freely. If you can raise your proficiency enough before the war to master combining three different attributes, you’ll be able to scatter the enemy forces just by showing that off.”

“Jeez, yeah, I’d think any mercenary would run away pretty fast in the face of a three-attribute combined attack.”

“Exactly. Well, first thing’s first. We’ll start by just getting you to the point where you can use all of the attributes. And that we can do right here,” she declared. “We’ve done pretty well for ourselves in just ten floors, huh?”

“Yeah... Possibly too well.”

“Ha ha. No such thing!”

Advanced swordsmanship. Every magical attribute. Advanced alchemy. And, of course, taming a behemoth. That litany of Ciel’s—master swordsman, sage, dragon knight—suddenly those classes, that had seemed so exalted as to be mythological, were starting to feel like real possibilities.

“Okey doke, we can’t do anything until you have the aptitude for each attribute, and we haven’t even gotten that yet. Time to fight! Charge!”

“Raaah!”

“Meeeeep!”

At Ciel’s command, we burst through the boss’s door, screaming battle cries.

“Meep!”

“Ack, no lead-in?!” The moment we entered the room, we were attacked by something quick and nimble. In a panic, I instinctively fought back and quickly realized that they didn’t have much defense other than their speed. At the same moment, Ciel’s warning shout reached my ears.

“Remille! You can’t be the one to defeat them!”

“I know!” Without unsheathing my sword, I managed to knock my opponent

away. Meanwhile, Catra was chomping on two magic chiefs. The Skill Eater ability was more effective when consuming the corpse of an enemy Catra felled herself. So in a case like this, where we cared a lot about obtaining the enemy's skills, it was important for Catra to do most of the fighting.

"Seems like she just got one with a light attribute and another with dark." When Catra used the Skill Eater ability, I could feel its effects directly via Ability Absorption.

"Nice, perfect hit!"

"Won't we get them all eventually?" I hadn't thought that the order mattered.

"Those are the two I was most hoping for in this situation. The gloominess of this floor favors the enemy, but light magic can illuminate it. And dark magic specializes in debuff spells, which is the best way to help you support Catra without actually defeating them yourself."

"That makes sense. Hey, wait, I don't know how to actually use this magic!" What I had gained just now was just the *potential* to use the attribute.

"Focus your thoughts! In your case, once you have the potential you should be able to do most of what that attribute is capable of just by thinking of it."

While trying to avoid the hit and run attacks of the unseen magic chiefs, I did as Ciel commanded and focused my thoughts into a single wish.

"*Let there be light!*"

Instantly, the gloomy chamber was flooded with light.

"Wow, so that's light magic..."

"Light magic 101, but yeah. Nicely done! Okay, four to go!"

"*Slow!*" I yelled.

"Nice! A dark magic debuff! You're doing great!"

It wasn't exactly a pleasant memory, but it was still easier to call to mind spells that I'd already experienced. This was the type of magic that Rui was using when I was killed in the seventh loop. The magic she used to kill me.

Well, that was then. “Catra!” I called. “Finish them!”

“Meep!” At my command, Catra dashed to and fro around the arena. The remaining magic chiefs quickly scattered before her.

“Is that...it?”

“Unless they’ve got a final trick up their sleeve... Ah, looks like that is indeed it.”

A second door appeared in a wall of the chamber, which had previously only had one entrance. The floor boss had been defeated.

“Congrats. You have cleared the tenth floor.” Ciel smiled at me.

As you’d expect from a floor boss, that fight had given us more trouble than we’d encountered on the path up here. On previous floors, Catra had defeated whatever we encountered almost instantly on her own, and all Ciel and I had to do was stroll along in her wake. So despite the fact that we’d just had our first real battle in a while, Ciel continued without a pause.

“Okay! I’m gonna teach you some basic spells of each attribute, so pay attention and etch these into your memory. You too, Catra.”

“Meep!” Despite just having finished a battle, Catra seemed raring to go. Honestly, I was also pretty eager to learn some new magic.

“What kinds of sorcery did you use in the past?”

“Basically, I was best at fire magic. When I had to, I could manage a bit of light magic for healing spells.”

“You’re not really the sorcerer type, right?”

That was true. I had a feeling that my attempts at sorcery were the times I was least useful. After all, our party already had Rui, a sorceress powerful enough to be a possible sage candidate. She could use fire magic, dark magic, and the opposing earth and wind attributes—all in all, she could use four different types. If things continued going well for her, that wasn’t that far off from mastering all six.

“Well, that’s fine. You’ve both gained the aptitude for any kind of magic now. With that, all you need to do for basic spells is wish for something. Did you get

the hang of that?”

“More or less.”

“The next step is just to keep using them over and over. In your case, all of your XP means that your magical proficiency will level up naturally. As for Catra, I think she’ll continue getting stronger without us doing anything special.”

Behemoths are really something. When I looked over at her, Catra cheerfully chirped at me. And thus began our magical training.

“Let’s start with the fire attribute. Make a fireball or something; I don’t care exactly what, just as long as you produce fire.”

“Meep!”

“Like this?” As instructed, I formed a clear mental image of what I desired, and sent it out through the magic. I was familiar with fire magic from previous lives, but this was a somewhat different way of approaching it.

Catra, meanwhile, was emitting dense balls of flame strong enough to singe the dungeon wall.

“Excellent. Now the same idea, but with water.”

“Meeeep!”

“*Water Ball*.”

“Now wind.”

“*Air Cutter.*”

We continued on like that for a while, training in each magical attribute. After a time, I realized something. “Wait. Ciel, how do you know all of these examples?”

“These are elementary level.”

“Yeah, but...” *Couldn’t Ciel also reach sage class herself?*

“Oi. Remille. Did you think I was nothing but a cute girl for you to amuse yourself with?”

“No no no, not at all!” I’d never thought that, truly.

“I have no intention of being a burden you have to constantly worry about. When I said I’d leave the combat to you, that was just a technique to force the two of you to fight.”

“You didn’t have to do that!”

“Yes, I did. If you knew I could fight for myself, you would have let down your guard. You’re the sort who only goes all out when he’s protecting someone else.”

Now that she said it, that was probably true. It was a strange feeling to have her point out things about me that I hadn’t even realized myself.

“All right, since we defeated the floor boss, the way out should be clear.” As she spoke, Ciel reached for the door that had appeared.

Dungeons often had such doors, enchanted to appear and disappear in a fixed pattern. In this case, it was a door that appeared only when the floor boss was defeated. But still... “What if it’s a trap?”

“Exactly who do you think I am?” Ciel retorted, her Eye of Appraisal flashing turquoise.

Oh yeah, good point. Our party never had to worry about things like poison or traps or whatever. It was a standard pattern for beginner adventurers: let your guard down after defeating the boss, only to fall right into a phase trap or some such thing. But, of course, the door that Ciel opened led us right outside.

Battle Preparations

“Oh goodness me, for Her Highness herself to grace us with her royal presence...”

After our dungeon quest, I had been shepherded directly to a noble’s estate.

“And might this young man be the esteemed hero I’ve heard rumors of? If it’s not too forward to refer to you so...”

The man who spoke these words as he glanced at me was none other than the lord of the estate, the Earl of Gitelle. He was short and stocky, not a build seen often among adventurers. The finery he wore marked him at first sight as someone of importance. Since I came from humbler origins than Margus and the others did, in past lives they were usually the ones who handled this sort of negotiation, while I tended our equipment. So while I had technically seen him before, this was the first time I was officially meeting the earl.

“I wouldn’t call myself a hero just yet. My lord.”

“Ha ha! But I have already heard much about your formidable strength.” He laughed affably. Everything about him gave the impression of an extremely good-natured person.

“He is early yet in his training. And that brings us right to our main business, Lord Gitelle.”

“Yes, indeed. There have been some suspicious activities involving your adversary Lord Argus, from what I hear.” Lord Gitelle spoke with the air of someone announcing shocking information he had gathered, but Ciel cut in impatiently.

“Yes. He’s going to start a war.”

“A w-war? How do you...” He trailed off, at a loss for words after Ciel’s proclamation. He could only stare at her, dumbstruck. After a few moments he regained his composure. “Ah, is that an eventuality your Eye has foreseen?” he asked.

“No. But I am certain of it.”

“I see. I can’t say I’m completely surprised, to be honest,” the earl said with an unconcerned smile.

Nobles really are made of different stuff than adventurers, huh? I thought to myself. Like...how to put it? They were imperturbable, somehow.

“Well, in that case we must make preparations. Are you able to offer any more specific guidance, Your Highness?”

“That is all the guidance I can give you. But I will offer military aid.”

“Aha. Then our side will have governmental support, eh? To what extent are you proposing? When it comes to the royal army, even a few hundred troops makes a marked difference, of course...”

“One man and one beast.”

“E-Excuse me?” Lord Gitelle was once again dumbfounded. “Do you mean—you can’t be saying...” Slowly, his gaze turned toward me. Our eyes met.

“Surely it will give you heart to have a hero on your side, won’t it?” Ciel said.

“You were just saying it was early yet in his training...”

“You have my assurance he is plenty strong already. He will be more help to you than if I sent a thousand troops.”

“That’s quite a claim.” The puzzlement in his eyes had given way to eagerness.

“Wait a sec,” I said, “I can’t replace a thousand troops!”

“You can,” Ciel replied. “Okay, we’ve said what we came here to say. We’ll be back once things are in motion. Ah, right—I said one man and one beast, but if all goes well, you can expect further reinforcements as well.”

“What sort of reinforcements?”

“Our hero here is a tamer. Well, we’ll see what happens.” With that, having completed our mission here, Ciel made as if to depart.

Lord Gitelle, still apparently confused as he tried to process all of this, could only call out, “Where are you two headed from here?”

That was exactly what I was wondering as well.

With the eyes of two men and one beast upon her, Ciel replied, “We’ll return to the capital for now, and begin preparations.”

That should give us a chance to rest for a bit, I thought. Ah, to think I was ever that naive...

❖

It was a whirlwind trip back to the royal capital, and before I knew it, I found myself back in the throne room.

“Ah, Ciel, you’re back,” said the king.

“I am. I need to borrow some troops from the Royal Order of Chivalry.” As though that completely settled things, Ciel swiftly left the room.

“Hm? Hey now, wait a moment, you need what now...? Did I hear that right...?” With a sigh, the king turned his gaze to where I still stood, left behind. “Ah, well. I apologize, but I’ll leave you to deal with her.”

That’s a bit much to ask... Bowing my head to His (rather befuddled) Majesty, I had no choice but to follow after Ciel.

❖

“Princess Ciel, Your Highness. Whatever could bring you here...?”

“Ah, this is perfect. Sirius, I would like you to serve as a training partner for him.”

“Huh?”

Ciel had brought me to the training grounds, and wasted no time in getting down to business. And the person she had accosted was, well...

“But Your Highness, I still have the Royal Order of Chivalry to oversee. It’s not a simple matter to find the time to—”

From the finery of his uniform, there was no doubt that he was the highest-ranking person here.

“You were just wounded on your left side, weren’t you?” Ciel cut in, undeterred. “It’s throwing off your whole balance. At your age, you can’t afford

to ignore an injury like that, or your whole body will go kaput."

"...Wow. Harsh."

"And anyway, they're just practicing. You don't have to be the one to oversee that yourself. Hey, you there! What's your name?"

"Yes, ma'am, I am Serram, if it please Your Royal Highness, ma'am."

"Serram, you're familiar with how the rest of the training exercises go, I assume?"

"Yes, ma'am, after this the next—"

"You don't need to give me the details. Since you're familiar with them, you'll take over leading training now."

"M-Me...?"

"Okey doke. Let's go, Sirius."

And just like that, Sirius was caught up in Ciel's web. But he wasn't the only one too shocked by Ciel's brazenness to process what was happening.

"Oi, what are you doing? You're coming too!"

"Oh! Right, right," I replied. *Forgive me, Your Majesty. It just isn't in my power to stand in her way...*

❖

"All righty. The reason I picked you for this task is simple. You're the strongest of the tools available for my use."

"Your words do me great honor, Your Highness," Sirius said.

This so-called "strongest tool" of Ciel's was indeed the commander of the Royal Order of Chivalry. And Ciel had unceremoniously plucked him from his duties and now called him a tool. *She really is a force of nature...*

"Now, down to business," Ciel went on. "We will now begin the hero's confidence-building training."

"I see," said Sirius. "By confidence-building, you mean that I will help him to practice, and offer praise of his strong points—"

“No,” Ciel interrupted. The next words out of her mouth shocked both of us. “I mean that you will fight him using your full strength, and when he wins, he’ll build more self-confidence.”

“...Pardon?”

Well, I’m going to die.

“Full strength? Do you truly mean that?” Sirius asked.

“Yup. Ah, hold on. Move exactly how I tell you.”

“Uh... Yes, ma’am.” Ciel issued a stream of instructions as Sirius took a few practice swings.

I don’t like where this is going...

“All done! Your poor balance has been repaired, see?”

“Huh? Oh! I feel so limber! I can’t remember the last time I could move this easily...”

“Hey, wait! Why are you helping him get even stronger?!”

Ciel completely ignored my outburst. “Sirius,” she asked, “how would you rate your current strength?”

“Rate it? Let’s see, the last time I felt like this would be...probably the northern campaign where I took down a dragon.”

“Perfect.”

“No, wait, that is not perfect!” Did she really expect me to take on an opponent who could bring down a dragon?!

“It seems like exactly the right level to me. Remille, are you all prepared?”

“No! I’m not at all prepared! But...that makes no difference to you, does it?” I conceded in the face of Ciel’s glare. Nothing I could say would deter her. *Well, Catra gained a lot of power going through the dungeon. As her tamer, I should at least be able to draw on her abilities. That’s something.*

“Meep?”

But Ciel quickly dashed my hopes. “Oh, right, I meant to say—you’ll be on

your own in this battle. Catra's gonna sit this one out."

"You can't be serious." *There really is no future for me no matter what I do, is there...?*

Ignoring my angst, Ciel forged ahead explaining the rules of this mock battle. "Your swords will be blunted. All magic is fair game. As much as possible, keep it below the neck—don't aim right at the head. In the event of a fatal wound, we will stop the battle and dispatch a medical squad immediately. This is a serious mock battle."

Sirius laughed as he prepared his sword. "As long as we don't get our heads chopped off or skulls smashed in, the medical squad should be able to fix us right up."

"They should definitely be able to handle a severed limb or two."

There was nothing I could do to escape this ridiculous situation; all I could do was resolve to try as hard as I could not to get injured.

"Meeeep?"

"Thanks, Catra. You're the only one who actually cares about me."

"Meep!"

As I stroked Catra and waited for Sirius to finish his preparations, Ciel spoke again. "Let's see, what else... Ah, right, we should probably have some healing tonics prepared just in case."

"As you say, Your Highness. There is supposed to be medicine of the highest quality stored in the treasure house in case of emergencies, isn't there? Of course, I don't anticipate being that severely injured by your young hero, but you can never be too safe."

"Oh, that won't be necessary. Remille! Make five potions exactly how I tell you."

"Sure, no problem."

I could all but see the question mark floating over Sirius's head as he tried to follow the zigs and zags of Ciel's thoughts, but I was used to her sudden commands, and quickly readied myself to follow her instructions.

“First take this, and then... In the dungeon, did any of the monsters we defeated have more than four limbs?”

“There was that big bug thing.”

“Yeah, that’ll do.”

“What in the world are you making...?”

“Meep?” Catra, as though echoing Sirius’s question, also peered down at us with a quizzical expression as we worked.

“Right now we’re making three different intermediate-level potions. Next we’ll try two advanced potions that Remille has never made before. If we can do that, then we’ll be able to make high-grade potions without having to raid the treasure house.”

“Wh-What?! Even intermediate potions require abilities on the level of the royal alchemist class! And only a handful of alchemists in a whole generation can create advanced potions...to say nothing of those of the highest grade! Truly, only in legends...”

“Exactly. That is precisely what I intend to achieve.”

“Incredible. Then you are saying he is already at the level of a legendary alchemist...?”

“And that’s not all. That kitten of his is a behemoth.”

“What?!”

“He can use all of the magical attributes.”

“Th-That’s...”

“But when it comes to swordsmanship, he’s stuck at advanced. That’s where you come in.”

“I...I am...honored.”

Well, when she lays it all out like that, I guess I really do sound damn impressive, don’t I? Still, I kind of wished she hadn’t told him all of that. Sirius hadn’t seemed like he’d really been taking the fight seriously before, but now he radiated competitive spirit. He was really going to give it his all.

Oblivious to my misgivings as always, Ciel continued her instructions. “Is that one done? Next is an advanced potion...”

“Yeah, that’s all done. Huh? Did I do something wrong?” At my reply, Ciel had fixed me with a sharp glare. My skill had leveled up right after making the intermediate potion, so this one had gone quickly...

“All done?” Ciel repeated. “Just like that, before I’d even finished explaining the ingredients?”

“Oh, yeah, as soon as I obtained the skill, the ingredients and procedure just sort of flowed into me. I could tell what they’re supposed to make, so I made it.”

For some reason Ciel let out a sigh at my explanation.

“Ah, I am starting to understand your aim in attaching yourself to this man, Your Highness,” Sirius said.

“Good, I’m glad. He’s been like this from the start.”

Hey! The two of them suddenly seemed to be conspiring together.

“Yes, I see. He possesses such fearsome power, yet seems completely oblivious...”

“Which is why I brought you here to help instill more self-confidence in him.”

“Ha. So I will lose, then?”

“Hmm, I can’t say for sure. But I’d like you to do your best.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I had thought Sirius radiated competitive spirit before, but that was nothing compared to the fierce energy that burned in him now. *What is up with this guy...?*

“Okay then,” Ciel said to me. “How’s the final high-grade potion coming? If you’re not feeling confident, take extra care making this one. You might need it to save your life.”

“Yeah, I know.” The two advanced potions and a few other raw ingredients were arranged before me. Typically you would have to gather extremely rare

ingredients to make this, but one of the perks of alchemy is that you can transmute potions into other top-grade materials.

“Finished.”

As I showed it to Ciel, her Eye of Appraisal glittered. “Yup, that’s high-grade. Excellent. Let’s do this.”

“Extraordinary, truly extraordinary.” Commander Sirius beamed in astonishment.

This was it. I was about to fight someone strong enough to take down a dragon. “Take it easy on me...”

“Same to you.”

“Ready? And...” Ciel winked at me and the commander. “Begin!”

The instant she spoke, Sirius bore down on me mercilessly with his blade.

—Clang!

“Gah... Damn, you’re...strong...” Sure enough, the leader of the Royal Order of Chivalry was extremely powerful with the blade. I honestly had no idea how I was driving back his blows.

“What an odd feeling,” Sirius said as we locked swords. “Despite your youth, it feels as though I’m dueling a veteran soldier.”

“Really?”

It was Ciel who responded. “That makes sense. If we’re measuring just in XP, he’s way ahead of you.”

“H-How can that be?! Well then, I must redouble my efforts!”

“Guh...” He skillfully extricated himself from our locked stance and forced me to jump back.

Ciel spoke the truth. However, the art of the sword had never been my forte. When it came to swordsmanship, I wasn’t close to Sirius’s level.

“In that case, it stands to reason that he would become stronger just by the act of fighting... I assume that is your aim?”

“That’s right. But that’s not all. Remille! You can use magic, can’t you? So use it!”

“Huh? That’s allowed?”

“Weren’t you listening?! I said all magic was fair game. What, did you think you could beat a commander with your sword alone?!”

“...Uh, good point.” I had been more focused on the swordsmanship than on actually winning the fight. And yet somehow, even fighting with just my sword, I had been holding my own. *So if I also use magic...* “That’s how I can close the gap!”

“...?!”

Right as he charges at me, and...

“Shadow!”

“Wh-?! Dark magic?!”

“I told you he could use every attribute, didn’t I?”

Shadow was a spell to turn yourself into, well, a shadow. At higher levels it could also let you manipulate your enemy’s shadow, but for now it was basically just a way to make myself disappear. In this case, though, that was all I needed to make an opening.

—Clank!

“Blocked?!” *That should have been right in his blind spot!*

“I don’t need to see you to sense you.”

Damn him. Well then...

“Flash!”

“Ung...! But this is no different—”

“*Slow!*”

“Gah, such an irritating arsenal of spells...”

It turned out dark magic was surprisingly effective in combat. And what’s more...

“Are you getting it now?” Ciel asked.

“Yeah. The sword and magic are stronger together.” At first I’d just been thinking of *Slow* as a way to stall for time—but when combined with a blade, suddenly it was a death blow. Whereas before I’d only just been able to keep up, now that my opponent’s movements were slowed down I could cut through his defenses easily.

“Ugh... I concede. You have won.”

“I...won.” My sword touched the exposed skin of his neck. The contest was decided. *Weakening magic really is handy in close combat, huh?*

“A magic swordsman...who uses dark magic. I never imagined such a thing. Your young hero really is incredible,” Sirius said admiringly to Ciel.

“Dark magic is extremely delicate, so it’s not feasible to use while also fighting in close quarters. Well, normally, anyway.”

“That is so. And what’s more, his swordsmanship is formidable as well. He fights with the intensity of one whose sword has seen many serious battles. And it was terrifying to feel his power growing steadily throughout the fight. Next time, I don’t believe I would be a match for him.”

“No, no, that’s not...” I stammered. But I could not deny the truth of at least part of what Sirius had said. I had felt my own power growing steadily as we fought.

“Okay! So, did you gain some self-confidence?”

“Uh...”

“You just beat the best that the protectors of the realm, the Royal Order of Chivalry, have to offer. At this point, there are only a few people capable of beating you one-on-one on the whole continent.”

...*Oh.* The reality of who I’d been facing hadn’t really set in. But I supposed that made sense.

“Well, whether you believe that or not, it’s about time you experienced a real war.”

“Oh?” said Sirius. “You would expose an asset as powerful as him?”

“Not to the rest of the world. Just to quell the upcoming civil war.”

“Upcoming? Has some faction been making suspicious movements...?”

“It’s nothing that the Royal Order of Chivalry need concern itself with.”

“If... If you say so, Your Highness.” Sirius refrained from pressing her further.

“Hmm... From the look in your eyes, I don’t think your confidence is sufficiently bolstered,” Ciel said to me. “Perhaps it would be easier to understand in the context of adventurers?”

“What do you mean?”

“All you’re lacking right now is confidence in yourself. Let’s go to the Guild. We will officially register our party.” And with our next destination abruptly decided, Ciel departed in high spirits.

It was all I could do in my bafflement to bow my head quickly to Sirius before chasing after her.

I didn’t learn this until much later, but apparently Serram, the knight who had been left in charge of training in place of the commander, was awarded a substantial promotion in recognition of outstanding talent.

Battle Preparations (Belated)

“What?! Gitelle has started drafting an army?!” The Earl of Argus, Margus’s father, froze in shock at his spy’s report. “What the devil for...?”

“Yessir, our intelligence suggests that he is acting on orders from Lord Rostel.”

“Rostel?! So the minister of the judiciary himself is involved?”

“Yessir. Possibly Lord Rostel saw this as an opportunity to strike a financial blow against a barony aligned with Lord Guilm’s rival faction.”

“Guilm’s faction? Marquess Guilm, eh? A baron... Wait, do you mean Julius?!” The truth finally dawned on Argus—albeit belatedly compared to Remille’s party, who had the advantage of knowing events of previous loops. Argus clenched his jaw. He had bankrolled Baron Julius for no specific reason other than his high position within the capital.

“Damn it. Cancel our financial assistance of House Julius immediately! And inform Minister Rostel of that intention as well.”

“We have already taken care of that, m’lord, but it appears to have been too late.”

“Blast it all!” By this point, the alliance with Baron Julius had already been well established, but it had not yet led to fruitful connections with the powerful Marquess Guilm. Without the backing of Guilm’s so-called militant faction, Julius had no riches or troops to speak of. And now that Lord Gitelle was making his move, there was no chance that Lord Guilm and his allies would come to Argus’s aid when the financial support he’d been able to offer them thus far was so paltry. They would be too mindful of the powerful Ministry of the Judiciary looming behind Gitelle.

“So then we have no choice but to try to strike first.” Given that his enemy had already begun drafting an army, some may consider Argus’s decision...a bit rash.

“You plan to be the aggressor?! M’lord?”

“I do. Alert my sons! In a dispute between noble houses, the winner’s word is law. Conversely, it follows that the defeat of his followers could be a blow to the Judiciary Minister’s authority. I intend to crush Lord Gitelle with all possible haste and establish peaceful relations.”

The servants scattered to obey their lord’s command and summon his sons. The same thought echoed through all of their minds: *I’ve got to get out of here before the fighting starts...!*

The commoners living in the villages of House Argus’s lands didn’t think especially highly of their lord. They neither loved nor hated him. Those who were able to travel outside their home village came to realize that they were taxed relatively harshly for very little benefit, but never quite so harshly that they feared for their survival. It was a delicate line of exploitation that Lord Argus walked. His lands were rich in ore, but all of the profits from that trade went to line the lord’s pockets, not to benefit the common citizens. Despite living in what should have been an extremely affluent territory, they were forced to scrape by, leading completely unremarkable lives.

The farmers might never realize their situation, but the servants who worked in the manor house got wind of things. Accordingly, none of those servants possessed even one iota of anything that could be called “loyalty” to Argus.

“This may be war, but it’s a civil war. There are limits to how far each side can go...” In order to limit the needless loss of soldiers’ lives, in some ways a civil war must be played more like a kind of game than like a war against another kingdom. Musing on that and thinking about the game pieces under his control, Argus smiled. “For once that no-good layabout son of mine can be put to good use.”

Argus did at least place some value on Margus’s swordsmanship skills. In times of war, especially a civil war, having access to a military asset with top-notch potential made a huge difference. As he chuckled to himself, Argus had no way of knowing that Lord Gitelle had his own ace up his sleeve—in the form of the very opponent who had just given Margus the beating of his life.

Adventurers

“Adventurers? Really?”

“This will be a more intuitive frame of reference for you. It’ll be good.”

“I...guess.”

“This is the final ingredient to get us ready for this civil war. We need to get you more self-confidence.”

We had arrived at the royal capital’s adventurers’ guild. This was the national headquarters—the building was huge compared to the rural guild I was used to, not to mention the sheer number of people and number of commissions being processed.

“Welcome to the—oh! Are... Are you really...?!” The young receptionist gasped as she looked at Ciel. “I-I’ll summon the guildmaster right away, Your Highness...”

“There’s no need for that,” Ciel told her. “I’m just here for registration.”

Ciel’s words caused an immediate stir among the gathered adventurers.

“Yo, did you hear that? That’s Princess Ciel!”

“I heard that she’s got sage-level magic abilities, even apart from her Appraisal skill.”

“Surprised that guy she’s with is still alive. I’dda thought someone would’ve taken care of him already.”

“I know, right? A shame for the princess to be stuck with him, don’tcha think?”

“You know it. Think we should just take care of him here and now?”

Well, that’s not great. I couldn’t decide if this Interception skill was a blessing or if it just gave me extra things to worry about. In any case, this was bad.

“Begging your pardon, Your Highness,” the receptionist continued. “You wish to register...the two of you?”

“That’s right. I am also hoping you’ll make a bit of an exception for us. Seeing as how we don’t have letters of referral, I would like for us to be tested right here.”

“T-Tested? There’s no need for such an exception, Your Highness; in your case I am sure that a suitable letter of referral can be prepared without delay...”

“And what would be the point of that?” Ciel said.

An exception... Normally when you register with the guild, you’d start from F rank and gradually work your way up by completing official quests. The exception to that is that people who have demonstrated specific ability levels are given permission to begin from the corresponding rank. One common example is if you attend Adventurer Prep School and earn high enough marks, you could be allowed to begin in E rank. Or, if you were to get a referral letter from royalty like Ciel or upper nobility, you could be placed in a higher rank. There were a few other ways to do it as well, but... “Ciel, when you say be tested here, do you mean—?”

“I mean just what I said. I’m hoping to obtain a referral from a practical exam.”

That comment raised another commotion among the guild adventurers.

“You hear that? A practical exam means we could go up against them!”

“Yeah. I’d like to tear that weak little princess’s pet a new one...”

“Plus it’s a chance to show Princess Ciel what we can do!”

“It’s the perfect opportunity!”

They were getting way too excited about this. As the name implies, the practical test involved being directly tested on your skill level and being assigned your starting rank based on the results. There were various methods, but the standard way to do it was to battle against adventurers who were on the premises, and if you could beat them, you’d attain their rank. It was an all-out, anything goes sort of fight.

Of course, since amateurs had basically no chance against well-trained adventurers, it was hardly ever actually done. And since ultimately participation

was at the discretion of the professional adventurers, there were also cases where the test couldn't be given because there weren't any adventurers who felt like making time in their schedules to test new recruits.

This time, however, the waters were swarming with sharks hooked by the bait Ciel dangled before them.

"Isn't this perfect?"

"Ummm, I... I guess..." I faltered in the face of Ciel's radiant smile.

"If you desire a practical exam, Your Highness, then of course... I will alert the adventurers on the premises. Is there a particular rank you would like to aim for?" the guild employee asked.

Typically the highest anyone would ever go for would be C rank, but of course...

"Let's go with B," Ciel said. "Since it seems none of the adventurers here have reached A rank."

"B?! But that's... Er, we can arrange for you to compete against B rank adventurers, if that's really..."

"Oh, I was right? Too bad. If there were any A rankers here, we'd be able to start right from A."

Ciel's words sent ripples of astonishment through the crowd.

"Um, well..." the staff member said, "The adventurers who are present—"

"Good idea," Ciel interrupted. "Whaddaya say, if we beat every single adventurer assembled here, would that earn A rank? That seems reasonable, right?"

"Ah, th-that's rather..."

"Yeah, you're right," Ciel said affably. "Well, that's okay. It sounds like there are some B rankers here at least. That will suffice. We'll take on as many as you can find."

A request for a B rank test didn't just mean finding one B rank adventurer to battle; it meant fighting everyone present at B rank or below who wanted to

participate. The air buzzed as though an electric current ran through it.

And Ciel, having instigated that charged excitement, casually brought it crashing down entirely on my shoulders.

“Remille here will be the one doing the fighting. He was just telling me that he could take down any number of you weaklings without breaking a sweat.”

“H-Hey!” *I said nothing of the sort!*

“Okey doke!” Ciel said. “Let’s do this!”

The gathered adventurers reacted predictably.

“He’s a dead man.”

“Hell yeah, I’ll kill ’im.”

“Not if I kill him first...”

As the bloodthirsty adventurers readied themselves for battle, I felt panic start to surge through me.

“Okay, make me proud,” Ciel said to me. “I’ve set the stage nicely for you.”

“You call this *nicely?!”*

“What’s the matter? You can use any tool at your disposal here—swordplay, magic, your behemoth, alchemy. This should be a cinch.”

I couldn’t argue against that smile of hers. All I could do was clutch tight to the potion we had prepared.

❖

“We will now commence the practical exam of adventurer applicant Remille.”

We stood on the guild’s training grounds. The guild employee who was officiating the test was a meek, anxious-looking man. He leaned over toward us and asked yet again, “Are... Are you sure you want to go through with this?”

“How many times do we need to say yes? We are sure.”

“Uh, actually, I’m not sure...” Thanks to Ciel’s machinations, I had been cast in the role of villain facing off against a horde of adventurers who could smell blood in the water. I looked over my competition once more. Three B rankers—

two swordsmen and one sorcerer—plus five C rankers and about eighteen D rankers. To be honest, compared to Margus or Rui at their peak, these guys weren't that scary. It was just...facing that much naked hostility and venomous rage really heightened the pressure.

"The royal capital sure does attract a lot of adventurers, huh..." I said to Ciel.

"If you're just stressed about the numbers, don't be. This is perfect sparring practice for you. After all, in war you'll be facing scores of enemies."

"Right... Sparring practice."

"Listen. If you can't handle this many opponents at once, we're in big trouble when it comes to actually waging war."

That's what she meant by setting the stage, I guess. She was trying to look out for me, for better or worse. As I pondered her unique brand of thoughtfulness, the time for the battle fell upon us. The official signaled to me that he was ready, and I reluctantly nodded back.

No way out now. I just have to face it and prepare for the worst.

"Ready, and...begin!"

Before the words were out of his mouth, the sorcerers had begun to stir up a whirl of magic. Just like in a real war, standard tactics said to take out the rear guard first. *Let's see, among the sorcerers, it looks like the ones to watch out for are*... "One B rank and three C rank, huh?" I muttered to myself. At my current strength, I didn't think that even a direct hit from any of the lower-level sorcerers would be a real problem for me.

No, I take that back. There seemed to be one D rank girl who was brewing up a powerful spell. *I need to watch out for her...*

"*Flame!*" Three sorcerers chorused the spell in unison. It seemed the C rankers were teaming up.

"*Water Ball!*"

"Damn, he's too quick!"

I wasn't about to let them put me on the back foot. But before I broke through to the rear guard, the swordsmen made their move.

“Hey now, you think magic is the only thing you have to worry about? Hiyah!”

“Catra!”

“Meeep!”

“What the—?! A little kitten? W-Wait a sec, how is it that strong?!”

Catra fought against the two C rank swordsmen. At this point, there was no way that a C rank adventurer could land a scratch on her. I felt a sudden swell of magic and turned my attention back to the sorcerers.

“Let’s see you handle this. *Giga Flare!*”

“No problem.” I prepared my counterattack, but in that moment two of the swordsmen saw their opening and charged me. “Gah... Stay back, you’ll get hit!” I cried.

“You will feel the wrath of my sword!”

“What the—?!”

Advanced magic often has a wide area of effect. *Giga Flare* was a difficult enough spell to cast at all, let alone control, but the sorcerer who cast it tried to curve the trajectory to avoid hitting their allies.

I had only two choices. *Take the hit from the swords, or take the hit from the magic...* The swords were scarier. However much my stats had increased, I couldn’t survive a hit from B rank warriors. I had to fight back. With my Advanced Swordsmanship skill I moved to counter their blades, but...

“Unnngh...” The spell hit me.

The swordsmen withdrew as I went down. “Did we get him...?”

“That was a direct hit from a high-level spell—no way that didn’t get him.”

It was Ciel’s voice that answered from the sidelines. “Don’t be silly. It’d take more than that to kill this one.”

Ciel’s words reached my ears through the roar of the flames as my body was engulfed by the high-level magic. “Well... It’s now or never.” My opponents, not wanting to get too close to me as I burned, were simply keeping watch. Seizing that opportunity, I pulled the high-grade potion I had prepared out of my magic

bag and gulped it down. “Huh... This is surprisingly effective.” The instant I drank it, the flames vanished completely.

“He’s... He’s a demon!”

“Wow. Rude,” I said, emerging completely unscathed from being hit with an advanced spell. The other adventurers gaped in shock.

After a moment one of them piped up. “Hey! C’mon, using items is cheating!”

The officiating guild employee, to whom that comment was addressed, only looked around anxiously. Finally Ciel stepped in. “Don’t be ridiculous; items aren’t cheating. Unless you would all like to agree to fight completely unarmed?”

“Er...”

“But fine,” she continued. “Remille! From now on, use of such items is prohibited!”

“What?!”

“If even using items that you made yourself doesn’t sit right with some of these people, it’s best just to let it go, so they have no cause for complaint.”

“Uh...” This was getting a bit extreme. *Well, whatever. I just won’t get hit next time.* “Yeah, okay.”

“That’s settled then. From now on, no more items. Sound good?”

The adventurers were at a loss for words. Several of them still seemed to be pondering Ciel’s previous statement.

“Wait, did she say...he made that...?”

“No way... That high-grade potion?! Only a great healer or alchemist would be capable...”

“But Princess Ciel said...”

The reactions of the adventurers could be divided into two camps.

“We concede. It’s frustrating to admit, but he’s too strong.”

“Yeah. If he can take on a B rank party and emerge unscathed, what chance

do we C rankers have?”

“Humph... Now what? If the C rankers leave, how can the rest of us hope to take him on?”

It happened in an instant.

As the adventurers prepared to retreat, there was a lone fighter among them who hadn’t given up. A blast of magic shot suddenly toward me. But...

“I can see you.” As soon as I shot back my counterspell, the sorcerer who had attacked quickly relented.

“Gah, fine! I give up.”

That spell had been light magic. It was rare to see light magic used offensively. In the right context, it could provide a powerful unexpected advantage. But since I was able to counter with dark magic, it wasn’t very effective against me.

“Hey, did you see that?”

“What happened? I just saw a sudden flash...”

She was only in D rank now, but she would rise quickly from here. Her face was hidden by a hood, but I could still make out her short stature.

At that moment, the B rank party started to approach—but not to fight.

“You got us, man. We wouldn’t have been prepared to counter that spell.”

“We were totally outmatched. At this point, I’d be fine with you starting right from A rank.”

“Honestly, we should have believed Princess Ciel from the beginning...”

One by one they laid down their arms.

“Well, what’s the verdict?”

“Oh, ummm, right...” stammered the guild employee. “Victory goes to Remille! He is hereby accepted as a B rank adventurer.”

It was over.

“So? Is it finally sinking in a bit?” Ciel asked.

I finally understood Ciel’s scheme. In my past lives, I’d been a member of a

party that eventually made it up to S rank, but in our first year as adventurers that was still a far-off dream. This time through, though, I was already strong enough to crush opposition that included B rankers, all by myself. “Yeah,” I answered.

In this loop, I had truly become an entirely different person than I’d ever been before.

Later on, by the way, Ciel did explain to everyone that her whole big provocation speech had been just part of her “uncut gem” playbook, and the other adventurers came to accept me.

❖

“This card will serve as verification of your status as a B rank adventurer.”

After the test, we returned to the reception area. The air of hostility that had greeted us when we first arrived had been replaced by deferential fear. I caught snippets of conversation here and there.

“Hey, uh... Did we just pick a fight with a B ranker?”

“But that’s just how the test goes, we had to fight...”

“I don’t think that guy’ll be in B rank very long. He was crazy strong.”

“Could they put us out of work? Will we be okay...?”

The higher-rank adventurers had quickly taken their leave after the test, but the D rankers and below stuck around—maybe because there were so many of them they couldn’t afford to take a break. The ones who were talking now were the same bunch who had wanted to take me out before Ciel even tried to provoke everyone. Well, hopefully after that show they would think twice about it.

There was no sign of the hooded girl who had shot the light magic blast.

While those adventurers were talking, the receptionist returned bearing a second card. “And here is your card, Your Highness.”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Huh?” Come to think of it, I was the only one who’d been tested. *So why is she...?*

“You look like you’re wondering why I’m also being granted B rank.”

“Ummm...”

“It was all explained earlier. Having a referral is sufficient.”

“A referral?” That seemed a bit too convenient, but I guess if it worked, it worked. *But to be referred straight into B rank, wouldn’t the referral have to come from someone very highly ranked?* “A referral from who?”

“Crow is an S rank adventurer.”

“Oh! Your...steward?” Crow was Ciel’s personal attendant. *Who knew he was*

such a badass? Although, to be fair, he did give off general badass vibes.

When Ciel was away from the castle she mostly looked after her own affairs, but from time to time she would reach out to Crow for help procuring some necessary supplies or making necessary arrangements. Crow would appear as though from thin air to answer her call. *So I guess she must have contacted him at some point...*

“Crow.”

“Yes, Your Highness. At your service.”

Sure enough, Crow somehow materialized at Ciel’s side as soon as she beckoned.

“We’ve managed to make B rank, but I’d like to progress further. What sort of missions are best for raising our rank most efficiently?”

“Yes, ma’am. As I believe you are aware, Your Highness, Master Remille would be the one with the most insight into such questions.”

“Hm, I guess that’s true.”

“Yes, ma’am. I fear my own knowledge on the subject is rather dated by this juncture.”

He did have a point—I was the perfect person for that task. With my knowledge of the future, I should know exactly which missions would improve our rankings most easily.

“Well, that’s fine. For now, could you find out where that hooded girl disappeared to?” Ciel said.

“Of course, Your Highness.”

Ah, so Ciel was curious about that too.

“Although you being you,” she continued, “I bet you already followed her.”

Ciel knew her steward well. “Ha ha ha,” Crow replied. “I am afraid I was unable to pursue her to her destination. Perhaps I need a larger staff...”

“No no, no need for that. If it was impossible for you, it would be impossible for anyone.”

“Your words honor me, Your Highness.”

Huh?

“You really couldn’t catch her?” Ciel seemed to share my surprise. “That alone makes it clear that she’s a foe worth keeping an eye on.”

“Do you mean...?” I asked.

“It’s possible that she’ll turn out to be connected to your date with destiny three years from now.”

“That seems like a bit of a stretch...”

“I just said it’s a possibility. It’s also quite possible that she’s just an entirely separate problem to deal with.”

“Yeah...” That seemed most likely to me. *Great, something else to add on top of my stress about the impending war.* Well, no real choice but to just leave it to Crow for now.

Ciel’s mood brightened suddenly. “Well, anyway! Remille, what yummy missions can we take on?”

As I stared at the application forms, I cast my mind back to my memories of this period of time. “Er, nothing especially impressive comes to mind...” Of course, in past lives at this point in time, we weren’t in the market for higher-ranking quests. Plus, with the scent of war on the horizon, Margus was distracted by preparing for battle. But still, it was possible that the reason I couldn’t remember any particularly appealing missions was that there just weren’t any.

“Okay, no biggie, that just means this is the perfect chance to head back to the castle.”

“The castle? Why?” I had a sudden vivid recollection of the last time I naively followed her and found myself in a duel with the commander of the Royal Order of Chivalry.

“Relax, I’m not going to rope you into another surprise battle.”

“Well, that’s good to know. So why do I get a feeling I’m being led into some sort of trap...?”

“Ooh, is m’lady perchance thinking the time has come...?”

“Astute as always, Crow. That’s exactly what I’m thinking.”

I hovered anxiously on the outside of their cryptic conversation. “The time for...what, exactly?”

“With your stats and the official designation as a B rank adventurer, you’re eligible to receive an official royal medal of distinction and ceremony of blessing,” Ciel explained.

“I... I am?”

“A medal of distinction is a great honor for the kingdom to bestow, but in your case, Master Remille, it will not just be symbolic recognition,” said Crow.

“What do you mean?”

Crow raised an eyebrow at Ciel, who nodded in confirmation. “For you to receive such a medal,” Crow explained, “would constitute official recognition of your status as a hero of the realm.”

“Really? A distinction that grand...?”

“Any medal of distinction is quite grand in its own right,” Ciel said. “You know it means that from now on you’d receive an annual payment from the royal treasury, large enough for you to live your whole life in luxury?”

I’d heard rumors to that effect. I guess they were true. *But wait a sec...* “A hero of the realm? Already? I know the role is vacant at the moment, but...”

“Yes. And two or three years from now, that scoundrel will come to be considered a hero candidate.”

Margus.

“But more importantly for the short term,” Ciel went on, “from what I’ve observed, I’ve realized that receiving such a distinction will actually make you stronger.”

“What do you mean?” I wouldn’t have thought that simply being recognized by the monarchy would have an actual effect on my stats or abilities.

“Right now your mental maturity hasn’t caught up with your actual ability

level. That was a miscalculation on my part. Someone with your experience would typically be at least twice your age, so it hadn't occurred to me as an issue."

"Ouch."

"It's not your fault. In all of your previous lives, there was a restriction on your ability to gain self-confidence."

A...restriction?

"Those three placed it on you, intentionally or not. Our goal in this loop is to lift that curse."

"Wait—curse?"

"Yeah. Think of it like a curse etched onto your soul. But it's not something you can free yourself from with just your own efforts. Only external validation and recognition can break this curse."

"And you'd leverage the official power of the monarchy just for that purpose?"

"Hehe. You know it." Ciel grinned. "A small price to pay to unlock your full powers."

When she smiled like that, all my words seemed to die on my lips. *How is it that her smile has such...destructive power?* "By the way," I finally said, "you mentioned some sort of blessing?"

"Oh, yeah. That's a little added bonus. The church is all entwined in political affairs, so it comes with the territory."

"There are some rare reports of people who undergo the ceremony who are favored by a god or a spirit of the dead," Crow added. "Some were said to display brilliance and resourcefulness that they had not previously possessed."

Oookay...

"Eh, that's mostly just church propaganda," Ciel said. "Although there are definitely cases of people being visited by ghosts."

"Really?"

“It’s extremely rare. And in any case, your natural proclivity is for taming; I haven’t seen any evidence of innate talent as a spiritual medium.”

I suppose that made sense.

Crow smiled mischievously. “When you put it that way, you could say there’s a possibility of being tamed by the gods.”

“That’s an extremely remote contingency. At any rate, even I can’t predict such things.”

So Ciel’s Eye didn’t give her insight into the whims of gods. *In other words...* “So there’s no point in stressing about it for now, I guess.”

“Exactly. Anyway, we should return to the castle. We should have a bit of free time while various formal arrangements are taken care of, so I’ll do a full check of your current stats.”

“Oh, thanks, that’d be great.” I currently had no clear sense of exactly what skills I possessed.

“Okey doke, let’s get going!”

“Shall we procure proper clothing for Master Remille before we begin the journey?” Crow asked.

“Oh yeah, good point. There’s going to be a commendation ceremony. Wait, does that mean I’ll also have to dress up?”

“Naturally, Your Highness.”

“Come to think of it, let’s just drop this whole medal thing.”

Wow, that bad, huh...? “But don’t you always wear a sort of dress?”

“This is designed for freedom of movement and uses minimal fabric. The ceremonial gown is, uh...rather stifling.”

“The princess’s dislike of dresses is quite legendary.” Crow smiled indulgently, but his tone conveyed no intention of letting the matter go.

Perhaps sensing his stubbornness, Ciel sighed in resignation. “Fine. I’ll leave my clothes to you. I’m gonna head back to the castle and start getting things ready.”

“Yes, ma’am. Leave it all to me.”

“Oh, uh, what about Catra?” I asked. “Will she be part of the ceremony?”

“Hmmm, yeah... We should get some made for her too.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Meep?”

Are they going to dress a cat up in ceremonial garb...? Well, whatever; Crow would know how to arrange it all properly.

“In that case, let us take our leave.”

“Meep!”

And so the odd party composed of me, Crow, and a little cat set out to go shopping together. Catra still hadn’t warmed up to Ciel, but she seemed to take immediately to Crow.

❖

“What have I gotten myself into...?” The clothing shop that Crow led us to was nothing like what I’d imagined. Instead of having clothing on display, it had reams and reams of fabric. In other words, this was the sort of super-ultra-high-class place that custom-made all the clothes to order.

“Meeeeep.” Catra was calm and cooperative as her measurements were taken. If anything, she seemed to be enjoying the attention.

“Cheerful little kitten, aren’t you...”

“I wish that you would allow yourself to be similarly relaxed, Master Remille,” said Crow.

“I just feel...like a fish out of water.”

“Ah, but these waters are soon to be your natural habitat, Master Remille. And looking toward the future, it will be necessary to have several suitable outfits.”

“Really, several?”

“Once you have accepted a medal of distinction, you will be expected to

attend state functions in the capacity of a knight."

"Oh..." His tone said that this should be obvious. *Yup, definitely a fish out of water.* "Um, where is the money to shop at a place like this coming from?"

"That is not something that you should concern yourself with. It is all accounted for in the budget. Compared to the value of the services you will render to the kingdom, this is pocket change."

I had no way of even estimating the cost at a place like this that was too fancy to have price tags. *Better not to know...*

Crow interrupted my anxious musings. "Master Remille, I would like to thank you."

"Huh?"

"Ever since you came into her life, the princess has been so lively and joyful."

"Oh...really? This is her being joyful?" *She always seems all huffy and annoyed when she talks to me...*

"Having had the honor of serving the princess for many years now, I can discern different underlying feelings behind superficially similar affects. I cannot remember the last time I have seen her this vibrant." Crow's whole face lit up with a fond smile as he spoke.

While we talked, the shop staff were expertly taking my measurements.

"The immense power that she wields also burdens her with a lack of personal freedom," Crow continued.

"Yeah... That makes sense." She was the treasure of the kingdom. A jewel in a crown. I could definitely see how that could become suffocating, especially for someone with Ciel's personality.

"I hope you will stay by her side and continue to look out for her."

"I hope so too." Without Ciel, I could never even have imagined this sort of life for myself. Compared to the excitement and growth I'd experienced in such a short time with her, the sum total of all seven of my previous lives seemed like nothing. And that was why I knew, no matter what...

This time I absolutely, positively, cannot fail.

My immediate concern was that fated encounter with some unspeakable horror three years from now. *If I can just get through that...* Well, to be honest, I had absolutely no idea what terrifying foes awaited me beyond, even if I could get through that fated moment.

“Master Remille, this is not a matter that you should dwell on for now.”

“Huh? What’s not?”

“I am familiar with the basic gist of your situation. What is to come is not something that can be predicted in advance.”

Yeah... That’s what scares me.

“At present, you are extremely powerful compared to others of your generation—nay, compared to the entirety of the kingdom.”

“I...am?”

“Yes. Without question. You remain fixated on the tragedy that looms three years down the road. But that is too lofty a point of comparison.”

“Too lofty?” *Come to think of it, what was it like back in the very first loop, back when I had no idea what was coming? What was I thinking then?*

“That incident that you have experienced three years in your future is not something that can be predicted or averted by human efforts. You could almost think of it as a sort of natural disaster.”

“Huh. I never thought of it that way...”

“And thus, you should not be so hard on yourself. Rethink the standards you are holding yourself to.”

“What do you mean?”

“You should not judge your worth solely in relation to a threat on the order of a calamity.”

I could only stare in surprise at Crow’s words.

“I do apologize for being so forward. It may not be my place to say such things, but I have a feeling that they may do you good to hear.”

“Thank you...” *When did my self-confidence desert me?* I had always believed it was because I was constantly chasing after Margus and the others—but that was wrong. This time through, I had faced all three of them and won.

In her own way, Ciel had arranged that chance to set myself apart as a way to restore my confidence, not to mention the dungeon that we’d fought through with Catra, and the adventurer registration exam. Ciel had devised all of these opportunities to help me boost my self-confidence. *It’s not my abilities that are lacking...* “If that’s what I’m comparing myself to, no wonder I feel like I come up short.”

“Precisely. The outcome of that battle was your own death. If that’s the only standard you’re measuring yourself against, no matter how strong you get, you won’t have a clear view of where you stand.”

He’s right. I had never beaten any of those seven demons in any of my seven lives. I had no way to put their strength in perspective. And until the encounter actually occurred, I would be living in the shadow of that fear.

But even supposing I’d managed to defeat it in the third year... “I would have kept battling against that invisible enemy my whole life...”

“Your demeanor has downright transformed, Master Remille.” Crow seemed to glow with smug satisfaction. And somehow I got the sense that Catra, too, wore a similar expression.

❖

As soon as we got back to the castle, we met up with Ciel.

“Oh, you wore the new clothes right out of the store,” she observed.

I had assumed that the custom-made clothing would take time to complete, but it was ready before we’d finished paying—like magic. The artisans of the capital city really were incredible. I had been too scared to take a peek at the final price, but it had to have been the most stuff I’d ever bought in my life. Crow had gotten his way in the end, and I’d let him make all the final decisions about what we needed.

“Yeah,” I replied. “Crow said if I was gonna be around the castle, I should look the part so people take me more seriously.”

“Humph. Well, whatever.” Ciel turned and flounced away with an air of indifference.

“What the princess means to say is that it looks good on you,” Crow explained.

“I mean to say nothing of the kind!”

I had a feeling that Crow had deliberately whispered his comment loud enough for Ciel to overhear. Of course she immediately denied it, but a moment later, her face still turned away from me, she added “...Though I guess it doesn’t look awful.”

“Really?”

“Sheesh, can we get moving already?”

She is really not good at giving compliments, huh?

“I’ve begun making the arrangements,” she went on. “You’ll be summoned within the next few days. So in the meantime, you’ll be given chambers here in the castle.”

“Gotcha. Wait, wait—what?!”

“Hmmm?”

Did she say...I’ll be living in the castle...?

“A hero is treated as a visiting general.”

“Indeed,” said Crow. “Even when hosting high-ranking adventurers, it is customary to provide palace chambers for them.”

“But that seems—” I was worried about the security implications, but before I could complete my question Ciel anticipated my concerns.

“Of course they undergo strict background checks beforehand. And of course, when it comes to security, the castle has its own monsters.” She looked meaningfully at Crow as she spoke.

“Ah, good point.” Crow was at the level of an S rank adventurer. *And I bet he’s not the only one in the castle.*

“The royal order of chivalry is our main force, but there are also individual

assets," Ciel elaborated, with uncharacteristic frankness. "Anyway, once your chambers are ready, you're free for the rest of the day. Tomorrow I'll check your current stats, and we'll think about what comes next."

"Gotcha."

"If you have need of anything, please do not hesitate to contact me," Crow added.

"Thank you."

I parted from them and entered the chambers I'd been led to.

"Wait a sec..." Crow had said to contact him if I needed anything, but...how was I supposed to do that?

Well, knowing him, if I just speak his name he'll probably materialize from somewhere.

I decided I was all set for the time being.

Foolish Pride

“Ah, I see you’re hard at work, Margus.”

“Father...”

Margus’s father, the Earl of Argus, approached the training grounds where Margus was drilling with some of the soldiers. “With the mastery of both magical arts and swordsmanship that you’ve been granted, you are nigh unbeatable. I expect great things from you.”

“Yessir.”

“As I believe you are aware, we cannot afford to lose this battle.”

Margus sheathed his sword and turned to face his father. “What do we know of Lord Gitelle’s forces?”

“We anticipate about twelve thousand troops all told.”

“About four thousand of those should be elite forces, right?”

“You’ve got a good grasp of this, eh?” Typically, the noble houses considered keeping a thousand troops on hand to be sufficient; in an emergency, peasants could be drafted into service as extra units. In Lord Gitelle’s case, there were a relatively large number of career soldiers among those ranks.

But right now that wasn’t the biggest concern. “Lord Rostel is also preparing to deploy troops. One or two thousand. For now they’re only officially doing ‘training’ exercises, but I have no doubt that they will manufacture some pretext to launch an attack on us.”

“So you intend to strike before Lord Rostel can muster his full force, right, sir?”

“Yes. As a neighboring territory, we can claim justified self-defense just on the basis of his gathering an army at all.”

It was a defense of last resort, but technically the earl’s statement was correct. Except in cases where the monarchy itself got involved, military skirmishes between nobles were governed only by the principle of “might

makes right.” Of course, civil war was technically prohibited, but in reality it was accepted as inevitable that the nobles would need to blow off a little steam by fighting each other now and then. As long as they weren’t mobilizing fifty or one hundred thousand troops, it wasn’t treated as a big deal.

Accordingly, it was also not unusual for the nobility close to the capital city to employ so-called “ace-class” knights capable of single-handedly repelling a force of a few thousand conscripted farmers. And given that the relative power of the involved parties could be ascertained before any moves were actually made, it was common for these skirmishes to be more contests of scouting prowess than actual wars.

“It goes without saying, but we should draft as many troops as possible,” the earl continued.

“Most of those twelve thousand are more for show than anything, but four thousand elite troops is a real threat,” Margus said.

“Exactly. All the more reason to strike before they’re expecting us.”

“Elite” forces referred to soldiers who could not be easily scattered by an ace-class attack—generally knights on retainer. The outcome of a battle was generally determined by the number of elite soldiers and the quality of the aces.

“So basically, you want to attack before they’ve been able to acquire any assets stronger than me?”

“Hah. You’re not the only weapon up my sleeve. You just worry about wiping the stain from your own name.”

“Yessir...”

Despite his words, deep down Lord Argus did indeed have high hopes for Margus. Already Margus could wield both sword and sorcery, and in Lord Argus’s estimation he was already powerful enough to match up with a B rank opponent—a high rank for an adventurer. All in all, he had the potential to become a powerful ace, capable of taking on thousands of troops single-handedly. None of the knights employed by Lord Gitelle should be able to stand against him. As for Lord Rostel’s aces, this conflict shouldn’t be enough to

mobilize them; in fact, Argus had already confirmed that they had not been mobilized, as doing so would risk upsetting the delicate balance of power within the royal capital.

And furthermore, Argus had already set plans in motion to obtain his own aces in addition to Margus.

“I’m counting on you, son.”

“Yes, sir...”

They both believed—as did everyone in House Argus—that as long as their enemy didn’t manage to find and recruit some unexpected outside asset, their victory was assured.

But they had no idea.

They had no idea that just such an outside asset had already offered himself (well, okay, had himself offered against his will) to Lord Gitelle as a supplement to his military forces. Or that that asset was the very same son of poor country nobles whom Margus had mocked as worthless, and the very cause of the stain on Margus’s name...

The Blessing

“Okay, I’ll bite—what happened? I almost didn’t recognize you.”

Ciel had been leading me silently through the palace halls after summoning me, until she suddenly blurted that out.

“What do you mean you didn’t recognize me?”

“You just...seem like you had some sort of epiphany or something.”

“An epiphany...” I did feel different ever since my conversation with Crow, it was true.

“Humph. And here I was, trying everything I could think of with no effect at all...”

“Ah, the princess appears to be feeling sulky. Perhaps you would do well to communicate your deep gratitude for her efforts on your behalf.”

“Ack, Crow?!” I winced as Catra’s claws dug harder into my shoulder; Crow’s characteristic sudden materialization from thin air had startled her so much she almost slipped off her perch.

“Oi, Remille! Don’t listen to him!”

“Of course, of course,” I said quickly.

“Humph. Well, whatever. We’re heading to the church. Before I Appraise you again, I want you to receive the ritual blessing.”

“What...sort of blessing is that?”

“It’s just a little ritual. A formality.”

Typically, blessings were performed by the church in exchange for a fee. It was also traditional for nobility to go through the ritual as a formal coming-of-age rite. Tales of people receiving the powers of gods or spirits during the blessing were most likely just remnants of ancient times. Back in the day, the church used to perform an Appraisal on children when they reached the designated age. Nowadays, there were easier ways to receive appraisals, as

there were more people like Ciel who possessed the ability. So the blessing ritual was reduced to a mere formality.

“Here we are,” Ciel said.

“Oh, wow...” We had arrived at a magnificent church adjoined directly to the castle. The elaborate decorations and ornamentation rivaled the castle’s own.

“Here, you’ll need this.”

“Need wh— Oh.”

“Payment, duh.”

The leather pouch she handed me was heavy with gold coins. *How much is in here...?*

“Once you hand that over, just follow all the instructions and you’ll be fine. Nothing to fret about. It’s just some regular old priest.”

“Your Highness, I believe His Holiness the Pope is conducting today’s blessing personally...?”

“Yeah, I know. Like I said, just a regular priest. He’s a harmless old geezer.”

Only Ciel could get away with saying that...

“Crow, does Ciel have something against the church?”

“Not precisely. I imagine that her emotions surrounding the church are...complicated. It was the current pope, Rosabel, who discovered the ‘uncut gem’ power within her.”

“Ah.” *The uncut gem.* The discovery of her ability, which allowed her to wield the powerful Eye of Appraisal, placed a heavy burden on Ciel’s shoulders that she’d carried ever since. The memory might be a bit traumatic for her, in a way.

“What are you two mumbling about?” she snapped. “Let’s go.”

“Right, coming.” *As independent as she usually is, I guess the church’s influence is too great for even Ciel to ignore.*

“Rosabel, we’re here!” Ciel threw open the doors, and...

“Welcome home, my lost lamb.”

“Huh...?”

The person who greeted us was not the pope, but a short woman wearing a hooded cloak. *The girl from the adventurers’ guild!*

“Remille! Watch out!”

“—?!” At Ciel’s shout, I quickly assumed a battle stance. But...

“Hah. You are too late. Much too late.”

“What?!” There had been a good deal of distance between us, but in less than the blink of an eye she was somehow at my back. *I didn’t even see her move!*

As I stood frozen in shock, Catra sprang into action. “Meeeeeep!!!”

“Oh my, what a brave little thing to try to face me head-on. But I’m going to need you to be a good girl now.”

“Meep?!” With one blow—honestly, more like a gentle pat—Catra fell unconscious.

“Worry not. She is alive. I did not come here to fight.”

I looked at Ciel.

“Luring us into a trap isn’t her style,” Ciel said grudgingly.

“The princess is correct,” Crow agreed. It was a testament to the woman’s odd power that even Crow, an S rank adventurer, seemed paralyzed in place.

“I am so glad that we understand each other. Please, be at ease. Rosabel has agreed to this.”

“Someone higher than the pope...” I mused. “But wouldn’t that mean...”

“Correct. In your language,” she said as she lowered her hood, “I would be called a god.”

She glowed with a dazzling halo. In stark contrast to our guarded, tense postures, this woman who named herself a god sat before us as the very picture of nonchalance.



“Now then, where shall we begin?” The woman—no, the god—spoke with such serenity, absently stroking Catra, who lay across her lap. “Firstly, please seat yourselves.”

We obediently sat around the table. It seemed we had no will to resist—or rather, that our wills were irrelevant.

“You need not fear for the little one,” she went on. “She simply couldn’t take that much of my power. If I just... Oh?”

“Meep!” The instant she regained consciousness, Catra sprang to my side.

“Hmmm... To think that you command the devotion of a behemoth, a creature worthy of being a disciple of gods. You are a man of breathtaking power.”

Abstractly, I knew that I sat under the steady gaze of a literal god, but I couldn’t really wrap my mind around that—after all, she just looked like a normal woman right now. The only thing I could make sense of was that she seemed to be praising my taming ability.

“How about we cut the chitchat and get to the point?” Ciel seemed to have reached the limit of her patience.

“I couldn’t agree more. The truth is, however, that my purpose in appearing here today was truly to aid you in procuring the blessing you desired, and now that task is complete.”

“...Huh?”

Ignoring my confusion, Ciel peered at me, her eye flashing emerald. “Well, whaddaya know...”

“What *do* you know???” I asked.

“Your stats are—no, wait, all of our stats, including Catra’s, are rising dramatically,” Ciel told me.

“But how is that...?”

The god only smiled benevolently.

The blessing... As the words came to my mind, I started. My body seemed to

move of its own accord. “Oh, right,” I found myself saying. “Here.” I held out the pouch of gold that Ciel had given me to offer in exchange for the blessing.

“Oi, Remille... It’s a bit, uh, tacky to presume to offer money to a god, don’t you think?” Ciel said, exasperated.

I could definitely see her point. I just figured I didn’t want to keep walking around with that much money on me.

“Hmmm. Your action at this juncture was not as foreseen. It appears you truly were the correct choice.”

“Choice? Choice for what?”

With a sigh at my obtuseness, Ciel explained. “She is the reason you have the ability to loop through repeated lives.”

“Oh...” *Oh.* The reason I had been through seven lifetimes. *It was her doing.* “But... Why?”

“A fair question. But let us defer that discussion until after you have come safely through the ordeal.”

“What...ordeal?” The monster that I faced in my third year flashed through my mind. *Was that an ordeal sent by the gods...?* But why? What was her goal?

As my thoughts swirled, she spoke again. “But first, the goal is this blessing you desire. It was originally my intention to bestow a hint upon you, but it appears that the princess by your side is more impressive than I had realized. You do not require anything more than this from me.”

“Huh?” The god’s form seemed to dissolve into the light that had formed her halo.

“Your ability to wield light magic has already been awoken. I shall bestow further power upon you.”

A portion of the light that had been the god seemed to break off and flow into my body. And in the next instant, the light and the god had vanished so completely it was as if they’d never been.

“Wow...” said Ciel. “You really are a magnet for drama, aren’t you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Repeating life over and over until you have many times the experience of a normal person... I knew that a supernatural ability like that would end up being tied to something bothersome, but this...” Ciel groaned in exasperation.

“Is it...that bad?” *She seemed perfectly friendly to me... And anyway, weren’t the gods supposed to be allies of humanity?*

My face must have betrayed my thoughts. “Don’t you get it?” Ciel said. “Gods are supernatural beings multiple *dimensions* above humanity. Dragons, elves, vampires—none of those higher beings are even on the same plane as the gods.”

Yeah, that much I knew. Although nowadays, most higher beings or otherwise supernatural entities were mostly relegated to the realm of myth.

“The gods are neither allies nor enemies of humankind,” she continued.

“Well, at least they’re not our enemies...”

“No. That would be preferable. Think about it—if we knew they were enemies, then you’d know you needed to defend yourself as soon as you saw them. But as long as there’s the possibility that they’re friendly, then they automatically retain the upper hand. There’s no way to know how to approach them. And if you offend them in the slightest, it’s game over. Jeez, I just can’t even...”

“When you put it that way, much of that could describe you as well...” Crow said.

“Excuse me?!”

Crow’s tone shifted from teasing to soothing as he continued. “There’s nothing we can do about her involvement now. We might as well count our blessings that she doesn’t seem to bear us any animosity at present.”

“Yeah, that’s true enough. Okay, well, I’d like to Appraise your current abilities once more, and then we’ll figure out what comes next.”

Seems like this is a more serious problem than I realized... However, one obvious and elegant solution sprang to my mind.

“Sooo, can a god be, uh...tamed?”

“What?!”

“Ho ho. Fascinating,” said Crow.

“Are you insane?! We’re talking beings that are waaaay above even dragons here...” Ciel’s yells gave way to a thoughtful silence.

And then...

“I love it!” A sly grin spread over her features. “Okay then. That settles the next steps of your training.”

“Speaking such blasphemy inside a church... I never thought I’d see the day.”

They both laughed. Despite having been the one to make the suggestion, I was starting to feel pretty uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation, but it was too late to take it back. *Well, we have to do everything we can...*

Oh, and speaking of what we could and couldn’t do, something was bothering me. “Ummm, by the way, about that light magic she gave me at the end...” I had previously gained the ability to wield any magical attribute, but after her magic entered me I felt something change about the magic inside me. Like my skill with light magic had jumped one or two levels ahead of the other types.

“We’ll work to strengthen that gift,” Ciel said. “That magic must be the ‘hint’ she mentioned.”

“Right... A hint...”

“Don’t you worry about that for now. You’re not very smart, so it’s best to just focus on one thing at a time.”

I couldn’t honestly disagree with that assessment. *If she says I shouldn’t worry about it, I guess I should take her up on that and be grateful...*

“Meeeeep...” Catra, now fully recovered, chose that moment to stretch herself out and give a big yowl.

“Hmmm, Catra, you seem like some sort of divine messenger,” Ciel said. “Are we sure you should be involved in this conversation?”

“Meep!” Catra chirped as if to say *of course I should*, and climbed up onto the top of my head.

“Hm, fair enough,” Catra replied. “You did immediately fight her.”

“Oh yeah, so she did.” *And the god seemed surprised by it.* The god had said that behemoths were creatures worthy of being gods’ disciples. Well, they were more powerful mythological beasts than even the dragons; I supposed that wasn’t such a crazy idea.

Of course, given that I had just been visited by a literal god, the bar for crazy had been raised a good deal. “Well, anyway,” I said, “let’s just hope that she remains an ally and not an enemy, I guess.”

“You really are a weirdo,” Ciel told me.

“Huh? Why?” From her expression, it didn’t seem like she meant it as a bad thing. *I’ll just take it as a compliment, then...*

“Okey doke, time for the Appraisal, and then while we’re at it we’ll also improve your equipment. I took the liberty of having some things made that I think will suit you.”

“Whoa, for real?!” Having your own custom-designed weapons was an adventurer’s dream.

“A minute ago you were casually talking about taming a god, but now *that* gets you so excited?”

The church echoed with the music of Ciel’s laughter.

Progress Check

“See? This is your current level and skill distribution.”

After leaving the church we’d parted from Crow, so for the first time in a while Ciel and I were alone. Well, alone except for Catra, who lay against me as she slept.

“Wow... That high already?”

“Level” was a term used when referring to the overall synthesis of various skills and abilities. It was similar to “stats,” but generally speaking, “level” referred to the big picture and “stats” was used more to talk about the detailed breakdown of specific abilities. What the Appraisal skill revealed was mainly one’s level.

“Level 80, seriously?”

“Seriously,” Ciel said.

“Okay, actually, I don’t really know if that’s good,” I admitted. Since routine Appraisals were limited to a very select few, the technical specs for stats and levels meant basically nothing to me.

“Hm, yeah... To put it in context, I’d say a B rank adventurer would generally be between level 40 and level 60. Level 70 is about average for A rank, and the bottom tier of S rank would be about level 80.”

“Whoa...”

“Congrats. Just based on level, you’d be S rank. Of course, you don’t yet have the necessary achievements.”

It was hard to wrap my mind around, but it must be true if Ciel was saying it. And by this point, with everything that had happened, it’s not like I was completely lacking self-confidence. Still, it was hard not to feel skeptical at the thought that I’d already hit a level worthy of an S rank adventurer.

“Think about it, Remille. That former party of yours, rotten as they were, made it to S rank, right? You should be used to this level.”

“Oh, yeah... I guess that’s true.”

“Mmhmm. Especially that leader guy. With proper training, he should be around the high 70s by now, I’d say.”

Margus. He was seriously strong. *So in other words, he could already be about at his peak from previous loops...*

“Well, unless he has a truly exceptional teacher or awakens in the heat of battle, that potential most likely remains unrealized.”

“Oh.”

“Nevertheless, at your current level, there’s a good chance that you’d lose.”

I was surprised to hear such a statement from someone who was just insisting I needed to gain self-confidence.

“Here,” she said, “I’ll explain the plan.” She pulled out a piece of paper. “Why was your confidence so extremely low? It took me a while to put the pieces together, but I finally realized.” She paused for a moment. “First of all, what do we mean by level? We could describe it as a general synthesis that takes into account all of a person’s different stats, right?”

“Right.” In other words, a high level means high stats, and vice versa.

“But that’s not all. There’s something else that has a major effect on someone’s level. Do you know what that is?”

It wasn’t hard to guess. “You mean skills?”

“Bingo.” Ciel added a column to her paper. “Level is the overall combination of stats and skills. And when it comes to your current state...” She filled in the stats and skills sections of her paper with a rough bar graph.

“Wow, that big a difference...?” The bar for skills was fully twice as large as the bar for stats.

“I had been focused on using your XP to build up your skills. But the reason that you didn’t have confidence proportional to your ability level is right here.” She tapped her finger on the stats graph. “Clearly, your base stats are not up to speed with your overall strength and abilities. I’d wager they’re not even at your previous peak from past lives.”

“I think that’s true...” I could feel it, somehow. *My peak...* That would be right at the end of the fifth loop. *I was stronger then than I am now. I’m sure of it.* At this point, I was still quite weak in basic things like raw physical strength, tactical analysis, reaction time...

Although, to be fair, maybe it didn’t make sense to compare how I was now to how I was after three years of real life experience.

“In any case,” Ciel went on, “the fact is that right now only your skills are disproportionate. That’s partly because your tamer skills are so highly developed.”

Catra perked up at Ciel’s words.

“Just like a typical trainer, most of your XP has gone toward progressing your skill tree rather than your own base stats. But at that rate, if you go up against a god, you’ll be finished before you can make a single move, let alone tame them.”

“Meeeep...” Catra yowled as though to protest Ciel’s claim.

“I know,” Ciel said to her. “You want to become stronger, but we’re talking about facing a god. If you don’t want to take the risk of getting your master killed, Remille himself has to be strong too.” She turned and fixed me with a solemn gaze. “You said you want to tame a god, Remille. To do that, you *have* to get stronger.”

“Yeah...” I braced myself for the worst. Buffing my stats would probably involve enduring some really severe training.

But once again, the next words from Ciel’s mouth shattered my expectations. “So, we will continue to focus on taming.”

“...Huh?”

“Ability Absorption,” she explained. “When I Appraised you just now, I realized that your trainer capacity isn’t maxed out yet. So this is the fastest way.”

Ability Absorption... So that means... “I need to tame familiars other than Catra.”

“Yes. Exhaustively. Dragons, ogres, elves—every single being of this world, you must make them yours. That is the road to taming a god.”

Every single being... Wait, elves? Is that...allowed? That doesn’t seem right... I pushed aside my jumbled thoughts—there were more important questions right now. “So... You’re saying just waiting for Catra to mature isn’t fast enough?”

“Technically that’s not quite accurate... But that’s the other thing I wanted to talk about.” For some reason, Ciel looked not at me but at Catra.

“Meep...” Catra averted her gaze awkwardly.

“Huh? Talk about what?”

“By all measures, she already had more than enough power. When she fights she grows larger, but overall she maintains this immature form, which limits your power as well. She just wants to keep letting you spoil her like this indefinitely.”

“Oh... Huh.” I looked at Catra. For a moment she seemed to avoid my gaze, and then...

“Meeeep!”

Suddenly she sprang right at me. And... “Wh-What the...?”

“Grrrh! But I wanted to wait until I could transform perfectly before showing Master!”

...Catra had suddenly become a beautiful girl.



❖

“I told you. Disciple of the gods.”

“Yeah but how was I supposed to know what that meant?” *Gods’ disciples can turn into beautiful girls?* Well, Catra wasn’t quite perfectly human... She still had a long waving tail and catlike ears on top of her head. In some ways, she seemed more like a cat who had suddenly decided to start walking on two legs.

“Meep, don’t look at me! The transformation’s not complete...” As Catra became flustered in her embarrassment her fur became thicker, making her look less human and more like an anthropomorphized cat. The hands that hid her face became paws. Still, there was something cute about her shyness...

“It’s rude to stare, you know.” Ciel’s voice drew my gaze back in her direction. “Well,” she went on, “what do you feel?”

“Feel? What do you mean?” I turned my awareness inward. “Wh-Whoa, how...?!”

“This is the power that kitten was hoarding.”

“Don’t call meeeep a kitten! I wasn’t trying to trick Master!”

“I know that,” Ciel said.

I distantly registered their squabbling, but my mind was still focused inward. “All of this power...?” I had the sensation of my stats rising across the board, thanks to finally really experiencing Catra’s growth.

“There’s one more thing she’s been hiding from you,” Ciel said.

“Oh?”

“Do you remember a time she randomly vanished from your side?”

“Ummm, yeah, now that you mention it...” I could think of one time. I had figured she’d just felt like taking a walk or something. Since I knew she’d come if I summoned her, I hadn’t thought much of it.

“She used that time to bring several additional monsters under her command.”

“Meep... Forgive me...” For some reason Catra apologized meekly, head

bowed, even her ears lowered in shame.

“Why are you apologizing?”

“Because...I left Master’s side without permission, and I made new followers without permission...”

“But that just made you stronger, right? And when you get stronger, I get stronger. You did good, Catra.”

“Meep?!” As soon as I patted her on the head she jolted upright, tail raised high and a bright smile on her face.

And in the same moment, her human form seemed to dissolve, and I found myself stroking a cat...

“That’s enough of that. You’ll melt her.”

“Meeeanie!” Catra had reverted completely to her previous form, and was rolling around on the bed like a little kitten.

“Getting back to business,” Ciel went on. “This is the true power level you’re starting from. But it’s still not enough to take on a god. I had to figure out where to go from here, and that includes how to make use of Catra.”

“So that’s why it took this much time.”

“But it’s clear now what we have to do, and it should also fix the whole low-confidence stat problem too. It’s finally time to go to war.”

Well, if Catra’s minions were already assembled, then the next step did indeed seem clear. And while this discussion had been focused on long-term goals, a more short-term confrontation loomed before me.

“So it’s really happening...” *Soon, Margus. We’ll have our battle.* Just because I’d beaten him once didn’t mean I could take anything for granted. I knew that all too well.

After all, we’d spent seven whole loops together...

New Allies

“Okey doke, time to actually get down to business,” Ciel said.

“Meeep...!” Catra settled onto my lap back in cat form, but she let out a disgruntled cry at Ciel’s words, which Ciel ignored. I supposed she was sore over having all of these secrets revealed without her consent. But she calmed down as I stroked her, and sat quietly to listen to the discussion.

“Okay, our short-term goal is to aid Lord Gitelle in his defensive stand. To that end, I’d like you to acquire a skill necessary for waging war. Or rather, I would like you to obtain a familiar that can use such a skill.”

“Necessary for war...?”

“Mm-hmm.”

War... How many times had I truly been part of a war? All those times before I had really just been along for the ride—a soldier under Lord Gitelle’s command, fighting together with Margus and the others against Lord Argus’s forces. *What was necessary in that situation?*

“The skill of restraint?” I guessed.

“Exactly. As I’m sure you understand from your own experience in this matter, that is crucial to waging a civil war.”

In other words, without restraint, my attacks could have too large an area of effect. “We don’t want too many casualties,” I said. You might think that the most important thing when armies clash would be soldiers or weapons. After all, if those resources don’t match up, you don’t have a war at all. But when you actually fight a war, you find that it’s actually much more about money than you’d expect. So it’s a more efficient path to victory to steal the enemy’s funds than to scatter their armies. Especially when fighting against your own countrymen, it’s not especially commendable to run up a high body count. Of course, some deaths are inevitable, but it damages the opponent more effectively to take prisoners of war that have to be bought back for ransom.

“It sounds like we’re on the same page, so this should be a quick discussion.

There are various methods of restraint, but since your strength is mainly as a tamer we should take advantage of that."

"By subjugating a monster that can use restraint?"

"You may not have to do it yourself. Catra's already collected some minions, right? I intend to determine the powers of the monsters under her command. The strongest among them you can make use of directly. The rest we can leave under the behemoth's control."

Listening to this speech, Catra morphed halfway back into human form. She seemed like a cat standing on its hind legs, more beast than human. Although she made no move to raise her head from where rested cozily in my lap.

"There are certainly a bunch who could be useful, if you ask meeeep," said Catra.

"Can you summon them?" Ciel asked.

"I'll call them as soon as I wake up to*meow*row," Catra said happily, nuzzling against my knee.

As I patted her head, I asked, "Is it okay to summon them to the palace? Will they attract too much attention?" If they could transform into something innocent-looking, like Catra could, there should be no trouble. But when I thought of monsters capable of restraining, what came to mind was monsters like spiders or slimes, which were sure to appear hostile to anyone who saw them.

"Ummm..."

"You didn't think about that question at all, huh?"

Catra's ears drooped in shame.

"Should we use somewhere outside the palace as a meeting point?" I asked.

"Good idea," said Ciel. "I'll think of somewhere. I'll just need you to let them all know."

"...*Meow*kay," Catra said glumly. I patted her on the head. "But but!" she chirped, "I'm sure they'll be really helpful to you, Master."

“I have no doubt,” I said.

“Meeeep!” Catra closed her eyes and beamed in contentment as I continued to stroke her.

Yup, as long as she’s mainly in beast form, this doesn’t feel too weird, I thought. Catra in her human form was a bit much to handle, so maybe this was just right for now.

❖

The next day, the monsters under Catra’s control gathered in the section of the forest that Ciel had chosen.

“Whoa... Amazing...” I breathed.

“Meep!” With an exultant chirp, Catra—in the form of a kitten—leapt into my arms.

“Yep, I was afraid of this,” said Ciel.

The monsters that Catra had gathered were, well... “Tentacles, huh?”

“Meep.” Catra seemed to be fishing for praise, so I patted her. But...

“Well,” Ciel said, “you’d typically use these to torture women, but that doesn’t mean they’re not also capable of restraining men.”

“Yeah, that... That seems right...”

“This is good,” Ciel went on. “Slimes would be too weak, and in a way these are easier to communicate with than insect-type monsters.” Ciel’s words were as optimistic as ever, but her strained expression told a different story. *And she seems kinda...distant...*

“How many of these things are here, anyway?” I asked. The sea of tentacles all blended together into one writhing mass, so it was hard to tell how many belonged to each individual monster, but there had to be more than just one here.

“Meeep!” As though Catra’s call were a command, the mass of tentacles began to disentangle itself and separate into a line of separate creatures.

“Looks like six,” I said.

“That’s enough to increase our military strength significantly.”

“Considering each of them has at least eight tentacles, that’s what, about fifty men?”

“That’s right.” The idea wasn’t to use the tentacles as weapons for fighting, but rather to use them for binding hostages. “This should work well with the Disarmament skill you’ve learned,” Ciel went on. “We should start with the hostages that seem likely to fetch the highest ransom.”

“Sounds like a plan... But to do that, will I need to tame these things directly?”

“Nah, I think it should work fine either way. As long as they’re under the thrall of your familiar, you should be able to use them as though you had tamed them yourself. You should save your strength for directly taming only the ones that have some especially powerful ability. Although I guess if you’d prefer to do it that way, there’s no—wait, no, forget it!”

Ciel seemed to suddenly change her mind. *What’s up with that?* “Are you blushing?”

“Shut up!”

I didn’t really get what was wrong, but it seemed like she didn’t want to talk about it, so I figured I’d let it drop—but at that moment, Catra leapt from my arms and transformed into human form.

“He should tame the*meow*! Master should get their skill too!”

“Do you even have any idea what skill he would get from these things?!”

“Duh! Making a girl feel good... Ummm...”

Oh. Right, duh.

“...Do whatever you want.” With those words Ciel turned suddenly and walked away, as though she couldn’t stand to be here a moment longer.

“Well, now what...?” I wondered.

“Meep.” In the blink of an eye, Catra was back in her kitten form.

“Whatever, it’s really not a big deal. I’ll just do it.”

I had no hidden agenda.

Really. No hidden agenda at all. But just to be on the safe side, in case of future emergencies, I went ahead and tamed all six.

An Overdue Realization

“Is it finally time, Father?”

“All preparations appear to be complete, eh?”

“Yessir. We are ready whenever.”

On his family lands, Margus could feel the warlust that permeated the air like an electric buzz against his skin. The recent tax increases were pretty obviously for the purpose of civil war, though, so people who could read the room had largely left the territory already.

“I want you to view this battle as a fight for the very survival of House Argus,” said Lord Argus. “If we’re defeated, we lose everything.” To him, this war was existential. As the battle fever rose in him, he had finally realized what was at stake. Whereas before he had been comfortably focused only on the possibility of victory, as the battle actually approached he finally began to feel anxious about what might happen if they were to lose.

While providing financial assistance should have bought Argus future favors, instead it had just drawn Lord Rostel’s attention to his current predicament. At this rate, if he said nothing, House Argus would be destroyed by the minister of the judiciary, using Lord Gitelle as his tool. House Argus lacked the backing of any allies as powerful as cabinet ministers. The very survival of the house hung in the balance.

“Honestly... What was the point of doling out all of that money in the first place...” Lord Argus muttered. Of course, the other nearby nobles could also read the situation. But not a single one would publicly come out against the minister of the judiciary. To tell the truth, Argus’s doling out of funds to poorer nobles was more to puff his own ego than anything else. It was, indeed, a testament to the earl’s financial strategies, overall attitude, and a host of other personal defects that not a single ally sent him any reinforcements at such a crucial moment for his house.

Well, that wasn’t quite accurate; he did have some support, albeit not

publicly, but it was not enough to act as a deterrent to war. Facing that fact had forced Argus to seriously consider the possibility of losing.

"We *must* be victorious..."

"I will ensure that we are," said Margus.

Argus's attempts to recruit other ace-class fighters to his cause had come to nothing. Anyone who could read the situation's development had already left the area by the time he reached out to recruit them, and the response from the other nearby nobles was more meager than he had hoped. It was no exaggeration to say that the entire fate of House Argus now rested on Margus's shoulders. Margus's three older brothers didn't possess the same combat prowess that he did. While the army Argus had conscripted was good for some things, he couldn't expect them to play the role of ace fighters.

"My power will reverberate through the very heart of the kingdom," Margus declared. From Margus's point of view, this war was a once in a lifetime chance to showcase his skills, and a major spectacle like a war was the perfect venue for quickly wiping away the stain of his humiliating loss to Remille. Remille, who should have been nothing but a convenient errand boy!

The uncut gem... Remille had wreathed himself in the borrowed power of that national treasure, but this time Margus would show him the true gap between them. This time he would prove his power—first to his father, and then to the whole kingdom, and he would take the national treasure for his own. It was simply unacceptable for the princess to be consorting with some random lowlife who might as well be a commoner.

He was under the delusion that he alone could put a stop to Remille's evil deeds, as though somehow clinging to memories from his previous lives as a hero candidate.

"At my current strength, I could take on a thousand—no, three thousand men single-handed!" Ace-class fighters were expected to stand against a thousand troops. But in Margus's mind, he never imagined that the enemy might also have their own aces. Since his own side had failed to recruit any, he assumed it would be the same for the other side.

Although aces specialized in waging one-sided battles against large numbers

of severely outmatched foes, that was not their only job. Margus, however, never considered that he might have to take down a truly powerful enemy.

A Memory Surfaces

“Okay! So from this day forth, you are officially a knight,” Ciel said.

“Really? Just like that?”

“Just like what? You did things properly, didn’t you? Kneeling before the throne and taking a vow and everything.”

“Uh, I guess...” So many surreal things had been happening that my mind couldn’t process it all. It was true that my family was technically nobility, but the rank of knight wasn’t inherited by the heirs of the house, so it was a title with a life span of just one generation. My father, who came from a rural farming family, had been granted the noble title after presenting the royal family with treasure he had unearthed while farming. But since he knew that the title wouldn’t pass down, my life growing up was no different from any other farmers, despite the noble title. I had never imagined that I would actually have a title of my own.

“What’s with you? You sat before a literal god in the church, but now you’re all discombobulated over receiving a standard rank and decoration?”

“Yeah, I guess I see your point,” I said. But really, that was all backwards. Being accosted by a god was one thing. But this was something that was part of my existing reality, which made it feel all the more surreal.

“Now then, the battle will soon be upon us,” Ciel said.

“Oh, right... Soon...”

“Of course, since it’s a civil war, the enemy is not especially formidable.”

Easy enough for her to say, but war is war, I thought. When we fought against House Argus in my past lives, a lot of people ended up dead even with a policy of taking prisoners alive. Maybe the enemy wasn’t that formidable, but so far nothing in this loop was predictable. Even leaving Margus aside, it would be best to be prepared for the other... *Wait a sec.*

“Ciel... I want to go over House Argus’s military strength one more time.” I

had just remembered something. Something terrifying. Like a memory that had been somehow blocked right until this moment had finally broken free.

“What’s with the cold feet? Are you a hero of the realm or what?”

“I just remembered! The battle itself was a walk in the park, but afterwards there was one foe that not even the hero Margus could handle. It was—”

Ciel’s Eye changed color. The next moment I saw Crow spring into motion.

“Tell us everything you can remember, Master Remille.”

“Yeah, okay...” I frantically racked my brain for the memory. Right, Argus ultimately failed to recruit any ace-class warriors, and our party, with Margus leading us, thoroughly trounced him. In fact, it was such a complete victory that hardly any real damage was done. Closely matched fights take a much bigger toll. We cornered Margus’s father, the Earl of Argus, largely unscathed. And that’s where it appeared.

“Back then I couldn’t quantify the power difference, but all of us—Margus, Rui, Aman, and me, obviously—were completely paralyzed by the intensity of its aura.”

“And? What happened?”

“Nothing. The war itself had already been decided by the time it showed up, so it disappeared without any incident.”

“Oh. Huh.” Ciel looked thoughtful for a moment, but then lifted her gaze and shrugged. “Well, no point in dwelling on it.”

Well, that’s true enough. There’s no point dwelling on inevitable death.

“We’ll double-check the intel that Crow collected again,” Ciel went on. “Although it’s difficult to judge the strength of individual units in advance, of course.”

“Are the pieces in place to get this all over with quickly, like in previous loops?”

“Well, we’ve done what we can,” Ciel replied. “There are always factors we can’t control.”

I had no idea what that enemy had been thinking. The fact that it didn't make a move until the end—or rather, even at the end—made it seem like it wasn't actually a friend to House Argus. I had wondered whether it might have had a connection to both Margus and his father and thus not want to fight against either of them, but that idea was complicated by the fact that Margus seemed completely unfamiliar with it.

We just don't have enough info... If only I'd remembered sooner. All I could do at this point was... "Catra."

"Meep?"

"Might any of your minions be suited for spy work?"

Thrilled to be asked to help, Catra popped exuberantly into human form. "Yes, lots of them! Lots!"

If we followed any trails leading out from House Argus, they might lead us to something.

"By the way, Catra," said Ciel, "give a full report of the monsters you brought under your control. I'd like the whole picture."

"Ohhh... I don't really remember..."

"Sheesh!" Ciel seemed exasperated, but I guess Catra had just been trying to take initiative. "Well then, how many?" Ciel asked.

"I stopped counting at a hundred..."

"A hundred...?" *Wow*... That was more than I'd imagined.

"Fine then," Ciel said. "In that case, let's just start by summoning the strongest."

"Ooh, that much I remember *purr*fectly!" Catra dashed for the window and let out a cry as though howling to the moon. "MEEEEEEEEEOWWWWW!"

"Not a very creative howl," Ciel commented.

"But the sheer lung-power..." The air itself trembled at the sound, which seemed more rightfully called a roar than a howl. *Behemoths really are full of surprises...*

“At this rate you should be able to directly tame all of the creatures she’s assembled, yeah?”

“What happened to leaving it up to me...?”

Ciel seemed surprised at my hesitation. “Oh... If you start taming them yourself, she’ll get upset, huh?”

“Upset?”

“Yeah. Well, whatever, leave the taming to her for now. When she gets stronger you get stronger, and when you get stronger she gets stronger. So it all works out.”

“Your wish is my command.”

Ciel’s eyes widened at my words as though that had startled her, and she stared at me strangely.

“What?”

“It’s nothing, just... Your vibe seems to have changed a bit again.”

I had no idea what she could have meant.

“The old you would have more meekly gone along with whatever you were told. But just now you made a decision based on your own will.”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess.” *That must be because...*

“They’re here!” Catra’s cry conveniently cut that conversation short. “Master! Over here! I called them to the same spot as last ti*meow*!”

“All right, all right, you don’t have to drag me.”

That must be because when I look at Catra, I feel a budding desire to make myself better too...

❖

“Did you, um...expect this many?”

“Oops, looks like so*meow* they all showed up...”

As I followed along behind Catra, we came upon a horde of monsters large enough to make the ground under our feet shake like it was practically a

stampede.

“You were actually serious when you said you stopped counting at a hundred...”

Even Ciel seemed shocked. It was impossible to count exactly how many there were. “Ciel, um, this could...” Even with Ciel’s foresight in picking an out-of-the-way meeting place, this many monsters congregating this close to the capital seemed like trouble.

I had intended to confirm that feeling with Ciel, but she spoke before I could finish my thought. “Yes, I know. Crow... Oh, right, he’s not here, huh?”

“I am right here, Your Highness.”

Wait, wasn’t he just looking into the thing with Margus...?

“Do not worry, Master Remille, I have people on that matter as well.”

In typical Crow fashion, he seemed to respond directly to my thoughts. *I don’t know whether to be impressed or disturbed...* Well, in any case, Crow should be able to handle this.

“Okay then,” said Ciel. “At least we can still go through them all in order of strength.”

“On it!” Catra leapt off toward the throng of monsters.

There are just so many, I marveled. Slimes, goblins, magical beasts of all forms, from wolves to bears... Those were all well enough. But then there were others: giant death worms, and fire lizards, and more—monsters that would be tough even for a B rank party. Whatever the cream among this crop was must be something pretty impressive.

After a few minutes Catra reappeared leading a humanoid monster. “Ta-da!”

“Whoa...”

“How did we not see him...?” Ciel said.

Before us stood a giant so massive that it seemed impossible that it had been hidden within the crowd. It seemed capable of decimating the entire castle with a single blow. This could only be... “A king troll?”

“Master of all fae,” Ciel confirmed.

Trolls, orcs, goblins, kobolds, and other similar creatures were often lumped together as fae-type monsters. It was said that they originally descended from the elves, but of course by now elves were considered a separate thing. The fae were sometimes referred to as “all the ugly races,” but that was going a bit too far...maybe. At least, other than its monstrous size, this king troll wasn’t especially unpleasant-looking.

“Catra, can you command the fae through these king trolls?”

“I can, yeah!”

There seemed to be a whole lot of fae there, mostly goblins, so it was a relief to be able to delegate that. The king troll saw Ciel and gave a silent nod. Seemed like this should go smoothly enough.

“Okay, then with those terms, *Tame*!”

“GRAAAAAWWWWWRRRR!” It answered me with a roar that rent the air. And then, in the blink of an eye, it suddenly began to shrink down, until...

“I pledge to do my utmost to be of service to you,” said the elegant youth now kneeling gracefully before me.

“Uh. Ummmmm...”

“That’s quite an evolution... Looks like your Tame skill has quickly become rather monstrous.” The corners of Ciel’s mouth twitched up.

“Who...?”

“Oberon, King of the Fae. You’ve snagged another divine-class being.”

“Meeep?! Meee first! Meee first?!” Catra went into a tizzy at Ciel’s words.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” I said. “Catra was first. Er, Your Maj—um, Oberon? Is Oberon okay?”

“You may address me however you wish.”

This was going to be challenging. “Do you...have any objection to Catra maintaining a primary role?”

“Of course not. I have no objection.”

“Okay, well then, in that case... I’ll leave the fae in your charge, Oberon.”

“As you command.”

With that settled, I turned my attention to petting Catra’s head soothingly, since she seemed rattled somehow.

“At this rate, we should have any humanoid opponents pretty much covered,” Ciel said.

Continuing on, the next monsters that came before me were an emperor slime, a grand wolf, and... “Is that...a dragon chick?”

“Kwaaah!” Despite still being small enough that it could sit on my shoulder, the dragon gave off an intensely fearsome aura.

And once I tamed it, imagine how fearsome I would become.

Ace Up The Sleeve

“Ah, there you are,” Lord Argus said with an air of relief. The white-clad figures who stood before him made no reply. “We cannot afford to lose this war,” the earl continued. “I am counting on you all.”

“We shall perform the work we have been hired to do. That is all.”

“Yes, yes, good,” said Argus. “When it comes down to it, war is all about money. And the other side simply cannot afford anyone of your caliber.”

Argus had not received any direct support. But there were a few nobles who were sufficiently dependent on House Argus for funding that they could not afford to see it fall. One such noble house was the house of Keyes, which relied on Lord Argus to sponsor their illegal alchemical research. They couldn’t openly send renowned ace fighters or large numbers of troops; instead, what House Keyes had sent Argus was a bunch of researchers. And all but one of them were field researchers.

“Smart man, that Lord Keyes. He made the right choice to hand all of his tools to me,” Lord Argus said with a chuckle, as though those “tools” weren’t standing right where they could hear him. The research conducted by House Keyes was wide-ranging, but one of their specialties was research into doping potions that altered and enhanced the human body. For Keyes, this civil war was an elaborate experiment, with the field researchers as test subjects and the battlefield as laboratory.

“Father, preparations for mobilization to the front lines are complete!” Margus’s eldest brother, Lugus, reported.

“Very well. Get moving then. I have something to take care of. Set the shadow forces in motion too, as usual.”

“Yessir!” Lugus was a large man, and normally served as commander of the guard. In this war he was in charge of leading the vanguard as their general. Unlike Margus, he was not expected to play the role of ace fighter, but Lugus had his own ideas. As the first son of a notoriously ambitious house, it was

natural that he would have something up his sleeve. “Father, I will not let you down.”

“I have no doubt. After all, depending on how this goes, you may be able to come into your inheritance quite soon.”

The conversation seemed more like adversaries testing each other than a discussion between father and son. Neither believed the other’s words. But even so, it was enough to plant these thoughts in each other’s minds.

“Humph... As if I would entrust the fate of my estates to such an inexperienced child. Once I’ve gained myself a place at the royal court, I’ll find a worthy successor.”

“I don’t need my father’s recognition, as long as I can gain the support of the commoners. I must seize this opportunity. I refuse to be shown up by the likes of Margus!”

With such conflicting plans and ambitions, House Argus’s forces began their march.

The Big Four

“This is crazy...”

“It’s perfect,” Ciel said. “You’ve got the big four, with the behemoth leading them, and you stand above all of them. And just like that, you’re the Demon King.”

“Yeah, but...so soon?” Sure, the idea had come up, but wasn’t I supposed to be training as a hero, not actually becoming a demon king...?

There was no denying, however, that the lineup I’d assembled was worthy of a demon king—although Oberon was the only one I’d directly tamed so far. I ran through the current lineup once more in my mind.

First there was the king-troll-turned-Oberon, King of the Fae. And with him came all of the fae-type monsters: goblins and trolls and orcs and such.

Then there was the Emperor Slime, with the special ability to unconditionally control all nearby slimes. Along with it came all of the tentacle monsters and other amorphous beings.

Next, the grand wolf, a legendary beast belonging to the most powerful lineage of wolves. With it came not just the rest of the wolves but many other varieties of magical beasts.

And last but not least...

“Kweeee!”

“This guy seems cute, but why do I feel like it could end the whole war on its own...”

“It is a dragon, even though it’s still young, and there’s something...different about it.”

From the look on Ciel’s face—and from the intensity of the aura that the chick gave off—I knew what she meant. Normal dragons could be found in the mountainous areas where they nested, and running into a solitary dragon didn’t pose a problem for most adventurer parties. But this chick was no normal

dragon. There was something unique about it.

Ciel's Eye of Appraisal flashed, and she let out a long breath. "Kukulkan..." she said. "A divine beast on par with the behemoth."

"What?!" Catra exclaimed. "Then I don't want it!"

"Kyoooh!"

She's being childish... Although, come to think of it, I guess she's also basically still a child. Relative to the dragon chick, she was sort of like an older sister.

"Don't worry," Ciel said to her. "It won't be able to assume human form that easily. It takes too many years to mature to adult form. We won't have the chance to see it fully grown in our lifetimes."

"Oh. That's okay then."

Catra didn't seem to realize that by the same logic, it should be just as impossible for any humans who encountered a behemoth cub to live to see it transform or reach adulthood. *Well, as long as she's okay with it for now...*

"Kwaaaaeee!"

"Aww, it likes you," Ciel said.

"But I'm not even doing anything..."

"Don't you see? It can sense your strength as a tamer."

"Oh. Huh." *It can sense that just by instinct?* "Okay, Catra," I said. "I'm gonna take direct control of these four." Technically, I'd only completed taming Oberon so far.

"Okey doke! But..."

"I know. You're number one."

"Meeep!" She nuzzled against me happily as I rubbed her neck.

"Okay, let's do this." All four of them were incredibly powerful. My experience with Oberon had shown me how much it took to tame just one such being. And honestly, it had felt surprisingly manageable. But...

"Kwah?" The divine beast kukulkan cocked its head at me innocently.

I felt a bit uneasy about this one. Still, Ciel seemed to judge that it was okay to proceed. I cast *Tame*.

“Mmph...”

The taming took hold more easily than I expected. In front of me knelt two humanlike forms, heads bowed, just as happened with Oberon. And...

“Kwooo!”

...The kukulkan, the divine beast, seemed only to have grown ever so slightly.

“The emperor slime naturally has the ability to take human form,” said Ciel. “Or more precisely, I should say, the ability to take *any* human form.”

As though to demonstrate the truth of Ciel’s words, the slime, which had morphed into a voluptuous woman, turned quickly back into amorphous blue jelly, and then reformed back into the guise of a human. Specifically... “Ciel? Wow, that’s incredible.”

“If I didn’t have this Eye I wouldn’t be able to tell us apart myself, except—Hey, wait a sec! Why is she naked?!”

I had been too focused on how impressive the transformation ability was to even register it, but sure enough, the imitation Ciel was completely naked. *Wow, that really is a useful skill...*

“Stop staring like that!”

“Ah, right... Quit fooling around!” I ordered the slime.

At my command, Ciel’s form morphed once again into jelly, and a moment later a vaguely humanoid blue blob stood—er, undulated?—before me.

“Well, anyway, that’s a powerful ability,” I said. “Being able to create such precise clones will definitely come in handy.”

“You better not get any more weird ideas,” Ciel said, glaring at me suspiciously.

Sheesh, it’s not like that stunt was my idea in the first place... “So, uh, who’s next?”

“The lycanthrope. A werewolf of the grand wolf lineage. If things had worked

out a bit differently, he could have been a demon king."

A werewolf. The lycanthrope, exceptional even among werewolves, would be able to go toe to toe with vampires. The grand wolf that it came from was of the highest order of magical beasts. As a werewolf, it should be able to hold its own against even a vampire lord.

Together with the legendary king Oberon, and the kukulkan and behemoth that were literal divine beasts, our force was indeed becoming quite terrifying.

"Leave the command of the magical beasts to me." The lycanthrope spoke in a deep, sonorous voice that immediately engendered trust.

"I'm counting on you. Both of you."

The slime indicated agreement by shifting form again, while the lycanthrope let out another deep roar, which was enough to rouse all the nearby beasts into a frenzy.

"I'm counting on you too," I said to the dragon chick.

"Kwaaaa!" My taming hadn't caused it to take human form, but it did seem to have grown a bit.

"Oberon, Lycanthrope, Emperor Slime, you will focus on marshaling and organizing your troops," said Ciel. "As for the chick, I think it should come with us for now."

"I think so too." The kukulkan was no ordinary monster. If left to run wild, it could become a military target. Of course, the other three were also immensely powerful—in particular, as Ciel had said, they were each powerful enough to have become demon kings themselves. And they were smart. It should be enough just to relay orders to them through Catra.

"Now then," I said to the chick, "your name is a bit of a mouthful, huh? Let's see what we can do with that..."

"Kyooo!" it chirped cheerfully.

Well, no need to overthink it... "How about Kuku?"

"Koookyooo!" It seemed happy enough.

“Wow, real creative.” Ciel rolled her eyes at me, but I ignored her.

The other three actually looked a bit jealous. *Do they also want me to give them names? Will something that simple be okay with them?* “Umm,” I said to them, “do you want names too?”

The three of them each expressed eagerness in their own way: Oberon knelt before me and bowed his head; the lycanthrope let out a deep roar; and the emperor slime wobbled with excitement.

“Okay then...” *Let’s think. Oberon, born from a king troll...troll...Oberon...* “How about uh, Tron?”

“I am unworthy of such an honor. You have my everlasting gratitude.”

Next up, the lycanthrope... “Ly.”

“I am pleased. Thank you.”

Okay, okay, this is going well so far. Now, an emperor slime... “Slimy? Er... Okay, no.” I balked under the glare of the naked woman that now stood before me. “Ummm... What about, um, Em...Emmy?” The slime smiled at me. *Phew...*



“All righty, I’ve gotten a general sense of our military strength,” said Ciel. “Seems like it’s about the equal of the landed noble houses.”

“So if they throw everything at us...”

“We won’t let that happen. I don’t intend to publicize the extent of our strength. Until we’ve made it past the incident in three years at the very least, you should think of your forces as just yourself and these two.”

“Meep!”

“Kwaaah!”

A behemoth and a kukulkan seemed like plenty of power to me.

“Now, shall we distribute the weapons Limdt made and the stuff you took from the royal treasure house to these guys?”

“We can do that?”

“Of course. It’s like Limdt said. What’s the point of weapons if they’re not being used?”

Fair enough, but did that really apply to handing out national treasures to monsters? *Well, if the princess says it’s okay, I guess it’s okay...* “All right, let’s see...” I reached into the magic bag and began pulling out the equipment that Ciel had stuffed into it. “Tron, you should have this sword.”

“Truly? Am I worthy of a treasure such as this...?” He began to cry.

“Ly, this should suit you well.”

“Thank you.” The claw weapon I gave him was probably originally designed for a dragon, but it seemed like it would fit him. While Catra was about the same size as me, the lycanthrope was about twice the size of a normal human. He should be able to handle it.

“Now, what do slimes use...?”

“How about something like this?” Ciel said.

“Oh...” Ciel had pulled out a sorcerer’s robe. “What do you think?” I asked Emmy.

In answer, the slime wrapped herself happily in the robe.

“Now,” Ciel continued, “we’ll leave the rest to them. That way we’ll create good organizational incentives.”

“Incentives?”

“That’s right. You’re at the very top, with the behemoth right below you, and these four below her. The more you entrust to the lower levels, the more they’ll feel motivated to do an excellent job and possibly move up in the ranks.”

Makes sense. As Ciel spoke, she was continuously pulling various swords and spears and other equipment out of the magic bag and handing them to the monsters. They seemed a bit dazed, but accepted the weapons anyway.

“I’m impressed you can sort all of these so quickly.”

“Hah, I wouldn’t have expected you to notice.”

She was right; until recently, I wouldn’t have. The weapons that Ciel was distributing were neatly sorted into those suitable for fae, for slimes, and for magical beasts. It made sense to organize them to some degree, but I had learned enough by now to be able to tell that every single piece was perfectly allocated, with no inefficiency.

“What about meeeep?” Catra approached Ciel eagerly.

“We’ll deal with you later.”

Having been brushed off by Ciel, she returned to my side. “By later, she probably means that Limdt made you something special,” I said to her.

“Meep!” she chirped happily.

I shared her excitement. I couldn’t wait to get my own specially made gear. “Yeah,” I agreed. “This is gonna be awesome.”

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“And here is the armor that I have had made for your personal use, Master Remille,” said Limdt. “Of course, it may require a few final small adjustments, which we can get started on right away.”

“Wow...” I gazed upon a dream come true, spread out before me. *Personal*

armor. There wasn't a single adventurer alive who hadn't fantasized about those words.

"I see," said Ciel. "This is excellent."

"I have done my best, Your Highness."

The armor that had been laid out for me consisted of fine chain mail designed to protect all of the vital areas. I could tell just from looking at it that it was crafted with the highest quality materials. And with it... "Is that...a spear? No, that's not quite right. Then what...?"

"It's a type of longsword," Ciel replied. "A scimitar, I believe."

"I endeavored not to give you anything too heavy. My aim was to craft a weapon with a focus on attack range."

Makes sense. The weapon looked like a long spearlike handle with a half-moon blade longsword attached. It certainly *looked* pretty heavy.

"It is made from extremely high quality materials, so it should be easy to handle," said Limdt.

"Whoa, you're not kidding." When I tried hefting the weapon, I was surprised to find it extremely maneuverable for its size.

"There are two main tasks required of an ace-class fighter in a war," Limdt said. "Firstly, to take down large numbers of enemies single-handedly. And secondly, to defeat the enemy's strongest individual fighters."

"This will come in handy for the first of those," Ciel said. "Right now you're an unknown entity, so you can use this to make a stir and grab their attention."

"Oh, I get it." Now that I looked closely, the blade was pretty dull. This was a weapon designed more to scare the enemy away than to actually slice things. It was almost like a blunt force weapon.

"Right now you're already a powerful tamer with hundreds of beings under your power. You should easily have the strength to drive off a few humans."

She was right. Even before she'd said anything, I had begun to feel the changes in my body.

“It seems that preconceptions matter a lot to you. Or perhaps I should say your own subjectivity. You knew a while ago that Catra had recruited other monsters, but your Ability Absorption skill didn’t kick in until you met them face-to-face.”

“Huh. So in theory I could have started to gain power from the moment Catra subjugated them?”

“That’s right. Bringing them under your direct control does make some difference, of course, but for you that difference seems to be especially pronounced. I guess you’re just the self-centered type.”

Surely there’s a nicer way to put that... But still, I understood what she was trying to say.

While we’d been talking, Limdt had quickly finished up the final adjustments to my armor, and he now presented it to me.

“Well, if preconceptions make such a difference to you, then I expect that wearing the finest armor in the kingdom—hand-crafted by Limdt himself—should be a big confidence boost, huh?”

She wasn’t wrong. As I accepted the armor, I felt a wave of power swell within me.

Civil War

The opening move in the war between Lord Argus and Lord Gitelle was made by Lord Argus. Argus set out to invade Gitelle's territory, but Gitelle had readied his troops in advance, and engaged House Argus's forces on the open plains outside of the Gitelle lands.

Among those troops was one particularly fired up soldier.

"Let's go! I've got this! My power is unstoppable!" Now that he was on the battlefield, Margus's confidence was returning—the confidence that had been so shaken by his humiliating defeat at the hands of the errand-boy, Remille. "I knew that was just some weird fluke! I am unbeatable!"

It was, possibly, a bit *too* much confidence that was returning. But the truth was, at that moment, there was no one on that battlefield who was a match for him.

❖

Thanks to the efforts of the sons of House Argus, in particular the ace fighter Margus, the early stages of the opening battle seemed to be swinging in House Argus's favor.

"Hmph. They're late," Lord Gitelle muttered to himself as he observed the unfolding battle. His side had no aces of its own. House Argus had four sons, each of whom seemed to be giving his all. By all appearances, things were not going well for Gitelle so far.

But Gitelle's face betrayed no hint of panic. It would not be the loss of common soldiers on the battlefield that ultimately decided this civil war. It would be the financial loss caused by ransoming prisoners of war. All the more reason for Gitelle, without valuable aces of his own, not to stress yet about being at a disadvantage. It just meant the eventual prisoner exchange would be that much less expensive for him.

"Even so, if they were to break through to my position, it could all change in an instant..." If the commander in chief were captured, the war would end. If

Margus—no, if all of House Argus's forces had focused on making a desperate push right to the general's position, it might have been a different story. "A true ace can turn the tide of a whole battle by themselves." It's not as though Lord Gitelle hadn't made some preparations of his own. But above all else, he had faith in the assurance of the "uncut gem" that the royal family would intervene on his behalf.

"Aaaany minute now..."

Lord Gitelle patiently awaited the appearance of the single reinforcement the princess had promised him.

❖

"Meeeep!"

"Well, aren't you in a good mood?" Catra was riding along on my shoulder in her kitten form. Her paws glittered with clawlike weapons. "What kind of sorcery makes it possible that these will work when she's in kitten form, human form, or even someday her adult beast form?" I asked Ciel.

"Hmmm, I guess you could call it sorcery," Ciel answered, "but really Limdt is just that skilled."

Catra's custom equipment was a set of claw weapons. They looked normal at first glance, but they had the special property of changing their form to match Catra's. The intricately entwined metal links would apparently somehow sense when Catra transformed and automatically rearrange themselves. Limdt's technique was truly off the charts.

"Can all dwarf artisans make this kind of thing?"

"No way," said Ciel. "Limdt is special."

"Good, I'm glad." That was a relief. It was frightening to think of such things becoming everyday equipment.

"Kweee!" Kuku cried out as though to say "I wanted some too!"

"He said he was working on yours. Be patient."

"Kwaaa!" Kuku seemed to cheer up completely just from being pet. *You're a simple little fella, huh?*

“Okey doke, it’s time to head into battle. How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” I said. “It’s not like I haven’t done this before.”

“True. That’s good, then.”

I’d gone through this same civil war many times in my past. Facing that same battlefield again, I felt an odd lack of enthusiasm. “Guess we missed the beginning of the battle already, huh?”

“On purpose,” Ciel said.

“What? Why?” I *had* thought our preparations had gone oddly slowly...

“Isn’t it obvious? The easiest enemy to defeat is an enemy who thinks they’ve already won.”

“Ah, of course.”

“That’s why Gitelle isn’t deploying ace fighters of his own. He’ll get beaten down at first, but then the stage will be set for you three to swoop in and turn things around.”

“So what exactly do you want us to do?”

“Basically, show the enemy how dangerous you are. Once their ranks are broken, you’ll be able to pick off their ace, and that should finish things.”

Ciel wasn’t just focused on victory. She was aiming for a victory that did the least total damage possible. In all my loops fighting as an ordinary foot soldier, I had never thought to look at things that way.

“Just aim to get it over with as quickly as possible,” she said. “That will be the best result for everyone involved.”

“Got it.” The scale was completely different. I suddenly and clearly perceived the distance between the soldier focused only on the back-and-forth clash of swords with his opponent, and the princess who saw the good of the whole kingdom at once.

At that moment, the battlefield loomed into view before us.

❖

“Rude not to show up when we have a score to settle...” Margus tore through

the battlefield with the might of a hundred men. Perhaps he wasn't yet quite a match for a full battalion, but there was no doubt that no one on either side of the battle right now was his equal.

"Hah. Must be too scared to face me." The enemy had no aces of their own, so nothing impeded Margus's steady progress through their ranks. "Taking prisoners is all well and good, but capturing too many will be a pain. At this rate, maybe the rest of my opponents will find themselves the victims of unfortunate accidents..." Margus's lips twisted in a cruel smile.

At that moment, the blare of a trumpet interrupted Margus's focus.

"What the—?!"

"Report! Fresh troops at the enemy stronghold! Master Lugus has been captured!"

"What?! He's the commander of the vanguard! How—?! He should have been protected by his guard!"

Margus's confusion was warranted. The battle so far had progressed entirely in House Argus's favor. There had been no reports of any break in the troops that should have been marching out in front of their commander. In fact, two things had occurred simultaneously on the front lines. First, Lugus, in a rash attempt to seize glory for himself, had foolishly advanced to the front of his forces. And second...

"We have details on the enemy reinforcements! Reporting now! The reinforcements consist of... Huh?!"

Margus glared impatiently at the messenger who had suddenly halted in his reading of the report.

"M-My apologies," the messenger continued. "The reinforcements consist of one B rank adventurer, and, um...a juvenile divine beast behemoth, and...a juvenile dragon."

"...*Excuse me?!*" Margus was hit with a sudden suspicion. In this life, he had no idea that Remille had been training as a tamer. But nonetheless, some instinct inside him felt certain.

Remille is here.

"I'll show him this time...!" Margus's blood boiled with rage. *What happened before was just a fluke. My success on this battlefield has already proven it. Just a fluke.*

It was a boon to Margus that Remille had already attained B rank. "Finally, an enemy ace..." In the context of the battlefield, B rankers were treated as ace fighters. That meant that they would fetch a large ransom in the prisoner exchange. Despite the fact that Remille had beaten him, Margus was confident that Remille's actual strength was no more than it had been in their prep school days. *I couldn't script this any better*, he thought.

Oddly, at that moment, he seemed not to have fully registered the presence of the divine beast behemoth and dragon. Perhaps he had only focused on the "juvenile" part.

"I'm coming for you, Remille..."

With that, Margus dashed toward the heart of the front lines, where Lugus had been captured.

❖

“Okay, so you came out of nowhere, and all you brought with you was a kitten and a baby dragon. There’s no way the enemy won’t underestimate you,” Ciel said.

“Hm, I guess so.” Catra was currently staying in her kitten form, and Kuku was too small to seem like much of a threat. I suppose if someone tried to attack me with a kitten and a tiny dragon, I wouldn’t take them seriously either.

“Which is all the more reason to go in swinging. Punch through their troops and go after the generals.”

“So you’re saying our target is—”

“There,” Ciel and I said together—a unit whose commander was clearly visible too close to the front lines.

“But wait,” I said, “shouldn’t we get the go-ahead from Lord Gitelle first?”

“Nah, it’s fine. Gitelle should keep his focus on the enemy forces, not take the time to talk to us.”

“Oh. Sure.” I adjusted my grip on the weapon Limdt had given me. For such a seemingly large and unwieldy weapon, it somehow felt completely natural in my hands. Not quite a sword; not quite a spear. Mighty enough to slice through the enemy with a single slash. A scimitar, they’d said it was called.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s do this.”

“I’ll do a sweep from headquarters to check for any particularly troublesome enemy forces, but right now it seems like only riffraff.”

“That’s...harsh,” I said. *Margus is somewhere among that riffraff...*

“But fair. No one here is a match for two divine beasts, even juvenile ones.”

Okay, yeah, that *was* fair. They may have looked small and cuddly right now, but that didn’t mean they weren’t extremely powerful.

“So,” Ciel went on, “our goal is to end this tiresome squabble as quickly as possible.”

“Got it.” I surveyed the enemy troops once more. The commander we were targeting led more troops than anyone else.

❖

I charged across the battlefield in the direction Ciel pointed me. As I rode through the enemy troops on my borrowed horse, just brandishing Limdt's weapon in front of me was enough to open up a path. "Catra, you okay?" I called.

"Meeep!" Catra was still in the guise of a small cat—partly to make the enemy underestimate her, and partly for ease of motion—running nimbly alongside my horse. No one could mistake her for an innocent little kitten now, though, as she sprinted along deftly dodging incoming attacks while aiming her own strikes right at the enemy's weak spots. The soldiers on the front lines who had seen her before we charged and dismissed her based on her appearance sure were surprised.

"Kookyooo!" Kuku's seemingly benign call unleashed a powerful *Wind Breath* attack, scattering the enemy lines.

With the two of them covering me—each attacking with the power of an ace fighter in their own right—I was able to keep my focus on not losing sight of my target as I charged. "Almost there..." We had penetrated deep into the enemy formation. Our allies wouldn't be able to catch up for a while, but with Catra and Kuku here I wasn't worried about being surrounded or attacked from behind. Still, I was just thinking it was about time we finished things, when—

"Ummph... Stay back!"

"There!" I shouted. "Catra, you got this?"

"Leave it to meeeeep!" Catra morphed into human form in midair as she leapt forward.

The enemy commander's horse and equipment set him apart from the other troops surrounding him. His face and bearing reminded me of Margus somehow. He was frantically trying to retreat, but there was nowhere for him to go.

"Calm *meow*n!" Catra said to him. "Master said not to kill you."

"Damn it, what is that fool Margus doing?! I will not be—"

“Oh, shush,” said Catra.

“Gyaaah...”

—*Thud.*

At just one kick from Catra, the commander fell down unconscious.

“Nicely done, Catra.”

“Meep!” Catra bounded swiftly back to me and I patted her head as I led my horse over to the fallen general. Until now, I’d been leaving the taking of prisoners to the soldiers who followed us, but I wanted to be certain of the general’s capture myself.

“Okay, you guys can take it from here.” We were surrounded by enemy troops on all sides, but no one dared to approach Catra and Kuku. That left an opening into which I released the amorphous tentacle monsters I’d brought along.

“Wh-What the hell...?!”

“Aaaah! They’re going to eat Commander Lugus...!”

“B-But... They said they wouldn’t kill him...”

The tentacle monsters were certainly horrifying to behold, but the truth was that the feelers were just for restraining hostages. Still, it was convenient that their appearances made the enemy less eager to intervene.

“All right,” I said, “now we’ll head back to headquarters, picking up any hostages we—”

Catra interrupted me with a cry before I could finish my sentence. “Master! Someone’s coming!”

“Is that...?” I watched as a small mounted party cut furiously through the enemy ranks, heading right for us.

❖

“Out of my way!”

There he is, thought Margus. *It really is Remille.*

“They haven’t taken my brother far yet! Recover him!” Margus yelled to his men as he galloped toward Remille.

“It’s my lucky day,” he said to himself. For some reason, Remille had actually been deployed to the battlefield as an ace fighter. *If Lord Gitelle had called in high-ranking adventurers from his territory, or if Minister Rostel had sent any of his own trained fighters, I might have a real fight on my hands. But...* “If this is the best they’ve got, there’s no way I’ll lose.”

Whatever happened at the colosseum was just some fluke. A mistake. And because of that mistake, my whole life’s been derailed. My shining future as an adventurer should have begun that day—he shattered that dream. “It all started with that talk of him leaving the party... He should have been my slave for life!”

Rui and Aman had both offered to fight alongside him, despite their distaste for war, but he’d refused them. He couldn’t afford to owe them that much. Not in terms of money; that was no problem. But the wound to his pride—to the pride of his whole house—would not be so easily mended.

“This is all your fault! You ruined everything! Remille!”

“Margus...”

Margus raised his sword and kicked his horse into a wild gallop. Weapons designed for mounted combat relied on the momentum of the charge. Standing still, Remille was a sitting duck.

“Die!!!”

❖

“Master!”

“It’s okay.” Catra started to rush forward as Margus came bearing down toward us, but I held out a hand to restrain her.

“He’s here! It’s Master Margus!”

“Master Margus has come to save us!”

“He’ll put an end to this freakish foe!”

The mood among the enemy troops around us turned from fearful to hopeful.

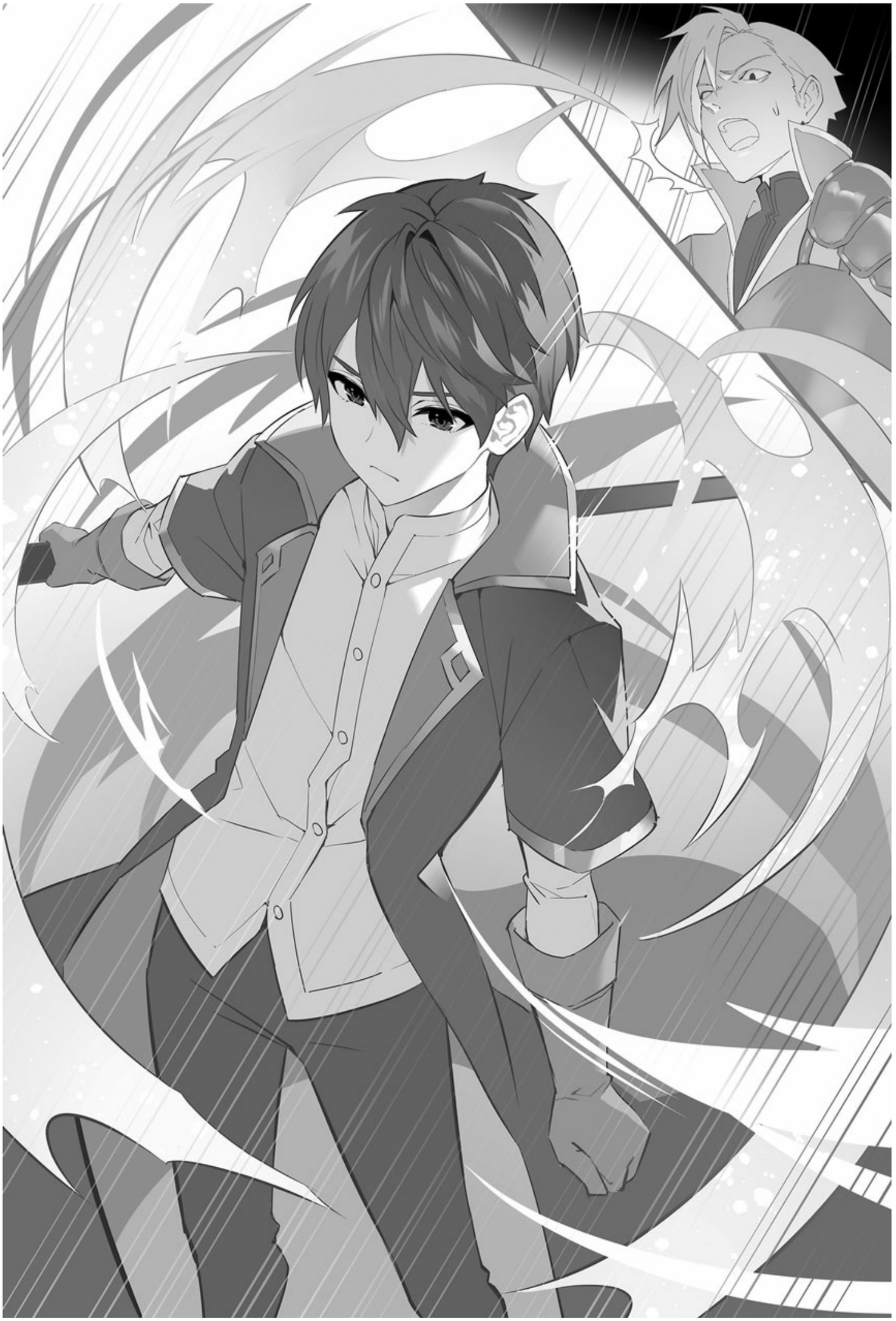
Ever since our prep school days, Margus had always had natural charisma. And, of course, he also had the skill to back it up.

“Die!!!”

As Margus brought his sword sweeping down toward me, I said just two words. “Don’t die.”

“Huh? ...What?! Ack...!”

With the hilt of my scimitar, I sent Margus flying from his horse.



As I'd watched Margus riding toward us, it had finally truly clicked.

"Catra," I said. "I...really am powerful, huh?"

There was no one I'd been closer to, no one I'd gone through more with, no one I'd spent more time with than Margus. And throughout all of my repeated lifetimes, I had never, *never* been able to keep up with him. I knew how strong he was in battle. And yet...

"Master Margus has fallen! Just like that..."

"It's over! We're done for!"

"We can't win! If we stay here, we're screwed! Even if they let us live, it's not worth being injured..."

The soldiers around us had turned from an organized force into a panicked mob. Going to war really didn't have much upside for them. Even though casualties were generally lower in a civil war, serious injuries were common—and fatal wounds weren't unheard of. In theory, the soldiers were compensated financially for their efforts, but if they ended up on the losing side even that was uncertain. And in this case, to make matters worse, it seemed the troops had gotten wind of the fact that their opponents were backed by the powerful minister of the judiciary.

"I...won."

After all this time, I finally, truly, actually beat Margus.

The Final Battle

“Nice work. But we’re not finished yet.”

“Huh?” Those were Ciel’s first words to me when I returned to her bearing the captured general and ace fighter, Lugus and Margus. “These two aren’t enough?”

Not that I’d been planning to just stop here. If we didn’t immediately attack and secure the enemy stronghold, who knows what that mysterious foe with godlike powers might be capable of? I had been planning to take Lord Argus prisoner as soon as possible and put an end to the whole battle, but...

“No,” Ciel said. “We’ve got a more troublesome enemy to deal with.”

I hadn’t seen any especially worrisome opponents out on the battlefield, which meant...

“As soon as you left,” she continued, “we suddenly observed some sort of strange activity in the enemy camp.”

“What do you mean by strange activity?”

Ciel’s Eye flashed aquamarine. *He’s already here,* I thought. *That powerful foe...* But Ciel’s next words were not what I expected.

“They’re doping.”

“Wait—doping?”

“Not like the strengthening tonics you’ve made. Those were temporary. I’m talking doping potions that permanently change you, for the rest of your life.”

Ciel’s Eye turned back to its normal color. I could sense the deep emotions behind those eyes.

“Is there anything that can be done for them now?” I asked.

“The high-grade potion you made—that would cure them.”

Before I could say anything, another voice reacted to Ciel’s words. “Did you say high-grade potion?!” That voice belonged to none other than...

“Lord Gitelle.”

“Ah, I do apologize for the delay in greeting you,” Lord Gitelle said.

“Not at all, that was on us...” I started to bow, but he stopped me with a gesture.

“Come, come, Master Remille, you are a hero of the realm in both name and deed. There’s no need to stand on such ceremony. Not to mention that right now you are an acting commander.” He nodded a greeting at Ciel, then continued. “Now then, seeing as you are here on my behalf, it would seem a shame for you to be forced to use something so precious as a high-grade potion. Besides, our intelligence says that those augmented troops number around twenty. I certainly couldn’t afford to pay you back for that much.”

“That’s no problem,” said Ciel. “We can just add it to Argus’s bill.”

“Can he afford that...?”

“I’ll make him.”

A smile blossomed on Lord Gitelle’s face, as though he’d been waiting to hear those very words. “So adding in the handling of the augmented soldiers, then that’s... I’ll just head over to Lord Argus’s location and put an end to this war, shall I?”

“Yes,” said Ciel. “And then...”

At Ciel’s nod, Lord Gitelle stood up eagerly. “And then, the spoils!” With that, he turned and strode away.

Ciel waited until he was out of sight, then turned back to me. “Just to be on the safe side, you should use the Big Four instead of just these two. Things have gotten a bit more complicated than we expected, and there’s still another enemy lurking around.”

“Right. That there is.” I agreed that we should call in the Big Four. *If that...whatever it was shows up again this time...*

“Neither Crow nor your familiars were able to gather any intel on it, so chances are it’s somehow connected to that god.”

“And we don’t know what it’s after...” When I’d met this foe in previous

loops, it just stared us down and then left without actually doing anything.

"See what I mean?" Ciel said. "It's a real pain not to know if you're dealing with friend or foe."

Yeah, I did see what she meant.

"So," she went on, "how will you deploy your troops?"

"I think I'll send Emmy out with any of her slimes that can also take human form," I said. She and her minions would be useful in securing the prisoners of war. Ciel nodded in agreement, and I turned to Catra. "Catra, can you contact Emmy and convey those orders?"

"Meeep?! And leave your side, Master?!"

"You're the only one I can ask to do this."

"Mmmph..." Catra nodded reluctantly, looking disgruntled. "Fine. I'll do it."

"Good. I'm counting on you." *Okay, what else needs to get done... There's the mysterious enemy from my past lives, and tracking down whoever supplied the doping potions...and neutralizing the transformed soldiers with my high-grade potion.*

"I'm gonna hand over all of the potions that I have to Catra."

"Hm? I assumed you would take care of that part yourself," Ciel said.

"I think we should recreate the conditions of my previous loops as much as possible, rather than just trying to track down an enemy we know nothing about." In the past, the enemy had appeared as we headed to Argus's headquarters after securing victory. "Plus, if we end up just capturing Argus without incident, that will put an end to all this."

"That's true."

I wasn't sure exactly how many of Emmy's minions could transform into humans, but in any case it seemed best to leave that job to Emmy, Catra, and their crew. I explained the plan to Catra, and she quickly set out to get started.

❖

"Is it really okay for a princess to be on the battlefield?" We had decided to

mount up and ride toward the enemy stronghold, taking a route that avoided their troops as much as possible. Ciel used her Eye to map out our path, so we were able to ride basically unobstructed despite the battle being technically ongoing.

"Of course. Who better to deal with a disgraced noble?"

"I guess." From my experience in past loops, I could pretty well predict the endless stream of desperate, raving excuses I would face if I went by myself. "Seems like you've seen this before..."

"No, you're the one who's seen it before."

We both chuckled. Despite the fact that we were riding through hostile territory, it felt good to laugh. "At this rate, it looks like things will—"

—*Go smoothly*, I was about to say, but the words died on my lips.

"You see that?"

"Yeah." We had both pulled our horses up abruptly, and now peered at the space just ahead of us.

"Ah, so you did notice... Perhaps you are more intelligent than we had heard." The figure that approached us was a man in a white cloak.

The threads that stretched across our path were so thin as to be effectively invisible. Ciel had detected them with her Eye of Appraisal, and I had used my Detection skill. Without those abilities, they would have been impossible to see while galloping on horseback. Both Ciel and I guessed immediately that this man was the brains behind the augmented troops.

"So you're the one who created those soldiers," Ciel said.

"Indeed I am. I have taken a bunch of useless morons and given them a new purpose."

"Did they know what that potion would do to them?"

"Of course not. Didn't I just say they were morons?"

"I see." Ciel's voice was quiet, but anger radiated from her in palpable waves. She turned her back on the man and spoke to me. "Take him captive. We have

to get him to spill every single person responsible for this.”

“Got it.” I raised my scimitar.

“My, my. Do you think you’ve won just because you detected my trap? So you are fools, after all.” The man spread his arms wide.

When I thought of augmented troops, I imagined men with greatly increased physical strength, but...

“You *must* be fools to believe you could fight my creations on your own!” As he spoke, the forest behind the man seemed to come to life with a deep rumbling. And crashing towards us through the trees came...

“No...!”

“Remille! Stay with me!”

I had gone so rigid that Ciel instinctively shouted at me. *It can’t be. It can’t be... This doesn’t happen yet, not for years, this can’t be happening...*

“Okay then...” said Ciel. *“Giga Flare!”*

A giant flame burst forth around me, threatening to engulf me as I stood frozen in place. Seeing the monster react to the fire finally jolted me back to the present.

This was it—the monster that I faced in the previous loop. That horror against which neither the hero’s sword nor the sorcerer’s magic had been enough. *It’s over. This is the end.*

“Ha! Did you truly believe that puny flame could harm my masterpiece?”

My thoughts exactly. And yet, the monster seemed to shy away from Ciel’s fire, halting its attack. It should have been able to swat away a fire spell like that without a thought...

“Thanks, I...”

“We’ll talk about it later,” said Ciel. “Right now, just focus on what to do next.”

“Right.”

The man in the white cloak laughed. *He created this chimera that looks just*

like the monster that shows up three years from now... All the more reason he must be captured!

"You got this?" Ciel asked.

I nodded. Now that I got a good look at it, the similarity to the monster that had killed me was superficial. This thing was nowhere near as strong. *I can take it...*

"Heh. Fools such as you have no prayer against my creation!"

As though to mock the man's cocky words, my scimitar cut through the air toward the monster, and...

"Wh-What...?! Impossible!"

...Sliced it clean in half. Without missing a beat, I cast a spell to restrain the man. "*Slow!*"

"Unngh..."

I didn't know if he had any fighting ability, but just to be safe I wanted to restrict his movement so the tentacle monsters could take him easily. Suddenly —

—*Ka-THUNK.*

With a thud like a heartbeat, I found myself involuntarily flung backwards. When I looked for Ciel, I found her face twisted in intense pain. I suspected my expression was similar.

This debilitating pressure emanated from a new arrival on the scene. "What the hell..." I muttered. "Now what? H-Huh—?!" I couldn't see what happened, but suddenly the white-cloaked man's body rose into the air as though he was floating on his back. He wasn't dead. I glanced at the being who had knocked him out with one blow...

Our eyes met. Just for a moment. And then, just as suddenly, they were all gone without a single trace, as though the monster had never been there.

"Ahhh... Ah..." Ciel gasped in air as though she had been forgetting to breathe.

It had happened so fast. The figure...whatever it was...emitted such an oppressive aura that I had only just been able to glimpse its silhouette. A basically human shape, but I felt it was slightly bigger than the god we had met in the church.

“Are you okay?” Ciel asked me.

“Yeah. But...” Every single trace was gone. We had no way to track them. “How...”

“For now, we should just be thankful that we didn’t have to fight,” Ciel said.

For Ciel to say such a thing, with her Eye of Appraisal, was in itself a testament to the enemy’s power.

“You go ahead. I’m gonna look around here a bit to double-check that there’s no trace evidence left, and then I’ll follow.” Ciel activated her Eye.

After what just happened, I felt reluctant to just leave her here—but at the same time, it also meant that it was all the more urgent to put an end to this war.

“Be careful,” I said.

“Same to you.”

❖

As predicted, Lord Argus did not come quietly.

Catra and Emmy’s work seemed to have gone smoothly, and the whole front was now under the control of House Gitelle. With the general and the ace already fallen, the second and third sons of House Argus had been captured by Gitelle’s troops without any trouble.

And since I arrived at the enemy headquarters ahead of Ciel, at the moment of his complete and utter defeat, I was the target of Lord Argus’s vitriolic ravings.

“Ha, as if I could ever be taken by some pathetic noble pretender like you!”

“And yet...”

“You will regret this! I will have my revenge, you mark my words! I will have

revenge!”

...And so on. The soldiers at the headquarters, however, already seemed to have abandoned his cause.

There was nothing to do but restrain him and wait for Ciel. Mentioning her name shut him up instantly. He’d have plenty of time later to reflect on whether he would rather have been captured by the princess.

Aftermath

“Now, shall I summarize the intelligence we have gathered?”

With the conclusion of the civil war, we had quickly checked in with Lord Gitelle and then made our way back to the palace. In Ciel’s words: “The aftermath of war is just a huge pain in the neck.”

We had taken a bit of time to decompress, but now that Crow had returned we were going over what he had learned about those events.

“First, there is the matter of the Earl of Argus. He will be stripped of his rank.”

“That seems like a harsh punishment for a skirmish against another earl...” I said.

“His son’s humiliation in the royal colosseum was already a stain on the house,” said Ciel. “Plus, they have been engaging in unjust taxation and funding illegal research. They brought this on themselves.”

“Of course, it was ultimately the decision of the minister of the judiciary to take things this far.”

Ah, of course. As a result of the whole thing, the former earl had been imprisoned and was awaiting judgment for all of his past crimes. Margus and his brothers had also been arrested.

“But enough about those trifling matters. What of the white-cloaked man and the mysterious figure who fled with him?” Ciel asked.

“Regrettably, I have been unable to pick up a single hint about where they absconded,” said Crow.

“Catra, how about you?” I asked.

“Sa*meow*...”

Well, that wasn’t surprising. In fact, given the total lack of leads, there was one obvious candidate.

“It appears we should assume for now that this is connected to the gods,”

said Crow.

“So it seems,” I agreed. But why did it take the man in the white cloak? And what did this all have to do with the chimera that appeared in my third year? It was obviously connected, but...how?

“Well, no point in dwelling on things we can’t know,” Ciel said. “What about the other thing?”

“Concerning the man in the white cloak,” Crow said, “thanks to testimony from some of the soldiers that Catra helped rescue, we have learned that House Keyes was involved.”

“I helped, I helped!” said Catra proudly. I rewarded her with some pats. She was currently in more or less human form, so it felt a bit strange. I had already praised her effusively right after the battle ended.

“Keyes...” Ciel, meanwhile, had reacted to that name with an expression of disgust.

“He’s a marquess out near the border, right?”

“That’s right. Just having the testimony from these common soldiers isn’t enough to move against him.”

“I concur, Your Highness. It will be difficult to root out all of the illicit research facilities scattered around such a large territory. Despite having this information, there is nothing more we can do to act on it for now.”

This illegal research and the white-cloaked man all tied in with the chimera, which was connected with my date with destiny. *We’ve got to get to the bottom of this, whatever it takes!* “Well, I mean, given that we were starting from no information at all, even a small lead is better than nothing, right?”

Ciel laughed. “Look at you, Remille the optimist.”

Huh. Now that she mentioned it, I guess I was feeling uncharacteristically optimistic. “Maybe you finally managed to improve my self-confidence after all.”

A look of surprise flashed across Ciel’s face.

“Hmm? What is it?”

“Nothing,” she said. “Just thinking about how you’ve changed. Anyway, we can’t afford to get sidetracked.” With that, she seemed to forcibly drop the matter.

She was right. Although Margus’s defeat had taken care of one of the main sources of my past trauma, we still had basically no information about the chimera or about the mysterious god who had appeared. And furthermore, we couldn’t assume that Rui and Aman would be as easy to deal with as Margus had been. All the more so because Rui’s family were allies of Marquess Keyes.

And all that I’d really learned so far about the trial I would face in three years was that going up against a god was terrifying.

“It is convenient that Lord Gitelle and Lord Rostel both owe us for coming to their aid in the war,” said Crow. “I will call in those favors to enlist their help in tracking down information about the being that absconded with the white-cloaked man.”

Crow being Crow, I had no doubt he would soon find out whatever *could* be found out.

“And I am going to keep making you stronger,” Ciel said with a smile.

“I can’t wait.”

“Meep neither!”

Two and a half years left before I hit the three-year mark. But this time would be different. It *had* to be different. *A life this incredible surely only comes along once...*

“This time, I’m going to live!”

Filled with newfound determination, I set my sights on the next goal.

Afterword

Allow me to introduce myself—my name is SkyFarm. Thank you so much for reading my work. This story was originally serialized on the web and was later collected into the light novel format. The idea arose from thinking about how cool it would be to be able to level up with maximum efficiency using a huge stockpile of XP.

Most of my work centers around protagonists who are tamers, and this one is no exception. But in this story, the familiars can also assume human form and participate as real party members. As of the end of volume one, Remille has already tamed a variety of strange beings. Where will he go from here? I'm curious to find out myself! I very much hope you will come along for the ride.

On another subject, I think a lot about how crucial it is for any creator to follow popular fads. Especially in entertainment, it's so important to have a sense of what the audience will enjoy. With that in mind, I hope you will all continue to follow me even when it's hard to tell if my Twitter belongs to an author, or to some kind of animal trainer or hunter (lol). But jokes aside, games these days are truly incredible, aren't they? I really enjoy them. I often wish I could actually live inside such a world.

As I come to the end of this note, I want to express my gratitude to t e f f i s h for the gorgeous illustrations! Every time I received a new illustration, it gave me a burst of motivation and excitement about the project.

There were so many other people without whom this book would not have been possible, from the managing editor Yamaguchi all the way down. Thank you all so much.

And the biggest thank you of all goes to all of the readers who gave this story a chance. I am so grateful to you. I hope to see you again in volume two!

SkyFarm, May 2021