Shin Araki

Illustration by
Haruyuki Morisawa

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Classroom for Heroes


4
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Illustration by
Haruyuki Morisawa
CLASSROOM
FOR HEROES


The "Hero King" appears before the students of Rosewood Academy.
Clay
Kassim
Claire
Earnest
Hero King
"My lady, I have good reason not to take it off. You see, this is not a suit of armor but restraint gear designed to hold back my surging fighting force!"
"Ahhh! It's the revered Hero!"
"Please could we see your face?"


"Now, Blade, show us your undergarments!"
The Overlord
"Why're you all acting so weird...?"
In order to awaken Blade to his hornier side... the girls wage all-out war!
"L-like this...?"
"Ee-hee... ♥"
Yessica


01 [1・UNE]
A balanced type with a large sword.
The closest to the original Sophie
and leader among the sisters.
02 [2・DEUX]
A power-oriented type with a giant
spiked club. Crude and prone to anger.
03 [3・TROIS]
A speed-oriented type with a long
lance. Pessimistic and distrustful.
04 [4・QUATRE]
An emotionally enhanced type with
a large scythe. Overtly sexual.
05 [5・CINQ]
The youngest, a defective (?) unit.
A fighter type with gauntlets.
Loves destroying things.
Here, in this abandoned warehouse,
five dark shadows made their presences
known. They were girls, each
with the same face, and they
were all resting in their preferred positions.
Mass-produced, manmade Heroes—
the Sophie Series.



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YEN ON
New York

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Translation by Kevin Gifford
Cover art by Haruyuki Morisawa

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Chapter 1:

Turmoil at Rosewood Academy

Episode 1: The Student Council Election

◦ Scene I: The King's Bedchamber

Knock, knock.

With a turn of her wrist, Earnest rapped on the door to the headmaster's office. After a few seconds, she tried again.

Knock, knock.

No answer. She took a deep breath.

"…Your Majesty, it's Earnest Flaming."

Still no answer.

"Haaah…"

With a loud sigh, she put her hand on the doorknob.

"I'm coming in… Okay? All right…?"

It wasn't the first time Earnest had not-so-discreetly invited herself into the king's bedchamber. Just like the previous time, she found the monarch sprawled across his large square bed, snoring loudly and completely vulnerable to attack.

She tried calling out to him before approaching.

"Sire…?"

But atop the crumpled sheets, the naked beast—or man, rather—continued to contentedly snore at full volume.

"Your Majesty?" Earnest called out again as she took a step closer.

She had permission from Sirene to mercilessly beat him out of bed if need be, and she had to admit she was looking forward to that a little. With the tip of her finger, she poked his cheek above his beard.

"Mmmph… Mmm… C'mon, Sirene… Knock it off…"

He'd completely misunderstood what was happening. It amused Earnest enough that she kept poking him for a bit, jabbing at his cheek without a shred of regret. It wouldn't be a problem at all. She had permission. This wouldn't count as treason or anything.

"Hee-hee-hee-hee! You scamp…"

Then, still babbling in his sleep, the king came right for her. Earnest found herself in his arms…but this, too, wasn't a first for her. She wasn't about to make the same mistake twice. She knew the king didn't have any bad intentions hugging her like this, but Blade would get jealous.

Earnest quickly wriggled out of the hold. The king finally opened his eyes, realizing he didn't have a woman in his arms anymore.

"Oh. Hello there, Earnest. Nice morning, isn't it?"

He looked and sounded perfectly chipper. He'd been half-asleep until just a moment ago, and although he didn't show it at all, it was obvious he was trying to hide his embarrassment. Earnest found it a tad funny, looking at this man several times her age and having the word *cute* pop into her mind.

"I brought the papers outlining the itinerary for our next interschool goodwill meeting, sire." She thrust the file at him, thankful to finally get down to business.

"Ah, um, yes. I'll take a look at it during my afternoon work session—"

"I'd appreciate it if you could look at it *now*, please. You were supposed to approve it yesterday."

"You're as rough with me as Sirene, aren't you?" the king said, reluctantly accepting the file. "But then, come to think of it, I suppose I *am* the headmaster here."

"Who *else* did you think you were, sire?" replied Earnest.

The king, still sitting half-naked in bed, began to look through the papers. Earnest patiently waited by his side, her back straight. She'd started staring at the king's vast mound of chest hair, and now she couldn't look away.

"The interschool competition should be something team-based rather than individual events. Otherwise, I have nothing to add."

It had only taken the king ten or so seconds to give his decree.

"Yes, sire."

Earnest sighed. He'd pointed out the one thing she'd been wavering on herself. She wasn't dumb enough to ask why the king preferred a team-based tournament; Earnest had also been wondering whether individual matches would be exciting enough for the audience as the main event.

She had thought the king was just skimming the papers, trying to get the task over and done with quickly, yet she couldn't have been more wrong. The idea of becoming a knight in the service of such a talented ruler someday thrilled her.

"I'll be on my way, then," Earnest said, her work done. She needed to get out of there fast, lest the king try to bear-hug her again. Blade would be *so* jealous.

"Ah, one moment." The king stopped her just as she put her hand on the doorknob. "Isn't this sort of thing normally handled by the president of the student council?"

"Hmm?"

Earnest didn't really know what he was asking, but she desperately racked her brain trying to come up with something that wouldn't make her sound stupid.

"Does this school not have a student council president?" he asked.

"I suppose *I* am something like that, my liege," she replied. Earnest was the Empress of Rosewood Academy—or at least, that was the name people had given her. If she started calling *herself* that, she'd become a laughingstock. Yet for practically her entire time at school, even after Blade had arrived on the scene, she had pretty much decided everything about Rosewood policy.

"Well, you have to be elected as student council president if you want to call yourself that. You can't simply be a dictator ruling the population through fear alone."

"Through fe—…"

Earnest stopped herself. Part of her wanted to argue against this characterization of her as a terrifying despot that struck fear in the hearts of the students—but if that opinion came from an *actual* king, she had to bow her head and listen to it.

"I want an election held at once."

"But, sire—"

"Do it."

"Rosewood Academy has no such tradition—"

"Do it. *Do* it. *Doooooooooo* it."

"Um…"

The sight of the king waving his arms and legs around wore on Earnest. He'd had the air of a mighty ruler a moment ago, yet he had seamlessly segued into acting like a spoiled child.

"I certainly don't mind a tough-as-nails girl like you coming over here and yelling at me…but if I had the choice, I'd prefer the classic class president type. You know? Glasses, braids? All frowning and saying things like 'You failed to finish all this work before the deadline, so I have no choice but to question your abilities.' I'm just looking for some *novelty*, you see?"

"*That* is your reason?"

Earnest sighed. So when it came down to it, this was just about the king's personal preferences—to have a student council president with glasses and braids. She felt as if she understood a tiny fraction of Sirene's troubles.

"Well then, if you will excuse me."

"Will you hold the election or not?" the king asked.

"…I shall think about it."

And with that, Earnest shut the door.

○ Scene II: Lunch as Usual

It was the usual lunch scene at the usual table in the usual dining hall. The buffet spread was fully laid out, and Earnest's Gang was digging in.

Just like any other day, everyone was enjoying their own personal favorites. Blade, as usual, had helped himself to some katsu curry. People claimed that was all he ate, which irked him a little, but what could he do? It really *was* that delicious. And it wasn't as if he ate it *every* meal. Maybe just, like, two and a half meals out of three. That's all.

"Hey, listen to me!"

Earnest was trying to catch Yessica's attention, but the other girl was engaged in separate conversations with Claire, Maria, and Iona all at the same time. Even for her, a three-way was about the best she could manage. Anything more than that put her over capacity.

"What?" Blade asked, which made Earnest's face light up.

"Can you *believe* how awful His Majesty is? He was all like, 'Oh, there's no student council president here? You have to be elected if you want to call yourself that! You can't be a dictator ruling by fear alone!'"

She attempted a throaty imitation of the king's voice as she paraphrased him. It seemed Earnest had been hoping to gain the approval of her peers with her "the king is awful" bit, and everyone at the table was now looking past Blade and giving her slow, serious nods. Even Yessica, still in her three-way, had turned to look at Earnest and was nodding repeatedly.

"Huh?" Earnest blinked in surprise, then tried again. "Isn't the king…just awful?"

"No, not that part," Yessica said, a serious look on her face. "We were nodding more about what *he* told *you*."

"Uh? Huh? What? You mean…about the student council president?"

"Sorry, but can you repeat what His Majesty told you?"

"Oh? Uhhh… That we should hold an election?"

"Yeah. Yes. Uh-huh."

Everyone nodded in unison again.

"Wow! I can't believe someone as crazy as His Majesty actually said something sensible."

Another round of nods. Everyone was in agreement, although whether it was over the "crazy" part or the "sensible" part was open to interpretation.

"Hey… Hey." Blade still had his spoon in his mouth as he addressed the table. There was something about this he didn't quite understand. "What's an election?"

"You don't even know that, honored Father?" the child on his lap said.

"Oh, you do?"

She was such a smart girl. Blade patted his daughter on the head. Cú was always in just the right position for that.

"I am certain," she said, "that this 'election' is a type of duel. Even I can understand such things, as long as I listen to everyone properly."

"Ohhh, I see… Okay, so what's a student council president?"

"Can't you tell from how the words sound, honored Father? It must mean the scariest person in the whole school!"

"You should rely on me, Master," Iona cut in. "As a high-spec machine, I can provide a perfect, complete explanation."

Blade was reluctant to ask Iona anything. If he did, she'd get all smug and start nagging him to heap praise upon her. So he ignored her.

"Good job, Cú. That's mostly right!" Claire said, patting her on the head.

Look at that. thought Blade. *You were right.*

"I want you to pat me, too, Master," said Iona.

You didn't help out at all.

"…So what, then? Are you gonna do it? This 'election' thing?" he asked, pointing his spoon at Earnest to accentuate his point.

"I… I will! I mean, I should, right?!"

"Wow, you're really gonna do it?" Blade asked.

He didn't see the point. If this "election" was meant to decide who the scariest person in school was, then Earnest was bound to win anyway.

○ Scene III: A Chain of Nominations

"Right, so as I was saying, is there anyone who wants to run for student council president?"

Blade's class was having their afternoon training session on the Proving Ground, and Earnest was taking a break to address all the other students. Their instructor was waiting patiently in a corner of the arena making a "hurry up!" kind of face at her—but if he said it out loud, the Empress would make him kneel on the bare earth and wait, so he opted to bide his time instead.

"Well, if there are no other candidates, I'll have to report to His Majesty that no one else volunteered—"

The Empress was obviously eager to wrap this up. She was just about to do so when a few hesitant students slowly raised their hands.

Glare.

It was her first high-pressure glower in a while. Earnest's glares had gained a sort of physical force as of late, and this one gouged a trench an inch or so deep into the ground as it moved toward its targets, before spinning them around and blowing them away.

"Right! No candidates, then? In that case, I'll tell him that—"

"Hey," said Blade.

Wham!

"Owwww…"

Blade had just landed a punch on the top of Earnest's skull, and she crouched down clutching her head.

He disliked being the only one who didn't understand what was going on, so—forgiving the smug look on Iona's face—he'd asked for a proper explanation.

According to her, an election was an event where the students selected a kind of king for the school. It wasn't a role the scariest person in the academy could intimidate her way into—instead, everybody had to talk among themselves and decide who got the job in a way they could all agree on. Apparently, this was something called "democracy."

"…You can't shut things down like that," he declared.

Earnest mumbled, "Aw, but…"

"No buts."

"Ugh… All right, fine. So who wants to run?"

The small group of people who'd previously raised their hands must have learned their lesson, because they remained silent now.

"Th-there, you see? Nobody wants to."

Blade greeted this defense with another bop on the head.

"Ooft…"

Earnest crouched back down and rubbed at the resulting bump. They could hear some snickering among the students, who sat on the ground hugging their knees—but even with tears in her eyes, Earnest's glare was strong enough to send a few of them flipping through the air. That shut them up pretty quickly.



"Okay," said Blade. "Then instead of people volunteering to run, why don't we do it the other way? The, uh, 'nomination' approach? Where people say who they think would make the best president?"

Iona stood to his side, looking incredibly smug, but he didn't let this bother him.

"Ummm…" Claire raised a finger ever so slightly. Blade pointed at her, and she nodded back. "Clay."

"Huuuuuh?! *Meee?*" the lucky nominee shouted, pointing at himself. Voices around him were murmuring things like "Ah, yeah" and "Good idea."

Huh. So Clay's a good person for student council president?

"I—I—I think a lot of people are better suited for it than me, y'know?" he said. "Like…well, how about Blade?!"

"Me?" Blade asked, pointing to himself. Now *he* was in the line of fire.

"No, Blade's a terrible choice," Yessica said, laughing and waving a hand like she was shooing away a fly. "He's got no common sense at all."

Well, that's rude. I'm a normal person. Normal. Totally normal, okay?

"All right, then how about…*you*, Yessica?!" Blade shot back.

"Me?"

"Ooh, that could work," came a few whispers from the class.

"Huh? It *could*?" Yessica pointed a finger at her surprised face. "Oh, no, no, no. I can think of someone *much* better…"

This chain of human sacrifices, with each nominee offering someone else up to the altar, went through several more people before Earnest finally interrupted it.

"All right. Then those nominated will run for student council president, okay? And I'll be running, too, of course."

"When're we holding this?" asked Blade.

"After school today."

And just as Earnest said that, the bell rang, ending class. The instructor, who'd been forced to stand in the corner the entire time,

had started crying.

○ Scene IV: After the Vote

Once everyone had written out the name of the person they were voting for on a piece of paper and put it in the designated box, Earnest spoke up.

"All right. I'm opening the ballots."

The ballot papers were pages torn from a notebook, and the box just an empty one they'd found somewhere. "It doesn't matter how we do this," Earnest had reasoned. "It's not going to affect the results anyway."

She was now standing at the lectern in a lecture hall, her desire to count the votes quickly and report back to the king clear on her face. Blade was by her side, roped into serving as her assistant, and was in charge of writing the results on the board.

Next, Earnest reached into the box and pulled out the first slip of paper.

"Earnest Flaming," she said, reading it out. She ran her fingers through her hair, rested her weight on one leg, and gave the audience a "you see that?" sort of look. Iona was pretty annoying, but Earnest could be just as irritating when she wanted to be.

"Come on, keep it going!" someone shouted.

"All right, next… Cú? Who wrote Cú down here? She's not even technically a student. And nobody nominated her, either."

Earnest chuckled, as did everyone else. Blade slumped.

So Cú's not good enough? Personally, I think my kid's pretty smart. Everything she says cuts right to the heart of the matter.

"Okay, let's keep going. Next… The Overlord?"

Maria's face stiffened in shock. She hadn't seen that one coming. She was just a plain-looking girl with twin braids, but there was another personality living inside her: the Overlord. This other half only appeared when she let down her hair.

It wasn't even clear whether she was a legitimate student… As a blood relative of the former Overlord, Maria was in the academy's

care—an outrageous turn of events made possible only by the king's position as headmaster. After all, if the ruler of the continent and chairman of the Eight Nations Alliance said he would take total responsibility for someone, then who could defy him?

"Guys, you need to treat this more seriously, all right?" said Earnest. "Stop messing around."

She continued to read out the votes. A few other unexpected names popped up. At first, she'd grin at each one, but over time, her expression began to cloud over. After counting twenty votes, her smile was completely gone. Once she reached thirty, she was staring blankly out into space. By fifty, she was clicking her tongue every time. By eighty, her face had transformed into that of a hideous monster. And by the time she read out the 109th and final vote, Earnest had taken on a look of divine transcendence, as if she had ascended to a higher plane of consciousness and was completely done with this shit.

The results:

Earnest… Two votes.

Cú… One vote.

Clay… Thirteen votes.

Leonard… Seven votes.

The Overlord… Three votes.

A few other names also had one or two votes attached to them, some of them surprising and others not so much. The nomination round earlier had meant nothing to the students, who'd all just voted for whoever came to mind.

But one person had achieved an overwhelming majority: Maria, with seventy-two votes, a record-breaking margin.

"Y-y-y…you chose *me*? B-b-b…but *why*?!"

As she stood up in a panic, her braids swirled around her.

"Congratulations, Maria," Earnest said with a soft smile. "I suppose…that ruling by fear…just isn't the way. I… I'm sorry, everyone."

After all the dramatic twists and turns as she counted the 109 votes, Earnest had come to accept how her peers saw her. She had the ability to face the truth and the capacity to change herself. The Empress was, in the end, a fairly broad-minded woman.

"But…why Maria?" she asked.

"Well, because she listens to people," said Blade, wholeheartedly supporting the decision. "She knows everyone, too. And I think she's the only one who's friends with all of us."

In the heat of battle, either he or Earnest would carry the class. He was sure about that. But during times of peace, the person at the center of the school's social hierarchy was undoubtedly Maria.

By now, Blade knew all of his classmates' fighting styles. When it came to what went on in their hearts, however, nobody had a better understanding than Maria. The 108 students, one dragon, and one android (and two birds) here were all friendly with one another—but when it came to someone you could discuss your inner problems with, it had to be Maria. When someone wanted to talk about a crisis with Blade, it was usually along the lines of "How do I get stronger?" or "How can I defeat a super-being like you?" or something like that. It was never anything about love or relationships.

"Really?" Earnest asked, sounding surprised.

"Really." Blade nodded.

Ah, she doesn't get it, does she? She needs to be a little more observant.

"That's why we got the results we did," he said, trying to appease Earnest. *Facts—concrete results like this—are convenient things. Trust in them, and you'll never be caught flat-footed.*

"You're right. I'll just have to accept this," said Earnest. He'd expected no less of her.

But, thought Blade, *isn't my own daughter really close with everyone too? She goes up and gives everyone hugs and has them carry her around and stuff. Is that not enough? I guess not. Can't argue with the facts.*

"But… Ha-ha-ha… It's weird, isn't it? You got zero votes, didn't you, Blade? I can't believe you're *that* unpopular, even though you're a super-being and all."

"Shut up. *You* only got two."

"That's two whole votes, though. That's infinitely more than zero."

Earnest stood there smugly, one hand on her curvy hips. Blade hated it when she made that face.

"I bet *you* put one of those votes in, didn't you?" he said.

"Well, yeah. But the other one… Oh! That's right! Hey, who was the other person who voted for me? Who was it?! Come on, speak up! Because…I love you!"

No one came forward, despite Earnest's shouting.

Earnest… I guess you really can't tell.

Watching over his Empress and master from the shadows as always, Leonard felt just as pitiful as ever that day.



Episode 2: A Sexual Awakening

○ Scene I: The Girls' Gathering

The girls were holding their usual late-night get-together in Earnest's dorm room.

"Blade is such a child, isn't he?" Yessica said, taking some chocolate from the table.

"He *really* is," said Earnest with a nod, grabbing a few cookies.

"Well," Claire said softly as she helped herself to a slightly more modest amount of snacks, "that's a good thing about him. Sometimes, though…I guess it is a little troublesome."

"Troublesome?" replied Earnest, indignant, as she took a whole handful. "More like incredibly annoying. Or, like, it hurts my pride a little."

"Yeah, none of your sexy techniques ever work on him," said Yessica.

"Then teach me something more powerful!"

"Ohhh, I don't know… I think that's a little too much for you to handle right now."

"Um… How powerful are we talking?"

The thought unnerved Earnest a little. Yessica's seductive smile seemed terribly mature.

"He certainly has a firm reputation of being a five-year-old at heart…and since I actually *am* five years old, we're a perfect match."

"Whoa! Deemo! Don't drop *that* on us so casually!" cried Earnest.

It was the Overlord joining the girls' party tonight, not Maria. This second personality had been born within Maria five years ago, which (more or less) made her five years old.

"What? I am perfectly fine being his mistress. I'll let you be his legal wife."

"Hey…! Wh-what're you even talking about? His l-l-l-*legal wife*?!" Earnest's cheeks turned even redder than her hair.

"But if he's mentally five years old right now, does that mean Blade will, you know, *awaken* at some point?" asked Claire.

"I… I guess so?" said Earnest. "I don't really know."

"Hmm. He *did* learn how to be jealous not long ago." Yessica nodded as she pondered this.

The term *jealous* startled Earnest a bit. Was it really jealousy Blade had shown back then? Had he been jealous over her? And even if it really *was* jealousy, that didn't mean there were any other emotions behind it.

"Honestly. He really is five years old. He's such a child!" Earnest said, her lips pursed and her gaze distant.

"But someone like Blade… Once he wakes up, he could be *really* amazing, you know?" said Yessica.

Her reputation as the most experienced girl in the room gave her words deeper meaning. The girls all crowded around her, nervously holding their breath.

"A…amazing? Like how?"

"Oh…*you know*," Yessica crooned.

"Hya! Kya! Aah!"

The squeals continued for a short while as the room burst into commotion.

"That… Oh man, that's crazy! …But, like, *how*?"

"Like I said… *You know.*"

"Hya! Kya! Aah!"

Once they got excited, they found themselves stuck in an endless loop.

○ Scene II: The Dining Hall

"Ee-*hee…* ♡"

Yessica came up to Blade as he was eating his katsu curry, bent down in front of him, and squeezed her breasts between her arms.

"Ee-*hee… ♡*"

"Hey, what's that sound you're making?" Blade asked, putting his spoon down for a moment. He'd been wondering about that for a while now.

"Hmm. That didn't work, huh? I thought that'd be straightforward enough that even *you'd* pick up on it…"

"I can't say if it worked or not," said Blade. "What's even the point of that noise?"

"It's meant to get you all hot and bothered. To *slay* you. That sort of thing."

"Well, it's certainly bothering me, but I don't know about 'slaying' me. How are you gonna kill me with that?"

"Ahhhn… ♡"

Yessica changed poses, putting her little finger up to the corner of her mouth and tousling her hair with her other hand.

"'Ahhhn'?" repeated Blade. "…Again, what is that?"

Confused, Blade put his spoon in his mouth as he stared at Yessica. She was pulling a weird pose, making weird sounds.

"Yessica, what are you *doing*?!" Earnest stormed toward her friend with so much energy her tray almost went flying.

"Don't stop me, Anna. I mean, there's no way he can ignore all of *this*. As a girl, you know, I feel a need to fight this out with him."

"You don't have to *fight* him! And that's not what you should be fighting *with*!"

"Wanna join me in the battle, Anna? I'll teach you some new moves."

"I… No thank you! I don't want any! I mean, yes, teach me some, but, like, not when everybody's watching…!"

She pointed to their surroundings. Everyone in the dining hall was staring at Earnest's table, wondering what all the commotion was about.

So let's just be quiet and eat, all right?

Blade went back to his katsu curry again, fully losing track of the topic of conversation. While he loved katsu curry, it wasn't as if he ate it for *every* meal. At most, he only had it two and a half meals out of every three…and it just so happened that it was time for katsu curry again at lunch that day. Honestly, he really didn't eat it *that* often.

"Master, another large plate of katsu curry for you."

"Ooh."

Iona already had his second helping at the ready, and Blade responded by cleaning the plate in just three mouthfuls.

"And a non-spicy version for you, Cú."

"Thank youuu!"

Cú had recently grown capable of holding table utensils by herself. This meant she could chomp away without having her honored father spoon-feed her all the time.

What a good girl she is.

"Hey, Blade. Look this waaay. Ee-*heee…* ♡"

"Huh? You're still doing that?"

Blade, a little startled, turned to the side. He thought he'd left the conversation, but it looked like he was still at the center of it. What kind of exotic assassination technique *was* this anyway?

"As your mistress, I can no longer sit here quietly."

Maria, who'd been eating a salad for lunch, suddenly stood up and began to undo her braids. With a seductive smile, she transformed herself into the Overlord. Maria, as the main possessor of their shared body, had first dibs on it, but sometimes the Overlord would take the initiative and jump out herself.

"How is this?" Now she was affecting some kind of pose.

"Whoa… Deemo!" shouted Earnest. "Don't lift your skirt up! That's going too far! Too far, girl!"

"What kind of demon would I be if I didn't exhibit my whole body? Here, Blade. Take a good look."

Will you all just shut up? I'm busy right now. I've got this pork cutlet, this curry, and this rice here, and I'm busy trying to get all

three on the spoon at the same time. If you get just the right balance and put it all into your mouth together, it creates this miraculous sort of harmony. I can't say for sure, but I think I'm the only person in the world who knows about this.

"Look, Claire, you try it, too," said Yessica. "Come on."

"Huh? No, I'm— Ah! Eep! Hya! Eek!"

"This is amazing, honored Father."

"Oh yeah? I bet it is."

"Master, I will capture a visual snapshot of this for you. If you wish to use it later, my high-spec features can project it at a moment's notice."

"Sure, thanks. You're *so* high-spec."

Blade focused his mind wholly on his katsu curry. *Ugh. What is even going on in here?*

"L-like *this*…?"

"No, not like that, Anna. You have to lean forward more. Like you're pushing them up from below."

"Ah! W-wait! That feels tight! It's so tight! My chest… Too tight!"

The sound of Earnest's voice made Blade look over for a moment.

"Why're you all acting so weird…?"

Yessica was hugging her from behind, causing a ruckus with her hands on Earnest's breasts. Was she rubbing them? Squeezing them?

Seriously, what are they doing?

"Come on, Anna. Try saying it. '*Ahhhnn… ♡*'"

"N-no, um…th-that isn't… That's too much!"

"I'll *make* you say it, then."

Yessica bit her earlobe.

"Ahah! ♡"

Earnest let out a strange noise.

Blade watched the girls' bizarre behavior, exasperated.

What in the world…?

○ Scene III: In the Thermae

The sexual attacks continued over in the public bath.

"Oo-*hoo…* ♡"

"Wh-whoa! Ah— Wait! Yessica! They're showing! I can see them! I can *seeeee* them! Your…bits! Your bits!!"

"Don't stop me now, Anna. There's no *way* he's impervious to something like this. If we can't make him turn around at least once, we'll lose our honor as women."

"Blade! Don't look. I'm serious, okay? No matter what you do, don't turn around!"

"I won't," he said, disinterested.

"Worry not, Master," Iona declared. "I have captured everything in a visual snapshot for you. If you wish to use it later, you need but ask."

"Yeah, thanks. You're *so* high-spec."

"Yessica, stop. Stand up," said Earnest. "What kind of pose *is* that, even?"

"This? You mean my leopardess pose?"

"Leopardess pose"? What's that *supposed to mean?*

"I said don't *look*!" Earnest shouted.

Oops. Now she was angry with him. Blade pouted.

"Are you not going to join the fray, Sophie?" asked Earnest.

"I'm fine. As long as Blade is happy, that's all I care about."

"Well, Blade's pouting up a storm right now, you know."

Please shut up, Earnest. I'm not pouting. Just be quiet. Leopardess pose or whatever, just keep it to yourself.

"I see," said Iona. "So you have decided there is little chance of winning in a visually oriented psychological battle. That is a wise judgment. Meanwhile, Earnest has opted to dominate her target's sense of touch by making physical contact. Perhaps, Sophie, given your lack of stimulating externals, you could learn from Earnest's body language— Ow, ow, that hurts, Sophie. Applying that much pressure to my temples clearly exceeds the design limits of my metal skull."

Sophie was punishing Iona. Even with his back turned, Blade could tell that much.

"Come on, Blade, stop pouting," demanded Earnest.

"I'm not pouting."

"Eesh. Just lie down here."

He was coerced into lying down on top of a flat rock in the hot water. Lately, Earnest had been in the habit of giving him a massage whenever something happened to him. Her fire-infused masseuse skills made his whole body feel warm and worked wonders.

"…Ugh. What's *with* all of you?" Blade grumbled, but only moments later, he was sprawled across the rock.

He didn't know anything about this "leopardess pose"…but Earnest's massages? Now *that* was the stuff.

○ Scene IV: The Men's Meeting

"Sorry! You gotta let me hide out here!"

Blade had escaped down the hallway and run into Clay and Kassim's room.

"Huh? Blade? What's wrong?"

"Shhh! Keep it down!"

Blade covered Clay's mouth with his hand. He did everything he could to hide any signs of his presence, then listened carefully for the sound of footsteps out in the hall. He'd completely hidden himself, so as long as he didn't make a sound, no one—not even Yessica or Iona—would notice him.

Several people moved through the hallway, saying things like "Did you see him?" "Is he there?" and "He's not this way." Blade continued to hold Clay's mouth shut until he was sure they'd gone. Kassim, also in the room, had similarly put himself into stealth mode like the assassin he was. It was only after Clay started frantically tapping at his hand that Blade finally let him go.

"*Phaaah! …Haaah!* I thought I was gonna die!"

Clay panted heavily, the snot running from his nose ruining his good looks.

Sorry about that. I mean it.

Blade held up his hands in front of his face, apologizing to the handsome yet snot-covered man before him. "Sorry. You need to hide me."

"That's fine, I guess."

Kassim passed him a tissue, and Clay caught it without even looking. Their teamwork was always in perfect sync. It was so flawless, Blade thought, that they might as well get "married," or whatever it was.

After loudly blowing his nose, Clay turned to Blade. "Can I say something to you real quick?"

"Hm?"

Blade had meant that as a question, but Clay took it as a yes.

"Blow yourself up," he said.

"What?"

"I said blow yourself up."

"What do you mean?"

"Please blow yourself up."

The command had turned into a request.

"What? You want me to teach you a self-destruct move or something?"

"You *have* one?"

"Yeah, but I've never used it…"

If he did, he'd be dead—reduced to a pile of ash, impossible to revive or recover from.

"So you *do*."

"But what do you mean, 'blow yourself up'?"

"Never mind. I just wanted to say it. I'm done now."

"Oh?"

Blade didn't really understand, but it looked like things were okay between them again.

Clay and Kassim lived in this dorm room together. Blade, who lived alone, gave the bunk bed a curious look.

"Um, don't you have any snacks?" he asked.

Blade looked around. This place was a lot drearier than the girls' rooms. He didn't see any bowls of sweets around.

"Huh? Snacks?"

"They serve snacks at the girls' gatherings."

"Snacks…snacks… Don't we have some crackers, Kassim?"

"Crackers…? Oh, yeah, we do! …But they're a little moldy."

"Black, green, or red?" asked Blade.

"Green mold."

"Okay, they're edible, then."

The three of them sat down around their plate of moldy green crackers and had a guys' night. The spread wasn't quite as extravagant as what the girls had, and the vibe was a bit different… but it was fun, too, in its own way.

"Oh, don't eat that one. *This* one's okay, though," Blade told them.

Consuming moldy rations on the battlefield was something he had experience with. He'd learned which types of mold were edible and which weren't. If you were a Hero for long enough, you'd naturally figure this stuff out.

"By the way," Blade began, straight-faced, "if you know, then could you tell me…what the heck is going on right now?"

Clay and Kassim looked at him with disappointment.

"You don't even know *that*?"

"Come on, I mean it. I don't understand at all. Why are the girls making weird noises, striking weird poses, and pulling weird faces around me?"

"Weird poses…?"

"Weird faces…?"

"I need someone to explain it to me," Blade said, pleading.

"Well, basically…they're trying to seduce you."

"'Seduce'? …What's that?"

"Like, when they go 'oooh' and 'ahhh' and stuff."

"Yeah, Yessica's been saying that a lot to me."

"Go blow yourself up!" shouted Clay.

"Come on, Clay. Chill," said his best friend, standing up and grabbing him from behind. "So, Blade, when someone tries to seduce you, they blush and start trying to get closer to you," Kassim explained.

"Oh, Claire's been blushing a lot lately."

"*Damn you!* Go blow yourself up!"

"Chill, Kassim. Chill."

Now Clay was the one standing up holding Kassim back.

Clay liked Yessica, and Kassim liked Claire. At this point, though, Blade was starting to get the vague idea that this kind of *like* was different from the way good friends liked each other.

"Hmm… Mmm… Hmm…" Blade thought hard to himself, his arms folded. "Is this maybe, like, similar to the sorts of things the doctor does to me all the time?"

"Huh? *What* sorts of things?" asked Kassim. "…Wait, you mean *her*? The doctor on duty at the infirmary? I don't know her name…"

"She's…pretty hot, right?" said Clay. "…Like, I can't really explain it, but she's *hot*."

"Oh, I get that. I totally agree! …But I've got Yessica, man!"

Kassim and Clay looked at each other, clearly troubled. Blade took that as his cue to continue.

"Right, so that doctor keeps approaching me."

"*Approaching* you?"

"Yeah, what do they call it on the street? 'Mating'? She keeps proposing we do that. So I run away from her every time, but—"

"Blow yourself up!!" Kassim and Clay said in unison.

Guuuh. They both began to strangle him.

"I gotta admit, though, you're pretty amazing. I really respect you," Clay said once his hands were pried off Blade's neck.

"Same," added Kassim with a nod.

"What do you mean?" Blade cocked his head.

"Like, you don't *feel* anything for any of them?" Clay asked point-blank.

"Feel what?"

But Clay didn't answer the question. Instead, he said, "I mean, they're probably all just playing around with you… Or at least, I'm sure Yessica is. Claire, I can't say."

"Nah, I dunno about Yessica, but Claire's definitely not serious," said Kassim.

They were both nodding at Blade now. He still wasn't getting any answers, though.

"Guys, listen to me," he said. "What kind of feelings are you talking about?"

"Well, um, like…how to put it?" said Clay. "I mean, Yessica, and the Empress… They're, uh, pretty…y'know, s-sexy, right?"

"'Sexy'?"

Blade raised an eyebrow in confusion. How should someone with such normal sensibilities as him respond to that? Should he agree? What was he supposed to feel?

"No way. Clay… If we're talking about sexy, Ovie takes the cake, don't you think? Like, when I was in the bath, I…uh, I wouldn't dare go close to her." Kassim sounded like he was confessing to some great sin.

"Why not?"

"I mean, it'd create *problems*…y'know?"

"Like what?"

"You know, *down there*…"

"Uh…"

Blade grunted a bit, folding his arms. What was the problem they were talking about? Why would getting close to the Overlord cause an issue? It seemed serious, and his total lack of an answer began to concern him.

"Ah, I'm that way with Ovie, too. And the Empress. And especially Yessica, and Yessica, and also Yessica…"

"Clay, you just said 'Yessica' three times," said Blade. "Did you really need to repeat it? And don't just say things like 'that way' and 'down there,' all right? I need specifics. No more vague descriptors, all right?"

"I *can't*. I can't just blurt it out."

"I know, right?" said Kassim.

They were agreeing with each other again. Blade was totally lost.

"B-by the way…did you see it?" asked Clay.

"See what?"

Important words were constantly being replaced by pronouns and euphemisms in this conversation, and Blade just couldn't get used to it. He was completely confused.

"Yessica's…you know. *That.*"

"Oh, *that*?"

Think. Think. Think.

Now that he thought about it, hadn't Earnest shouted something when they'd been in the bath…?

"You mean her bits?" Blade asked.

"Her *bits*?" asked Clay. "What's that?"

"I don't know, either. I didn't see them. I wasn't looking."

"Why not? How can you stay so chill?"

"Why would I look at her? That's what I'm trying to find out."

"Well, if you saw *it*, I'd have to cut you down right here. I don't know what you mean by 'bits,' but if you've seen *that* part of Yessica, then friend or not, you're dead."

Clay's eyes were suddenly fixed on him. He was clearly emotionally unstable. But why? Besides, Blade hadn't even *seen* anything.

"Listen, let's just talk, okay?" Blade said.

"Ah. Sure, yeah." Clay took his hand off the hilt of his sword.

"Oh, but I *have* been looking at her breasts a lot."

Or maybe not "been looking at" so much as "been shown."

"On second thought, I *will* slay you."

"Wait, you're going to *slay* me? Is that like getting me all 'hot and bothered'?"

"Hot and bothered…? I wish Yessica would get *me* that way!"

Was Clay going to kill him or not? If Blade had the choice, he'd prefer not to have that happen, of course…

"I… I… Claire!" cried Kassim. "Ohhh, I wish Claire would get me all…hot…and bothered…!"

"Ah, she'd never do that," protested Clay. "It's just not in her character."

"But she did it to Blade! She's so innocent and purehearted, but she was going in for the *kill* with him!"

"Well, that's because Claire likes him, right?"

"Don't just blurt it out like that! I know, but it still hurts, okay?"

Now Clay and Kassim were arguing.

"I like Claire, too," said Blade. It felt like they'd come full circle.

Clay and Kassim both heaved deep sighs.

"Ugh… He's always like that, isn't he?"

"Totally."

Hmm. Being "normal" sure is tough.

"How does getting 'hot and bothered' slay someone?" asked Blade. "That's all I want to know. How exactly will that kill me?"

"Yessica…you know… She's got the greatest legs…"

"What're you talking about? The ass! She's all about the ass!"

Clay, the leg man, and Kassim, the ass man, were locked in combat.

"Guys, listen…"

"I mean, her ass is fine, but have you seen her calves…?"

"Her calves?" asked Blade.

It turned out Clay wasn't a leg man but a calf man.

"And you know how her belly button's always on display? That, too. Like, when Yessica moves around, just a little, you see her abs, right?"

"Her abs?" Blade repeated.

Wait. Apparently, he was an abs man.

"Wow, Clay!" said Kassim. "You're a real connoisseur, aren't you?"

He seemed to agree. *He* was an abs man, too. That made the ab party the leading faction at the moment.

"Quit poking fun at me, Kassim. So…what is it about Claire you like, then?"

"Well, her hair…"

"Her hair? Her *hair*?! *That's* what you're into?" Clay sounded shocked. Apparently, being a hair man was a rarity.

"Hey, guys, what do you mean by her hair?" asked Blade.

"What?" cried Kassim. "Eesh, I'm sorry, okay?! What's so wrong about getting horny over someone's hair, huh?!"

"Getting horny? What's that? What kind of move is it? What triggers it?" Blade peppered him with questions, keen on learning this technique. This seemed like something essential to being an average man.

"It's normal! Right? Doesn't that happen to you?! Don't you get horny?!"

"No, um, I'm not sure I understand…" He really didn't get it.

"But it's just like…you get *horny*! What's not to get?!"

"Damn, Kassim… Getting horny over someone's hair? I gotta respect that."

Clay was apparently quite adept at "getting horny" as well. It seemed like a must-have skill for all men.

I've got to learn this!

"So, like, say for example you're holding a girl tight and you lay her down on your bed, and then…"

"Whoaaa! And… And then what?!"

"Then her long black hair spreads out across the sheets, right? Like, *fwoosh*. Like a fan!"

"Oh! Like a fan!"

"Yeah, and then I… I get on top of her, and her shiny hair, and her soft body, and I start breathing all heavy…and it's like, 'Oh yeah! Oh *yeeeah! Whooooooo!*'"

"Whooooooo!!"

"…Whoo?"

Blade decided to play along, though he had no idea what was going on. None of this made any sense at all to him.

○ Scene V: Time for Beddy-Bye

"Honored Father, I'm tired!"

"Oh? Okay," Blade replied, only half paying attention.

Cú had her small back toward Blade as he combed her hair. This was their regular pre-bedtime routine. At first, Blade had just put her to bed without doing anything beforehand, but Earnest and the other girls had yelled at him about being a bad father. "Oh, what's the big deal?" he'd said, only to have them take turns jabbing at him as if they were going to take Cú away. Thus, these little pre-bedtime rituals were now mandatory, and he made sure to do a proper job of them.

After Blade combed her hair out, he would tie it up into a pair of pigtails, then file down her horns—all the basic care needed for a young dragon girl.

"Is there a possibility that Master will also comb my hair one day? What should I do if my master begins to adjust my antennae with his own hands? It makes me very excited."

Iona, who worshipped Blade as her "master," was kneeling on the floor in a corner of the room, pondering over events that would never happen. She didn't have a room of her own, and had instead taken up residence at the far end of Blade's. A little space in the corner about a square foot large was all that belonged to her. When she had no business to attend to, she knelt there to pass the time. Before, she'd stood around the whole night, but that had unnerved Blade enough that he'd made her sit instead—which she did, frozen in place, not moving an inch until morning.

Blade finished combing out Cú's hair, not letting Iona's gaze bother him.

"Okay, all set."

"Mmm…"

Cú was gently swaying. She was already pretty sleepy.

As he gathered the hair flowing down her back into a pair of symmetrical pigtails, Blade ruminated on what he'd learned from Clay and Kassim.

Wait. Cú's also a female. Let's try it out with her.

"Um… The hair goes *fwoosh*, right?" he murmured to himself.

Undoing the pigtail he'd been just about to tie up, Blade tried fanning out her hair behind her back.

"Hmm? Honored Father, what are you doing? You're not tying it up?"

"I think it's supposed to go out in a fan shape, kind of."

The set of steps that would eventually lead to him "getting horny" seemed pretty strict, and Blade tried to follow them to the letter.

"Ummm, and then I hold her tight?"

He turned Cú around and hugged her.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! That's so tight, honored Father!"

"And then I get on top of her, right?"

He laid Cú down on the bed. Her golden hair spread out like a fan on the sheets, just as he'd been told.

Wow. Neat. That is *pretty.*

"What are you doing, honored Father?"

"So then I 'get horny,' and then I go 'whooooooooo,' I think?"

He didn't really understand that part, but he went ahead and covered Cú with his body, breathed out heavily, then let out a "whoooooo."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! What are you, some kind of beast?"

Hmm. This wasn't adding up. He was pretty sure he'd gone through all the motions, but it still hadn't clicked.

"You have long hair, too, don't you?" Blade called out to Iona, kneeling in her corner of the room. She might not be female, but she was female in *form*, at least.

Iona eagerly came over. Blade found her pretty irritating, but maybe he could try the whole "get horny" thing with her, too. He really wanted to learn that skill.

So he *fwooshed* her hair out, just like he'd done with Cú.

"Those are heat dissipation wires, to be exact."

He hugged her, then laid her down on the bed. Her green hair, different in color from Cú's, spread out like a fan.

"If you wish…I do also have *that* function. I am a high-spec machine, after all. A *very* high-spec machine."

"Keep quiet for a sec."

"Yes, Master. Is that an order? ♡"

He got on top, panted in her ear a little, and went "whooooooo."

…

……

……

He didn't get it. He just did not get it.

But then there was a knock at the door.

"Blade, are you in? Are you up? I wanted to apologize for getting carried away earlier. I promise we won't chase you around anymore, so can you let me in? …I'm opening the door."

Earnest entered the room.

Blade, still on top of Iona and Cú, twisted his head around to look at her. She was standing in the doorway, mouth agape as she stared at them.

"What are you doing?" Earnest asked, her voice strangely emotionless.



"Oh, um, I'm trying to get horny."

"Huh?"

Her mouth was agape; she looked dumbfounded.

"Honored Father is a wild beast!" shouted Cú.

"My functionality is fully operational. I am a high-spec system, after all."

"Um, Blade, sorry if I'm mistaken here," said Earnest, "but it looks a lot like you're assaulting Cú and Iona at the same time."

"I *fwoosh* their hair, making sure it's in a fan shape, then squeeze them tight, push them down, breathe hard, and get horny."

"So… I guess I'm *not* mistaken…or misinterpreting this in some way." Earnest drew the sword she always carried at her side. "In that case…*die*, you monster!"

She rushed at him, sword in hand, but Blade caught her arm and threw her onto the bed with a loud *whump*.

"Wh-what?! What are you…?!"

Earnest struggled beneath Blade, her limbs pulled in defensively.

"But I just don't *feel* anything," Blade said. "Does it not work with Cú? I don't think it does, and it worked even *less* with Iona. But what about with you, Earnest?"

"Wha—? Wh-what? Huuuh?"

Blade reached out to her.

"Ah! Hey!"

"Okay, *fwoosh*."

He undid her hair. It was long to begin with, and once he removed her hair clip, it ran all the way down her back. In a *fan* shape. That fan shape was important. Once that was done, the next step was…

"Okay, squeeze…"

"Hey! Hey! Heyyyyyy?!"

Earnest continued to protest as Blade hugged her.

"Then I lay you on the bed…"

Blade pushed Earnest down, covering her with his body. Her red hair spread out across the sheets. It was beautiful.

His face was right next to hers…and he could see tears welling up in her eyes.

"Hey!" she shouted. "I… I need time to prepare for this…!"

"Can you be quiet for a moment?"

"No… No, Blade… I can't…," she said, shaking her head weakly.

Uh… What do I do next? Oh, right. Heavy breathing, and then the "whooooo."

He panted against Earnest's bare neck.

Haaah, haaah… Whoo?

"No… No, stop…"

Earnest was resisting him. He squeezed tighter so she couldn't escape…

"I said *nooooo*!!" Suddenly, she let out a deep roar. Her voice sounded completely different from her high-pitched squeals a few moments earlier.

She'd also started lashing out with her fists. Struck with an uppercut, Blade flew a good few feet into the air.

"Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! I can't *believe* you! Just die, you stupid idiot! You're an idiot, Blade! An idiot! A total idiot!"

Earnest repeated herself over and over before stomping out of the room in a huff.

"Owww…"

Blade crouched down, rubbing his chin. He didn't really understand why she'd hit him. There were a lot of things about today he didn't understand. Earnest often got violent with him for reasons he didn't understand, though.

"Master, your heart rate is rising," said Iona. "Your body temperature is also creeping higher and higher."

"Oh?"

"If you require a precise medical diagnosis, I can provide it, thanks to my high-spec functionality."

"No, I'm not sick…I don't think."

He hadn't felt anything with Cú or Iona, but with Earnest… Yeah. It *had* made his heart beat a little faster.

"Whoo."

He wanted to express his current feelings, and "whoo" seemed about right. Was *this* what "whoo" meant?

Blade thought it over, poking at the palm of Cú's hand as she lay beside him, fast asleep. A faint smile crept across his lips. *Heh-heh! That Earnest. Why was she panicking like that? What a silly goose.*

And just like that, Blade acquired another "normal" skill.



Episode 3: The Hero King's Visit

○ Scene I: A Certain Practical Training Session

It was a typical afternoon on the Second Proving Ground, where Blade's class was doing their usual physical training session. Blade was going up against the combined force of Clay, Kassim, Claire, and Yessica, teaching them how to fight as a group against a single opponent, when that damned king arrived surrounded by gorgeous women.

Who's going to notice him first? thought Blade as he easily parried Clay's sharp sword strikes, Claire's bludgeoning mace, Kassim's poison-tipped knives, and Yessica's dazzling metal fan. Just as he'd expected, it turned out to be Earnest.

"Atten-*shun*!"

The Empress's shout rang out, causing all the students to freeze in whatever position they'd been in. Blade was staring at the spiked mace that had stopped a couple of inches short of his forehead. Claire had been about to bash his skull in but had stopped herself just in time.

Wow. So she can stop it right there? If she stops worrying about stuff like that and just goes for it, she oughtta be able to kick her power up a notch or two, right? I'll mention that to her next time.

"C'mon, Blade, let's go."

Claire was dragging him along, and Blade reluctantly lined up behind everyone else.

"I have good news for you all today!" the king bellowed.

The moment they heard that, everyone frowned.

You guys really need to be quicker on the uptake. The moment the king showed up, I was trying to run away. Though Claire

grabbed me before I could…

"Your next round of practical training is a real treat, let me tell you! After all…" The king stopped. He must have noticed how nonplussed his audience was. "Now, now, what's wrong? Don't you appreciate this opportunity to dramatically improve yourselves?"

Dramatic improvement brought about by being forced into some ridiculous, impossible task, no doubt. Everyone knew from the last few rounds of "practical training" just how crazy it could be.

"Well? What do you think? Want to hear more?"

The king rubbed his hands together, a big smile on his face. All the students groaned. That smile of his spoke volumes. From here on out, they'd be at the mercy of this man's insane whims.

"Ah! Okay, then! How about this?! The students who perform the best in the next round will be granted a personal training session with an actual Hero!"

Whoa! What the heck is that old man saying?

…But everyone looked just as sullen as ever.

"…Your Majesty," ventured Earnest, giving the king a doubtful look. "This is not the first time you have said that. Are you sure we will *actually* be able to meet the revered Hero this time?"

…The "revered" Hero?

"Of course!" the king said with a smile.

That smile had tricked eight different nations into forming an alliance and giving him the monarchy. But Earnest wasn't fooled.

"Is the revered Hero even alive, Your Majesty? Because rumor has it that nobody has seen him ever since he and the Overlord defeated each other."

Uh, no. I'm alive. I'm right here.

"Yes, well, let me be very clear with all of you. He is very much alive. He is eternal! After all, he…is the *Hero*!" The king's eyes shot open as he made that proclamation, spittle flying from his lips.

Well…yeah. He's alive, all right. Right here, in fact.

"Very well, sire. So…assuming the revered Hero is alive…I have heard that he was gravely wounded in his battle against the

Overlord. He must currently be recuperating from his injuries, which is why he has not made any public appearances as of late."

"Mmm. Yeah. Though he's feeling quite a bit better, I hear."

"You *hear*?" Earnest pressed. "Are *you* talking based on rumor as well?"

"Oh, er, I mean, he's feeling quite a bit better. Yes."

"*If* the revered Hero is alive and recuperating, would he truly travel all the way out here simply to spar with us, a group of students? Even if it *was* upon the orders of Your Majesty?"

"G-good heavens, what are you saying? Why, he and I are the best of friends! He gladly does whatever I ask of him! After all… we're *friends*!"

Yeah right. Like hell we are.

Earnest was openly scowling at him with her arms folded, and the king began to sweat under the students' white-hot gazes. He withered, his smile starting to dull. His kingly aura had vanished on him—now he just looked like some stubble-faced old man.

"W-well! How about this, then?! Just this one time, I'll give you your reward in *advance*!"

"Huh? You mean…?" Earnest's ears pricked up.

Whoa, whoa, whoa…

Blade was suddenly very concerned. What was the king about to say? How was this old man going to ruin his life *this* time?!

"Indeed I do! I will have him, the Hero, train *all of you* first! That should prove to you all that he and I are friends!"

"S-so it's true…? The revered Hero himself…?!"

Earnest, I'm telling you, you gotta quit it with the "revered" stuff. What made you start saying that, anyway?

"The one and only, young lady! Have I ever lied to you before, eh? Bah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-*haaah*!! Indeed, I hope all of you are *very* excited for what is to come! *Baaah*-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!"

The king's mighty laugh echoed across the Second Proving Ground.

Oh, great, Blade thought. *Now he's made a promise.*

Ughhhh…
Well, it's got nothing to do with me…

○ Scene II: The Royal Kowtowing

"Please! I beg of you!" the king said, bowing.

Here was the man whose heroic deeds in the previous war had spread his name far and wide across the continent. Gilgamesh Soulmaker—the one who had banded the human race together and guided them forward as leader of the Eight Nations Alliance—was bowing to *him*. Blade had known the man for a long time, but this was a first.

"No, like, I *really* don't wanna," said Blade. "*You* made that promise, not me."

"Yes, I know! And I have to keep it now! What do you *want* me to tell them?!"

"How about 'Gee, sorry, it didn't work out, *tee-hee-hee*!' or something?"

"You want to make me into a liar, then?"

"Sure," Blade immediately replied.

It wasn't that he *wanted* to—the king really *was* a liar, and everyone had the right to see his true colors. Like Earnest, for example. At first, she'd been looking at the king like he was a piece of dirt, but once he blurted out that promise, she'd completely fallen for it. If he couldn't keep his word and betrayed her again, that should finally convince Earnest exactly what kind of man he was.

"Please! Please! I'm saying 'please' to you, so *please*!"

"No. No way." Blade was sticking to his guns. "You can say 'please' all you want. I absolutely refuse."

It was just the two of them in the room, along with Sirene, who'd spent the whole time giggling to herself. She appeared to be really enjoying the show. The king didn't care at all about how much he embarrassed himself around her. Blade, too, didn't mind looking dumb around one or two people in his life…but maybe not Earnest.

Sophie, at least, he could show pretty much any side of himself and she'd accept it. He was totally fine with that.

"Please. Please. Please. *Please!* Help me protect my reputation a little!"

"No. No. No. I refuse! Stop making promises you can't keep. *Screw* your reputation. This is your punishment for being such a liar!"

The king was begging, while Blade's lips were flecked with spittle as he refused. Sirene, meanwhile, just kept giggling.

"…All right. If you're *that* dead set against this, I have another idea."

"Wh-what is it…?" Blade asked fearfully.

"This," the king said, "I believe it is a traditional Eastern method of supplication…"

He got down on both knees, then both hands. Blade understood the gesture well enough. He knew this Eastern method of begging. "Kowtowing," they called it.

"Whoa, wait, hang on!"

"I will *not* wait. If you won't acquiesce, then I'm left with no other choice."

This guy… A king among kings… The lord of the continent… Gilgamesh Soulmaker… This is the one thing you can't do… You can't kowtow to anyone…and especially not me!

"Wait, wait!" cried Blade. "Wait, wait, wait, wait!"

"Yes? What is it?"

"I don't remember saying no to you yet!"

"You said exactly that earlier. Multiple times."

The room fell silent—except for the prime minister's giggling in the background.

"Would either of you like something to drink?" she asked, her voice ringing like a bell.

"Yeah. Open a forty-year-old bottle for me. *He'll* have some fruit juice."

The king quickly got back to his feet, then sank his weight into the nearby sofa.

See? There you go. There's no way he'd actually kowtow to me, Blade thought. *He was just pretending. And I fell for it hook, line, and sinker. I should have just let him do it…*

Blade took the glass of juice from the beautiful woman, then sat down opposite the king and drank it.

"Still…there's one problem, isn't there?" said Blade. "I mean… people will figure out I'm the Hero, won't they?"

"Oh? Is that gonna cause problems for you or something?"

"Well, no, but…"

If everyone at school found out about his ex-Hero status, would they still be friends with him?

"Ah-ha-ha! It seems you've come around, so I'll stop picking on you. Let me ask you another question. If we had a way to engineer this so you *wouldn't* be found out, would you have a problem with it then?"

A way that would keep everyone from realizing it was Blade? But how?

"It'll be quite the surprise, trust me! I'll let you in on it the day of."

The king had a look of supreme confidence on his face, as if to say, "leave everything to me!"

Great. That face again. He can fool everybody with that face, can't he?

Even me.

○ Scene III: The Hero King

It was a typical afternoon at the Second Proving Ground. If there was anything different about this training session, it was that Blade was standing in front of the class, rather than among them. In fact, he was looking down at them from about a foot or so above his normal eyeline. It allowed him to clearly see the tops of everyone's heads.

Right now, Blade was nearly ten feet tall. He was wearing the suit of mechanical armor he'd sported during his Hero days, though it was really less of a suit he wore and more of a vehicle he piloted. Still, it was armor nonetheless. There was no other way to describe it.

To the audience before him, Blade must have looked like a huge, ten-foot-tall warrior. The armor was encased in a mysterious metal that shone blue, and, according to the king, had been designed to embody the people's image of the Hero. Not that Blade knew much about that.

"How does the armor feel, revered Hero?" Eliza's voice suddenly echoed within the suit.

"Please don't do that," said Blade.

The voice surprised him, but he just smiled instead of looking around for the source. The surprise was twofold: one, that she'd immediately figured out he was the Hero; and two, that he was able to hear her voice. But Eliza was the one who'd restored his armor back to working order. She must've installed some kind of device that let her talk to him from afar.

Blade had seen a lot of action in this suit. It was one of the pieces of gear he'd lost in the last great war, and after being destroyed beyond recognition, it had been placed back into the royal vaults and sealed there. Eliza Maxwell was the genius who'd pulled it out and restored it to the point that it could be worn and moved around in once more.

"Now, Mr. Super-Being, everyone's awaiting your instruction. I've installed a voice changer so you'll sound the part, so feel free to speak whenever you like."

"All right."

Wrapping up his chat with Eliza, Blade switched to his external voice.

What's a "voice changer" again? Ah well, never mind.

He gave it a whirl.

"Uh, test. Test one two."

Whoa. His voice was completely different—deeper, more mature—and he guessed that was the voice changer at work.

But…having everyone stare at him hurt. Their eyes were all open wide and gleaming, their ears pricked up to catch every syllable he uttered.

"Uhhh… Right. So I'm the Hero."

"Ha-ha-ha! You see? You see?!" The king put an arm around Blade's shoulder.

Ugh. He's so annoying.

"I told you, didn't I? He *did* show up! Me and the Hero King really *are* besties!"

Wait. "Hero King"? Is that who I am? So there's more than one king now? Well, whatever.

"Yes, Your Majesty, you were right." Earnest beamed. "Now, would you mind stepping aside so we may hear the revered Hero speak?"

That smile was exerting a tremendous amount of pressure on the king, who yelped a bit and stepped back.

"Uhhh… Right. So I'm the Hero King," said Blade.

It was beginning to dawn on him that he had no idea what to say. Back in his Hero days, he'd sometimes been dragged on stage in front of everyone wearing this same suit of armor. The king had stood next to him then, too, and it was usually *him* who'd done all the talking.

"Uhhh… I'm the Hero King." He ended up just repeating himself, completely at a loss as to what else to say.

"Ah…um, Sir Hero?" Earnest looked troubled. Blade was, too, but no one could see that. "Hero King?"

"I'm the Hero King."

"Yes, um, we heard that already… Uh, are you not going to remove your armor? We were hoping we might be able to see your face."

"Hmm?"

Earnest's cheeks were bright red as she looked up at him. Her hands were clasped together in front of her body, and she was making some sort of magical sign— No, actually, that was just her nervous fidgeting.

"Wow. The Empress is a lot more girlish than I thought," said Eliza.

"Earnest has long admired the Hero," Iona chimed in. *"It comes up as a topic of conversation during our nighttime gatherings in her room—72.3 percent of the time, to be exact. I have been told so much about him that it has triggered irreversible changes in the performance characteristics of my auditory senses. In ancient languages, this was referred to as 'having one's ears talked off.'"* How was she tapping into this, anyway?

"I am a high-spec system," she replied the moment that thought crossed his mind. He hadn't even asked her.

But, uh, wasn't this a problem? If he took his armor off, they'd all find out it was him. Also—and this hadn't occurred to him until just now—how had Eliza found out he was the Hero? All she'd done was repair his armor; she hadn't even helped him put it on. She shouldn't have known who was inside.

"Well, because I'm a genius, of course. A genius with a high-spec brain."

He was sure Eliza was giving him a smug look right now. Exactly the same as Iona's. He could tell even without looking.

"I had a hunch about your identity for a while," she continued. *"But I think the clincher was when the king ordered me to repair the Hero's legendary suit of mechanized armor. He had to give me data on the wearer's physical specifications, so really, it'd be stranger if I* didn't *figure it out. And if someone out there matches the specifications I was given, then he'd naturally have to be the Hero. And that would be you, Mr. Super-Being."*

So that's what it was, huh? Yet Blade was still only at 18 percent of his prime.

"You're too much of a super-being, though. Like, you don't even need a pseudo-gravity buffer mechanism. I didn't even have to restore the main power source. Apparently, you don't need any of that stuff, because you can operate it all with spirit. How crazy is that? I mean, how can your body surpass the output of a degenerate matter reactor?"

Blade sure didn't know. He was just a normal guy.

"If a regular person wore that suit, their entire skeletal structure would collapse under the strain. In a matter of seconds, they'd be sucked dry and turned into a mummy."

Wow. So was this armor cursed or something? Actually, Blade *did* recall hearing something like that.

"By the way, the Empress is still fawning over you. Don't you think you ought to give her a reply?"

Hmm?

Earnest was looking down at the ground, fidgeting. Blade—or rather, the Hero King—had stood wordlessly for a good half minute by now, and she wasn't sure how to handle the awkward silence.

"I…apologize, Sir Hero, if that was asking too much," she meekly whispered. "Please allow me to rescind my earlier request."

There was a glint of light in the corner of her eye, and she wiped it away with a finger.

What?! Is she crying*?! The* Empress*?!*

"N-no, my lady, you misunderstand me. There is a reason I cannot take this off…"

He needed an excuse.

Think, Blade! Think! Three seconds!

"Why don't you just say that it's a restraining device to hold back your fighting force?"

That's *it*!!

Eliza provided him with just the hint he needed.

"You see, my lady, this is not a suit of armor but restraint gear designed to hold back my surging fighting force. Hence why it

cannot be removed. Taking it off would turn the surrounding area into a gigantic crater."

Long, long ago, one of Blade's foes had said something like this to him. He hadn't been anywhere near that strong in the end, though. The whole fight had been such a letdown; the other guy kept prattling on for so long that Blade decided to try punching him, and that was the end of it. The battle never even *began*…but at least his spiel was coming in handy now.

"Oh… I see. My apologies, Sir Hero," said Earnest. "I can see that you truly are off the charts in every way."

"I-indeed… I am glad you understand, my lady."

Blade reached out and gently patted Earnest on the head. The suit accurately traced the movements of the pilot inside and replicated them with absolute precision, meaning that Blade could stroke someone's head softly without worrying about caving in their skull.

"There is a student at this school who's also rather…out of the norm. But he can't compare to you, Sir Hero."

Earnest smiled. Blade, meanwhile, felt sick. *Give me a break.*

"…Oh, speaking of which, where *is* Blade? We have the revered Hero right here, and he decided to skip out? What is he, stupid?" She turned her head so all her friends could hear her.

"What is the matter, my lady?"

Blade hurriedly turned his attention back toward her. He was here right now, and if people started wondering why he wasn't among his classmates, this whole thing would fall apart pretty fast.

"Ah… No. Never mind. Just a personal matter. I apologize."

She bowed to him. But just as Blade breathed a sigh of relief, Earnest turned back toward her classmates again.

"Hey, can someone go track down Blade? If he misses his chance to train with the revered Hero, he'll regret it forever."

"My lady…" Blade summoned up his most heroic demeanor possible. He needed to do whatever he could to make Earnest turn his way, which she did.

"Um, my… My name is Earnest." She blushed.

"Hmm?"

"My name is Earnest Flaming." *Fidget, fidget.*

"Hmm?"

"So if you could call me by my name, um…that would be an honor." *Fidget, fidget, fidget.*

Ohhh. So *that's* what she wanted.

"Then Earnest is what you shall be called," Blade gravely intoned. "I will commit it to memory."

He was starting to get used to the Hero King's tone of voice. He'd once gone up against a group who called themselves the Four Titans, and the wimpiest among them had sounded almost exactly like this.

"He called me by name!" Earnest said to everyone, spinning around and holding up two fingers in a peace sign. "The revered Hero called me by my name! *Yaaaay!*"

Whenever she was facing the others, she was the same old Earnest—but when she turned around, she was a completely different girl, all meek and nervous. The gap was so huge that Blade began to wonder what was going on in her mind.

Sighing inside his armor, he turned to look at Sophie. He was sure the armor sighed and looked at her, too. It was designed to faithfully mimic whatever the pilot did. Wear it for long enough, and you really *would* start to feel like a ten-foot-tall giant.

On the battlefield, gear like this was primarily used to provide an HP boost at the start of combat. If the fight went on for a week or so, the suit would get pretty beaten up by the end, and you were free to take it off and leave it wherever. Honestly, Blade thought he'd be stronger without it. Mechanized suits like this were meant to give champion-level power to normal humans, so anyone stronger than that would actually see their strength decrease. The armor *was* useful, however, for preserving your strength in the early stages of combat. It let you throw champion-level power around without using

any of your own stamina. All you had to do was set it to auto mode and take a little nap as it went hog wild for you.

Sophie locked eyes with Blade and nodded. Was she agreeing with him? He wasn't sure what about, though. She couldn't possibly be agreeing with the thought behind his sigh. Regardless, her face told him, "I understand; it's all right," which relieved him somewhat.

"Someone needs to look for Blade," she said.

"Ah, yeah," replied Yessica. "Blade… Right, Blade. We'll hunt him down, Anna, so you can get some instruction in the meantime. Come on, Clay, Kassim. Let's go!"

The two boys looked at her. "Uhhh, we were actually hoping to—"

"What? You guys got a problem?"

"L-like… This is the *Hero*, you know? The real deal! And maybe we're too inexperienced to gain anything useful from this. Maybe it'll all be way over our heads…but still…"

"Fine, then," Yessica said, cutting off her two whining classmates. She went with Leonard instead, searching for someone they'd never find. As they left, Yessica winked at Blade. He wasn't sure what that meant, but oh well.

Claire, Clay, and Kassim stayed behind.

"Oh? It's hard to tell if they still haven't noticed or if they've known all along."

It was only then that Blade understood the purpose behind Sophie's nod and Yessica's wink. Both gestures had meant, "Don't worry, we'll back you up so you can keep up the ruse."

So, uh, who hasn't *figured it out yet…?*

Blade looked down. There, about three feet below, the rest of the class was looking up at him, eyes sparkling—and the sparkliest eyes of all belonged to Earnest.

"Sir Hero, we were promised that you would train us today," she said. "When His Majesty agreed, I could hardly believe it… I'd been thinking of what to do to that old man if he was bluffing. I came up with no less than seven different ways to punish him without it constituting treason…but I'm relieved to say that none of those plans

will see the light of day." Her eyes kept sparkling despite her threatening words.

Yeah, that is *a relief.*

So now Blade had to teach these students something.

"Right. First off, let me show you a skill that allows you to crush mountains into dust."

"Sir Hero," said Earnest, "I'm afraid it might be too early for us to learn that yet…"

"Oh. Really?"

"Yes. But I was hoping you'd teach us dragon-destroying techniques! Blade's the only one who— Oh, he's this kid in our class who's kind of a super-being. He's the only one who can use them. His teaching methods are so sloppy, though, that we can't figure out how to copy him at all."

"Okay, then let's start with Technique Number Three, Dragon Banish—"

"Sir Hero… Sir Hero!" She stopped him just as he squared up to demonstrate the move. "That's going to be impossible for us, I'm afraid. If you could start with the first one in the order, please? Dragon…er, Dragon Smasher, I think it's called?"

"Oh. The first one…?"

Blade had to be careful in his suit, or else it would boost his moves several times over. That made it difficult for him to use any techniques less powerful than the third one, but…

"Well, the first technique…works a bit like this."

He pointed in the direction of a barren plain, then snapped his fingers. This produced the same amount of power as if he'd used his bare hands—in other words, it blew a large hole in the ground, big enough to bury three people. That, in fact, was what it was often used for on the battlefield.

"You charge it up, twist it a bit, squeeze it, then *bang*. You see?"

"Uh, not really… Actually, Sir Hero? Is it just me…or is your teaching style rather similar…to the doofus super-being we have here?"

"N-no, it's not. N-not at all!"

Blade panicked. He needed to teach them properly. But how? He felt like he was giving them every possible detail here. If they couldn't learn the move from what he'd just showed them, then what could he do?

"Oh, I did it."

It was Clay who spoke up. The blast from his sword had gouged a small hole into the ground—not enough to penetrate a dragon's scales and wound it, the intended use of the skill, but it was still identifiably Dragon Smasher.

"What?!" cried Earnest. "No fair! How did you do that, Clay?! Tell me!!"

"You charge it up, twist it a bit, *squeeeeeze* it, then *boom*."

"How's that any different from what *I'm* doing?!"

"Like, it's not just *squeeze* but *squeeeeeeeze*. Then at the end, it's more of a *boom* than a *bang*, I think."

"What does that even *mean*?"

"Maybe your magic sword's tripping you up. It's imbued with fire magic, right? I bet you could get the hang of it faster with a regular blade."

"Hear that, Asmodeus? He said it's all your fault." Earnest banged her sword against the ground to drive her point across.

"In terms of the *feeling* behind it, it's pretty much like I told you," Clay explained. "Theoretically speaking, though, it requires kind of a unique approach to compressing your spirit. You don't do it the normal way—you kinda apply some spin to it while you store it up. The release has a bit of a trick to it, too…"

"Uh-huh… Okay. Then what?"

Clay busily answered everyone's questions.

Whew. Good thing we got more of a theory guy in our class, Blade thought. *He's doing a pretty good job explaining.*

Thus, by the end of the training session, a decent number of people had managed to fire Dragon Smasher at around half power.

"Sir Hero! ♡ Sir Herooo! ♡ Look, look!" cried Earnest. "I've gotten the hang of it, too, now! ♡"

She really had. In fact, Earnest was shooting blasts all over the place.

"Ahhh, yes, very good technique," replied Blade, leveraging his newfound mastery of Hero speech.

But Earnest's random rapid-fire barrage probably wasn't a good idea. A stray blast or two came flying toward Blade, but he flicked them away with his fingers.

Dusk began to draw near. From high up in the sky, far above the ceiling of the Second Proving Ground, the cries of Ein and Zwei could be heard. Their cawing had long served as a signal to the royal capital's citizens that night would soon fall

Indeed, it was nearly the end of a long, long day for the Hero King.

○ Scene IV: The Usual Lunch

"Why didn't you show up? Were you out running around somewhere? How stupid can you get?"

It was the usual lunchtime scene. Earnest was talking to Blade in between mouthfuls as they munched away, taking in calories.

"Heroes aren't that rare," Blade replied as he put a spoon into Cú's mouth.

"*That's* your lame excuse for missing out? You are *such* an idiot."

"Only idiots call other people idiots… Besides, it's not an excuse."

It really wasn't. Blade had rather enjoyed playing the role of the Hero. But after a few days—or, to be honest, as soon as he took the suit off after their training session—he had felt nothing but regret and remorse. He'd even called himself the Hero King. Why a *king*? Since when was *he* a king?

He wanted to take it all back, but he couldn't. Apparently, there was a phrase for this sort of thing. It was called one's "dark past." To Blade, that special class had become a kind of trauma he wished he could erase from his mind. Every time Earnest squealed about it, it

felt really, *really* painful, like she was rubbing salt into his wounds. That was why he looked so grumpy right now. He wasn't *actually* grumpy, of course…

Please, just stop bringing it up already… Please…

"Can you stop squealing about that all the time?" he said.

"Since when was I squealing about it? Besides, what's wrong with being excited? We got to see the Hero. The legendary Hero! Who wouldn't squeal about something like that? *Eeeeeeeek!* ♡"

Now she was doing it on purpose. Blade weathered the aural torture. It felt like he'd lost a bet or something.

"Hey, did I tell you?" she went on. "The revered Hero did the wall thing with me!"

"What 'wall thing'?"

Blade honestly didn't recall doing something like that. He didn't even know what "the wall thing" was in the first place.

"Like, when you're up against the wall, and a guy hits his hand against it so you won't run away, and it's super romantic! Like, *oooh*, what am I gonna do *nowww*? That sort of thing!"

"Indeed, this was a prominent form of expression often seen in the ancient texts I salvaged," said Iona. "If you need access to ancient visual media, by the way, please let me and my high specs know."

"Uh, so when did the Hero do the wall thing to you?" asked Blade. He had no recollection of it whatsoever. None at all.

"Well, the Hero tripped and kind of smashed into the wall. I thought he was going to crush me!"

"I don't think that's romantic at all. It sounds kinda destructive."

Ridiculous. Now Blade felt stupid for even listening.

"Hey, Blade?" Earnest suddenly looked straight at him.

"What?"

"Aren't you…jealous?"

"Huh?"

Blade glared back at her. Why would he be jealous? When? What month, what day, what hour, what minute, what second?

One thing was for sure—he was *never* doing another training like that. The Hero King wouldn't be making another appearance. He was dead. Blade had made up his mind. It was decided. Set in stone.

"You're such an idiot, Earnest!" he shouted.

"Hee-hee-hee-hee…"

But no matter what Blade said, Earnest just giggled.



Episode 4: Blade's Rest Day

○ Scene I: The Usual Physical

"Okay, all done," the doctor said, wrapping up Blade's regular exam. She slapped his bare rear, and he pulled up his pants.

"Why are you crying?" she asked him. Blade was, indeed, weeping silently. She asked that every time.

"For reasons a woman wouldn't understand," he replied, giving his standard response. "So? How'd it go? Up or down?"

Seeing the doctor had become a weekly ritual by now. Before, when he'd first joined the academy, these checkups had been more frequent, but they'd settled down to once a week as of late. That meant Blade only had to fight back tears once every seven days.

These exams, however, gave Blade a chance to ask how much of his power he could safely release, relative to his prime. The doctor gave incredibly accurate figures; if Blade went past the point she specified would kill him, he really *would* die. Even if it was only by a tiny little bit. He'd gone past it once during a fight with Ovie, and he really *had* died. Dying had instantly cut all his stats in half, but his figures had begun climbing a little as of late. Maybe all that rehab was finally paying off.

Blade wasn't exactly sure if he wanted his numbers to go up or down. He didn't really mind if they continued to decrease—in fact, he'd be happier if they did, since it would get him that much closer to being an ordinary person. Some people out there, however, wanted to see him recover, and he felt an obligation to meet their expectations. And in that case, improving his numbers would be for the best.

The doctor tapped the desk with her polished fingernails.

"Well, it seems they went down a little."

"…Huh?"

"You've been at eighteen percent for a while now, but this week, it's closer to seventeen."

"Eh? Uh? Huh?"

Blade blinked. That was unexpected. He hadn't been pushing himself at all recently. There shouldn't be any reason for his numbers to drop…

"Are you getting enough rest?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"I'm asking if you're taking the time to get proper rest."

"I'm sleeping," Blade replied. And he was, amazingly enough. Every night. On a bed and everything.

At first, he'd had trouble getting used to the nice, soft bed. Blade had never slept on anything like it before in his life, so he used to occasionally crawl underneath the bed and sleep there instead. It was strangely comforting. Since Cú had shown up, though, he'd had no choice but to give up that habit and sleep on those soft sheets…

"I'm sleeping!" he repeated confidently.

"I'm not just talking about sleep. Is there anything else you're doing to ensure you're getting the rest you need?"

"Eh? Uh? Huh?"

Blade was confused. Besides sleeping, what else *was* there to resting?

The doctor sighed. "Well, take this as an order from your doctor, all right? You need to get some rest. That's your prescription for this week."

"I don't get it."

"What do you do to rest? Try to think about that. That's also a part of the prescription."

"But I don't get it…"

"All right. Get going… If you don't, I might *attack* you."

Blade hurried out. He figured that by "attack," she probably meant "mating" or something similar.

○ Scene II: The Usual Dining Hall (Sophie's Turn)

"What's wrong, Blade?" asked Earnest. "Don't tell me you've lost your appetite."

Blade had his arms folded and his spoon balanced between his nose and upper lip.

Eesh. Was him not eating katsu curry really *that* much of a cause for concern?

"Or wait, don't tell me you're actually using your brain and *thinking* about something. Is that it?"

Why did she have to say "don't tell me" twice? Was it really *that* weird for him to think about stuff?

"So what's bothering you? Tell me."

"Nooo…"

"Why are you sulking?"

"Blade, is something wrong?" asked Sophie. "You know you can always talk to me."

"Well, to tell the truth—"

"Hey!" cried Earnest. "So you'll tell Sophie but not me?!"

Now *she* was sulking. If she'd just asked the same way Sophie had, Blade would've been a lot more honest with her.

"The doctor told me I need rest…," he said. "But I don't know how to get it."

"Oh." Sophie listened. There was no denial or affirmation. She just listened. That made him feel good.

"Oh, come on. You were agonizing over something *that* simple? How stupid are you?" Earnest, meanwhile, immediately judged him.

"So I was thinking about what I should do."

"Hey! Are you ignoring me?! Listen! Let me join the conversation! I won't bully you anymore, all right? I won't make fun of you!"

So Earnest had been consciously bullying and making fun of him?

"Oh? Hey, what's up?" said Yessica, joining them.

"What's bothering you, Blade?" chimed in Claire.

Clay and Kassim showed up as well and sat down at their usual seats.

"Quit being so secretive, Blade. You shoulda asked us."

"Should I change into the Overlord?" asked Maria, hands on her braids.

"No, it's not that much of a crisis. It's just…when people say I need 'rest,' I don't really know what they mean."

"???"

The looks on their faces indicated to Blade that he needed to explain himself a bit more.

"I just mean, what kind of state are you in when you're 'resting'? I've never really rested before, so…"

"Really?" Earnest asked.

He nodded back. "Really."

"You're on a whole other level. You really are a super-being, huh?"

"You're always so quick to call me names like that."

"Blade, it's all right," said Sophie. "There's nothing wrong with you."

"You always spoil him, Sophie."

Earnest and Sophie stared at each other, with Blade in the middle. If he had the choice, he'd take Sophie's approach over Earnest's any day. Being spoiled seemed like the far better option.

"Um…I don't really understand…but the doctor told you to get some rest, right? Well, why don't you do that?" Claire asked, tilting her head to the side. Her black hair spilled onto the table, and Kassim, with his black hair fetish, stared intently at it.

"See?" said Earnest. "*She* doesn't understand what you mean, either, Blade. You need to give us a proper explanation."

I did, though. I'm explaining it right now.

"So…I mean, this 'rest' thing, yeah? I haven't done that. Not even once. I was constantly fight—er, busy either training or testing the results of my training. One of the two."

"Huh? You mean you've gone seventeen years without sleep or rest?"

"N-no, I mean, I *sleep*, but…"

Blade began to wonder just who his classmates thought he was. This super-being treatment was a major drag. Even for someone like Blade, fighting without sleeping at all was something he could only keep up for fourteen days or so. And if he didn't get a total of eight hours' sleep every thirty days, he'd collapse from exhaustion. Divvy that up, and it came out to around fifteen minutes a day.

In other words, when he fought continuously, Blade often drifted out of consciousness for around thirty seconds every hour. Of course, that wasn't feasible unless his opponent could be defeated using only as much concentration as he could muster while fast asleep. Against stronger foes, it just wasn't possible.

"Um, so…you 'sleep,' but you don't 'rest.' You're not sleepy, just… unrested?"

Right. That. Exactly. Claire was finally getting him. The most normal-looking student among them understood. And now everyone else in Earnest's Gang was starting to pick up on it, too

"Yeah, but the doctor says that sleep is different from rest," explained Blade.

"It is, yeah," agreed Claire, nodding.

It seemed like the doctor had been telling the truth. Every time Claire nodded and her black hair swayed, Kassim gulped nervously. *Weird.* How much of a fan of black hair *was* he?

"Master, the solution is simple," said Iona. "All you have to do is leave the minimum number of sensors on and place everything else in standby mode until an enemy arrives."

"That's called 'standby,' not rest," Blade shot back. "And that feature's not available for humans."

"Then, while you're waiting on standby, your master will come and find you. Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee."

"You want me to break you into pieces again?"

"I'm not sure if my experience will be much help…" Sophie said, interrupting. The glare Blade was directing at Iona magically shifted to a more serious look as he turned toward her. "…but you actually taught me a lot about resting, Blade."

"Huh? Me? When?"

"Yes. You invited me on a 'date' so I could experience the 'springtime of my youth' like a 'normal' person." There was a hint of shyness on Sophie's face.

"Ah, I remember that!" said Earnest.

"Yeah, we were tailing them…," agreed Yessica.

"I can't believe that was so long ago now," chimed in Claire.

Oh. So *that* was the presence he'd picked up on during his date with Sophie. But why had they been tailing him?

Sophie took out a notebook. "I made a record of the event. According to my notes, the most efficient way to rest is… Meet at ten hundred hours. Ten-oh-one, greetings and confirmation of the schedule. Ten-oh-three, begin traveling. Walk around the city area until ten thirty, then rest at the Parlor until eleven hundred hours. Lunch at twelve hundred. Relay the rest of the plan at that time."

The others had made a good dent in their meals by the time Sophie finished reading through her notes.

"Oh, are you done?" Earnest asked.

"No, there's more."

"That's fine… I don't think that's the right answer, anyway."

"No?"

"Well…not entirely. But hey…" Earnest cast a sidelong glance at Yessica.

"Who? Me? Um, well… Don't you think that schedule's just a *teensy* bit cramped?"

"Cramped?" repeated Sophie.

"Claire, your turn!" said Yessica.

"Huh? Me? Well…you see…if you pack that much into your schedule, it's hard work, isn't it? Like, running across rooftops from one end of the city to the other… Um, it tires you out, right?"

"You think? Doesn't that make it easier to get where you're going?"

"Uhhh, Maria, over to you!"

"Huh? M-m-m-me?! Uhhh, ummm…" Maria's braids flew around as she grew increasingly flustered… "Ovie! You're up!" …so she untied them and passed the hot potato to her other self.

"That sort of thing won't work," said the Overlord. "Not at all. This isn't military boot camp, you know."

As expected, she told it to them straight.

"It won't work?" Sophie looked crestfallen. As did Blade.

So that's not the answer, either.

"Oh, look, now you're making Blade all depressed, Deemo. You can't just say things like that. You've gotta soften the blow."

"Demons speak only the truth. Lies are the forte of mankind."

And so the lunch hour ended without much progress. All Blade had learned was that the "Sophie method" wasn't even worth trying.

○ Scene III: A Certain After-School Trip to the City (Claire's Turn)

"Hey! Are you still buying stuff?"

"One more store! Just one more, and then I'll be done!"

The sun was beginning to set as Blade walked behind an overexcited Claire along the main street lined with shops. Since Sophie—the first warrior in the quest to help teach Blade what "rest" was—had been shot down before she even had a chance to act, it was now Claire's turn, and her prescription called for a date. Blade had no idea how this would work, or how it would help him rest, but as a beginner at all this, he was ready to meekly follow the instructions of his guides.

His hands were full of paper bags containing Claire's purchases. Claire decided where they went, and Blade carried everything for her. He didn't even know what half the stores were selling as they visited shop after shop, but he always left with Claire's spoils in hand.

Claire said she hadn't had a chance to spend the money she'd saved up on anything yet, so she was enjoying this shopping spree to the fullest. Students at Rosewood Academy received a salary far

higher than that of even newly recruited soldiers. However, with so much of their time devoted to classes and training, there wasn't much left over for relaxation and even less chance to spend money. Blade, for his part, put all his earnings into an empty metal can in a corner of his room.

Claire was currently busy converting all that money into clothing, shoes, accessories, stuffed animals, and so forth—and Blade was carrying it all. She was riding a natural high, while he was overburdened and weighed down.

Am I really getting any rest here…?

He glanced over at the board of advisors following behind them.

"Ohhh no," Yessica said. "She's getting way too carried away. Someone like that never gets a second date."

"Hmm? You think?" asked Earnest. "Is it really that bad, though? She looks like she's having fun to me."

"You know, Anna…a date isn't only about how much fun *you* have. You've got to make your partner happy, too."

"You think…?" Earnest gave Yessica an admiring look that seemed to say, "wow, you're so grown up."

"Check out Blade right now. What do you see?"

"…A lost kid who's found himself separated from his mother and doesn't know what to do?"

"Exactly. This isn't working at all. He wants to go back to his dorm *so* bad. There's no *way* he's asking her out again."

"Y-you're probably right…"

This commentary seemed to indicate that the outing was a failure. But no—if this was Claire's "prescription," Blade was prepared to stick it out to the bitter end, no matter how much it was starting to feel like punishment.

"Okay, Blade, sorry to make you wait!" Claire bounded out of the shop. "Let's go get something to eat."

"Okay!" Blade's face brightened.

Whoo-hoo! Food, food, fooood! He was beyond hungry.

“I know this really good place. We all went there before, remember? The place with the big bowls of custard.”

“Wait, um…”

Blade slowly shook his head. He knew that place; their special menu item was the Gorgeous and Dangerous Custard. Claire called it “big,” but a common adjective like that completely failed to express its immense size. After all, how are you supposed to tackle an entire bucket full of custard? Blade was just a helpless young man. He wasn’t Earnest, or Sophie, or Claire. He simply couldn’t imagine eating that much of the stuff.

“What’s wrong, Blade?” asked Claire.

“Ummm…”

“Blade, let’s go! I got a ton of stamps on my loyalty card, so I should be able to get us one of the specials!”

“No…” Blade took a step back. He kept his eyes on Claire, patiently waiting for the right moment—then sprinted off without so much as a backward glance. “Noooooooo!!”

“Ah! Hey—Blade! Blade! Wait up!”

“He ran off.”

“He bolted, huh?”

“He sure did.”

The girls left on the sidewalk murmured among themselves. Sophie might’ve lost before her fight even started, but Claire’s performance was so bad it ended with Blade running all the way back home.

○ Scene IV: The Usual Training (Earnest’s Turn)

“All right. Today’s a rest day, so we’ll keep it light, okay?”

“Sure.”

Blade and Earnest faced each other as they performed some warm-up exercises, stretching one arm out and then the other.

For reasons that were beyond Blade, Rosewood Academy had one day a week where there were no classes—none in the morning, none in the afternoon. That allowed them to spend the whole day

training. Back when she was Empress, Earnest would work through her grueling practice sessions alone, but now she trained alongside Blade. He still didn't understand why nobody else wanted to join them. They all said it was "too hard," but it wasn't as if anything they were doing was particularly tricky. After all, an ex-Hero still in recovery could handle it.

"Okay, let's—"

But before Earnest could even finish her sentence, Blade smoothly thrust the tip of his sword toward her throat. She leaned back, moving out of the killing blow's path in a fluid motion.

Blade might have launched his attack while she was still talking, but such a move was by no means against the rules. A battle starts well before any signal is given. No enemy is going to wait for you to finish your intro speech. Considering the level Blade had been fighting at day in and day out, he could never get away with saying he simply wasn't ready. That was true strength—being able to use your power even when you *weren't* ready.

"Hey, I think you cut a few strands of my hair," said Earnest.

She'd evaded the tip of the blade, but it seemed some of her hadn't quite made it.

"You're gonna wind up bald if you keep leaving yourself open like that."

"*Bald?!* Did you just threaten to *shave* a girl's head?!" Earnest yelled, enraged. After that, she ramped up the speed of her moves by 50 percent.

Among Blade's old war buddies was a sword-wielder so skilled that she could fight without getting any mud or blood on her. You had to be that good to stay beautiful even in the midst of battle.

"I didn't say *I'd* shave it. I just said you'd wind up bald."

"Same thing!"

A sharp thrust from Earnest was met by an equally sharp one from Blade. She narrowly avoided it…but a little *too* narrowly, because a few straggling hairs fell to the ground.

"You did it again!" Earnest shouted, angrily slashing her sword at him. "Is that your *thing* or something? You like bald girls? I wouldn't mind pigtails or a ponytail! If you *really* want me to keep my hair short, I guess I could consider it! But I'm not going to *shave* it! *Never!*"

"Well, start dodging, then."

Blade slashed, and slashed, and slashed. Earnest dodged, and dodged, and dodged…but eventually she couldn't dodge anymore, so she began parrying the blows with her sword. The light sound of metal clinking graduated into heavier, clanging blows, then ponderous *thuds* that clearly would've been fatal if they hadn't been parried away. In a fight like this, a normal sword would be rendered useless after just a few strikes. Earnest's magic sword, Asmodeus, was completely undamaged, but the regular one supplied to Blade was already reaching its limit.

"Ah! Whoa! Hey!" Earnest shouted. "Show a little restraint, why don't you?!"

"It wouldn't be training if I held back, would it?"

But Blade *was* holding back. With Earnest, at least, that was possible, and Blade was extremely grateful. The other students in the senior class were the same. But when it came to the junior class, he had to be even *more* careful, lest he hurt them. He simply had no idea how to adjust the strength knob in his mind to the right setting for them. It'd be nice if he could spar with someone like Dione every now and then. He didn't need to hold back with her. But if he did that, the Second Proving Ground's barrier probably wouldn't hold even at max power, so they'd have to travel to some desolate mountain instead—someplace where nobody would mind if they rearranged the topography a little.

Oh. What should I have for dinner tonight? Mmm. Katsu curry would be nice.

"Don't…you…*dare*…mess with me!"

Blade took a good look at his shouting opponent. "Huh? What's wrong, Earnest?"

"If *that's* how you want to play, then *I'll* get serious, too! Asmodeus! Heed my will and burn my enemy to ashes! …Summon Hellfire!"

Earnest pointed her sword up toward the sky, and a crimson fireball manifested above her head. Not long ago, it had taken several minutes and the spirit of all 108 students to create a fireball this size—but now it took Earnest only an instant.

"Ooh, a new skill? That's new, isn't it?"

Blade was excited. He couldn't stop wondering how powerful it was. He even thought about purposely taking the blow head-on, just so he could find out.

"Haaaah!"

She unleashed her skill, and the fireball above her headed not for Blade…but straight down onto Earnest. There was a watery *splosh*—the sound of the immense heat melting the ground below her and turning it into lava. It was a little different from the usual Scion of Flame transformation process.

"Impressive, my master. So you noticed? When you transform into the Scion of Flame, your battle strength is directly proportional to your initial heat level—and quite an impressive level that is, if I may say so. However, the pain during the transformation is also proportional to the initial heat—"

"Shut up! Don't talk to me!" The blade's master dismissed its praise outright.

"We shall call this state 'Scion of Flame II'—" said Asmodeus.

"No way! That's so lame!" The blade's master also rejected its naming suggestion outright.

Faced with this new Scion of Flame, clearly more heated up (and furious) than usual, Blade flashed a fearless smile, holding nothing but his half-bent sword.

Looks like today's going to be interesting after all.

✻

The intense battle continued for another ten minutes.

"*Haaah…haaah…haaah…* Well…? Say it… I beat you…"

Earnest was using her sword like a walking stick; she could barely stand up. A little bit of her shoulder was still smoldering, but her transformation had almost completely come undone.

Blade, on the other hand, was lying flat on the ground, worrying about the state of his brand-new uniform. He'd only worn it for the first time that morning, and it was already ruined.

"Shouldn't you…be the one…saying uncle…right now?" he wheezed.

Blade was surprised. He was actually out of breath. Earnest occasionally seemed to have trouble speaking when they trained—and now he understood why.

Wow. Amazing. It's not even a real fight, and I'm still panting. But now I get it. It's difficult to talk because I'm breathing so hard! Now it makes sense!

"…Okay. I give… I'm tired. So tired."

At last, Blade admitted defeat. It would be too much of a bother to try to continue. Not that Earnest was in any shape to keep fighting.

"All right. Then how about…we call it a draw today?" she said, smiling.

Earnest was filthy and exhausted, but Blade still thought it was a pretty smile.

"Sure," he said, smiling back.

"Hey, sorry to interrupt, but what was the original purpose of this?" Yessica called out. The whole gang had come by to watch them as they trained.

"Training?" suggested Earnest.

"I don't think so."

"Huh? No? Um…" Earnest cocked her head, then her face gradually turned pale. "Um…well… This is part of helping Blade… rest."

"Right. So what're you doing making him so gassed that he can't even stand up to walk away? Can you really call that rest?"

"No, um, but, I mean…" Earnest tapped her right and left index fingers together. "But, but, but, but…"

"Enough with the buts, okay?"

Her friend's scolding had Earnest on the verge of tears.

"But! I mean, this is the only thing I know how to do! I've been so hard on myself for so long! I've never taken a break, either! I've only just learned about sweets and desserts and stuff! What else do you expect from me, keh?!"

"Oh. Right, that makes sense. Oh, Anna. There, there…"

When her friend patted her on the head, the dams burst and Earnest began crying.

Blade looked at them. *Women really do cry at the drop of a hat, huh?* Long ago, someone told him that men shouldn't cry, and he aimed to follow that advice, no matter what. Though he *had* cried his eyes out on his birthday the other day.

"…What? It's over already?" said a voice.

Blade turned toward the sound. The Overlord, who'd been napping in a corner of the Proving Ground, was just sitting up.

"Ooh, that looks nice," Blade said. She'd spread out a soft, fluffy, comfy-looking rug on the ground and was elegantly lying on top of it.

"Hmm? Come on, then, Hero," she said, beckoning to him.

"Don't call me that," Blade retorted. But it was fine. Everyone was too busy trying to calm Earnest down to hear their conversation.

He lay down on the rug next to the Overlord, who offered him the upper part of her arm to use as a pillow. Her limbs entwined around him like a comforter…and they were so warm, just the right temperature for human skin…

Zzzz…

Blade was exhausted, and he instantly fell asleep.

"But I mean, I don't *know*, keh? I've never taken time off before, keh? I just wanted Blade to be able to rest! I—I…! This is all… It's all I *knoooooowww*! *Wehhhh! Weh, weh, wehhhhhh!*"

"There, there… Come on, Blade, say something to her. Anna's all teary and snotty and ugly, and you're the only one who can help her… Oh my."

"*Shhh…* He just went to sleep," the Overlord told them all, holding a finger to her lips.

She was gazing down at Blade's face with the smile of a mistress. Earnest took time out from her sobbing to say, "That's not fair…"

"Me too! I wanna take a nap with my honored Father!"

Cú toddled over and wriggled right between Blade and the Overlord.

"Wow, Ovie's a napping expert." Yessica sighed, her hands on her hips. "What do you think, Anna? Should we wake him up? Your mistress is taking all that quality time away from you. You really want Ovie to win? She wasn't even in this competition."

"It's fine," Earnest said, rubbing her nose. "As long as Blade's happy…then that's all that matters."

And it seemed he was. The look on Blade's face as he slept was one of pure bliss.



○ Scene V: The Usual Physical

"Okay, all done," the doctor said, wrapping up Blade's regular exam. She slapped his bare rear, and he pulled up his pants.

"Seriously, why all the crying?" she asked Blade, who was, once again, silently weeping. Sometimes, Blade wondered if she knew all along and was just asking him for fun.

"…So?" he said, watching the doctor throw her used rubber gloves in the trash. "How'd it go? Up or down?"

He didn't think he'd been very successful at following her instructions. If anything, he felt even *more* overworked than usual.

"Up."

"Huh?"

"Just by a percentage point, but still. You've gone back to eighteen percent."

"Eh? Huh? …How?"

"Well, because you followed my instructions for a change and got some proper rest, didn't you? …Here, how about I give you a reward? Something that'll make you feel *reeeeally* good. ♡"

Blade quickly retreated from the room. But as he walked down the hallway, he scratched the back of his head.

Rest, huh…? I guess I still don't get it.



Episode 5: The End of Katsu Curry

○ Scene I: The Usual Afternoon Scene

It was an ordinary afternoon, and that meant the usual break for katsu curry.

Mmm! Why is it always so good?!

Blade was wolfing down his food as always. The holy trinity of crispy pork cutlet, curry, and rice all thrown into his mouth at the same time created a harmony like nothing else.

Chomp, chomp.

Whoever came up with this is a total genius!!

Homph, homph.

He cleaned his first plate, let out a satisfied sigh, then stood up to get a second one. It was only then that Blade noticed the crowd gathered in the dining hall. And for some reason, it was all girls.

"Eeeek!"

"Congratulations! Hya! Aah!"

They were surrounding the lunch lady, yelling at her in shrill voices.

"Madam, more katsu curry, please," Blade said, pushing his way through all their hair, backs, and butts, plate in hand.

"You got it!" Always eager to feed him, the lunch lady happily took his empty plate.

"Ugh! Blade!" Earnest shouted, pointing an accusatory finger at him. "How could you be so thoughtless? Is katsu curry the only thing you care about in the world? You're *so* awful!"

Huh? So? What else am I supposed to be interested in?

"Here ya go! One large serving!" the lunch lady said, handing him back his plate. He never told her to make it a large, but she always

did anyway.

"Oh, Madam, just ignore that heartless buffoon!"

"Now, now," she said demurely with a hand on one cheek. "You should know that as a cook, there's nothing more satisfying than watching someone enjoy what I make."

It was only then that Blade realized the lunch lady was actually very attractive. Making the distinction between beautiful and ugly people was extremely difficult for someone like Blade…but applying the fact that people regarded Earnest, Sophie, Claire, Yessica, the Overlord, Iona, his doctor, and the women in the king's royal guard as beautiful, it was easy for a high-spec former Hero who was currently an extremely normal, average man to deduce that the lunch lady's face would also be considered attractive.

"Ow… Why did you just punch me in the head?" asked Iona.

"No reason," Blade responded. Apparently, her persona was staring to seep into his own thoughts.

"Well, I know it's nice to be loved as a chef, Madam, but it's even better to be loved as a woman!" said Earnest.

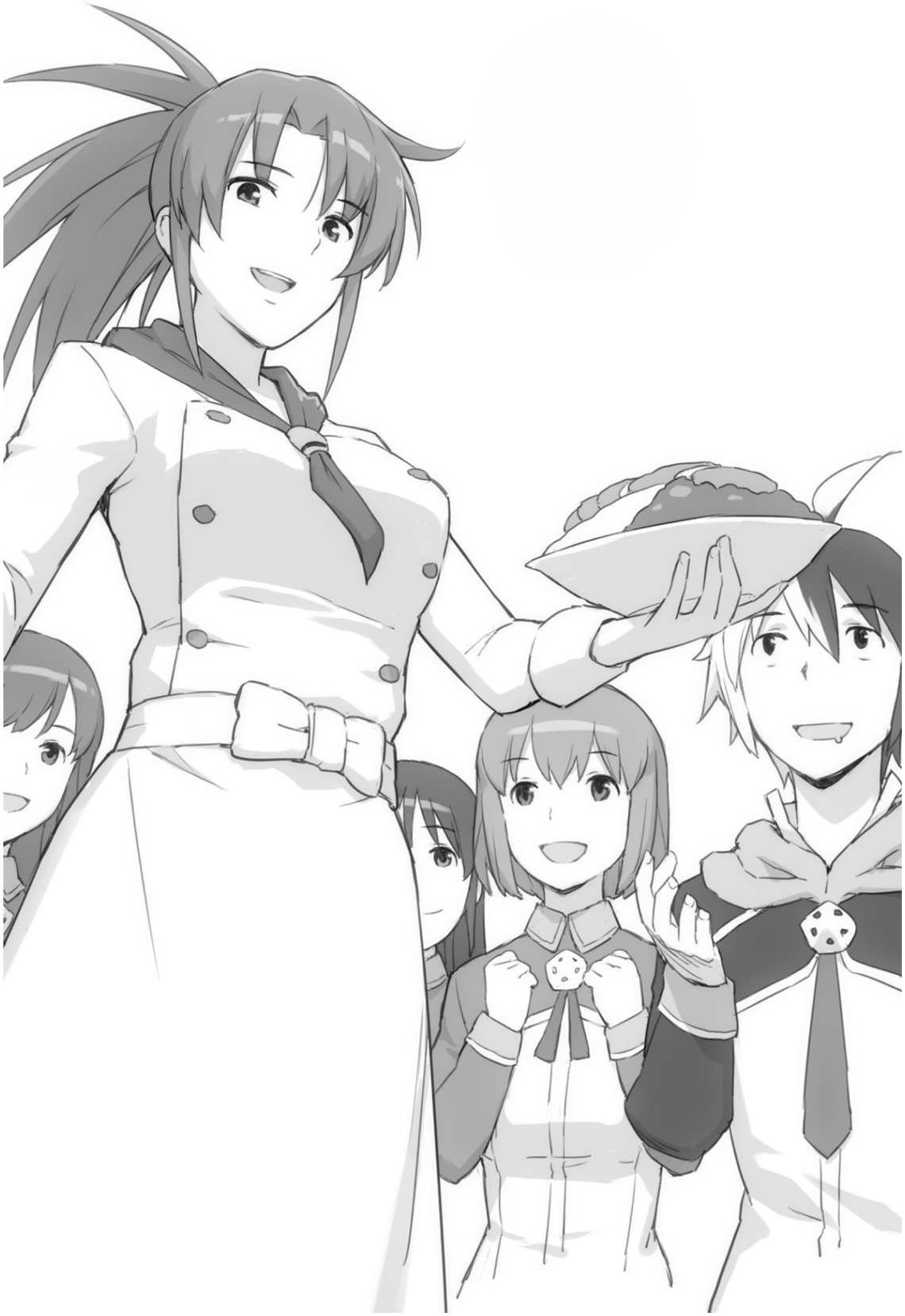
"Ohhh, I suppose," the lunch lady murmured, her hand still on her cheek. The topic had thankfully been diverted away from admonishing Blade, and he was now eating his katsu curry in the middle of the group of girls.

Ughhh! This is so good!!

"But really, you don't need to make such a commotion. Someone *my* age talking about marriage, you know… I'm almost ashamed."

"Hmm?"

"There's nothing to be ashamed of! You're the champion of everyone's hearts—or, um, I just mean, you should have a little more confidence in yourself, Madam! You're young, you're beautiful, and you live for your work. What could be more wonderful?" Earnest was trying to give as convincing an argument as she could.



"But you know, I haven't even decided whether I'll get married yet… I've only just been proposed to."

The lunch lady showed off her hand. There was something glittering on her finger. A ring.

Blade had never seen her wear something like that before. If she was wearing it in public like this, did it have some kind of magical power, maybe? Like, did it make her cooking knife several times sharper, or create a barrier that protected her from stew spatters?

But there was a piece of unfamiliar vocabulary flying around, too: "Married."

"You're getting 'married,' Madam?" he asked.

"Oh dear, not *you*, too! I don't know yet." She let out a hearty chuckle—the same kind of happy sound she made when someone complimented her cooking.

"By the way…what's 'married'?"

It was a simple question, asked with a simple heart. But—

"You *idiot*!" Earnest shouted. "You don't even know *that*?! After joining the conversation for *this* long?! Get out of here! Get out of my sight! Go on, shoo! Back to your kennel!"

"Why are you so mean…?"

Earnest was treating him like the family dog.

"Oh, it's fine," said Madam. "I know well enough how he is by now… Ah, another plate, right? Want me to make it a large again?"

"Mmm, yeah. Yummm."

Blade went back to his seat, large helping of katsu curry number three in hand. This topic of conversation apparently wasn't all that relevant to him.

"You know, marriage *would* be nice, I have to admit. But, well… there *is* one thing that worries me about it," the lunch lady continued.

"Oh? What is it?" Earnest asked. She leaned forward, ready to help in whatever way she could.

"It's this dining hall… Well, I've trained the whole staff here, so I don't think the quality of the food will suffer. But there's just one

menu item that my apprentices haven't mastered quite yet."

"Oh? What's that?"

"That one." The lunch lady pointed her chin in Blade's direction.

"Mm? Hmm? Mmmm? Are you talking about me?" asked Blade, looking back at them. He was the center of attention now, for some reason.

"No one's talking about you," said Earnest. "Just shut up and eat."

Homph, homph…

Blade did exactly as he was told.

Yummm! Katsu curry is so good! Whoever thought this up is a super-genius!

"That dish, you know… It's actually a recipe I got from some ancient texts. I recreated it with modern ingredients. And you know, I can write out the recipe for someone else to prepare, but for some reason, it just doesn't taste the same when I'm not the one making it."

Earnest and the lunch lady were talking about something. Meanwhile, Blade poured his heart and soul into eating his katsu curry.

Oh yeah! That's the stuff!

"So if I leave my job to raise a family and all…well, I'm afraid that boy won't be able to eat it any longer, will he? And I'm worried he'll take that, uh…rather hard."

"Oh, it won't be anything *that* dramatic! I know it's Blade's favorite, but losing it isn't going to kill him."

Blade continued eating his katsu curry. He didn't know why, but for some reason, it tasted even better than usual today. He was shedding tears of joy as he ate it. It was the second time in his life that he'd cried while eating. The first time was when he'd had that *special* katsu curry for his birthday. In the end, it was always over katsu curry.

I… I'll do it! I swear! I'll live off nothing but this my whole life! Two meals out of three, every day! Forever!

He kept eating through his tears, and when he was done, he stood up in search of a fourth plate. He presented his empty one to Madam…

"…Huh?"

…only to realize the faces of everyone in the room—Madam, Earnest, all the girls, and everyone else—were directed squarely at him.

What? Why am I attracting all this attention today?

○ Scene II: The Usual Evening Scene

"Dinnertime, dinnertime, din-ner-*tiiiiiime*! ♡"

Blade was singing to himself as he stood in line for dinner. This was "The Dinner Song," written and composed by him.

He was eagerly awaiting his turn at the buffet, already picturing the curry, pork cutlet, and rice awaiting him, when—

"…Huh?"

Blade was stunned. It wasn't there. It was nowhere to be found. No curry. No pork cutlet. No rice. Wait. There *was* rice. But no curry and no pork cutlet—not anywhere.

"Ah, sorry, Blade. There's no katsu curry tonight or tomorrow night."

"Huh?"

"What's with that face?" demanded Earnest. "You're not going to die if you skip katsu curry for one meal, are you? Even if you *do* love it, it's not like you have it three times a day… Hey… Hello? Are you okay?"

Earnest paused her lecture to bend down and look at him, concerned.

"Y-yeah… I-I'm okay… R-right, Madam's getting married, huh? Then she—she—she won't be able to make the katsu curry. I—I heard all that… I'm fine…"

"She's not leaving just yet. She's going out with her fiancé tonight and tomorrow, is all… Uh, hey, are you sure you're all right?"

"Y-yeah… I'm fine…"

Blade slowly shook his head. Despite what he told Earnest, he wasn't wholly sure whether he was okay or not. His head was spinning, like he'd just suffered a strong psychological blow. He was having trouble thinking clearly. He shoved some other, non-katsu-curry food on his tray, although he couldn't remember what. If it wasn't katsu curry, it was all the same anyway.

He sat down and started eating. Earnest sat next to him, still shooting him worried looks. He moved his spoon up and down mechanically, but he couldn't taste anything at all. He felt like all the blood vessels inside his body were bubbling like a pot of boiling water.

"Hey… Listen, are you *really* okay?" Earnest leaned in close. When he didn't respond, she squeezed his cheeks with one hand and turned his head to face her. "Look at me."

"I… What should I *do* with the rest of my life?" he asked.

"Uh, is—is it *that* bad?! You look like you've just lost half your lifespan or something. Is not having katsu curry *that* much of a shock?"

"Half? Don't be ridiculous. It's all gone. I've lost everything."

"*All* of it?! You've lost all the joy of living?! It was one hundred percent katsu curry for you?!"

"Yeah," he replied, voice firm. "Pretty much."

"God! I swear…"

Earnest removed her viselike grip on Blade's head, and it fell and hit the table with a *thud*. He didn't have the energy to lift it back up, though, so there it stayed.

Katsu curry… I… I can't eat it anymore… Haaaaaaaahhh…

"Stop being so depressed, Blade." Earnest patted him on the back. "We'll do something about it! ♡ …Okay?"

Her voice slowly seeped its way into his brain.

"We"…?

Trying his best to lift his head, Blade opened his heavy eyelids once more…and then he saw it. All the girls together. And Clay and Kassim in the corner. They all looked at him, smiling and nodding.

“Huh? You’ll help me…? But…but how…? How…can I eat…katsu curry?”

“Just leave that to us,” Earnest said, pounding a fist against her chest. “Don’t underestimate the power of us girls!”

○ Scene III: A Feminine Awakening

“All right, let’s split up the work. There are enough copies of Madam’s recipe for everybody. Just stick to that, and we can do it. I know we can. It’ll all work out! So let’s just believe in ourselves and do our best!”

Earnest gave the best pep talk she could. The girls, all wearing aprons, eagerly nodded their agreement. Clay was the only man among them, and his apron frankly suited him better than it did most of the girls—though none of the others found that weird at all.

“Hold it right there, First Wife!” the Overlord shouted just as everyone was about to start combining their ingredients.

“Stop *calling* me that!” shouted Earnest. “L-like that’s ever gonna happen!”

“Shouldn’t each of us be preparing this recipe individually? Instead of doing it together like this?”

“Why? We’ll get much better results if we team up!”

“Think about it. Whoever cooks the katsu curry that satisfies Blade will have an iron grip on his stomach forever, right?”

“Huh?”

Earnest blinked in shock. Behind her back, the girls were already on the move, furiously getting down to business—each of them working strictly by themselves.

“Whoa! Whoaaa! What?!” cried Earnest. “Why are you all…?! Let’s do this together, people! Wait a minute! Listen to me! C’mon, listen! Are you listening? Listen to me!”

But no matter how much Earnest shouted, they were all too busy frantically cooking to spare her any attention.

“Ha-ha-ha!” The Overlord laughed. “You see, First Wife? You better hop to it before you get left in the dust.”

"I *told* you to stop calling me that!"

"Well, I suppose I should get started, too."

"You can cook, Deemo?"

"Change! Maria mode!"

The Overlord hurriedly began braiding her hair—first the right pigtail, then the left. When she was done, her face changed completely.

"Huh? Ah! Wha—? Um… Am I…supposed to be cooking something?"

Maria, the epitome of a reserved, reticent young woman, had resurfaced. Seeing the utensils and ingredients in front of her, she quickly picked up on what was going on and began to prep the food with practiced movements. She might not stand out when it came to academics, but she had full mastery over the domestic arts.

"Whoa! Maria! What do *you* care about Blade?! Why would *you* want an iron grip on his stomach?!"

"What? But Blade's always so nice to me. I want to repay him for that…and besides, who's saying I'm not interested?"

The meaning hidden behind her smile made Earnest shudder.

"Why is everybody here so good at all this feminine stuff? I… I need help! Somebody!"

Silence fell over the kitchen as the others went about their work. Earnest was surrounded by enemies. No one volunteered to help her—not even Clay. Thus, holding back tears, Earnest attempted to cook for the first time in her life.

⁂

"I… I think it's done…," Earnest muttered weakly, looking at the mysterious substance simmering in the pot. It was emitting purple smoke.

She had added all the ingredients listed in the recipe—meat, veggies, flour, and spices. In terms of the contents and their relative proportions, it *should* have been katsu curry. And yet something had gone wrong. Earnest had an overwhelming sense that she should

not, under any circumstances, try to eat the contents of the pot. Her instincts, honed in the wild, told her that if she did, she would die.

"I have a pretty high resistance to poison. Maybe I could try it," offered her best friend Yessica.

"*Poison?!* You're treating it as poison right from the start?!" shouted Earnest.

"Ah, look. The bottom of the pot. It's leaking," said Yessica, pointing. For some reason, the contents of the pot were leaking out from the bottom and into the stovetop's flame, making a sizzling sound.

"Huh? Ahhh! Eeek! Why, why, why?! Why's there a hole in the bottom of the pot?!"

"So it melts metal, huh? That's some incredible poison. I guess I better not try it. I don't want to die." Yessica sounded disappointed.

"I wonder if poison could kill Mr. Super-Being. We should test that out. Killing him with poison… I never thought about *that* route…"

Eliza, who often talked about her "little gray cells," was also here for some reason, curiously examining the pot of poison.

"*Killing* him…?!" said Earnest. "We're not killing him! Or at least *I'm* not! I… I'm just trying to help Blade out! But… I mean…!!"

Earnest sat down on the kitchen floor. She didn't care about her butt and knees getting dirty, and her hair was an absolute mess. She'd completely lost her cool. It was nothing but women in the kitchen, so she didn't see any need to try to keep it together. Incidentally, Clay was so accomplished in the feminine arts that people basically treated him like a girl in such contexts.

"I… I wanted to be the one to make katsu curry for Blade!" cried Earnest. "That's all I wanted! But I've never cooked before, and now everyone's working by themselves! They won't let me join them! And I… I tried to watch them and copy what they did, but then I ended up with *this*!"

"Making poison by copying someone and using regular ingredients is a pretty incredible talent…," muttered Yessica, sounding exasperated.

Eliza, however, seemed impressed. "I will have to analyze it later. It may just be what we need to beat the super-being."

"I'm not killing him, keh?! And it's *not* poison, keh?!" Earnest finally broke down and began to sob.

Up till now, she'd kept herself strategically on the verge of tears to win everyone's sympathy, but now it had escalated to full-on crying.

"It's Blade and his 'rest' all over again, isn't it?" Yessica smiled. "She really is so helpless with things like this."

"Mm," agreed the Overlord. "Perhaps I should take her place as first wife."

These comments from her best friend and her rival were the final straw, and any hope Earnest had of making this work was completely lost.

"Wehhhhhhhhhh!!"

"Oh, great. C'mon. There, there. Wipe your tears, okay? And your nose. Okay? Blow for me."

"Get up! Get up and fight! Show me you are worthy of being my rival!"

One girl was consoling her, the other sternly encouraging her to take action. It took this sort of double-barreled support to get someone like Earnest back on her feet.

○ Scene IV: The Taste Test

"I just don't know… I brought the best of what we all made, but…"

It was late at night in the dining hall, and several plates were lined up on a table. They were all katsu curry, at varying levels of quality—your standard-looking curry, curry that looked a bit off but was still identifiable as curry, and a plate or two that looked just as good as Madam's (on the outside, anyway). Regardless of their differences, they were all the same dish.

"It's katsu curry…"

Blade, seated in a chair, looked blankly at the spread in front of him.

“That’s right. It’s katsu curry,” said Earnest. “You said you wanted some, so we made all this for you. Okay? You really *can* eat it whenever you’d like. So you’re not allowed to get in the way of Madam’s marriage, all right? This could be her last chance—*ahem!* I mean, um, she’s trying to find long-term happiness in her life, and you can’t keep her from that because of your own needs. Do you understand?”

“……”

Blade stared blankly at the plates.

“Are you going to try them?”

“……”

At Earnest’s urging, Blade picked a plate at random and began to eat. It was the worst one of the spread.

“Well? Do you like it? …Whose was this again?”

“Um, mine…”

“Claire? You’re not very good at cooking, are you?”

“You’re one to talk,” Claire said with her eyes as she fixed Earnest with a glare. But these salvos went right over Blade’s head as he kept eating. He cleaned the plate and put his spoon down with a *clink*—then pulled the next plate toward him.

“Oh, that one’s mine,” Maria said. Blade silently ate it. Another clean plate. On to the next one.

“Ooh, that’s mine! ♡”

Yessica was next. She made a heart symbol with her hands, remotely injecting more of her affection into the dish. Blade scarfed it down. Next.

“Master, I have perfectly reproduced Madam’s skills to the most finite degree measurable. It was no trouble at all for a high-spec machine such as I…”

Once the plate was clean, Blade reached for another.

“Oh. That’s mi—”

Clay’s was up next. Blade cleaned it, too. Next.

Blade kept on eating, finishing plate after plate.

“W-wow… How can he even eat that much?”

"Like you're one to talk, Anna. You probably eat about three times as many calories every day."

Blade finally finished off the last dish. His spoon clinked against the table.

"Wh-what do you think…? How about the second one… I think that one turned out pretty well, don't you…?"

"But *you* didn't make it, did you?" said the Overlord. "That was Maria's—"

"We *all* made these together, okay?! Let's just leave it at that! So? How was it?" asked Earnest.

And Blade…

Blade began to shed tears.

"Gehhh! Y-you're crying?! W-was it that good…?!"

"No… No… This is katsu curry…but it's *not* katsu curry. The… The harmony… The holy trinity…"

"What are you talking about?! It's katsu curry! It's just food, right?! I mean, *mine* was some kind of frightening mystery substance X, but everyone *else* made perfectly fine katsu curry, didn't they?! So what didn't you like about it?! Tell me! Just say it! *Say it!!*"

By the end, Earnest was violently shaking Blade by the collar. But that level of violence was pretty much standard for her.

"All right, First Wife, calm down," chided Ovie.

"Anna. You're choking him," said Yessica.

Once Earnest had taken her hands off his neck and he could breathe again, Blade looked at all the smiling faces around him.

"Guys… Thank you. And I know. You all made these for me, didn't you? I really appreciate it."

"Huh?" replied Earnest. "I-it's not like we did all this because we wanted your thanks…or whatever!"

"Give Anna some more praise, Blade. She needs it."

"Hey! Yessica! We promised not to talk about that!"

"Earnest… Thank you," said Blade. "You really *are* my best friend."

"Hwehhhhhhhh…"

Earnest suddenly slumped to the ground, drained of all her energy.

"Huh? What's wrong?"

"Ah, don't worry about it, Blade," said Yessica. "That was probably just a little too much for her."

"???"

○ Scene V: The Kitchen, Round 2

"Hey! You, over there! No slacking off! Keep on cooking!"

Earnest clapped her hands, playing the role of supervisor. All the female students who hadn't joined in on yesterday's katsu curry session had been dragged into the kitchen to take their turn. It wasn't that they didn't *want* to cook for Blade; they were just a bit reserved about volunteering for it, so nobody minded this treatment very much. In fact, they seemed to be enjoying it, and chatter and laughter filled the kitchen as the girls devoted themselves to cooking.

"Why do *I* have to do this…?" But one girl, the smallest of them all, was still complaining. "If I had time to spare, I'd *prefer* to spend it on research. I haven't even finished analyzing the poison from yesterday yet…"

Eliza was mumbling to herself as she formed the ingredients in front of her into yet another mystery substance.

"It's not like I care at all about Mr. Super-Being. I certainly don't *love* him. I don't know anything *about* love! Besides, what kind of man would even be interested in a short, stumpy, ugly girl like me?"

"What're you talking about, Eliza?" said Earnest. "You're pretty cute."

"I… I'm not *cute*! I'm not cute at all!" Eliza shouted, stirring the ingredients in her bowl and making even more of a mess.

Just then…

"Hey… Is that smoke?"

"Huh?"

…smoke started to billow out of the mysterious substance Z that Eliza was stirring.

"Huh? Wha—? Huh?"

It was expanding fast, like a bomb just before it exploded…

"Evacuate!!"

Everyone, whether they were cooking or chatting, reflexively followed the Empress's order, rushing out of the kitchen. No sooner were they out than an explosion rocked the room.

Once the shock wave had subsided and the debris had mostly stopped falling, Earnest turned toward Eliza, who was sprawled out next to her on the ground.

"Why did it *blow up*?!" she shouted. "How do you cook something so it *blows up*?!"

"Oh, like that's *so* much worse than making *poison*!"

○ Scene VI: The Taste Test, Round 2

"Ugh, I have to eat *more*…?"

Blade sighed at the row of plates presented to him. He'd finished off twenty of them the day before, and he had another twenty to get through tonight. It was an incredible amount. Though he almost always went back for more at every meal, that was maybe four or five servings at most. *Twenty* was turning this into some kind of torture, pushing him to his limits.

"So today we have…Sophie." Earnest counted the girls off on her fingers as she named them.

"I have never cooked before…," admitted Sophie, "but I learned how to for you, Blade."

Her expression was blank as always, her fingers covered in bandages as she produced a vaguely curry-like concoction with a slightly crooked pork cutlet on top.

"And Cú."

"I tried my best for you, honored Father! I put some secret meat in it, too!"

Cú produced a katsu curry plate crowned with a mystery cutlet.

"I can add some secret meat for you as well, Blade," said Sophie. "Just give me a few moments…"

"No! No, no, no, no! I'm good!" shouted Blade. "Normal meat's fine!" He stopped her quickly before she derailed the whole competition.

"And also Eliza."

"I don't really care about events like this," she said, fidgeting with the edges of her apron and the bandanna she'd been wearing over her hair. She looked up at Blade. "Can you just let me go back to my research already? I can't guarantee it tastes good, Mr. Super-Being, and I can't say whether you'll like it, but…if you still wanna eat it… then go ahead."

By then, she'd completely scrunched up her bandanna.

Blade began to eat. They'd all put a lot of emotion into this, and he wanted to repay it in kind—all twenty plates' worth of it.

After finishing every single one, he let out a belch. Blade's body shape looked…different now. His belly was bulging a bit, and the belt around his pants wouldn't fasten anymore.

"…Well?" Earnest asked on behalf of everyone.

"It's…different somehow."

Blade couldn't lie to them. They were all being so sincere, and he felt they deserved his honesty.



"So…no dice, huh?" Earnest sighed.

"I just can't work out Madam's secret," said Eliza. "We could analyze her food with 99.9999 percent accuracy, but that missing 0.0001 percent is still significant enough to make a decisive difference. I mean, this is beyond science! What kind of alchemy is she using?!"

"I guess…there really is no hope… She did say that the rest of the dining hall staff couldn't replicate it, either…"

"Mmm…"

Blade nodded. Not being able to eat that *special* katsu curry again had come as a shock… But Madam said she wanted to do this "marriage" thing in order to be happy, so Blade had to endure. As an ex-Hero, he could easily lie on the floor and throw a tantrum, arms and legs flailing as he shouted "No! Noooo! Make me the good katsu curry!!" as loud as he could, but even he knew he shouldn't do stuff like that.

"It's okay," he said. "I… I'm fine now. I'll soldier on."

Sometimes, boys had to show some patience. Someone once told him that.

But putting that aside, Blade had one more question to ask.

"Hey. Um…what's marriage?"

"Blade! Kennel!"

He'd gotten yelled at. Again. He wasn't even allowed to ask. He was being told to endure, like a good boy, and he didn't even know why.

Earnest was about to scold Blade some more—but before she could point her raised finger at him for a follow-up jab, she turned toward the dining hall entrance, a blank stare on her face.

"Huh? …Madam? What's wrong? Don't you have your second date tonight?"

"…Oh? Why are you all here? Haven't you eaten dinner yet?"

The lunch lady was standing in the entrance, her tone the same as usual…but her appearance was completely different. She was dressed in a beautiful, alluring outfit.

"Don't worry about that. Uh… What about your date?"

"Oh, this?" She took the ring off her left hand and threw it over her shoulder.

"Huuuuuh?! Hey! Your ring!"

"That old thing? Well, the mission's over now, so I won't be needing it."

"You can't just toss your ring, Madam! …Did something happen on your…date tonight? What do you mean, '*mission*'?"

Earnest's voice filled with trepidation. Something told her this was a topic she shouldn't be touching upon. But Madam, looking as carefree as ever, patted her stomach—the area her apron would normally cover.

"Oh, don't worry. It's nothing like that," she said with a broad smile. "There's a rumor that's been going around the capital lately about a cute guy asking girls to marry him, then ditching them after he steals all their money. He targeted a younger girl in the kitchen here, so I thought I'd teach him a lesson for her. I went to Gil and volunteered… I guess you'd call it a sting operation."

"Huh? Huh? But, Madam, you looked so happy…"

Earnest's eyes were wide open. She wasn't following.

"Well, you know how the old saying goes: If you want to fool your enemies, first you have to fool your friends. I kept it a secret from all of you to make sure the truth didn't leak out."

"Madam, that sounds pretty dangerous," said Blade. He didn't know what marriage was, so he didn't really understand much of this conversation…but at the very least, he could tell that the lunch lady had been involved in some kind of criminal investigation.

"Oh dear, you weren't worried for me, were you? Well, I may not look it, but I had *quite* the reputation back in the day. Though I can't compete with champions like *you* all."

"Huh? Are you strong?" asked Blade. "Wanna go a round sometime?"

"Oh? Are you challenging me to a fight…or something else?"

"???"

He didn't understand. All Blade wanted was a training session at the Proving Ground.

"Ah, maybe you're still too young for that joke."

"Um, Madam," said Earnest, "when you said the mission was over, does that mean…?"

"Ah, well, he *was* pretty handsome, you know. *Real* nice guy. He was even starting to fool *me* a little. But sure enough, after a couple dates, he started showing his true colors. And he paid for it tonight, lemme tell ya! I made *real* sure he won't be pulling any more marriage scams anytime soon!"

She beamed at her audience.

Blade looked around the room and felt a chill run down his spine for some unknown reason. Around 70 percent of the girls had sinister-looking smiles on their faces…and, what's more, 100 percent of the guys were trembling and holding their hands over their crotches.

"Hey, uh, Madam," said Blade. "About the katsu curry…"

"Oh? Hungry, are you? Gimme one sec. I'll whip up a heaping plate of your favorite!"

"Large, please," Blade said. He was smiling from ear to ear as he waved his spoon in the air, urging her forward.

"You got it!"

"Hey! Blade! You're going to eat *more*?" asked Earnest. "H-have you looked at yourself? Your stomach's about to burst!"

"Mm. I can always fit more of *hers*," he said, putting his spoon in his mouth.

"Ugh… I can't believe this… We're not even *close* to beating Madam, are we?"

Earnest was chattering away about something. Then she fell limply to the floor in sheer disappointment. Blade wondered if she cared about getting her panties dirty—but none of that really concerned him. All that was on his mind was the beautiful katsu curry coming his way.



Chapter 2:
Sophie

Act 1: The Assassins

○ Scene I: The Usual Proving Ground

Blade and the others were having their usual afternoon class at the Second Proving Ground. Everyone dedicated themselves to their training as Blade watched from up high. This was pretty much a free practice session, so they were all polishing their skills as they saw fit. Lately, the junior and senior classes had been training together pretty often. It hadn't just been the seniors teaching the juniors, either—they'd also held battles between one senior and several juniors so the latter could get experience going up against a far stronger opponent and working as a team against a single foe. They'd been trying out all sorts of training styles.

That was all Earnest's idea, however. Maria might have been the student council president, but in terms of school business, the Empress maintained her iron grip.

"That's not true," said Earnest from the seat beside Blade. "I've taken a lot of advice from you."

"Huh?" he replied, startled. He'd been gazing at Earnest when she suddenly spoke up.

"Whenever I'm in trouble, I bring it up with you. Then you give me an answer, right? You always have good advice."

"I… Did I say something just now?"

"No, but you were looking at me, weren't you? And at everyone training."

"N-no I wasn't. And I certainly wasn't praising you or anything. You big dummy."

"Ugh… Idiot."

Blade tried to get a rise out of her, annoyed that she'd read his mind, but Earnest didn't take the bait. Instead, she had her hands on her cheeks, seeming happy.

Tch. How boring. "Well, fine," he said. "I'll take on Sophie, then."

From their lofty vantage point, Blade made three quick leaps down into the arena and started looking for Sophie among the crowd.

"Draaagon…*Smasherrrrr*!"

As Blade made his way through the students, a mass of powerful energy came roaring at him from the side, blowing him away.

"Hey, watch out, won't you?" he said. "That's dangerous."

"It's your fault for walking between me and my target."

Clay tapped his sword against his shoulder. He'd managed to master Dragon Smasher, the first technique of the dragon-destroying series Blade had taught them all as the "Hero King." In the Hero business, watching and stealing techniques was pretty much how you learned new skills, so he'd made sure to be as detailed as possible with his instructions: Charge it up, twist it a bit, squeeze it, then *bang*. Not a stone had been left unturned when it came to imparting every single detail to his students.

However, only a few of them—namely, Clay and Earnest—had figured it out instantly. While Earnest could transform into a magical fireball-spitting beast anytime she wanted, Clay must have found it a thrilling novelty, because he was now firing the move off at random for no reason.

"Oh, it's not *that* dangerous," he said. "You could take a direct hit and be just fine, couldn't you?"

"Well, yeah, but…"

Blade had to admit that was true. Dragon Smasher, the first of the dragon-destroying techniques, was meant to break the armor of a true dragon, making it possible to inflict further damage. In other words, its force only extended to the creature's outer skin. The spirit barrier that Blade unconsciously maintained around his body was stronger than that, so even if he took a direct hit while he was fast

asleep, he probably wouldn't take any damage. The barrier would automatically manifest as long as he wasn't dead, so logically, it stood that no attack of this level could ever kill him.

Still, it was hard being a super-being. Clay had probably known exactly what he was doing, and simply been using this weak, beaten-up ex-Hero as his target.

"Eek! Clay!" shouted one of the girls. "Do it again! Keep shooting it!"

"O-okay… But just a few more shots, all right?"

"Shoot it! Shoot it! Shoot it again! Again and again!"

Clay was starting to amass a fan base. The girls would squeal at him, and he'd keep firing Dragon Smasher and overexert himself, and by the time night rolled around, he'd be hollow-cheeked and sleeping like the dead. Blade couldn't figure out the point of it all.

Now, where's Sophie…?

He found her at the edge of the crowd of girls cheering for Clay. *She hasn't joined his fan club, has she?* he wondered. *If she has, I'll have to kill him…* But Sophie was silent, staring blankly at Clay's performance.

"Do you want to learn it, too, Sophie?" Clay suddenly asked after a few salvos.

Blade sat and watched them, deciding not to tell them *he* was the one who'd taught them in the first place. A strange feeling was welling up within him…but before Blade could ask himself what it was, Clay pulled a reluctant Sophie forward, insisting she should give it a try.

"You charge it up, twist it, kinda *squeeeeeze* it, then *boom*."

That. That was it. It was *squeeze*, not *squeeeeeze*. *Bang*, not *boom*. If you went *squeeeeeze* then *boom*, the move would become explosive before you began manipulating it, decreasing its output power. It *did* make the move easier to trigger, though.

Defeated by Clay's persistence, Sophie took her stance. She normally relied strictly on her bare hands, but today she was holding up a sword as tall as she was.

"Dragon. Smasher," she mumbled quietly, not sounding enthusiastic at all. Still, it worked, and a superhelix of compressed spirit shot out, gouging the earth and extending in front of her like a writhing snake. The suit of magical armor set up as a target was instantly shattered. It was a *proper* Dragon Smasher, not at all like Clay's ersatz version. All the force it was supposed to have was there.

Clay whistled admiringly. "You really *are* amazing, Sophie. Learning it in one go like that. And yours was *way* stronger than mine, too."

He had no qualms about praising her. That, Blade thought, was one of the things that made Clay so amazing. The girls were all squealing for Sophie, but Blade squealed internally, praising Clay.

But…what's the deal? Why do I have this weird, uneasy feeling?

Maybe it *wasn't* because Clay had called out to Sophie after all. But if not that, then what?

"Everyone, step back."

Sophie's voice rang out—yet it hadn't come from the Sophie in front of him but from somewhere behind.

Huh?

Blade turned around. A blue streak shot past him, and he heard the *clang* of metal against metal. Facing forward again, he saw Sophie coming to blows…with Sophie. One Sophie with a longsword and another fighting with her bare hands like usual were locked in combat.

"Huh? Huuuh? There's…two Sophies?" Clay said, confused.

Blade had already recovered and immediately took action. He joined the fray, supporting the "real" Sophie.

"Blade. I am fine. This is my fight. I will protect you."

One of them—the unarmed Sophie—spoke to him. That was the one Blade had been about to back up, and now he was convinced she was the real one. Sophie never asked for help. She said "I'll protect you" instead.

“Did Sophie…use some kind of cloning move?” Clay wondered aloud.

“Of course not,” said Blade.

He shot a Dragon Smasher at Clay’s feet, and the pillar of dirt it created brought everyone back to their senses. Some took cover, getting as far away as they could, while others rushed in, weapons in hand.

The metallic *clang* of sword against gauntlet sounded over and over, and the more confident members of the senior class surrounded the fighters in a circle.



"Tch…!"

The fake Sophie clicked her tongue in frustration and threw something at the ground. A puff of smoke billowed into the air, quickly obscuring her and spreading to the line of senior students.

Blade sensed someone running past him, but he didn't try to stop them. He could see that Sophie hadn't moved at all. She was letting the other her go. And of course, when the smoke cleared, the fake was gone.

"What in the world was that?" Earnest asked.

Blade shrugged, then looked at Sophie.

She was just standing there, her blue eyes gazing off into the distance.

○ Scene II: The Hideout

After making sure nobody was following her, the blue figure opened the rusty metal door with a loud *creak*. It was dim inside the building, but a little sunlight peeked in through a broken window high on the wall, cutting like a knife through the darkness.

This abandoned warehouse was the girls' hideout. They didn't show any sign of their presence, but they were there. If you looked closely, relying on nothing but your eyesight, you could make out someone sitting holding their knees on the opposite side from the light. Someone else was standing, leaning with their back against the wall. Another was sitting on the floor, their legs outstretched.

It's been only a week, and already they've developed so many different personalities, thought the girl who had been assigned the number one. For identification purposes, she had been given the name "Une," meaning "one" in some lost ancient language.

"I'm back," Une said to her compatriots.

"I see you failed your mission, Une."

It hadn't taken long for the sarcasm to start flying. The speaker was number three, or "Trois." A scarf hid her mouth as she leaned against the wall with her long lance in hand. Trois was always the first to berate her peers. It was just a part of her personality.

“The mission this time was to infiltrate and ascertain the situation,” Une stated matter-of-factly. “In that regard, it was duly accomplished.”

Part of her wanted to respond to Trois’s melancholy sarcasm with a jab or two of her own, but sarcasm was a skill Une had yet to master.

“What a pain. Why can’t we just storm in and kill them all? Yeah. That’s it. That’s the only way.”

That was number two: “Deux.” She spun her metal club above her head, then thrust it forward, stopping it in midair. Deux was by far the strongest of the girls in their series. Exactly what sort of parameter tweak led to her unusual musculature was still unknown, but none of the other individuals exhibited similar traits. Perhaps as a side effect, her thought process was always crude, unrefined, and wholly unsuitable for planning out strategies.

“Sister. Was there anyone cute? Anyone worth killing?”

Number four, or “Quatre,” was smiling, holding her giant scythe in her hands. For reasons only she knew, Quatre alone referred to the others as “Sister.” Because of this, Une had begun to think of them as one big family. Quatre was the most emotionally expressive among them, and she always looked like she was having fun. However, all the sisters lacked certain key emotional responses—joy, anger, sadness, or pleasure—and Quatre was no exception. She knew how to have fun but was unable to comprehend anger or sadness.

“Hya-ha-ha-ha! Destroy! Destroy! Hya-ha-ha-ha!”

That shrill, echoing laugh came from number five, “Cinq,” who was sitting on the floor happily bashing away at it with her divine metal gauntlets. Gleefully destroying things was her main pastime. Out of the core emotions, she was mainly ruled by joy.

The other sisters were all roughly the same size, but Cinq alone appeared physically younger. Perhaps she’d been taken out of her incubation tank too early or hadn’t received the right nutrients during the growing process. Or maybe there had been a shortage of

raw materials when it came time to create her. Either way, she weighed only half as much as her sisters. Her mind was even simpler than the crude, crass Deux's; all it was capable of was taking pleasure from destruction.

"So Une failed her mission," Trois said in a sad, almost hopeless voice. "That much is clear by the fact that she cannot prove otherwise."

Une began to feel the emotion "irritation" for the first time, and spoke up.

"Cinq, you're allowed to destroy her."

"Hya-ha! Destroy! Destroy! Cinq will destroy Trois!"

Whack. Smack. Thunk. Clunk.

The gauntlet-wearing martial artist and the wielder of the long lance rampaged across the warehouse. None of them were given much time to train, so each of the five, from Une to Cinq, had learned to use just one type of weapon or skill—a large sword for Une, a metal club for Deux, a lance for Trois, a scythe for Quatre, and hand-to-hand combat for Cinq.

"Une, if your mission was successful, please provide evidence… Ow… Ow… That hurts, Cinq."

Trois was still talking. Cinq, meanwhile, was half hanging off her, attempting to destroy one of her joints with a grappling technique.

"Ow. That hurts, Cinq. Owww… I said *that hurts*! You stupid little shit!" Trois began using her lance for real.

"So? How'd it go?" Deux asked. She was joined by Quatre.

"I learned it," Une said.

"???"

They didn't seem to understand. So be it. Une stood up and went to Deux first. Holding her by the cheeks to keep her head in place, she pressed her lips against Deux's, transmitting the data of her experiences through the mucous membrane. This method of exchange worked between those who shared the same genetic information and were created via the same method—in other words, it was only possible for these five sisters.

Une kissed Quatre next. For some reason, Quatre got into the mood a bit and stuck in her tongue, so Une gave her a little nip.

The other two were still arguing, Trois brandishing her lance and saying all kinds of filth. Une grabbed her by the head and kissed her. Trois struggled, but Une didn't let go until the transfer was complete.

"Kissy!"

Unlike Trois, Cinq didn't resist at all. In fact, Cinq kissed Une before she even had the chance to initiate.

Now that all the sisters had shared Une's experience and knowledge, it was clear what she'd meant by "I learned it."

"Here it is."

Une shot a Dragon Smasher at the bare floor. This technique was what she'd learned.

"No, you're doing it wrong."

Dragon Smasher blasts came flying from four directions at once. And while Une was tossed around by the blasts, she couldn't help but think, *…Why?*



◦ Scene III: The Usual Proving Ground, Part 2

Blade's class was having their typical afternoon session at the Second Proving Ground, training as usual. Everyone was paired up with a partner of similar level, and like always, Blade was engaged in realistic combat with Earnest. Only a very limited pool of students could spar with her. If she wanted to use Asmodeus instead of a dull practice sword—and if she wanted an opponent who wouldn't hesitate to slash at her full tilt—then Blade was about the only partner available.

Well…Sophie might be suitable, too, but she wasn't here. Last time, after the impostor Sophie had interfered, they'd asked the real Sophie what had happened. Her reply? "I saw a cat." After much debate over what this meant, the class had concluded that she must have been off chasing a cat. People had, in fact, spotted Sophie jumping across rooftops around town, pursuing a stray cat of some sort.

She was gone again today, and so the class kept up their practice as they patiently waited for "Sophie" to show up.

"Whoa. This is amazing!" said Clay.

At the sound of his voice, Blade turned toward him.

"Better watch out, Blade! Or your head's gonna fly off!"

"Ah. Yeah. It sure will," he said sarcastically.

If simple inattentiveness was enough to send his head flying, he couldn't have become a Hero. Not that he was one now.

"What? What's this?" said Eliza. "Don't tell me even Mr. Super-Being has taken an interest in the newest invention of Eliza Maxwell."

"Not really."

"Wonderful. Allow me to explain how it works."

"What is it?" Earnest asked, finally stopping her attacks on Blade. The two of them approached Eliza, and although Blade wouldn't have minded staying at the back of the crowd, Earnest dragged him right up to the front.

"I tried out a whole bunch of things. As for swords, there's a longsword, a rapier, and a gladius. There's also a bludgeoning mace and gauntlets… Ah, this is for Sophie."

"She's not here right now," said Earnest.

"Oh? I'll give it to her later, then."

"What *are* all these weapons? They don't look that unusual to me."

The only real difference was that each one had a cylindrical object attached to its base.

"I was inspired when I saw Mr. Super-Being unleash that six-shot Dragon Eater attack."

"Huh? Me?" Blade pointed at himself.

"…Don't interrupt. Talking over a scientist or engineer while they're bragging about their work is punishable by death, you know. Keep that in mind from now on."

"All right, *Ms. Scientist*," Blade said, raising his hand. "What *are* these things?"

"Great question. The cylindrical containers are meant to hold these cartridges, up to six per cylinder," she said, showing them the items. "I'd like to be able to fit more, so I'm working on a magazine-style loading mechanism at the moment, but we're still in the prototype stage for now, so six is the maximum."

If they let Eliza keep going, she would only descend into more and more technobabble. Blade decided to correct their course before she veered off track.

"And what do you use them for?" he asked.

"Another excellent question. In essence, these devices eliminate the need for you to work up your spirit—or to be precise, they allow

you to store it up in advance. Unlike Mr. Super-Being here, who can drum up more spirit on the fly at any time, it's hard for most people to activate extra spirit during battle."

"It is?" asked Blade.

"But you see, everyone. If you remain stationary and carefully focus your mind, you can build up a good amount of spirit. Not that *I* can, mind you. I'm not very good at practical skills like that. What do you people expect from me? I'm a scientist. An engineer."

"We weren't expecting anything, really."

"So if you charge up these cartridges with spirit beforehand, you can activate it at any time with the simple flick of a finger."

"I see. So you can unleash a skill at a moment's notice?"

"Exactly. It seems you've understood." Eliza smiled warmly as if she was hoping they'd shower her with praise. If she had a tail, it would probably be wagging like mad right now.

One student, Yessica, was already trying out one of the items. The metal fan had clearly been made for her. After loading each cartridge with a different variety of elemental power—fire, ice, wind, thunder, and so on—she picked the fan up and promptly fired off four shots, each a different type.

"Blade! This is great! Amazing! *Stupendous*! It'll be *sooo* much easier to tap into my skills now! Um, is it okay if I keep this fan?!"

"Absolutely," Eliza said with a smug smile. "And everyone else here knows which one's meant for them, too, right?"

"I don't see any weapon here for me," said Earnest.

"Well, I wouldn't want to upstage Mr. Asmodeus, so I didn't make one for you. All you have to do is transform, right, Empress? Then you can shoot all the fireballs you please. I mean, *come on*."

"That's true— Wait, no! Huh?! Wh…*what?!* Why do you have to make that sound so *negative*?!"

Today, for a change, Earnest was warmly stroking Asmodeus instead of beating it up. Blade wondered what kind of conversation was going on between the magic sword and its master.

Regardless, he now understood how this new invention worked.

Huh. So you can execute a bunch of small moves really fast? … Oh, but can't you do that without any special tools?

It seemed like a simple enough question, so she decided to ask Eliza.

"But, um, what use even is all this stuff?"

"Shut up, you stupid, rotten super-being!"

Whoa! Wasn't expecting that*!*

Eliza had suddenly turned into a whole other person, spittle flying as she angrily spouted verbal abuse.

"Everyone here is just trying to catch up with the super-being among them! They're tapping into forbidden science and technology, harnessing artificial forces, and so on, all to come a little closer to your natural talent! And *you* come along and say, 'Ooh, ooh, what use is all of that?' Don't you *get* it? That's why you're called a *super-being*!"

"Okay. I get it. Well, I don't get it, but I'll apologize, okay?"

Blade did his best to soothe this small creature that was rearing up, ready to bite him. But he also found himself apologizing to someone else: "Sophie," who was standing next to the tiny Eliza and nodding briskly.

"Oh, you're back, Sophie?"

Nod, nod.

"Hey, guys, Sophie's back!" Blade called out to his classmates. But they all just stood there, exchanging looks. No one tried approaching Sophie. Only Blade was engaging with her.

"So," Blade said, affecting a casual demeanor. He put his hands on his hips and puffed his chest out. "What should we do today?"

That day's version of Sophie was carrying a scythe. Yesterday's had had a giant metal club, and the day before that, a lance. The first day, she'd had a great big sword.

"Sophie? What would you like to learn today?" he asked.

Sophie put a finger to her lips and thought for a while. "… Mating?"

"Oh, not that. I don't know anything about it, but I *do* know you're not supposed to do it in the daytime."

"You don't know *anything*?!" a few surprised voices rang out from behind. Blade wasn't sure what they were getting at.

Sophie started thinking again, her finger back on her plump lips.

Oh. Wait. This one's lips are thicker than Sophie's. About as thick as the doctor's.

"Then how about ways to kill?"

"Okay, let's practice some ways to kill, then."

"You're *fine* with that?!" a few students shouted from behind. Again, Blade wasn't sure what they were getting at.

"Yes. Let's," Sophie said with a smile.

There was something about her expression that was almost… sexy. Lately, Blade felt like he'd come to understand what that word meant, and when Sophie smiled at him like that, he was sure that's how you would describe it.

"Okay, then," she said. "I'm coming to kill you."

"Sure. Come at me."

Her scythe whirred through the air as she swung it. There was more than enough force behind it to kill. If Blade's head were in the weapon's path, it would've popped off and flown several feet into the air. But as he engaged his opponent, who was attacking him with genuine bloodlust, all he could think was:

Ahhh… This is so relaxing.

This was how he'd felt every day as a Hero, and it was completely natural to him. Sure, things were generally better *now*. People fought him without any intent to kill. He'd sworn to himself that, as much as possible, he'd no longer resort to killing to solve his problems. And yet…

"Stop messing around… I can't kill you," Sophie chided as he kept avoiding her attacks.

"Yeah, but if I do that, I might actually die."

"Kill *me*, then," said Sophie, her face flushed and her pulse racing as she put a hand on her chest—or really, on her boobs.

"Oh, well, I can't just go around killing like that…"

"What are you doing, Blade?" said Earnest. "Here, let me sub in. Sophie? Hi. What do you want to learn? Feints? Advanced swordsmanship? Oh, but you have that scythe today… Hey! Do we have any scythe users here?!"

There were 108 other people in the Proving Ground, masters of all kinds of battle skills—but none of them knew how to use a scythe.

"Earnest Flaming…," said Sophie. "You are not my target."

"Ha-ha! Way to get dumped, Earnest!" shouted Blade.

"You idiot. This isn't what getting dumped is."

"I know! It's just a metaphor."

"Huh? Really? Are you *sure* you know what it means? Dumping someone?"

"It's the opposite of being a couple, right?"

"Okay, so what's being a couple? Tell me."

"Huh? Um… What was it again? Like…going on dates?"

"See? You don't get it at all."

"Wait! I know! Mating! You engage in mating, right?"

"Ugh… Can you just die already?" Earnest held her head in her hands.

Wait… Was I wrong?

"Getting dumped…is the opposite of being a couple. Being a couple means going on dates and mating."

"Look, Sophie's taking notes," said Blade.

"Hey, Sophie, that's wrong, okay?" chided Earnest. "It's not correct… Or is it? Actually, maybe it's closer than I thought."

"So which is it?" demanded Blade.

"Sophie, are you gonna join us at the next lecture? We have those in the morning, too."

Sophie looked up from her note-taking and nodded eagerly.

"…Oh. There's Sophie," said Blade.

He was facing the Proving Ground entrance. There was another Sophie—the *real* one this time—and she was stomping toward them,

a clear aura of rage surrounding her. Her walking soon turned into a full-speed sprint as she came charging toward them, smashing her fists against each other.

She was clearly ready to go, and once she was in range, she swung at the other Sophie, striking to kill. Her opponent answered the call, brandishing her giant scythe. It must've been hard to handle, with its unwieldy center of gravity, but Sophie deftly spun it around as if it were as light as air. In response, Sophie swung her fists, dealing the most brutal of punishments…

Blade was starting to get confused, so he decided to call them "real Sophie" and "sexy Sophie" from now on.

Real Sophie confronted sexy Sophie. This wasn't training, but an actual duel to the death.

"The one today's pretty good, isn't she?" said Earnest, who'd come up to stand by Blade's side.

"No kidding," he replied. The lancer from two days ago had run off pretty much straightaway.

"Oop!"

Blade dodged a scythe swipe that came his way. Even as she fought her other self, sexy Sophie occasionally took aim at Blade whenever she had an opening. If she kept *that* up, real Sophie would only pressure her more.

"*I* am your opponent," real Sophie said. But just when sexy Sophie seemed cornered—

"Oh, she's running," observed Earnest.

"She sure is," agreed Blade.

All the Sophies were quick on their feet. Blade couldn't keep up with them, and real Sophie also gave up the chase. She stood alone in the arena, staring off in the direction sexy Sophie had run for a while before exhaling heavily.

"Blade. I will protect you," she said.

But right at that moment, Blade was asking Earnest something. "How many Sophies does that make? …Oh. Sorry, Sophie. Did you say something?"

Sophie skulked off angrily. At least, Blade *thought* she was angry. She had the same blank expression she always wore, so he couldn't be certain.

"One, two, three… Four now, right?" Earnest counted them off on her fingers. "Oh…but what's up with Sophie?" she asked, only now noticing her walking away.

"Dunno."

Blade pondered it, tapping his shoulder with his sword, but some things were just beyond his understanding.

○ Scene IV: The Dining Hall Conference

"Okay, so what do *you* think's going on?" Earnest asked between bites, demonstrating her voracious appetite.

She seemed to violate all laws of physics as the sausage, which was a good couple of inches thick and looked to have about the same volume as a baked ham, disappeared in a single mouthful. The salad, bigger than a whole head of lettuce, was there one moment, then flickered out of existence.

"Who knows?" said Blade. "All I can say is that there's at least four of them."

He was wolfing down his katsu curry as he spoke. He'd recently discovered that katsu curry functioned as a liquid beverage just as well as solid food, and he could slurp it all down in one go. Now he could ask for seconds even quicker than before.

"What about you guys?" Earnest asked, looking at Claire's end of the table. "Any thoughts?"

"Well…just that this is, like, really amazing."

"Amazing? Really?" Earnest said, confused. "What about you, Clay?"

"Well, it's certainly been fun teaching them. I wish they'd all show up together, though."

"Right? They're *so* eager to learn. Putting all their energy into killing Blade like that."

"Yeah, look at this," said Blade, showing them his cheek. "She cut me here. It killed, like, a millimeter's worth of skin."

The skills of that scythe-wielder today had been pretty sharp. He thought he'd dodged her, but the blade had ever so slightly grazed him.

"Oh, that's nothing," said Earnest. "Just rub some spit on it and it'll heal up."

"Hey, don't do that. It's *yucky*."

"What? Did you just call me 'yucky'?!"

"Hey, guys, can you listen to my problem for one sec?" said Blade, changing the subject. "Right now, I have one hundred and eight friends, yeah? So if *they* all become my friends, too, that'll put me over a hundred and ten, won't it? Like…what am I even gonna *do*, huh?"

"Master, you have not included me in that calculation," interrupted Iona. "Including myself, the current number of students at this academy is one hundred and eleven people and two birds."

"Uh-uh. Including me, it's one hundred and nine people, one dragon, one android, and two birds. You're the android. Also, I don't remember ever becoming friends with you."

"That is true. We are in a master-servant relationship—something deeper than friendship or even romantic love."

"I never said that. And it's *not* deep."

"Why don't all *those* Sophies attend our school, too?" asked Earnest. "I have no idea why we're seeing all these girls with the same face, but the point still stands. If I brought it up with His Majesty, I'm sure he wouldn't mind having one or two, or four or five Sophies around."

"Ohhh, I don't know, Anna," replied Yessica. "I think we should give it a little more thought. Isn't this all a bit weird?"

"Oh?" Earnest looked at Yessica, her eyes wide.

"I mean, Blade taking crazy things like this in stride is typical for him, but…I think he's starting to rub off on you a little," Claire chimed in.

"Oh?"

Earnest, startled, straightened up in her seat. Both her best friends had just betrayed her.

"Ha-ha! They're making fun of you, Earnest!" Blade shouted, laughing in her face.

He didn't really get the gist of the conversation, but he could tell that everyone was starting to get fed up with Earnest.

"*You're* one to talk," she said, sitting bolt upright. She brushed her hair back, moved her super-sized dinner to one side, and turned toward everyone once more.

"Um… So again, does anyone have any opinions or observations on this situation?" In the blink of an eye, Earnest had switched from gluttonous monster mode to Empress mode.

A few of the junior students gingerly raised their hands.

"Um, could we say something?"

"Go ahead."

"Uh, well, you know, looking at it from our perspective…it seems like they're trying to kill Blade…"

"So am I," said Earnest. "I'm always aiming to kill when I attack him."

"Yeah, me too," Clay added.

"Hmph. As am I," Leonard said, his steely eyes on Blade.

"Need I remind you that *I* am the one who will kill him?" said the Overlord, who'd rapidly tagged in with Maria to join the conversation.

"No, I mean… Um… Sorry! I'm really sorry!" The junior said, then fell silent.

"Quit talking like that," Blade said to Earnest. "You're scaring them for no reason."

"What? Wait, are you trying to lecture me?"

Who else do you think I'm talking to? You're the beyond intimidating, beyond scary Empress of Rosewood Academy.

Blade shrugged and motioned for the junior-class student to continue.

"Oh… No, uh, that's not what I meant, exactly…," they said. "Um… Like, I think they're *seriously* trying to kill him…"

"They want to…kill Blade? Why? What for? Or really…*how?*" asked Earnest, placing extra emphasis on the word "how."

By now, Blade's invincibility was taken for granted around here.

"Wait a minute," said Clay, his hand on his chin in thought. "If you think about it that way, don't all the pieces come together?"

"Um… Okay, let's try to organize our thoughts," said Earnest. "We have these Sophie look-alikes who show up and act like they're trying to replace the real Sophie. They always challenge Blade to a fight, and they always attack him as if they're trying to kill him. If I had to guess, the most probable conclusion you could draw from these facts is that…"

Earnest looked up at the ceiling. Blade followed her gaze, wondering if the answer was written up there.

"…Blade's being targeted by assassins?!" she said, startled by her own line of thought.

"Probably," he agreed with a nod.

"Blade! This is *serious*! How are you acting so calm about it?"

Earnest began to shake him, and his head bounced back and forth.

C'mon. Stop that. I can't eat katsu curry like this.

"You should be at least a *little* agitated, Blade! You're being targeted by assassins!"

But just as Earnest shouted that…someone slid into their midst headfirst, having fallen flat on her face. It was Sophie. Her lunch, previously balanced on her tray, was now gliding gracefully through the air, but four or five students managed to catch it all.

"Sophie, what happened? Is, um, your face okay?" Blade reached out a hand to help her up.

"I'm fine. I just tripped a little," she said. The tip of her nose was red.

This, by the way, was the real Sophie—no sword, nor lance, nor club, nor scythe to be found.

“How’d you manage that? You’re never surprised, and you never trip.”

Sophie stared straight at Earnest. “I just heard you say that none of you realized it was an assassination attempt until now…”

“What?” Earnest froze.

“Maybe…I should have told you clearly,” Sophie said.

“N-no way!” Earnest replied, flustered. “Y-you didn’t have to do that! It’s fine! I—I knew the whole time!”

“Yeah, me too,” Blade said quietly. His reaction was the opposite of Earnest’s loud, flailing self-defense.

“What?” Everyone but Sophie froze. “What was that, Blade? Did you just say…you knew?”

“Yeah.”

“Since when?”

“From the very start,” he replied, as if it was unbelievably obvious. Once Blade had realized that the Sophie behaving oddly was a fake look-alike, the uneasy feeling he’d been having had vanished, leaving him refreshed.



"So why are you so chill about it?!"

"Huh?"

"You have assassins targeting you! You ought to be scared for your life!"

"Uhhh…" Blade thought for a moment.

"Someone's after your life, honored Father?"

Cú, sitting on his lap, craned her head up so far that Blade feared she'd break her neck.

"Looks like it, yeah."

"Do you taste good, honored Father?"

"I don't really know, sadly."

Fighting, winning, and eating—that was the way of the world for magical beasts. Any beast was a potential target for any other, and anyone who was defeated was promptly devoured.

But although Blade certainly understood Cú's point of view, Earnest's was another matter.

"Ohhh!"

Then it dawned on him. This was the kind of situation where he was *expected* to act all panicked. He was letting his Hero-era knowledge trip him up again. It was business as usual for a Hero to have several assassins following them around from place to place at all times. Come to think of it, since he'd quit being a Hero and become a normal person, he hadn't noticed any assassins after him.

Wow! Now, at last, it all makes sense!

…So how should I react?!

"Oh! *Ohhh!* I'm being targeted by assassins! Oh, gee! That's big trouble!"

He took Cú's arms and waved them around, trying to express the paralyzing fear he felt in the face of these sinister hitmen. He was greeted with irritated stares. They stung.

"It's all right, Blade. I will protect you."

Sophie put a hand on his shoulder. She was the only one unaffected by the mood of those around her. And honestly, Blade

was a lot less worried about these attempts on his life than he was about how seriously Sophie seemed to be taking them…



◦ Scene V: VR Day

A pleasant breeze blew across the field of candy. The garden and the great blue sky above seemed close enough to touch each other, and the weather was perfect… Perfect for getting soaked in blood, that is.

Blade looked up at the rising sun. It was a spiral, like a child's drawing. In this world, the sun looked like a swirly lollipop.

The First Proving Ground had served as the academy's virtual training site for a long time now. No matter how close to reality this world might sometimes seem, nothing about it was real. It was a new sort of training system, partially powered by restored technology that dated back to the Age of Divinity. The lollipop sun, along with the candy trees and gingerbread houses, were being used because without this fairy-tale landscape, you could easily mistake this space for reality.

Sadly, the tree trunks weren't really devil's food cake, the pond wasn't chocolate milk, the bricks weren't graham crackers, the flowers weren't made of edible candy, and the acorns on the trees weren't marshmallows. These elements had merely been deliberately changed to remind everyone they were in a VR space. Their actual bodies were resting in the real-life garden under the blue sky within the Proving Ground. Everything here was essentially like a dream, and once they woke up, it'd be like nothing had happened.

"Earnest, don't eat that."

"Homph?"

Blade kicked her in the rear, and Earnest looked back at him with her mouth crammed full of sweets. That was the thing about this

world: Even the dirt was made of little chocolate-flavored rice puffs. You could eat whole handfuls of it.

"*…Munch, munch… Gulp!* …What's the harm? I can eat as much as I like and not get fat."

"You're gonna eat the ground out from under you… Hmm?" Blade looked off into the distance. "Ah, there she is."

His attention was on "Sophie," who was being escorted by a group of students.

"Wow, Sophie's tiny today."

"Cinq," said Sophie.

"Huh?"

"My name is Cinq. Not Sophie."

"Oh? It's Cinq? You have a name, huh? That's great."

Blade was happy for her. By his calculations, he'd been nameless until he was one year old.

"I believe 'cinq' means 'five' in an ancient lost language," said Eliza.

Blade nodded in understanding. "Okay, so she's the fifth? Does that mean there's not four but five of you?"

The pint-sized Cinq nodded.

"Is that everyone?"

Nod, nod. She seemed open to his questions, at least.

The girls who'd brought her here, now a safe distance away, were all excitedly watching. They were beside themselves over how cute the petite Sophie was and were using all their self-restraint to keep from immediately running over and giving her a big hug.

The "operation," after all, was already underway.

"But are you sure you should be telling me that?" asked Blade. "You're trying to pose as Sophie, aren't you?"

"…Oh. Whoops. I messed up."

Apparently, that had only just dawned on her. It made some of the girls lose their cool, and their knees shook as they fell to the ground laughing. But then again, who could blame Cinq? The

previous four girls could do a pretty good job at it, but how was someone as tiny as *her* supposed to impersonate Sophie?



The students had established a system for telling the previous four apart by now. They looked almost exactly the same, but in addition to their weapons, they each had a number of other subtle differences. There were little bits of their clothing and equipment that didn't match, and they differed between braiding their hair and tying it back, and to which side it was tied. Some students insisted that their facial expressions differed as well, and yesterday's Sophie had certainly been *sexier* than usual. Her face had been as blank as always, but something about her had been more erotic.

A few of the boys had formed something called a "fan club" for them, engaging in bloody struggles to prove which one of the Sophies was the best. Would this tiny one here garner some "fans" as well?

"Forget I said all that…or I will destroy you." The pipsqueak spoke up, clearly agitated despite her blank expression.

Blade held his hands out. "Okay, I forgot it."

"Good… But actually, I'm still going to destroy you."

"Could you maybe *not* do that?"

"Sorry. But if you let me destroy you, I'll stop."

"That's not gonna help me very much…"

He'd thought he could negotiate with her, but she wasn't listening.

"Destroy. Destroys. Destroyed. Destroying."

She was doing an admirable job of conjugating the verb. It seemed she was hell-bent on destroying. Oh well.

"Okay, let's do some destroying, then. But if I destroy you, you have to stop destroying, okay?"

"Hya-ha! Destroy! Destroy! Destroy!"

Whether tiny Sophie had heard and understood him or not, she let out a huge, happy laugh. She clapped her hands, the dully shining gauntlets clanking against each other. Sparks flew—then, with rocket-like acceleration, she charged at Blade. In just a few seconds, tiny Sophie went from chatting to demonstrating a pure, unadulterated desire to kill.

It really took Blade back and reminded him of his Hero days. He'd be talking all friendly with someone, and then they'd say, "Okay, let's kill each other," and when it was over, Blade was always the one left standing. He might sense a kind of kinship with the all-powerful foes he faced, but he'd still have to kill them. That's what a Hero does.

Although this time, it was Blade who was defeated.

"Oooft! Urgh!"

One good shot to the solar plexus. Another to the face.

This kid must've been a martial arts type, the same as Sophie, and the gauntlets on her arms must've been made of some special kind of material. They looked massive on her—they'd probably been made to be worn by an adult—but thanks to their qualities and the child's own physical abilities, the sheer destructive force was well past the level of a semi-champion.

"Destroy! Destroy! Hya-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Cinq continued to wreak havoc, laughing shrilly. Blade was her main target, but she'd also taken the opportunity to destroy other things—the ground, the fences, the trees, the fountains. It was like she'd poured all her stat points into destructive power.

Fighters like this often tended to neglect their defense; they could dish it out, but they couldn't take it, so to speak. So Blade decided to let his opponent tire herself out. She kept attacking, and he kept letting her attack.

The damage began to build up. These weren't just simple punches she was throwing; they had a kind of penetrative force that drilled into your body and stayed there—the kind of skills only a master who dedicated their whole life to martial arts could boast of. There was no spirit or magic involved—just sheer skill acquired though a total mastery of basic techniques. Somehow, this child had achieved an expert-level proficiency at kung fu.

Blade had also trained under a master of this level, so he had at least a passing understanding of the techniques. He managed to repel the spirals of destruction entering his body with opposing

spirals, but since he wasn't defending himself at all, he was taking more damage than he could effectively counteract.

"Urgh! Urgh!"

"Ha! 'Urgh'! He said 'urgh'! Blade! The super-being! He's going 'urgh, urgh, urgh' the whole time!"

Earnest was savoring every moment. She was rolling on the ground, laughing her head off.

Doesn't she know I can see her panties?

If things kept going like this, the spiraling force building up within him would eventually tear his body apart.

"Destroy! Destroy! Destroooooooy!"

Right. Exactly. He'd be destroyed. *Nooo…*

Blade kept letting Cinq attack. And then finally, it happened—

Bang!

His body suddenly burst from the inside. The explosion cast a wide net, spattering all over the surrounding trees, cobblestones, and bricks with shades of red and black.

The sensation of death was oddly familiar to him. There was a disconnect, then darkness, and then his thoughts fell apart and he plunged completely into the dark. He'd experienced this process several times. That meant he'd died several times. Though he'd only been *half* dead…

○ Scene VI: Revived

"Blade. Hey, Blade. Wake up. How long're you gonna stay dead?"

Someone was slapping him on the cheek. There was a soft feeling under his head. It was probably Earnest's lap. His head was resting on it.

"Hee-hee! If you don't wake up, I'm gonna play a trick on you! So do you want *that*, or do you wanna get up?"

He wanted to get up, of course, but he couldn't move. The simulation had been so realistic, it had put his physical body in a state of apparent death.

Wake up. Wakes up. Woke up. Woken up. Wake up! Come on!

Blink, blink…

He finally opened his eyelids—and then the sleep paralysis gripping his body released him.

The first thing he did after reviving was take his head off Earnest's lap. He still couldn't move very well, but he managed to crawl away.

"Honestly…" Earnest pursed her lips.

"Oh, everyone's like that the first time," Eliza said, looking down at Blade. "You keep on winning these death match battles, Mr. Super-Being, so you've never died in the virtual world before. Me, I die every single time. I get killed right after the starting whistle." She pouted. In terms of fighting ability, Eliza was maybe on par with the portly old dude who ran the sausage shop back in town.

Blade recalled his virtual death. It had felt exactly like dying for real. Super realistic. He'd lost his bearings entirely, which was proof enough for him. Even when asleep or otherwise unconscious, Blade *never* lost track of his position or the passage of time. He always knew what time it was, and he always knew if someone moved his body. The only situation when he didn't was when he was *dead* dead.

"Blade," Earnest said, "you're not used to dying at all, are you? You wimp."

Whoa! Wow! Whaaat?! The ex-Hero, who'd died several times in real life, was being treated like a wimp! It made Blade feel a little emotional. When was the last time someone had called him a wimp? *Years ago.* It was such a nostalgic experience for him.

"By the way…where did that girl Cinq go?" He sat up and looked around. Everybody but the tiny Sophie was there.

"She left."

"Oh. She did?" Blade sighed, relieved. He honestly had no idea how much time had passed, but it seemed like it had been a while. "…Was she in a good mood?"

"Oh, absolutely. She was practically skipping when she left."

“Ah… That’s good.” Blade smiled, knowing she’d accomplished her mission.

For some reason, those Sophie look-alikes had been coming to kill him every single day… So he’d thought, why not let them? It was Blade’s way of being hospitable to his guests. He’d tried to give this latest “destroyer” the best service he possibly could. Destroying him had clearly made her a satisfied customer, and now she was safely on her way home, but…

“Hey, do you think another one will come tomorrow?”

“Good question. I wonder.”

Earnest was not very convinced of the effectiveness of Blade’s plan. At the very least, it seemed like Blade had been able to escape this endless loop of look-alikes trying to assassinate him and the real Sophie driving them off (though they’d only just realized that’s what was happening yesterday). Whether that was good or bad, she couldn’t yet tell.

Blade willed his unsteady legs to support him and stood up. “Right! Time to eat!”

“The thermae comes first.”

Oh. Right. They had to bathe. He’d worked hard today, so he was sure Earnest would give him one of her special massages.

Sweet!

○ Scene VII: Blade’s Bedroom

That night, Sophie quietly visited Blade’s room. She’d been running around the royal capital all day, so her clothes were covered in dust and mud, and her hair was similarly a mess. Sophie never really thought about such things, but she was still hesitant to go into Blade’s dorm room, fearing she might leave tracks on the carpet. She quietly opened the door.

Inside, she heard two people breathing—Blade, and someone else.

“Sophie?” the humanoid figure lying next to Blade asked, sitting up. “My sensors are having difficulty recognizing you. It would be

helpful if you could exit out of stealth mode."

"I don't want to wake him up," Sophie said.

As her eyes strained to make out shapes in the darkness, she finally began to see the bed…and then she jumped back in alarm. Blade and Iona were sleeping together under the comforter, and they didn't seem to be wearing anything. Because of this, Sophie had shown a rather unusual reaction, as if she were a little girl.

"Oh, this? My master was very tired today, so he never noticed. This was a premeditated act… Please do not tell anyone about it."

The fully naked Iona had her limbs and hair entwined around Blade. As Sophie knew, she could freely adjust the temperature of her skin, and her hair also had the ability to dissipate heat. This, then, was just Iona ensuring her master maintained a proper body temperature as he rested. That relieved Sophie a little. Yet even if they *were* engaged in the act she'd first assumed it to be, she wouldn't have minded at all. As long as Blade was happy, that's all that mattered. As long as he felt good, then all was well.

"Would you like to sleep with him, too? Right now, you can do it as much as you want."

Sophie thought for a bit, then said, "I'll pass."

It was an attractive offer, but to Sophie, her own happiness was secondary to his. More to the point, she was filthy right now. If she wanted to climb into bed with Blade, she needed to bathe and cleanse her body first. Her top priority at the moment was to protect Blade, not indulge her own desires.

So she turned down the offer and left this task to Iona, whom she trusted.

"Very well. Allow me to handle this, then," replied the android. "I will protect my master even if it costs me my body."

"As will I. I shall protect Blade…in my own way. I will stake my life on it."

The two girls exchanged a look of understanding and went their separate ways—Iona sticking close to Blade, and Sophie closing the door and disappearing into the night.

○ Scene VIII: The Attack

"Whoa, they're angry now!"

Blade was running along a wall.

"The damage rate for Building Two of the school is at thirty percent," said Iona. "Any further damage could trigger a collapse, so I recommend moving to the fully evacuated Building Three."

Iona was running along the wall beside him. She wasn't concentrating her spirit in her feet and using it to stick to the wall, however—she was using the antennae extending from the back of her neck to dig into the material itself. She may well have been damaging the building as much as their enemy was.

"Tell *them* that, not me. They're so angry, they won't listen to me at all."

Blade was dealing with two visitors today. Cinq must not have liked his hospitality the day before, because today both of them had come straight for him. He'd escaped, and they had begun wrecking the building with their metal club and shiny black gauntlets, as if venting their anger.

"They didn't forget their original goal, did they? They're supposed to be destroying Mr. Super-Being." Eliza joined the conversation, flying alongside Blade and Iona on a magic broom. She may not have been physically gifted, but she had the technology to make up for it. "Man, they're really going *ballistic*."

"What's 'ballistic' mean?" asked Blade.

"It's a term from a lost ancient language. It means 'to be very angry.'"

"I think I could have guessed that…"

Blade suddenly stopped, still standing horizontally on the wall. The two Sophies—the tiny one called Cinq, and, if memory served, their second visitor, who was called Deux—weren't following him at all.

"Heeey! Your mother wears army boots!" shouted Eliza.

"What's *that* mean?"

"It's an ancient insult. Its meaning is, sadly, unknown to my little gray cells. Even I, Eliza, am not perfect."

"Well, are you sure it'll work on *them*?"

Deux and Cinq rushed toward them, smashing up the building.

"Ooh, it did!"

Blade made a beeline for Building Three.

○ Scene IX: The Trap

"It's all right. We're dealing with Sophie here… Or, I mean, two people as strong as her. There's no need to hold back."

Earnest was leading a team of junior-class casters. They had taken up position at the end of the longest hallway in Building Three.

The plan called for Blade's group to lead the two rampaging Sophies here. The junior group was prepared with an ample supply of low-caliber firepower, and while no individual junior caster could break through the Sophie Series' defensive barriers, they could probably penetrate them if they worked together. Plus, since no individual caster was packing a major punch, they didn't have to worry about causing excessive damage to their targets. If Earnest, Cú, Iona, Leonard, or Clay busted out too powerful of an attack, they'd smash up both the barriers and the girls themselves. They might even kill them.

Instead, Earnest's group was trying to capture the two Sophies alive. It would be fine if they wanted to become students and learn with them, but if the Sophies were busting up buildings and laying waste to the school, that would be a bit of a problem. In that case, they needed to be captured.

Earnest's group could hear a roaring sound from afar. It drew closer and closer. When the echo finally reached the other end of the hallway…

"Fiiiiiire!!"

Earnest swung Asmodeus down. With that signal, the casters broke out a cavalcade of spells. This hallway had been covered with

a protective coating in advance, so a wealth of colorful long-range attacks bounced off the walls, spewing forth like artillery shells from a cannon.

"Hraaaaaargh!!"

Deux and Cinq were caught in the magic. Blade, running down the hall as a decoy, slid under all the spells and emerged safely by Earnest's side.

"Is it working?!" he asked.

"Give me more power!" she shouted. "They're close to overcoming it!"

"We can't!" cried the girl leading the casters, nearly screaming. "This is the best we can do!"

"Ughhh!"

Earnest thrust out a hand and released a spell of her own. The one spell in her arsenal that didn't require any casting time was a flame arrow, and she shot off eighteen of them at once—roughly the equivalent of eighteen more junior-class students joining their force. If she began swinging Asmodeus around, Earnest could release gigantic fireballs with no prep work at all—but she couldn't restrain those to the point where they wouldn't blow up the building.

Looking over, she saw Blade also sticking an arm out to cast a spell.

Wait, he knows magic?

Not only did he know magic, he was incredibly skilled. Blade couldn't cast as quickly as Earnest, but he could still break out three different elemental magics at once. She quickly realized he was filling in for the elements the casting team lacked, making fine-tuned adjustments to the output as needed. He really was a monster.

Between the group of casters, Earnest, and Blade, they were at a stalemate with the Sophie Series' combined barrier strength. They'd calculated all this out very precisely, and thanks to that, they eventually began pushing their foes back, little by little. Then, all at once, their barriers shattered.

"Aaahh!"

The two Sophies shouted as they were struck by lightning, flames, slicing winds, and icy blasts all at once.

The moment the barriers broke, the casters reduced their output. In fact, they had to; the junior class was exhausted. Now that the barriers were gone, the casters were exerting the bare minimum amount of energy necessary. It was enough damage to keep the Sophies immobile for two or three days.

Generally speaking, the physical strength of a person—excluding spirit- or magic-generated barriers—was fairly constant. Unless you were a full-on dragon like Cú, an android like Iona, or a half-demon like Ovie, that strength always fell into a certain range for humans. Super-beings didn't count, of course.

Based on the students' calculations, the amount of power they were emitting now should be enough to capture the Sophies alive. And yet…

"Ugh. Hrrrgh…"

The two Sophies on the ground were groaning, trying to get back up.

"Huh? They're still moving?"

Earnest tried to order her group of casters to attack them again. But she couldn't. They were out of gas—and that caused a split-second delay in judgment.

"Artificial…Hero…force!"

They could hear a voice from one of the two Sophies, or maybe both at the same time. All the color disappeared from the world around them, and a loud roar echoed down the hall. Actually, maybe the building was simply vibrating, with no sound involved at all. Earnest knew this phenomenon well. It was Sophie's secret weapon. Whenever she was cornered in a fight, she'd use this power to cheat her way out of it. Earnest didn't know what it was, exactly, but she knew that it was insanely powerful.

"Get back!" shouted Blade, waving his arm. He was telling all of them—even Earnest Flaming—to back off as he stepped forward. Earnest could see his back, but that was all.

You idiot! You're the one they're aiming for!

Blade was the person whose life was being targeted. Everyone else was trying to protect him, and here he was, stepping forward to defend them instead.

It's supposed to be the other way around! Stop! Stop it!!

Earnest reached out toward Blade's back. But it didn't work. She couldn't reach him.

…Don't go.

As her outstretched hand searched for Blade, a bolt of blue lightning streaked past her. It was Sophie. A blue aura rose from her body as she charged in like a shooting star. *This* Sophie had broken out her secret weapon from the start.

A dark void had opened up around the two Sophie Series girls, distorting the surrounding space. Eliza was pointing at the void, shouting something, but the wind was too strong to hear her. Wind? Was there wind blowing? Where was it headed?

The void around Deux and Cinq was sucking up all the air in the hallway. But as Earnest stared blankly at it, someone slapped her in the face. Eliza.

"What're you doing?!" Earnest shouted.

"Empress! That's a black hole! We have to get everyone out of here!"

"A black *what*…?" She didn't know what it was, but she promptly made her decision. "Evacuate! Evacuate!! Get away from that thing! Just hold out for ten seconds!"

She knew that Sophie's little cheat only lasted for ten seconds at a time. Intuitively, she understood the same must be true for Deux and Cinq. It was difficult to get away from it, though. The best Earnest could do was hang on to something heavy to keep from getting sucked in.

"Hold out!"

A chunk of concrete around the size of a child's head smashed into a nearby student as it flew past. The girl was hurt, but she still clung desperately to a pillar.

"Hang in there!"

Earnest was shouting. All she could do was shout. If she relaxed her own grip, then *she* might be the next thing to fly past.

"Hold on! Hold on tight!"

She could see the dazed girl's hands nearly slipping from her pillar. All she could do was shout at her. But just as the girl lost her grip and was about to fly away…Blade reached out and grabbed her hand.

Earnest wondered how he was moving around in this maelstrom, but to her amazement, he was walking, his feet planted on the floor. Every step made a small cracking sound as his feet went through the tiles.

Blade helped a few more students, letting them cling to his body as he stood, apparently unaffected by the wind. His eyes were fixed straight ahead, watching the three Sophies fight it out in the abyss. The mysterious light had disappeared from two of them. Their ten seconds had run out before the third's.

Her light still shining, Sophie grabbed the edges of the dark void with her hands and pulled them inward, closing the hole. The moment it was fully shut, her own time expired, and she collapsed, falling forward onto the floor with a concerning *thud*. Deux and Cinq were down as well, and they didn't seem to have the strength to get back up.

Every time Sophie used that power, she wound up in the infirmary afterward.

"Blade! Get Sophie!" shouted Earnest.

"Got it."

"I'll get the other t—"

But just as she was about to run down the hallway, Earnest stopped. She saw three of the same face lined up—Une, Trois, and Quatre. The three Sophies who hadn't gotten involved so far were watching them from the end of the corridor.

Up against *three* Sophies, they couldn't do a thing. Earnest's legs froze in place…but Blade walked briskly toward them. He lent a

shoulder to Sophie, helping her up.

"Yo!" He greeted the three Sophies as they lifted their fallen comrades.

They were supposed to be trying to assassinate him. Earnest had wanted to capture the two defeated ones…but now they had a sort of unspoken truce. The two parties exchanged glances, and nothing else, as they parted ways. The skirmish was over.

"Is anyone too hurt to move? Get the injured to the infirmary!"

Earnest began giving orders, one after the other. She was the commander, and that kept her mind occupied. There was no time to fall into shock or get all sentimental.

In the midst of her duties, she glanced at Blade. He was staring off into the distance through the large hole that had opened up in the wall—the direction in which the five Sophies had escaped.

○ Scene X: The Infirmary Bed

The rhythm of Sophie's breathing changed slightly as she lay on the bed, and Blade called out to her.

"Oh, you're awake?"

There was only one bed in use in the infirmary right now. Some of the students had been injured, but they'd all recovered and left in a hurry. Sophie, however, was still suffering from the aftereffects of tapping into her artificial Hero force. That void—Eliza had called it a "black hole" or something—must've been pretty difficult to open up, and to close, for that matter. Not that it had anything to do with Blade; *he* didn't have his Hero force any longer.

Sophie tried to sit up. Blade placed a hand on her to keep her in bed. Some visitors had left a bowl of fruit at her bedside, so he picked an apple up and began peeling it with a knife.

"You were the most worn out of all, Sophie. You'll be the last to get discharged. The doctor said you should rest until tomorrow."

"Is that an order?"

"Yep. Sure is. How about I make these slices look like little bunnies for you?"

It was custom to leave a little of the skin on an apple when giving it to someone in recovery, forming the shape of a rabbit's ears. Blade now wished he'd watched the girls more carefully when they'd done this trick… Whoops, he'd lopped off an ear. Haphazardly sticking it back on, he held the piece of apple out to Sophie.

"Well? Did I do it right?" he asked.

She slowly shook her head. "You're right about the bunny, but your choice of knife is wrong."

"Oh, it is?"

Blade looked at the longsword in his hand. He used it all the time to cut up meat, so he'd figured fruit wouldn't be a problem, either. That was just common sense in the Hero business.

"How much damage was there?" Sophie asked as Blade began working on the next one, aiming for the perfect bunny-ear shape.

"Well…y'know. We're lucky you closed that thing for us. If it was left open, it would've been big trouble. Apparently there was once a whole nation that disappeared because of one of those things, and they got off easy."

"I remember up to that point. But how is everyone? Did anyone die? Any injuries?"

"No one died. A few people were injured, but they all healed up already. We actually suffered more damage fighting Ein and Zwei. Or Cú, even."

Those two "practical training sessions" had landed at least a couple of people in the intensive care ward for a while.

It should be noted that when the doctor handled an injured person, she was "treating" them—but when Claire did it, she was "curing" them. Watching Claire work was still a pretty mysterious sight. Eliza and Iona said it had something to do with "operator rights" or whatever, a secret technique handed down exclusively through Claire's family. It was all way beyond what Blade could fathom.

"How many hurt?" Sophie persisted. Apparently, there was no more beating around the bush about that.

"Five people. The most serious was a girl who was hit in the face with a piece of concrete. Claire's restoration did the trick, though, so there's not even a scar remaining. And the other four really *were* just cuts and bruises. If it were us, we wouldn't even consider it an injury."

"Oh."

Sophie's eyelashes lowered as she looked at the floor, and Blade stared at her for a little while.

"Can you tell me about them?" Blade asked.

There was no one else in the infirmary at that moment. The doctor was around; he could sense her in the next room…but then there was a *creeeak* as she shut the door. She'd stepped out. That was…thoughtful of her.

"Now there's no one here, I promise."

"Those girls…are me," Sophie said.

"You?" Blade repeated. He knew their faces were identical, as well as the constitution of their spirit. And today…they'd even tapped into the same artificial Hero force.

"They were created with the same cloning technology as I was. They underwent the same fine-tuning as me. They even had the same mysterious metal, called Heronium, implanted in them, which gave them their artificial Hero force. They've all been assigned numbers, so they must have been successes."

"So they're part of that…Manmade Hero Project?"

The king had told Blade about it before—an experiment to make an artificial Hero. Sophie had been created through that project. There is a certain force, or special power, that makes a Hero what they are—the sort of force that only a Hero or Overlord can wield. Heroes aren't simply six times stronger than a champion, they have control of a *force* that separates them from others, putting them into a completely different category. This power to overcome the very laws of physics was called the "Hero force" or the "Overlord force." They both shone different colors of light, but they were probably one and the same.

"I had…the king," said Sophie. "He rescued me, and then I met you. You saved me… But nobody was there for those girls. If there's any difference at all, it's that. They are me, and I am them."

Sophie was recounting how the king had shut down the project and rescued her, and how she'd met the natural Hero she and those like her had been made to surpass. This was *her* story.

"If anything, *you* were the one who saved *me*," Blade told her.

He wasn't lying. After meeting Sophie, he felt like he'd been forgiven for a terrible sin.

At first, Blade had felt guilty about what Sophie had been forced to go through. As a living, breathing Hero, he was the entire reason she'd been born. The tragedy of her youth and her life being stolen was all his fault. Yet Sophie didn't resent him at all. She'd told Blade that he'd saved her, and in that moment, Blade learned for the first time that being a Hero had caused him to suffer his entire life. That suffering hadn't been in vain, though. He'd helped out everyone he met.

And most of all, he now realized that at least one person out there knew he was suffering. That's how Blade had been saved by Sophie, and vice versa…and that was why he wanted to save her sisters as well.

"I hope I can be friends with them," he said, his eyes shifting to gaze out into the distance.

Coming here, learning… They'd seemed to enjoy it. All five of them. Why couldn't they continue?

"The idea behind creating artificial Heroes was for them to one day defeat natural Heroes. Their whole reason for existing is to surpass a natural Hero," explained Sophie. "The king saved me before I underwent brain modification, so I never received that imprint in my mind. But the others…"

She bit her lip. It seemed she felt this was her own personal problem—and in a way, it was.

"I've caused everyone so much trouble," she said.

"Don't worry about that."

Blade had caused a lot more trouble when Cú came along, and he'd begged the entire student body to take on a dragon in life-and-death combat for him. With Ein and Zwei, too— Oh, actually, that was all the king's fault, wasn't it? Blade had just been forced to clean up after him. And the food hunt—well, that one *was* kind of Blade's fault. They had been collecting ingredients for his katsu curry birthday present.

"I mean, look at me. I've done nothing but cause trouble," Blade said with a confident nod.

He wasn't proud of it, but he was pretty sure he would never be able to live without causing others trouble.

"……"

Sophie looked down, silent. As always, Blade had no idea what she was thinking or feeling. He sat beside her and gently held her head in his arms.

"……"

Sophie clung to him, still silent. This wasn't normal at all. Usually, she was the one to hold him against her mostly flat chest, spoiling him. Today, though, Sophie's head was against Blade's chest, and he could smell a nice scent from her hair.



◦ Scene XI: The Disappearance

That night, Sophie vanished from school grounds. She was gone without a trace, leaving only a person-shaped imprint on the infirmary bed.

Her private room in the academy's dorm was almost completely empty. It barely looked occupied. No one could believe she'd been living there right up until the day before. Sophie had never invited anyone over, and now they knew why.

After searching high and low, Blade and his friends decided to pay a late-night visit to the headmaster's office.

✻

"If you're wondering, then yes, I have her request to withdraw from school right here."

Despite the late hour, the king was fully dressed and waiting for them.

The usual gang was all there—Blade, Earnest, Claire, Yessica, Clay, Kassim, Leonard, and Iona. Cú was too much of a sleepyhead, so they'd left her behind. The Overlord was there, too, but she was on the office's roof, spreading her wings and moonbathing.

The king removed a letter from a drawer of his gigantic desk and placed it on the tabletop. On the front were the words *Withdrawal Request*.

"Why didn't you *stop* her?!" Earnest shouted, slamming her fists onto the desk in a rage. An inkwell perched there leaped a few inches into the air.

"The students of this academy have the right to take classes to help make them into champions. But because it is a right and not an

obligation, they are free to give it up at any time. It is not part of a headmaster's duties to prevent a student from voluntarily leaving."

"How can you be so cold?! *You* rescued Sophie yourself, didn't you?! You're her legal guardian! And you just—"

The king spread his arms. "Every child has to fly away from their parents' nest at some point. I consider myself a sensible adult. I'm not so crude as to keep my daughter from setting off on her own."

"…!"

Earnest was still trying to argue, but Blade held her back. He whispered something into her ear, and she grew quiet, a quizzical look on her face.

"Did you ask where she was going?" asked Blade.

"To her sisters, she said."

"You probably know where they are, don't you?"

"Well…"

"Oh, I can answer that for you," interrupted Yessica, pulling out a notepad. "They rotate between several different hideouts. These are the three spots they're most likely to be at right now."

That was all well and good, Blade thought, but where had she pulled those notes from? Her cleavage?

When Blade took the notepad from Yessica, she tugged at his ear and whispered to him.

"Hey, Blade, what did you say to Anna just now?"

"I told her that when the king's blustering and pretending he's not bothered, that's when he's feeling the most hurt."

"Ahhh." Yessica nodded.

"Hey, where did you pull that notepad from?"

"Not telling! ♡"

Blade memorized the three locations on the list, then stuffed the notepad back between her breasts. He was pretty sure he had the right place.

"Unh! ♡"

"Great. Let's get going." Blade turned toward the door—but the king stopped him.

"Wait."

"Huh?"

Blade turned back around, looking ready to cut the king down where he stood. The ruler of eight nations was, of course, unfazed by the ex-Hero's glare.

"Have you considered why she went off alone in the first place?" asked the king.

Blade didn't care about that at all. They were going to chase after Sophie no matter what her reasons were.

"You don't understand, do you? I suppose not. Hee-hee! You don't get it at all, huh?"

Should I go ahead and slice this guy in half? thought Blade.

"What about you, Earnest?"

"Huh? Me? Um…well…uh…"

Earnest, too, was at a loss for words. She, Blade, and everyone else in the room had no idea. They could think of a few possibilities —that Sophie had felt responsible for her sisters showing up and so forth—but they also knew something like that wasn't the whole reason, either.

"Well, want me to tell you? If you say 'please,' I might consider it."

"Come on, guys, let's go."

"Ah— Wait! Hold it, Blade! …Um, *please*?!" Earnest shouted, tossing aside all her pride.

"…Because she doesn't want to taint you," replied the king.

"What? …*Taint* us?"

"There's a dark side to this world, Earnest. Sophie knows she's a part of it. She's going back because she wants to keep you from joining her there."

"That… That's just… She can't. She can't just treat us like strangers."

"She's not, Earnest. Trust me…as someone who truly knows what it means to be tainted."

The king fell silent. *Well, yeah*, thought Blade. During the great war, he'd gotten up to all kinds of stuff. Even though he was now the mightiest of kings, leader of the Eight Nations Alliance and savior of humanity—a beacon in the night.

"If you are prepared to be tainted, go and pursue her… But first, you must spend the night thinking about what that word *truly* means."

"But if we—"

They had to go find Sophie right away. That was what everyone wanted.

"No. Just one night. I'm putting my foot down. If you think it over for one night and still don't change your minds, then I won't stop you. That is all."

And with that, the conversation was over.

○ Scene XII: Departure

Well, then…

Blade tapped his sword on his shoulder, his only luggage a light knapsack. He stood outside the dorm's entrance in the moonlight.

After consulting with the king, all the students had gone back to their own rooms. Blade had immediately started packing his bag. He had a long-standing habit of keeping himself ready to move at any time, so the prep work had taken him only three seconds.

He looked up at the dorm entrance.

"Wherever you go, Master, I shall follow," said Iona. "As a high-spec system, I can make that decision in less than a nanosecond."

"Mmm. Honored Father. I… I'm awake…"

Iona was bragging about something or other as Cú swayed on her feet. The dragon girl had been completely passed out on the bed a moment ago but had woken up and followed Blade all on her own. He hadn't told her where he was going, but even if he had, she probably would've done the same thing. The concept of bracing yourself for what was to come didn't really exist among dragons. Cú

might seem totally carefree, but she was fully prepared to die any second in a way that no human could really comprehend.

"Mm. Let's go, Hero," said another voice.

The Nightwalker girl who'd just hopped off the roof—the Overlord—slowed her descent with a quick flap of her wings and alighted on the ground. There was something about the darkness of night that really suited her.

"Quit calling me that," said Blade. "…Did you tell Maria about this?"

"She said that as student council president, she couldn't let the matter go unaddressed."

"Oh yeah?"

Maria had officially become Rosewood Academy's first student council president after the entire student body voted her in.

Thirty seconds passed, and no one else showed up, so Blade began to walk.

The four of them—one person, one android, one dragon, and one demon—cut across the school grounds.

Once I reach the gate, I better turn around and look back so I can burn the memory of this place into my mind, Blade thought. But as he approached it, he saw a group of people there, making a lot of noise.

"It's about time you showed up, Blade. You're so slow!" Earnest was smiling at him.

"See?" said Yessica, practically hanging off of Claire. "I *told* you Blade was probably standing around the entrance to his dorm. Someone oughtta go meet him there, I said, but *nooo*. So I win the bet, okay? You owe me a dessert."

"Dang, Blade. Were you wavering? What kind of super-being acts like *that*, huh? 'Cause *I* made my mind up in, like, five minutes."

Quit calling me that, Clay.



“Sorry. I didn’t mean to keep you waiting.” Blade’s stiff face finally broke into a smile. “Ready to go?”

Then, along with everyone else, he stepped through the school gate and into the night.



◦ Scene XIII: Capturing Sophie

"Clay! Go around from the right!"

"Roger!"

"Claire! Above the bridge to the left! Can you hold it?"

"Huh? Ah— Wait a sec! The cord for the AMD! I-it's all tangled…!"

Apparently, Claire had her hands full at the moment.

"Yessica!"

"Ready and waiting! ♡"

"Ah! Wait, I got it! I can do it!"

Blade placed Yessica on the bridge instead of Claire. The idea was that she'd be a step ahead of Sophie, cutting off her escape route and cornering her.

Finding Sophie proved fairly simple. The problem was how to capture her as she jumped from rooftop to rooftop. They couldn't really talk things over until then.

Eliza wasn't taking part in this mission, but she had lent them some secret weapons. Thanks to these items, called "radios," they were able to talk with one another despite being scattered all across the city.

"I thought something like this might happen," Eliza had said, "so I had a transmitter injected into Sophie's body. It's smaller than a grain of sand, so there's no way she'll ever notice it…but because of that, the signal it transmits is weak at best. That said, as long as Mr. Super-Being doesn't leave the capital, Sophie and her sisters will probably stay within city limits, too, so that shouldn't be a major issue."

To sum it up…

I haven't got a clue, thought Blade.

The mad scientists comprising Eliza's circle of friends would probably understand straight away, but for a man with no "little gray cells" at all, who was just a totally normal, extremely ordinary super-being, it was impossible to wrap his head around. But hey, if Eliza said it'd be all right, then it probably would be. He trusted her.

"Damn it, Sophie! Why're you running from us?!"

Blade could hear Earnest's voice. She sounded pretty irritated. Nobody knew for sure why Sophie was running away from them. Blade and his friends had wanted to talk things out first, but they hadn't even managed that yet. The plan was to surround her from the four cardinal directions and prevent her escape. However, right now, it was coming dangerously close to falling apart.

"Arrrgh! Come onnn! I'm so angry right now! Get over here! … Zwei!"

Earnest raised her arms up high and called out to the monster bird, and one of the twins swooped down from a corner of the sky like a swirl of light. This was Zwei, who'd taken a special liking to her. The baby bird—no larger than a horse and carriage—summoned a small storm when she hit the ground. A second later, she soared back up with Earnest on her back.

Oh, great. She's gone, thought Blade.

Ein, Zwei's twin brother, was squawking above, asking Blade why he was being left out. Blade had no choice but to whistle for him. Soon, Ein was stopping traffic in the middle of the street, perched at the intersection with his head bowed down. Blade jumped onto him and they set off.

"Sorry!" he told everyone via radio as he flew higher. "I'm going on ahead!"

His friends—or those of them capable of flight—followed along. The Overlord unfurled her demonic wings. Cú went into half-dragon mode, flying twice as fast as the Overlord. Iona executed a series of jumps so high she may as well have been flying. Looking closely, you could see rocket exhaust coming from the soles of her feet.

"Sophie's heading for the Fifth Bridge! Wasn't that the boundary for her transmitter's range?! I've gotta stop her by force! Back me up, everyone!"

Earnest's shouting could be heard through the earplugs—no, the "transmitters" Eliza had carefully constructed for them.

Just as Blade caught sight of Zwei's tail, she suddenly went into a steep dive, and her brother hurriedly followed her. By the time he was close enough to sniff his sister's butt, they were rapidly approaching the ground.

Craaash! Smash! Squish!

A house had collapsed under the combined weight of the two monster birds. They were babies but they were still gigantic, and the wooden structure was squashed like a cardboard box.

Blade had jumped off before impact and carried out the house's inhabitants. He set down the father, who was holding a piece of bread, and the mother, who held a ladle. He almost lost his balance carrying the three children, so he took a moment to right himself before putting them down, forks still in their hands.

"Sorry for the trouble!" shouted Earnest from atop Zwei. "You can invoice His Majesty the King for all the repairs!"

The newly homeless family looked blankly up at her. "Birdie," said one of the children, pointing.

Yeah… That is *a birdie, isn't it? But is this really okay? This isn't one of the king's "practical training" sessions. Should we be putting him on the hook like this?*

By smashing recklessly into the house, Blade had managed to come down right in front of Sophie—though it'd been more of a fall than a landing.

Sophie stood frozen in place. He'd blocked her just before she could reach the bridge. She immediately turned on her heel and set off in the opposite direction.

"Wait! Please! Don't run!"

Earnest's anguished cry finally stopped her. Did Blade have that kind of pathos in him? Could *he* have let out a scream containing

that much tormented emotion? Could he have drummed up the courage to wail, *I can't go on without you, Sophie! I can't! I just can't!*

"Just…talk to us, all right? Please. I'm begging you."

"And I'm begging you as well," replied Sophie. "…Stop involving yourselves in this. I'll handle it."

This wasn't a competition, but both their voices held the same amount of pain and sadness. Yet it wasn't enough to change anyone's mind. Blade's ground forces had caught up with them now, completely cutting off Sophie's escape.

She looked pained…but eventually gave them a subtle nod. Earnest let out a long breath.

"Hey, uh, we're attracting an audience," said Blade. "Can we move this somewhere else?"

He was right. The Capital Defense Force had mobilized and was on the scene. A lot of their leaders didn't have the best opinion of Rosewood Academy. Blade wasn't sure, but it might have had something to do with how they'd wrecked the capital not too long ago.

Sophie jumped on Ein, situating herself behind Blade. She hugged his waist tightly, her small breasts pressing against his back. Blade pulled on the reins, glad to feel her warm body against his once again.

○ Scene XIV: Under the Bridge

"This way!"

"Are they there?!"

"I don't see them!"

"Damn it! They're toying with us! We gotta find them! And *this* time, we'll finally arrest them!"

Capital Defense Force members were shouting and running around on the bridge, hard at work. Below, Ein and Zwei rested their wings, as Blade and his friends faced Sophie, who stood by herself where the streetlights didn't reach.

"Listen, Sophie," said Earnest. "We know exactly what you're thinking and what you're trying to do. We all thought it over, and made the decision to come here. Right, Blade?"

"Sorry, what?" *What did I decide, exactly?*

"You dumbass. I'm talking about being tainted."

"Ohhh, that? I see. Yeah, you're right."

He hadn't really thought about it, actually. Ex-Heroes like him were tainted to the hilt from the very beginning, probably much more than their peers imagined. He'd essentially made up his mind to dive into this stuff at the age of three.

"So you don't need to worry. All right, Sophie?" Earnest smiled at her, but Sophie shook her head.

"There is…something I haven't told you yet."

"Wait, you mean—"

Sophie raised a hand to silence Blade. "I was…built by the Manmade Hero Project. I was created, not born."

"Huh? The Manmade…Hero Project?" Earnest asked, confused.

"During the war, a group conducted research aimed at artificially creating humans that had powers equivalent to, or greater than, Heroes. I…am Sophitia Femto, the twelfth test subject of that project."

"Huh? *Huh?* What?" Earnest blinked in surprise.

"I am a failure who was unable to fulfill my target specifications. His Majesty the King quashed the project, and saved me. That is how I came to attend school with all of you."

"……"

Earnest looked surprised at first, but her face grew more solemn as she listened to Sophie's story. Clearly, she understood that Sophie was revealing an important secret. Blade didn't want to interrupt, either. Sophie was telling them something she'd been hiding—something she'd only told Blade before. It was about her past, an aspect of herself she likely hadn't wanted anyone to know about until now.

"I was told that all the people involved in the research had been captured…but I also heard that some of the samples and data were smuggled out."

Everyone listened, holding their breath. They might have been enjoying their carefree lives as students (although they got a lot less carefree with every new "practical training" session), but here was a story straight from *reality*, that great, heavy thing lying just outside their bright, exciting school days.

"It seems someone continued the research…and created *them*… and gave them orders. They are the products of the Manmade Hero Project, and their prime objective…is to surpass a natural Hero. That is their whole reason for existing."

"A Hero…? You mean…?" Earnest hesitated to finish her question.

"Yes." Sophie lowered her gaze.

Is this it? thought Blade. *Has the time come? Is this when everyone finds out I'm an ex-Hero?*

"…You mean they want to surpass the revered Hero King?" Earnest interlaced her fingers in front of her chest.

Huh?

"No, that's just crazy talk," she said decisively. "Whether you had five Sophies or a hundred, you could never beat him."

Mmm? Hmm? Huh? It's the revered *Hero King now? And why isn't anyone looking at me? Like, you know—me? Me? The guy at the center of this whole conversation?*

"But if their goal is to defeat the Hero King, then why are they going after Blade?"

"Because…" Sophie looked at Blade, concerned.

"Oh, wait, I get it. They want to test out their skills on a super-being first, right? Because if they can't beat one of those, they'll *never* beat the Hero King."

"Uh. Uhm…"

"Ah, yeah, more or less."

Blade and Sophie both nodded, opting to play along with this logic.

"I've caused so much trouble for all of you," Sophie continued, regaining her composure and her grave tone. "My past has caught up with me. I always felt that I didn't deserve it—all this fun and happiness. That a pseudo-person like me shouldn't be enjoying my life as though I were a real human."

She said all this with a stark lack of emotion, like she was discussing someone else. Everyone listened in silence. Blade folded his arms behind his head. Sophie was saying exactly what he'd expected her to.

"So I intend to return to the dark place I came from," Sophie continued. "However, I will protect all of you. Even if it costs me my life. And those girls, too… I will take them with me. To the place I was before—the place I'm meant to be."

Sophie paused there. She looked at everyone's faces in turn before stopping at Earnest.

"Even if it was only for a little while…it was nice being able to walk in the sun."

It was only then that Sophie's expression shifted into what was clearly a smile. And in response…Earnest landed a karate chop on her heard.

"Ow."

And then another.

"That hurt."

And once more for good measure.

"That *hurt*."

As Sophie rubbed her forehead with one hand, Earnest spoke in the gentlest voice she could muster.

"Stop being so silly. If it makes you happy…if you want to walk in the sun…then just keep doing it forever." She grabbed Sophie firmly by the shoulders. "I mean, look at me. You know how stiff and uptight I used to be… Right? I used to live every day with eyes like *this*, looking like I was never happy or having fun."

Earnest had pushed the corners of her eyes upward with her fingertips, giving her an angry, serious look. Blade couldn't help but

laugh. Everyone stared at him, silently pressuring him to read the room.

"…But you know what? It's all thanks to Blade. I learned a thing or two from that guy…and now I can even act like an idiot sometimes, too."

Why was she calling him "that guy"? And what did she mean she could "act like an idiot sometimes, too*"?*

"Come on, Anna," Yessica said. "You're making yourself out to be a poor little princess."

Everyone laughed. *See? It's fine to laugh. So why did I get glared at just now? Did speaking up ten seconds earlier really make that much of a difference?*

Sophie laughed a little, too. *Finally.*

"We can't let you get your hands dirty alone, okay? All of us here are prepared to dive into the muck with you. So how about we do it together?"

"Do what?" Blade asked, and another wave of pressure descended upon him. He couldn't figure out this "reading the room" stuff at all.

"Blade…" Earnest rubbed her temple. "You know what His Majesty said. We all came here resolved to face whatever awaits us, right? We can't let Sophie's feelings go to waste. 'If you are prepared to be tainted, go and pursue her,'" she said, imitating the king's voice and copying his stance, her arms folded. That elicited another round of laughter from everyone.

"Oh yeah, he *did* say that."

"So we're going to come with you, Sophie, and help with your sisters—"

"The others of my model," Sophie said, correcting her.

"R-right, your, uh, model…"

"They are the mass-produced version."

"So does that make you a high-spec machine, Sophie?" asked Iona.

Sophie nodded briskly in response.

"Can both of you high-spec machines shut up for one second?" said Earnest. "We're all on the same page here, right? We're resolved to put an end to this, even if it means killing them, correct?"

"Uh-uh. I'm not doing that," Blade said.

"What?"

"I won't do it."

"Huh? But, Blade, you… Um, didn't you make up your mind to do this?"

"I'm not gonna solve my problems by killing anymore. I refuse."

"Eh? What? Huh?"

Blade had done a lot of killing in his Hero days. He'd killed his enemies constantly, and that had solved his problems most of the time. But he wasn't a Hero any longer, so he figured there had to be some other way to resolve this. Even when he was a Hero, he'd never killed because he wanted to. Not even once. After all, his strongest foes had all been really great guys. He wished he could've been friends with them.

"B-but… Do you have any idea what you're going to do?"

"Nope. None. Nothing." He hadn't had any sort of plan going into this. That was the truth. "…I haven't thought of anything, but I want to do *something*. So help me out, guys." Blade bowed his head. Then he looked around at everyone.

Not to brag, but I have all the confidence in the world…that I can't *do this by myself!*

Everybody there returned his gaze, some nodding, some acting like they didn't even need to nod. Cú was still yawning. The conversation must've been too hard for her to follow.

"But…are you fine with that, Sophie?" Earnest asked, turning toward her. Sophie had wanted to take care of things herself. That was the line she'd drawn clearly in the sand.

Blade looked at her. "Sophie. I want you…to give me your life."

"All right."

"*All right?!* That was fast!"

Earnest sounded shocked. But why? What was so surprising about Sophie's answer?

"Okay," Blade said. "So the only one still grumbling…is you, Earnest."

"I-I'm not *grumbling*! I was just trying to move things along! That's my job!" There was a certain indignation in Earnest's voice. She turned away, then gave Blade a sidelong glance. "…Ugh! When it was *me* on the line…you said you *would* kill people to solve the problem…"

"You're special," Blade said.

"Uh… Really? I am?" Earnest nervously stroked her hair.

"You are *such* an easy mark," Yessica retorted.

"An *easy mark?!* Who—me?! What?! Why?! How?!"

Now everyone was laughing…and not *with* Earnest, but at her.

○ Scene XV: The Sophie Sisters

A large fan was spinning around and around on the ceiling. It had a sort of mesmerizing effect, where you'd find yourself staring at it, then snap out of the trance to find twenty or thirty seconds had passed.

Something similar was happening not just to Une but to all the girls. No—it was actually far worse.

"If anyone stops being able to move, say so and I'll dispose of you."

The girls, slumped over and groggy in various places around the room, straightened up and fixed their eyes upon Une. Their expressions said they were okay, but they all looked like they'd gone through the wringer.

It was little wonder. It had been several days since they'd left their incubation tanks. Une, the least altered from the original among them, was in much better shape than the rest… However, the other four, whose parameters had been forcibly tweaked for enhanced strength, speed, or mental capacity, had started showing serious wear much sooner.

After their creator died, they had looked into their own conditioning data. The process had been rushed, and the raw materials used to create them had a high degree of impurity. This had undoubtedly shortened their service life considerably…but that didn't matter to the girls at all.

Their sole reason for existing was to carry out their orders. A reduced service life, a lack of support and maintenance from the "organization"—all those obstacles were trivial. For that matter, so was whether they *accomplished* their orders or not. All they had to do was *carry them out*.

The person who had given numbers one through five their orders had already ceased life functions—in other words, they were dead. And besides, their creator had only had maybe a minute or so of face time with the girls after they'd come out of their tanks.

Actually, it was hard to say they'd really met at all. The girls, culture fluid still dripping off their naked bodies, had been greeted with a decayed, mummified figure propped against the wall. He should have been dead long ago, yet the mummy had moved his head, turning his sunken eye sockets toward the five of them. Arresting them with his dried-up eyeballs, he'd used a bony, skin-covered hand to point at each of them in succession, calling out their names—Une, Deux, Trois, Quatre, Cinq. They were sure of it.

Then the mummy—or rather, the man—had told them the purpose of their creation and given them orders…then he'd stopped moving entirely. Maybe he'd never moved at all. Perhaps it had been some sort of collective hallucination. Either way, Une and her sisters had been given their orders. They'd been given a reason to exist.

To the girls, these orders were absolute. They found it hard to accept a life without a clear purpose, and so they continued acting upon those orders. By killing the Hero, they hoped to prove their superiority as artificial Heroes.

As Une recalled these past events, Cinq walked over with something in her hand.

"We got a letter," she said.

"What?"

"A letter."

Ah. A "letter." A method of communicating information through written text.

"Should we read it?" asked Cinq. "Or destroy it?"

"I'll read it."

Une took the letter. Cinq was the smallest of the sisters, and her poncho had hidden her tiny hands throughout their exchange. Une was gripped by an urge to hug her close, but instead she opened the letter.

"Can I destroy it?" asked Cinq. "Can I destroy the letter?"

"I'm not done yet."

Une finished reading…then crushed the letter in her hand. She looked up, filled with rage.

"Ahhh…! You destroyed it! You *destroyed* it! You didn't let *me* do it! You're so mean, Une! So mean!"

But Une ignored this, instead relaying the news to her sisters:

"Today. Twelve hundred hours. The final battle."



Act 6: The Final Battle

○ Scene XVI: The Fight

Wind was blowing in from somewhere, making an awful racket.

Your presence is requested in the Second Proving Ground at noon today. I won't run, nor will I hide from you. We will decide this with a one-on-five battle.

The Super-Being

Blade and the others dropped off a written challenge like this at each of the girls' suspected hideouts. This meant Blade had to write out the same letter multiple times. He had gotten pretty bored of it by the end, so he'd decided to have some fun and write a few that said things like:

Hey, dummy! Pipsqueak! Rude lady! Gloomy chick! Sexy weirdo! I could whip all five of you at once easy! Also, I heard your mom wears army boots! How d'you like that? If you wanna do something about it, come to the Second Proving Ground. You better show, okay? At noon!

Blade waited for them alone.

The plan was to lure the girls out with these letters. It was a pretty simple strategy, but if it worked, they'd have all five of their elusive foes in one place.

Some of the Sophie Series already had Eliza's transmitters on them. It had been particularly easy with Cinq, who had participated in one of their VR sessions. While she was out, they'd been able to put transmitters all over her body, in all sorts of places.

And still, the girls hadn't been easy to find. Experts in covert operations possessed advanced techniques that could even affect people's perception, and it appeared Eliza's radio waves were not immune.

So Blade waited. He was taking this unusually seriously and still wondering whether the plan was really a good idea.

Sophie had said sternly, "I am sure I would accept this challenge," so they'd decided to move forward with it. She could be surprisingly dumb that way. It was also surprisingly hard to figure out what made her tick, since she always had that same blank expression on her face. They figured the rest of the Sophie Series was likely just as dumb.

Thus, everyone had high hopes that this plan would work. And so Blade stood, a hand on his sword hilt, his legs spread out at shoulder width. If he invoked "Wait," one of his skills from back in his Hero days, he could stay in this position for seven days and seven nights without moving an inch.

"How's it going, Mr. Super-Being?" Eliza's voice came through the device in Blade's ear. *"Did you want to break out your Hero Armor? I've made some more improvements to it, and the main engine's up and running now. I'll even add a graviton beam emitter and molecule manipulator blade. What a deal, right?"*

"Stop playing with my armor. And stop adding weird things to it. No extreme mods. Put it back the way it was."

"No way. This is an amazingly advanced piece of tech, and now that I've got it, I'm gonna run my nubby little paws all over it until I wear it out. If you expect me to keep my sanity around such a forbidden piece of equipment, well, I may as well burn my mad-scientist card right now! You hear me?!"

Yeah, but we have to give it to the next Hero, thought Blade. *I'm only borrowing it.*

"Oh, look, they're here. The camera by the school gate caught their faces. It's locked on to five figures."

"Camera"? "Locked on"? Blade didn't know what any of that was supposed to mean, but if Eliza said their targets were here, then they were.

○ Scene XVII: The Fight Begins

The five of them lined up in a row. The entire mass-produced Sophie Series was here, looking incredibly angry and holding their preferred weapons at the ready. There was a sword huge enough to cut through a horse, a club the size of a tree trunk, a scythe that no human could conceivably lift, a lance already bristling with white-hot lightning, and a pair of gauntlets that scattered sparks everywhere when clanged together.

But…man, they're seriously pissed off, aren't they? thought Blade.

Had he really done something to rile them up *that* much? …Oh. Maybe a few of the diss letters he'd written for fun had rubbed them the wrong way. *Guess that makes sense. This must be what going "ballistic" means.*

"Hey, uh, actually, can you get my Hero Armor ready?" he said to Eliza.

"It's too late for that. You are *a super-being, you know—you've got the specs to deal with five semi-champions, at least. You held out against a dozen for a whole hour not long ago, didn't you?"*

"Yeah, but I can't use more than eighteen percent of my power. Doctor's orders."

"…?! Eighteen percent..?! You really are *a super-being.*

The radio crackled as Blade shut it off. He couldn't put up with any more of Eliza's back talk.

And then…the fight began. It just kind of kicked off by itself, with no start signal or anything.

Even just standing, Blade's spirit clashed against his opponents'. His foes were launching active spirit at him, so Blade was using passive spirit to counteract it, all while dealing with Eliza's chatter. There was no telling who would break the stalemate first.

All of a sudden, the balance shifted slightly. The lance-wielder had made the first move.

She came at him in a perfectly straight line, furiously accelerating from zero to top speed instantly. Blade deftly dodged with the minimum amount of movement. He even waited until after Trois, the lancer, had let a confident smile cross her face. Completely assured of her victory, she charged right past him, unable to stop after missing her target. Slowing back down took her ten times the distance it had taken her to accelerate.

Blade's neck had escaped her lance…but now it was in the path of the giant scythe. The weapon curved through the air in a wide arc, ready to reap his soul, and he hit it, just a little, with his sword. Quatre, the sexy scythe user, found her momentum and centrifugal force now working against her, and she spun away from him.

Long ago, Blade had met an old master, thin as a withered tree, who blew away hordes of enemies without using even a little finger's worth of power. He could literally beat them with a flick of his wrist. A single touch on the shoulder or back would instantly send his foe flying. Blade had asked this old man to teach him—and after over a decade of Hero work, he'd managed to master around 60 percent of his teacher's moves.

Unlike the previous two sisters, the club and gauntlet users staged a coordinated attack against him. Between their short fuses and their weapons designed for destruction, they formed a natural team.

The club swung down toward him. It had a decent amount of momentum, and it certainly looked heavy, but the infusion of fighting force, along with the earth elemental power inside it, boosted its mass several times over. It must have weighed several tons, and if you missed that and treated it as a normal club , you'd be flattened instantly.

"Hngh!!"

Blade took the blow head-on, his pectoral muscles straining as he assumed what was called a "side-chest pose." His body was now

covered in highly refined spirit at least 99.999 percent pure—"five nines," as those in the know called it. Refining it to that point allowed him to tap into a secret defensive art known as Diamond Body.

He could keep that going for the length of a single breath. One time, he'd faced a demon general who'd used Diamond Body to block a gate and prevent Blade's comrades from attacking his friends further. He had proudly stood there like a statue for a full hour until he breathed his last. Not even the combined offensive barrage from a Hero (i.e. Blade) and nearly a dozen champions on the side of light could break him. Blade was still far from achieving that level, though.

The club, of course, was deflected away. It flew up in the air and smashed into Cinq's face as she shouted, "Destroy! Destroy! Hya-ha-ha-ha!" with her fists in the air.

Une circled around Blade, her huge sword whizzing through the air as she whirled it around. Her footwork alone demonstrated her mastery of the weapon.

"Hah!"

The first strike came. Blade dodged it.

"Hah! Hah! Hah!"

He dodged the second blow, then the third, then the fourth. The fifth he parried with his sword. A fight between two sword masters like this looked almost choreographed, as if every move had been worked out in advance. For Blade and Une, it was more a like a dance than a fight. One, two, three—after three steps, they spun around and switched places. In the ancient language, that would be *un, deux, trois*.

Now Deux and Trois were joining in the dance. "Quatre" meant "four," and she was the next to pop in. Cinq, the fifth, joined the fray, holding her badly bruised nose. Blade had lured all five girls to the ball, taking the lead and manipulating them so they were dancing in the palm of his hand. The party went on, the host barely moving as the girls twirled their way around him.

○ Scene XVIII: From the Stands

Wow…

Earnest was engrossed in the scene playing out before her. It was like a royal ball. One girl would engage Blade, separate from him, spin around, and then another girl would take her place, just like a grand dance.

Earnest had never been to a ball, though she wanted to. She had caught glimpses of those glittering events through the windows of her family's mansion while she practiced with her sword in the garden. She'd only been a little over ten at the time, but she still turned her face away from the scene, maintaining strict discipline as she kept swinging her sword. But she had seen those beautiful dresses, and she wanted to try one on…

…Wait! That's not important right now!

Blade was doing a brilliant job carrying out his plan. In short, he was trying to wear out his opponents, and once they hit peak fatigue, he'd grab them. By forcing them into the dance—or rather, these dance-like movements—he'd have them use up all their energy while expending very little of his own. He'd dodge their attacks, make them think he was open, and then lure them into going for the kill—a series of moves that steadily drained them all.

Once they'd captured all five girls, they could use Eliza's forbidden science or the doctor's medical skills to handle them. They'd figure something out. They had done so before, and they would do it again today. She knew they could.

Earnest was aware that these girls, the Sophie Series, were being forced to carry out orders. The original Sophie was kind of like that, too—waiting for someone to order her around. In the beginning, before Blade showed up, she was open to doing pretty much anything if it was phrased as a command, which had occasionally led to problems. These sisters (or those of the same "model," as Sophie had corrected her earlier) were only attacking Blade because of their orders. Surely there was a way rescind those commands. And surely

there were five empty seats at the academy for the girls when they were done.

Now Blade made two of his opponents clash with each other. It should have been a graceful royal ball, but things were starting to come apart at the seams.

○ Scene XIX: Blade

Haaah…haaah…haaah…

Blade was panting.

Even he thought he was getting pretty rusty. In his prime, he'd been able to do this sort of thing against a party of six champions—but now, facing only five semi-champions was grinding him down hard.

I mean, I'm glad I'm this much closer to being normal…but at times like this, that's a bit of a problem…

His five opponents were strong, and they were going all out. The twelve women in the king's royal guard were semi-champions as well, but they hadn't fought seriously against Blade. This quintet, however, was devoted to killing him. Their lack of hesitation, like three-year-olds stepping on an ant, was almost exhilarating.

He hadn't felt this tingling sensation since the last time he was on a battlefield—the sense that even the slightest mistake could kill you. Even an ex-Hero could die when it was his time.

The same had been true in his Hero days. Heroes weren't immortal or anything; they just had a knack for always returning from battle alive. That was all. Even a tiny error in judgment could result in a quick, brutal death. And this was the level of skill and decisiveness these girls showed. There wasn't a single moment of indecision. They didn't spend a moment thinking about their own safety. They probably didn't even have the concept of "friendly fire" imprinted in their minds. That was how unconcerned they were about their own lives.

Blade, of course, was more focused on keeping up the dance so he wouldn't die…and so they wouldn't, either. That was why this

fight was so much more exhausting than usual.

The time limit was one hour. That was the number Eliza had come up with. If Blade could keep the sisters dancing for an hour, that would drain them enough to capture. He could count on that number. Otherwise, Eliza had said, she'd cut her own throat on the spot. And if an hour was what it took, then maybe…he could make that work. Or maybe not? Could it be that he was in more trouble than he thought?

Perhaps because he'd let such thoughts wander into his mind, Blade got his legs tangled up. He fell to the ground, then rolled onto his back, facing the sky. It was an amateur move, leaving him defenseless in the face of five foes.

Uh-oh. Not good.

They all leaped at him as one.

○ Scene XX: Earnest

"Blade!" Earnest shouted. She could see that he'd fallen over, and now he was out of sight, covered by the Sophie Series.

"Blade! Blade!"

The Second Proving Ground was a circular coliseum. Earnest had been sitting in the stands, and now she was trying to climb over the rim to get inside. But a hand held her back. It belonged to Sophie.

"Trust in him."

Earnest knew she shouldn't go. This whole plan rested on Blade handling matters by himself. If his friends swarmed onto the scene, the girls would likely scurry off. Meanwhile, if Blade continued fighting alone—even if the sisters knew it was a trap—they'd feel obliged to respond in kind, not leaving until they had exhausted every chance to assassinate him. All aspects of this plan had been worked out in advance.

"I know! I know. I know that…" Earnest started biting her nails. "But…! But I have to do something…"

She couldn't just sit there and watch. Why wasn't she fighting next to Blade right now?

"Haaaahhh!"

Blade's voice bellowed out from beneath the Sophie Series, and all five of them were blown in every direction.

A spherical space had opened up around him, and he had his arms spread and his feet planted flat on the ground inside. This skill emitted spherical shock waves out from his body—the perfect way to escape being dogpiled by a team of opponents.

Blade had used a variety of moves in this fight—some Earnest had seen before and some she hadn't. He really did have an amazing arsenal; whether he had a clear advantage or was in over his head, or whether he was fighting one-on-one or fending off a horde of enemies, he always seemed ready. It was as if he'd experienced every type of battle there was. And at this point, there was nothing left to do but leave it all to him.

Blade's uniform was falling apart. His sleeves were missing at the elbows, and his pants were now more like long, uneven shorts. No matter what kind of battle he'd wound up in at this school before, he'd never so much as torn a seam. Even during the marathon battle for survival in that alien world they called the Royal Larder, Blade had kept his uniform in pristine condition, a lone civilized man among a student body turned savage. Now Blade was being pressed so hard, he'd soon be half-naked.

Earnest gripped the hilt of her sword. It silently told to her to stand strong. She knew she had to… But right now, she felt like a helpless young girl.

"You know, Anna…there *is* something we can do, isn't there?"

At Yessica's reminder, Earnest finally realized something.

"You're right!" she exclaimed.

She pulled out a bandolier filled with cartridges, another one of Eliza's inventions. Each cartridge packed a supply of spirit; Earnest hadn't been given any at first, but Eliza had made this for her later on.

These cartridges glowed with crimson energy. It was flame magic, the only type Earnest could manipulate, but she was second

to none at it. They didn't call her the Empress of Flame for no reason.

"Wait! Me too, me too! ♡"

Yessica took out her own bandolier, this one flashing a rainbow of colors—earth, water, fire, wind, and even a couple of incredibly rare elements. She had unusual skill with her spirit.

"That's sure a lot of cartridges, Anna. Looks like you've been busy with your *solo efforts*."

"Ugh… Don't put it like *that…*"

Earnest turned toward her male classmates and glared at them, in case they got any funny ideas.

"Leonard, Clay, Kassim… You've been *squeezing it out* as well, haven't you?"

"But of course, milady," said Leonard, as if this made him look very cool.

Clay was a bit more withdrawn. "Uh, um… I'm not really sure you could call it that…"

"If you need a poison-type aura, I'm your man! I produce a *ton* of it!" said Kassim proudly. This type of aura was quite rare.

"Okay!" shouted Yessica. "I'll start! Are you ready?"

"Go ahead!" Earnest nodded.

What Blade needed right now was as many weapons in his arsenal as possible. It was the perfect application for Yessica's variety pack of spirit.

"Blade! Catch!!" she said, throwing the bandolier at him.

Must be nice, being able to fight together with him like that. My superheated cartridges have to be saved for when he needs pure firepower…

Earnest was tempted to throw her bandolier to Blade right away, but she somehow managed to resist.

○ Scene XXI: The Sophie Series

Une wasn't showing it on her face, but on the inside, she was gloating. It was by a hair's breadth, but they had won. The target

was worn down. They were closing in on him.

Their service life was reaching its end. They'd calculated how long they would last based a number of factors—their cultivation process, the adjustments made to them, the degree to which the raw materials had been refined, and so on—and all of that put together provided for a fourteen-day shelf life. And *today* was Une and her sisters' fourteenth day of life. The exact timing would vary for each of them, but by sunset, they would all revert to lumps of organic matter.

But before they did, by a hair's breadth…they had won.

Heh-heh!

Une's mouth twitched a bit, about to form a smile, when… something was thrown from the stands. A weapon? Ammunition? She'd never seen an object like that before. There was no data on record for it.

The target caught it in his outstretched hand as if he'd been waiting for it, as if it belonged to him.

Pulling one of the cartridges from the bandolier, he shoved it into an empty slot in his sword…and activated it. Immediately, lightning coursed around his weapon, and sparks of electricity shot out from the blade. The five girls of the Sophie Series attacked in rapid succession, giving their target no time to further manipulate his spirit, but it was no use.

Une calmly analyzed the situation. She looked for the optimal course of action. The smile that had been just about to reach her lips was long gone.

◦ Scene XXII: Sophitia Femto

"Artificial Hero force… Ten seconds," muttered one of the Sophie Series.

All the hair on Blade's body stood on end.

Here we go. Finally.

At first, he'd overwhelmed his opponents, then they'd driven him back, and now he'd turned the tables using the accumulated aura

the others had lent him. And as soon as his opponents realized they were on the back foot, they finally pulled out their most powerful weapon.

This is insane. Their power is crazy.

Blade had been able to tap into the same power before, so he knew far better than most just how dangerous it was. It violated the very laws of nature. A cheat, the likes of which could easily overturn any difference in power. Even with the ten-second time limit, seeing someone besides the Hero or the Overlord tap into it was nothing short of astonishing.

And now they could use it five times in a row! He was facing five opponents, and that meant ten seconds of power for each of them. In his previous virtual battle against Sophie, Blade had been able to hold out against her ten-second cheat. After all, there were ways to deal with it if you knew it was coming, and since it was only ten seconds…well, maybe he couldn't beat it, but he could at least avoid being killed.

But now that time was multiplied by five. Could he really survive that, in his beaten-up ex-Hero state?

…He had to.

Hearing the *whoooosh* of a sympathetic vibration, Blade got ready to face his opponents. Deux, the club wielder, had her artificial Hero force activated. She swung her weapon above her head, then froze.

"Take…thiiiiis!"

She was about to shout out the name of the skill. Between that and her other preparations, Deux lost around three seconds. Then she thrust her club to the ground and cried out:

"Earth Craaaaaash!"

Blade thought the ground beneath him would split apart. But he was wrong—it was the opposite. Deux had embedded the club in the ground, and when she forcibly swung it back up, heaven and earth seemed to flip over. The ground that should've been under his feet was somehow above him. And then…

"Orrrph!!"

…the ground smashed into him, and he was sent flying into the air—where the ground was waiting for him once again.

"Hrrrgh!"

What had she done, you ask? Well, Blade knew exactly how Deux was using her Hero force.

No one had ever confirmed it, but it was said that the world was round. A big, round lump of earth called a "planet." This was what Deux was swinging around, using her embedded club as a kind of handle as she slapped it against Blade.

"Th-there… Y-you see that…?"

Deux collapsed on the spot. Ten seconds had already passed.

Blade slowly got up. Thanks to all that swinging around she'd done, Blade had taken nothing but simple physical damage from being smashed against the ground. That said, it was as though he'd been hit by a carriage and trampled by a dragon…

"I can't believe this…" Deux fainted.

Whooooosh…

Another gust of wind-like resonance announced the activation of the next artificial Hero force. This time it was the scythe-wielding Quatre.

"Heh-heh-heh-heh… Hope you're ready to see god."

Dozens of images of Quatre spun endlessly around Blade. Or maybe they weren't images. With such crazy power, it was entirely possible that every one of those Quatres was real.

Blade readied himself. Quatre and that alluring smile of hers were about to torture him for this entire ten-second period.

Scythe in hand, she whizzed past Blade at high speed. He was cut. Another image passed by. Another cut. Another image. Another cut, another cut, another cut.

Oh man… Wow. I might not even last ten seconds.

"Blade!"

He could hear Sophie—not his opponents, but the real one. She had rushed out to support him.

"Artificial Hero force… Ten seconds…"

She also manifested her Hero force.

The two forces began to interfere with each other, but Sophie, who'd activated this ability many times before, had the advantage. The endless stream of images flickered out. Quatre was back to being just one person.

Blade wasted no time.

"Dragon Smasher—Machine Gun!"

Blade fired off the large collection of tiny cartridges Clay had tirelessly filled up for him, releasing them at a rate of about twenty shots a second. Quatre was forced to use the remainder of her Hero force to offset the power of all those Dragon Smashers, and the supply of cartridges was more than enough to hold her off for those last few seconds. Clay had really pushed himself to fill up all those containers.

Blade shot out Dragon Smashers at impossible speed with his left hand, pulling Sophie close to him with his right. He thrust his arm into the characteristic glow of the Hero force enveloping her body, making it his own.

"Sophie. I'm stopping you with seven seconds left."

"What?"

Blade forcibly stopped her artificial Hero force.

Once Sophie activated that power, she wasn't able to stop it herself until it was fully used up. Blade was no longer a Hero, so he didn't have access to that force…but when it came to *controlling* it, he considered himself to be one of the top two most skilled individuals still living among both humans and demons.

I spent fifteen years as a Hero. Don't forget that.

Sophie's body convulsed violently, reacting to the forced stoppage.

"Can you still go on?" Blade asked her.

"Yes. My life is yours. Use it as you wish."

Sophie's face was so close to his, and there was an ever so slight tinge of emotion across it.

"Aaaaaaargh…! Our chances of *winning*!"

Trois came charging in with her lance, wailing almost as if she was singing. It was a charge driven by the Hero force, which, naturally, made it faster than light. Canceling out that attack took another three seconds of Sophie's artificial Hero force.

"Ultra-Divine Technique—Indestructible Barrier!" Blade cried out.

Who came up with that name? Leonard?

Leonard had given him just one cartridge, but it contained a hyper-dense barrier that blocked all attacks for ten seconds. Blade had activated this spherical barrier around Trois, so it would block all attacks directed at her. However, being on the inside meant that Trois couldn't attack anyone, either. Thus, her ten seconds of invincibility came to an end, along with her strength.

Sophie had four seconds left.

"Destroy! Destroy! Destroy! Hya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Now it was the kid's turn. She was laughing maniacally as she stomped toward them. Unleashing her ten-second-long cheat, she began smashing away, the impacts from her gauntlets destroying the ground and everything else in her path.

"Ready, Sophie?" whispered Blade as he held her. "This is gonna hurt a bit."

Sophie manifested her artificial Hero force. She used it to run at high speed, virtually teleporting them both to the other end of the arena, then Blade immediately shut it off.



"Ah…"

Sophie's body shook. That bulldozer of a kid changed direction, charging toward them again, and Sophie reactivated her Hero force, teleporting them to another location. Like this, they consumed just one second at a time.

"Ngh…"

Sophie's face contorted, her chest and leg muscles spasming irregularly. The bulldozer roared toward them once more. One more artificial Hero force activation. One more pseudo-teleport. Now there was just one second left…

"Urrrgh…"

Sophie was covered in beads of sweat, her breathing fast and shallow. The bulldozer charged toward them again.

"Blade… I—I can't… I'll die…"

"Don't worry. I'll be there when you do."

If Sophie couldn't hold out, Blade was ready to join her. If it meant seeing the afterlife together, so be it.

Using their last second of time, they leaped away from Cinq. That final burst caused Sophie to fall unconscious, and Blade laid her on the ground, then took out his last cartridge. It was deep red in color. The vast store of heat Earnest had put into it was burning so hot it had already half melted the transparent container.

Blade readied his arm. His sword had fallen apart long ago, so instead, he'd been using his own arm as the catalyst to fire off techniques. But how was that possible when there was no cartridge slot? Well, he just rammed each one straight into his arm. No problem.

His left hand was a mess from repeatedly firing off attacks, and the bone was even sticking out in places. So this time, he used his right hand.

Uhhh… Wait. What was the name of Earnest's technique again? …Ah, it doesn't matter.

"Earnest Monster Beam!"

There they were. Those fireballs Earnest spat out whenever she was in monster mode. It was a rapid-fire barrage, one after the other, after the other, after the other, after the other! It wasn't a beam, no, but the projectiles were fired with such incomprehensible speed that it might as well have been one.

This beam of fire smashed against the oncoming bulldozer. They pushed at each other, moving one way a little, then the other. The balance held for just a few seconds, and that was enough.

"Looks like time's up…"

The Earnest Beam fizzled out just as Blade's opponent's artificial Hero force stopped. He had planned this technique so it'd work out that way. Cinq was now lying on the ground, face-first.

…Four down.

Sophie had collapsed. The cartridges from Earnest and his classmates were all used up. Blade could no longer use his arms. His heartbeat was also a little irregular; it seemed to stop two out of every three beats.

Things were *bad*. Back in his Hero days, it was times like this—when he'd lost his arms and his equipment, his spirit and magic had run dry, and his heart had started hiccupping on him—that the *real* battle would begin. Blade had once had to continue for seven days and nights in that state. *That* had been a real fight. But now that he was a defective Hero only capable of 18 percent of his full power, going any further would mean death. Instant death. Serious death. He didn't really mind that, but if he died, he wouldn't be able to stop Sophie's sisters. So he had to live.

"Well?" Blade said to Une, smiling fearlessly. "You're the last one."

He had no strategy at all. But it was said that times like this were when a Hero stood strong with a big smile on his face. Not that Blade was a Hero anymore.

The wind blew. Seconds ticked by as Une and Blade faced each other.

"So? Are you gonna come at me or not?"

He had no plan, of course. Not to brag, but he hadn't thought up anything at all. Not even the slightest glimmer of a plan. He was totally hopeless.

And then…

"Time's up," Une said in a soft voice, almost mumbling to herself.

"'Time's up'? …What do you mean?"

One of her arms fell. Literally. It sloughed right off at the shoulder.

"Huh?"

Blade froze. He hadn't done anything, much less attacked her. But her arm had just fallen right off her body. Almost like she was melting…or rotting.

"Whoa! Wha—?! Hey!"

He ran over to her. His own arms didn't work too well, either, but he willed them into action, holding Une up.

"Hey! What do you mean, 'time's up'? Snap out of it! Hey!"

This all-powerful enemy he'd been facing just a moment ago was now fighting for life in his arms. It had only been a few scant seconds, and now she was dying. Unlike her four sisters, Une had never used her power—her artificial Hero force. There was no reason in the world for her to collapse like this.

"My…service life…lasts…until dusk…on the fourteenth…day."

She pointed with her remaining arm. The setting sun was visible behind the arena's wall to the west.

"So pretty," she whispered, her eyelids trembling weakly.

"Hey! Stay with me! Hey!"

Blade pressed a finger to his ear, where the radio transmitter still sat.

"Eliza! Hey, Eliza! Get over here now! You can hear me, right? Are you monitoring this? What's happening?! What *is* this?!"

Earnest and the other students swooped in from the stands. Blade continued to shout into his radio as he watched them from the corner of his eye.

"…She's talking about the end of her service life," said Eliza. *"I can't go there right now. I'm investigating the Sophie Series' hideout with His Majesty—the one they came from. We found a whole conditioning facility in here. There's five or so empty tanks, too. It's all but certain they were born here. I just finished going through the research data."*

"What? What do you mean, 'service life'?!" Blade shouted.

"It's the number of years they can remain operational…usually. But with the ones we're dealing with, that number is measured in days. Their construction was beyond shoddy. There's no way they'd make it past a year. If it's been fourteen days since they were born, well, they did well to survive even that long."

"Blade…? Blade… I can't fix it… It's not restoring her…"

Claire was beside him using her restoration ability. Its familiar pale light was shining over Une, but her detached arm wasn't doing anything at all in response.

"The Hero force and Overlord force are powers that transcend the laws of physics. Invoking that power creates a disturbance in the laws of causality. Claire's ability works by forcing entropy into an atmospheric nanonetwork, which she can use to restore an object to the orderly structure it had before it was destroyed. However, if its causal status has already been interrupted, there is nothing left to restore. Her power only works within the laws of physics, you see."

He didn't see. Eliza's explanation had left him utterly befuddled. And more to the point, he didn't want to accept that they couldn't fix this.

"Isn't there anything we can do? There's no way at all to save them? You always say you can do anything, Eliza. Isn't your 'science' supposed to be all-powerful and stuff?"

"I could research it. With my brain, I could establish a method to re-regulate these imperfect conditioners. But…there's just not enough time for that."

Blade heard a sniffle through his radio.

"…So no, science isn't *all-powerful. It can't solve everything with a snap of the fingers, like magic. I… Ahhh… Ughhh! Damn it!* Damn *it! Why couldn't I have been more of a genius?!"*

She cut off the connection. So even Eliza was powerless.

Blade looked at Claire. She was still trying to restore Une's arm. She looked up at him and shook her head. Iona was probing Une's body with her antennae—another product of amazing, ancient science. Yet she, too, kept glancing back at Blade with sadness in her eyes.

"……"

Blade stood there, silent. He'd doubted he could do it alone but thought it might be possible if they worked together. But if even *that* was impossible…what then?

"There's…still…a way…"

"Sophie, don't move."

Sophie, under Yessica's care, groaned as she stirred on the ground. Yessica gave up keeping her down and helped prop her up instead.

"Everyone… Deux to Cinq… Bring them here."

"They're here. All of them."

The male students had just gathered up the four sisters, who had been sprawled out in different spots all across the Second Proving Ground.

"Une… Une, hang in there for me," said Sophie.

The other girl was barely breathing, not long from becoming a corpse.

"You…haven't used…your artificial Hero force yet…" Sophie kept struggling to talk to her, regardless of whether Une could hear. "You…will die. But…there is a way…for you to live."

Sophie pressed her lips against Une's. The two girls, identical copies of each other, were kissing. When their lips parted, the saliva formed a thick, glistening bridge between them.

"I…under…stand…" Une opened her eyes slightly, her speech weak and broken. "Ar…ti…fi…cial… He…ro…"

Each syllable brought her to the brink of death. She pulled herself back each time, her heart stopping and starting repeatedly.

"…force."

A faint glow surrounded her.

"Blade… Give me…their hearts… Give me…their two weeks' worth…of experiences… Give me…their souls," Sophie said, pleading with her eyes.

What was she talking about? What did she want? Well, Blade understood perfectly.

He guided the weak Hero force Une was emitting. He could no longer manifest his own…but he had more experience than almost anyone else when it came to *controlling* the Hero force. He was able to do it…because he was an ex-Hero.

The force enveloped all six of them—Une, Deux, Trois, Quatre, Cinq, and Sophie. The six became one, and one became six. All of the sisters, with their identical faces, closed their eyes and drifted off to sleep, embraced in the world's gentlest light.



Act EP: Epilogue

The room was pure white—a white bed, white sheets, white walls, and a white ceiling—and Blade was intensely bored inside it. He couldn't use his hands, and that was proving to be a problem. All the male students who visited showed a strangely large amount of sympathy for him, although he couldn't figure out why.

Kassim left him a magazine on his bedside table, but Blade hadn't been able to open and read it yet—not with his useless hands. Even if they were mangled to the bone, Claire would usually be able to restore his arms without breaking a sweat…but apparently there was some phenomenon that made wounds harder to cure when Hero force was involved. So he'd have to heal up the old-fashioned way, over time and with the doctor's normal medical treatment—or rather, with her *forbidden* regeneration treatment.

Guess this really is more of a fix than a cure. It's taking forever to heal. Why's it taking so long? I'm so bored!

At least the doctor hadn't cried over him this time. Blade had followed her instructions and fought at under 18 percent of his power, and he hadn't died, either. Back in his Hero days, he'd returned home with his arms shredded all the time. The doctor was funny that way—so long as he didn't come back in a coffin, she was remarkably chill about it. Coming back with a couple of bloody stumps for arms wasn't enough to make her fall down on the floor and start sobbing.

Apart from the arm stuff, though, things were progressing smoothly. In terms of physical health, this battle hadn't actually been that hard on him. The doctor said that once Blade was fully healed, his percentage limit was likely to rise at the next checkup. He wished those checkups didn't always have to involve a rectal exam, though. Why didn't women understand how humiliating that was for guys?

Only Blade and Sophie needed to be hospitalized after the battle, and Sophie recovered fast. Using her artificial Hero force fatigued her greatly, but it hadn't harmed her otherwise, and she'd woken up

the day after the fight. A few days of observation and mental exams later, she was discharged without issue.

But Blade was still here. And bored. These hands, after all… Unless someone came to visit him, he wouldn't even be able to enjoy that apple sitting on the nightstand.

Click.

The infirmary door opened, and a girl came in and stared at him.

"Um, I wanna say…Une?"

"Correct," replied the girl. She looked identical to Sophie.

"Can you slice that apple for me?"

"Ask Sophie later. I just came to see if you were feeling better."

"And what'll you do when I am?"

"*I* am the one who will kill you. Don't forget that."

"Sure, sure."

He'd heard that line from a decent handful of people in his life, the Overlord included. Adding one, or two, or five more people to the list wouldn't make much difference.

"See you later, then," Une said, waving only her fingertips at him as she left.

Soon, another girl came in.

"Deux, right?"

"Bingo! ♪"

She chuckled, baring her teeth. Her face was identical to Sophie's, but she was so expressive it threw Blade a bit. Une had kind of the same aura as Sophie, but Deux, not so much.

"You wanna play soccer? Well, do you?"

"No thanks."

"But you don't need to use your hands for that!"

"The doctor told me I need to rest."

"*Tch.* Laaaaame."

Deux left. As soon as she was gone, another one came in.

"Trois?"

"…Your arms…will never be the same. The aftereffects…will plague you your whole life."

"Wow, thanks for the positivity. The doctor told me they should heal fully, though."

Trois left. Next up…

"Want some…*sexual* care?"

"No."

She left, too. With a question like that, Blade didn't even need to ask to know it was Quatre.

"Destroy? Destroy? Can I…destroy?" the child who followed after Quatre asked him, her eyes sparkling.

"Yeah, you can destroy whatever's in that trash can over there. But not the can itself, okay? Put that back when you're done."

"Destroy! Destroy! Hya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Cinq zoomed out of the room with the trash can, cackling the whole way.

Then, a little while later, Sophie came in carrying the trash can Cinq was supposed to bring back. At long last, Blade let out a sigh. All the girls had the same face…but Sophie's always calmed him the most.

"What's that?" Sophie said, looking at the magazine on the table.

"Oh, *that*? Kassim gave it to me—"

"Not on my watch."

With a *fwump*, it was thrown into the trash. Blade hadn't seen what kind of magazine it was, but now that Sophie had put it in there, Cinq would gleefully destroy it before too long. Oh well.

Sophie pulled up a stool and sat down next to his bed. He hadn't asked her to, but she was already slicing and peeling the apple for him. She knew exactly what he wanted without him saying a word.

Wow, Sophie. You're amazing. "Making bunny slices for me?"

Sophie stopped peeling. "Yes. Of course. Bunnies."

Blade nodded, his suspicions confirmed. This was normal. This was the usual. This was how things were ordinarily done.

"Thanks."

She finished deftly peeling the slice, not even cutting off a single ear by mistake.

"Here's a bunny for you," she said.

"Feed it to me."

"I can't do that."

"Why not?" Blade asked, surprised.

"*She* is watching."

Earnest was at the doorway, glaring at them and huffing like an angry bull.

"Hey," said Blade, greeting her.

"Oh good, Blade, you're awake. You want to eat an apple, huh? Bunny slices? Here, let me peel some for you. I can do that no problem."

Earnest invited herself in, and Claire and Yessica followed close behind. She pulled up another stool, settling down on the other side of the bed from Sophie. But just a few seconds into her peeling…

"Owwwww! I cut my hand!"

"You okay?"

"How can a knife this small be so sharp?! …Ugh! Whatever! I'll use this instead! I'm more used to it anyway!"

Switching blades, Earnest began fervently peeling once more.

See? I was right. You can *peel an apple with a sword.*

"Shut up! Shut up! Stop crying! Shut up! You are *so* damn annoying!"

Earnest slapped Asmodeus a few times as she peeled the apple. Blade had to wonder what kind of conversation was taking place between master and magic sword.

Still, everyone was laughing. So was Blade. Sophie was staring at Earnest with her usual blank face, but Blade knew by now that was the face she made when she meant to smile. He was the world's foremost expert on Sophie, so he was confident about that.

He gazed into her eyes. Noticing him, Sophie returned his gaze. He gestured with his chin, beckoning her to come closer so he could whisper in her ear.

"Hey… How do you feel?"

Sophie thought for a while, a hand to her lips, then said:

"Like I've had six children."

That made sense to Blade at first…

…But wait. Isn't that one too many? Shouldn't there be five? Who's the other one?



Afterword

This series is a relaxing school-life story about a former Hero after his retirement. I mean it. If I say it's a relaxing story, it's a relaxing story. Even if there are monsters rampaging in the capital, even if the king of demons' daughter shows up, even if the Hero dies and gets resurrected once or twice, even if he's about to be assassinated by five people with the same face, it's still a relaxing story.

Compared to the sort of deadly battles he fought when he was still active, Blade's current life is breezy, peaceful, and *very* relaxing. Look at how much time it took for him to figure out people were trying to kill him, for example.

By the way, this fourth volume takes a slightly different approach from Volume 3. The structure's changed a little—this time, there are five short stories and one longer one (instead of the usual three short stories and two medium-length ones).

Sophie's past catches up with her big-time in this book. Even at the plotting stage, it was clear that her tale wouldn't fit into the usual eighty-page framework for a medium-sized story…so it got structured like this instead. I suppose the traditional style for a light novel is to use the entire book length (or, for that matter, several volumes) to tell a big, heavy story… I, Araki, certainly wrote a lot of stuff like that even before *GJ Club*…

One key aspect of *Classroom for Heroes* is the way that things get wrapped up quickly and neatly. No matter what difficulties come their way, Blade and his classmates never get too serious, breezing through everything with a smile and a laugh. That's how it works,

and what he and his friends are capable of. After all, he is a *He—koff, koff, koff…*

If this kind of short story–heavy structure is well received, I might keep bringing you more of this style in the future. Telling a wide variety of tales is something I find a lot of fun, and I might've used up five different story ideas in this volume, but I came up with ten more that sound interesting as I wrote these, so…

For the next volume, should I go crazy and come up with ten short stories? Should I revert to the usual three short, two medium-size format? Or will it be another five short, one long one instead? That's what I'm working out right now with Y, my editor.

The thing is, in the light novel business, it's a generally accepted fact that short story collection volumes in the middle of a longer series don't sell well at all! It's seen as something to actively avoid, even. *Classroom for Heroes* has always featured at least a few short stories, though, and from what I'm seeing, I think we're pretty good where we stand.

Now for some plugs. First, some comic-related news.

◦ ***Classroom for Heroes: Empress of Flame***

Written by Takashi Minakuchi and running in *Ultra Jump*, *Classroom for Heroes: Empress of Flame* is now available in Japan from Young Jump Comics. It's told from the perspective of Earnest, my "red" heroine, so you can expect a slightly different feel from the novels.

Next, one of my other novel series.

◦ ***C-Mart Prospering in Another World***

The novel I've been writing on *Shousetsuka ni Narou* is now published in book form in Japan! The first volume was released by the Dash X Bunko label in December 2015, a month before this

book, and Volume 2 is scheduled to come out two months later, in February 2016. This means, combined with this fourth volume of *Classroom for Heroes*, you can buy new works from Shin Araki three months in a row if you want!

The story follows a guy who's wandered into another world by chance and opens a small store stocked with goods from our own modern Earth. It's a real heartwarming, "everybody wins," relaxing kind of series. Yasan, the illustrator for *GJ Club*, is providing artwork for this series, too, so if you like the vibe of *GJ Club* or *GE: Good Eater*, you'll wanna check this out for sure!

Finally, some of my current webnovels. I've got several different series running on *Shousetsuka ni Narou* right now.

◦ ***My Hero Friend Won 400 Million Yen***

A thrifty, relaxing tale about living in a one-room apartment with a beautiful shut-in girl who wins the lottery one day. This is getting a book release, too! It's due out March 1, 2016 from Sneaker Bunko.

◦ ***The Hero's Harem Starts Out with Chopping Wood***

For the first time ever (?), a choice-driven light novel! Chop firewood every day, take it to the villagers, talk to them, be thanked for it, and have the girls take a liking to you. It ain't much, but it's honest work.

◦ ***Traveling the Post-Apocalyptic World with a Girl on the Back of a Motorbike***

A relaxing take on the apocalypse, this travelogue covers the journey of a man from Tokyo to Kyushu with a girl sitting behind him the whole way. Civilization might be on the skids, but things are still pretty chill out there.

◦ ***Stardust Hero Chronicles***

One of my better-known early works. I'm currently posting content from the previously published books online, but once I catch

up, I plan to start uploading new chapters regularly again.

To see all my online work, check out these QR codes. Please note that all websites are available in Japanese only.

Shin Araki's *Shousetsuka ni Narou* page

http://mypage.syosetu.com/605697/

I also have a feedback form up for *Classroom for Heroes*, Volume 4. Thanks in advance for filling it out.

http://www.araki-shin.com/araki/eiyu4.htm

About the Author

Shin Araki

A character-oriented novelist who's doing all kinds of work in the light novel industry. Recently, he's started popping up more often on *Shousetsuka ni Narou*. Member #001 of the More Win-Win Slow-Life Light Novels Society.

Illustrator: Haruyuki Morisawa

A Tokyo-based illustrator from Toyama Prefecture. I really want to take it easy around New Year's for a change.

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