

Shin Araki

Illustration by
Haruyuki Morisawa

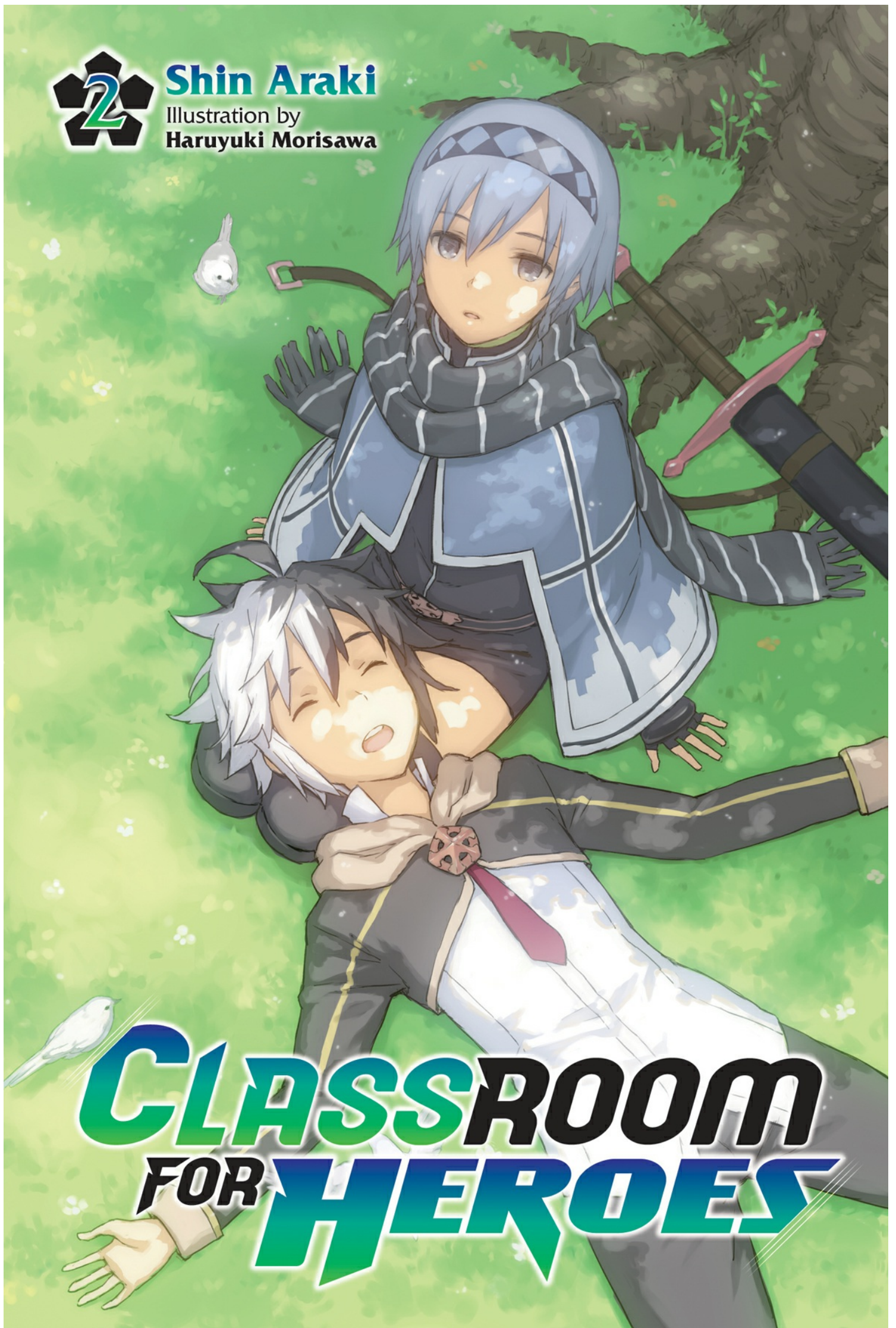


CLASSROOM FOR HEROES



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CLASSROOM **FOR HEROES**





**"Bow
before
me!"**

**Quiver
in fear!**

**Worship
the ground
I walk on!**

Let me hear your screams
and curses! Rejoice, for
a new **Overlord** is born!"

The way
she looks...
**It's
almost
like...**

It wasn't just
her face—her
entire body had
undergone
noticeable changes.
For example, the
black bat-like wings
on her back.



CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Training at Rosewood Academy

Episode 1: A Certain Realistic Training Session

Episode 2: Blade's Special Training

Episode 3: Earnest's Special Training

Chapter 2

The Overlord's Daughter

Chapter 3

The General and the Giant Birds

Afterword





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SHIN ARAKI

Translation by Kevin Gifford

Cover art by Haruyuki Morisawa

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CONTENTS

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Chapter 1

Training at Rosewood Academy

Episode 1: A Certain Realistic Training Session

Episode 2: Blade's Special Training

Episode 3: Earnest's Special Training

Chapter 2

The Overlord's Daughter

Chapter 3

The General and the Giant Birds

Afterword

About the author

Yen Newsletter



Chapter 1:

Training at Rosewood Academy

Episode 1: A Certain Realistic Training Session

○ Scene I: The Usual Training Environment

It was a peaceful afternoon of practical training like any other.

What a nice day. Wish I could just sit around and bask in the sun, thought Blade as he deflected the flurry of sword strikes coming his way. His moves were sloppy. He knew taking blow after blow with his sword like this would quickly dull it, but it was just a practice sword anyway, and a pretty crappy one at that. Earnest's sword would never dull on her, however, so she was slashing away without any hesitation.

To an outside observer, the Proving Ground must have looked particularly unusual that day. First off, the students were having a rare joint training session. The junior and senior classes usually trained separately, but today all 108 students were gathered in the same place. Everyone was working together and practicing their skills, and— “Ugh! You need to take this more seriously!”

Earnest stopped swinging and started complaining, so Blade let up as well.

“Sorry. I was just thinking...about how everyone changed so quickly.”

“Well, I guess that's true,” she said, sounding a little proud.

Blade looked around again. There were more people at the Proving Ground than usual, of course, but the biggest difference was the sheer level at which everyone was operating.

“Okay, here I go!”

“Bring it on!”

Yessica threw a suit of magic armor into the air, and Clayde drew his sword

and promptly swung away—*slash, slash, slash, slash, slash*. The chopped-up remains of the armor fell to the ground like confetti.

“Wowww!”

Claire clapped her hands, and the handsome swordsman scratched his head, embarrassed.

“That’s amazing,” said Blade.

“Is it?” Earnest asked.

“Of course it is. That’s not just spirit—he’s using fighting force. Otherwise, he could never cut through magic armor like butter.”

“Fighting force? What’s that? I can slice through stuff just fine without it.” Earnest tilted her head, puzzled.

Right, thought Blade. You’re one of those types. Everything’s easy for you, so you wouldn’t understand... Wait a second. Does that mean she mastered fighting force without even knowing it exists?!

“Clay! Next round! Here goes!”

Now it was Claire’s turn to toss something Clayde’s way. She opted for a large boulder she’d found nearby. With an emphatic shout, Clayde readied his sword. People had been shortening his name to “Clay” recently.

“One, two...!” Claire tossed the boulder up. She was surprisingly strong.

“Clay!” Yessica shouted suddenly. “Give it a Brilliant Cut for me!”

“Huh? Huhhh?! Wha—? Wait...!”

Flustered, Clay swung. The boulder fell to the ground, shaped rather differently from before. Now it was something like a polished, multifaceted precious gem.

“Clay...that sucked.” Yessica laughed, one hand on her curvy hip.

“Give me a little warning next time!” Clay shouted back.

Blade smiled as he watched them carry on...only to deftly deflect a fireball flying at him from the side.

“Hey, be careful!” he shouted.

“S-s-sorry!” called a dark-haired magic user, her braids swinging through the air as she hastily bowed, magic staff in her hands.

The girl had a reputation for being a total klutz. Her name was... Um, what was it again? She wasn't all that physically gifted, so she'd decided to study magic instead.

All the students were having fun. Spirit and magic power were manifesting all over the place, and flashes of light were popping up at random here and there. Everyone was messing around, testing out their abilities. They had just learned a bunch of neat new tricks, so it was only natural.

Ever since their battle with Cú, all the students had shown dramatic progress. Things like spirit and magic power used to be the exclusive domain of the senior class; the juniors hadn't been capable of much more than busting out their life force, which was a step below the higher energies. In fact, even among the seniors, only Earnest had been able to tap into fighting force and elemental power and make it look easy; everyone else could only muster the basic kinds of spirit and magic.

But now, even the juniors could wield spirit and magic power like pros, and the seniors were starting to master fighting force and elemental power, too. And they'd all come this far without even noticing. It was nothing short of impressive. Normally, the process would take years of devoted training.

This meant that the junior class was now at the level the senior class had formerly occupied, and the senior class was currently pushing themselves one level higher.

Back when they'd fought Cú, they had all become part of a circuit, transmitting all their energies through one another and into Earnest. That flow of magic and spirit must have forced open everyone's inner channels. In other words, they'd all gained a feel for how to use their powers.

“Honored Father? Are you done?” said Cú, noticing that Blade and Earnest were now idle.

“Hmm?”

“Honored Father! Give me a-*ttennnnnn*-tion!”

She tackled him like a rocket. As her father, Blade took the blow without staggering. He had told her that hugs and/or snugs were forbidden during training, but it seemed she thought his goofing off meant that he was done.

Cú never joined in their training; she simply sat and watched them. As a dragon, she didn't *do* training.

“What's wrong, Earnest?” Blade said. “We all leveled up. That's great.”

She looked at the other students sourly.

“Power should come with responsibility,” she muttered.

It was very like her to say such a thing.

○ **Scene II: The King's Announcement**

“Hey. Look,” said the first person to notice.

He nudged the student next to him with his elbow, prodding him to look the same way. This set off a chain reaction, and it took only around ten seconds before everybody's eyes were pointed in the same direction.

A man was walking over, accompanied by several beauties. The students parted to let him through as he made a beeline for Blade.

“Your Majesty—”

Earnest took a knee, her head bowed low. Blade, meanwhile, stayed on his feet. He didn't treat the king as above him or below him. They had a fully equal relationship.

“What're you doing here?” he said. “You're interrupting class.”

Everyone else was probably thinking the same thing.

“Blade!” Earnest kicked him in the calf without changing her respectful posture. She was agile that way.

“Oh, no need to pay attention to me,” said the king. “Carry on!”

He looked around at the students. Naturally, they were very much not carrying on. Some were on one knee, following Earnest's lead, and others were

standing bolt upright at strict military attention.

“Earnest, please lift your head. I do not gain any enjoyment from making young women prostrate themselves before me... Well, maybe a little, but there’s a time and place, you see.”

“Yes, my liege!” Earnest lifted her head, purposely ignoring the king’s problematic humor.

“You’re way too happy,” Blade said, addressing the king as well. “You’re up to something. What’re you trying to do now?”

“Be quiet and listen.” Earnest elbowed him. He took the blow without blocking it.

“You are all doing very well, I see,” said the king. “Your progress is simply amazing.”

He was showering them with praise, which was very unlike him. This made Blade even more suspicious.

“To reward your efforts, I’ve prepared something for you. It’s—shall we say—a *very realistic* kind of training.”

He held out his arms as his royal robe spread out behind him, making him look even bigger and grander than usual. But Blade wasn’t about to be tricked. All this talk, this body language—it was a performance. The king was unconsciously acting out a role for his audience. In a way, he was a genius at it.

“In fact, I swear on my name as king that you will not find a more practical training exercise. I’m sure you’ll all love it.”

The oratory skills that had enabled him to form the Eight Nations Alliance in the great war were now being put to use on a bunch of students. Earnest was waiting with bated breath, clinging to his every word.

“So... Let’s see how you do.”

The king signaled to someone behind him, and a group of people in work clothes swarmed into the Proving Ground. There were several dozen in all, and they got right to work. From the tools they were using, it seemed they were involved in some kind of civil engineering.

“Um... Huh? Hey... Your Majesty?”

“To make this training as practical as possible, certain preparations need to be made, you see. We’ll have to do a little excavation.”

“What? Excavation...? Huh?! But we’re in the middle of class...”

“As the leader of this academy, I hereby cancel your afternoon classes.”

The students were then hounded out of the arena and given the rest of the day off.

Blade certainly didn’t mind. Now he could lie in the sun and nap just like he’d wanted.

“What kind of training do you have in mind, Your Majesty?” someone asked.

“You must wait until construction is finished. It’s more fun that way, don’t you think?”

“Ugh...”

○ **Scene III: Garden Under the Blue Sky**

The king had made it sound like a few minor adjustments were being made, but construction dragged on for a while. In the meantime, Blade and his friends spent a handful of lazy days unable to access the Proving Ground. Then, when the work was finally complete: “Wow...”

There was a wave of awed exclamations, mostly from the girls.

The refurbished Proving Ground looked completely different from before. First off, the roof was gone. Sunlight poured down on the area from the blue sky above. Second, the ground itself had changed. The Proving Ground used to be a large patch of barren earth, but now it had an actual floor, with a mysterious sheen to it. Nothing of the previous structure remained. Leafy trees had been planted here and there, and it looked more like a lovely springtime park than a training ground. If there was a bench or two, it’d be a perfect lunch spot.

“I’ve never seen this kind of tiling before,” Earnest said, tapping at it a bit with the heels of her ankle boots.

The tiles were made of some strange material that could have been stone or metal or something else entirely. Most of the larger ones were white, with some blue, pink, green, and yellow ones mixed in; some of the girls were already going on about how cute it was. Blade had absolutely no idea how a floor could be cute.

“Huh... I really like the design,” Earnest continued.

“So you’re one of *them*, huh?” Blade said, looking at her.

“One of what?”

Whenever someone’s foot touched a tile, ripples of color would appear on it. This, too, was a big hit with the girls, who were now running around trying to light up the whole floor.

Blade looked up at the sky. A bird swooped down out of the blue, so he lifted a finger, providing it a perch. *Hang on. This white bird—is this the little guy who always shows up when I’m napping on the grass?*

“Whoa...!” came a voice to his side.

Blade turned toward the sound to find Earnest hopping around, waves of color passing over the tiles beneath her. He stared at her like this was the most unbelievable sight he had ever seen.

“A-hem!”

Just then, the king very conspicuously cleared his throat.

“Line up!” shouted the Empress at once.

Everyone snapped to attention and formed a line.

“Do you enjoy it?” the king asked when they were done.

“Well, I mean,” Earnest began, “weren’t you talking about instituting some *practical* training? I don’t remember any talk about turning the Proving Ground into an amusement park.”

“Hmm... An amusement park? I suppose we could use it for that as well. Excellent idea! You really *are* talented.”

“Oh, not at all...”

Blade was dumbfounded. Why was Earnest's face so red?

"But won't this interfere with our classes?" she asked, looking down at the blue, red, and yellow circles rippling around the Proving Ground.

You look the most excited out of everyone, thought Blade.

"No worries there. This place is reserved for special classes. We're constructing a new Proving Ground for normal instruction, and let me tell you, the Second Proving Ground is amazing. Its magic barriers are ten times stronger than before. Ten times! Blade could go pretty darn crazy, and they'd still hold up."

"Really?" Earnest asked, looking at the king doubtfully.

"...Well, probably."

"What do you mean, 'probably'? Make yourself clear."

"Right! Change of plans! Make them a hundred times stronger! Right now!"

"If we multiply the strength of the barriers another tenfold, it will raise the budget a hundredfold, my liege," a woman to the king's side pointed out dryly.

"I don't care! I'll take responsibility!"

"Can we talk about what we're *doing* already, old man?" Blade cut in.

"Blade!" Earnest shouted.

He'd set her off again. She was always raging at him for being "rude" and whatnot.

At last, it was time to activate the floor. The students each got into a hexagonal booth. Then the king deployed his royal seal, triggering a flurry of activity. Cords with electrodes on them snaked out, latching on to each student's forehead and instantly causing them to lose consciousness. The only students yet to be caught were Earnest and a few other top-level seniors.

"You're not supposed to dodge them," said the king. "Just stand still."

"But...!"

"Hey, Earnest! He's testing your loyalty!" Blade shouted irresponsibly.

Earnest stopped dodging. And the moment an electrode found her forehead, she fell to the floor.

Next was Sophie.

“Is this an order?” she asked.

“It is,” said the king.

“Understood.”

Down she went.

“Now, Blade, are you willing to trust me or not?”

Blade didn’t answer, but he didn’t dodge the cords, either. One of the electrodes struck home. Then Blade went down a rainbow-colored road...and found himself standing in exactly the same place.

○ **Scene IV: To the Virtual World**

“All transfers successful.”

A voice echoed directly inside everyone’s head. It belonged to the king.

This threw everyone into confusion. They couldn’t sense the king’s presence anywhere, but his voice was inside their minds.

Only Blade kept his cool.

“This isn’t real life, is it?” he asked.

“Oh, you already picked up on that? You could have at least acted a little more surprised.”

“I’ve been caught up in illusion magic a few times in my life.”

Something about this space was different—it felt wrong, somehow. Blade’s mind was telling him that this wasn’t reality.

“Oh-ho. Impressive. We had fine-tuned everything so you wouldn’t feel any difference, too.”

“Hey, what’re you talking about?” Earnest asked.

“This isn’t real life,” Blade explained. “Some kind of spell or illusion has put us

into a make-believe space. You remember that weird thing that latched on to your forehead, right?”

“This is the work of a long-lost branch of magic known as ‘science.’”

“Oh. So it’s a kind of inner, mental world? Like when I was fighting Asmodeus?” asked Earnest.

“No, I did that,” replied the sword. *“Though I don’t know how it works.”*

“Oh yeah. You’re right...”

“What are we meant to do?” Sophie asked, not particularly concerned. Nothing shook her.

“Hey, old man,” said Blade. “I don’t know what’s happening here, but this is no good. It’s *too* similar.”

“What is?”

“You have to make it clearer that this isn’t reality. Otherwise, we won’t be able to tell the difference when we go back. That’s going to cause problems.”

“Hmm, you may have a point. How about this, then?”

With an audible pop, words appeared above everyone’s head. It was each of their names.

“Whoa, what’s this?”

Earnest tried to touch the letters, but her hand went right through them.

“How’s this?”

“Got anything else?” asked Blade.

“Hmm... Well, if you insist, how about I make the young women’s dreams come true?”

Their surroundings suddenly took on the form of a fantasy dreamscape. The ground, the trees, the flowers, the bricks—all of it was turned into candy.

“Mmm, it’s so sweet!” someone exclaimed.

“You’re eating it?” Blade said, incredulous.

“If you’re still not convinced, feel free to test this space however you like. I’ve

left some telltale flaws you should be able to pick up on.”

Soon, everyone began testing out their environment, taking their own individual approaches to confirm they were somewhere other than reality. Several of them broke out magic spells that were meant to give their exact coordinates. Then Claire’s restoration magic failed to activate.

“I’m afraid we don’t have enough processing power to re-create her skills. You won’t be needing them anyway.”

“What do you want us to do?” asked Sophie.

“Hear that?” said Blade. “That’s her way of saying ‘State your business, you old fool.’”

“No, it’s not.” Earnest chuckled.

“You are about to begin practical combat training. Up until now, we’ve placed certain limits on your freedom. We’ve had you stop your blade just before your strike hits home and given you dulled swords. There is no need for any of that here, however. I’m giving you permission to fight in any way you like, as if you were in actual battle.”

“Hmph.”

Blade took this in stride, but the rest of the students didn’t quite seem to grasp what the king was saying. It took ten or so seconds before they began to understand his intentions.

“Huh? U-um...? I can’t believe I’m saying this...but are you seriously asking us to go at one another with lethal force?” Earnest asked.

“Is there a problem with that?”

“What? N-no, but... If we do that, some of us will die—”

“But this isn’t reality, remember? You can’t die.”

“B-but...um...”

Earnest still didn’t get it. Blade scanned the rest of the student body; about half of them seemed to understand what was going on. Claire was not among them, and neither was Clay. Yessica, Leonard, and Kassim had figured it out,

while Sophie and Cú didn't seem to care either way.

EARNEST

BLADE

CUCHULANN



“Oh. So it’s like a dream...,” said Earnest. She’d finally caught up with the pack. She wasn’t exactly right, but she was close. “Okay, so we can do whatever we want, then...”

On second thought, maybe Blade had overestimated her understanding. *Is this gonna be okay?*

“Oh, I almost forgot—no one can leave until all but one of you has been eliminated. Now, make the most of your training and kill, kill, kill!”

“Huh?! Wh-what...?!”

“All right, students. Your training begins now.”

○ **Scene V: A Lovely Day for a Bloodbath**

It was a swirling vortex of mayhem. The weather was fine, and as it turned out, their little garden under the blue sky was just the spot for a massacre.

Blade walked straight ahead, passing through puddles of blood. There were bloody pieces of flesh strewn about, too—someone’s pancreas or spleen or kidney or whatever. These he avoided stepping on. Otherwise, he’d start feeling guilty.

Ugh. How is this in any way realistic?

Blade’s shoulders fell as he walked. What a disappointment. How depressing. Here he thought that joining this school would mark the end of his killing days, and now this...

“Blade! Got—!”

Something, or someone, flew out from behind the trees. He was likely trying to shout “Got you!” but Blade probably sliced him in half before he could get it out. *Probably* was the right word here, too, because Blade wasn’t consciously swinging his sword at all. If he needed to think about every slash and swipe, he would never have made it as a Hero. He had to rely on his reflexes to dispatch the enemies in his way. Otherwise, how could he have faced thousands of foes single-handedly? It’s not like he could steel his resolve by shouting out “*Yaaah!*” or “*Take this!*” ten thousand times. It was a Hero’s job to turn the tide of battle, even if it meant he had to face a force of three hundred thousand all alone. Not

that Blade was a Hero anymore.

“Haaah...”

Blade heaved a deep, heavy sigh. Cutting down his own classmates didn't feel very good. He had no wish to do such things. Looking ahead, he saw a newly exposed cross section of one of his classmates on the ground.

“Come *on*! At least censor the gore a little!” he shouted at the heavens.

“Don't worry. Everyone else is getting a censored version. It's rated R for the senior class and PG-13 for the juniors.”

“Oh. Okay, then.”

Blade reluctantly let this slide. Still, he tried to choose a route that would have him meeting as few people as possible. He wanted to keep his kill count to a minimum, though if someone decided to take a swipe at him, he wasn't going to just sit back and take it. He didn't want to stab anyone, but he didn't want to be stabbed, either.

“Wahhh!”

“Yagghh!”

“Monster!!”

He began to hear shouting from up ahead. A few students were running toward him, fleeing—but their number kept shrinking. First one fell, then two. By the time they passed Blade, there were only one and a half people left. Why the half, you ask? Well, one of them was missing a hand, a leg, and an eye and was dragging his entrails behind him as he ran. The blood loss meant he would be dead very soon.

At the end of the crimson trail of blood stood a fiery woman. Her naturally red hair was made redder by the blood, which also caked her face. She turned toward Blade, her crazed eyes sizing him up.

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh...”

“Hey, can you snap out of it, please?” Blade called out to her, not expecting it to work.

“I’ve been looking for you, Blade...”

Surprisingly, she responded. She must have retained at least part of her sanity, enough to understand speech. She wasn’t all creepy laughs.

“Hey, Blade?” she muttered in a daze. “What color are your organs?”

Then, with a look of ecstasy on her face, she brought her sword—stained with the flesh and blood of their classmates—up to her mouth and gave it a *looong* lick with her tongue.

Oh. Well, so much for that.

“I never knew...it was so much fun to cut people... I had been holding back for so long... For what? And look! Look at how overjoyed Asmodeus is...you see...?”

She proudly showed off her magic sword. It had fused with her arm all the way up to her elbow. Thick, veinlike protrusions snaked their way up to her shoulder.

Look at that. It’s starting to assimilate her. What a mess.

Blade breathed out another sigh as he recalled a promise he’d once made with Earnest. It seemed the time had come to live up to his end of the bargain.

“Come on, Earnest. Stop that.”

“Ee-hee-hee. Ee-hee-hee-hee! Ee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee...! Blade, can I cut you? Can I cut you?! You’ll let me, won’t you? Ee-hee-hee... Hee-hee-hee... Keh... Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh...”

“Earrrrnesst, stop that...”

Any further conversation seemed futile, but Blade went ahead and tried.

“If you let your magic sword take you over and it turns you into a murderous monster, I’m supposed to finish you off, right? Isn’t that what we agreed?”

“Keh-heh-heh-heh-heh...”

Blade casually swung his sword vertically through the air. Earnest stopped laughing and stood still for a few more seconds. Then a single vertical line appeared across her body—from the top of her skull to her forehead, from her forehead to her throat, from her throat to her chest, from her chest to her

stomach, from her stomach to her crotch...

From there, Earnest split in half, divided neatly into left and right sections. She peeled apart as she fell, revealing her brain, spinal cord, and everything else inside of her. There were two loud, moist splattering sounds.

Blade was receiving the unrated “for-the-Hero’s-eyes-only” director’s cut of all this, so nothing was censored. Everything was laid out for him as viscerally as possible.



“Whew...”

Blade sighed. He had fulfilled his promise.

○ **Scene VI: Encountering Sophie**

“There you are, Blade.”

After some more wandering around, Blade ran into Sophie. Suddenly feeling her presence behind him, he turned.

“Sophie... Not you, too?”

“...?”

Sophie raised an eyebrow.

Well, that's a good sign. Seems she's still got her marbles. Everyone in this battle royale has gone nuts, except for Soph—

“Blade, I want to duel you.”

“Never mind...”

“...?” Sophie shook her head, not really understanding him. “I always wanted to test out my full powers against you in battle. Now that we're in a virtual world, I can fight you to my heart's content.”

She smiled. Her cheeks were a little flushed, just like Claire's always were. Something was wrong with Sophie, too. Why was she blushing at a time like this?

“If I unleash my full power...could I defeat you as you are now?” she wondered aloud.

“You'll have to try and see,” Blade said with a sigh.

“I will.”

A blue light enveloped Sophie's body. She was activating her artificial Hero force. Though she could activate it at will, she could only maintain her power for around ten seconds.

“Time stop.”

Time ceased to flow. A Hero's power could bend all the laws of physics in their favor, and it seemed to work even here, in this virtual space. Only Sophie could move while time was stopped. Her wrists, her elbows, her arms—they all danced through the air as a flowing flurry of strikes hit every exposed point on Blade's body.

In only a few seconds, she executed over a hundred attacks. And then the ten seconds were over. The blue glow faded from Sophie's body, and time began to tick once again.

"Kohhhhhhhhh..."

As Blade exhaled, the *essence* held within his body was released. This was more than mere life energy, more than spirit, more than fighting force—it was spirit raised to maximum purity. When spirit is purified to 99.9 percent, and then four more nines after the decimal, it is no longer mere spirit.

Blade had used this purified spirit to execute the move Adamantine Body, allowing him to block all attacks for a period of time. However, even he could only maintain it for the length of a single breath—barely even a second. But if time were to stop, the effect would go on as long as he needed. And if he knew that a time stop was about to happen, it gave him plenty of advance notice to work up his essence to the level necessary.

"Come on, Sophie. Stop that," said Blade, just as he had to Earnest. "No matter how much you stop time, no matter how many hundreds of times you attack me...it's not gonna work if it doesn't cause any damage, all right?"

Sophie's ten seconds were up. Her body was completely exhausted; she could barely stay on her feet. Blade couldn't tell if she was even listening to him.

"Also, Sophie, that move's no good. If your target survives it, you're pretty much dead, aren't you? That's no way to fight."

Blade lifted his sword. He didn't really want to do it, but he took a few steps forward, and as he passed Sophie, he swung. Sophie's head went flying, slowly rotating as it arced into the air. At first, her eyes were wide open in surprise, then they quietly closed.

"Whew."

Blade sighed. Sophie had challenged him to a real duel using her full power. He'd had to at least take off her head, or she would have never stopped.

○ **Scene VII: Encountering His Child**

"No! Nooooooooo!"

After some more walking, Blade heard screaming from behind some shrubbery to his side.

"Yaaaahhh!"

Then there was silence. Though he had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach, he climbed through the bushes and checked out the other side.

Fssssh...

A large, carnivorous magic beast was there, her breath wavering between flame and steam. It was a baby dragon—in other words, his child.

"Hey, Cú. I didn't know you were here, too."

The dragon didn't reply. Her eyes were wild as she chewed on a hunk of meat. It was as if she'd lost all reason and reverted to her primal instincts.

"Heeeeey, Cú? You in there?"

"Mmm...mhhh... Ooh... Claire, you're...you're so tasty...Claire..."

Oh. So that's Claire, huh? She's eating Claire? Or maybe I should say she's eating what's left of Claire...

"Come on, Cú. Stop that. I can't have you picking up these bad habits."

This was tremendously distressing as a parent. Blade couldn't let his daughter develop a taste for human flesh.

"I'm gonna send you back now, okay?"

Blade swung his sword. It swooshed down at the speed of sound, its tip cutting through the dragon's armor, muscle, and bone. The first swipe cut her in half. When he drew the sword back, she was in quarters. Another swing put her in eighths.

Blade kept on slashing away at high speed, his sword growing faster by the

millisecond. This was a move known as Inexhaustible Flash, and it pretty much just involved slashing your sword a whole lot. For it to be recognized as a special technique, though, you had to swing dozens of times per second—and that took more than just hefty arm muscles. You needed to know how to flex and relax with perfect timing over and over...

“...That ought to do it.” Blade stopped. “One shipment of dragon burger, ready to go!”

A gigantic mountain of ground dragon was piled high in front of him.

Oh, but isn't Claire mixed in there as well? Maybe it's, like, a nine-to-one mix of dragon and Claire burger, then.

Blade gazed at the pile of meat, sword resting on his shoulder. Then, from somewhere in the distance, he heard the wail of a siren.

So Cú was the last one. Or maybe two people somewhere else just took each other out. Either way, the battle royale was apparently over.

○ **Scene VIII: Reality**

Once again, Blade traversed the rainbow road. It seemed he'd unconsciously closed his eyes at some point, so he opened them.

He was sprawled out on the floor. The electrode cord previously attached to his forehead had let go and coiled its way back below the floor tiles. As he crouched down, looking at where it had been, Blade realized that everybody else's eyes were on him.

“Hey,” he said, raising his hand.

They kept staring at him.

“I am Blade,” he ventured.

“We *know* that.”

Finally, everyone began to smile.

“*Tch*. Of course it would be you, Blade,” one of the male students said, a little frustrated.

That was when Blade realized. *Oh, right. The point of this battle-royale-style*

“realistic training” was to be the last one alive. Earnest had been knocked out approximately midway through the fight, and Blade figured she wouldn’t be too happy about it. He looked around for her signature red silhouette... And there she was, balled up and sulking in the corner.

“Hello? Earnest?”

“Don’t talk to me,” she said, her face gaunt and disheartened. “I know, all right? I get it. But I never thought... I never thought I’d...end up *like that*...”

Like what...?

“Oh,” Blade said, “you mean like asking what color my organs are and stuff?”

“Shut up! Just be quiet!”

Earnest was now talking to her sword, which she’d thrown to the ground nearby. She landed a few solid blows on it. *Wait, did she just kick it? Who kicks a sword?*

“No need to worry,” Leonard said, brushing his hair back and looking incredibly self-absorbed. “You had a kind of eerie beauty. It was a tremendous honor to be slashed down by someone as lovely as you.”

“Shut up! I’ll kill you!” Earnest shouted at Leonard, then turned back to her blade. “No, I’m not killing him! *You* shut up!”

This was starting to get confusing. Blade took his eyes off Earnest and turned his attention to two others who looked just as depressed by the fight’s outcome.

“Claire! Claire! I’m so sorry! I’m so sorry I ate you!”

“It’s all right... Did I taste good? Then it’s perfectly fine... *Oof*... But...but it did hurt... What with all that snapping and crunching...”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

Cú and Claire hugged, trying to comfort each other.

Then Earnest stole Blade’s attention once again.

“Blade! There’s something I want to say to you! ...Did you really have to slice me *vertically*? I mean, come *on*!”

“What, would you have preferred me to do it horizontally? Personally, I wouldn’t recommend it. If I sliced you like a zucchini, there’d be guts all over the place. You wouldn’t die right away, either, and you’d wind up with your face buried in your own entrails and stuff. And I’d be cutting up your intestines, too, you know... Don’t you know what’s inside those things? They’re full of *poop*.”

“I’m not talking about *that*!” Earnest was livid.

“I had my head chopped off,” offered Sophie.

“Oh yeah,” said Blade. “That ends it pretty quickly, too.”

“What? Why’d you only do that to Sophie?! Why’d I have to get exposed like that?!”

“Exposed? How? What do you mean?”

“You could see it, right?! I know you saw!”

“I don’t understand. If you wanted to be decapitated, you should have said so —”

“Ahhh, it’s so charming to see youth in bloom...,” someone said, interrupting their conversation.

Everyone turned toward the voice. Earnest glared, her eyes boring into him. A weaker person would have died from shock. Blade hadn’t seen that nasty gaze of hers in a while... But it didn’t have the slightest effect on the man in the deck chair.

Sitting before them was the king, basking in the warm sun. A small army of beautiful women were holding an umbrella for him, fanning him, bringing a cup to his lips. All the king had to do was sip his drink through a straw. It seemed only a matter of time before he asked the women to feed him mouth-to-mouth.

That bastard never does anything himself, thought Blade.

“So what did you think of the practical training?” he asked. He had even changed his clothes and was now sporting a tropical getup. He was completely in vacation mode.

“.....”

Earnest and the others were silent, confronting the king with their eyes. Blade thought it proper to speak for them.

“I don’t think this is gonna cut it.”

“Oh-ho? What laudable drive.” The king lowered his dark sunglasses and shot Blade a satisfied smile. “Very good. Very, very good.”

Using his hands, Blade signaled the 108 students (and one dragon) behind him. They understood instantly, and each took up their assigned position.

Blade had known how much of an annoyance this man was for a while, and he was sure the others were now in full agreement with him.

First, Blade kicked the deck chair, sending the king tumbling to the ground.

“Whoa! Blade, what are you doing?”

Next, he grabbed the king by the collar and dragged him to the nearby tiles.

“Oh, wait. You need to activate it with your royal seal, don’t you?” Blade placed the king’s palm on a tile, activating the practical training device once again. “Despite how he acts, the king is a former champion. I’m sure he’ll make an excellent training partner.”

A cord snaked out from beneath the tiles, sticking straight to the king’s forehead with one of its electrodes. He instantly lost consciousness and fell to the floor.

Looking around, Blade saw that everyone else was back in the virtual world, too, and was spread out on the floor, just like the king. *Aha. So this is how it looks in real life.*

“Can you adjust the settings on this?” he asked the king’s army of girls.

They were all beauties of great talent; they were the ones who really ran this country.

All of them were snickering—hands on their mouths, bent over, shoulders trembling—each assuming a different elegant posture. Among them was the prime minister, a woman named Sirene, who had been by the king’s side longer than anyone else. She wiped the tears from her eyes as she spoke for the group.

“Yes... Yes, you can. What sort of mischief do you have in mind?”

“Let everybody resurrect themselves infinitely, and don’t let the king leave until he’s been taken out ten—no, a hundred times!”

“Very well.”

The king’s real-life body twitched and contorted as it lay on the tile floor. Just what was happening to him on the other side? Ex-champion or not, he was facing off against 108 fighters, plus one dragon.

Blade sat on the deck chair, donning the king’s tinted sunglasses. Then, surrounded by grinning beauties, he decided to take a nap.



Episode 2: Blade's Special Training

○ **Scene I: Exercise on the Water**

A large number of boats were floating on the water.

The day's training had involved a simulated sea battle. The royal palace and the surrounding town stood atop an enormous lake. Its blue surface was clearly visible from the dorm and classroom windows, and that was where the exercise took place.

Warfare was not the exclusive domain of land; it could occur up in the air, beneath the sea, or on the surface of the water. When the king became chancellor of Rosewood Academy and reformed its curriculum, he realized that all the training conducted in the past had been land-based.

And so that day's training had been a large-scale exercise utilizing the whole lake.

All 108 students were fully equipped and spread out across a number of boats, with a few students assigned to each one. They had divided into two armies that morning and staged a grand battle. Then, in the afternoon, they were further divided into smaller forces in order to stage a conflict between multiple groups.

Now they were on the final exercise, saved for last so the students would have already grown accustomed to sea battle. Here, each boat represented its own force, and every other boat was the enemy—a pretty tough scenario.

“That idiot king sure loves battle royales...,” Blade muttered as the sea breeze battered his cheek and blew back his hair. He scowled.

He, Earnest, and Sophie were on the same boat, which made them the strongest force in the academy. Though most shunned and avoided them, they had no shortage of foolhardy challengers. They had just sunk another moments ago.

A plume of water shot upward nearby. Someone was being pulled up from the lake, rescued by the instructors’ boats. The student was wearing full armor, so getting him back on deck wasn’t easy. Once a student was rescued, they were counted as dead and removed from the exercise.

It was ridiculous. Regular clothing already made it difficult to swim. With a full suit of armor, you’d have to be an amazing swimmer not to drown.

“Ahhhh... I-I-I’ve received air...f-f-from *her*!!”

The student was shouting as he spat out water. He’d just been rescued, but he looked like he was enjoying every moment of the ordeal. Even Blade, as oblivious as he could be, understood what that meant. If the boy had fallen into the lake and then been “given air,” it must mean he’d received mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

With another splash, “she” appeared on the surface. She slapped the water with her tail fin, winked, and blew a kiss at the student.

During this event, the academy was being assisted by a group of mermaids who lived at the bottom of the lake. Their job was to help save the lives of anyone who fell into the water. Mermaids were all female and all incredible beauties. Telling whether someone was beautiful was another concept Blade often had trouble with. He could tell if someone looked strong or weak, but...

“Ohhhhhh! My—my—my first...my first...!!”

The rescued boy had started shouting again.

What was so great about putting your lips up against someone else’s anyway? That was even less clear to Blade... Or wait a moment. Perhaps he did understand. Once, not long ago, Sophie’s lips had made his own heart beat faster, and ever since, he’d been getting a little flustered...

“Blade?” said Sophie. “What is it?”

She must have caught him looking at her lips.

“Oh, it’s nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Sophie! Blade!” yelled Earnest. “Stop messing around and pay attention... We have more challengers!”

Another suicidal group of students was sailing their way.

“Oh... Oh, right. I’m on it,” said Blade, calming his quivering body. He must be trembling with excitement for the battle ahead. Yeah, that had to be it.

“Haaa-ha-ha-ha! Oh, Earnest! I’ve come to challenge you. Will you grant me that honor?!”

Leonard stood on the other boat’s prow, arms folded. He was the most dashing boy at the academy, but he was also a bit of an idiot. Blade rather liked him.

“Leonard!” Earnest shouted back at him. The Empress of the academy seemed ready to accept his challenge. “Die!”

Suddenly, she took out Asmodeus. Using the sword to create a fireball, she launched it at the enemy.

“Die!”? Earnest seems pretty excited about this. She must be enjoying herself.

Blade, meanwhile, was too busy holding on to the prow of their boat as it shook mightily from the recoil of Earnest’s cannon fire.

“Blade! What are you doing?!” she yelled.

He began to understand, just a little, why the other students were so scared of her. She was pretty terrifying.

“Sophie! Blade! They’re coming alongside us! Prepare for hand-to-hand combat!”

“I’ll take that as an order.”

“Yeah, yeah...”

Sophie would do anything you wanted as long as it was an order. Blade, on

the other hand, was less enthused.

The enemy boat drew nearer. Blade widened his stance a bit, preparing for the shock of impact. Leonard had cleverly erected a spherical barrier around his boat using spirit, fully blocking Earnest's fireball.

The ships collided, throwing up a rain of splinters. Blade and the others timed their leaps to match.

When moving from one boat to the other, you had to be careful because there wasn't much space to work with and your balance was always going to be off. You needed to watch your legs... Yes, Blade needed to watch his legs...

But he screwed up, and they flew out from under him. Instead of the enemy ship's deck, his jump plopped him right into the water.

Splash! Blub, blub, blub.

"Blade, you twit!" shouted Earnest. "Why did you fall in?! Get up here now! ... Ah! Leonard! Leonard, you coward!"

"I like my odds a lot better when *he's* not around. Prepare to face the full brunt of our might!"

"Sorry, Anna!" Yessica yelled from the enemy boat. "I'm on this stud's side today!"

Earnest had to face both Leonard and Yessica, and it wasn't exactly smooth sailing.

"Yah! Yah! Yah!"

Now Claire joined the battle, her menacing morning star flying all around as she attempted to pummel Earnest into submission. She gouged holes in the deck as Earnest barely avoided her strikes.

Blub, blub, blub...

Blade, meanwhile, was struggling to keep his head above the surface. He waved his arms and legs like mad, but he couldn't propel himself upward. He couldn't find air.

Blub, blub, blub...

H-help...

Blade reached out in vain toward the water's surface as it drifted farther and farther away.

○ **Scene II: Blade Drowns**

"Blade?"

Earnest and the others stopped fighting.

Blade had messed up and fallen into the water, but it wasn't like he was wearing full armor. They'd assumed he would clamber right back up and rejoin the fight. And yet...

"Um... What are you doing?" asked Earnest. "Get back up here already..."

But the only thing that came out of the water were bubbles of air, and those bubbles were dwindling fast.

"This isn't funny! Quit pretending that you're drowning..."

"Um, Anna?" Claire retained an iron grip on her morning star. "You think he might really be struggling down there?"

"What? N-no way."

Earnest looked down at the water's surface. It had been a while since any bubbles appeared, and there was no sign of Blade.

"That...that *idiot!*"

Earnest dived into the water, joined by Sophie. They swam toward the lake bed, and right as the blue water began to turn a murky black, they spotted Blade, supported by a couple of mermaids. They accepted him from his rescuers, then worked together to take him back to the surface.

"Pwah!"

The moment they'd filled their lungs back up with air, Earnest began shouting.

"Hurry! Guys! Help us! Blade is...?! Blade's gonna die!!"

"It's all right. He's not going to die," said Sophie. In stark contrast to Earnest's panic, she was calm and collected.

As they waited for the boats to come pick them up, she brought a hand to Blade's neck and checked his pulse. Thanks to a wholly unexpected screwup from a wholly unexpected person, the exercise on the lake came to an early end.

○ **Scene III: Blade's Secret**

"Look...if you can't swim, you've got to at least *tell us!*"

They were back on land now, and a thoroughly soaked Blade was kneeling on the grass. Thankfully, he hadn't breathed in that much water. After receiving mouth-to-mouth and regaining his wits, Blade was immediately inundated by Earnest's scolding.

"Understood," he said.

"We had to cancel the whole exercise because of you, you know. You caused a big problem for everyone."

"Understood." Blade kept his head down.

"Are you *sure* you understand? Do you think I'll let you off if you just keep saying that?"

Earnest glared at him, hands on her curvy hips. Unable even to say "understood," Blade hung his head and fell silent.

"Um... Earnest..." The king, taking pity on him, attempted to intervene.

"Silence, Your Majesty."

"Understood."

The lord of the land, the uniter of the eight nations, had been reduced to the same answer as Blade.

"Come on, Anna... Just tell him you were worried about him..." said Yessica, Earnest's close friend and the next to intervene. She put her hands on her even curvier hips and smiled at Earnest, who still looked pouty.

"Huh...?!" Earnest immediately turned red. "I—I—I wasn't *worried* about him at all! This has nothing to do with how I feel. I was just criticizing him for hiding something important and inconveniencing everyone. This is for the whole

school's benefit, okay?!"

"Sure, but... You know..." Yessica looked at Claire.

"Yep, I sure do..." said the other girl, meeting her gaze. They nodded at each other.

"Weren't you and Sophie the first to dive in to save him? That was pretty impressive... I mean, you didn't hesitate at all, did you?"

"Yeah. I would've started wondering if I should get undressed first so my clothes didn't drag me down... And I totally would've missed my chance..."

"That's kind of impressive in a different way. As for me... Well, I figured someone was gonna dive in, but if they didn't, I thought I might give it a go. That's all."

Yessica folded her arms behind her head. She hadn't dived in, either.

"But—but—but Blade was seriously about to drown! He wasn't coming to the surface at all! What would've happened if he *never* came back?!"

There were tears in Earnest's eyes as she shouted, and her hair was getting more and more disheveled. Blade looked at her, a little surprised.

"I was worried, okay!" she went on. "I was really worried about you!! Don't you get that?!!"

Glare.

"Understood," said Blade.

Apparently, he'd raised his head too soon. He grabbed his knees, looked down at the grass, and assumed a pose of repentance.

"But it's surprising, isn't it?" said Yessica.

"Yeah," said Claire. "Yeah, maybe it is."

"We're talking about *Blade* here, after all..." Earnest gave a self-satisfied nod. She was calmer now that no one was interrogating her.

"It doesn't bother me at all. Not as long as Blade is still alive." Sophie didn't agree or disagree, but her words cut Blade the most.

“Look, guys. It’s not what you think. I can swim...”

“We had to rescue you,” Earnest fired back.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! You’re acting just like all the other boys.” Yessica was loving this.

“Um, Blade...?” said Claire. “It’s nothing to be embarrassed about, you know?”

And that was when Blade broke.

“Well... It’s not like I *need* to swim...”

“We had to *rescue* you.”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! This is so hilarious! I mean, this is Blade we’re talking about! *Blade!* And he’s acting all stubborn, just like Clay or Kassim!”

Clay and Kassim shot Yessica sour looks. But to Blade, this seemed like a terrible misunderstanding. Everyone here was talking like he couldn’t swim or something. He desperately tried to correct them.

“Look. Like I’ve said over and over, I can totally swim. I’m just a little out of my element in the water... And like I’ve been saying this whole time, it’s not like it’s some huge problem for me. As long as I channel my spirit properly, I can walk right across the water’s surface. There’s no need for me to get all soaked and paddle through the stuff. I can just run across it! Right? Right? *Right?* Ain’t I smart?!”

All he got back was silence.

“We had to rescue you,” Earnest pointed out again.

“I don’t think I can laugh at that,” Yessica said, no longer smiling.

“I... I—I—I can swim, keh? And besides, I don’t even need to, keh?!”

“You sound like a child.” Earnest’s eyes were cold. “And not that it matters, but what’s ‘keh’ supposed to mean? Are you trying to say ‘okay’?”

“No! I...! I! I can swim, keh?! I just don’t wanna, keh?!”

“Um... Blade...? I...don’t think that’s going to get you anywhere... That’s not to say you’re at fault here. But, um...you know...?” Claire was trying her best to go

easy on him.

“I don’t mind if Blade can’t swim, or if he does nothing but make excuses,” said Sophie, adding another layer of support.

But even these comments were painful for Blade. Too painful, in fact.

“W-waaaahhh!!”

So he fled, leaving them all behind.

“Were those tears?!” said Claire, incredulous.

“Awww, someone made him cry,” said Yessica. “And who do you think that was?”

“Huh? Wh-what? How is this *my* fault?” exclaimed Earnest.

“Blade, it’s going to be all right...,” Sophie called after him.

After Blade left, the girls stayed behind, exchanging comments.

○ **Scene IV: At the Dining Hall**

A few days later, Blade was in the dining hall, enjoying his usual lunch of katsu curry. Earnest walked over with her tray and sat across from him.

But as soon as she sat down, Blade silently stood up. Though he still hadn’t finished his curry, he picked up his food and was about to walk away when—
“Wait!”

—Earnest’s voice stopped Blade in his tracks.

“What’s your problem?!” she shouted. “Why are you leaving?! Do you hate me that much?!”

“You were picking on me for not being able to swim.”

Blade was finally being honest with himself. After several days of reflection, even *he* had to face up to the truth.

“Oh? ...So you finally admit it?” Earnest seemed genuinely surprised. “No more pouting and saying ‘keh’?”

Blade was prepared to be laughed at again for not being able to swim. *But I never said ‘keh’! That’s a lie. She’s totally making that up.*

“Yes, all right?” he said. “I admit it. I can’t swim. I’m sorry, okay? Sorry I disappointed you and let you down. But even I have something I can’t do, all right? So just leave me alone!”

“You are *such* a pain.”

“A—a pain...?”

Blade staggered. He almost fell to his knees.

So I’m a pain...? Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. Sorry, everyone.

He focused on keeping himself upright, despite his weak knees. But he still wobbled as he tried to walk off.

“Ugh! Blade!”

Without turning around, he waved one hand at Earnest.

“Sophie! Grab him!”

“What?”

Though he hadn’t felt her presence, Sophie was right beside Blade, and she quickly caught hold of him. He really wished she’d let him go. He was about to drop his curry.

“Ugh,” Earnest began once he was placed back in his chair. “Can’t you rely on me just a *little*? If you can’t solve a problem by yourself...then ask for help. Aren’t we pretty clo—? Wait, no! I mean we’re classmates, right?”

She had gone from a warm smile to a fit of rage in a single sentence. She was also punching the sword at her hip, though everyone was pretty used to such things by now.

“*Huff...huff...* All right. It’s fine, okay, Blade? I’ll teach you. *We’ll* teach you!”

“We...?”

Blade looked around. Earnest and Sophie were there, and so were Yessica, Claire, Clay, and Kassim. They had all sat down to eat lunch, trays in hand.

“Um...teach me what?”

“How to swim, of cour—”

“No...don’t.” Blade began to rise from his chair. He had already tried to flee once, and he seemed ready to try it again. “There’s no need.”

“We’re *going* to teach you.”

“It’s fine. I don’t need to swim.”

“You might be able to manage on a boat, but what if you need to fight *in* the water itself? Won’t you be in trouble?”

“I don’t mind.”

“Ugh... This is getting nowhere...” Earnest sighed.

Blade stared at her. Had she understood? Would she finally give up?

“All right... Do it, Cú.”

Apparently not!!

Turning around, Blade found Cú right behind him.

“Honored Father, you are truly pitiful...”

This wasn’t the usual Cú—the cute little girl who hopped up on his lap and doted on him. Now she was frowning and glaring at him sternly. She heaved a gigantic sigh, hands on her completely un-curvy hips.

“You’re pathetic. You’re the honored Father of a dragon, the most powerful of creatures. And yet just because you can’t swim, you’ve been lying, refusing to admit the truth, whining and throwing tantrums. You roll around on the floor, flailing your arms and legs!”

“I don’t think I went that far.”

“And whenever you open your mouth, it’s nothing but excuses. As your child, I find you pitiful.”

“Yeah, but... Don’t you hate carrots? Isn’t this the same?”

“Honored Father! You call yourself a dragon?!”

“I don’t, actually,” Blade replied, waving his hands around. *I’m just an ex-Hero.*

“*More* excuses!”

“It’s not an excuse. It’s the truth.”

“I don’t want to hear it! I don’t want to hear it, honored Father! You’re a failure as a parent! A big zero!”

He’d just been called a zero.

“S-s-s-so...wh-wh-wh-what does that mean for me...?”

“It means I hate you, honored Father! From now on, I am no longer your daughter!”

She thrust her pointer finger out in front of her, audibly cutting through the air.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

Her words were like punches right to his gut. Earnest’s contempt, Yessica’s laughter, Claire’s scorn—that was all stuff he could deal with. But Cú’s words... hit hard.

“When I say ‘good morning’ from now on, no more kisses on the cheek!”

“You were *doing* that?!” Earnest shouted.

“No, she wasn’t,” Blade shot back.

“And when I say ‘good night,’ no more kisses then, either!”

“*What?!?*”

“I mean it, she’s lying.”

“And when it’s time to eat, I won’t say ‘ahhh’ for you. It’s so, so hard for me to forsake my own father like this, but I must show you tough love. That is how low you have fallen, honored Father! You must be cool and impressive! A pathetic, whiny kid is no honored Father at all!”

“No...?”

Blade slumped his shoulders. Even Cú had given up on him.

“But if you are willing to learn, we might decide to team up and give you a crash course. And if you cooperate willingly, I might agree to make you my honored Father again.”

“...You would?”

“Mm-hmm! And a dragon’s word is her bond, as you know. It’s a dragon promise!”

“B-but... But if you try teaching me...and I still can’t swim... Will you be okay with that...?”

“Couldn’t you be a little more confident?” Earnest rolled her eyes, hands on her curvy hips.

“Yes,” replied Cú. “Just do your best, and that will be fine. Even if you don’t learn to swim, I will never abandon you, honored Father.”

“W-well... Okay,” said Blade. “I... I’ll do it.”

○ **Scene V: The Lakeshore**

One day after school, not far from the academy, Blade and his friends gathered on the shore of the capital’s main lake.

There, a small pier jutted out into the water, and Blade was walking down it with obvious trepidation. Only a single layer of wooden planks separated him from the lake. Below that was liquid. If the planks broke, he’d be underwater. The thought was almost too much to bear.

“Get it together, Blade,” Earnest called out. “You’re not going to fall.”

“Yeah, but...”

Blade turned back to face Earnest. Everybody here already knew Blade was afraid of the water; there was no reason to hide it. That’s why he could walk down the pier despite his obvious terror. The exercises they’d done on the water a few days ago...had been more than a little hard for him. He’d been hiding his fear the whole time, constantly pretending he was fine.

“Are you scared, Blade? ...Do you want to hold my hand?”

“Oh. Yeah.”

Sophie lent him her hand. It made him a little happy.

“That’s enough, Sophie. Don’t spoil him too much.”

“I’ll spoil him, and you can bully him. All right, Earnest?”

“Okay, cut that out!” Earnest sent a karate chop into their joined hands, breaking them apart.

...How cruel.

“Why do we need to define our roles? I don’t remember agreeing to that. And what are you saying anyway? Are you saying I’ve been bullying him?”

Their audience—Leonard, Claire, Yessica, Clay, and Kassim—booed. They had all come along for the swimming lesson. When met by a withering glare from Earnest, however, they all quickly looked away.

“Also, Blade, I have something to ask you.”

Blade steeled himself. Whenever Earnest opened her mouth, she always had something harsh to say.

“...Why are you in your regular clothes?”

Or not. That wasn’t very harsh at all.

“You’re here to practice swimming, right? Why didn’t you bring a bathing suit?”

Her hands were on her hips again, and today they were even curvier than usual, thanks to all the exposed skin.

Earnest wasn’t wearing clothes. Well, she was, but instead of her normal clothes, she was wearing something called a swimsuit, which covered only about as much as her underwear, leaving her well-toned body on full display. The bathing suit was red, of course. She chose red so often, people wondered if she ever wore any other color.

Sophie, meanwhile, went with...blue. Hers covered more skin than Earnest’s, but it was also a swimsuit, and both girls were showing parts of their bodies that usually remained covered at school.

Blade didn’t exhibit any special interest in the scantily clad women around him. He had seen Sophie and Earnest naked, after all. But Leonard, Clay, and Kassim seemed very keen to take a closer look at the girls in their swimsuits... Whenever the girls weren’t looking, the boys’ eyes were glued to them.

“Hey, Anna and Sophie! Can you back me up over here? Claire’s not wearing a swimsuit, either!” Yessica said, dragging the other girl into the spotlight.

In terms of exposed skin, Yessica was pretty much always walking around in a swimsuit. Her back, her rear, her nape, and even her boobs were all on display, but Clay and the other boys weren’t taking the bait.

“Stop it, Yessica. It’s fine, okay? I’m fine... Stop...!”

“She’s got a really great body, you know... Aw, come on! You’ve got one on underneath, don’t you? Take it off! Take it *all* off! There we go!”

Blade followed Leonard’s, Clay’s, and Kassim’s gazes and saw Claire being stripped down. None of the boys seemed shy about watching.

Claire was indeed wearing a swimsuit under her clothes, and it exposed far less than Yessica’s or even Sophie’s. But if skin exposure was the main factor in getting the boys’ attention, why were they ignoring Yessica?

“Why are your eyes swiveling around all over the place, honored Father?”

Cú came up and took Blade’s hand. Though her hand was small, it still brought him a little relief.

“No idea,” Blade replied. The question was a little too complicated for him.

“Ughhh... You guys are so mean,” moaned Claire.

She was now dressed in only a swimsuit, her clothes all peeled away and tears in her eyes.

“So getting back to business... Blade, why aren’t you in a swimsuit?” Earnest asked again.

“Y-Yessica isn’t, either, is she? Those are just her regular clothes! And Cú’s the same!”

Blade pointed at Yessica, then to Cú beside him, her little hand still in his.

“Me?” they both said, pointing at themselves. Cú sounded a bit more pompous, of course.

“This is basically a swimsuit, as far as I’m concerned,” said Yessica.

“And this isn’t clothing,” said Cú. “It’s merely a pattern covering me.”

Everyone had changed into their swimsuits... They were all ready to teach him... A profound sadness washed over Blade. He would've been content to simply sit on the shore and kick his legs in the water a bit. Couldn't they cancel the swimming lesson and just have a party by the lake instead?

"We all came prepared, Blade. So why aren't you, the star of the show, wearing a swimsuit? Did you think we'd give up and have a barbecue by the lake or something?"

Bull's-eye.

"I don't even *have* one," Blade blurted out, pouting.

"Why not?"

"Because I can't swim. So I don't need one."

"We're all sick of that game, you know."

They weren't going to let Blade start up again.

○ **Scene VI: Earnest's Turn**

"All right. Let's decide who will give the first lesson." Earnest wasted no time taking charge.

"Well, I thought m-maybe we could all teach him together..., " said Claire, timidly raising one finger.

Incidentally, ever since she'd been stripped down to her swimsuit, Claire had started hunching over. It dawned on Blade that she was probably embarrassed. But why? Blade just couldn't figure it out.

"Denied," Earnest said. "Everybody has their own approach to teaching. If we all go at once, we'll never get anywhere. Our first priority is to get Blade swimming... Why are you looking at me like that?"

Blade was staring intently at Earnest.

"O-oh... I just thought that was an unusually sensible thing for you to say."

"Unusually? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Turn off the glare, okay? That thing can do real damage to anyone who

hasn't built up an immunity."

Whenever Earnest turned the full force of her glare on Blade, innocent bystanders like Clay would get caught up and go flying like they'd just taken a punch to the gut.

"Forget it. I mean... I'm sorry. I see now you were just trying to help me."

"Wh...what's this all of a sudden? What did you *think* I was doing?"

"Harassing me."

"...Um, excuse you."

A blue vein throbbed on Earnest's temple. She was just as terrifying as people said.

"Right." She turned back toward everyone else. "So who's going first?"

Not a single person raised their hand. No one was brave enough to try to steal the stage from Earnest.

"Don't worry, Blade," she began. "There was a time when I didn't know how to swim, either."

"Huh? You too?" Blade looked surprised.

"Well, sure. When I was little. Like age four or five." Earnest stuck her tongue out and laughed.

Blade was relieved. If Earnest was going to use a teaching method for little kids, that probably meant she'd be going really gentle on— "So basically, my father did this..."

Shove.

Blade was pushed from behind. The next thing he knew, he was over the water. He tried flapping his arms in the air...but not even a former Hero could fly.

Splaaash!

Blade fell in, sending up a huge plume of water.

"Wha—?! Anna!"

“...and just pushed me straight into the water... Um? What?”

Earnest blinked at Claire.

“What do you mean, ‘what’? You just shoved Blade into the water!”

“Huh? Is that bad?”

“Yes!”

“But...in the Flaming family, when we’re trying to teach someone, we always start by throwing them right in... They struggle to survive, and... You know, it really motivates them... Is that bad?”

“Yes! Blade’s gonna drown again! ...See?!”

Claire was shouting with unusual volume and severity. She waved her arms, pointing at Blade.

Blub, blub, blub.

He was drowning again. And with nobody coming to help, it looked like he’d soon be done for.

“Blade!”

Just as he heard someone yell his name, darkness engulfed his consciousness...

*

Water spurted out in a jet from Blade’s mouth, and he finally started breathing again.

“Wow! I died!”

“See? He’s alive,” said Earnest.

“He almost died!” shouted Claire. “No more pushing him off! I mean it!”

“But doesn’t having to fight for your survival...teach you how to swim...? I mean, it worked for me...”

“No it doesn’t! You just die!”

“Yeah... I really thought I was a goner,” grumbled Blade as Claire passionately

defended him.

“But he made it! See! It’s fine, right?”

“But I didn’t...learn how to swim...”

“Well...that’s *your* fault, isn’t it, Blade? I-it’s not mine!”

Earnest turned away and folded her arms.

“And hey,” said Blade bitterly, “you said I wouldn’t fall in. You *promised!*”

At first, he’d thought Earnest would be kind. He’d thought she’d teach him gently, like a little child. But he’d been wrong.

“Yeah, I said you didn’t have to worry about falling in because I was going to push you. That’s what I said, remember?”

“No it’s not! I’m positive you didn’t say that!”

“What a whiner.”

“You promised! You said you’d be gentle! Like you were teaching a child...!”

“Well, I know I didn’t say *that*. The Flaming family believes in a very strict education. Always keep a lion in your heart. That’s our motto.”

“I sure as heck didn’t ask about your family motto!”

“This is getting chaotic...,” said Yessica, sounding disgusted.

Meanwhile, Clay and Kassim were playing with Cú, splashing water everywhere. Dragons knew how to swim from birth, though they could only do a doggy paddle. Still, Blade envied her. And since he wasn’t on honored-Father duty that day, he was going to whine as much as he wanted.

○ **Scene VII: Sophie’s Turn**

“Do I go next?”

“Huh?”

Blade turned toward Sophie’s voice. She was standing there in place of Earnest, who was now looking away in disgust.

“You must have been scared, Blade.”

Sophie came up behind Blade to embrace him and circled her arms around his neck.

“Yeah. I was. Scared of that mean old woman.”

“That *what?!* ” Earnest balked.

Blade glared at her. This was rewarded with a glare about ten times as fearsome, so Blade amped up his own ten times more, sticking out his tongue for good measure. Then he felt Sophie’s body press tightly against his back. It startled him for some reason, making him forget all about the glaring contest.

“Forget about Earnest. I’ll teach you next.”

“Okay.” Blade nodded.

He was reasonably sure Sophie would take a different teaching approach. At the very least, she wouldn’t push him into the water.



“See? Just being in the water isn’t scary, is it?”

“Um...”

They had gotten off the pier and entered the water together. Since Blade hadn’t brought a swimsuit, he had stripped down to his boxers, which wasn’t doing much for his injured pride. He offered to just take everything off but was quickly stopped by the others. Everyone except for Yessica and Cú anyway. Yessica was all for it, and Cú didn’t seem to understand what he meant. She *was* a dragon, after all.

“I, um... M-maybe I’m a little scared.”

Blade held Sophie’s hand tightly. They were shoulder-deep in the lake.

“Your feet are still on the ground, right?”

“Y-yeah, but...”

But having water up to his shoulders was...admittedly a little scary. Very scary, in fact. With Sophie holding his hand, he was managing to keep his fear in check. Otherwise, he’d have started panicking long ago.

“Look! You’re just fine,” remarked Earnest. “Why did you have to carry on like a chicken with its head cut off when I was your teacher?”

“Because you *pushed me in!*” Blade whirled around to shout at Earnest.

The sudden motion made his foot slip on the mud at the bottom of the lake, knocking him off-balance.

“Ah! Ah! Wahhh?!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Earnest laughed loudly at him.

Damn her. Acting so high-and-mighty, just because she can swim and I can’t...

“Blade. It’s fine. I’m right here with you.”

Blade clung to Sophie, steadying himself. He was on edge, both physically and mentally, but he managed to stop himself from descending into panic.

“Hff...hff...”

“Oh, wow... I think he’s hyperventilating...!”

Earnest was holding her stomach and kicking her legs in glee. She was laughing so hard she seemed like she might suffocate.

“Isn’t that rather cruel of you, milady? The boy really *is* scared.”

Surprisingly, it was Leonard who spoke up.

“Huh? Me? Why am I being scolded?” Earnest shot him a puzzled look. “We’re talking about Blade, here. The super-being? It’s okay to laugh at him a little, right?”

Her logic wasn’t very sound.

What’s a super-being anyway? I’m just an ex-Hero; that’s it.

He was now revising his opinion of Leonard, however. Maybe he wasn’t just a smooth-talking, flirty playboy after all. Maybe he was actually a pretty nice guy!

“It’s all right, Blade. I’ll be right here for you until you calm down.”

Sophie was now hugging Blade tightly against her body. Two bulges, present on a woman’s chest but not on a man’s, were right in his face. It was weird. His

heart was racing for some reason. Whenever his cheeks brushed against those things called “boobs,” it made his pulse pound. It was so odd. He used to think this wouldn’t happen unless lips were involved...

Those two bulges... Their softness...made his heart pound...and he felt safe, somehow...

“Hey...! Whoa! What’re you doing?!” shouted Earnest. “That... That’s so inappropriate! Th-they’re latched on to each other! H-her br... Her br... H-he’s pressed right up against them!”

“Calm down, milady.”

Leonard held Earnest back for them, pinning her to the pier.

“Do you feel calmer, Blade?”

“Huh?” Blade blinked at Sophie.

“You’re not scared?”

“Huh? Oh...?”

Come to think of it, he wasn’t. The racing of his heart had drowned out his fear.

“I see,” said Leonard. “You were trying to distract him from his fear of the water, weren’t you? Guess Blade really *is* a man.”

He was currently sitting on the pier, acting every bit like their commentator.

“Maybe if you tried the same thing, Claire—,” suggested Yessica.

“No! I can’t!” Claire shot back emphatically.

“You’re *spoiling* him!” Meanwhile, Earnest was furious.

“I’ll spoil him, and you can bully him. All right, Earnest?”

“I don’t remember agreeing to that! And why do *you* get to decide?!”

“All right, Blade,” said Sophie. “Now let’s practice swimming a little. First, you need to kick your legs...”

“Sure!”

Blade did as he was told and began moving his legs back and forth. As long as

his face was buried in Sophie's boobs, the water wasn't scary at all.

○ Scene VIII: No Good After All?

"Ah! *Mmph*— H-help! *Brrph...rrh...*"

"Oh no!" said Yessica. "I guess it didn't work after all."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! He's blowing bubbles!" Earnest was laughing again. "*Blade's* blowing bubbles! Oh, this is just too much...!"

"Whoa...?! Blade!" shouted Claire. "Are you drowning? It sounds like you're drowning!"

Yep, I sure am.

After learning a few strokes—kicking, the crawl, the breaststroke—they decided he was ready to try swimming by himself, without the assistance of Sophie's boobs. This was the result. He immediately lost all control. To forget about his fear of water, he had to be supplied with sufficient booby. The moment he tried to swim alone, he was too terrified to move his arms and legs.

Blade was sinking fast. He was about to kiss the surface good-bye for good when someone jumped in and saved him.

"Blade! Blade, hang in there! Blade!"

Blade did the first thing he could think of and buried his face in the first pair of boobs he saw.

"Aghhh! No! You can't! Blade, stop! N-not when everybody's watching!"

"Hey, Claire," Yessica said from above, "you know that just makes it sound like you'd be okay with it under different circumstances."

Apparently, Claire had come to his rescue. Based on the feeling against his cheek, Blade figured her boobs were about twice as big as Sophie's. Thanks to them, he was just barely able to keep his composure.

"You see, Sophie? You couldn't do it, either. Blade can only swim when his face is pressed against your boobs. The moment he's away from them, he's useless. He hasn't learned how to swim at all. He's been pampered into sheer uselessness."

“.....”

Earnest sounded pretty happy about Sophie’s failure. Sophie remained silent.



“And it seems Blade doesn’t care who the boobs are attached to, either.”

“.....”

Earnest’s voice now held a twinge of irritation, while Sophie grew even more silent.

Blade, meanwhile, desperate to stave off his fear, kept his face firmly planted in Claire’s boobs.

It didn’t even matter that Claire was landing a barrage of blows on his head the whole time...

○ **Scene IX: Cú’s Turn**

“Boy, she sure is good...”

Cú was dog-paddling around at tremendous speed, water churning and spraying behind her. It wasn’t the most efficient way to move through the water, but her velocity was impressive.

Blade was watching her from the pier. He had given up on swimming. Earnest’s ruthless approach hadn’t worked and neither had Sophie’s pampering. Claire and Yessica gave it a shot as well, but nobody got Blade any closer to mastering the skill.

“You guys are tapped out already, huh?” said Earnest critically.

“We’re not like you...”

“Yeah, we tried our best, you know...”

Clay and Kassim were both lying limply on the pier. They’d been playing with Cú, who had basically unlimited stamina. It’d given them a taste of the hardships Blade faced as her honored Father.

“Even Leonard has more stamina than *that*,” Earnest observed.

“Heh!” The man in question brushed his hair back, looking debonair as always. “I never go a day without my morning ten-kilometer jog, you know.”

“Ah—look out!”

They heard a sound, and Blade, who had been looking at the others, turned

back toward Cú.

“Ohhh, honored Father! Honored Father!”

She was splashing water at them.

“Heyyy...”

Blade returned a half-hearted wave. Whenever his daughter called out “Honored Father! ♥” it was his job to wave back.

“Ah...*ooph!* H-honored Father! H...help me!”

“Mmm?”

Blade stopped waving his hand. Something seemed amiss.

“Huh? What’s that...?” said Yessica.

“Hmm? Isn’t that Cú?” answered Claire. “Did she get a cramp in her leg or something?”

“What? Hey, Blade...,” said Earnest. “Is Cú...drowning?”

At last, Blade realized that Cú wasn’t playing or messing around. This was real! She was in trouble!

The moment his brain processed this, his body was on the move. Kicking off the pier, Blade jumped straight into the water. A dozen or so perfectly executed crawl strokes later, he reached Cú. He hadn’t quite learned to swim yet, but he’d at least learned the movements.

“Cú! Are you okay? Grab on!”

“Honored Fatherrr...”

Cú wrapped her arm around Blade’s back, and Blade held on to her as they made their way back to the pier.

“Honored Father... You can swim now...!”

Cú’s face, so close to his, was smiling.

“Huh?” That was when it dawned on Blade. “...Come to think of it...”

He was swimming. He was *swimming*. All by himself. Swimming! And with no boob support, either, since Cú didn’t have any. And yet he wasn’t afraid of the

water. His body was moving just fine.

“Oh! Ohhhh! I—I—I—I can swim! I’m swimming!”

“I knew you could do it, honored Father. I’ll race you to the other shore! C’mon! Try to catch me!”

“Ah-ha-ha! Hey, wait up!”

They started chasing each other around in the water.

“Looks like she stole the show, huh?” Earnest sighed, dejected. “After all that, it was his love for his child that did the trick. Neither pampering nor bullying got us anywhere.”

“That’s all right. As long as Blade is happy.” Sophie watched him, looking satisfied.

“Try to catch me!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Wait!”

Blade and Cú swam off in the direction of the setting sun.



Episode 3: Earnest's Special Training

○ Scene I: Practicing with Earnest

It was after school at the Second Proving Ground, and the sound of swords echoed through the air. The new location was now open, and Blade had joined Earnest for a round of voluntary after-school training.

Blade weathered a sharp strike from Earnest. *Oops. That nicked the blade. Crap. I caught her sword dead center with mine. This thing's toast.* Such thoughts filled his mind. Fending off a magic sword with a regular one was kind of like trying to fend off a regular sword with a tree branch.

"You need to take this more seriously, Blade! This barely counts as practice!"

Earnest was yelling at him. Whether she was taunting him or scolding him, he wasn't sure.

Come to think of it, Blade hadn't tried any attacks of his own yet. It was time to go on the offensive.

"Whoa...! Wait...!"

Immediately, Earnest was forced into defending. She took an orthodox approach to swordsmanship, and Blade knew that if he responded in kind, they'd wind up in a waltz-like back-and-forth. Instead, he continually changed up his moves—and on his fourth attempt, Earnest's stance finally crumbled, and she left herself open.

"Okay, last one," he said.

He swung hard. Just then, his sword snapped off at the base. Instantly, the edge of Earnest's blade was at his throat.

"So do I win?" she asked.

"Guess so." Blade nodded.

In a real battle, he would've lost his life. His sword breaking would have been no excuse.

"That was a nice workout," Earnest said, starting to walk away. Then she suddenly turned back toward him. "Um...don't come too close to me, okay?"

Blade reacted by giving his armpit a sniff or two. He wasn't that oblivious. He could get the message.

"Oh, I guess I did break a sweat."

He could smell a faint odor coming from his body. That must have been why she told him to stay away. It made perfect sense.

"Lemme borrow that," he said, pointing at Earnest's towel.

"Are you serious?"

"I sweat, too, you know."

"No, I was talking to—"

Earnest slapped the sword on her hip a few times.

"Here, use this one. I have two."

She carefully pulled out another towel and handed it to him. *I would've been fine with yours*, he thought.

"Should I wash and return this?" he asked.

"N-no, either way is fine. I mean, no, you don't need to wash it. You can just give it back. No, wait. I don't want you to wash it."

"You don't?"

"Shut up!"

Earnest was at it again, bashing her fist against Asmodeus.

“I’m not going to huff it, damn it!” she shouted.

Blade was used to this by now and just ignored it.

Instead, he went over to one wall of the Second Proving Ground and pressed a button. This new version had some really amazing equipment—just press a spot on the wall, and a drink would roll right out of it. The flooring was also made of a strange new material that was neither too hard nor too soft. No more getting covered in dirt after every session. The girls in particular appreciated that change.

Sipping his well-chilled beverage, Blade suddenly realized something. He’d been staring idly at Earnest’s body, and it finally occurred to him why their fight had felt off.

“Hey, have you gained weight?” he asked.

“*What?*” Earnest froze. “Wh-what do you mean?” She seemed to have no idea what he was talking about.

“I dunno. Some of your moves today just felt a little dull. I thought you might be sick, but that doesn’t seem to be the case.”

“Did I...look that off my game to you?”

“Yeah. There were times you could’ve easily avoided my slash, but you just barely managed to dodge it.”

“D-doesn’t that mean I’m getting better? I managed to dodge you with as little movement as possible.”

“As little *care* as possible, maybe.”

Blade had given Earnest plenty of room to avoid his attacks. And yet she’d been escaping his strikes by only a hair’s breadth. If Blade had been leaving her less room to dodge, he would have sliced right through her skin. That might’ve been fine in the virtual world, but in real life, it would’ve been a bloodbath. He would’ve had to ask his old doctor friend to help fix her up, or had Claire use her restoration ability...

“Yeah,” he said. “I think you *have* gained some weight.”

That had to be it, he was sure. He couldn’t think of any other reason. It made

him feel good to have an answer to the problem at hand.

“I...I know.” Earnest was shaking.

“Hmm?”

Blade was so pleased with his brilliant detective work that it took him a while to notice the change in Earnest.

“I can tell, too, all right?!” she shouted. “You don’t have to spell it out for me!”

“Hmm? Uh, what?”

“I *hate* you, Blade!!”

Whoa!!

There was a flash, followed by a sword strike that would have cut down anyone else. Then Earnest ran off.

What was all that about? Did I do something wrong? Am I the bad guy?

○ **Scene II: The Trial**

“Hey, is this my fault?”

Earnest hadn’t been showing up for dinner. On the evening of the third day, Blade finally got up the nerve to ask everyone what was going on.

Three days had passed since Earnest had last spoken to him. Whenever he tried approaching her, she’d just brush him off, and whenever he sat down at her table in the dining hall, she’d hastily get up and leave.

Everyone around them was worried and asking what was up, but Blade kept saying “Nothing.” He didn’t think he’d done anything wrong, and just assumed Earnest was worked up about something again and her mood would eventually improve. That got him through the first day, but when it continued for a second and third day, Blade felt obliged to speak up.

“Could this be that grave punishment I’ve heard so much about? You know... the silent treatment?”

It was heavy. Too heavy to bear.

“What did you *do*, Blade?” asked Yessica. “Why is Anna so angry at you?”

“Um...I don’t recall anything in particular...”

Blade told the others everything that had happened the day it all started. He didn’t understand what went wrong, so he told the whole story, including a few things he thought were irrelevant. He also brought up his observations about Earnest’s weight. This, too, he’d filed under “irrelevant,” but he mentioned it anyway.

Then it was time for everyone to react.

“Exactly what you deserved.”

“You’re *so* guilty.”

“I think you’re awful.”

“I can’t believe you.”

Was it that bad? Really?

“Why is my honored Father at fault? I don’t understand.”

Cú was on his side, at least. But he knew his beloved daughter had even less common sense than he did when it came to the human world. He was growing increasingly anxious.

“So it’s my fault after all?” he asked.

“I see now. So *that’s* why Anna got all angry and locked herself up in her room. Blade, you can’t do stuff like that. She said she was never talking to you again, you know.”

“So does that mean we’ll have to communicate using gestures...?”

“It means she doesn’t want to be your friend anymore, Blade.”

“*What?*” Blade froze. “S-s-so...you mean our friendship is over?”

“Yeah, exactly. When you stop talking to someone, it means, like, the whole friend thing is over.”

“*Whaaaaat?!!*”

With a loud wail, Blade shot up from his seat. This punishment was

unbearable. This was far more serious than the silent treatment!

“But... But she *can't*!! I *can't*! I really want to stay friends with Earnest! Oh, oh, *ohhh...! Ahhhhhh!* Would she forgive me if I said I'm sorry?!”

“Well, it'll depend on how sincere you are, I suppose.”

“I'll go right now!”

“Hold on a second. Um, Blade? You don't even understand why what you did was wrong, do you?”

Blade shook his head. He didn't.

“Well, if you apologize without understanding what you did, it'll only make her angrier.”

Blade couldn't argue with that.

“So how about we go with you?”

“You'd do that?!”

“We're friends, aren't we?”

“Yeah! Yeah, we are!”

○ **Scene III: Earnest's Room**

It was well into the night by the time they made it to Earnest's room. There were things like homework and practice to attend to after dinner, and by the time everyone was able to meet up, it was almost time for bed.

Blade marched there, along with Sophie, Claire, Yessica, Clay, Kassim, Leonard, and Cú, forming quite a large crowd.

Earnest's room was in a special section of the dorm, and she had the whole place to herself. Once they arrived at the dorm's entrance, Yessica, who was in front, turned around and put a finger to her lips. Blade then turned around and shushed the person behind him, followed by Claire, then Leonard, and so on and so forth. It was well past lights-out, and if that scary, scary dorm leader caught wind of their presence, they'd never hear the end of it.

Soon, they reached Earnest's room. Yessica lightly rapped at the door.

“Anna? Are you up? It’s me...and everybody else, too. Blade wanted to apologize to you.”

They waited for a little while, but there was no reply.

“We’re coming in, okay?”

Yessica turned the doorknob, but it was locked.

She then slipped a length of wire out from her sleeve, and a few short seconds later, the door was open. Blade was so glad she’d come along. If he’d been by himself, he probably would have started crying in front of Earnest’s door and then run all the way home. It’d be simple for him to rip Earnest’s door off its hinges, but even he knew that wasn’t in his best interests. He had more common sense than people gave him credit for.

“We’re coming in, okay?” Yessica said again as she cracked open the door. Despite the lack of response, she beckoned everyone else to join her. “Here, follow me. Anna’s inside, and she’s awake.”

They all filed in, impressed that Yessica could detect all that from beyond the door.

It was completely dark inside; all the lights were off. After the last person in closed the door, it grew even darker—one step away from pitch black. But Blade’s eyes were keen enough to spot Earnest sitting there, ten or so feet ahead.

“Ow!”

Claire, meanwhile, had just bumped right into the back of a chair. Yessica had deftly swerved around it—so why had Claire tried to go right through the thing? ...Oh, right. Most people probably couldn’t see in this darkness.

Blade nodded to himself. Another precious piece of “common sense” acquired.

“Anna...? What’re you up to?”

Earnest was still crouched in place, facing away from them. It looked like her shoulders were trembling.

“Are you...crying?” ventured Yessica. “I’m coming over, okay?”

Ever so carefully, Yessica sidled up to Earnest.

“Ooh, that looks *tasty*!” Cú exclaimed.

Guess her night vision’s pretty good, too.

Zooming past everyone else, she leaped onto Earnest’s back.

“Earnessst! Lemme have some of that, too!”

“*Mmph?*” Earnest turned when she felt the sudden weight on her back.

“*Mmmmmmmmmph?!?*”

“What do you mean, ‘mmph’? Give me some. You have so many. I just want a few, okay? Give it! Gimme! Gimme those snacks!”

“Huh? Snacks? What snacks?” said Claire.

“Someone turn on a lamp already,” said Leonard. “There’s got to be one around.”

Cú had to have some kind of infrared dragon vision to see everything so clearly. Despite his skills, Blade couldn’t make out any details.

What’s going on in here...?

“Here’s one...,” said Claire. “I’m turning it on, okay?”

Once she placed the lampstone in its socket, it flickered on, filling the room with light and shadow. Earnest was now fully visible...

“Geh...”

“Huh? What...?”

“Wow...”

Blade and his friends were at a loss for words. A mountain of snacks was now visible in front of them—cookies, shortbread, chocolate, a variety of dried fruits, golden madeleines, pound cake, and assorted baked sweets. There was hard candy, too, in every color of the rainbow, along with an entire bottle of bright red jam. And Earnest was sitting in front of it all, taking great big handfuls and shoving them into her mouth.

“Th-the sweets...,” she muttered. “They’re so delicious... So good...”

She was hunched over in the darkness, on the verge of tears as she shoveled down the snacks. She knew everyone was looking at her, but she couldn't stop.

"Um...Anna?"

"Don't look at me... Please don't look..."

Swipe. Swipe. Munch, munch. Munch, munch.

There she was—a girl in the prime of her life, bits of sugar and crumbs tumbling out from the corners of her mouth.

"Oh." Blade put his hands behind his head. "So *that's* why you gained weight, huh?"

Now he knew the reason. It was plain as day. His hunch had been right all along. Earnest *was* heavier.

"Yeah, eating that much every day would make anyone gain weight."

The mountain of snacks was more than any one person could reasonably eat by themselves.

"At...at first...I thought it'd be all right...if it was just a little... *Munch, munch...*"

Earnest was making excuses even as she continued to eat.

"I...I had no idea there were such tasty things in the world, so... *Munch, munch...*"

"Talk or eat. Pick one."

"....."

"Talk."

"...I-I'm telling you...! I can't stop!"

"Okay, okay. Then keep eating."

"*Munch, munch...* Just a bit more...a bit more... I keep saying that and adding extra every day... Before I knew it, I was eating all of this... *Munch, munch...*"



“Let me ask you something,” said Blade. “Did you stop being friends with me?”

“N-no... It’s not that... I—I just...didn’t want you to see me like this... So I couldn’t...talk to you... *Munch, munch...*”

Earnest was grabbing fistfuls of snacks as she spoke, then stuffing them into her mouth. She had tears in her eyes.

“Oh, okay.”

Blade felt terribly relieved.

So that was it! This wasn’t a punishment! Earnest is still my friend! That’s great! I didn’t need to worry about anything. I can finally get some good rest tonight.

“Okay, I’m heading back, then,” he said.

“Awww, I wanted to eat some, too!” said Cú as Blade dragged her by the hand toward the door.

“Whoooa! Hold up!”

“Wait! Wait, Blade!”

Yessica and Claire grabbed him and held him in place.

“What?”

“You can’t leave like this! Look at Anna! She’ll never recover if you do!”

“Blade, you...you have to give her some kind words, at least! Say something nice! Or *else!*”

“Something nice...?”

He looked at Earnest. She was munching away through tears. The contours of her face looked different now, and it probably wasn’t just because her mouth was stuffed with sweets. Her cheeks, her chin—they looked fuller, plumper. Blade hadn’t picked up on this before because she’d been avoiding him lately. But seeing her head-on in the light like this—it was clear as day. Blade thought for a moment. What should he say in this situation?

“Um... Those snacks must be really delicious, huh? That’s great.”

More tears began to well up in Earnest’s eyes.

“No! That’s not nice at *all*, Blade! You really screwed up. You basically just struck the killing blow!”

“Okay. What do you *want* me to say?”

“I dunno, like ‘You’re beautiful even with a little weight on you’? Or ‘You’re you no matter what the scale says’ or... Come on, Leonard! Help us out here!!”

Leonard, who had been tuning out for a while, came back to attention when Claire turned the topic toward him.

“Know, milady, that my loyalty shall never waver... No matter how overweight you become.”

“Who are you calling overweight?!?”

A pie flew from Earnest’s direction and smacked Leonard in the face.

“Wow. What a pain,” said Blade.

“You still have to say something nice, okay?!” said Yessica.

“I... I’m a pain...?” muttered Earnest. “Are you saying...I’m an annoying... fatty?”

“Okay, okay. I think we’ve heard enough from everyone.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, guys. Blade, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I’m so fat... *Munch, munch...*”

Earnest continued packing it in as she apologized.

“Blade! Stop being mean! You’re the only one who can save Anna!”

“Milady, would you allow me the honor of finishing this pie you started?”

“Me too!” shouted Cú. “I want some snacks, too! It’s not fair that you’re keeping them all to yourself!”

“Grrrr!”

“Oh, great. Now Anna’s animal instincts are awakening.”

The situation was quickly devolving into a huge mess.

“Listen up!” Blade shouted, silencing everyone else. “Look, Earnest. You’ve gotta stop hiding. If you can’t handle a problem on your own, just come to us. Ask us for help. Even if you’re facing some weight issues at the moment... Um, you can always slim down, okay? That’s all you need to do. We’ll just do some extra training. We’ll help out...because we’re friends, right?”

“F-friends...? ...*Munch, munch...*”

“Yeah. Friends.”

“I—I... I’ll do it! ...*Munch, munch...*”

“That’s right.” Blade smiled warmly, showing off his teeth.

Though he would have liked for her to stop eating before she replied, he was nice enough not to say so out loud.

○ **Scene IV: At the Bath**

“Hey! How’s it going over there?” Blade shouted over the partition.

He was currently in the men’s bath; the one for women was on the other side. The dormitory’s communal baths were divided by gender, but the partition didn’t extend all the way to the ceiling, so people could still call out to one another. Blade had no idea what was happening on the other side, so he thought he’d ask...

...but there was no reply.

Planning an effective operation required a comprehensive understanding of the current situation—that was just the basics of warfare. So Blade and the gang had headed over to the dorm’s communal baths so they could figure out Earnest’s current condition. In other words, they had to weigh her. He and the boys had started to enter the women’s bath with everyone else, but for some reason the girls had kicked them out like they didn’t belong there. Now Blade was on the men’s side with Clay, Kassim, and Leonard.

“Hey! Are you weighing her?” he shouted over the partition.

They could hear voices from the women’s bath—a lot of giggling and

squealing. The girls sounded like they were having fun. The men's side, meanwhile, was as quiet as a funeral. Blade thought it was a little too quiet and turned around to see what the others were up to.

"...Why did you take your clothes off?"

Leonard was buck naked, showing off his well-honed body. Clay, the handsome swordsman, and even Kassim were in the middle of undressing as well.

"We don't have anything to do over here, so I thought I'd take a bath."

"Oh."

That made sense to Blade. He turned around and tried shouting over the partition again.

"Hellooooo?! ...Ugh. Great."

"Whoa—hey!"

Ignoring the other boys' shouts, Blade scrambled up the partition. Looking over, he saw Earnest and the others.

Since she had a private room with an attached bath, Earnest wasn't used to communal spaces like this. She kept nervously turning this way and that. It was hilarious to watch.

Yessica had her stand on the scale. Only the women's side had one.

"Oh my, that's no good..."

She was bent down, looking at the needle. Blade chose this moment to speak up.

"How much does she weigh?"

"I think I better keep this one to myself..."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It would be too rude to say..."

"That bad, huh?" Blade pulled his head back and looked down at the clueless men below him. "It's too rude for her to say."

“You’re a hero, Blade,” Clay said.

“Oh, n-n-no way! I’m definitely not a Hero! I’m just a regular guy!”

“I just meant you have a lot of courage, is all.”

“Whuh? Courage? What’s courage got to do with this?”

“Uh... Well, what’d you see?” asked Kassim. “Were they all naked?” His breathing seemed oddly accelerated.

“Oh, hmm.” Blade raised an eyebrow.

Earnest had been naked on the scale, but what about the others? He hadn’t been paying any attention to them, so he couldn’t be sure.

“Whoa! Stop, Yessica! Stop!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Boing, boing! Look, you can pinch this part! Here too! Jiggle, jiggle! I can hold this like a ball of dough! And check out how it feels down here! Oh, wow. This is so addictive!”

All kinds of joyful voices were coming across from the other side.

“Wha...? What parts...do you think she’s talking about?”

The men were swallowing hard now, gasping for breath.

“I’ll be right back,” said Blade.

Blade grabbed on to the wall and climbed up to get another look.

“Why are you peeping on us like it’s your right, huh?!”

A washbasin. A basket. A towel. A knife. All sorts of things were thrown up at Blade, knocking him back down in an instant.

○ **Scene V: Morning Training**

So began Earnest’s weight-loss regimen.

The core of it was simple enough—diet and exercise. The morning began with a ten-kilometer jog, followed by a strict, calorie-controlled breakfast and lunch. After her usual afternoon training session, she then doubled up on her individual practice routines.

“Hff, hff, haaah... Hff, hff, haaah... Hff, hff, haaah...”

Two regular exhailes, then an extended one. Just the sound of her breathing made it clear how hard Earnest was working as she ran through the morning mist. Blade was right behind her, joining her for the run.

Now that he thought about it, Blade had never really exercised during his Hero days. He hadn't needed to. He was constantly in the midst of battle, and he used and abused his body until he was completely spent on a regular basis. Training, in his mind, seemed meaningless. But now that he'd retired and become a regular person, making the effort to exercise had started to seem like it might do his body good. In fact, he'd been feeling like he was losing his edge of late. He was only running a few laps around the school with Earnest, and his pulse had already gone up ever so slightly.

“I...don't need...you to...keep me...company.”

Earnest gasped out the words between strained breaths.

“Why don't we slow the pace down a little?” suggested Blade.

“Don't be stupid! If...it didn't hurt...it wouldn't...be training...!”

The old Earnest would have been effortlessly bounding along like a doe in the springtime, not so much as kicking a single pebble. But, alas, now she was far slower and more sluggish. Blade searched for another animal metaphor but ultimately decided against it. He felt it would be rude to whatever animal he picked. And, really...could you even call what Earnest was doing running?

“Hey there, Earnest! Good morning! Nice day today, huh?”

Leonard came up from behind and passed them by. It was the second time he'd lapped them.

“Hff...hff...”

Finally, they finished the last lap.

“Here, Earnest. Have some water,” said Blade.

She took the bottle he offered and gulped it down, still breathing heavily. Then she noticed a boy leaning against the entrance to the dormitory.

“Oh... Leonard?”

“Good day, milady... Would you like to use this towel?”

“What? No way. Why would I want your used towel?” Earnest turned away in a huff.

“Th-this is brand new,” Leonard mumbled back.

Then something dawned on Earnest, and she turned back to him.

“Come to think of it, Leonard... Why are you running so early in the morning?”

“Huh?” The dashing man froze. “W-well, I mean... You told me to run ten kilometers every morning... So that’s what I’ve been doing...”

“I told you that?”

“Yes. You said to do it for the rest of my life.”

“I did?”

“Ah-ha... Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha. Well, if you don’t remember...th-then never mind.”

“Hey, Blade. Did I say something like that?”

“Hmm...”

Blade folded his arms and thought. He had never been very good at reading a room, but he gave it his best shot.

“I don’t think you did.”

“Yeah. Otherwise, I’d remember.” Earnest nodded, triumphant.

In fact, Blade *did* remember her saying that, but he’d put some thought into which answer would hurt Leonard less and decided to pretend he’d forgotten.

Despite this, Leonard showed up again the next morning. What a guy.

○ **Scene VI: Dietary Restrictions**

At lunch one day during her training program...

“Ughhh...”

...Earnest, knife and fork in hand, sized up the plate in front of her, an utterly pathetic look on her face. Her meal that day had been specially prepared for her

dietary needs by the old biddy—ahem, the lovely lady who ran the dining hall’s kitchen.

“This...this is all of it?”

“That’s about how much the old you ate, Anna,” said Yessica.

“The old me...?”

Earnest’s shoulders slumped. She was being treated like a totally different person.

But what could Blade do? He wasn’t much of an expert on what made people physically beautiful or ugly, but he knew that women’s bodies came in several different types. There were slender ones, like Sophie and Cú; beauties, like Yessica and Claire; and then you had chubby or curvy ones—women with a little more meat on their bones.

Blade could draw a distinction between those, at least, but Earnest’s current body type was somewhat outside the scope of even the “chubby” or “curvy” designation.

“Okay, once I’ve eaten, it’s back to work! Next up are my afternoon drills, and I’ve got a lot of calories to burn!”

Chomp, chomp, chomp. Three bites were about all it took to wrap up her meal, and soon Earnest was up again.

“Afternoon drills are gonna be in the virtual world, so you won’t be burning any calories,” said Blade.

The original Proving Ground had been converted into an open-air garden. It now served as an entrance to the virtual world they used for practical training.

When she heard this, Earnest nearly fell to her knees in shock, but she managed to recover in the end.

“All right, I’m officially switching this afternoon’s practice to the Second Proving Ground! We’re going to have a *really* practical real-life training session!”

It had been a while since Earnest had exercised her special rights as Empress. She was instituting a change in the curriculum, but none of the 108 students

was about to object. Everyone could see how hard she was trying, and they all wanted her to succeed.

○ Scene VII: The WeighIn

Earnest got up on the scale, one foot at a time. She stared at the needle. It wavered a little, then stopped.

“Why...isn’t it going down...?”

As she stared at the number beside the needle, Earnest was gripped by utter despair.

“Hey! What’s it say?”

Blade was at the top of the partition wall, peeking over from the men’s side again.

“Stop peeping already!”

Earnest picked up the nearest washbasin and threw it at him. Blade always popped up in the exact same place at the exact same time during this routine, so she’d actually flung the basin before his face even made it over the partition.

“Just tell me how much you weigh!” he shouted.

Ugh, thought Earnest. *He’s such a nuisance. Why is he so hell-bent on learning a young woman’s secrets?* But Earnest knew he’d just pop his face over the partition again the next moment if she didn’t tell him. It seemed she didn’t have a choice.

“It’s—*mumble, mumble*—seven pounds!”

“I couldn’t hear you!”

“I *said* it’s—*mumble, mumble*—seven pounds!”

“Oh? Did the tens digit change?”

“No, it didn’t!”

“So you haven’t lost any weight at all?”

“No, I haven’t! I’m sorry, all right?! But I can’t do anything about it!”

“Well, Anna. Keep in mind that all that exercise is increasing your muscle

mass. And that'll rev up your metabolism, too. It won't be much longer, okay?"

"Y-you think...?"

Yessica's observation lifted her spirits a little.

"He'd probably prefer me a little thinner, right?"

"Hmm? You mean Blade? Well...good question. He's a little hard to figure out. Maybe he doesn't care... Or maybe he even prefers you this way? Or maybe he's thinking, 'She could go on a hunger strike for sixty days and that needle would never move!'"

"Ugh, stop being stupid! I'm not *that* fat!"

"Um...are you sure?"

"Hey! Did you call?" said Blade, popping up again.

"No, we did *not*!"

Earnest threw another washbasin at him.

○ **Scene VIII: Earnest's Resolve**

Earnest was at a crossroads.

She had run ten kilometers every day without fail. She had adjusted her training curriculum to make it more physically active, with lots of exercise in the mornings and afternoons. Yessica and Claire were staying in her dorm room to ensure she didn't go on a bender, so she hadn't been eating any snacks or sweets. Well, just a little. But not *that* much!

So why wasn't the needle on the scale going down?

"Hey, Blade?" said Earnest, lowering her sword.

She and Blade had just finished their after-school practice session and were still facing each other.

"Yeah?" Blade replied, a carefree smile on his face as he placed his sword on his shoulder.

Earnest had stopped their sparring session early and was now sheathing her sword, and yet Blade didn't even give her a second look.

Did anything faze this guy? Sometimes it made her skin crawl. Here he was, with that childlike smile, just waiting for her to speak...

“Today I wanted to try some more...drastic measures,” she said. “Is that okay?”

“Sure, no problem. What kind?”

“W-well...”

Earnest hesitated a bit. This was not easy for her to say.

“You know, if this works out and I succeed...and make my target weight, um... could you do *that* for me again?”

“Do what?”

“You know. *That*.”

“I’m afraid you’re gonna have to tell me.”

“I *know* you know what I’m talking about.”

“Oh, the vertical-slash thing?”

“How did you come up with that?!” Earnest shouted.

Blade was talking about the way he’d killed her during their first training session in the virtual world.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Just say it already. I’ll do it, whatever it is.”

“Really? You’ll really do it?”

“Sure. No problem. Now tell me.”

“Actually, maybe I won’t.”

“Oh, come on,” Blade said, laughing. Earnest joined in.

“You said you’d do it, right? So I’ll just tell you when I’m ready. Does that work?”

“I guess...”

“Hee-hee...”

Earnest laughed again.

Obviously, by “that,” she’d meant *that*—the way Blade ran his hand along her head. As far as she could remember, the last time someone had patted her like that was when she was five years old. Since then, no one had praised her for anything. Her place at the top was a given, so there was no need for praise. No one stood above her—not her peers, not even her instructors. So there was never anyone around to pat her on the head and say, “Good job.”

Okay, let’s do this. And when I succeed, I’ll have Blade pat me on the head and praise me.

Asmodeus, resting by her hip, began to tremble.

“Aren’t you gonna punch that thing?” asked Blade. “You know, like you usually do.”

“What do you mean?” she said, drawing her sword. “He’s going to help out today, too.”

○ **Scene IX: Inflammification**

“He’s going to help out today, too,” said Earnest, pulling out her sword.

“Oh?”

This surprised Blade.

A tremendous amount of heat rose up from the sword as she lifted it. In fact, the entire length of it was on fire.

“You know,” Earnest said, her face dead serious, “I’m not all that confident about this, so I decided not to invite anyone else. If something goes wrong, you know what to do. And if it works...do *that* for me, too.”

“Um, sure...”

Blade winced. There was an ominous sense of urgency to Earnest’s words.

“In the name of Earnest Flaming, I command you! Sword of mine, consume my body and become its power!”

“Oh? Oh? Ohhh?”

Blade looked on as the sword's flames grew stronger and stronger. He could tell Earnest was using Asmodeus to do something. Back in the virtual world, the sword had corrupted her to the point where they'd nearly merged. Now it looked like she was trying to adapt that process into some sort of new technique.

"Oh? Ohhh? Ohhhh?!"

The fire ramped up in intensity. The entire sword was now a pillar of flame. Earnest's hand, gripping the hilt, was burning as well.

"Wh-whoa! Earnest! You're on fire!"

"Be quiet and watch! You're a super-being, not a wimp!"

"Okay."

Blade was startled by what was happening, but he watched in silence, keeping his mouth shut as Earnest transformed. The fire spread from her hand up to her elbow, then to her shoulder, then to her torso and on to her legs. In around thirty seconds, her entire body was engulfed in flames.

And all the while, she was writhing in agony. The experience of being burned head to toe must've caused her unimaginable pain. The smell of roasting flesh and fat filled the Second Proving Ground—a familiar aroma to Blade. Whenever a high-ranked mage cast a fire-based annihilation spell on the battlefield, the same smell would fill the air.

"Huh? What's going on? What's that smell? Is something burning?"

"Blade? What's happening? Blade?"

It was Claire. Blade could sense Clay and Kassim there, as well as Leonard, who seemed quite frightened by what was going on.

"Hey, Blade, have you seen Anna? Is she—? Wait, what's burning? ... Whaaat?!"

It was either Yessica or Claire who first noticed the identity of the human-shaped pyre before them.

"Whoa! Anna! Anna?!!"

“Ahhhhhhh! Aaaaahhhh! Aahhhhhh!! No! Noooo! Anna! Annaaaa?!”

Claire ran up to her, a shining light emitting from her palms as she tried using her restoration skill to save Earnest.

“Don’t touch her!” Blade shouted, holding Claire back. Then he turned to the others. “Trust her, all right? If you can’t...then get out of here!”

Nobody turned to leave as Earnest’s body continued to burn, convulsing with pain all the while. And then finally...

“Whew... I think it’s passed now.”

The figure stood up, flames still dancing around her. She was calm as she spoke—or rather, as she mentally projected her voice. They could hear it, but they weren’t certain where it was coming from.

“Blade. Thanks for stopping Claire for me. If she had restored me to normal... I’m not sure I could’ve gone through with this a second time.”

The voice was clearly Earnest’s.

“But, boy, that was hot. Really hot. I thought I was gonna die.”

“Indeed, your physical body has perished.”

They could now hear a second voice. This one was unfamiliar to Blade and the others, but they quickly deduced that it belonged to Asmodeus. It was surprisingly low and refined.

“Be proud of yourself. You are the first one besides the founder of your clan to enter this realm.”

“Hmph. Soon I’ll be doing even cooler things. Who do you think I am?”

Everyone began to relax. This was definitely Earnest talking.

“What’s going on with Earnest’s body right now?” Blade asked Asmodeus.

“It has become fire.”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

“By which I mean it is now indestructible. She can no longer be hurt by ordinary physical attacks. The body of my master was destroyed, but my power

has brought her back to life as a living flame.”

“So she really did burn up?”

“Yeah. It was really hot.”

“So where is our enemy, my master? If you have taken this form, there must be a powerful foe to defeat. Who is this adversary that we must burn to the ground at once?”

“No one.”

“What?”

“I became a Scion of Flame to help with my diet.”

“...Your what now?”

The fiery figure had taken the form of a perfect, platonic ideal of a woman.

“Yeah. Weren’t you just telling me how the Scion form consumes a huge amount of energy?”

“Yes, the heat of the Scion of Flame can destroy any enemy...but in return, it requires an enormous amount of energy. Therefore, its duration is limited. Indeed, it requires nothing short of one million calories per hour—”

“A million calories per hour!” Earnest sounded ecstatic. “Meanwhile, running a ten-kilometer jog eats up maybe five hundred or so. I don’t have time for that. It’s better to just burn it off in a flash. Hee-hee-hee!”

“I see your lust for battle has intensified. Very reassuring, my master.”

To Blade and the other observers, it sounded like one person using a woman’s voice and a man’s voice in turns, like some kind of ventriloquist act.

“...So where is the enemy we must smite? What shall we burn?”

“The enemy, Asmodeus, is Earnest’s flab.”

This back-and-forth was getting pathetic, and Blade felt obliged to cut in.

“Don’t call it flab!” Earnest shouted. Then she staggered and almost fell.

“Whoa, you all right?”

Blade was a little worried. Merging with her sword and allowing herself to

become this Scion of Flame was all well and good, but this was the first time Earnest had experienced any kind of metamorphosis. She shouldn't push herself.

Incidentally, Blade had witnessed quite a few transformations like this before; it was something you saw among champions with some frequency.

"Oh. I think I'm in trouble."

"H-hey, now..."

"...I'm getting hungry."

Earnest's voice echoed in the arena.

"Huh?"

"I'm...so hungry..."

"Earnest?"

"Um, didn't she just say something about burning a million calories per hour?" asked Claire.

Yessica nodded. "She did, yeah. Isn't a normal diet, like, twenty-five hundred calories a day? And even if we're at more like four thousand 'cause we're physically active..." She took a moment to count this out on her fingers. "Let's see... That would mean you're consuming four days' worth of food every minute. Wait, do I have that right?"

Around two minutes had already passed since Earnest transformed. Had she just done the equivalent of fasting for a week, then? No matter how much fat she had stored up, she should be practically starving to death by now.

"Hun...gry..." Earnest's speech was breaking up and becoming more childish.
"Yum..."

"H-hey...?"

She leaned forward, placing her hands on the ground. Then, like some quadrupedal beast of fire, she started circling the group.

"Rrrrrr..."

A threatening snarl welled up from her throat.

“Um...Anna?”

Spooked, Claire clung to Yessica. Clay stood in front of the others, his sword drawn. Blade thought once again that Clay was quite the hero type.

Slowly, Earnest's body grew more beast-like.

“Hey, uh, is it me, or is she growing a tail?” asked Blade.

She was. Earnest, still walking on all fours, was becoming less human and more animal by the second.

“This is known as Beast Mode,” said Asmodeus. “Some forms of strength can only be achieved by abandoning one’s humanity. Call it the second stage of her inflammification.”

“Anna! Don’t quit being human!” shouted Claire.

“It’s a little late for that, don’t you think?” Blade shot back.

“Grrrrrrrr... Claire...”

“See? She’s calling for me! That was definitely my name just now! It’s not too late!”

“Claire...delicious...”

“She said you look delicious.”

“Nooooo! I’m through with being eaten!”

Previously, Cú had remarked on how delectable Claire appeared, and now Earnest had, too. Maybe she really *was* delicious.

“My master this generation is rather weak in spirit. I fear her willpower is shockingly low, particularly when it comes to appetite.”

Now Earnest's own sword was dissing her.

“Well, yeah, that’s why she was on a diet,” said Blade.

“Very well. So what is this ‘diet’ we are meant to fight? Where is this so-called ‘flab’?”

“I think you’re in the process of burning off the latter right now.”

“Rrrrrrrrrrr...”

Blade broke off his conversation with Asmodeus. It was time to get serious. The murderous aura emanating from the flame beast, formerly Earnest, was no longer a laughing matter. She wasn't out to kill them, of course—not exactly. She was out to *eat* them.

“Blade...?” said Yessica, whipping out her metal battle fan. “What should we do? I think we’re in serious danger of becoming dinner.”

“Give me ten—no, thirty seconds. I’ll figure it out.”

“Thirty...? That’s a long time. Can’t you cut that down a little?”

“.....”

Blade didn’t answer. He had already begun to knead and form his spirit. He held his sword forward and closed his eyes. Shutting out his surroundings and all idle thought, he poured the entirety of his focus inward.

“Here she comes!” shouted Yessica. “Clay!”

“On it!”

Clay struck the flame beast with his sword...but it passed right through her, from her jaw to her tail.

“She doesn’t have any mass!” exclaimed Clay.

“What?! Whoa! So wait... What’s going on with Anna’s body?!”

“She’s coming again!” Claire shouted.

“Rrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!”

“Yah!”

The next rush was parried by Yessica, her metal fan fully opened. Instead of taking Earnest head-on, she deflected her, throwing her up at an angle to counteract her momentum.

“Ow! Hot, hot, hot...! C-come on! Next! Claire, Kassim, Sophie, Leonard! One of you handle it!”

“Huh? Wh-what?” Claire was panicking.

Sophie went out next. The beast jumped at her, and she hit back with a spin

kick, then knocked it down with a right hook. She covered the tips of her hands and feet with ice-aspected elemental power, allowing her to strike home against the flame-based foe. Elemental power outclassed magic power, just as fighting force did plain old spirit.

“Who’s next?!”

“Huh? Wh-what?” Claire was still panicking.

“Milady...”

Leonard was standing in a daze. Why was he so shocked?

But the next instant, his eyes widened as he suddenly thrust his spear into the ground and began channeling all his energies into it, generating a spherical barrier.

“Leonard? How long will that hold?”

“Twenty seconds at full power... Heh-heh... I’ve been running every morning without fail, after all.”

“Okay, good. That just leaves Blade...”

Yessica glanced at Blade, but he was still fully focused on kneading his spirit. He knew what was going on around him, but he wasn’t perceiving it. And after ten or so seconds inside the protective barrier, his fighting force was ready.

“Dragon-Destroying Technique Number Three...”

This was the third-weakest technique, counting up from the bottom, making it the fourth strongest. Blade assumed his stance. Dragon Eater, the second of these skills, was deployed with a horizontal sweep of his sword—but the odd-numbered techniques were vertical.

Blade swung his sword, starting high and plunging all the way to the ground. This was Dragon Banish—but Blade was only using the wind pressure from the slice.

Around half the air in the Second Proving Ground rushed toward the flame beast all at once. This wave of wind energy, laced with Blade’s fighting force, hit the beast head-on—immediately extinguishing its fire. And the moment it fizzled out, the girl’s naked human body was reconstructed. Earnest stood there

for a few moments, au naturel. Then, dazed, she fell forward.

“Oop.”

Unleashing a major skill like this usually caused Blade to stiffen up, but he managed to shake it off just in time, catching Earnest’s naked body as it fell.

“Blade...” She must’ve been at the limit of her strength. She was conscious but gasping for breath. “I... I did it...”

Technically speaking, it was Blade and the others who’d done most of the work this time. They didn’t want to get eaten, after all. But Blade kept that to himself as he ruffled Earnest’s hair.

“Great job,” he said, patting her head a few times.

Earnest smiled faintly. It was clearest in her eyes just before she shut them.

“Anna...?” Yessica asked, concerned.

“She just fainted,” said Blade.

But the moment everyone breathed a sigh of relief—

Grrrrrrrrroooowwwwwwwlllll...!

—the sound of someone’s stomach rumbling reverberated across the Second Proving Ground, like it was being run through an amplifier.

No one had to ask who it was. That much was obvious.

○ **Scene X: The Second WeighIn**

Later that day, Earnest was back at the dormitory baths, standing on the scale.

“H-how’s it look...?”

All her clothes were off. Her proportions were now completely back to normal. You could even see the vague impressions of her ribs at her sides again. She climbed on the scale, toes first. Soon, the needle stopped wavering and pointed at a number.

“Whoo! Yessssss! I did it! I’m back to normal!!”

Earnest pressed her hands to her head. She was so moved by this news that

she crouched down on the scale.

“That’s great, Anna!”

“Yeah! Congratulations!”

Claire and Yessica cheered her on, while Earnest looked ready to cry. This was all wonderful, but... Unfortunately, Blade couldn’t see the numbers on the scale very well from his place up on the partition.

“Hey! How much does she weigh?”

“Didn’t we tell you to stop brazenly peeping?!”

A basket, washbasin, towel, and knife all flew up at the same time in formation, and Blade was shot down once again.

○ **Scene XI: Back in Earnest’s Room**

Yessica, in front of Blade, turned around and shushed him. Blade did the same to Claire behind him, and Claire to Leonard, and so on and so forth.

It was past lights-out, and they were all sneaking into Earnest’s room again. They had a good reason for breaking the rules: Earnest had successfully completed her weight-loss program, and they needed to make sure she didn’t go back to her old snacking habits.

“I’m opening the door,” Yessica signaled with her face. Everyone else nodded. She undid the lock with a length of wire, her skill even more brilliant than last time. Then, without knocking, she cracked open the door and peeked inside. She nodded an “all right” and the others nodded back. At last, she swung open the door, and they all rushed in.

“Fweh? Fwehhhhhh!!”

The figure of Earnest was visible in the darkness, seated on the floor. She turned toward them, startled...

“Dnn’t lnnnk! Dnn’t lnnnnnnnnnk—fph, fph, fph!”

Teary-eyed, she continued to munch away, grabbing fistfuls of the snacks in front of her and bringing them up to her mouth. Her eyes might have been watery, but her hands didn’t stop. It was like they belonged to a whole other

creature.

“Ahhh... I knew it.”

Yessica brought her hands to her hips and looked down in disgust.

“Ffph... Frppheh! Frppheh! Rrph! ...Munch, munch...”

“Talk or eat,” said Blade. “Pick one.”

“.....”

“*Talk,*” Blade ordered with a sigh.

“I...I’m fine, keh!” Earnest shouted. “It’s not a problem, keh! I just turn into the Scion of Flame for an hour each day! Then I can eat whatever I want!”

She offered a childish excuse, completely unlike the school’s Empress.

“This is starting to sound familiar,” Yessica said.

“Yeah.”

Even Blade nodded. He remembered hearing this line of self-defense before, too. But where...?

“It’s fine, keh. I can eat whatever, keh! I can drop a million calories in no time, keh!”

And so Earnest ate. And ate. And ate.

“I wonder why hopeless people’s hopeless excuses all end up sounding the same...,” said Yessica, turning to look at Blade.

“Right, yeah. Like when Blade couldn’t swim...”

Now Clay was looking at him, too.

“It’s true,” said Claire, followed by Kassim and Leonard.

Everyone was looking at Blade.

“My honored Father and Earnest are best buds!”

Even Cú was staring at him.

“Huh? You think I’m the same as Earnest? No way...”

Blade was perplexed.

He may have their friendship, but he got the feeling that somehow, he'd lost some of their respect.



Chapter 2

The Overlord's Daughter

○ Scene I: The Physical

“Okay, you’re all set.”

The doctor peeled off her examination gloves one at a time and tossed them into a wastebasket as she spoke. Blade shed tears as he lifted his pants up.

“Why’re you crying?”

“Oh...I dunno... I just am...”

Whenever she examined him like this, he always felt like he was losing something important as a man.

“Come to think of it, the boys don’t really like this exam much, do they? ...I wonder why.”

“Can you just give me the results?”

“Let’s see...”

The doctor brought a finger to her lips as she thought for a moment. Unlike the rest of Blade’s classmates, her lips were bright red. Blade realized she must be applying something to them. *Whoa. Could I be the first man to ever notice?!*

This woman had been Blade’s doctor since his days as a Hero. She had been about as old as Blade was now when they first met. Blade had been six or seven at the time. Maybe eight. Somewhere around there anyway.

Blade visited the school’s infirmary on a regular basis in order to receive thorough examinations from his doctor. He was still suffering from the aftereffects of his final battle against the Overlord, and she was always throwing dire warnings his way, saying he’d die if he used over X percent of his power. It was convenient to have his recovery expressed as a percentage, of

course, but still...

“This time, I’d say you’re at around thirty percent.”

“Isn’t that the same as before? I remember you saying last time that I could break out up to thirty percent of my power.”

“No. This time is different. Thirty percent isn’t the amount of power it’s okay to use, it’s the amount that will *kill* you. If you use that much of your power... you *will* die.”

“I’m getting *worse*?!”

She had examined him all the way down to his buttohole, and *this* was the result!

“Did you overexert yourself at some point? Or were you just wasting it all by yourself?”

“Wasting what?”

“Hm? What, you don’t know? Oh. Well, how about I show you?”

She licked her red lips and put one knee up on the examination table Blade was on. The slit in her tight skirt spread wide, revealing a glimpse of her dark panties. Blade pulled back, shuddering like he had just encountered a carnivorous magic beast.

“I’m not sure what you mean, but I think I’d better pass this time.” He slid past the advancing doctor and got off the exam table. “See you. I’ll be back next week.”

Snatching up his jacket, Blade ran out into the hallway. Various female students screamed as he passed by. *What’s going on with them?* he wondered, before realizing he was still topless.

Uh-oh. Just like how a guy says, “Dude, whoa,” when he sees a naked girl, girls scream when they see boys in the nude. This made no sense at all to Blade, who wasn’t particularly inclined to react either way when he saw a naked member of the opposite sex. Apparently, however, those reactions were normal.

Blade put on his jacket as he ran toward the dining hall. If he didn’t hurry, he was going to miss lunch.

○ Scene II: The Usual Gang, Plus One

“Sorry I’m late.”

“I saved you some food.”

Blade entered the dining hall and walked over to his usual spot. The food had already been carted away, but Earnest had saved a tray for Blade. It was his favorite dish—a large order of katsu curry. *Earnest is so thoughtful.*

Blade sat down across from Earnest. Sophie sat beside him, and Cú climbed on top of him. With his beloved daughter on his lap, he promptly got to work on the curry.

“Um, Blade... Hey,” said Claire after he’d taken a few bites.

“What?” he replied, looking back at her.

A vague, awkward feeling washed over him. He counted everyone at the table in order, pointing at each person in turn with his spoon.

“One... Two... Three... Four... Five... Six... Seven... Eight... Nine... Ten...”

Him, Earnest, Sophie, Cú, Claire, Yessica, Clay, Kassim, and Leonard. That should make nine. But there were ten people at the table. *Weird.* Why was there an extra?

“Who’re you?” Blade asked, addressing an unfamiliar girl.

“I...I’m in the way, aren’t I?”

She looked well-behaved and a little plain, and her hair was braided into pigtails. She offered Blade a gloomy smile and a reserved chuckle.

“Oh, I didn’t mean that...,” he said.

“*Do you remember her name?*” he whispered into the top of Cú’s head.

She had an excellent memory and knew the names of all 108 students at the academy.

“*That’s Maria, honored Father.*”

“Oh, right. Maria. Yeah. Maria. No worries. I remember it.”

“What an idiot...” Earnest touched her face and sighed. “You didn’t even

remember her name.”

“Well, did *you*?” asked Blade. “What’s her full name, then?”

“Huh? O-of course...I do. Why wouldn’t I? I’m the top student at this academy. I know everybody’s name *and* their grades.”

Earnest was stalling for time, of course. But everyone was kind enough to ignore her. She definitely didn’t know the girl’s name. If she did, she would’ve said it right away.

“Um... Sh-she’s my friend...,” Claire said. “She told me she had something she wanted to discuss, so I invited her over... She was waiting for you, Blade.”

Her plain-looking friend nodded. *Okay, so she’s with Claire. That makes perfect sense. The two of them seem kind of similar.* It made a lot more sense than Claire’s friendship with Yessica, who seemed like her total opposite.

“I know it,” mumbled Earnest. “Of course I do. How could I not?”

“Give it up already,” said Blade.

“Give what up?”

“You’re not fooling anyone. And besides, Maria has something to say.”

Earnest puffed out her cheeks theatrically.

“I didn’t remember her name,” Blade said, “but I know what kind of person she is, at least. Like what she’s good at and stuff.”

“Liar.”

“I’m telling the truth!”

Blade had once commanded an army of 108 students against Cú. In order to lead them properly, he had to know the extent of his forces’ capabilities.

“Maria’s gifted in magic. It feels like everybody leveled up after the Cú fight, so I bet you’re developing your elemental power now, huh?”

Maria looked a tad surprised. She propped up her glasses before they fell off her nose.

“That, and one more thing,” Blade continued. “You’re kind of clumsy, right?”

It's like your weakness. You trip a lot, and the fireballs you conjure fly off in weird directions... Ummm, what do they call it? Oh, right. You're a klutz. A klutz!"



“You idiot...” Earnest sighed.

“Oh, was I not supposed to say that?”

“No, it’s fine. I *am* clumsy...” Maria smiled gloomily.

“Oh, crap. Sorry.”

“It’s all right...”

Maria looked down at her lap. Then, after a moment, she raised her head. She turned to Blade, no longer smiling, her expression deeply troubled.

“I have a favor to ask of you, Blade. If I lose control over myself, could you... kill me?”

“Huh?” Blade blinked.

He got the feeling he’d heard something like this once before. The phrase had been *cut down*, not *kill*, but the meaning was the same. He turned his gaze toward Earnest, thoughtfully staring at the back of her neck as she turned away from him. She wasn’t able to bear the pressure of his gaze for long.

“...Don’t look at me, all right? I didn’t tell her anything. The only people I told were Claire and Yessica...”

“What?” Claire exclaimed.

Yessica just stuck her tongue out mischievously.

“Oh, um...” Claire faltered. “I-I’m sorry. I...kind of told Maria.”

“Come on. I bet everybody in school knows by now—about how Earnest got all lovey-dovey over Blade.”

“Lovey...?! No, no! No! I wasn’t being lovey-dovey at all! I was just saying how trustworthy Blade is!”

“Yeah, in the most lovey-dovey way possible...”

Yessica put her elbows on the table and propped her head up in her hands, then flashed Earnest an indulgent smile.

“Look, *no*, okay?!” Earnest shot back.

“Forget about all that...,” said Blade. “What’s up, Maria? Can you tell me more

about what's going on?"

Blade cut Earnest off before she could get any more worked up. He didn't even know what "love-dovey" meant anyway. It made no sense.

And besides, all the noise and shouting coming from Earnest was making the timid-looking girl shrink in fear. She was gripping her glass tightly with her head down, like she was weathering a storm.

Blade just stared, patiently waiting for her to begin speaking. He was good at waiting. On the battlefield, there were situations where you had to stay calm and focused, ready to fight at any moment. Those times could last for half a day or even half a month. Not that this was a battlefield, of course.

"Um... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to give you the wrong idea. I don't *want* you to kill me or anything. It'd just be in case of an emergency... So, um... If I can, I'll keep it under control. That would be better, of course. A *lot* better."

She looked up at Blade through the lenses of her glasses. That was when he noticed that they weren't correcting her vision. They were likely magic glasses, not the kind meant to help with a person's sight. They probably suppressed her magic power. Blade had once known someone with an "evil eye" who wore the same kind of glasses, meant to keep the wearer from charming anyone they looked at.

"So I begged Claire to help me," Maria continued. "I asked her to bring me to the most powerful person in the school. That's you, Bla—"

"Wait," interrupted Earnest. "I can't let that slide. If you're looking for the best in the school, that's me, Earnest Flaming—"

"Chill, Earnest."

"Down, girl."

"Don't sweat it."

"Let's hear this student out first, milady."

"Yeah, yeah, Anna, you're the best. Can we continue now?"

Earnest was taken down by a tag-team effort—Yessica, then Clay, then Kassim, then Leonard, followed by Claire, who landed the decisive blow. Blade

noded gently, urging Maria to continue.

“I’ve been able to manage by myself...up until now. But lately, my body’s been acting weird...”

“Yeah, all the students have powered up lately.” Blade said, trying to soothe her.

She certainly wasn’t alone—it seemed like everybody was keen to try out all their newly acquired skills and abilities. Thanks to that, there was a fresh disaster every day. Students were only supposed to go all out in the virtual world, but even in the real world, it seemed to be one incident after another.

“Um... I...” Maria was silent for a while, then she looked hard at Blade, like she was about to let him in on a secret. “I’m not actually...a person.”

“Yeah.” Blade nodded.

“You don’t seem surprised.”

“You’re half-human, right?”

“You can tell?” Maria seemed taken aback.

“Mmm, yeah. Though it was just a hunch...”

Blade could smell the “scent” of magic beast on her. This wasn’t a smell in the physical sense—not something you could sniff under her armpits and get a whiff of; it was more like an aura or a presence. There was something different about her spirit.

Blade had known quite a few half-humans in the past. There were even more working for the Overlord. Since he’d known so many, Blade was adept at picking up those little, telltale signs.

“You leveled up after the fight with Cú, right? I bet that opened up a lot of new channels for your spirit and magic, awakening your latent powers. You must be having a hard time keeping it all in check.”

“Mmm? Me? So you improved thanks to me?” said Cú. “Then you should thank me! And I’d appreciate it if you expressed your gratitude with an offering of food. Make me say ‘ahhhh!’”

“Um...all right. Say ‘ahhh’...” Maria played along with Cú, taking a piece of katsu from Blade’s plate. “Mmm...”

After putting down the fork, she turned back toward him. “I don’t really know much about spirit or magic power or anything. I’ve been suppressing it all my life.”

“And now you can’t hold it back anymore?”

Maria nodded, her face hard; the hand holding her glass tensed...and then, with a crushing sound, the cup shattered, its contents splashing out.

“Oh! I’m sorry! I’m really sorry! I didn’t mean to break it! I wasn’t angry at all! This just happens when I don’t use the right amount of force! I’m so sorry!”

She apologized over and over. Nobody really cared, yet she was acting like it was the end of the world.

“It’s all right, Maria. There’s no need to dwell on it.”

Claire was trying to sound as gentle as possible. She picked up the broken pieces and wiped up the spilled tea with a washcloth.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Maria kept apologizing. She probably did this all the time. As he watched her, Blade felt sure of it.

“You’re in the junior class, right, Maria?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you move up to the senior class?”

“Huh? ...Um, well.”

“Because she’s terrible at practical exercises,” Earnest said, taking over for the tongue-tied Maria. “Her academic performance is really good, though. It covers for her poor showing on the Proving Ground. That’s why she hasn’t had to drop out.”

“Y-yes... That’s right.”

“But you need to work a little harder, okay? This school is meant for training champions, not bureaucrats.”

Earnest was channeling some of her dignity as the Empress for the first time in a while.

Maria hung her head in shame. “Yes... I understand. I...won’t fail. If I get kicked out, I don’t have anywhere else to go...” She clasped her hands together in her lap.

“Then why aren’t you doing better?” asked Blade.

If she didn’t want to fail, why wasn’t she putting in her all?

“Huh?”

“What are you talking about?”

Earnest and Maria both looked at him.

“Just what I said. Maria, why are you hiding your real powers and staying in the junior class?”

“I...I’m not...hiding anything.”

“Why go through the trouble of keeping yourself just barely above failing?”

“What are you talking about, Blade?” asked Earnest. “How do you know that’s what she’s doing?”

“Can’t you tell?”

“No, that’s why I asked. She’s... I’m sorry, I don’t want to be mean, but...she’s, you know, a giant klutz.”

“Yeah, she does fall a lot.”

“Right. So you see? She’s just bad at physical activity—”

“You just broke a glass, didn’t you?” Blade said, turning to Maria. “With nothing but the strength of your grip.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I’ll pay for it. Please take it out of my stipend.”

“I’m not trying to criticize you...”

Blade scratched his head. In terms of latent ability, Maria seemed like she’d fit right in with the seniors. In fact, it was downright weird that she wasn’t in their class. *Why don’t the others see it?* Then it dawned on him. Of course they

couldn't tell—most people couldn't. But in the heat of battle, misjudging an opponent's ability meant certain death. How could you call yourself a Hero if you couldn't tell how much power your enemy had left? But Blade wasn't a Hero anymore. He was retired. He was just a regular person.

"Maria went to Rosewood Junior School, just like me," Claire said, covering for her friend. "I've been watching her for a long time, so I know how hard Maria's been working all by herself. I know how worried she was that she wouldn't make it into the academy. But she made it, and now she's here."

Maria squeezed her hands, neatly folded on top of her knees. Her friend's words had clearly encouraged her.

"This... This is the only place for me," she said, looking pained. "I don't have a mother or father. No home to go back to. I'll do my best. I'll do anything. So please."

Blade glanced to the side and saw Earnest's awkward expression. As a constant top achiever, she must have no idea what it was like at the bottom of the ladder. Neither did Blade, for that matter. But...yeah. If Maria got kicked out of school, she might have trouble even finding enough to eat. No wonder she was so desperate.

"It's the same for me," said Blade.

"Huh?" Maria's eyes blinked a few times behind her glasses.

"I'm the same. I don't have a mother or father, either. I never even knew them. Even my name, Blade—I was hugging a sword when this group of mercenaries picked me up, so that's what the old man named me. Oh, he's not *my* old man. That's just what everyone in the corps called him."

"Um... I—I never knew my father, but I did grow up with my mother. She's... dead now, but..."

"Oh. You knew your mother, huh? It's nice that you have memories of her."

"Yes."

Blade smiled, and Maria smiled back, her eyes sparkling.

"Hey, why're you two staring at each other?" Earnest broke in. "Are you guys

having a *moment* or something?!”

“Blade,” Sophie interjected. “I don’t know my mother or father, either.”

“Oh, right. That’s true,” Blade agreed.

“Hey, wait! Slow down! Am I the odd one out here? Come *on*, guys! Yeah, my mother and father are still alive, but...!”

Blade offered Earnest a smile, too.

He had no idea why this Maria girl was holding back so much power...but he was ready to do whatever he could to help her.

○ **Scene III: At the Second Proving Ground**

After school that day, Blade and the gang headed out to the Second Proving Ground. There were a few students there already, working hard on their own training regimens, but Blade’s group shooed them off so they could have the place to themselves.

“Um... What are we going to do?” asked an uneasy Maria.

“Hold on just a minute,” said Blade.

A few moments later, Sophie came out from the control room.

“Is the magic barrier up, Sophie?”

“Exactly as ordered. I turned it up to maximum.”

“Wha—?” Earnest was flabbergasted. “You maxed out the strength of the barrier...?”

“Yeah. Just in case.”

Theoretically, the place’s walls would now be able to withstand a Hero-level strike.

“...What do you mean ‘just in case’? Do you have any *idea* how much it costs to run that thing at full power?!”

“Charge it to the king. He’s always saying he’ll take responsibility. Let him do it.”

“That’s rude, Blade.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Blade just couldn't work up any respect for the king. They'd known each other for a long time. He'd done the guy a lot of favors. But with all the impossible requests the king had thrown his way, the two of them were far from even. In fact, the king owed Blade so much, he ought to start collecting.

The newly built Second Proving Ground reportedly had magic barriers a hundred times stronger than the previous ones. If you ran it at full power for an hour, the nation would be out their entire budget for that amount of time and then some.

Blade had made other preparations, too. He'd called all the most powerful students at the academy, in order—Blade, Earnest, Sophie, Cú, and Leonard. Though Claire was worried for her friend, they'd asked her to sit this one out. Only the best of the senior class were present—the kind of people who were already at the top, even before the fight against Cú.

With Sophie back among them, Blade turned to Maria.

“Okay... I think that about does it.”

“Um... What are we...going to do here...?”

“Oh, I guess I didn't tell you.”

Maria was standing around anxiously. Realizing he hadn't explained anything to her, Blade began to feel a little guilty.

“So you're holding back your powers on purpose, right?” he began. “In that case, I thought maybe you could just take everything you've been keeping in and release it all at once.”

“No! No I can't!”

“That's why we've prepared all this. You've got the best barrier and the best team of students helping you.”

“Huh?” Earnest cast a sidelong glance at Blade. “Blade, are you serious?” She put her hands on her curvy hips and sighed dramatically. “What are you, *stupid?*”

“I think it's a really good idea, actually.”

“You’re *such* an idiot.”

“Back then, you kept bottling up that power for over ten years. That didn’t go very well, did it? And when you finally let it all out, everything turned out okay.”

“That... W-well, yeah, but...”

Blade had come up with his current plan based on what Earnest had done. She had spent all that time trying to force Asmodeus under her control, but after she finally unleashed her sword’s power and made peace with it, things went much, much better.

“I...I can’t. That’s a bad idea,” said Maria. “We should stop. I can’t release this. I have to keep it locked up for the rest of my life, or else.”

“Come on,” said Earnest. “Let’s just try it, like Blade said. I know it sounds stupid, but it worked before.”

“Quit calling it stupid!”

Earnest, now convinced, tried to persuade Maria. But Blade had to get the final word in.

“If *I’m* an idiot,” he continued, “then you’re an even bigger one.”

“.....”

“You’re just another idiot going along with this idiot’s idea.”

“I’m gonna cut you down.”

Blade nimbly dodged a sword as it whizzed past him.

“Hey, give me some warning!”

This exchange made Maria laugh. It seemed she wasn’t as nervous as she’d been before.

“All right... I’ll trust you, Blade. And if something goes wrong...you know what to do,” she said, reminding him.

“Yeah. Leave it to me,” Blade said, nodding.

“Okay...”

Maria put a hand around her wrist. At first, Blade wasn’t sure what she was

doing, but he soon realized she was taking off her bracelet. It fell to the ground with an unexpectedly massive *thud* and even made a little crater where it landed.

“This alone cuts my power in half.”

What the heck?! That wasn't some kind of training weight?! It was suppressing her power?!

Even Blade was taken by surprise. He watched as Maria removed the shackle-like bracelet from her other wrist as well.

Thud! Two more came off her ankles. *Thud, thud!*

That made four in total. And if one of them cut her power by half, having four on cut it by two to the fourth power—in other words, down to a sixteenth of her true strength.

Then Maria pulled a necklace out from the collar of her uniform. It had a small locket attached to it.

“This is the most powerful sealing item I have. It reduces my strength down to one-tenth all by itself.”

“W-wait—,” Blade called out to stop her.

If she'd previously been at a sixteenth of her power, they were already in big trouble. But now she was saying her true strength was another ten times that? That meant she'd been using only 1/160th of her full potential.

“Hmm?” Maria looked up at Blade. It seemed she'd only just registered that he'd asked her to wait.

But it was too late. She'd already removed the locket from around her neck. Sophie, standing next to her, reached out to take it. The silver locket—the final sealing item—was now in Sophie's hands. As soon as she took it, a tremendous burst of magic power erupted from inside.

“Ah!”

Sophie, the closest one to the locket, was blown away by the force, right into Blade, who grabbed her from behind.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I’m fine. But, Blade...what *was* that?”

Sophie’s eyes, usually devoid of emotion, held a slight hint of awe.

“Ohhh... No, no, I can’t do this... My magic power... I...I can’t hold it back...”

It wasn’t just magic power gushing out from Maria, either. There was fighting force, too, rampaging around the arena—the kind of power they’d all believed she lacked.

“No... No... I... No!”

“Don’t hold back!” shouted Blade.

Trying to bottle her power back up at this point could put her in danger. This was probably her first “awakening,” and she needed to get everything inside her body out...or the process could destroy her.

“But...! B-but...! She...she’s going to...come out...!”

“It’s fine! Trust me!” Blade was screaming now.

What’s Maria talking about? Who’s “she”?

Blade had no idea. But he knew what he had to say.

“You’ve got to trust me! Trust us—your friends!”

“But—”

“I’ll figure something out! ...Trust me!”

“Okay!”

Good answer.

She—Maria—was done hesitating. She wasn’t holding back any longer. She was releasing her power of her own free will. She had been suppressing it her whole life, and this was the first time she was letting loose. Her face was filled with ecstasy. Her clothes, unable to withstand the enormous outpouring of magic and fighting force, were torn to shreds and scattered.

Blade could barely stay standing amid the howling gales of energy.

Sophie was nearby, crouching low to the floor. She was hanging on to the

stone tiles on the floor to keep from being blown away.

Everyone else was inside Leonard's spherical barrier. Earnest was shouting something at them, but Blade couldn't hear anything over the deafening roar.

"...Haaa-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

But despite the noise, Blade thought he could hear someone laughing. Was he imagining it? No, he couldn't be.

It was Maria; Blade was sure of it. She was standing naked at the center of the erupting energy. Her braids had long ago come undone, and her lengthy black hair blew in all directions around her body. It made her look like a completely different person. And it wasn't just her face—her entire body had undergone noticeable changes. For example, the black bat-like wings on her back.

The way she looks... It's almost like...

"The Overlord...," Blade muttered.

Sophie, bracing herself to his side, looked up at him for a moment...but there was no way she could've heard him over the roar.

The black bat-winged demons known as Nightwalkers were a powerful race that had produced a great number of Overlords throughout history. Maria, as it turned out, was half-human, half-Nightwalker.

"I'm out! I'm finally out! I'm free!"

The clear ringing voice was Maria's, but the tone and cadence belonged to someone else. And Blade understood—he knew exactly what had been inside Maria. The presence lurking deep within her, the one she'd tried so hard to suppress. The other her had now come to the surface.

"Bow before me! Quiver in fear! Worship the ground I walk on! Let me hear your screams and curses! Rejoice, for a new Overlord is born!"

The self-styled Overlord waved an arm, and a rush of energy wrapped itself around her naked body, forming a black outfit that fit her slender body perfectly. She had conjured it out of nothing. This was the magic spell Materialize, a skill that only high-level demons could perform.

After a bit, the old $E=mc^2$ formula took effect, and the gale stopped. The

arena was silent again.

“Blade... Is that the Overlord?”

Sophie was right next to Blade, whispering the question so that only he could hear it.

“No...” Blade shook his head.

The Overlord—the one Blade had fought, at least—was male. This was clearly a woman, Nightwalker or not. Or rather, it was a girl—Maria. But...but...that pattern on her forehead... It was the crest of the Overlord...

“Guys! We gotta go all out! Don’t hold anything back!” Blade could hear Earnest’s voice. “We can’t let the Overlord escape! We have to defeat her right here!”

“Whoa!” Blade shouted at Earnest as she unsheathed her sword. “Earnest! That’s Maria!”

“I know that! But we have to go in with the right mindset! Otherwise, we’ll never beat her!!”

Earnest understood her foe’s strength. The enemy was clearly superior to her. As soon as she’d readied Asmodeus, she lit the sword and then herself. She was back in Scion of Flame mode, and she immediately took the lead, diving into the fray.

“Yaaaaaaaahhh!!”

But with one graceful wave from the Overlord, the Scion of Flame was flicked away. She slammed against the magic barrier in midair and bounced around the arena a few times in a zigzag pattern without slowing her momentum, before finally smashing into the barrier at the far end.

The flames died out, leaving Earnest’s naked body half-buried in the rubble. She was no longer moving.

“Milady! ...How dare you!”

Leonard was enraged. Holding up his spear, he activated its rocket engine to make the tip white-hot and charged. With Earnest down, this was probably the strongest attack any student at the academy could offer.

...But once again, the Overlord stopped it with one hand.

“Hmph... Is that all you’ve got?”

The Overlord held the spear and released an explosion of pure magic power from her palm. She wasn’t using any kind of skill, simply unleashing her power. Both the spear and Leonard’s body disappeared in the flash of energy.

“Give me ten seconds.”

Sophie headed toward the enemy, her whole body covered in the dim glow of her artificial Hero force. She leaped at the Overlord, latching on to her body. A black sphere materialized with Sophie at its center. She wasn’t self-destructing, however, but trapping herself and her opponent in a cage of supergravity. Three layers of black spheres engulfed them both. The earth cracked and caved in. Within the innermost sphere, it ceased to exist at all.

“Oh-ho. It seems you’ve got me,” the Overlord casually observed.

Sophie didn’t have the strength to speak. She was using all her mental and physical power to cling to her enemy. Just keeping the Overlord down took everything she had.

Five seconds passed, then seven. Sophie could use her artificial Hero force for only ten seconds at a time—and soon, those ten seconds were up. Sophie fell to her knees before collapsing completely. The Overlord didn’t even need to lay a finger on her.

Leaving Sophie where she fell, the Overlord leisurely walked over to the others.

“That just leaves you two. Time to end this and get out of here.”

As she spoke, she looked up. The magic barrier, a hundred times stronger than the old one, distorted the space around it. It looked like an iridescent curtain was covering the ceiling.

“One human and one dragon, hmm? ...Who wants to go first?”

“Graaahh!!”

Cú growled. She was already in dragon form. And thanks to the ten seconds of time Sophie had earned them, she had readied her dragon breath. The inside of

her throat was burning, its intense heat visible as an orange glow through her skin.

“Do it,” Blade said.

Cú obeyed. The dragon released all the power she’d saved up and struck the Overlord at full blast.

“Wow, that’s toasty,” said the Overlord.

You’ve got to be kidding me.

Not only had she taken the full brunt of the dragon’s flame, but she’d also crushed it with her bare hands, seizing and compressing it. The blaze, now ultrahot and highly dense, glowed not red, yellow, or white, but blue—so bright it was nearly blinding.

“I think I’ll return this to you.”

The hyper-energized ball of Cú’s flaming breath came hurtling right back at her.

“Arrrrgh!!”

Cú screamed as she took a direct hit. It scorched her, rendering her unable to continue the fight. The dragon was defeated—a dragon with high heat resistance, done in by her own fireball. It should have been impossible.

Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap...

Blade faced a conundrum. They might be in some pretty serious trouble here. His doctor had told him that he could use 30 percent of his power— Actually, wait. Didn’t she say that he’d *die* if he used 30 percent? Which one was it?

Either way, it looked like they were in quite a pinch...

“Hey,” Blade said, addressing the Overlord. “What’re you gonna do if you get out of here anyway?”

“Hmm? Well, let’s see...” The girl with the Overlord’s crest clearly visible on her forehead paused to think. “Spreading destruction would be nice, for starters. Maybe I’ll lay waste to the capital. I bet that’d feel *really* good.”

Yep, we’re in big trouble.

Blade gave up on letting her go. He needed to stop her here. Right now.

He lowered his hips and assumed his battle stance.

“Oh? Gonna fight me?” she asked.

Spirit filled Blade’s body. Normally, it stayed within him, but now it grew so dense that it began to glow as it wriggled its way to the surface.

“Oh-ho?”

The Overlord smiled, her golden eyes squinting. Her pupils, vertical and narrow, bore into Blade.

“Haaah!”

Blade closed the gap between them and unleashed a killing blow.

But—

“What was that, now?”

—the sword landed on the tip of her shoulder.

She cast a sidelong glance at the blade. She hadn’t even tried to avoid it, taking the brunt of the strike without any defense.

Numbness spread across Blade’s hand. It felt like he had punched a boulder of pure orichalcum metal with his bare fist.

“What was the point of this? Did you hit me with a dull sword on purpose?”

Blade had, in fact, slashed at the Overlord with his sword still in its scabbard.

Looks like this isn’t going to work after all.

“Ha! Ha-ha! I love it! Look at you! You thought you’d capture the Overlord *alive?! ”*

Oops. Guess I’m busted.

“Get serious...or I’ll kill you.”

She swung one willowy arm through the air, tossing Blade toward the magic barrier’s ceiling. If he didn’t do something, he’d wind up just like Earnest. But just then, Blade kicked the air and changed direction.

Once he'd built up enough spirit, it was possible for him to compress the air itself into a foothold. For now, he was operating at around 10 percent of his power... That was all he needed to perform such feats.

"I won't hesitate to kill you," said the Overlord. "If you hold back, you're going to die."

"Kohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..."

Blade was still enhancing his spirit. Compressing it, he wove in a little magic power and kneaded it together, converting it into fighting force—a higher level energy. Weapons coated in fighting force could cut through steel like it was air, and he was wrapping his whole body in it. Blade was now as tough as magic metal, stronger than steel.

At last, Blade drew his sword. He removed it from its scabbard, and light bounced off the white blade. He was at around 20 percent of his power.

How about this?

"Hi-yahhhhhh!"

He stepped forward, lifting his sword high in the air. He brought it down, then slashed horizontally. Though not his typical style, he attacked her with all the conventional sword moves he could muster.

But—

"Nice, nice. Oh, what's the matter? Done already?"

—it didn't work at all. In fact, the Overlord seemed to be enjoying it.

She parried all of Blade's blows with her bare hands. Of course, they weren't actually bare—they were covered in fighting force, too, boasting the strength and sharpness of any famous blade.

Just how strong is she?

Maria was clearly not a fighter; Blade was pretty sure she was primarily a magic user. But she had full control over fighting force, too. *A mage who can hold her own in hand-to-hand combat... That's definitely cheating!*

Blade's sword was a mess after landing only a few blows. He was getting

nowhere with the school's standard-issue garbage.

"All right. Is it my turn next? It's no fun to just stand here and be attacked, you know. I want a turn, too... So please don't die on the first hit, all right?"

"Whoa... Hey! Wait—!"

A thick beam of light, several meters in diameter, came flying at Blade. It must have been a Sun Ray—a beginner-level spell, something that novice mages learned right after Fireball. It gathered the light in the air, focused it, and shot it out as a laser.

"Gaaahhhhhhh!!"

The pressure of the condensed light plowed into Blade, throwing him back into the wall. He was now caught between the beam and the magic barrier, unable to escape the laser's onslaught. He boosted the amount of fighting force covering his body as high as possible, trying to maximize his defense. But he couldn't produce it fast enough to make up for what he was expending. At this rate, he was going to run out.

However, just before that happened, the torrent of light stopped. The Overlord's Sun Ray, that beginner spell she'd powered up to an unbelievable level, was finally tapped out. Apparently, even *she* couldn't keep blowing that much magic forever.

Okay, so she has limits.

She had a ton of magic power, but it was only one or two (or maybe three) orders of magnitude above the norm. It still followed the normal laws—there was a finite amount, and it could be exhausted.

In other words, this foe could be defeated after all.

Blade lay on the floor, miserable, face in the dirt, little more than a pile of charcoal, and all the while he thought.

"Get up already," said the Overlord. "I can tell you're pretending to be knocked out so you can recover. Or were you trying to catch me off guard? You think I'd fall for that?"

"You got me."

Blade had no choice but to get up. He tried to use his sword to support himself, but it disintegrated, crumbling into bits of metal. He tossed away the hilt (the only part that remained) and managed to stand, if a little unsteadily.

“Well, look at you. Still alive.” She grinned. She had a lovely smile, and Blade was captivated by it. “Everyone else was floored with one hit. Who *are* you?”

Blade couldn’t exactly admit he was a former Hero, so he simply stayed silent.

“Blade...”

He could hear Earnest’s voice nearby. He’d been blown all the way over to where she’d landed earlier.

“Just rest,” he said.

“Use this...”

Earnest handed him her sword, and Blade accepted it before she could faint again.

“I am exceedingly reluctant to be used by anyone other than my master, but it is her wish. I will forge a limited-time pact with you.”

Asmodeus’s voice echoed in Blade’s head the moment he clutched the sword. *What an arrogant weapon. Man, this must be why Earnest is always making snide comments at this thing.*

“Hmm, that’s a nice-looking sword. If you want, I can wait until you put on some proper armor. If you were fully equipped, I bet we could have a rather enjoyable battle.”

“Sorry,” Blade said, “but I don’t really like to fight.”

It was true. He had never done this for fun, not even during his Hero days. Taking someone’s life had never struck him as enjoyable. Not even once.

“I’ve got things to do, okay? I can’t waste a bunch of time with you. I’m going to end this in one blow.”

“Oh-ho... One blow, you say?”

“Yep.”

Her gaze fixed on Blade, the Overlord narrowed her eyes. “You’ll defeat me,

the Overlord, in one blow?”

“Yeah.”

In fact, he had to. He couldn't afford to whittle her down over time.

Blade suddenly thought of his doctor. *You told me to stay under 30 percent, but... Sorry. I don't think I can take her down with just that.*

“Perhaps you should have accepted that doctor's proposal and mated with her?”

The sword was getting weird on him. Blade wasn't sure what “mated” meant here, but he could tell that Asmodeus was saying something dirty.

“Hey, now... Stop it...!”

Blade slapped the sword a few times. *Ah yes. Now it makes sense. So this is why Earnest is always hitting this thing.*

But he'd had enough of the comedy routine. Blade prepared to unleash one of his skills.

“Haaaaaahhh...”

He took a deep, deep breath, inhaling as much air as he could.

He could manage this one, even if he only went up to 30 percent.

This wasn't like your typical dragon-destroying skill. Those could be executed by anyone—well, that is, *most* people, if they made it through grueling training and risked their life over and over again.

Blade gathered fighting force in his right hand and elemental energy in his left. He was conjuring two opposing forces in the left and right sides of his body. And when he was ready— *“S-stop. Stop! That skill! It's too much power! I'm not sure even I can withstand it!”* cried Asmodeus.

“Quit grumbling. If you're Earnest's sword, you can tough it out.”

Blade sent the two contradicting energies through both hands simultaneously and into the sword.

This was Holy Demon Blade, a technique exclusive to Blade that was equal parts magic and swordsmanship. It was a Hero-level skill, one that could slay all

things holy and demonic—demons, dragons, giants, even gods.

Asmodeus, now filled with these two energies, emitted blue and red light simultaneously.

“Here I go!” shouted Blade.

His opponent had been patiently waiting until he was ready. Now the time had come.

“All right. Give it your best try!” she called out.

There was a considerable distance between them...but that didn’t matter with this technique.

“Ohhhhhhhhhhh...!!”

Blade swung his sword. The energy inside it created another, larger blade, which he threw at his opponent.

The Overlord held up one hand as before, stopping the blade in midair before it touched her body. It had run up against the magic barrier covering her. Beings as powerful as she was unconsciously and automatically produced such barriers. If Blade’s attack had been strictly fighting force or elemental power, she could have blocked it as before. However, the automatic barrier deployed to stop Blade’s fighting force let elemental energy right through. The Overlord put up another automatic barrier to block elemental power before the blade could go even a few millimeters farther, but *that* one allowed fighting force through.

“Mmm? Mmmmm... Mmm...!!”

The tug-of-war between forces continued. The Overlord was now using both hands to defend herself. The bolt of energy Blade had released was stopped just a few inches in front of his opponent, but it still had momentum. If it could get through her magic barriers, it would reach her, almost as strong as it had started, and explode in her face.

One by one, the barriers were peeled away. Blade didn’t know how many layers there were. High-ranking mages could only manage five or six at best, and even at the Hero level, not many could reach double digits. As for the

Overlord—the real one whom Blade fought in the past—well...

If she *was* the real Overlord as she claimed, this wouldn't work. But what if she wasn't? What if she was just some regular, champion-level demon?

Blade was on his knees, exhausted from unleashing the greatest move he was currently capable of. His body was a mess. When his doctor had told him not to break out 30 percent, she hadn't been kidding. Not that she had ever misdiagnosed him before, of course.

"N-no... You...you can actually...overpower me?! You!! What *are* you?! *Who* are you?!" Her eyes, wide with astonishment, turned toward Blade.

"I'm just a regular guy. Nothing but a student...these days, that is."

Blade's attack broke the final barrier. With almost 50 percent of its power remaining, the blade of energy blew up over her unprotected body.

"Graaaaaaaahh?!"

There was an explosion.

Then, after the dust and rubble settled, a young girl was left behind, unable to move. She wasn't dead—probably not anyway. Blade had been able to hold himself back, just barely. If she had been even a little bit stronger, that might have been impossible.

Huh...?

As relief washed over him, all the tension left Blade's body, and he fell forward. He tried to break his fall with his arms, but they wouldn't move. Instead, his face collided with the stone floor.

Hmm... What was it she said...?

Blade struggled to think as his mind grew foggy.

The doctor... She said something... Uh...it was 30 percent, right? If I use 30 percent...what happens again? If I use it...then...I die?

And with that, Blade's consciousness faded to black.

○ **Scene IV: The Infirmary**

Blade woke up to a familiar ceiling. That and the chemical smell told him he was back in the infirmary.

“I...”

Claire appeared at the edge of his vision.

“Doctor! Blade...Blade’s awake!”

The curtain slid open, and the doctor’s familiar face came into view. She briskly walked over, her charming eyebrows raised high, then she pulled Blade’s body up and hugged him tightly.

“You’re so *stupid*!”

“What? Why am I stupid? ...And why am I in the infirmary...?”

“Ugh! You’re such an idiot! Stupid, stupid, stupid! I can’t believe how reckless you are! I thought you were done with all that! I’m always having to worry about you! You said you wouldn’t make me cry again! You said it right at the end! I remember! You’re such a liar!”

The doctor was shaking him. His whole body ached. He often wound up in this condition after going overboard in battle.

Blade looked around. On the beds to his right and left were Earnest, Leonard, Sophie, and Cú. Most of them were wrapped in bandages and hooked up to IVs.

“Oh, I remember now...”

Blade was confused about where he was. He’d lost his bearings, and now he understood why. Normally, he’d be able to pinpoint where he was within a few meters, even if he’d been unconscious beforehand. But under these circumstances, that was impossible.

“You were *dead*, you know!”

He’d thought the doctor was a grown woman, but now, as tears streamed from her eyes, she looked like a little girl. She wasn’t all that different from Claire, who stood next to her openly weeping. Both of them looked lost.

“Blade... So you’re back from the dead?” said Yessica as she came over. She wasn’t crying. In fact, she seemed pretty indifferent about the situation. “Your

heart stopped and everything. Boy, was I surprised! But the doctor connected you to some machine and did a bunch of stuff to get it working again. Isn't that great?"

"Yeah... Sorry for causing so much trouble."

This wasn't the first time the doctor had resurrected him from the dead. Or the second.

"Want an apple?" Yessica pulled up a chair and began to peel one with her pocketknife.

"How many days have I been out?" Blade asked. He'd completely lost his sense of time and had no idea. Normally, he could tell down to the second.

"It's still the same day."

"How's everyone else?"

"Not too bad. Compared to you anyway... I mean, they're all alive. Claire's gonna restore them once she composes herself a little."

If Claire's powers were enough to heal them, it meant the damage was strictly physical. Blade breathed a sigh of relief as he accepted a slice of apple. Yessica had cut it to look like a little bunny with long red ears. She placed it in his mouth for him.

"...Don't do this again," the doctor said, still choking back tears. "If you pull another stunt like this, you better be ready... There's no guarantee it'll turn out like this next time."

She was rubbing at her eyes like a little kid. Whatever she'd used to paint around them had run down her face, making a big mess.

Come to think of it, when Blade first met her, she was about the same age he was now. She'd been a teenage prodigy, already practicing medicine, and she certainly hadn't bothered to put anything on her face back then.

"I won't do it again," Blade assured her. If he didn't, he got the feeling she wouldn't ever stop bawling.

"You better be telling the truth. I'm serious. If you try to use even fifteen percent, you're going to die again. Got it?"

“Whoa, it went down?”

“Of *course* it did! You idiot...”

The doctor was furious now. But Blade wasn't actually complaining. In fact, he was glad. If the number kept going down, wouldn't that make him a regular person for *real*? What percentage would it have to drop to before he became normal? 3 percent? Or maybe 1.5?

“...What about *her*?” he asked.

“She's fine.”

The doctor pulled aside another curtain, revealing a girl tied to a bed. It was Maria, her inner self now awakened.

“I have to say, her regenerative powers are incredible. She managed to restore herself almost completely without any help. It'll be a while before she regains consciousness, though.”

“Not taking any chances with her, huh?”

The bed was wrapped in iron chains, and all the sealing items had been restored to her wrists and ankles.

“I put everything with a sealing effect back on her, so by my calculations, she's back to one-hundred-and-sixtieth of her power.”

“And how much is that?”

“It puts her at about the level of a senior class member.”

“I see.”

So she wasn't really an Overlord after all. If she was, even cutting her powers that much wouldn't bring her down to a student's level. Besides, it wasn't strength or power alone that made someone an Overlord. Just as a Hero wasn't simply some muscular superman, the Overlord wasn't simply the strongest demon. There was a certain power that made a Hero a Hero, and a similar power that did the same for the Overlord. Without it, becoming either was impossible.

“So what *is* she...?” Blade asked.

“Why don’t you ask the king? He’s the one who enrolled her in this school in the first place.”

At the mention of the king, Blade got a terrible feeling in the pit of his stomach.

○ **Scene V: The King, as Expected**

The next day, once Blade and company were discharged and had a chance to gather up, they made a beeline for the chancellor’s office to stage their attack.

“Okay,” said Blade. “Can you explain what’s going on for us?”

“Why, hello!” the king replied. “What brings all of you here?”

“Don’t give me that. Spill the beans.”

“About what?”

“Her.”

“Who, now?”

The king was playing dumb.

All the commotion at the Second Proving Ground the night before couldn’t have escaped his ears. The magic barrier had been improved to be one hundred times stronger than its previous iteration, and yet it had been so overloaded during the fight, it had supposedly almost ruptured. There was no way the king hadn’t been informed of that. Besides, it had been running at full power for nearly an hour, neatly blowing through a whole hour’s worth of the nation’s entire budget. The king had to be fully aware, and yet he was still feigning ignorance. He was always good at that—using the sheer force of his personality to solve his problems.

“I mean Maria,” said Blade. “Tell us about her.”

Blade sat on the floor of the chancellor’s office. He wasn’t leaving until he got the info he wanted. Everyone—Earnest, Cú, Leonard, Claire, Yessica, Clay, and Kassim—followed suit, sitting cross-legged or kneeling down or grabbing their knees like they were in gym class. They were sitting in different ways, but they were all in this together.

“Why do you want to know about her?”

That was a weird question.

“Because she’s our friend, of course.”

“...Well, personally, I think she’s a rather dangerous person to have around. We have her in custody now. Don’t you think we should imprison her for good?”

“Don’t give me that crap,” Blade said. “You want me to trash your office?”

“Mmm, I thought you would say that.”

The king broke into a smile, but Blade wasn’t fooled. He wasn’t going to fall for the king’s feigned ignorance or his smiles. This was a man who lied and tricked his way into holding power over every country in the continent. You had to assume about 98 percent of everything he said was a lie.

“Tell me the truth,” said Blade.

“Where should I start?”

“For starters, tell me when you—”

At that point, Blade stopped and turned to the side to look at Earnest.

“What?” she asked.

“Um... Never mind.”

She always yelled at him for being rude when he failed to call the king “Your Majesty.” Today, though, she was letting it slide. Maybe she was finally starting to see what kind of guy he really was.

Blade turned back toward the king.

“When did you first find out about Maria?”

“Well, before she was born, I suppose. Her mother was under surveillance, you see, and once the girl was born, the surveillance shifted to her. We’ve been watching her ever since—just watching, mind you, never meddling with her. We’ve only reached out to her twice so far. The first time was when her mother died. She didn’t have any other relatives, so she would have become an orphan. Instead, I enrolled her at Rosewood Junior School. The second time was during

the entrance examination for Rosewood Academy. Her grades weren't quite good enough, which would have meant the end of her student career, but I pulled a few strings to get her scores past the threshold. Only a few points difference, mind you."

Earnest was glaring hard at the king. She wasn't a big fan of people cheating and bending the rules.

"So you know what Maria is, I assume," she said.

"I'd like to think I know more about her than you do, yes."

"Well, what is she?"

"You've crossed swords with her now. What do *you* think of her?"

Earnest looked up at the king, then down again. "She was...very strong. I hate to say it, but I didn't stand a chance."

Earnest stared at the floor as she spoke, biting her lip, and none of her friends seemed any happier. Some of them hadn't even gotten the chance to fight, and the rest had been felled with a single blow.

"Yes. It seems you gained the power to transform recently, Earnest, and I think you've been getting a little sloppy. Perhaps this was exactly the sort of lesson you needed."

"I haven't—... No, perhaps you're right."

Earnest, to her credit, decided not to refute the king.

The king then turned to Blade. "What's your opinion, Blade?"

"She seemed like a cut-rate version of the Overlord to me."

The moment he spoke, everyone turned to Blade in surprise.

What's up with them? ...Oh, right. Just now, I made it sound like I'd personally fought the Overlord.

"Well, Maria's mother is no longer with us," the king explained. "And we don't know where her father is, or if he's even alive at all, but we *do* know his identity."

He was trying to wind up his audience, but Blade cut right in with the question

they all wanted to ask.

“So who is it?”

“The one they called the Overlord.”

“Wha...?!”

Earnest was at a loss for words. As Blade turned around, he saw that everyone, save one person and one dragon, had their mouths half-open in shock. *Oh yeah. Guess that’s pretty surprising.* Blade had figured as much, and he’d been right.

Sophie and Cú were the exceptions—Sophie was just as cool and expressionless as always. Cú’s mouth was open in a yawn instead. *Oh, right. It’s about time for her nap.*

“That doesn’t surprise you, Blade?” asked the king.

“Nah, I kinda assumed,” he said.

“Come on, Blade!” exclaimed Earnest. “How can you not be surprised?! We’re talking about *the* Overlord, here!”

“Yeah, I know. I mean, what other Overlord is there? It’d be more of a surprise if she *wasn’t* related to him.”

“M-maybe, but...”

“To be precise,” the king said, “she’s the daughter of the *former* Overlord. And since her mother is a human, Maria is a half-demon.”

“Okay,” Blade said. “And you let her enroll in this academy meant to train champions despite knowing all that?”

“Y-Your Majesty!” Earnest shouted. “What were you thinking?!”

“Ha-ha-ha!”

“Don’t just laugh it off, sire! Do you have any idea what you’ve done?!”

“Ah-ha-ha!”

Blade was internally cheering Earnest on. He, too, wanted to know what the king thought he was doing.

At some point, the Overlord himself had sneaked into the royal capital, and the king, despite being fully aware, had done nothing about it. The Overlord had fallen for a human woman, who in turn gave birth to a child, and the king had watched over that child for years as she grew up.

“Why did you let her into the academy?”

“I thought it would be interesting.”

“Well, it’s *not*! Please reflect on your actions, sire!”

Earnest was close to publicly denouncing him.

“I’ll remind you,” replied the king, “that this school has the absurd aim of raising the next generation of Heroes. What’s so strange about letting an Overlord’s daughter or two attend? Won’t that just make things more fun?”

This felt like the truth to Blade. Around 98 percent of everything the king said was a lie, but about 2 percent of it was the truth, and this was that 2 percent. He’d done all this because he thought it’d be fun. It was just like him.

“And hasn’t this been stimulating for all of you?”

“A little *too* stimulating, Your Majesty! What would you have done if things had gotten out of hand? I mean...Blade literally *died* for a moment there...”

“Not a problem. I’ll take full responsibility for whatever happens.”

“What good would that do?!”

“Everything’s fine,” the king said, puffing out his chest.

“How do you figure that?” asked Earnest.

“Well, because he’s—*mmph, hrgph, mrrph!*”

Blade had leaped forward and placed his hands over the king’s mouth. Otherwise, he was sure the king would have proclaimed “Well, because he’s a Hero!” to all his friends. It was a common phrase during grand battles, used to inspire their allies. But Blade couldn’t have him blurting it out right now. Besides, he wasn’t a Hero anymore. He was a regular person—a totally normal guy who’d die if he used even 15 percent of his power.

“And besides,” the king said smugly, “it *did* turn out all right, didn’t it?”

Because he figured something out.”

No one, not even Earnest, had anything to say to that. It was, after all, the truth.

○ **Scene VI: Ovie Goes to School**

“Morning! ♪”

“Morning.”

“Good morning! ♡”

“Morning.”

“I, um, uh, I, uh...”

“Morning.”

A beautiful girl, dressed all in black, was going around greeting not only the girls, but the boys, too, despite their suspicious behavior toward her. This one was blushing hard, his back as straight as a tree trunk. But she graciously walked on, paying him no mind.

“Hey! Good morning!”

Blade greeted her, too. She had been attending regular classes for a few days now, and she was quickly getting used to things.

“Good morning, He—”

He zoomed over to her and quickly covered her mouth with his hands. He couldn’t let her say things like *that* at school. However, covering her mouth required touching her, and the softness of her lips made his heart beat a little faster.

“Please don’t call me that,” he said.

“Hee-hee! Looks like I’ve found one of your weaknesses. Heh! But very well. I’ll keep my mouth shut if you wish... Until I can find something better to bargain for.”

“Please. I’m serious.”

“How does it feel, He—I mean, Blade, to make a deal with the Overlord?”

“Please, I’m begging you...”

The girl in black shot back a thin, bewitching smile.

“And you’re not really the Overlord, are you?” he continued.

“Mmm? Well, it’s my fate to become one, so I don’t see the problem with using the title a little in advance.”

“What kind of logic is that?”

The girl walked along at a steady pace, and Blade followed after her slender back.

“Hey, Maria?”

“Also, ‘Maria’ was the name of the *other* me. I’m a whole other personality.”

“So what should I call you, then?”

“Well...” She stopped to think about it. “I...don’t have a name.”

“You don’t?”

“No. No one has given me one yet.”

“They haven’t?”

So no one ever named her. Even Blade had a name, ever since the old man from that mercenary gang saw him with that sword in his hands.

“And so you may call me the Overlord.”

“Great, we’re back to square one. Then I’ll repeat what I said before. You’re not the Overlord.”

“All right. Then you may call me ‘li’l Ovie’ or something like that.”

“I don’t think making it cuter is solving the problem.”

“All right. ‘Your Grace, the Foul, Fiendish Overlord,’ then.”

“I think ‘Ovie’ is better.”

And so the newest student at the academy got her name: Ovie.

○ **Scene VII: Ovie Climbs the Social Ladder**

Even between classes, “Ovie” was rapidly gaining popularity. Everyone readily adopted the nickname, perhaps eager to separate her in their minds from her identity as a potential future Overlord.

The students flocking around her were primarily from the junior class. They had been attending school with Maria all this time anyway, so the idea that Ovie was a second personality sleeping within their classmate was surprisingly easy for them to accept. The Overlord had been observing the outside world from within Maria for long enough that she knew all their names already.

“Hey, Ovie, do you remember me?”

“Elsa, right? You’re good at ice magic, but you tend to let it run wild.”

“That’s right!”

The juniors hadn’t witnessed the violent power she’d used in her battle with Blade and the others, and that was probably why they were able to be so friendly with her. Most of the senior class, however, stayed by the wall on the opposite end of the classroom, a bit reluctant to go near her. They, unlike the juniors, knew exactly what she was capable of. She might’ve had all but 1/160th of her power sealed away, making her seem chill and relaxed, but there was still a palpable *something* around her. She was still over a hundred times stronger than your average senior class student. She was easily at the level of a champion.

“That’s such a cute skirt, Ovie.”

“Oh, this?”

She took the fabric around her knees and turned it up, exposing her panties. A jolt went through the boys. Clay, taking the blow at point-blank range, literally staggered back, blood erupting from his nose. Was that skirt flip a kind of physical attack, the same as Earnest’s glare?

Blade had never taken an interest in women’s panties—or really anything below the belt. He had no idea why other men would gasp or faint from seeing such things.

“Well, with my powers reduced to a hundred-and-sixtieth of their original strength, I’m just a regular young maiden,” said Ovie. “If they want me to go to

school, I will. If they want me to wear all these frilly clothes, I'll wear them. It would be petty of me to fight over such trivial things. No matter what I wear, I'm still the strongest."

"Yeah, right. I know you just like looking cute."

"Mmm? ...I could proclaim that I don't, but lies are not befitting of a king. Let me be frank... I am, perhaps, a little taken by these frills. I think they're rather nice."

"Riiight?!" chimed in a group of junior girls. They all seemed to get along well with Ovie.



“B-b-but the strongest is me! ...The dragon!”

“What? Oh, you? You want a rematch? I’ll grind you into hamburger meat and eat you up.”

“Honored Fatherrr...”

After just one glare, the strongest of all creatures fled, coming back to Blade and hiding behind him.

“Go back and wait for me in our room, okay?”

Cú shook her head. “No, honored Father! You need to avenge me!”

“What? Why? You just lost. It’s not like she killed you.”

“He—er, Blade,” the Overlord began. “Did you want to take me on again? Because if you do, I will not lose a second time.”

She might have been telling the truth. The doctor had made it clear, through all those tears, that Blade would die if he used even 15 percent of his power. She’d made him promise not to push himself anymore.

Cú was now hiding behind him and baring her teeth at her new adversary. But at least his beloved daughter still had the guts to do so. Out of everyone who had faced the Overlord and had their butts handed to them, Cú was the only one who (sort of) still wanted a piece of her...

“Hey! Deemo! These kids need to go back to class!”

Actually, there was one other. Earnest was shooting the Overlord a nasty glare as she yelled at her. That was the Empress for you. Even after having her butt kicked, she wasn’t the slightest bit intimidated.

“It was not I who called them here. They came of their own accord.”

“C’mon, everyone, get out of here. The next class is about to begin.”

“Awww, but...”

The girls wouldn’t leave the Overlord’s side.

“Hey, who’s Deemo?” Blade asked. It sounded like Earnest had just called the Overlord that.

“Oh, just think of it as a term of endearment. You know, like how people call me Anna. It’s better to keep it short, you know? Since she’s a demon, I figured ‘Deemo’ was good.”

“Would that make my nickname ‘Blay’ or something?”

“Huh? Do you want me to call you that?”

“No.”

“Mmm, yes, I am a magnanimous Overlord,” said Ovie. “I will allow this little girl to call me Deemo.”

“Did she just call me a little girl?!”

“M-m-milady...,” said Leonard. “I—I don’t think you should rile her like this...”

“Out of my sight, loser.”

“L-loser...”

Leonard fell to his knees. That had hurt. Someone he admired enough to call “milady” had just called him a loser. Of course he was devastated.

Blade went up to Sophie and whispered in her ear: *“What about you, Sophie?”*

“I’ve been given an order,” she quietly replied. *“Currently, I have been told to build a relationship with Ovie, so I intend to be nice to her.”*

“Were you ordered to call her Ovie, too?”

Sophie nodded back. Those orders had come from the king. He was also the reason Ovie was attending school with Blade and the others. He had freed her from her chains and multiple layers of seals. “I’ll take full responsibility,” he had said (as usual), and so the shackles made of divine metal were taken off.

If there was one thing about the king that Blade trusted, it was his eye for judging people. No matter how much of a liar he was otherwise, that much, at least, Blade had confidence in. Otherwise, he would have never taken such a mean-looking, violent, animallike three-year-old who could barely speak and knew nothing but sword fighting and welcomed him as a Hero. If the king said Ovie should go to school, then this was where she belonged.

A chime rang to announce the start of class.

“All right, all right. Back to class! Hurry!”

Earnest clapped her hands. The girls all ran out into the hallway, shouting “See you later, Ovie!” and other pleasantries as they left.

The Overlord turned to Blade, still waving her fingertips at the departing students.

“What is it, He—I mean, Blade?”

“You’re doing that on purpose, aren’t you?” Blade sighed.

○ **Scene VIII: The Lunch Table**

Lunch break had arrived—and now, at the usual table in the usual dining hall, among the usual group who dined with Earnest, a new face had appeared. Ten people were now seated at a table originally designed for eight—technically nine, since Cú always sat on Blade’s lap. Still, it was a bit cramped.

“Hey, Deemo, um, you remember when you were Maria, right?”

Earnest continued to use the nickname she’d given Ovie without the slightest hesitation.

“Like I said, I am a different personality. It wasn’t that I *was* Maria. I am myself, and she is herself.”

“It sounds kind of like going into combat mode,” observed Blade.

Earnest looked at him dubiously. “What’s that mean?”

Oh. Guess I’ll have to explain it from the beginning.

“Um... Well, it’s like creating another self who never blinks when he’s in combat. A totally calm and serene version of yourself—someone whose eyes are pointed straight at the goal. You create another you in your mind and let *him* take over your body.”

“Did anyone understand that?”

Earnest looked around the table. Sophie nodded slightly, but everyone else was staring at Blade.

“I don’t think anyone gets it, Blade.”

“Didn’t you transform into a flame beast?! You were growling and stuff, and your eyes were pointed straight at the goal of filling your stomach!”

“What’re you talking about?”

Earnest raised an eyebrow. Apparently, she didn’t remember what happened when she went into Beast Mode.

“Um...” Claire raised a finger. “It doesn’t need to be that complicated. Can’t you just say she has a dual personality?”

“Huh?”

“What?”

Blade and Earnest both looked at Claire.

“It shows up a lot in stories and stuff...you know?”

Everyone nodded back to her—except for Sophie, who shook her head and said, “I don’t know any stories.”

“W-well, I do! I know all about stories. Wh-why wouldn’t I?!”

Earnest had started talking big again.

“Ha-haaa...”

This was met with bemused laughter from the Overlord.

“You’re like an open book, little girl.” Apparently, she’d been laughing at Earnest.

“Right?”

“Hey...! What?! What’s *that* supposed to mean?! And why did you say ‘right,’ Blade? What about me is like an open book?!”

“Ha-haaa...”

The Overlord kept laughing. But soon she was satisfied and turned serious again.

“Whether I have a dual personality doesn’t matter to me. I am myself, no one else. It is only silly humans who dwell on their own existence. We demons never

worry about what we are. We have only one purpose—to be ever stronger. That is all.”

She was right. That was the nature of magic beasts. Blade, having battled many of them with his sword, was well aware of that.

He hadn’t fought many magic beasts in human form, but he’d fought plenty of ones that looked like animals. Head over to the demon realm, and you’d find as many magic beasts as regular wild animals. But because Ovie looked like a human, Blade hadn’t been thinking of her as magic beast.

Maria had both human and demon blood mixed in her veins, which made her a half-magic beast. Her consciousness was completely human, which meant that Ovie’s was completely demonic.

Her lineage was very rare. Most magic beasts weren’t humanoid, and unless they were one of the exceptions, like Cú, who could take on a human form—or if they were originally humanoid, like a Nightwalker—mixing blood with humans was impossible.

Why was it so important to have a human form? Blade didn’t really know. He didn’t even know how blood got “mixed” in the first place. It must come down to the method involved, he thought...some ritual performed in a bed at night in order to achieve the mixing. But how was it done?

“You. Dragon child,” said Ovie. “You won’t grow stronger eating things like that. A magic beast like you needs meat.”

“Um... I have to eat my veggies, or Claire will be angry.”

“Oh, what?” said Claire. “...Don’t dragons need a balanced diet?”

Everyone smiled at her cluelessness.

○ **Scene IX: The Moonlit Date**

Blade was putting Cú to sleep. He patted her on the chest, and her breathing evened out as she fell into a peaceful sleep. Then he waited a bit longer. There was a knock on the windowpane from the outside. He had been aware of the knocker’s presence before any sound was made. If, instead of knocking, the visitor had caved the wall in, he would have run away with Cú in his arms. But

fortunately, they were showing a bit more politeness. Nothing was strange about any of this, apart from the fact that they were currently on the third floor.

Blade quietly got out of bed and opened the window.

“Hey,” he said to the late-night visitor.

“Morning.”

“Wrong.”

“Oh. That’s right. One says ‘good evening’ at this time of night, yes?” The girl stuck her tongue out a little.

“This is the third floor, you know.”

“Oh? I suppose height is a factor that cannot be ignored by the earthbound.”

The wings on her black gently flapped as she hovered in midair. They looked slender and delicate but were actually hard enough to block attacks. They boasted a span of several meters and required the superior muscular strength of a magic beast to keep them flapping.

“...So why are you here so late?” asked Blade.

“I had some business with you.”

“I guess so. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have come in the middle of the night. Don’t tell me you’re here to kill me.”

“Yes, I will kill you... Oh, but not now. In time. Right now, I have other business. What does one call it?”

“Don’t ask me.”

“A d-d-d...”

“A dih?”

“Ah yes. A date. That’s what Elsa said. She said a date was when you asked a man out.”

“It’s past midnight.”

Blade knew what a date was. It was a multistep process that kicked off with a

meetup at 1000 hours on Sunday morning. It was now the middle of the night, and therefore it would be impossible to carry out such a mission.

“A woman is asking you out. A man should follow her willingly with a spring in his step.”

She grabbed Blade by the collar and dragged him out the window.

“H-hey!”

With a flap of her wings, she lifted them both upward. Eventually, they settled on the roof.

They both sat down on the diagonal slope. This was Cú’s preferred spot as well.

“Look, Hero. The moon’s so beautiful.”

“I told you to stop calling me that.”

Blade sidled away from the Overlord, who was a little closer than strictly necessary. *What’s with her? Was she always this touchy-feely?*

“Why, Hero? Nobody else is here. Why should you mind if it’s just us two?”

“Because I’m not a Hero anymore. It’s incorrect. I’m just setting you straight. What’s wrong with that?”

“Silence, Hero. Can’t you appreciate the moon quietly?”

“The moon’s up there every night.”

“This is the first time I’ve seen it. Maria always pointed her head downward as she walked.”



Blade decided to stop protesting.

“By the way, how old are you?” he asked. “You don’t seem to know much about the world.”

Blade wasn’t exactly brimming with common sense himself, but he didn’t mix up “good morning” and “good evening” at least. He’d been born and raised on the battlefield, but even he exchanged morning greetings—unless he was in the middle of a battle or something.

This girl had been living inside Maria, watching the outside world from her perspective, and Blade was curious how long ago that had begun.

“I became aware of my own existence around five years ago.”

“Five? ...So you’re five years old?”

“Age means nothing to magic beasts. Do you believe that age is directly connected to how much power one can muster in battle?”

“Okay, good point.”

“You know, as a lady, I don’t appreciate you treating me like a child.”

“You’re a *lady*?”

“I believe that much is obvious.”

She exposed her limbs in the moonlight, emphasizing her breasts. They were decently shaped—smaller than Earnest’s, larger than Sophie’s—and the blue moonlight gently illuminated them. She wasn’t wearing her school uniform right now, but rather the skimpy outfit she’d worn when she first awoke. *Hang on. Can she cast Materialize with only 1/160th of her strength?*

“...So what did you want?” Blade asked as he stared at the Overlord’s body in the moonlight. He doubted she was just here to moonbathe.

“A date, like I said earlier.”

Is she serious? Blade peered at her face.

“The only reason I’m still here at this school, Hero, is because of you.”

“Oh? You seem to be enjoying school life pretty well on your own.”

“Yes, that is true. I enjoy that frilly uniform, and I like eating sweets. But a magic beast can leave such things behind at any time. A magic beast’s true essence lies in the continual pursuit of strength. That alone moves me.”

“Oh, speaking of sweets, I have a snack with me.”

Blade took a cookie out from his pocket. Earnest always had a bunch of snacks lying around her dorm room, and he’d stolen one the last time he visited.

“Give it,” said the Overlord.

She lunged at the golden-brown cookie, biting down on it. The gesture really made her look like a little girl.

“I, too, am troubled,” she said. “I have no idea why I am so fixated on you. Due to the consequences of your battle against the previous Overlord, you are no longer able to access your full power, and you have no hope of ever regaining it. In fact, your abilities have dwindled even further since we last fought.”

“The doctor told me I’d die the next time I used even fifteen percent.”

“During our last fight, I lost because I let my guard down. Or perhaps I was merely too absorbed in the joy of finally being out in the world, tasting freedom and using my powers. But I will not make the same mistake twice, and you have lost even more of your power. If we fight again, it is clear I will win. In other words, you are not even worth killing.”

“Gee, tell me how you *really* feel.”

“From a logical standpoint, you have no value at all—not even as an adversary. But I’ve made up my mind. I’ve decided that I will not leave here until I kill you.”

“No need to get violent.”

“One must listen to one’s own heart. I have done so and come up with a hypothesis. I believe I may be attracted to you.”

“What, now?”

Things are starting to get a little weird here.

“I am a magic beast, but half of me is human. And I read in the library that among the magic beasts, my race—the Nightwalkers—is a type that seeks out a mate to live with. I suppose, now that you have defeated me, I have unconsciously accepted you as someone powerful... And now I think I want you as my mate.”

“Uh, what?”

This conversation was hurtling straight toward Freakytown.

“This is merely my theory. But I think that if we attempt to mate, the truth will quickly become clear. What do you think?”

The Overlord moved closer, laying her hand on top of Blade’s. Her hand was soft, especially for an Overlord’s.

“I...um...I don’t really know much about that stuff.”

Blade was perplexed. “Mating” was something the doctor proposed to him a lot as well, and he fled from her every time. He never thought the Overlord would join her in “courting” him, whatever that meant.

“I don’t understand it, either. I am only five years old, after all. And please understand—I am even more confused than you are. I am a magic beast, and having feelings like these is most unwelcome.”

“How about we go to the Proving Ground right now and see who’s stronger instead? That’d be a lot simpler for both of us, right?”

“You’re a wreck. And I can’t take this off.”

The Overlord pointed at her chest. There was a pendant hanging there.

“For some reason, this refuses to come off me. I think what remains of Maria’s consciousness is resisting me. She’s trying to prevent me from regaining my full power.”

Aha. Looking closely, Blade realized that Ovie wasn’t wearing her usual shackles. All that remained of the sealing items was the pendant, keeping her at a tenth of her full power. Um, so someone I fought to a draw at 30 percent is now at one-tenth of her power. That means I could defeat her with about 3 percent of mine. And since anything within 15 percent is fair game right now, I

could take her down no problem. No problem at all.

“Well, look, why don’t you just stay here for good, then? You seem like you’re fitting in pretty well.”

“Not gonna happen. I am a magic beast, and a magic beast seeks one thing—strength, strength, and more strength.”

Blade knew what answer she would give. All the magic beasts Blade had spoken with in the past had said the same thing. For people, strength was nothing more than a means to an end, but for magic beasts, strength *was* the end. Humans were all about the pursuit of happiness, and strength was but one way to achieve that. It couldn’t serve as a goal by itself. And since the aims of humans and magic beasts were so different, though they could communicate and understand one another, they would always eventually part ways. They could never be truly compatible.

Blade and Ovie sat in silence for a while. Then Blade suddenly realized something. *Wait. Am I...am I dumping her, or whatever it’s called? She was courting me, I think, and then I rejected her. That’s what people call “dumping,” right? Not that I would know... But I just asked her to stay, and she refused, so maybe she’s dumped me, too.*

“I think Maria’s consciousness created me,” the Overlord whispered. “She was a weak woman, her life full of regret. She had to hide her true identity at all times while living with her mother in the human realm. Sometimes she’d accidentally let her wings show, and then people would throw stones at her.”

“Yeah,” said Blade. “People are generally scared of magic beasts.”

Most of those living in cities had never even seen one before, much less talked with one. They’d find them surprisingly friendly if they did... But no magic beast would talk with you unless you completed their “trial” and they accepted you. Such trials were actually pretty simple, however—just show them your strength. And strength was one thing a Hero always had in spades.

“Her mother loved her father, you see. She always used to talk about how wonderful he was, but Maria could never believe it. She couldn’t imagine that her father loved her mother at all. If he did, why would he abandon her in the human realm? Wasn’t her father the root cause of all the pain in her life?

Wasn't her father just a filthy, greedy monster who poisoned a human woman, then decided she wasn't even worth killing and left her behind? These were the deep, pressing doubts that haunted her childhood."

Blade listened attentively to the girl's story. On a moonlit night like this, it seemed even a magic beast was compelled to share a few stories about herself.

"Maria... She had a kind, gentle exterior, but deep down, she could be downright vicious. She hated everyone who oppressed and discriminated against her. She wanted to kill them all."

"Well, humans can have multiple sides to them. That's normal. They're not as simple as magic beasts."

Blade felt obliged to defend Maria a little. The Overlord was talking like Maria was some evil witch disguising herself as a meek little girl. If Maria was evil, Claire probably was, too.

"She yearned for power, power, and more power... Perhaps it was that desire that gave birth to me. But it was only when her mother died that I gained consciousness."

At last, the Overlord was revealing the details of her own birth.

"After that, there was no one left to protect her... So I was created to fill that role. We share the same body, so I couldn't allow her to come under threat. Whenever she faced danger, I helped her out."

Maria's life sounded pretty crazy. As far as Blade knew, regular people didn't "come under threat" on a regular basis.

"I know what all of you want. You want *her* back on the surface, and me sealed up on the inside again. That, or you want to destroy me entirely..."

That was indeed one of the strategies they had considered. But it was a Plan B—just a backup scenario. Blade had proposed another plan, one with broad support from everyone else.

"But you're wasting your time. She's burrowed deep inside. She's afraid to learn the truth—that she was an unwanted child. She'd prefer to surrender her body, her life, and everything else to me and live as a recluse."

Oh. So that's what's going on? Yeah, Maria didn't seem like a particularly strong-willed young woman.

"She—let's call her our first personality—she has inherited many deep-rooted human traits. She embodies the weakness of humans. And I, the second personality, have inherited the full nature of a magic beast. I embody the strength of my kind."

That's probably true, thought Blade. The Overlord thought exactly like a magic beast. Cú was the same, back before she made all those friends.

Blade had spoken at length with magic beasts—the ones powerful enough to comprehend speech, that is. The weaker ones had about the same intelligence as a regular animal, but that intelligence would develop alongside their power, and they became capable of speech once they attained what a human would call champion-level power. The most ancient and strong magic beasts were even smarter than humans.

Magic beasts were full of arrogance. They didn't feel or even understand fear. In their minds, nothing registered as valuable apart from strength. They could communicate via speech, but their mentality was completely different from that of humans. A small part of that was how little they cared about losing or being defeated. It was only natural for the strong to defeat the weak, they thought, and when Blade defeated them, they all met their deaths with smiles on their faces.

"I'm telling you all this because you're special to me, Blade." The Overlord, who had been gazing at the moon, turned to look at the man beside her. "You're more like us than you are human. I like that about you."

"Aren't we done with that?"

He had just dumped her. And *he* had been dumped, too. It was all in the past now.

"Hero, may I ask you something?"

"Stop calling me that, ahead—"

"If you're not a Hero, then I cannot be an Overlord, you realize."

“Well, you’re not one, are you?”

“Are you referring to my lack of the Overlord’s power? Hmph. Well, I will gain it someday. The previous Overlord had it, so naturally I will, too.”

“That’s some pretty weak logic.”

“Enough. Let me ask you something...Hero.”

“What?”

Suddenly, the Overlord’s face was very near to his, and Blade backed away slightly. He couldn’t have her lips so close to him. They made his heart race.

And now those lips were forming words.

“Do you think...you can stop this planet’s rotation?”

“What?” Blade stared at her. “I mean, I can’t know until I try...but probably.”

But that was in the past, back when Blade still had his Hero powers.

“That’s too bad. As long as you have such power, we can never live in harmony with the human race.”

Thus spoke the Overlord—or rather, the girl who swore up and down that she’d be one someday.

○ **Scene X: Eliza Maxwell’s View**

On the surface, the next few days appeared to pass uneventfully. The Overlord enjoyed her peaceful new life at school and made many new friends and acquaintances.

Then, one day, the usual gang gathered in the dining hall.

“After extensive investigation, I simply cannot see how this item has any sort of power-sealing capabilities. Yes, that’s right. In fact, I will state my conclusion right now. I, Eliza Maxwell, hereby proclaim that this item is nothing of the sort.”

Eliza’s glasses gleamed as she made this declaration. She was a student aiming to go into research, and she knew more about magic and artifacts than most professors. She had been asked to examine the pendant, the only sealing

item still worn by the Overlord.

“Oh. So it isn’t sealing her powers?”

“No, it is not. I’m positive. I guarantee it. And if I’m wrong...then I, Eliza Maxwell, will run myself through on the spot.”

“No need to go that far, thanks.”

Eliza was friends with both Claire and Maria, but she was kind of offbeat compared to them. As Maria’s friend and a fellow glasses-wearer, she had been doing a lot of research to help get Maria back to her usual self. There was something of a Bring Maria Back Committee (BMBC) working underground at the academy these days.

“But this item is certainly restricting me somehow.”

The Overlord fidgeted with the necklace as she spoke. She was fully cooperating with the BMBC and was even listed as a special adviser in their member roll. She was offering her full advice to a group trying to annihilate her, or at least to confine her deep inside Maria’s subconscious. Magic beasts could be quite strange that way. In the Overlord’s eyes, if any strategy, trick, or weakness led to her defeat, it simply meant that she was weak, and she saw nothing wrong with that.

Though most people found such a mindset difficult to understand, Blade kind of got it. When he was still training, he spent a month with a revered old magic beast. They would confer together over ways Blade could possibly defeat him. The experience made Blade a lot stronger...though in the end, the magic beast never accepted him as his student.

“Oh,” Eliza suddenly exclaimed. “Right. Blade, the Super-Being Subjugation Committee has a meeting tomorrow as well, and I was wondering if you could attend as special adviser.”

“Who made me special adviser? And stop calling me a super-being.”

Apparently, he’d been appointed special adviser to a club with the motto “Let’s Beat Blade!” Incidentally, Leonard was the president, and Earnest was among its members. Blade didn’t mind. No matter the circumstances, no matter what kind of schemes they used to trap him—if he lost, it still counted. He was

no magic beast, but those were the “rules” imposed on Heroes.

For example, even if he’d had to go seven days and nights without sleep or food, and then fell into a trap and had to fight hundreds of elite opponents bare-handed because his armor and weapons were broken, a loss was still a loss. As unfair as it sounded, if that was enough to defeat him, he had no right to serve as a Hero. Of course, he wasn’t a Hero anymore, so it didn’t matter even if he did lose. Humanity wasn’t going to be wiped out or anything.

Man. Being normal rocks.

“So”—Blade turned to Eliza—“if it’s not a sealing item, then what is it?”

“Good question. While it isn’t a sealing item, it’s clearly magical by nature. I performed a full analysis, and based on my results...”

Just as they were getting to the heart of the matter, Eliza suddenly turned to the side and waved her arms.

“Excuse me! Ma’am! Can I ask you for some cake, please? Cake, please! Cake!”

Eliza started begging the dining hall staff for a piece of cake.

“Me too, me too!”

Earnest joined in, her nostrils flaring. Ever since stumbling upon the Scion of Flame diet, she had ceased worrying about how she ate. All the other girls raised their hands in unison; even the Overlord joined in. *I guess she counts as “one of the girls” now.*

“...I’m sorry,” said Eliza, pushing up her glasses. “My constitution demands that I ingest a large amount of sugar to power my advanced thoughts.”

“Oh, me too!” joined in Earnest. “I need to store up a bunch of calories for the Scion of Flame transformation! I’m not eating because I want to, you know. I have to eat like this!”

They all waited until everyone had their cake and tea before resuming the conversation.

“The technology is unfamiliar to me, so I wasn’t able to perform a full analysis of everything, but I believe this is some sort of magical device. A storage device,

to be precise.”

“Storage?”

“A type of message cube, if you will. Again, this is just a hypothesis, but it could be a personal message—perhaps from the person who gave you the pendant.”

“Maria’s memories tell me that it belonged to her late mother.”

“There is likely some sort of video recording stored inside. I think I can play it back for us. Would you like me to do so now?” Eliza narrowed her eyes.

Blade looked at the Overlord questioningly.

“I don’t mind...,” she said. “But maybe we ought to wait a bit.”

Was the Overlord actually being considerate? That was a surprise.

○ **Scene XI: The Message**

Late that night, the gang gathered in Blade’s dorm room.

“Are we all set?” he asked the Overlord.

“Yes. I have cleansed my body and said my good-byes, as it were.”

Why did women always want to take a bath just before a big event? Earnest was the same, and Blade supposed the Overlord was a woman, too.

What’s more, it seemed the Overlord saw this message as something important. She was aware that good-byes might be in order and that her human friends would want them, even if they were unnecessary for her as a magic beast.

“Then let’s begin,” Eliza said. Blade and the others all nodded. “First, I’d like to make this clear—I think the records contained in the pendant will likely be useful in defeating the Overlord and rescuing Maria.”

“Hmph. I look forward to that,” replied the Overlord.

As she spoke, Blade recalled that old magic beast he once stayed with. He would always say the same thing at times like these—that he looked forward to his potential defeat—and then Blade would try out the techniques they’d come

up with together.

“If I didn’t have to lose Maria in the process...I think you and I could have been friends.”

“Don’t worry. Maria and I... One of us was always destined to disappear. And I’m sure whichever one remains will become your friend.”

The Overlord sounded as casual as if she was discussing the next day’s weather. She wasn’t bluffing, either. To a magic beast, life and death really *was* like discussing whether it would rain.

Eliza looked down. The sentimental emotions in the air were overwhelming. Glancing around the room, Blade saw that everyone else—Claire, Yessica, Sophie, Leonard, Clay, Kassim, and even Cú—was looking down as well. After accidentally meeting Earnest’s gaze, Blade quickly copied the others.

“Okay,” he said. “Are we ready?”

Blade didn’t feel sentimental at all. Maybe he was more like a magic beast than he’d thought. Back when he was a Hero—when he’d been actively fulfilling that role—he didn’t have time to get sentimental. A Hero’s job was to be stronger than anyone else.

“Open the pendant, please.” At Eliza’s command, the Overlord reached for her pendant. “It’s a locket, so you should be able to open it.”

“Hmm.”

The Overlord fiddled with it for a few moments. Then, with a click, the lid popped open.

“It’s a picture of a man...,” she murmured. “A demon.”

Then it happened. A man appeared out of thin air in the center of the room.

“Whoa!”

“Ah!”

Blade couldn’t help crying out. Faced with the most powerful enemy he had ever fought, Blade began to assume a fighting stance—until he realized the image wasn’t real.

Incidentally, the “Ah!” had come from Earnest. Blade was endlessly embarrassed that he’d screamed just like her.

“To project a 3D image into the air like this...,” said Eliza. “That locket must contain quite advanced technology.”

She pushed up her glasses and continued to observe as the man in the projection moved his arm.

“Whoa!”

“Ah!”

Blade was startled once more, again almost assuming a fighting stance. He moved to protect the rest of the group, thinking the man was about to execute some kind of battle move—then realized he was just a projection and that no attack was forthcoming. Once again, he felt ashamed. He was acting just like Earnest.

The man’s hand went to his cheek, and he began scratching it with his fingertip.

“He’s kind of handsome,” Yessica said. “Totally my type! ♪”

It was impossible to tell if she was serious or just trying to lighten the mood.

“He’s a Nightwalker, too...right?” asked Claire, comparing him with the Overlord among them.

As a half-demon, she didn’t have any horns, but the wings on her back were identical to his, as was the Overlord crest on her forehead. Every high-level demon race had their own unique crest, but the previous Overlord’s was particularly well known.

Blade, however, didn’t need to examine the crest to know they were looking at the previous Overlord. Blade had fought him and knew his appearance well.

“My beloved Emilia...”

“Whoa! He talked!”

“Ah! He’s talking!”

The projection didn’t just move; now it was speaking, too. Blade was so

startled he ducked, just like Earnest. *How embarrassing.*

“Please forgive me,” the man began, “or resent me, if you prefer, for leaving you and going away. I have a great and worthy cause to champion, and an enemy to fight, and I could not take you with me. I refuse to lead you down the bloody path I follow. This is my own selfish choice... Don’t say it. I know. You want me to take you as my plunder. I wish with all my heart that I could. But I cannot. And I have good reason not to. There is a new life in your body. You may not realize it yet, but I can smell it. Whether it be male or female...I never thought that I, as a magic beast, could ever conceive a child with you. I have given some thought to the name. If the child should be male, please name him Orthus. If female, name her Maria. And when the child grows strong enough to speak, tell them...that their father is dead.”

Blade wasn’t too versed in relationships between men and women, but even he could tell that this man truly liked Maria’s mother. Come to think of it, for a magic beast, the former Overlord had been pretty humanlike. Blade had fought him for seven days and seven nights and knew him better than a human he’d just met, at least.

Furthermore, Blade wasn’t too sure what “love” was. What was the difference between “liking” one’s friends and “liking” a member of the opposite sex? Intellectually, Blade knew there was a difference. But in his own experience, he had never felt a special “like” for someone just because they were a woman, so he wasn’t sure what it all meant.

“I will love you forever. I swear on my crest that I will continue to love you until my body crumbles to dust, my dearest Emilia.”

The recording came to an end. The man floating in the air was suddenly gone, and the room fell into a hush.

No one was sure who noticed it first, but the Overlord had tears falling from her eyes. Countless drops were trickling down her cheeks and dripping from her well-shaped chin. Perhaps *streaming* was the better word. This was no small amount of tears. They were coming down like a river.

“Overlord. You’re...crying?” asked Blade.

“Yes. I’m losing control of my body...”

That night, under the moon, the Overlord had explained why Maria shut herself away. She was afraid to know the truth—to learn that she was an unwanted child. She wanted to give up everything to her second personality, the Overlord, and stay in seclusion forever.

Now, however, she had no more reason to do that.

“Hey, Overlord,” called Blade.

“Heh. A test of spirit like this is just another kind of battle.” She smiled faintly. “Right this minute, Maria and I are fighting. Struggling over which one of us should exist.”

“What?”

“And it looks like she will destroy me.”

“H-hey—”

Blade wasn’t sure how to feel. Did he want Maria back? Or did he want the Overlord to stay with them? It was true that he’d promised to help Maria. But the Overlord... She...was the only one who...

Everyone looked on with conflicted expressions.

“Didn’t I tell you?” said the Overlord. “I do not fear defeat.”

She had that same arrogant look on her face as always, and she didn’t bother to wipe away her tears. Blade saw real beauty in that.

“It’s almost time,” she said. “Now...come. Call her name.”

All eyes were on Blade. He made up his mind and opened his mouth.

“Maria.”

Instantly, the Overlord’s arrogant expression disappeared. In its place was a weeping little girl. She fell to the floor, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand as her tears flowed without end.

“She... She...”

Maria kept crying. Everyone knew who she meant by “she.”

Blade stepped back and gently pushed Claire and Eliza forward. They were

Maria's two best friends.

"Welcome back...Maria."

"Yeah...yeah..."

The three of them hugged one another tightly as tears filled the eyes of everyone watching. Even Cú was crying.

But Blade's eyes were dry. The Overlord had remained noble to the very end, and for her sake, it was only right, he thought, that someone accept her fate soberly.

And that, he imagined, was the role of a Hero.

○ Scene XII: Epilogue

“Blaaaade! Blaaaade!”

“Maaaariaaaaaa! Maaaariaaaaaa!”

People were chanting both their names in rapid succession.

Blade was standing in the middle of the Second Proving Ground, opposite Maria.

This team competition had kicked off out of nowhere—it was a five-on-five event, with Blade and Maria serving as team captains.

Blade sighed internally as he tapped his neck with his sword. Half of the onlookers were cheering for Blade, the other half for Maria—and the latter were more anti-Blade than pro-Maria, hoping against hope that he’d lose.

“C’mon, Blade, blow this!”

Even Earnest was screaming her support. It was probably her duty as vice president of the Super-Being Subjugation Committee or whatever.

This was *such* a pain. Blade’s doctor had said to keep his power use under 15 percent, and besides, he was hungry. Morning classes were already over. All he wanted right now was a big plate of katsu curry.

“O-vie! O-vie! O-vie!”

The cheers were at a low roar now. They never stopped, growing louder and louder without limit.

“Huh?” said Maria. “What? Um... Will I not do? Am I not good enough?”

“You’ll do,” Blade said. “For around three seconds anyway.”

Given her propensity to trip over nothing at all, he couldn’t imagine this contest lasting any longer than that.

“That’s fine by me, of course. It’ll get me to my katsu curry that much quicker, so...”

“O-vie! O-vie! O-vie!”

The cheering continued. The crowd wasn’t having it. They were all shouting as

one, and they'd already drowned out everyone cheering for Blade.

"Ummm..."

Maria stood there, timidly eyeing Blade, a troubled look on her face.

"It's fine," Blade said with a sigh.

Her personality hadn't changed one bit. She was shy and always seeking approval from others. But...

First, she took off her glasses. Claire ran up to take them from her. They prevented her from paralyzing anyone with her evil eye, but right now, she didn't need them.

Next, she removed her pendant, a memento of her mother's, and handed it to Eliza. *Makes sense. Can't risk breaking something so important to her in battle.*

Finally, she began to undo her braids. First the left one, then the right. Her plain pigtails completely transformed into long, flowing locks which she brushed aside.

"...Haaa-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Loud laughter echoed through the Second Proving Ground.

"Ooooooooooviiiiie!"

The boys in the audience immediately voiced their approval, cheering themselves hoarse.

"Come, Blade!" she said. "Prepare to die!"

The Overlord was back.

Her spirit hadn't disappeared at all. She had fought for dominance against Maria and was defeated, and for a moment, everyone had believed she was gone. But Maria hadn't been fighting her at all. Instead, she had been trying to accept the magic beast within her, thus recognizing the Overlord as her friend.

Maria, now without her mother, had been supported from the shadows by the Overlord inside her. It was her other self's strength that had kept her alive. She had resisted her before because of her feelings about her father, but now

she had no reason to. Maria was on her way to becoming her true self—both a magic beast and a person.

Apparently, Maria and the Overlord within her were starting to merge. After a long time, they would eventually fuse together into a single personality. But for now, she was Maria when she had her pigtails in, and the Overlord when she undid them—that was just how her dueling personalities expressed themselves.

Even in Overlord mode, she was no longer able to tap into the overwhelming power she had before. Once the merging was fully complete, that power would come back, perhaps even stronger... But it would be a long process to regain it, and she was in no hurry. Besides, even in her current state, she was still a bit stronger than Earnest in Scion of Flame mode—in other words, far from a pushover.

“Die! Die! Die! Today’s the day I kill you! Never forget, I will be the one who finishes you off!”

“Kill him! Kill him!”

The audience was getting a little too excited, and their cheers were growing violent. *Come on, guys. Cheer for me to lose, not to die.*

“Rein it in a little, okay? Otherwise, I won’t be able to eat lunch.”

Blade readied his sword, a gentle smile on his face. Soon it would be time to eat, but first, he was going to enjoy a nice little workout.



Chapter 3:

The General and the Giant Birds

○ Scene I: The Centaur Woman

Blade was in the city that day, along with Earnest and Sophie. Cú was there, too, dangling from his neck as they wandered the streets.

“We’re going to *another* place?” asked Blade.

“No whining,” Earnest shot back. “Yes, we are. It’d be a wasted opportunity otherwise. The next place is even tastier.”

“Oh man, I’m done. I can’t eat anymore. And what *was* that last place? They basically just gave me a bucketful of whipped cream. What the hell am I supposed to do with that?”

But as Blade looked on in dismay, Earnest, Sophie, and Cú had all cleared plates (or rather, buckets).

“You’re good for another round, right, Sophie?”

“Yes, of course.”

Her face was expressionless, as usual, but Blade detected a hint of enthusiasm. And what did she mean, “of course”? *Eesh*.

“So the next place...is *really* something. If you get a stamp on every square of your point card, they’ll give you their special Gorgeous and Dangerous Custard.”

“Roger that,” replied Sophie. “My next mission is to complete a bucket of custard.”

Despite her blank expression, she was giving off an aura of cheer.

“Custard bucket!!” exclaimed Cú from her spot hanging around Blade’s neck. She was just as eager.

I guess if everyone else is having fun, that’s good enough for me. And so Blade

kept walking, letting Earnest's ample rear end serve as his guide.

"Oh?"

"What's up?"

Earnest's butt had stopped, so Blade followed suit. The street ahead was jam-packed. All the people and carriages were at a standstill. This city, along with the castle at its center, was built atop a large lake, and each of its five districts were connected by bridges. Whenever you wanted to get from one district to another, you had to cross a bridge...but the one ahead was in a state of gridlock.

"What's going on?"

The stone pavement was packed with rows upon rows of stagecoaches and wagons. Earnest and the others shimmied along the side of one row to find out what was happening up front.

"Oh... So that's it."

A particularly large wagon was stuck on the bridge, unable to get through the stone gate at the halfway point. Its canvas-covered load was so large that it had gotten firmly stuck underneath the arch.

"Where's the coachman? If you can't get through this gate, you have to go around to the main gate instead..."

Earnest walked to the front of the wagon. Blade left Cú with Sophie before checking underneath it.

"Hey, it could probably pass through if we took off the wheels, don't you think? It's higher than the arch by about four inches. It'd be a lot faster to take the wheels off, drag it out, then put 'em back on later."

That was Blade's answer after he'd checked the clearance between the wheels and the pavement. He was ready and eager to help out. It was a lot more fun for him to move his body around than to sit idly by as two women and one dragon scarfed down custard by the bucket.

"Um, Blade, the coachman...or rather, the human pulling the wagon. Or...the horse? Well, she's a centaur..."

"My pardons, sir. I know this is quite a bit of trouble."

“Mmm?”

Earnest brought back a female centaur who looked pretty embarrassed about the whole situation. The centaur race had a human upper body and an equine lower half; they could trace their ancestry back to a species of magic beast, but today they had fixed lifespans and were classified as nonmagic demilings.

The centaur before them had the upper body of a beautiful woman and the slender body of a horse underneath. Blade still didn't have much of an idea about what made someone beautiful or ugly, but he could certainly appreciate the centaur's well-proportioned face. She had a very clean, wholesome appearance, and her long golden hair billowed softly around her. Blade was reasonably certain that she would be considered very beautiful.

The centaur tribe claimed some of the kingdom's territory as their homeland, and Blade had visited the area once as a guest. It was actually quite rare to see a centaur in the middle of the city like this. They usually kept to the frontiers near their home, but... *Hmm?*

“Hmm? Hmmmmmmm?” Blade carefully examined the centaur's face.

“Mmm? Mmm? Mmmmmmmmm?” She looked just as intently at Blade.

Weird. Something about her seems familiar...

“What, do you know each other?” Earnest asked Blade, startling him. He looked at the centaur woman's breasts. They were explosive. The sheer size of them... There was no doubting it now. This girl was...

“...Dione?”

“Well, look at you, He—”

Blade zoomed right up to her and quickly covered her mouth with a hand before she said anything unnecessary. Once again, the softness of her lips made his heart race.

“*I'm keeping my Hero past a secret!*” he whispered into her ear, all but hanging off her as he held her mouth closed. Once Dione nodded, Blade leaped back down.

“What's the deal with you guys?” Earnest asked suspiciously.

“Well, um... Yeah, I think maybe I know her...or not.”

“Which is it?”

“We are acquainted, yes. The He—er, Blade assisted me long ago.”

“Enough of that. Dione, let me help you.”

Blade quickly stepped in to offer her a hand before the stubborn Earnest started asking too many questions.

○ **Scene II: The King's Welcome**

The wagon was headed, of course, for the royal castle.

They couldn't get the wheels back on it quite right once they took them off, but the centaur's sheer horsepower allowed her to drag it along like a sled instead.

“Great. Glad you made it.”

For some reason, the king himself was there to greet her. But then, considering the status of the woman pulling the wagon, it wasn't all that surprising.

“She's a general, after all,” Blade muttered, hands behind his head.

“Huh?” Earnest, next to him, blinked. “What? A general? Who? This woman?”

“You don't know her? She's General Dione of the—”

“Of the Northern Meadows? That famous cavalry leader? I know the name, sure... Wait! What? You called her Dione before, right...? So that means you know General Dione?”

“I sure do.” Blade nodded toward the centaur, hands still behind his head.

“Oh, Dione, allow me to introduce you,” said the king. “This is Earnest, the head student at my Rosewood Academy! Ahem!”

The king's throat clearing made Earnest stiffen up.

“Roger! My name is Earnest Flaming! I have heard all about your many feats of valor, General!”

There was a story about how she stopped a thousand-man invasion force all

by herself. And another about how, in the last great war—in the final battle against the demons—she had led the vanguard, commanding her elite cavalry and successfully splitting an enemy army twice their size, giving the humans the opportunity they needed to win. To put it frankly, she was a living legend, a walking goddess of war—and if she was *also* this beautiful, horse or not, it was no wonder the rumors were endless. Though Blade was still vague on personal beauty.

“Oh, no,” said Dione. “I couldn’t hold a candle to the Hero.”

She’d gone and said it again. As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she gasped, realizing her mistake a moment too late. Earnest, however, seemed to assume she was referring to the Hero in general and not anyone present. As a serving general, it made sense that she would have met the Hero during the great war.

“Wow... So you knew the Hero as well!”

“Ah...y-yeth. Yes, um, ha-ha-ha, of course.”

Her beautiful face began to twitch, and a sheen of cold sweat appeared on her forehead. *What did she mean by “yeth”?*

“Ahem.”

The king, tired of being ignored, asserted his presence with another clearing of his throat. He was a very self-absorbed man, so few things affected him more than being ignored.

Dione promptly offered a military salute to her commander in chief.

“Your Majesty! I have brought what you asked for!”

So all that cargo belonged to the king. What was in there anyway? Blade was a little curious. But after receiving a sheet of directives from Dione, the king simply signed the paper and accepted the delivery.

“Indeed, well done. Thank you... By the way, I have your next assignment ready. Would you mind getting started?”

“Sire! Your wish is my command!”

“I want you to serve as an instructor.”

“Sire?”

This “sire” and the one before it couldn’t have been more different. Dione, still saluting, stared at the king in utter bewilderment.

“And, Earnest, may I ask you a question?” the king continued.

“Sire?” Earnest, too, looked bewildered.

“I’ve been taking feedback from you for a while now about our instructor problem at the school. I trust that you will approve of an active general, yes?”

“Huh? General Dione...? An instructor? What?! *Our* instructor?!”

“Oh? Don’t think she’s up for it?”

“Oh, no, no, no, no, no!” Earnest briskly shook her head. “She’s more than qualified! Of course she is! I mean... An active general as an instructor?! I hardly even know what to think! I’d be honored to have her teach us!”

It was extremely uncommon to see Earnest lose her head like this. Blade took in the rare sight of her rambling on a mile a minute, completely forgetting she was talking to royalty.

Blade then glanced at Sophie to find her expression was the same as usual. She probably wasn’t surprised at all. It’d be nice, Blade thought, to see something catch her unawares for once. (Cú, meanwhile, was napping on his back.) “Great, that’s good to hear.” The king turned back to Dione. “I look forward to seeing you on the job, then!”

And without another word, he spun around and left.

○ **Scene III: The New Instructor**

The magic barrier covering the Second Proving Ground might’ve been a hundred times sturdier than the previous one, but right now, it was straining. Perhaps it was strong enough to withstand a battle between students training to be champions, but now a real champion was personally testing it out.

When Blade’s group arrived to start their training session, they found the centaur woman using the whole Second Proving Ground by herself. Her concentration was so intense that she didn’t even notice their arrival, so Blade

and the others decided to simply watch her at work.

It wasn't every day you got to witness Dione Orpheus, the Magic Spear General, engage in some solo training.

"Hey...is that divine metal?" asked Earnest.

Blade nodded. "I bet it is."

A number of dull, silvery cubes of metal had been placed around the Second Proving Ground. Each of them was about five meters to a side—the size of a small hut—and they were strewn around at random, about twenty or so in all.

"Hey...what's she doing?"

"I don't know," replied Blade.

But despite his curt reply, the truth was he *did* know what she was up to. She had been using this training method for some time.

Wow. She's doing that again? When she does that, she can turn a rugged, rocky stretch of land into a flat plain. And now she's using divine metal instead of bare stone. Amazing.

Spear in hand, Dione was crouched low as she worked up her fighting force, kicking the earth with her hind legs. She was building up her strength—saving it up bit by bit until she reached the limit—and then she set off.

Rocky earth erupted into the air behind her, a good three times as large as she was. Her legs were so strong, they dug straight through the floor of the Second Proving Ground. The surface was supposed to be a new kind of extra-strong concrete, but it was no match for her.

The tip of her spear had already reached the speed of sound, and it glowed with an intense red heat.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaooohhhh!!"

The air trembled.

Dione plunged forward, running the first cube of divine metal straight through. Then she took on the second one and then the third. They could hear a *thoop, thoop, thoop* as she gouged giant holes into each block. Some melted in

the process, losing their shape.

Dione retained her speed all the way to the edge of the magic barrier, then bounced back, instantly changing the vector of her onslaught. One after the other, she pierced through the next dozen or so enormous blocks of divine metal. The individual sounds of each strike could no longer be distinguished. Blade and the other students simply heard a ceaseless *thrrrrrrrrn*.

Sizzzzzzzzle...

The molten metal of the cubes flowed toward the drain, its vapors rising up in a cloud of steam. Dione looked back with a refreshing smile, her face glistening with sweat.

“Finally, I’m all warmed up... All right, class is in session!”

The looks on everyone’s faces when her words reached their ears were truly a sight to behold. Everyone visibly shuddered and took a good three steps back.

“Yeah, centaurs have a lot of endurance,” said Blade. “They’re horses, after all.”

To Dione, that was just a light warm-up session.

“I am not a horse,” she corrected. “I am a proud centaur.”

If the proud centaurs decided to settle on a mountain range, you could expect them to turn it into flat plain within about fifty years. And Dione had just provided a demonstration of more or less how they did it.

“Right. Come on!” said Dione enthusiastically. “Who wants to go first? I’m so excited to have a chance to teach the younger generations. I’m almost never this raring to go!”

“How about introducing yourself first?” Blade suggested to the hot-blooded centaur.

“Oh, right.”

With a loud *thud*, she thrust the butt of her spear into the stone. The force was so great, the floor shattered in a small explosion.

“My name is Dione!” she announced. “They call me Dione of the Magic Spear!”

And if you think you have what it takes, come risk your life in battle with me! Stand before me, blade in hand, and I will treat that as the signal!”

“This isn’t a duel to the death, okay?”

“Oh, right.”

Dione let go of her spear and bowed, her arms straight at her sides.

“Um, I am General Dione, and I’ve been asked by the king to serve as your instructor. It’s a pleasure to meet you all.”

Her long golden hair dangled in the air for a moment before she straightened and offered them a good-natured smile.

“Huh? A...a general?” Claire muttered, looking confused.

Earnest and Sophie had met Dione the day before, but for the rest of the students, this was their first time seeing her. A lot of them probably knew that the Magic Spear General from the north was a centaur; some might’ve even seen a picture of her somewhere. But as always, her completely unpretentious, ready-to-fight attitude gave everyone pause at first. New recruits constantly underestimated her. Blade had been advising her for ages now to act a bit more like her rank, but she still hadn’t learned.

Still, once people saw what she was capable of, they never belittled her again. And luckily for everyone here, she had already gotten that part out of the way.

“Uh, um...”

“Uh, uh, uh...”

Claire and Maria, the two most good-natured students in the group, were at a loss for words. After a moment, they exchanged a look, and Maria raised her hand as their representative.

“Ummm... General...Dione? The leader of the strongest cavalry unit in the Northern Meadows has the same name... So are you by any chance...?”

“Earnest went through all of that yesterday, Maria.”

“No I didn’t!”

Once it was clear to the whole senior class that the fresh-faced centaur before

them was a general and real-life champion— “All right! So who wants to train with me first? I, Dione, am here to teach the talented fighters of the future. And let me tell you, I’m positively *itching* to begin!”

—everyone shook their heads in unison. Their faces seemed to say, “We’re dead. We’re so dead. She’s going to erase us from existence.”

Pretty much the only exceptions were Earnest and Sophie. Sophie, as usual, looked blank. Earnest had broken out in a cold sweat, but she faced firmly forward.

“C’mon, c’mon! Who wants to begin?” said Dione. “Who will meet my spear in battle with their own?!”

At the word *spear*, everyone turned to Leonard, the best spear user among them. He put up a considerable resistance, but together, the others managed to push him to the front of the line.

“Noble lady...it is such an honor to meet you, but...”

Leonard, keeping as respectable a distance as he could, was doing his best to politely decline.

“Give it up,” Earnest advised him. “She’ll do more than just injure you.”

She pulled Asmodeus out of his scabbard, ready to announce her presence to Dione.

“N-no, milady! I won’t let you take my place. I am a spearman, and it is my job to spearhead the effort.”

A single remark from Earnest was all it took to completely change his mind.

“Ah, how encouraging!” said the centaur. “Then I will meet you at full power!”

“U-um... How about you stick to half power...? Or maybe one-tenth...?”

It goes without saying that Leonard was taken straight to the infirmary afterward.

○ **Scene IV: The Vegetarian**

“The food here is quite nice!”

Dione was stuffing it down—really scarfing it. Eating like a horse, you might say.

Earnest's usual table had gained another member. The centaur lay down on the ground with her legs folded, putting the human part of her body at exactly the right height. The table was laden with her plates. The student dining hall was buffet-style, and students were allowed to take as much food as they liked. But this particular table had to contain about half of the vegetables in the entire hall.

"This cabbage is so fresh!" Dione had eaten an entire head of it. "And I love how juicy this lettuce is!"

She ate an entire head of that, too. Her cheeks bulged out, making her unrecognizable and ruining the well-defined contours of her face. *Munch, munch... Gulp...* And then it was back to normal. Seeing this rugged beauty eat so much was honestly a little entertaining; her face would contort, then spring right back to normal once she swallowed. Earnest did that a lot, too, but with doughnuts and chocolate, not fresh produce.

"What did you say?"

Earnest glared menacingly at Blade.

"I didn't say anything. I was just thinking."

"Well, stop *thinking*, then."

"Can't I be free at least inside my own mind...?"

Centaurs seemed like total gluttons compared to humans. But in terms of their body weight, they weren't overindulging. In fact, they were rather light eaters. They had to maintain their large equine bodies with a chiefly herbivorous diet, and that meant eating a whole bunch—and the only mouth they had was their human one.

"I don't think I've had *this* before! Is it some kind of flower?"

"That's a cauliflower."

"And this one's new to me, too. Maybe a root or something?"

"I think that's called burdock root."

Blade was surreptitiously shuffling the cauliflower and burdock root off his plate and onto one of Dione's.

"Eat your vegetables, Blade," admonished Earnest.

Blade could hear her talking but decided to ignore her.

"Try to be a bit more like General Dione," she continued.

"What? She's eating meat, too."

He pointed his fork at one of her plates. There were small mountains of shrimp, tuna, and sliced chicken, all of which could be found at the salad bar.

"What are you talking about, Blade? These are vegetables. You can be sure of it. They're vegetables called chicken, shrimp, and tuna."

"Yeah, right. You're a sham vegetarian."

Centaurs were, by nature, both pacifists and vegetarians. If a centaur broke their edicts by wielding their strength in battle or eating meat, they were banished from the clan. Dione had been an outcast for a long time now—alone and aloof.

"If you have a taste for meat, just go for it, okay? Quit pretending they're vegetables."

"I'm not sure what you mean... Oh, but as good as the veggies are here, I fear they're cooking far too many of them. Veggies are best eaten raw, you know."

"You want to eat raw meat? Now you're just depraved."

"Um... I picked up some raw carrots from the kitchen lady," Claire said, approaching.

Normally, she spent lunchtime feeding Cú, but that day, the dragon was eating on her own. Instead, Claire was impatiently standing around in front of Dione, holding a basket of raw, leafy carrots.

"Carrots!" Dione's eyes locked onto the orange vegetables. A leaf fell from her mouth.

"Um... Yeah, so...say 'ahhh'..."

"Ahhhh!"

Chomp.

“She ate it! She really ate it! Did you see that, Yessica?!”

“She sure did. Good job.”

There were dozens more carrots in the basket, so Yessica picked one up, too.

Chomp.

“These are really good!” exclaimed Dione.

Claire and Yessica had the centaur eating out of their hands. Not just the orange part of the carrot—she was even pulling the green leaves into her mouth.

“Lemme try!”

“Me too, me too!”

The girls were swarming around the basket, unable to contain themselves. They impatiently leaped upon the carrots, competing to be the first to rush to Dione’s side. Blade was swept away by the tsunami of girls, like a dinghy capsizing in the sea.

All of them took turns putting a carrot up to her snout—that is, her mouth—and Dione would eat them all in a single bite, one after the other. The girls’ faces lit up as they kept on picking up carrots.

As they crushed Blade beneath their feet, he had only one thought:

Hurry up and find another pasture...

○ **Scene V: The Pajama Party**

“O-oh, I’m not really sure this kind of thing suits me...”

Dione’s face twitched as she was handed a thin, white, fluttery one-piece negligee.

“No, no, it’s gonna look great. I know it. I just *know* it.”

“Surrender. Nobody at this school can best Claire at cajoling. Look at me. She’s even got me dressed in fluttery nonsense.”

The Overlord was similarly defeated. Her braids were undone, making it clear

that *she* was talking, not Maria.

“You put all that on yourself, didn’t you, Deemo?”

“You saw?”

The girls were having an after-dinner pajama party in Earnest’s dorm. Sophie and Yessica were in a set of white negligees, though it was unclear if they normally wore such outfits to bed. It made them look like completely different people.

“Oh, um... Do you mind if I give you a hug?”

“Huh?”

“Ooh, you’re so fluffy! Mmm...”

Without waiting to hear Dione’s reply, Claire wrapped her arms around the centaur’s back—the fuzzy horse part.

“Back at home, I have this really big stuffed animal...and I couldn’t bring it to the dorm with me... I didn’t know what to do, but...hee-hee...”

“I’m not sure I know what to do right now...,” said Dione.

“Give it up. Once Claire latches on to something, she never lets go. She has preyed on me many a time as well.”

The Overlord’s testimony seemed trustworthy.

“By the way,” Earnest said, staring at someone out of the corner of her eye, “why is Blade here?”

“What, am I not allowed?” he asked.

“I thought I said this was a girls-only pajama party.”

“Yeah, I heard.”

They stared at each other for a few moments.

At last, Earnest declared, “Well, fine, I guess.”

He didn’t quite understand, but apparently it was fine, so Blade decided to remain where he was.

He’d come because he was concerned about Dione. He was afraid his

formidable female classmates would pulverize her spirit with their overwhelming girl power. Dione was a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield, but off it, she often seemed rather unreliable and out of her element. To the girls, this was extremely cute. That was also how they viewed Cú. For the life of him, Blade could not understand how the two of them were similar. Speaking of Cú, she was cooing in her sleep on Blade's lap; it was well past her normal bedtime, and a few reassuring pats on the back had sent her off to dreamland.

Leaving her with Sophie, Blade moved closer to Dione and pulled at her long, elf-like ears, a trademark of the centaur tribe.

"Yawn... What is it, He—I mean, Blade?"

There was another reason for Blade's presence here. It was true he was worried about her as an old friend...but he was also afraid she'd slip up around the girls and reveal his secret, as she'd almost done just now.

"Please. I really need you to keep that secret, okay? If they find out, I'll cry." Blade was exaggerating a bit to make his point.

"Don't worry. You know how tight-lipped I am."

"No I don't. I don't trust you at all, and I can't help worrying. You've come close to saying it a few times already."

"Ugh, what are you two whispering about over there? You're acting awfully suspicious."

Earnest scowled at them. It wasn't her usual withering glare, but more of a sharp glance.

"Not at all," Blade replied nonchalantly. "There's not a suspicious thing about us."

"That's right! I would never breathe a word of it, not even if I were drawn and quartered!"

Earnest stared at the two of them for a while...then smiled affably. It seemed they were off the hook.

"By the way," she said, "there's something I'd like to ask you, General."

“Oh? What is it?”

“I understand that you and Blade have known each other for quite a while. How long has it been, exactly? Blade refuses to say anything to us.”

“You didn’t even *ask* me,” Blade cut in.

“I wasn’t asking you. I’m talking to Dione here, so shut up.”

“I *am* shutting up.”

Blade turned away. To be exact, he turned his head toward Dione and shot her as threatening a look as he could muster. He was prompting her to make something up and make it good.

“Huh?” she said at first. “I—I—I—I...um, d-d-did I say that? We definitely aren’t old friends... I—I only met him the other day, so...”

“But according to Anna,” said Yessica, “you knew Blade’s name before you were even introduced to him. And you said yourself that you’d known each other a long time, didn’t you? ...Oh, I want to be an intelligence officer someday, so I’m pretty good at interrogations... Don’t you agree, Big Sis? ♡”

She smiled at Dione, whose cheeks began to twitch.

Blade twisted his face like an orc and shot Dione a murderous glare. *You useless oaf! Have fun getting drawn and quartered!*

“Oh no, look how late it is!” Earnest suddenly stood up. “Okay, girls, let’s hit the bathhouse. I reserved the biggest room for us.”

○ **Scene VI: Talking About Blade**

The interrogation continued in the bath.

Dione settling into the large bath naturally caused the hot water to overflow. It rushed out like a flood, ferrying the washbasins over to one corner.

That was so fun! I wish she’d do it again. Would she?

“I have to admit, it’s been a while since I’ve been in a bath like this... Oh? Actually, maybe it’s my first time. Usually, I just stand under some water. But... this is nice. It’s quite soothing...”

Dione was already loosening up in the bathtub, her enjoyment obvious in her face. Everyone agreed that the bath felt good. Soaking in the warm water made all of them forget about everything and just relax... But the other girls couldn't forget their purpose here.

"Big Sis? I'll rinse your back, okay?"

"Mmmm..."

"I'll wash your body, okay?"

"Mmmm..."

"I'll tackle the rear, okay?"

"Mmmm, soothing..."

Dione was like putty in their hands. Brushing seemed particularly effective. Each of the girls was thoughtful enough to bring their own grooming brushes, handling her horse body with military precision. The bristles of these brushes were too stiff and painful for people, but apparently it provided just the right amount of strength for the skin on her equine half.

Something about the girls' eyes was different now. They ran their brushes down her body with new enthusiasm.

"Haaaah..."

There was no helping Dione now. She was caught in their trap.

Yessica put her mouth to the centaur's ear.

"Hey, um, Big Sis? I'd love to hear some old stories about Blade. ♡"

"Ahem!"

Blade coughed loudly and deliberately enough to ensure everyone heard him.

"Again, why are *you* here, Blade? ...This is the women's bath."

"So what? Am I not allowed?"

"Um, no. You kind of aren't."

"Why not?"

Earnest was making it sound like this was common sense, so Blade turned to

Sophie for guidance. He also asked Cú, who was lazily floating around in the water.

“...?”

“Honored Father...wash...my hair for me... Zzz...”

Great.

“W-well, I figured you’d tag along anyway, and...we all wore swimsuits...so it’s fine, but...”

Earnest was wearing the red swimsuit she’d used back during Blade’s swimming lesson. *Don’t people usually bathe naked?* thought Blade. *What a weirdo.*

“Now, now, Anna. It’s just Blade,” said Yessica. “They let five-year-old boys into the women’s baths all the time.”

“Oh? They do? ...Wait, but Blade’s way older than that!”

“You think? He seems about that old to me. Mentally, at least.”

“Well...yeah, but...”

“You’re agreeing with her?” Blade said.

Who are they calling a five-year-old? That’s just plain rude.

“Hey. Hey, Blade...”

Yessica was beckoning for him. He turned his head to see what she wanted, and— “Yah!”

—she yanked up her swimsuit to reveal her breasts.

“...What?” *What was that supposed to mean?*

“There, you see?” said Yessica. She was ignoring Blade and speaking directly to Earnest.

“I don’t ‘see’ anything! What are you *doing*, Yessica?! Put those away, put those away! Hide them!”

“Look, he’s not even reacting.”

“Do you think that makes it okay?!”

“Eesh, Earnest,” said Blade. “Cool it, why don’t you?”

“Wait, *I’m* the one people are angry at here?!”

“Hmm... Perhaps I should disrobe as well,” said Ovie. “I can’t fully relax with this piece of clothing on me. Maria’s yelling at me internally, but I’m not sure I care.”

Claire, Earnest, and Sophie were now the only ones in swimsuits. Dione, too, had her top ripped off at some point; her enormous bosom was now floating in the water, much larger than anyone else’s...and due to anatomical issues, she wasn’t wearing anything down below to start with.



“Ooh... Yeah, right there. Give that spot some more attention...”

“Hee-hee-hee! If you want more, Big Sis, keep telling us stories about Blade’s past, okay? Then I’ll brush you all you want...”

Yessica nimbly manipulated her brush, intertwining her own body with that of Dione’s horse half as she gave her a thorough massage. Dione was now completely at her mercy, practically melting into butter.

“Oh... Speaking of five-year-olds... That’s about how old Blade was when I first met him...”

Blade stiffened.

“Whoa! Really? What was Blade like back then? Hmm? Hmm?!” Claire latched on to the new topic with a vengeance.

“I’m very curious myself,” said Earnest. “What about you, Sophie?”

“Mmm. Go on.”

Earnest and Sophie were on the same page.

“Oh-ho. Five years old. That’s my age. I’d love to hear more.” The five-year-old Overlord nodded her agreement.

Stoppp!

Blade didn’t want to recall any of that stuff. Memories he’d long ago buried began to resurface in his mind.

“Well, when I first met Blade...he was more like an animal than a human. He couldn’t speak very well, and he was ferocious... He raged like a captured magic beast.”

“Wow...” Earnest’s eyes were as big as saucers.

“Cuuuute...”

Claire was blushing slightly. “*Cute*”? *How is that cute?!* Blade wished he could press a button somewhere to delete those memories forever.

“He thought I was a horse at first and tried to eat me. If you look hard enough, I think you can still see the bite marks on my back hip.”

“Oh, I can!” Yessica ruffled the hair on Dione’s rear.

“Wow, that sounds just like Blade...”

“How?!” Blade exclaimed indignantly.

“Oh, you’re still here, Blade?” Earnest asked casually.

“I was still in training myself back then,” Dione continued, “so I didn’t have the strength I have now. He came pretty close to consuming me.”

“So he was really gonna eat you for dinner!”

“And when we finally convinced him I was a person, not a horse, the first thing he said was ‘*Tch*, a human? How disappointing.’”

“So he knew the difference, at least?”

“How did you manage to calm him down?” asked Claire.

“Well, like this...”

Dione reached out and put her hands on either side of Blade’s face. Then she pulled him in, wedging his head in between the two huge masses on her chest, completely burying it. Her swimsuit was off now, so he was receiving the raw, uncensored version.

“Oh... So you used your boobs? Figures,” Earnest muttered, disgusted.

As Blade burrowed his face into the two soft, taut objects, he began to forget about everything else in his life.

○ **Scene VII: Talking About the Hero**

The conversation continued unabated in the adjacent bath, which was a little less hot. Blade let the words wash over him as he floated listlessly in the water, his skin slowly wrinkling. With each new keyword, new memories were extracted from his mind. As he soaked in the bath, he also soaked in his own recollections.

The stories Dione told dredged up all sorts of things from Blade’s past. Dione had first met him as a half-wild five-year-old, and then they crossed paths again when he was seven or eight, at the height of his “naughty kid” years. Even then, he got the feeling he’d been trying to eat her every chance he got. This effort

was ultimately rewarded by a rear-leg kick that sent him flying a good fifty yards away.

Their third encounter came when Blade was ten. Having mastered the rules of etiquette, he had just kicked off his career as a full-fledged Hero under the patronage of the king. He often went off into the countryside and defeated magic beasts attacking various towns. On one such occasion, when he needed to slay a particularly strong creature, Dione—then a freelance fighter, not affiliated with any kingdom or military—had teamed up with him to finish the job.

After that, they met once more when Blade was around twelve. They spent quite a bit of time together on that occasion; it was at the beginning of the great war, and Dione was working with Blade on orders to defeat the Overlord. She was just another royal knight back then, not yet a general.

“Is it true you were a companion to the Hero, Big Sis?” asked Earnest.

Now she was calling the centaur “Big Sis,” too. She’d finally succumbed to peer pressure.

Blade’s own thoughts had long moved past the era everyone else was talking about. They were still discussing his early years as a Hero... *Wait! Did she say “Hero” just now?* That was *not* the keyword he wanted to hear! This was bad—really bad.

“Oh, of course,” said Dione. “In fact, I carried the Hero on my own back, more than once.”

Ughhh. She just had to say it, didn’t she?

Blade was in a state of shock. But once it was said, it couldn’t be unsaid. He’d just have to wait for everyone’s reaction. What would things be like once they knew Blade was a Hero? Would they no longer treat him as their friend? It suddenly dawned on Blade that what he was afraid of wasn’t having his past exposed. That wasn’t so big a deal to him. Losing his friends *was*.

“I was responsible for leading the Hero’s traveling party. It’s a tremendous pity that I was unable to accompany him to the final battle against the Overlord... But I’ve been working hard ever since to overcome my weaknesses

and be the best warrior I can.”

“I think that’s so admirable,” said Earnest, nodding.

...Huh? That’s weird. Why isn’t anyone looking at me? They’re talking about me, aren’t they?

“Oh, oh, Big Sis, let *me* ask you something! What kind of person was the Hero, huh? Tell me, tell me!” Yessica was clinging to the centaur’s every word.

“What kind of person? How do you mean...?”

Dione blinked. She must’ve finally realized that she had gone a bridge too far, because her face suddenly paled, and her eyes met Blade’s. He contorted his face, as if to say, “Keep it going, or I’m gonna make horse tartare out of you!”

“Because *I* always pictured him as an austere, well-dressed older gentleman!”

“You sure like older men, huh, Yessica?” Claire teased her, feigning innocence.

“Well, I suppose I like my men a little mature...”

“But the Hero’s supposed to be young, isn’t he?” said Earnest. “I think he might be in his twenties.”

Earnest seemed curious about the Hero, too.

Um...wait. Am I, like, really popular or something...? Oops! I mean...the Hero is surprisingly popular, huh?

“Oh, no, no, Anna. No way he’s in his twenties. His thirties, at least. In fact, if I’m allowed to dream a little, I’d *love* a fortysomething Hero!”

“Ewww.Then he’d be my dad’s age. I think I’d prefer him to be in his twenties...”

Now even Earnest was discussing her preferred type of man. Weren’t they talking about the Hero? Had he missed something?

“It’s all right, Blade. Nobody’s noticed,” Sophie whispered into his ear.

Her breasts were against Blade’s arm, and she spoke as softly as possible.

“They haven’t?”

“Everybody thinks the Hero is much older than you. Nobody would believe that

he's still in his teens."

"Oh..."

Once Sophie explained the situation, Blade finally understood.

"It'll stay our secret," Sophie added, before flashing him a bashful smile.

"Um... About that..."

He didn't want to rain on Sophie's parade, not now that she was showing him a rare smile, but... Blade turned toward the Overlord, who was now relaxing nude near the edge of the tub. When he and Sophie looked at her, she put on a bewitching smile. The smile was much like Sophie's, but the emotion behind it was completely different.

"It's not just us, I'm afraid," said Blade.

"....."

Sophie glared at him, and her silent protest cut him deeper than anything else that day.

○ **Scene VIII: In Search of Cú**

Once they all left the bath and began heading back to Earnest's room, Blade excused himself to look for Cú.

He had towed her off and told her to go on ahead, but in the end, he found her in the academy's courtyard. Dione had parked the large wagon she'd brought to the castle there, and Cú was loitering in front of it.

"What're you doing here, Cú?"

"Just having a chat."

"A chat?" Blade asked, in response to Cú's nonsensical answer.

He looked up at the wagon. Its load was still covered with a canvas cloth. Considering a general had personally escorted the delivery, it seemed odd that the king was allowing it to sit there unattended. Not that the school had any buildings large enough to store it.

Cú had her eyes closed, like she was trying to focus her hearing.

“It’s saying it’ll be coming out soon, and when it does, honored Father, you have to be there.”

“What are you talking about? And when’s ‘soon’?”

“It says seven days from now, in the evening.”

None of this made any sense.

“C’mon, Cú, let’s go. Your honored Father’s right here...” Then he shook his head. “Actually, you go on ahead and find the others.”

After sending her off, Blade decided to take a small detour.

○ **Scene IX: The King’s Chambers**

Blade chose the quickest way to his destination from the courtyard.

Standing outside a fourth-floor window, he knocked on the glass. He could have broken in, but he decided to wait a bit for a response first.

This was the royal residence. The king maintained an apartment in one corner of the school. Blade felt sure it must be difficult for his guards to keep secure. Both in the corridor leading to his chambers and outside the building, Blade sensed the presence of several people—though even he, with his ex-Hero super senses, couldn’t fully detect them. If anyone but Blade had been knocking on the king’s window, dozens of shurikens would be flying at him by now.

“Come in.”

Blade opened the window and went inside. The king was standing there in his dressing gown, looking a bit peeved. At a table in the corner of the room sat Lady Sirene, the prime minister; she, too, was wearing a gown over her bare skin. Unlike the king, she had a relaxed smile on her face as she poured water from a pitcher into a glass.

“Sorry. Were you sleeping?” asked Blade.

“No, we had just finished up.”

“...What?” The king’s reply didn’t seem to match Blade’s question. But leaving that aside, he launched into the subject at hand. “So about that wagon... What’s in it?”

“Heh-heh! That’s my little secret,” replied the king.

“Whenever you have a ‘little secret,’ it’s always something bad.”

“Oh, but I wouldn’t want to spoil the fun.”

“I see.”

Blade had asked what he came to ask, so he decided to leave. The king had made it clear he wasn’t going to talk, and Blade knew the old man well enough to realize he wouldn’t get anything more out of him.

“Aw, you’re leaving already?”

“Yeah.”

“Care to join us first?”

“For what?”

Just then, a glass cup shattered against the king’s head. Lady Sirene had apparently thrown it. Her contented smile had vanished, and she looked pretty angry.

Blade took that as his cue to leave.

He didn’t know what had happened, but he knew that hanging around an angry woman was never a good idea. He already had his hands full with Earnest.

○ **Scene X: The Giant Bird Appears**

Another huge load of vegetables was lined up on the table that morning. Dione was as hungry as a horse again, which made sense, since she was one.

According to the dining-hall lady, she had brought in an entire cartload of veggies that day. Still, it was a toss-up whether it would be enough to last through dinner.

“I’m betting it won’t.”

“What was that, Blade?”

“Nothing. Eat up. Those squashes are good, aren’t they?”

“The dishes here are all excellent!”

Dione was consuming the squash at a rapid pace, finishing each one in only three bites and spewing bits of orange and green as she replied. In Blade's opinion, however, none of what she was consuming really counted as "dishes." She wasn't even eating salads, just raw vegetables.

"Gwehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..."

Out of nowhere, an eerie sound echoed across the dining hall. Everyone stopped eating and looked around, but they couldn't find the source. It seemed like it was coming from outside...or maybe from above? The students looked at one another, concerned.

"Wehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..."

The cry came again, sounding like a curse. There could be no doubt—it was coming from somewhere in the sky above.

“That must be a simurgh,” Dione said casually between bites of squash. She was the only person unfazed by the sound. Then again, she was a centaur, not a person.

"A simurgh?" asked Blade.

“You often see them flying around the hinterlands.”

“Um, Big Sis...?” Earnest interrupted. It seemed this nickname was now set in stone. “You’re talking about the Northern Meadows, right?”

"You don't see them around here?"

“Of course not...! A simurgh hasn’t appeared in the capital for hundreds of years.”

“Oh, I see. Well, what should I try next? Another squash would be nice, but I like these potatoes as well. I wish I had some raw mashed potatoes. That would really hit the spot right about now...”

Personally, Blade felt mashed potatoes had to be cooked to be called “mashed potatoes.”

"What's a simurgh, again?" Blade asked.

"You're such an idiot, Blade. Don't tell me you haven't heard of this

continent's four great spirit birds!"

"Don't call me an idiot!"

"The phoenix in the south, the simurgh in the north, the roc in the west, and the thunderbird in the east. They were mentioned in your textbook, weren't they? You'd better memorize their names for the exam, at least."

"Whatever. It's not like knowing their names will make it easier to defeat them or anything."

"Ugh! Stop being so stupid! You can't *defeat* them! They're *spirit birds*!"

"Sure, you can. You just need a party of champions."

Spirit birds were avian magic beasts, but the term only referred to the very strongest of them. If it didn't require a whole party of champions to take one down, it wouldn't qualify as a spirit bird. There was an even higher rank, too, called "divine birds." To defeat one of those, you'd need a "raid" consisting of multiple champion-level parties. Incidentally, there was no record of anyone ever defeating a divine bird.

"No need to worry," Dione said between bites. "As long as we don't rile it up, it won't attack us."

"It won't cause any damage?"

"No. At most, it'll just steal a cow or a horse or something."

A load of washed, raw potatoes was brought in, and Dione ate them, skin and all, as if they were a snack-sized bag of chips.

"A cow or a horse...? For food?"

"Cows are really good," Cú exclaimed. "I like to gobble them up headfirst!"

That was generally how Cú ate while in dragon form. A cow or horse was just a unit of food to her.

"Up north, some farmers deliberately keep a single cow or horse tied to a post separate from the rest of the herd, like an offering."

"An offering..."

"Simurghs are very territorial. They're like guardian deities, you see. They're

always fighting off other spirit beasts, trying to drive them away.”

If these birds were so attached to their own territory, what was one doing all the way at the academy? Blade felt that question was at the crux of the problem... But he decided to continue listening and keep that thought to himself.

“So...you’re sure it won’t attack people?”

“What, is that not in your fancy textbook, Earnest?” asked Blade.

Whoosh...

A fork flew right at him. *Oof, that was close!* Blade dodged the utensil, and it whizzed by him, sticking into the wall and trembling from the force of impact.

“To a simurgh,” said Dione, soldiering on, “people must have too little meat to be worth it. It’s the same reason why people don’t eat ants and such—they don’t consider them a satisfying meal. I’ve never heard of such a thing happening, anyway. That’s why they’re treated like gods up north.”

“Oh...” Earnest nodded, still not convinced.

Another cry of “*Gwehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh*” sounded above them. The screech made it hard for those in the dining hall to keep eating—all except for Dione and Blade, of course.

○ **Scene XI: In Town with Earnest**

Some time later, Blade and Earnest were cruising around town.

The sight of the monster bird circling overhead was now a normal part of city life, its trademark “*Gwehhhhhhhhhhhh*” no longer a concern now that everyone was used to it. The city remained just as bustling as ever.

Blade and Earnest were out on a shopping trip that day. Earnest had asked Blade to join her, so he had. They met up at 1000 hours, and Blade carried all her bags, as if it were a matter of course.

Then it was time to eat. Blade complained about the sweets being full of carbohydrates and fat, so Earnest said, “Custard’s gotta have some protein in it,” and foisted a bucket-like container of the stuff on him. On second thought,

perhaps the word *bucket-like* was misleading. Blade had been given an actual bucket, no comparison necessary.

Later, as they walked down the street, Blade spoke up.

“So where are we going now?”

“I wanted to head to this other restaurant next—”

“More food? You’re still hungry?”

Earnest must have consumed a good ten thousand calories just now.

“Oh, but the sweets there are so delicious. And now’s a good time to go, too. I read that this is about the only time you can get in without a wait—”

“Laaaaame,” replied Blade. They had a close, casual relationship now, and he didn’t hesitate to speak his mind around her.

“Look, just humor me, okay? I’ll pick out some clothes for you later.”

“I already went to that other place with you, didn’t I? And I don’t need your help. I can buy my own clothes.”

“If I let you choose, who knows what fashion travesties you’ll wind up with.”

“Travesties...?”

“If you’re *really* keen on picking out your own clothes, I’d advise you to just give up. You’re better off wearing a uniform for the rest of your life. At least you won’t be committing literal fashion crimes.”

Earnest wasn’t watching what she said, either. They were just that close. They were *friends*.

Blade smiled at Earnest. “Well, since this is a date, why don’t I take you to some spots I like?”

“Fwehh?!”

“What? What’s wrong with your voice?”

“Wh-what did you say...just now?”

“You mean about our date?”

“Who said we were on a *date*?! Who’s dating whom, exactly?!”

“Well, me and you.” Blade pointed at his own face, then Earnest’s. “Isn’t this a date? We met up at 1000 hours and went on a series of missions together, right? That makes today a date. I mean, we started at the right time and everything.”

“Ah... Ahhh! Oh! So *that’s* what you meant! That’s just what *you* call a date, Blade. Boy, you scared me! What a weird way to put it. But you didn’t mean it like *that*. You were just being an idiot.”

Earnest looked relieved, but she was being incredibly rude.

“...So what spot would you like to take me to?” Earnest brushed her hair back. “I *guess* I can go along with you...”

“Okay, how about we go crawfishing?”

“Are you stupid? *Really?* You’re a complete idiot.”

“You can eat crawfish, you know. They’re really good.”

“Um...they are...?”

Now Earnest was showing a little interest. One more push, and he’d have her. He was fishing for Earnest the same way you fished for crawfish, with a little food for bait.

“Oop.”

Blade grabbed Earnest by the elbow and pulled her toward him.

“Whoa— Wha...?!”

Right then, a wagon zoomed by at high speed just behind her.

“Oh...thank you.” She was blushing a bit. “But—hey, let go of me, okay? We’re in the middle of the city... People will get the wrong idea, okay?”

But Blade didn’t let her go. Instead, he jumped to the side, still holding her arm. Then he pushed her down onto the ground and covered her with his body.

“Wha...?! Wh-wha...? Whaaaaaaa—?!”

Earnest was practically screaming, but Blade stayed where he was on top of her.

Suddenly, a shadow passed over the sun as something big swooped down. Powerful gusts battered them.

A giant set of talons attacked the wagon that had just passed by. The talons were big enough to grasp the whole vehicle. Blade looked up, only to see what looked like a ceiling covered in feathers. He was too close to make out its entire body.

It was the simurgh, the spirit bird. Up until now, it had merely been circling around in the sky, making its strange cries. But now, for the first time, it was attacking the city. It had clearly been aiming for that wagon, but why?

“What’s going on?! The simurgh... I thought it didn’t attack people!”

“Quiet.” Blade held a hand over Earnest’s mouth. “Try to conceal your presence.”

People as powerful as Earnest possessed a sort of spiritual aura that unconsciously covered them at all times. Because of that, attacks that would kill a normal person only felt like a little pinch to them. Suppressing that aura and pretending to be a normal person was one way to trick an opponent. Blade did just that, making himself indistinguishable from a regular person.

The simurgh’s eyes were pointed at them. Just one of its eyeballs looked like it’d take both hands to carry, and Blade could see a green flame burning inside them. Its eyes didn’t look aggressive or hostile—but they also weren’t the blue color seen in magic beasts’ eyes when they were calm. It seemed irritated.

With its sharp talons, the spirit bird proceeded to tear the wagon to pieces. It completely disassembled it, leaving only bits of cloth, wood, and metal. The wagon had contained food and groceries, and the simurgh shoved its beak toward them and sniffed. Blade wondered if it was looking for food, but it didn’t seem that interested.

Without warning, the giant bird flew off again. Another tremendous gale shot through the street, easily strong enough to blow away anyone trying to stand. Shop windows shattered, and merchandise flew through the air. Then, as the sky became visible once again, a gigantic feather, large enough for a grown man to ride on, landed on top of Blade and Earnest.

○ Scene XII: Storming the Chancellor's Office

"We have to talk, Your Majesty!"

Earnest threw open the door to the chancellor's office, almost breaking it. She didn't knock—of course she didn't. Blade trudged into the room after her.

"What's the matter?" asked the king. "Why so agitated?"

"What are you hiding from us, sire?!"

Earnest slammed her hands on the desk as she shouted. The wind she generated made some of the papers fly off it. Lady Sirene bent down, picked them up, and placed them back on the desk. Then she excused herself from the room. Blade eyed her sturdy-looking rear end as she left, then turned his attention back to the king.

"All right," said Blade. "Start talking."

"Before that, let me ask you—when did you first notice?"

"Just now, Your Majesty!" screamed Earnest. "The spirit bird just attacked us!"

Blade put his hands behind his head. "Well, since the beginning, I think..."

"And when was that?"

"You know, back when you came out to meet us with that big, self-satisfied smile on your face."

Blade glanced at Earnest. He was being disrespectful to the king, but she was long past the point of caring. She must've finally figured out what kind of person the old man was.

"Ah yes. I suppose that was a mistake on my part. I'll keep that in mind going forward... What else?"

"Well, that, and it's weird for the king to accept a delivery personally, whether it's from one of his generals or not. And why would an army general be pulling her own wagon? What in the world would require a general to personally escort it? And then you left the wagon sitting out in the courtyard unattended."

"Ah, but there's a barrier around the wagon that makes it invisible from

above. And the general wasn't *escorting* it, per se. She happened to be going the same way, so I had her bring it over."

"Hey, now!" shouted Earnest. "Stop ignoring me. Explain what's going on so I can understand, too!"

"Oh... Earnest. Do you understand what I am doing here at this school?"

"Huh? U-um...fulfilling your duties as chancellor...?"

"Mm-hmm. As chancellor, I am here to educate, supervise, and appropriately guide my students as they train to become great men and women—and, in time, champions or even Heroes."

"Oh, great. So this is more of that real-world training?"

"Mm-hmm. That's right. And I really outdid myself this time. Behold!"

The king's eyes lit up like a child's. Lady Sirene must've left earlier because she was too fed up to listen to any more of this.

"I still have no idea what you're talking about! What in the world was inside that wagon?!"

"An egg."

"No way. Are you a total idiot?"

Earnest had just called the king an idiot. Blade wished she'd go even further.

"An egg? Why would you need a whole wagon to transport one egg? There's no egg that bi— Crap, wait! It can't be! You *didn't*!"

"Oh yes I did."

The king smiled broadly and rubbed his hands together. He couldn't have been any happier.

"The wagon contains the egg of a spirit bird. I had assigned General Dione the mission of retrieving one for me—and now, as you can see, she's done just that."

"You stole its egg?!"

"Oh, you don't have to phrase it so negatively. I'm merely borrowing it for a

bit.”

“How *could* you...?!”

Earnest was at a loss for words. Her face went white as she stood motionless. Seeing her reaction was very educational for Blade. *Ah, so this is when a normal person's face pales, huh?* Earnest was pretty unflappable, too, so this news must have come as quite a shock. Blade was just as appalled, but—well, that's how things always went with the king. Blade thought back to the many times he'd carried out the man's reckless plans while the king looked on with the face of a demon.



“Y-Your Majesty... D-do you have any idea...what’s going on right now?”

“Oh, I have a good grasp of the situation, yes. The spirit bird’s furious and trying to get its egg back.”

“If you know all that, then do something! Give back the egg already!”

“That egg will hatch in a few days.”

“I didn’t say to *hatch* it! Give it *back*! *Return* it! Send it back to its parent! There’s no time to waste!”

“It takes two conditions for a simurgh egg to hatch. First, it needs to be at high altitude. And second, it has to be exposed to the setting sun. Unless both of those requirements are met, it won’t hatch.”

“What does *that* have to do with this?”

“Well, it seems this egg’s mommy and daddy are new to parenting. They didn’t put together a very good nest for their child. The opening wasn’t even aimed west, toward the setting sun. It was never going to hatch that way—and that wasn’t the only problem, either. To meet the altitude requirement, this egg would need to be at the very top of a sacred, ten-thousand-year-old tree. And it just so happens, the only man-made structure of that height is the grand spire at the royal palace.”

“Um... So...what’re you getting at?” mumbled Earnest.

“He’s trying to make it sound like he’s saving the egg. That he stole it because its parents don’t know what they’re doing and were going to let it die.”

“I prefer the term ‘rescued’ to ‘stole.’”

“It’s the same thing.”

“What do you think, Earnest? A perfectly fine pretense, is it not?” The king winked at her.

“So...what are you *really* after here?” asked Blade.

“Well, I want to give you all practical, real-world training, of course. And like I said, I truly outdid myself this time. This is so ‘real’ I’m not sure it even counts as training.”

“S-so when is the egg due to hatch...?” asked Earnest.

“Within a few days, I should think.”

“Four days,” Blade interrupted.

If Cú had been “having a chat” with whatever was inside that egg, and if she had told Blade the truth, the deadline was sunset four days from now.

○ **Scene XIII: Pre-Combat Instructions**

“Atten-*shun*!”

The Empress thrust her magic sword into the ground and placed both hands on the hilt as she shouted. Her voice cut through the early-morning mist, crisp and clear. There was a quality to it that inspired courage in the hearts of her audience. Even Blade had to hand it to her. She really was born to lead.

“Our supreme commander has provided us with pre-combat instructions!!”

She was referring to Blade, who stepped out in front of everyone. *Commanding really isn't my style. Earnest seems way more suited for this...*

For some reason, however, Earnest ceded the role of supreme commander to Blade and appointed herself vice commander instead. It really didn't matter who took what job, though. Unlike the fight against Cú, Blade would be on the front line with everyone else. He wouldn't be doing much actual commanding.

“Our *commander* has *instructions* for you!!” Earnest shouted again. She continued to face forward, not looking at Blade.

“Okay, okay...”

Left with no choice, Blade looked up and met the gazes of the 108 elite students of Rosewood Academy lined up before him—all his dependable companions. His friends.

“Today, we will face off against a spirit bird!” he shouted. “But there is no need to fear! This will be exactly like any other training exercise! So remember what you've achieved so far and believe in yourselves!”

“Um...”

Claire and Maria both raised their hands. As usual, the pair looked unsure of

themselves.

“What should we do if we have...”

“...trouble believing in ourselves?”

The two of them were so in sync they were finishing each other’s sentences.

“If you think you’re in trouble...”

“Yes?”

“...Just undo your braids, Maria.”

“Yes, sir!!”

That way, the Overlord would take her place.

“Wh-wh-what about me, though?!”

That just left Claire.

“You don’t have to believe in yourself...” Blade knew it was a bit sappy, but he decided to say it anyway. “...Because I believe in you.”

○ **Scene XIV: Start of the Battle**

Yessica ran up with a report.

“Blade! The Third Corps is half-destroyed. Two are out of action, three lightly injured.”

“Oops. Guess that didn’t work out... Switch them out for the Fourth Corps. Once the three injured are treated, transfer them to the First Corps. If the Fourth gets bogged down, replace them with the Fifth before things go south. We have to keep the rotation going at all costs.”

Blade was dishing out orders, but they were the kind of thing anyone could have handled. Any student who had received an A in Instructor Ibis’s Strategy and Tactics class would’ve made the exact same decisions.

“Yes, sir.”

Yessica took aim at a faraway building and pulled the trigger on her gun. A harpoon shot out, whizzing through the air—a wire arcing behind it—before hitting the wall of a building several blocks away. She pulled another trigger on

the gun's grip, and the wire began to reel itself up, sending Yessica hurtling forward at high speed.

This was a new piece of equipment invented by Eliza. Once the barb of the harpoon was embedded in a surface, it would pull the shooter after it. It was great for high-speed movement or for climbing up onto the roof of a building. She called it an "AMD," short for "aerial mobility device," and it was proving unexpectedly useful. Many members of the senior class were capable of running up walls by using spirit to stick the soles of their feet to the surface as they climbed upward, but those who couldn't were provided with AMDs instead.

"Gwehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

The spirit bird cried out. By now, everyone knew it was an expression of spite and resentment over the theft of its egg. The bird was now destroying parts of the city at random, dropping straight into buildings and using its talons and weight to smash up houses.

Perhaps it was looking for its egg. Though if the egg had been hidden within any of the bird's targets, it would have been destroyed along with the building. The creature was just that livid. Spirit birds were thought to be highly intelligent, but in its rage, this one had completely lost its mind.

In a sense, Blade and his army were here to protect the spirit bird. The egg had to be kept safe from its parents. And all this, of course, was the king's fault.

There were, naturally, *two* parent birds flying around the city, and Blade had split his forces in two as well, in order to provoke the enemy and provide diversions. Both halves were having a difficult time of it.

Blade and the other students had been fighting since morning, and their only moments of rest came when the angry spirit birds turned their attention to destroying the city instead.

The students paid no attention to the attacks on the city itself. No matter how many houses got destroyed, it was none of their concern. Only when it looked like the birds were getting close to the school, where the egg was being kept, did they intimidate and divert them away.

Blade's cavalier attitude toward property destruction was possible because everyone had long ago been evacuated. Not one resident remained in the city, and if the spirit birds leveled a house, the kingdom would provide ample financial compensation. To be precise, they would be given enough money to rebuild their house three times over. As a result, the residents were cheering on the battle from a safe distance, shouting things like "Hit *my* house!" or "No, not *that* one; the one *next* to it!" Blade could see them gathered in the hilly terrain surrounding the lake. They seemed to be in a festive mood.

"Gwehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

After destroying a few middle-class housing complexes, the spirit birds swooped back up into the sky.

"Whew! Looks like we're entering the next phase."

Blade shaded his eyes with one hand as he gazed into the distance and began to move. As commander, he had a good grasp of the whole battle. But now it was time to head out and join the soldiers on the front line.

○ **Scene XV: Midgame**

Three corps were fighting at once. These were the top three in the army, each led by senior students. Whenever the spirit birds landed, they would attack them in waves.

Leonard put up a barrier to protect the women in his unit. He even cleverly made it flicker on and off at regular intervals to reduce energy consumption.

Earnest was now spitting out a huge fireball—not conjuring it, but spitting it out of her mouth. Once in Scion of Flame mode, she could do that sort of thing. She was basically a monster. Then, suddenly, her fire went out, leaving her nude. She promptly ran barefoot to the nearest storefront among the rubble. Though it was half-destroyed, she'd managed to find a pastry shop. It would take Earnest a few minutes to replenish her calories enough to reignite her flame, and she didn't care how gross she looked stuffing as much of the dessert aisle into her craw as she could.

In the meantime, Sophie stepped in as main attacker. She intended to save her artificial Hero force for the very last moment, so she was fighting as normal

for now, covering her arms and legs with ice and kicking and punching with abandon. But since they were fighting spirit birds, she was doing almost no damage. Even if she went all out, she had no hope of injuring so powerful a creature.

Still, she was managing to agitate the enemy, and that was enough. The spirit birds glared at Sophie, their eyes shining red with aggression. They beat their wings and flew higher into the sky.

“Overlord! Cú!” Blade shouted to the heavens. “Keep ’em busy up there!”

The Overlord and Cú were their two aerial specialists. The Overlord grew wings in demon mode, which she could use to fly. Nightwalkers were particularly adept at air combat. Meanwhile Cú, after undergoing intense training over the past few days, had acquired a form that could be called “half-dragon mode.” Rather than fully becoming a dragon, she allowed only a little of her dragon form to come through, focusing it on her wings and the ends of her limbs. It looked *really* cool, and since she maintained her human form’s weight, she was capable of great speed and mobility in the air.

“Ah-ha-ha! You deign to make use of the Overlord? Very well, then! I’ll allow it! ...*Overlord Thunder!*”

Dozens of thunderbolts rained down from above. She’d given it a cool name, but Overlord Thunder was just a standard Thunder spell—a beginner move any new mage would learn in their first year. The force behind it, however, was massive. The spell itself might be low level, but the amount of power being used made it several dozen times stronger than normal. The Overlord could no longer use the truly vicious amount of magic she had before her duel with Blade, but she was still near the top of the senior class.

And yet the spirit birds’ feathers repelled her magic almost completely. The beastly energy in each one was enough to keep a large magic institution in operation for years—and their bodies had tens of thousands of those feathers. Using melee and magic attacks, or those based on fighting force, wouldn’t be enough to penetrate that armor. If you really wanted to slice one of these beasts into chunks, you’d need something on the level of Holy Demon Blade or higher.

“Take this, you!”

Pop, pop, pop. Cú was firing a barrage of fireballs. She could breathe fire when in her original dragon form, but while duking it out alongside Earnest in Scion of Flame mode, she found that she could spit out smaller fireballs even as a half-dragon. What’s more, these took less time to build up than her breath.

This fire seemed to have at least some effect on one spirit bird. It was struggling on the ground, its takeoff thwarted by the searing flame.

That was when the next corps stepped in. Men and women in school uniforms were zipping among the city’s buildings, pulled by wires from their AMDs. Eliza’s invention was good for more than just maneuvering, however. The units had a grip for each hand, and the students were firing them wildly, suspending wires all across the sky. These wires were made of divine metal, of course, and while people at Rosewood Academy could cut or crush that stuff pretty readily, it was still seen by the general public as unbreakable.

By the time the spirit bird finally managed to get off the ground—

“Too late,” said Blade.

—a spiderweb of metal wires had already been put in place to trap it. Everything had been done during the ten or so seconds it was down.

“Gwehhhhhhhhhhhh.”

There was a sinister tone to the bird’s cry. The divine steel was holding it back, preventing its flight, and the beast was enraged. It flapped its wings like mad, summoning an intense gale that would have bowled over the average person.

Blade took a few steps forward. The spirit flowing in the soles of his feet allowed him to walk through the hurricane force winds. The same technique he used to scale vertical walls now kept him on his feet. He figured it was time to use Dragon Eater, and he readied his sword.

“Hold it, hold it, hoIIIIld it!”

Either she’d eaten enough, or the pastry shop had run out of food. But either way, Earnest was running back, still naked. Mid-run, she transformed and

immediately spat out an enormous fireball.

“Gwehhhhhhhhhh!!”

The spirit bird was *really* angry now. Mad with rage, it began to tear at the wires. With bits of the stuff still tangled around it, the bird forced itself upward. The surrounding buildings were lifted from their foundations, like they’d been dug up—and the spirit bird took flight, carrying a section of the city with it.

Blade and his forces were thrown into the air, carried along with the debris before being tossed away. There were only a few seconds before everything smashed into the ground, but Blade kicked against the walls, floors, and pavement now falling through the air around him, and relying on these few footholds, he kept moving. Eventually, he escaped the debris and landed easily on the ground, feet down and head up.

“Everyone okay?”

“Of course!” Earnest roared.

But Blade wasn’t worried about the senior class. It had mostly been the juniors firing those wires, and they were who he was concerned about. Luckily, however, they were all accounted for.

The juniors looked on with wide eyes. Their breathing was rapid, and it seemed like they couldn’t believe what they’d just done.

On the battlefield, the two scariest things were panicking and crossing over the line of death. When fighting, people tended to stay within a certain boundary. Once you left this zone, death was inevitable, and people called the edge of that space the “line of death.”

The oldest, toughest soldiers were able to sense where this line fell, and that’s what allowed them to keep coming back home alive. Most new recruits died before they could become a tough old soldier. They’d step over that line and wind up on the other side for good. Only after coming close to death, sensing the line, and managing to come home safe over and over, did soldiers develop into wizened veterans.

But the students of Rosewood Academy had already toed that line many times. Because of the king’s disruptive practical training, they’d experienced

this line of death more times than any veteran. Even the lowest performers in the junior class didn't cower when they felt its presence. They knew instinctively how to calmly graze the line by a hair's breadth.

But while escaping these brushes with death was all well and good, due to their fundamental lack of offensive power, the students were still unable to inflict any damage.

"Gwehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

The spirit bird was angry. Really angry. Super angry.

It flew into a rage, shaking off the homes still attached to it with wires. Buildings went flying in all directions.

"C'mon! Get out of here!"

Blade's team began to run. The chase was on. If they could lure the bird to where the next team was waiting and hand things over to them, the corps' mission would be complete. They'd take a short rest and prepare for their next turn in the rotation. Blade's army might've been inferior in strength and lacking in decisive force, but they still had a chance.

They didn't have to win. All they had to do was avoid losing. Their mission was to keep the spirit birds busy, and as long as they could stave off defeat, Blade's army would automatically win.

But the sun was still high in the sky, and the battle was only about halfway through.

○ **Scene XVI: Triage**

The fight was now in its second half.

So far, nobody had been killed in action. However, many of the students had been hurt, sustaining anything from light injuries to severe wounds. Some were even in critical condition, and everyone in the force had suffered cuts and bruises by now. Blade was the only exception. There wasn't a scratch on him. He was completely unharmed.

Those in "critical condition" had suffered severe, life-threatening damage. "Severe wounds" were non-life-threatening but prevented a student from

rejoining the fight. “Light injuries,” on the other hand, didn’t bar students from the fight but would sap their strength without treatment. Incidentally, cuts and bruises required no treatment, and neither did being unharmed.

Claire’s restoration ability was close to omnipotent, but even it had limits. The problem wasn’t the mental strength of the patient but rather the density of some kind of field covering the area. Using her ability repeatedly in the same place caused its effectiveness to dwindle, so a sort of triage was necessary.

The critically wounded were left to Blade’s doctor and the medical organization she worked for. The severely and lightly wounded were attended to based on strategy and logic, rather than personal emotion. What would provide more power for the army—sending one severely wounded soldier back into the fray, or three lightly injured ones? How much of the army’s fighting power could be restored with one bolt of Claire’s restoration?

Emotion, or sentimentality, had to be kept out of it. The wounded were selected using a simple formula. Colored “triage tags” were attached to their arms, a system invented by Earnest that would eventually spread across the continent. It meant deciding, in a general sort of way, who would live and die on the battlefield... But that’s just how war was.

There were a few more hours until sunset, and the battle was only getting tougher.

○ **Scene XVII: Endgame**

“Keep going! We just need ten more minutes!”

Blade was shouting now. He threw away his bent, dilapidated sword, picking up another one off the ground that still looked usable. This was the fourth or fifth one he’d grabbed that day. He’d already lost count. The materials used to make most swords didn’t hold up very well against the fighting force Blade sent through them. The only weapons that could survive a battle like this without sustaining any damage were Earnest’s magic sword and Leonard’s spear.

Evening was approaching. The sun had turned orange and looked like a ripe fruit, ready to fall.

Blade looked behind him as he held a spirit bird back with his sword. His view

was now clear enough to see the royal palace beyond. A hastily constructed elevator deck rose up from the base of its tallest spire; it had just begun its slow ascent.

The plan called for the egg—previously held within a thick barrier—to be hauled out at around ten minutes before the end of the battle. It would then spend those last few minutes being carried to the tip of the spire.

In other words, they were now at the climax of the fight. Unfortunately, there were fewer than ten students left standing. Blade was among them, as were Earnest, Sophie, Cú, the Overlord, Leonard, Clay, Kassim, and Yessica. The usual gang were the only ones left.

“Keep distracting them! Don’t let up!”

One of the spirit birds was on the ground, and the other was perched atop a half-destroyed building. Dealing with two at the same time wasn’t easy, but if they stopped attacking for even a moment, the birds would start rampaging indiscriminately. The beasts had four eyes between the two of them, and all were dyed a deep red, the color of aggression. The egg was probably the last thing on their minds.

Blade and the others had to keep drawing away their attention. The hatching depended on it!

“Earnest! Take the right flank!”

Earnest had been switching between Scion of Flame and streaker mode all afternoon, and now she wore nothing but a cloak as Blade shouted at her. Naked aside from the cloak and holding her black magic sword in her hands, she looked like a real delinquent.

“But...but I’m out of calories...!” Earnest tugged at the ends of her cloak.

“Eat this, Earnest!”

Something was thrown down from above. It looked like a piece of dried meat.

“Beef jerky...?”

“No! Dragon jerky! It...it kinda hurt, lopping off the end of my tail!”

That rascal, Cú. Blade had been wondering why she’d had a bandage on her

butt for the last few days. *So that's what she was doing...* But as it happened, the meat of magic beasts was packed to the gills with nutrition. Its tallow was enough to keep a lamp burning for several years without stopping. And dragon meat was the most nutritious type of all.

Earnest quickly gnawed off a piece of dragon jerky, swallowing it after a few chews.

"...I can feel the power filling my body!" she howled. Flames burst up all over her. The cloak began burning from its edges and was soon mere embers dancing in the air. Soon Earnest was speeding off on all fours. Oh, wow, she's already in Beast Mode. All her sanity flew right out the window. And was I seeing things, or did she balloon out for a split second right before she burst into flame? ...On second thought, maybe that was just my imagination.

The battle had become a clash of magic beasts, their sanity long forgotten. The Overlord and Cú were raining down support lightning and fireballs from above.

"Leonard!" shouted Blade. "You go with Earnest! Take care of her for me!"

"You don't need to remind me!"

Blade left the bird perched on the rubble to Earnest's team and went to challenge the other.

"Bring it on." He readied his sword.

"Here I come!" Clay lined up next to him.

"Is this the swordsman team?"

"There's us, too, you know."

"True."

Yessica and Kassim joined them.

"Your orders, Blade," said Sophie.

"Let's all make it back alive."

How many times had he said those words before...? Most of the time, no matter what he said, it was only Blade who made it back. But not today.

Comparatively, this fight was still going pretty well.

They just had to hold out for a little longer. The egg was still rising toward the spire. Once it arrived and was exposed to the setting sun...the operation would be complete. In the next few minutes of fighting, one or two of the remaining students were bound to drop out. That number might grow to three or four by the end. But by then, victory would be theirs. That much was almost set in stone, as long as the elevator didn't get stopped midway up the spire or anything...

Huh?

"Hey... What's happening?" Blade pointed at the spire with his sword. "It's not... stopped, is it?"

"Huh?" said Sophie.

"No way. It can't be. Is it?"

"I think...you're right. It doesn't look like it's moving at all."

"Wha... Whaaat?!"

Why, why, why?! Why did the elevator stop?! Why did it have to stop now?!

The elevator was at a standstill halfway up the spire. Maybe a little past halfway. It wasn't moving at all.

"Get over there, Blade," Sophie said coolly.

"N-no, but..."

"Ten seconds. I still have all of it left. I was saving it for something like this."

"Y-yeah, but..."

"Trust me. Trust *us*."

"Yeah. Get going, Blade. Leave this to us and go!" Clay was trying to act all cool again.

It brought back old memories. Everyone was drawing the enemy away, telling Blade to leave it to them. Then Blade went off on his own, and...

...No. That won't happen. Blade shook his head. This wasn't like the past. He

wasn't alone anymore. He wasn't a Hero anymore. He had companions. He had friends.

"All right."

Blade looked up and fixed his gaze on the spire.

○ Scene XVIII: The Spire

Help! Help! Heeeeelp! If I fall, I am so dead!

Blade was running up the spire. Its outer wall was perfectly smooth, with no footholds or handholds to speak of. There was a legend about how this spire used to be the stern of a ship that crash-landed vertically, embedding itself into the ground. *As if. Ships can't fly. How stupid.*

Blade kept running, channeling his spirit into the soles of his feet and sticking them to the wall. This supported his weight enough to let him run straight up the spire's steep, almost vertical slope. If he let up for even a moment, he'd slide all the way down to the bottom—and if he fell from this height, not even he would survive.

He had been going at full blast since morning (still keeping it below 15 percent, of course), and even Blade was starting to feel the strain. He lost his footing once every ten steps, nearly falling each time.

"Hero! ...Where are you going?!"

An unperturbed voice reached his ears. It belonged to Dione. She was clip-clopping her way up the wall as well, catching up to him in the blink of an eye.

"Would you mind if I joined you?!" she asked breezily, like she'd just run into him on her morning walk. But then, to a champion, perhaps this was like a walk in the park. Maybe to Dione, it had looked like they were merely "playing" with the spirit birds this whole time. Blade couldn't dismiss the idea out of hand.

"If you're not helping me, then leave!"

"I am under strict orders from His Majesty not to help you, in order to provide you with 'real-world experience' or whatever. If I intervened, apparently, it wouldn't count as training."

“Then go away! I think it’s pretty clear I’m busy!”

“I cannot help you, but...”

She reached out, picked him up, and plopped him onto her back.

“H-hey...?! Weren’t you told not to help me?!”

“This much shouldn’t be a problem,” she said as Blade wrapped his arms around her to keep from falling. “Hero?”

“What?”

“Remember, I have never let anyone besides you ride on my back. And I never will, either.”

“Uh-huh...?”

Blade raised an eyebrow as Dione’s message zoomed right over his head.

○ **Scene XIX: To the Egg**

Blade got off Dione’s back and climbed onto the elevator deck. Being on flat ground for the first time in a few minutes made it feel like the whole world was tilting on him. It was probably all in his mind, but still.

He looked out at the horizon. The sun was changing from orange to red. It wouldn’t be visible for much longer. Then he turned toward the egg. There it was, atop a pile of soft hay.

“It’s huge...”

Though it hadn’t been a simurgh, he had seen a spirit bird’s egg once before, and this one was easily twice as large.

“We’re taking this...up there?”

Blade looked up at the spire. It was still a long way to the top, easily several hundred meters. And the egg... Well, it looked like it weighed at least a ton. *I have to haul this up there? By myself? While running up a vertical wall relying only on my spirit? And with the deadline just a few minutes away?*

Boy... I dunno... I’m not liking this... I’m not sure I can do it... I mean, it’s a Hero’s job to do what’s asked of him, no matter how impossible. To make the

impossible possible and all that. But, man, this is asking a lot...

...I just can't, keh?! I can't! I'm not a Hero anymore, keh?!

Blade wanted to stamp his feet like a toddler.

"Hero, hold on tight."

"Huh? Dione? What are you—? Ah! Whoa...?!"

Blade was being pushed from behind. Dione held him as she mercilessly shoved him toward the egg.

"Hmm? What's the matter, Hero? All I'm doing is giving you a little push. I'm *certainly* not helping you in any way!!"

She couldn't have been any worse of an actor, but the sound of her voice reassured him. As Dione pushed him, Blade held the egg as tightly as he could and focused all his spirit into building up his muscles.

Then Dione began to run.

"Hrrrrnnnnng..."

Blade was almost crushed. This centaur, the Magic Spear General who led the kingdom's strongest cavalry unit... This champion... She was running for *real* now. Right behind him. And in front of his body was the shell of a giant egg, easily over a ton of weight pushing down.

But Blade held out. He never let go of the egg. He might've been crushed if he wasn't a former Hero—actually, that much was certain. He'd be as flat as a pancake.

Setting a crazy pace, they made it up the last few hundred yards.

Blade and the egg were now at the tip of the spire.

○ **Scene XX: At the Tip of the Spire**

"Hey, there. Welcome to the finish line."

The king was waiting for him at the top with open arms.

Blade made the most disgusted face possible. Everything that was happening was all this guy's fault. He alone was behind it all.

“I always knew you would pull through in the end,” said the king. His eyes shot wide open, and a blue vein appeared on his forehead. This time, nobody would stop him. “And why? Because *you*... *You are a Hero!!*”

Not anymore, I’m not. I wouldn’t even be here without all the help I got from everyone else.

“I’ve brought the egg,” Blade said. “We’re good on time. The sun hasn’t quite set yet. Is it over?”

“Indeed, yes. Now it’s my turn.”

“Your turn?” Blade asked.

The king walked to the edge of the spire and gazed at the empty space in front of him. Then he began to shout.

“In the name of Gilgamesh Soulmaker! I hereby declare...that a life’s debt shall be repaid with life in kind! It is returned to you now, right here!”

“That man—Gil—was once saved by a simurgh.”

“Whoa! You scared me!”

Lady Sirene, prime minister of the kingdom, was also atop the spire. Blade hadn’t noticed her standing behind him. How had she caught a Hero by surprise like that...? No. He wasn’t a Hero anymore. He was an ex-Hero.

“It weighed heavily on his mind for a very long time. But now he’s returned the favor... Thank you, Blade.”

The prime minister was one of the king’s innumerable mistresses, but she was ranked first among them. Many of his subjects wondered why he hadn’t yet made her his queen, but Blade figured there were probably a bunch of grown-up reasons.

“He should’ve just said so... Ugh. He’s such a lying dumbass. A big, big dumbass!”

Blade taunted the king behind his back, and Lady Sirene giggled.

The spirit birds flew overhead—the king’s voice must have reached them, and they must have understood his words. A magic beast this strong—one worthy



“Draaa...gonnn...” He held his sword at his hip, instilling a double helix of spirit and fighting force around it. “...Eaterrrr!”

The undulating spiral blew outward. The two spirit birds were some distance apart, but the helixes homed in on both of them, swallowing them up. Soon they were crushed by waves of the two forces—spirit and fighting force—and then Blade slumped forward, all his strength used up.

“Blade!”

Sophie rushed to him, but when the blue glow disappeared from her body, she slumped down just as he had. She, too, had used up every drop of her strength.

“You’re so heavy, Sophie.”

“I shouldn’t be. I’m lighter than Earnest.”

Neither of them could move another inch. Bantering was about all they could do. They were truly exhausted. They couldn’t even stand up. But...they were okay. They wouldn’t die. Blade had stopped himself below 14 percent, so he wouldn’t be dying this time. *Hey, I’m pretty good at that*, he thought, mentally patting himself on the back.

Blade managed to turn his head to the side. The egg was there, and it was glowing bright red, bathed in the setting sun just before it disappeared below the horizon. He stared at the egg they had all teamed up to protect—and saw, on the surface, a crack had formed.

“Cheep, cheep.”

The shell cracked open, revealing a baby chick. *No, wait. Two?* Apparently, this egg contained a set of twins. No wonder it was so heavy—and twice the size.

As Blade watched them, their eyes met. The two chicks stared right at him.

“Well,” Blade said, “welcome to the world.”

The chicks hopped out of the shell and unsteadily toddled over to Blade, tumbling a few times on the way. Then, of all things, they opened their beaks wide and...licked Blade’s face.

Blade let them go to town on him. He hadn't realized birds had tongues or how rough they would feel against his skin. He'd gotten a real fright there. For a moment, he'd thought they were going to eat him.

"Hff, hff, hff... Haaaah... F-finally...I made it..."

Blade could hear Earnest's voice. Struggling to turn his head again, he found himself eye to eye with her just as she scrambled up the tip of the spire.

"Hey."

"Blade...what are you doing?" Her voice suddenly turned cold. "Ugh! You're so *stupid*! I was so worried! I came all the way up here just to find you hugging Sophie!"

"No, we're just paralyzed, so..."

"Also, why are those chicks loving on you?"

"Um... I dunno."

"They didn't imprint on you or something, did they? Blade, were you the first thing they saw when they hatched? Did you make eye contact with them?"

"No, like, I can't move... But, yeah, we did look at each other."

"You *fool*! They must think you're their dad! *Now* what're you gonna do, you stupid, stupid idiot?!"

Earnest thrust a finger toward Blade and began a barrage of scolding.

"Now you've got even *more* children! What're you gonna do?!"

"Whee! I'm a big sister now!"

Cú swooped down from the sky above and climbed on top of Sophie. *Gehhh*. Blade was almost crushed under their combined weight.

○ Scene XXI: Epilogue

It was a clear, cloudless day, the air as fresh as could be—perfect weather for a walk. Even the horizon seemed to stretch farther than usual. Two spirit birds were slowly circling above, way up high, as if watching over their own children.

“Hey! Hey! Not that way! Please, just fly where I tell you to! Fly! Got it?!”

Earnest was yelling as she pulled hard on the reins.

“Whoa, Earnest, they’re not horses. Give them a little freedom.”

“I know! I know, but... Ugh! All right! I’ll let up! Treat me like luggage if you want to! Just don’t drop me!”

Blade and Earnest were enjoying a “walk” in the fresh air with the two chicks. The little birds were only a few weeks old, but being spirit birds, they had already learned how to fly. Their parents were the size of buildings, but the chicks were about as big as a griffin—just right for a human rider. Add a saddle and reins, and you were good to go.

“Honored Fatherrrr...”

Cú, meanwhile, was nimbly whizzing through the air beside them. Whenever she said “Honored Fatherrrr” like this, it was Blade’s job to wave back at her. They were just a man, his dragon, and his two birds enjoying a happy family walk together. And Earnest was there too.

It seemed the chicks really had imprinted on Blade as their father...and the two adult birds soaring above were their parents, too. As far as they were concerned, they had three parents—and while they came to the older ones up above for food, they saw Blade down below as their playmate.

Blade didn’t mind all that much. Having this new aerial mount could be useful. He had Cú already; adding two more kids into his life wouldn’t make that much difference. And Cú was beyond delighted to have a little brother and sister to dote on.

Since the chicks adored Blade and all but refused to leave the capital, their real parents had to stay in the city as well. They had wasted no time setting up their nest, right at the top of the spire—and every day, each of them brought a

cow up there for feeding time. Blade felt a little bad for the nearby livestock farmers... But, ah, well. He'd heard the kingdom was generously providing several times the going price for each head lost. For all he knew, maybe the farmers were happy about it.

In fact, several of them were waving from below as they worked their pastures. Blade waved back at them. They were passing over a region of farming villages on the outskirts of the kingdom. *Guess it's about time to turn around.*

"Hey, ready to go home, Earnest?"

"Huh? W-wait... Whoa! Right! Turn right! That's *left*! Please, just listen to me...!"

Blade laughed. Reaching out with one hand, he stroked the feathery neck of the spirit bird he was riding. It gave him a pleasant *chirrrp!* in response.

But... Wow, more friends, huh? Blade smiled, deeply moved at the thought. He was now at 108 people, one dragon, and two birds.



Afterword

Hello, this is Shin Araki.

I've received quite a lot of support for Volume 1 of *Classroom for Heroes*, and to be honest, it's a little intimidating. Hopefully I've met all your expectations for this second volume!

Of course, as an author, I was totally convinced with Volume 1 that this, yes, *this* was exactly what the current day and age was demanding... But now I can't help but wonder if I had the right idea. Did Volume 1 get accepted so warmly for the reasons that I, the author, intended?

I had a great deal of anxiety about that.

I was reading people's feedback, online and through our surveys, as I talked with my editor about the direction to take for Volume 2. Then, together with Y (my editor), we reached some decisions.

No life-and-death battles! No heart-wrenching seriousness! We've got a guy who's way off the charts wrecking the structure and reason behind pretty much everything he touches, so let's just extract as much comedy from this super-being as we can! It's chill, it's fun, it's heartwarming, and in the end, it's the kind of win-win that brings a smile to everyone's face.

That's what I hope this book is. If you've had fun reading this volume, then that's just what we wanted.

That was Y's and my conclusion, and we were determined to follow through

with it.

This book is all about the laid-back life of a retired Hero!

Imagine the protagonist napping on a green meadow, a beautiful, quiet girl watching him with a smile as he rests his head in her lap. That's the kind of peaceful, leisurely story we were aiming for.

Of course, the daughter of the Overlord might show up, and, yes, the capital might get attacked by giant birds and stuff. But it's fine! After all, he's the He—*koff, koff, koff...*

So we'll be continuing in the same vein from Volume 3 onward. And I think the structure will be the same as well—three stories per volume.

Serious plot developments...likely won't happen.

Life-threatening battles...likely won't happen.

A super-being tripping flags everywhere he goes...likely will happen. A lot.

Yes, my motto's the same as Volume 1.

Of course, I *did* promise in Volume 1 that there'd be no life-and-death battles, but Volume 2 does depict the death of Blade at one point. (Sorry for spoilers if you skipped to the afterword before reading.)

But you can treat that death like something from *DBZ*. Like "It's all right—we have these magical balls that can revive him right away!" It doesn't really count as death. He died, but he also didn't. Sorry, I'm losing my train of thought.

Regardless, he's fine! Why? Because he's the—*koff, koff, koff...*

Anyway, thanks for your continued support. Blade may die in Volume 3, but don't worry. There might be more monsters, too, but don't worry. There will probably be new characters and perhaps a new heroine. We have red, blue, and yellow—and now black here in Volume 2. In terms of colors, maybe it'll be green for the next one?

I'd like to release Volume 3 as soon as I can. This ex-Hero still needs a lot of enrichment as he enjoys retirement in his own quirky way, so be on the lookout for his further adventures.

Finally, some advertising. Feel free to skip it if you're not interested.

I, Araki, run an online feedback site meant to help me improve my work. The QR code below will let you jump to my site, so please send all your opinions, requests, impressions, support, encouragement, admonishment, *etc.* We'd love to receive it all.

I've also begun writing on the novel-submission site syosetu.com, so stop by if you're interested. All my serialized work on there can be read for free. You don't need an account to access it, but creating one lets you add bookmarks to your favorite series, receive notifications when they're updated, write ratings and reviews, and many other useful things.

As of May 7, 2015, my latest work on there is called *C-Mart Prospering in Another World*. It's the story of a guy who wanders into another world and opens a tiny supermarket that winds up becoming wildly popular. If you enjoy the slow-life groove of *Classroom of Heroes*, I think you'll enjoy that story, too. Please note that all the websites mentioned above are available in Japanese only.

Shin Araki Encyclopedia



<http://www.araki-shin.com/araki/eiyu2.htm>

My page on *Shousetsuka ni Narou*



<https://mypage.syosetu.com/605697/>

My latest story, *C-Mart Prospering in Another World*



<https://ncode.syosetu.com/n6170cq/>

About the author

Shin Araki

A character-oriented novelist who's doing all kinds of work in the light novel industry. This series is his first fantasy novel in a while, so he's super enthused. Member #001 of the More Smiling Characters on Light Novel Covers Society.

Illustrator: Haruyuki Morisawa A Tokyo-based illustrator from Toyama Prefecture. I'll keep doing my best!

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